Toto, We're not in Oz Anymore: A Critique of Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas*

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According to George Lakoff in *Moral Politics*, not only do people frame their political ideas according to overarching family metaphors, but there are strict-father states and nurturant-parent ones. However, he doesn't explain why particular states are either, and why the former, which of late vote solidly Republican, tend to be either great-plains or mountain states facing agricultural decline, or southern ones, while nurturant parent states tend to be the more coastal, cosmopolitan places (if one dare use that c-word). A very recent book (*The Great Divide* by John Sperling *et al)* argues that the "red" states are those populated mostly by whites and dominated by agriculture, mining, oil, and lumbering — the so-called extractive industries.

In *What's the Matter with Kansas,* Thomas Frank focuses on one such state and shows it only became strictly strict-father quite recently. Frank says little about how some of these tendencies might relate to older episodes that alienated certain white workers, particularly males, from liberal Democrats, such as the long struggle over civil rights, including bussing, and against the Vietnam war, not to mention the long backlash against feminism. No mention is made, either, of long endemic problems of the American labor movement. Nothing is said of the possibility that deep structural changes (other than corporate concentration and deregulation) have occurred and have affected attitudes. Finally, nothing is said of the process of self-selection and segregation that increasingly allows people to gather in zones of the like-minded in ways that were less striking and widespread among previous generations.

Why should all that matter to us? Evidently for two reasons. The deeper is that by understanding whatever the causes for the current polarization, we might gain a clearer sense of how to go about revivifying and redefining the progressive cause. The more immediate, however, is because the division into red, blue and swing states enormously influences how we can do politics right now, this year. But this second reason is only so because of the

deplorable electoral-college system; with one person-one vote deciding the Presidency, we could concentrate more on voters we know better how to reach. The skewing of the Electoral College and also the Senate is what gives national power to the strict-father voters. Whatever the outcome of this election, a real movement to overturn the excessive power of small states is needed, and soon. It won't be easy, since the Constitution's amendment procedures effectively give the small states themselves a veto. Short of civil war, the only way to bring about change is probably going to be to offer sufficient bribes of some kind to enough small states to turn the tide.

Frank singles out Kansas, but the authors of *The Great Divide* are basically right to see it as similar to many other states that now have strict-father politics. It is one of many Great Plains states that are basically rural, agricultural, and far from the coasts. We have only to traverse the hills to our east to be reminded of the conservatism of rural areas. We could also travel in imagination to quite distant places, say rural France or Bavaria or Switzerland or even farther afield to Afghanistan or Baluchistan, to find a similar and more intense rural conservatism.

Kansas differs from the Asian areas, at least, in that it is far easier for those who are uncomfortable with rural conservatism to leave; but that only makes it, relative to other parts of the US, likely to become ever-more conservative, more strict-father in outlook.

What makes for this rural conservatism? One of the features of farm life is that farming as an occupation is primarily passed down by example from parents. It's true today that many successful farmers in the US have gone to Ag colleges, and mastered many technical matters unknown to their forebears before they enter into full time farming. But still, almost all farmers were raised on farms, and much of what they know or feel or think is much closer to tradition than to "book learning." Further, farmers are concerned with things staying on a certain narrow path; they must watch their fields and animals intently for weeds, pests, diseases, or undesired mating between different breeds or strains. Still today, even the most modern of farmers are very often stuck on their farms day after day, from sunup to sundown, with meager respite to obtain supplies or socialize in nearby communities. All this makes for conformity, traditionalism, and quite often for racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and a distrust of "city-folk." As is general in more traditional cultures, men's and women's roles are passed down in gender-specific ways. Sexism is likely to seem self-evident,

in the same way that you can only milk cows, not bulls. In addition, farm children are usually put to work fairly young, and must hew to accepted practices if they are to avoid injury to either themselves or their families' livelihoods. So strictness of up-bringing, at least past a quite early age, is almost built in.

