

ESCAPE FROM FREEDOM

Ellen Willis

WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH TOM FRANK (AND THE LEFTIES WHO LOVE HIM)?

THE AMERICAN LEFT loves Thomas Frank's latest book. A few quotes from the jacket of *What's the Matter with Kansas?* capture the general adulatory tone. Barbara Ehrenreich: "the most insightful analysis of American right-wing pseudo-populism to come along in the last decade." Michael Kazin: "the second coming of H.L. Mencken, but with better politics." Molly Ivins: "A heartland populist, Frank is hilariously funny on what makes us red-staters different from those blue-staters (not), and he actually *knows* evangelical Christians, antiabortion activists, gunnuts, and Bubbas." Janeane Garofolo: "Over the last 30 years, the Right has managed to agitate and frighten the citizens of the heartland into consistently voting against their own best interests. It's about time someone started telling the truth about it—kudos to Tom Frank." No left meeting or conference, it seems, is complete without a speech by Frank or a panel on the book. Trying to think of another piece of backlash-era social commentary that had had a comparable impact in left circles, the closest I could come up with was Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism*, which articulated an emerging strain of left cultural conservatism and added "narcissist" to the lexicon of anti-'60s-liberationist putdowns. These two books could hardly be more different, yet in regard to their audience the comparison is oddly instructive. For throughout the tumultuous political changes of the past three decades, one theme has remained constant: the mainstream left's desperate wish that the culture wars would disappear. As Lasch appealed to that wish in 1978, so does Frank today.

What's the Matter with Kansas? is fun to read. It is vividly written. It is witty. It is blunt. It paints a depressing and infuriating picture of what globalization, which is to say transnational corporate suburbanism, has done to Kansas and by extension to America. It attacks with ferocity and eloquence the stereotyping of authentic heartlanders vs. latte liberals from which lightweights like David Brooks have fashioned careers. It gives earnest lefties permission to pause in their handwringing efforts to "understand" the proles of the ultra-right and vent their frustration instead: since Frank was born in Kansas, he's allowed to voice un-pc thoughts about

the “derangement” of its inhabitants. All this would be enough to attract attention. But the book is also grounded in a compelling and unassailable observation: that a large chunk of the working class—enough people to set the tone of local and regional politics in much of the country as well as to swing national elections—has displaced its anger at class oppression from the corporations and allied politicians who actually rule us to the cosmopolitan, secular “cultural elite,” whose offenses range from rejection of conservative sexual morality to epicurean habits of consumption. So long as these class wires remain crossed, changing the direction of American politics is not possible. The question of course is how to undo the tangle, and to answer that we first have to understand what it means. Frank does a first-rate job of describing the inversion of class politics and making savage fun of it. Analysis, alas, is not his strong point.

Frank’s thesis is this: politically, what the right-wing cultural backlash amounts to is a ploy by Republicans to trick working-class voters into supporting them so they can carry out their pro-business, anti-worker economic program. It’s pure bait and switch: “Vote to stop abortion; receive a rollback in capital gains taxes. Vote to make our country strong again; receive deindustrialization.... Vote to stand tall against terrorists; receive Social Security privatization.” The “backlash leaders” know they can’t change the culture; indeed, they have no intention of doing so: “Abortion is never halted. Affirmative action is never abolished. The culture industry is never forced to clean up its act.” On the contrary, they need the cultural issues, so they can continue to be elected to wreak their economic havoc. The culture war, in short, is not real. It is a “never-ending” series of “forgettable skirmishes.” It is an exercise in triviality whereby “Because some artist decides to shock the hicks by dunking Jesus in urine, the entire planet must remake itself along the lines preferred by the Republican Party, U.S.A.”

