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Robert Wuthnow, *The Left Behind: Decline and Rage in Rural America*

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Cover Page Footnote

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Wuthnow, one of the leading US social scientists with a focus on rural America, attempts a sympathetic understanding of the rage expressed by rural Americans in the 2016 election of Donald Trump. In his interpretation, he waves off the shallow explanations based only on economic suffering on the one hand (Wood 2008) or by cultural isolation on the other (Frank 2004). To Wuthnow, the explanation lies deeper in what he terms *moral community* – “a specialized sense of a place to which and in which people feel an obligation to one another and to uphold the local ways of being” (p. 4). The moral outrage expressed in Trump’s election is part fear of rural decline and anger at the perception that rural communities have been under siege from Washington DC.

Rural moral communities are described in more detail in the first chapter. Yards must be kept up. Neighbors must speak to one another. Community events must be participated in. To residents of small towns, the diversity that is important is anchored in socioeconomic status. Gentry (wealthy farmers and educated professionals), service semi-professionals, wage workers, pensioners, and the poor each have their place and role. Those with more resources are expected to lead, but those with wealth tend to downplay it. College educated farmers work with their hands. Social isolation and separation by social class is just not possible as all ranks mingle at church, school, and grocery. What is important is equal treatment, hard work, and personal responsibility (Sherman 2009). They care enough about the community to want to preserve it (Daley 2015). “It matters greatly . . . that the communities upholding their way of life are in danger” (p. 43).

Threats to rural communities are described in chapter two from rural residents themselves: depopulation, brain drain, teen pregnancy rates worse than urban centers, drugs, lack of jobs, and cultural threats (Carr & Kefalas 2009; Dáil 2015; Duncan 2014; Wood 2008). It is common for those clinging to an imaginal close-knit community to place the blame on Washington or immigrants, but this is more perceptual than reality. The imaginal moral community is causal in the frustration, defeat, and anger

expressed by rural Americans who are mourning for something that never really existed.

In the third chapter Wuthnow notes the few positive influences on rurality: the proliferation of volunteer organizations, some efforts at economic development, charity to help the deserving needy, and a reliance on religion. Despite the prevailing *we take care of our own* spirit of independence (Couch 2016), the fact is that the problems are greater than the local resources except in those locales that are reasonably near urban centers or endowed with unique and interesting natural attractions (Wood 2008).

The memories are long in chapter four where the antipathy for Washington can go back to the Civil War or Reconstruction. For many, Washington would not be so bad if it left them alone, but unfunded mandates hit the resources of rural communities hard. Rural residents falsely believe that taxes are levied to support non-rural needs, and farmers are offended at shifting agricultural policies. In general, rural people have a mixed response to policies coming from Washington. They are strong supporters of crop insurance, but less thrilled with environmental issues (Dáil 2015). They support efforts to reduce climate change, maintain pure food regulations, restrict genetic engineering, and limit imports of foreign commodities. Despite some good policies, Washington is viewed as irrational, bureaucratic, and lacking common sense (Daley 2015). Rural people know they are a minority, which fuels a sense of helplessness. These sentiments fueled the Tea Party and those sympathetic to it.

As described in chapter five, even progressives in rural America are concerned with the loss of any higher moral accountability throughout the country. Key issues as presented here are abortion and homosexuality, although views on homosexuality seem to be changing due to knowing someone who is gay and rephrasing the issue as same-sex marriage (Anderson et al. 2015). Wuthnow addresses the question of whether a focus on moral issues is consistent with the economic self-interest of rural communities and concludes that it is, except for the blind spot associated with provision for the needy (Sherman 2009). Rural support for GOP policies that oppose welfare spending, favor regressive taxation, and endorse gerrymandering to exclude minority voters are difficult to reconcile with moral accountability.

The final chapter admits to the eruption in rural American of overt bigotry toward immigrants, Muslims, women, and non-whites in the 2016 election. Wuthnow seems to be letting rural whites off a bit easily when he

asserts that “silently suppressed bigotry can easily be mobilized” (p. 158), while claiming, “Most people living in rural America are probably no more prone to bigotry than many people living in suburbs and cities” (p. 158).

In a short epilogue Wuthnow states that “my message . . . is that rural America is not crazy” (p. 160). They are not “complicit in that derangement” (p. 159). The rage is real and stems from the sense of being left behind, but Wuthnow believes that there is more than rage in rural America. Extraordinary efforts have been taken to revive some of the poorest rural communities (Duncan 2014; Wood 2008) with mixed success. There is a pragmatism that squares off to face the challenges. Rage fuels the dichotomy between us and Washington, but pragmatism turns their efforts and loyalty toward their locality and region. Couch (2016) would agree.

With six pages filled with 53 endnotes and twelve pages of reading suggestions, it is easy to see that Wuthnow is trying to start a conversation, but it is not clear who the dialogue addresses. Observation may be enough to explain rural rage, but solutions are harder to come by. The facts are that many rural towns are not economically viable today. Transportation is no longer limited to horse drawn wagons. Long-term employment is not sustained by local industry alone and the role of seasonal agricultural workers has changed dramatically. Many small rural communities are at risk (Duncan 2014). Small rural towns may not want to change (Couch 2016), but there is simply no choice (Wood 2008). Regional population centers mimicking some of the amenities of urban centers are the likely heirs of rural life in America, and are more fertile fields in which to invest the federal resources that have been poured into rural communities in an attempt to reverse the depopulation trends.

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