Farmers generally are more closely acquainted with killing (of animals) than are city dwellers. On American farms, youngsters are regularly encouraged to raise an animal almost as a pet, only to send it to be slaughtered after a year. If even intimate relations with animals are not a barrier to their killing, the only way not to extend the same attitudes to humans is to emphasize a strict boundary between human and non-human. Is it far-fetched to suggest that this is one reason farmers are often anti-abortion and anti- evolution, both of which, in their very different ways, can be seen as blurring boundaries?

Because their communities are small, farm folk are likely to look to the well-off in their communities as neighbors and also as leaders; this is a simplified explanation, to be sure, but it does account for why the local elites have often been voted into Parliament or congress or the local legislatures as a matter of course.

Undoubtedly it is true that even in Kansas farmers are a declining proportion of the population, but still, farming helps define attitudes more broadly, because a majority of people were raised on farms, have farm relatives, or both, or they have close ties to farmers through their work. Farming as an occupation has declined in Kansas, which is largely a result of mechanization allowing ever-bigger farms along with government farm policies that effectively favor wealthier farmers. In many communities, as Frank says, only older people are left — and of course only the older people who either can't afford to move or have no interest in going somewhere more lively. That too makes for more traditionalism, more earnest Christianity, less acceptance of strange new thoughts and behaviors that are seen in accentuated and frightening forms over TV. Even farm-based industries, such as the slaughterhouses Frank discusses, tend to use workers — in this case mostly Mexican immigrants — who come from rural backgrounds and have somewhat similar mindsets.

I think all this helps explain why Kansas has been Republican since the Civil War, and partly why it is tending towards more extremes. Perhaps a more

interesting question is why Kansas and some other rural areas were heavily populist a century ago. As Frank points out, Kansas was deliberately settled by abolitionists; it was also however the scene of intense guerilla warfare during the Civil War. And of course that war heavily affected the rural South, another locale of populist feeling (as well as racism) at one time. Those factors made for a relative absence of settled farm tradition in the period of populism's greatest strength in the very late nineteenth century. At the same time, the railroads and banking and mercantile interests operated with much less PR savvy and much more nakedly against small farm interests than they do now. Coastal cities were far less appealing places for non-conformists to escape to than they are now. I'm sure this is a very sketchy start an explanation, but I would defend it as a start.

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Frank argues that working–class people are acting against their own self-interest when they emphasize values issues such as anti-abortionism that make them favor Republicans rather than the pocket-book matters that should have made them side with Democrats. At the end of his book, he argues that Democrats led by the Democratic Leadership Council have largely deserted workers, and that mostly explains Kansan workers' rightward shift. While I certainly share his antipathy to the posture of the DLC, I think he ascribes too much to their role.

Statistics do demonstrate that in the past seven decades Democratic presidential terms have almost entirely been better than Republicans' when it comes to generating jobs (with the one exception being Ronald Reagan's second term). But only people who don't have jobs or feel likely to lose theirs would normally vote on that basis. Other economic issues such as inflation, declining wages (or farm prices) matter, but so do issues such as war, civil rights, the environment, women's rights, and many cultural issues, which matter to us as well as to them.

Frank also argues that when working-class people refer to liberals as "elites," they are quite mistaken, since to him the word "elite" only refers to the most wealthy. When conservatives speak of "elites," however, they are not usually referring to money or even power in the direct political sense, but to those who appear to profess a comfort with new ideas, edgy arts, change, new freedoms, new equalities and rights, exotic customs, a world

without much of a god, and who put forward and support such things. By that definition, the elites are those who tend to do very well in school, who are literate and articulate in print or on the air, who are intellectuals. To many Kansans and others, where such people (people like many of us, in fact) get their self-confidence or their platforms seems utterly mysterious and somehow wrong.