Why has this right-wing strategy succeeded so well? Beyond the non-explanation that millions of ordinary people have gone off the deep end, Frank offers a couple of suggestions. Part of the blame goes to mass media: “The corporate world... blankets the nation with a cultural style designed to offend and to pretend subvert: sassy teens in Skechers flout the Man; bigoted church-going moms don’t tolerate their daughters’ cool liberated friends; hipsters dressed in T-shirts reading ‘FCUK’ snicker at the suits who just don’t get it.” When *People* magazine features celebrities who raise money for animal rights or tell us not to say mean things about the handicapped and “beautiful people of every description [who] don expensive transgressive fashions, buy expensive, transgressive art,” and so on, it gives

the impression that “liberalism is a matter of shallow appearances, of fatuous self-righteousness; it is arrogant and condescending.” From this perspective it is perfectly understandable that people should vote for backlash politicians who at least “stand there on the floor of the U.S. Senate and shout *no* to it all” (though of course the *no* is entirely hypocritical since “the assaults on... values, the insults, and the Hollywood sneers are all products of capitalism as surely as are McDonald’s hamburgers and Boeing737s”).

Mostly, though, the problem as Frank sees it is that liberalism, which is to say the Democratic Party (he makes no distinction between the two), has lost its way. “For us,” he declares, “it is the Democrats that are the party of workers, of the poor, of the weak and the victimized.” But the Democratic Leadership Council “has long been pushing the party to forget blue-collar workers and concentrate instead on recruiting affluent, white-collar professionals who are liberal on social issues.” Under such influence, Democrats “explicitly rule out what they deride as ‘class warfare’ and take great pains to emphasize their friendliness to business interests.... by dropping the class language that once distinguished them sharply from Republicans they have left themselves vulnerable to cultural wedge issues like guns and abortion and the rest whose hallucinatory appeal would ordinarily be far overshadowed by material concerns.”

Does this polemic sound familiar? It should, if you follow *The Nation*, *The American Prospect*, *Dissent*, *The Progressive*, *Mother Jones* and other left publications, or the work of such writers as Richard Rorty, Michael Tomasky, Michael Lind, and Eric Alterman. Since Ronald Reagan’s victory in 1980, variants of Frank’s argument and calls for the political strategy it implies have been endlessly repeated in the precincts of the liberal left. There is widespread agreement that the left must concentrate its energies on promoting a populist economic program, and that the Democrats, if they want to win elections, must stop being identified as the party of “upper middle class” feminists, gays, and secularists, preoccupied by what Lind calls “inflammatory but marginal issues like abortion.” Unlike Frank himself, many of the writers in this camp directly attack the cultural movements: they demand that feminists, gay rights activists, cultural left academics, and other inflammatory marginals cease and desist from waving red flags at the right by pressuring Democrats to stand firm on abortion and other social issues or making silly claims that popular culture has its subversive aspects or engaging in elitist debates about curriculum or defending artists who dunk Jesus in urine. Libs to cultural rads: shut up.

These writers also tend to share the dubious assumption that the Democrats are at heart the party of the downtrodden, and that the neoliberal economic agenda they have pursued since the Carter administration is a temporary aberration induced by bad strategic thinking (Frank attributes it to a lust for corporate money, along with the mistaken belief that workers will continue to vote Democratic because they have nowhere else to go). But let me bracket that line of thought for the moment and take up their conception of cultural politics. Cultural conflict, so the argument goes, has no real political meaning in its own right and, in itself, no real social consequences—yet for millions of people it takes precedence over real, concrete interests. Cultural concerns, however “hallucinatory,” are so potent as to override workers’ doubts about Republicans’ economic policies—but their effect would vanish in an instant if Democrats’ economic policies were better. Furthermore, cultural issues are a slam-dunk for the Republicans since most Americans basically share the right’s cultural values and only an affluent minority has any actual or potential interest in supporting feminism, gay rights, the sexual revolution, artistic freedom, or the separation of church and state. (Applying this rap to race, the first “social issue” to provoke a right-wing backlash and the reason the south defected to the Republicans, gets a bit complicated, since no one on the left can deny that the condition of blacks is a “real” problem—a dilemma solved by downplaying the cultural aspects of racism and arguing that it’s basically a function of class.)

