

The Conservative Heartland: A Political History of the Postwar American Midwest, edited by Jon K. Lauck and Catherine McNichol Stock. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2020. x, 390 pp. Index, notes. \$29.95, paperback.

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Few things could be more relevant today than the history and widespread presence of conservatism throughout the Midwest. As the United States struggles to balance its rural and urban voices (as so evidenced in the current debates over the Electoral College), as agriculture continues to decline as a percentage of employment in the national job market, and as Washington politicians close down pipelines and assault the natural resources of the region (especially in its western-most part), the culture of the Midwest desires desperately to be heard and not to be dismissed by the powerful political and economic interests of the coasts. Truly, the midwestern conservative must ask: what should and what must be conserved in the name of a broader understanding of America?

Yet, sadly, most standard histories of America have not only ignored the Midwest as an independent and unique region, but over the past century, they have also mostly dealt with the various risings of left-wing and Democratic figures and movements, such as Chicago under Richard Daley, South Dakota and George McGovern, or Hubert Humphrey and Minnesota. Typically, these accounts are presented as mainstream history, while the rise of Mike Pence in Indiana, for example, is treated as merely conservative history.

In this new and excellent study of the subject, *The Conservative Heartland*, Jon Lauck and Catherine McNichol Stock have brought together a fine community of scholars to ponder these very questions, sometimes on the most local level possible and sometimes as a regional survey. Topics covered in the various well-chosen chapters include presidential politics, abortion, Indiana University's *American Spectator*, the 1969 white working-class revolt of Minneapolis, environmentalism and its opponents, working-class populism(s) throughout the Rust Belt (and specifically in Milwaukee), the New Right in 1980s Iowa, the rise and fall of George McGovern, Reagan Democrats, Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels, privatization, and sexual politics. Again, it should be noted, sometimes these studies are very particular and specialized, but they always contribute to the book as a whole. As such, the book is remarkably uniform for an edited work on a subject as almost infinitely broad as midwestern conservatism. The scholars of this volume have not only researched well, they have, equally importantly, written and

thought well. There is no weak chapter in this book, and the best of the best is truly outstanding.

In *The Conservative Heartland*, two things become clear. First, it must be happily noted, the editors make a profound and convincing case that the Midwest is its own interesting and, at least politically, autonomous region. As noted, this understanding happens all too infrequently with American historians.

Second, again rather joyously, Lauck and Stock recognize that, in the Midwest, the history of conservatism is mainstream history and has been, with some notable exceptions, for at least a century. Even at the national level, Presidents Taft, Harding, Eisenhower, and Reagan all came from the Midwest and served as some of the most conservative presidents in American history.

If there are complaints to be made about this book—and they are very minor ones—it is, first, that the contributors have tended to limit their definition of conservatism to politics, mostly, and its many political manifestations, though chapters on the rise of economic populism and the various issues of the culture wars certainly broaden the horizons of the book. Yet the conservatism that emerged from the Midwest—especially that of Irving Babbitt from Dayton, Willa Cather from Nebraska, T.S. Eliot from St. Louis, Russell Kirk from Michigan, and through a variety of faculty at the University of Chicago and John Senior at the University of Kansas—tended to be specifically cultural, artistic, philosophical, and economic rather than political.

Second and related to the first criticism, one might note, it is (or, at the least remains) unclear whether populism and conservatism really can co-exist beyond a mere temporary political alliance and momentary outburst and anger. Conservatism, after all, is mostly about restraint, while populism always lingers too long around the edges of authoritarianism. While populism might not be specifically liberal, it is equally true that it is not specifically conservative.

Perhaps, however, these minor criticisms should be seen as opportunities. After all, really, such criticisms just mean that there exists excellent material for Lauck and Stock to edit a sequel to the rather brilliant *The Conservative Heartland*. Maybe entitled, *The Conservative Hearthland*, a study of conservatism in the home and the culture?