But let us return to (standard) economic matters to examine Frank's assumptions in that regard. Did Democrats once have a clear understanding of how to make the economy work for ordinary people, only to give it up for no good reason? It is true that in the post-World War II period, up until the early seventies, Democratic policies helped improve both lives and opportunities for workers as a whole. However, much of that prosperity rested on military Keynesianism; this is the method of legitimating government spending that subsequently circulates throughout the industrial economy. During WWII it turned out to be a means of ending the Great Depression and hugely increasing pent-up demand. To a much greater extent than spending on social services, military spending didn't seem to compete with private business or violate anyone's sense of private responsibility. When there was no war, there was still an active arms race, as well as a series of veterans' benefits such as the GI Bill. Together, all of these helped pump funds into the private economy at enough of a rate to keep growth fairly steady and allow some upward mobility.

Yet the Democratic governing coalition in that period was by no means united on backing workers. Just as Kansas has been very solidly Republican since the civil War, the South had been solidly Democratic since the end of post-Civil War reconstruction, but was led very conservatively, by and large, with a well-known anti-union bias as much ingrained as institutionalized racism.

The balance that had permitted Democratic economic success despite the varying pulls of the party came undone after — and probably because of — Lyndon Johnson's Presidency. Johnson realized full well that passing the Civil Rights bills would end the Democratic dominance of the South. His "War on Poverty," intended to end the remaining pockets of urban and rural poverty, came under attack from the start and was never really given an opportunity to be perfected. The same fate befell his "Great Society" program, even sooner. Meanwhile, Johnson polarized his followers with the Viet-Nam War; spending on it put millions to work for the first time, but it

also helped lead to inflation that was simultaneously fed by stagnating, quasi-monopolistic corporations. Coincidentally (or perhaps not) the youth culture of the sixties, including hippies, militant minority movements, environmentalism, feminism, and a growing backlash against conformist consumerism, helped set the stage for the culture wars to come.

By the mid-seventies, most major industrial companies in this country were being run conservatively and unimaginatively. So were the unions that had managed to gain and maintain a foothold despite the anti-union legislation of the late 1940's such as the Taft-Hartley law. I think one reason for that is that in the half century since 1954 when the AFL and CIO merged, the combined organization has been led by a total of only three men. Meanwhile we have had ten US Presidents, while the average large corporation has probably had at least six leaders. Long union reigns are partly the result of the fact that, in this anti-union country, union leaders have nowhere else to go. Whatever the cause, the long terms of office have been stultifying. Stolidly following a basic strategy of limited demands and overall labor peace, with little innovation in organizing or in forms of protest, little interest in new technology and its likely consequences, negligible efforts at effective public outreach, and very little in the way of global efforts aside from promoting anticommunism, has led to slow but steady losses. Union leaders feel so tied to the few corporations with whom they deal that they helped protect them from government regulation, such as environmental requirements. (In 2000, Al Gore, despite having written the ecological *cri de coeur, Earth in the Balance,* only a few years earlier, modified his stance to placate Michigan auto workers who agreed with Ford and GM that anti-global-warming efforts would hurt their roaring and profitable SUV sales, and thus cut jobs.)

To return to the situation in the seventies, facing stagflation, Democratic politicians began to adapt more and more to "free-market," anti-regulation nostrums as the cure. Meanwhile, large state pension plans and other institutional investors took up the cry of "shareholder rights." They soon came up with the notion that corporate managers needed closer identification with the companies they led, which turned out to mean that top managers should own substantial bodies of stocks, so that they would act not like mere employee-managers but like entrepreneurial owners of an earlier era. (However, unlike earlier owners who personally identified with the companies named after them, typical top corporate officers today see their new stock option-wealth as perfectly fungible, and have little hesitation

about taking short-term steps to improve share value — and thus their own worth— regardless of long-term consequences for their companies, stockholders, employees, customers, or the communities that house them. If that means moving jobs elsewhere, automating them to cut costs, or selling the whole business to some other firm, why hesitate?)