All these propositions are false. They make hash of the past 40 years of American history and, indeed, of the history of the 20th century; they are absurdly provincial, for the culture war in its various forms is a global phenomenon. If the question of why the right has come to dominate national politics, and how to reverse its ascendancy, is the first and most urgent question anyone on the contemporary left must ask, coming close behind is the puzzle of why so many liberals and “progressives” have signed on to a chimerical view of the relationship of politics, culture, and class.

The first great wave of cultural radicalism in Europe and America, beginning toward the end of the 19th century and lasting into the 1920s, built the framework of cultural modernity: feminism, sexual reform and birth control movements, youth movements, self-conscious homosexuality, psychoanalysis, avant-garde art and its associated bohemianism, the

Russian Revolution with its short-lived burst of sexual, domestic, and educational reforms, the social and cultural ferment of the Weimar Republic. The first great right-wing-populist backlash movement was Nazism. Hitler's *kulturkampf* mobilized the population against the traitorous cultural elite: the rootless cosmopolitans both capitalist and communist, the sexual perverts, the degenerate artists, the race mixers, and above all the iconic representative of all these groups—the Jews. Unlike their contemporary American counterparts, German workers could have voted for communist and socialist parties speaking to their economic interests, yet many supported the Nazis. Then as now, the left saw right-wing populism as purely a tool of corporate interests. For their part, the corporate interests thought they could control Hitler for their own purposes. Both were wrong. In the end, the murder of six million Jews could not be explained by class analysis. If you aimed to understand it, you would have to try to understand the *kulturkampf*: what was the profound appeal of Hitler's world view? Then as now, the mainstream of the left resisted this question, uncritically sharing the general tendency to attribute the Holocaust to an inexplicable outbreak of "evil."

The renewed cultural revolt known as "the '60s" had its epicenter in the United States, but its impact was felt worldwide. Feminism is a global movement, American mass culture with its invitations to sexual and other material pleasures is everywhere, and the vast increase in all manner of transnational interchange attendant on globalization ensures that almost nowhere on earth are people insulated from the challenges of secular cosmopolitanism to traditional religious and patriarchal authority as well as to nationalism and the preservation of local culture. The reaction, in turn, has not been confined to the United States and its Christian right. Militant fundamentalism in the Islamic world and its European diaspora is the most conspicuous, violent form of global backlash, but there is also right-wing Catholicism in Eastern Europe, ultra-orthodox Judaism in Israel (and its Brooklyn diaspora), evangelicalism in Latin America and South Africa, Hindu and Sikh fundamentalism in India. The role of capitalism in encouraging both cultural revolt and the reaction against it is complex—more on this later—but it should be clear that the latter is not a Republican plot. The American Christian right may be in bed with capital; the Islamists of the Middle East are not. Indeed, this has been very confusing to an American left that can't understand religion and culture as real issues: the great majority of leftists, feminists excepted, supported the Iranian revolution and are ignoring the incipient disaster of theocracy in Iraq; as for Osama bin Laden, those who do not buy the argument that 9/11 was simply motivated by

revenge, however misguided, for American Middle East policy have again resorted to “evil” as a convenient non-analysis.

