

focus on Central Plains politics—in particular, Kansas and its conservative educational focus on creationism—complemented by Thomas Frank's critique in *What's The Matter With Kansas* (2004). However, no discussion of creationism appears in either the Religion or Education chapters. Instead, creationism is relegated to a discussion of Plains politician William Jennings Bryan, who defended creationism at the trial of John Scopes in Tennessee in the early twentieth century.

Along with the rise of religious conservative Republicanism in the Great Plains, there is yet one more aspect of Plains culture that remains illusive: a discussion of Great Plains subregions. One of the challenges of engaging with the Great Plains is that one can easily believe it to be a homogeneous, flat surface that runs undifferentiated for 500 miles wide and a thousand miles long. Indeed, in his introduction Wishart comments, "Modern geographers have also identified the absence of features as an integral part of the regional character of the Great Plains." In one sense it is true that there are no dramatic mountains or deep river gorges: indeed, the Great Plains region offers up a very subtle landscape. However, in another sense it is very much untrue: regions such as the Texas Staked Plains or the Nebraska Sandhills remain invisible in this text, and it is a great shame for such an extensive encyclopedic endeavor to reiterate this misconception.

*What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*, by Thomas Frank. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004. 306 pp. Map. \$24.00 cloth, \$14.00 paper.

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Thomas Frank embraces a common theme of the American Left in his book *What's the Matter with Kansas?* He argues that the success of political conservatives in recent decades has been due to their success in subordinating once prominent economic issues to cultural values. His book focuses on his home state of Kansas, where political conservatism has had many victories. Frank concludes that, because of their political choices, Kansans suffer from a "derangement," have been taken in by an "illusion," live in a "panorama of madness and delusion," and have embraced the "politics of self-delusion." To behold a Kansas conservative is to "realize that we are staring into the eyes of a lunatic." Kansas can tell us much, Frank believes, because "things that begin in Kansas—the Civil War, Prohibition, Populism, Pizza Hut—have a historical

tendency to go national." Kansas, Frank worries, "is ready to lead us singing into the apocalypse."

Frank's argument that the working class in society does not understand its own interests or oppression is not new. Marxists have long bemoaned the "false consciousness" that leads many working people astray. Like earlier theorists, particularly the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci, Frank's basic concern is "the borderline criminality of capitalism." He thinks "Kansas is burning on a free-market pyre." Rural and small-town Kansas "is a civilization in the early stages of irreversible decay" that is winning the nation's "desolation sweepstakes," and the "culprit" is "free-market capitalism," with the constant buzz of contemporary publicity machines, corporate advertising, and the trivialities of consumer culture. Exacerbating the present crisis are political conservatives who are "deregulating, dismantling government, and rolling back the welfare state" and who supported the general "Reagan-Bush stampede of deregulation, privatization, and laissez-faire." Frank's solution, never explained in anything more than a random phrase, is bolstering the welfare state, raising taxes, promoting "unions, antitrust, public ownership," and generally returning to liberalism's former commitment to "equality and economic security."

While Frank's book targets American conservatives and "reptilian Republicans," the decisions of Democrats in recent decades also come in for criticism. During the 1990s, the New Democrats' "move to accommodate the right" and President Clinton's political "triangulation," which attempted to split the difference between liberals and conservatives, "pulled the rug out from under any possible organizing effort on the left." The pro-business Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) and its progeny is to blame for "pushing the [Democratic] party to forget blue-collar voters and concentrate instead on recruiting affluent, white-collar professionals who are liberal on social issues." While Clinton, the New Democrats, and the DLC stand "rock solid" on their pro-choice stance and other social issues, they make "endless concessions on economic issues, on welfare, NAFTA, Social Security, labor law, privatization, deregulation, and the rest of it." Frank thinks this is a "criminally stupid strategy" for liberals.

Frank's book, while an entertaining read and a genuine attempt to account for liberalism's troubles, suffers because he assumes too much. He believes that the various complaints at the core of the conservative revival since the 1960s—what he dubs the "great backlash"—are misguided. He questions the notion that "the haughty hedonists of Hollywood are largely Democratic," doubts the claim of "liberal bias in the news," and wonders if there really are "commissars of political

correctness" stifling open exchange. Frank questions the narrative of Vietnam veterans "being victimized by betrayal, first by liberals in government and then by the antiwar movement, as symbolized by the clueless [Jane] Fonda" and is skeptical of the impact of the "Vietnam syndrome." He also makes sport of conservatives in the middle of the country for worrying about "plans for depopulating the Great Plains so that it can be turned into a gigantic national park." The problem for Frank's argument, however, is that for each of these claims—the Hollywood-Democratic Party axis, the tendency of liberals to dominate political reporting, the continuing ability of Vietnam experience to paralyze liberal foreign policy makers—there is a deep well of supporting evidence. Despite his dismissal, it is also true that liberal professors (urban planners, no less) have advanced (to great acclaim) a plan (which he does not mention) to return the Plains to the buffalo. Frank does not provide historical evidence that the assorted claims of the "great backlash" are untrue. He assumes they are.

*Religion and Public Life in the Midwest: America's Common Denominator?* edited by Philip Barlow and Mark Silk. Religion by Region Series. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004. 254 pp. Charts, maps, appendix, index. \$24.95 paper.

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The Religion by Region Series seems to have been spawned by maps, particularly Philip Barlow and Edwin Gaustad's indispensable *New Historical Atlas of Religion in America* (2001). The editors define the Midwest as the Great Plains states east to Ohio, except Missouri. Although they do not explain why Missouri, politically and culturally midwestern, is included in the Southern Crossroads region (and occasionally the chapter authors stray in referring to the cities there as midwestern), a glance at Barlow and Gaustad's map, "Denominational Predominance [By County]," does argue for Missouri's inclusion as part of the solidly Baptist South, a Baptist predominance that ends miraculously right at the Iowa border.

To their credit, editors Philip Barlow and Mark Silk have assembled not just first-rate scholars, but chapter authors who all live in the region, such as Mark Noll of Wheaton College, the eminent authority on American evangelicalism; L. DeAne Lagerquist of St. Olaf College, who has written a very useful history of American Lutheranism for the Denominations in America series; and Jay Dolan of Notre Dame,

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