Later of course, Democrats went still further in favor of free-market solutions, such as the NAFTA and WTO trade agreements. Did they do this because they had sold out, or because the bankers and economists who pushed them in this direction seemed to know better what they were talking about than they themselves did? Probably both. But, in any event, no one has a clearly different course that would definitely work to keep high wages, prevent poverty and allow equal economic advancement. The DLC arose as much because more old-fashioned liberals didn't seem to have any solutions to economic problems anymore, as because the DLC types were eager to tap into corporate money to fund campaigns. Simply by having maintained a hold on power for so long, Democratic leaders had been corrupted, increasingly viewing themselves as part of an informal club including many corporate leaders and even some union leaders, who together by right and enlightenment were entitled to run the country.

How does all that bear on Kansas? Since it's main export is probably grain, and since NAFTA in particular aided grain exports, as has WTO to some degree, Kansas probably benefited, especially when farm subsidies are taken into account. Current unemployment figures for Kansas are well below California's; yet hard-hit Silicon Valley is hardly becoming a bastion of fundamentalist conservatism. Something further is needed to explain why Kansas seems to be moving still more in the strict-father direction now.

3

While George Lakoff is probably correct that views about family influence politics, as I have already hinted, these views themselves are developed according to the logic of the totality of life, not just of family life *per se*. We have to account for other aspects of life to make sense of Kansas in the 90's. Material life as such is not where we have to look. My own work over quite a few years keeps pointing to another sort of economic life, one that doesn't revolve around things, but around another, even more limited entity, namely the attention of other human beings. We all want and need some degree of

attention, but because of the prevalence of media of various sorts, less and less of it is available to the ordinary person, and that's especially true in a place such as Kansas. Yet people who are adept at getting attention usually live better than those who don't, and regularly being able to garner attention tends to yield high incomes.

In part, the plight of ordinary American workers these days is that they are not particularly able to get their fair share of attention. Culture involves attention, and thus culture is, in itself, economic in nature. The culture wars are just as much about economic standing, properly considered, as anything else. Thomas Frank simply doesn't get this point, though read with care, his book provides plenty of evidence for it.

With national media including the press, radio, music, movies and TV, the average person in a place like Kansas can easily feel ignored, and the feeling is based on reality. (After all, a very commonly held metaphor involving Kansas is as the dull, black-and-white counterpart to the color-filled Land of Oz.) Much of the new right-wing cultural "populism," I suspect, is an attempt to get attention by staking out positions frowned upon on the coasts. Of course, these positions do fit into a more stolid, farm- and tradition-based mode of life, as well as very often being positions that can be "deduced" by an independent reading of texts such as the Bible, without reference to much in the way of scholarly exegesis, nor requiring an academic imprimatur.

When farmers suddenly enraged against abortion descended on Wichita in their tractors, they were acting less out of some spiritual impulse than a culturally conservative one, not that different from their French counterparts who raided a McDonald's to protest genetically modified crops. In both cases getting attention was a key result. In each case, the protestors felt they were acting against a kind of cultural imperialism, perhaps in fact from the same sources, the centers from which a kind of elite quite generally expect to be heard, but who are not particularly interested, in their turn, in listening.

4

From the standpoint just offered, it's instructive to examine more closely the conservative attack on the teaching of evolution. Fundamentalists are not wrong in asserting that the theory of evolution is inconsistent with an idea of a personal God, who chose to put humans on earth and intervenes at will in human affairs. Of course, Darwinian science isn't alone in presenting this

contrast to traditional belief; current cosmology is at least an equal contender. Still, evolution gets a more prominent place in high-school science education than does cosmology, and unlike cosmology, which doesn't even deign to mention human beings or any kind of life, Darwin tackled the "Descent of Man" head on.

But let's face it. The American educational system in general does a pretty bad job when it comes to science. First, it is taken as a truism that science is hard, to such an extent that students are increasingly turned off to science as a career. At best, science is usually presented as set of integrated and unquestionable facts, with all the argument, exploration and experiment that went into the acceptance of those facts entirely left out. Indeed the background is probably little understood even by many so-called science teachers, much less by the elementary-school teachers who provide students with their introduction to scientific ideas.