The cultural radical impulse is rooted in the core elements of the democratic ideal: equality and freedom. There is a clear logic in the progression from affirming that all men are created equal, with the right to choose their government, enjoy freedom of speech and religion, and pursue happiness, to demanding that these rights apply to racial minorities, women, homosexuals, young people, atheists and other groups in one way or another denied them; that the challenge to repressive authority extend beyond government to institutions like the corporation, the family, and the church; that the pursuit of happiness include freedom from sexual restrictions dictated by patriarchal religious norms; that free speech include explicitly sexual and anti-religious speech. Such demands, however, challenge not only deep structures of social privilege and subordination but our very definition of morality. All of us living in Judeo-Christian or Islamic cultures have imbibed from infancy a conception of sexuality—and desire more generally—as dangerous and destructive unless strictly controlled, of repression and self-sacrifice as indispensable virtues. Movements that encourage us to fulfill our desires are bound to arouse conflicting emotions, to intensify people’s yearnings for freedom and pleasure, but also their anxiety and guilt about such primal rebellion. An outpouring of social experiment and innovation liberates creative energies, but also rage—at oppression, at losses of status and privilege, at the sources of anxiety and confusion. Cultural radical demands immediately question and disrupt existing social institutions, yet building democratic alternatives is a long-term affair: this leaves painful gaps in which men and women don’t know how to behave with each other, in which marriage can no longer provide a stable environment for children but it’s not clear what to do instead. Is it really surprising that cultural revolution should cause conflict?

To argue that this conflict has no political significance is to say that democratic values have none—never mind the blood and passion expended by democrats and their enemies. To argue that one’s “material interests” have only to do with economic class is to say that sexual satisfaction or frustration, bodily integrity and autonomy or the lack of same in the sexual and reproductive realm, the happiness or misery of our lives as lovers and spouses, parents and children are ethereal matters that have no impact on our physical being. (If abortion is a marginal issue, what about contraception, which was illegal in Connecticut until the Supreme Court’s *Griswold* decision of 1965?) To dismiss as “hallucinatory” people’s embattlement

about what moral and cultural norms will govern their everyday lives and intimate relationships is to say that people (at least working class people) do not, under normal circumstances, care deeply about anything beyond the size of their paychecks. Nor does this view consider that culture and economics are deeply intertwined: the family, after all, is an economic as well as a cultural institution. (Is sexist bias in divorce settlements a cultural or an economic issue? What about women's "second shift" in the household?)

A similar disregard for history, and for the concrete realities of American life, is embedded in another of Frank *et al.*'s assumptions: that cultural liberalism is entirely an artifact of the upper classes, while most Americans are social conservatives, essentially uninfluenced, except in a negative direction, by the cultural upheavals of the past 40 years. In fact, though the countercultural movements of the '60s came largely from the educated middle class, their influence soon spread far beyond those origins, especially among young people. Rock and roll—invented by black people, taken up by white teenagers, combined with folk music and blues by white bohemians—became the rebellious lingua franca of a generation. Marijuana and countercultural styles in dress, hair, and speech migrated from the cities to the provinces and up and down the class ladder (certain '60s styles—like long hair for men—have remained widespread in the white working class, long after the middle class abandoned them). Young Detroit auto workers and working-class Vietnam veterans were conspicuous participants in the dissident culture and its political disaffection. Feminism mutated, emphasizing or playing down different issues, as it arrived in black neighborhoods, union halls, Catholic and evangelical churches, Colorado and Mississippi, but no stratum of society or section of the country was untouched by it. Attitudes toward openness about sex, female sexuality, single motherhood, divorce, women's right to equal education and jobs changed across the board. Abortion is now commonplace (ending one out of five pregnancies, according to the *New York Times*) among women of all classes. Homosexuality is increasingly accepted, queasiness about gay marriage notwithstanding.

A telling indication of these widespread changes is the very social permissiveness of contemporary pop culture that Frank charges with contributing to the backlash. Like many critics of capitalism, Frank makes the mistake of imagining that mass culture is a pure reflection of the corporate class that produces it and has nothing to do with the tastes or values of the mass audience that consumes it—as if it were the habit of corporations to pursue profits by offending most of their customers, rather than trying to

appeal to their desires and fantasies. No doubt some readers are offended by the liberal “beautiful people” in *People*, but what about the three million or more who buy the magazine each week? Conservatives may be scandalized by Skecher’s ads, or hip-hop, or pornography on the Internet, but their audience is hardly limited to the rich. In the course of purveying culture the corporations have committed many sins against art, against thought, against human decency and the public good—but blowing off Middle America is not one of them.