Any student who has serious questions is unlikely to receive informed answers; the scientific community may well have excellent answers, but not ones explicable at a high-school level. So, when it comes to a subject like evolution, quite often what is actually presented is pretty close to indoctrination. People in the know, mostly at universities, mostly not in Kansas, insist evolution is so, but are not available for debate or questioning.

This might not be so bad, if all high school students were headed for universities where later they could ask critical and informed questions and be taken seriously. But, as we well know, high school functions as a filter, selecting the good and obedient learners for advancement while often absent-mindedly boring, torturing, and criticizing the others. If it is a question of having to accept authority, why not retreat to a traditional source that presents itself as authoritative but is also supposedly completely transparent to lay readers — the Bible.

Evolution is not just a theory, as its opponents claim, instead being a complex, conceptually well-motivated body of observation, experimentation and data. Still, it refers mainly to the past. In daily life, the practical consequences of denying evolution are very subtle at best. It's not a health hazard; it wouldn't affect farming or manufacturing or retail sales. That makes the denial a very tempting way of thumbing one's nose at distant authorities. That it may have ideological advantages, such as allowing a

reaffirmation of racism, male supremacy or human domination over nature, can remain an unstated side benefit.

Does this have to do with a hunger for the spiritual side of life, as some suggest? It seems to me that just about anything can be labeled spiritual as long as it engenders some sort of emotion. War, pacifism, fasts, feasts, silent prayer, noisy celebration, celibate routine, or wild sexual orgies can qualify equally well. But perhaps what is meant is more that attitudes like opposition to evolutionary theory are attempts to keep life meaningful, in the sense that believing human life to be simply a result of the random events implied by evolutionary theory would deny any larger meaning to life. I note in passing, however, that exactly the opposite motivation might be ascribed to opponents of abortion, where random fusing of sperm and egg is elevated to a much higher status than planned pregnancies. The common link is only realized if planning is left entirely to God, implying that, even though humans can change the way things are, they shouldn't. But even that position doesn't accord, say, with the use of pesticides in agriculture; if God afflicted us with pests (presumably due to our sins) wouldn't it be consistent to pray rather than use pesticides? The Amish might do that, but not the Kansas farmers who rally against abortion and the teaching of evolution; nor House majority leader Tom DeLay, the Texan ex-exterminator and fundamentalist who entered politics to oppose pesticide regulations.

If spiritual concerns derive from a desire to make sure that life has meaning, one might expect a serious effort at consistency would go along with that. No such luck. Meaning is not sought according some inner logic, but rather according to the way meaning is normally sought: through the approval of a community of some sort, which again equates to a sense of having a voice, not being ignored or ignorable, being worthy of getting attention.

To a certain extent, we can think of the multiplicity of causes that Americans take up as merely vehicles to enable people to feel that they matter to the community that shares those causes. That goal should not be overlooked even in our own cases, but I'll let you fill that one in yourself. The essential lesson is that we can never expect anything approaching consensus and unity on major issues in this country, and the bigger our population, and the more connected through media such as the Internet, the more intense and diverse the positions that particular groups hold will be.

One corollary of this is that as the two main parties continue to be highly professionalized seekers of votes, they will each continue to position themselves so that each gets about half the vote. Automatically, as one view gains dominance, the opposing view gains in attractiveness, just as a stance to better get attention and form community. The political parties will each continue to position themselves on one side or the other of each divide, in such a way that supporters will be forced to continue in that alignment. If one party shrinks, it will readjust its positions and perhaps emphasize new differences so as once again to increase towards the 51% mark, but the other will continue to counter.

That may all sound quite cynical, but it doesn't mean that supporters of one side or another — if not the pols themselves — do not fervently believe the stands they take. What our goal as progressives should be is both to continue to cherish our own values and to see how we too are subject to being affected by the overarching framework of politics now. It may mean that the struggles we now find ourselves in are likely to go on endlessly. Just conceivably, if we take enough care in these regards, we may find ways to alter the nature of the cultural divides, so that neither of the two poles is quite as toxic as the right's position at present, but that is going to be quite a task.