Of course, many people who are drawn to the hedonistic world of mass culture may at the same time feel guilty or repelled; which is to say that on such matters Americans are ambivalent. There is clearly a large gap between what people say to pollsters about cultural issues and how they actually live. Surveys in which 40% of Americans claim to attend church regularly have been contradicted by studies that measure actual attendance (the most famous such study, published in the *American Sociological Review* in 1993, put the figures at 20% for Protestants and 28% for Catholics). A recent *New York Times* article on an abortion clinic in Little Rock, Arkansas, interviewed 26 patients, some of whom had had more than one abortion: several said they believed abortion was wrong, selfish, or against their religion, but nonetheless felt they were too young or poor or alone to take care of a child. The American public has also shown on numerous occasions that it is leery of the sexual Robespierres of the theocratic right. Their antics at the 1992 Republican convention, where Pat Buchanan declared “a religious war... for the soul of America” and Marilyn Quayle disparaged working women (husband Dan had earlier made his notorious attack on the single motherhood of TV character Murphy Brown), were widely considered to have contributed to Bush *pere’s* defeat. Americans were not happy about Bill Clinton’s affair with Monica, yet they refused to join the right’s crusade against him; they reacted to the Starr Report’s prurient details with hostility toward Starr, opposed Clinton’s impeachment, and punished the Republicans for it in the next Congressional election. (This recalcitrance was bitterly frustrating to right-wing activists, prompting William Bennett to lament “the death of outrage” and Paul Weyrich to advocate abandoning electoral politics in favor of building separatist Christian institutions.) Nor did the majority of Americans support the right’s most recent wretched excess of cultural grandstanding—its orchestrating of federal intervention in the Terri Schiavo case. Assuming for the sake of the argument that “moral values” were a significant factor in the last two presidential elections, their closeness is yet another rebuke to the notion that the mass of the working

population supports the cultural right's agenda. Bush lost the popular vote in 2000 and won it by only 2.5% in 2004; Kerry received over 26,000,000 votes in "red" states, including 420,846 in Kansas.

The public's continuing ambivalence about cultural matters is all the more striking given that the political conversation on these issues has for 30 years been dominated by an aggressive, radical right-wing insurgency that has achieved an influence far out of proportion to its numbers. Its potent secret weapon has been the guilt and anxiety about desire that inform the character of Americans regardless of ideology; appealing to those largely unconscious emotions, the right has disarmed, intimidated, paralyzed its opposition. From the time the evangelical right's "pro-family" movement arose and joined forces with Catholic right-to-life organizers in the mid-70s, the broad left, including liberal feminists, adopted a strategy of appeasement rather than militant defense of feminism and abortion rights. Many men on the left had supported the women's movement only reluctantly and in response to tremendous political pressure at the height of the feminist surge; they jettisoned this baggage with relief. But plain sexism was only part of the story. It could not explain why Betty Friedan attacked feminist radicals and proclaimed herself "pro-family"; why feminist leaders insisted that the Equal Rights Amendment had nothing to do with abortion or lesbian rights or a critique of traditional sexual roles; why advocates of legal abortion began apologizing, praising the moral commitment of their opponents, and talking about "choice" in the abstract rather than the procedure that dare not speak its name. The appeasers argued that they needed to soften their stands to avoid alienating traditionalist voters from the ERA campaign, the "pro-choice" movement and the Democratic Party. But in truth their lack of conviction that a majority of Americans could be won over—if not immediately, then in the long run—to a politics of equality, freedom and pleasure reflected their own deep doubts about the legitimacy of those values. They were appeasing themselves as much as anyone else.

Predictably, the strategy of pandering to the right was an abject failure: Reagan was elected; the ERA lost. If an ambivalent public hears only one side of a question, the conservative side, passionately argued—if people's impulses to the contrary are never reinforced, and they perceive that the putative spokespeople for feminism and liberalism are actually uncomfortable

about advancing their views—the passionate arguers will carry the day. Why would anyone support a movement that won't stand behind its own program? But the left did not learn the obvious lesson—that to back away from fighting for your beliefs on the grounds that you have no hope of persuading people to share them is to perpetrate a self-fulfilling prophecy. On the contrary, the appeasers could see in their defeats only a confirmation of their pessimism. This scenario has been repeated countless times as the country has moved steadily to the right, yet it appears to have inspired no second thoughts. The stubborn failure to rethink a losing strategy can't help but suggest that its proponents on some level do not really care to win.

If despite this abdication the cultural right has met considerable popular resistance—if most people today, including many who profess to be conservatives, are reluctant to give up certain social freedoms or deny them to others—suppose the left had consistently stood up for the principle of a feminist, democratic culture? Can anyone doubt that the political landscape would be different? It follows, surely, that if the left were now to push back on cultural issues, it would find Americans more receptive than it imagines. But for Tom Frank, the fact that the right has not decisively won the culture war leads to a different conclusion, reminiscent of Vermont Senator George Aiken's position on Vietnam—that we should say we won and go home. According to him, nothing has changed culturally, and nothing will change, because our corporate rulers don't want it to.

It's at this point that Frank crosses the line from merely being wrongheaded to committing the intellectual equivalent of criminal negligence. For a great many people, especially women, have suffered, and continue to suffer, from those practical effects of the cultural backlash that he insists do not exist, and therefore need not detain us. True, the corporate wing of the Republican Party (which is to say the dominant wing, ideologically and financially) sees the religious right mainly as a key constituency that is essential to a winning coalition and useful for such purposes as providing a moral rationale for laissez-faire policies. For much of the party leadership, including Reagan and both Bushes, cultural issues have indeed been a handy demagogic tool rather than a serious priority. But this is not to say the Republicans are averse to rewarding their evangelical allies whenever feasible. They have first of all given what used to be the lunatic fringe the prestige and legitimacy accorded to players in the nation's ruling party, as well as an ongoing national platform for their propaganda and for psychodramas like the Schiavo affair. They have treated as patronage

for the Christian right numerous judicial appointments that will shape the courts for years to come, along with executive appointments that affect policy in areas ranging from criminal justice to women's health. Myriad laws and executive orders have financed religious activities and sanctioned religious discrimination in publicly funded jobs, banned all federal funding for abortion, required promotion of abstinence as a condition of supporting domestic sex education programs or international AIDS prevention organizations, restricted stem-cell research, blocked over-the-counter sale of the morning-after pill, denied federal grants to artists who don't meet religious right standards of decency (a very partial list). Nor should it be forgotten that the radical right nearly brought down a president out of cultural animus (Clinton's neoliberal economic policies could hardly have been the motive).

But the impact of the backlash transcends its role in the federal government. Christian right activists are a major force in local and state politics, from school boards to legislatures, especially but not exclusively in the south. They have also profoundly influenced the political climate—including, as I've noted, the behavior of their supposed opponents—and thereby the informal social norms and pressures that, far more than government action, dictate what people feel free to do, say, or even think. On all these levels they have pursued a war against secularism whose effects range from the planting of religious monuments in public buildings and efforts to teach religious pseudo-science in public schools to a new unofficial requirement for presidential candidates—that they not only believe in God but feel comfortable making public professions of faith.

Frank's cavalier pronouncement that "Abortion is never halted" is literally correct—abortion was never halted even when it was illegal all over the country—but entirely misses the point: the goal of the right is not to stop abortion but to demonize it, punish it and make it as difficult and traumatic as possible. All this it has accomplished fairly well, even without overturning *Roe v. Wade*. Current legal restrictions include bans on funding abortion for Medicaid patients, parental consent requirements, regulations that make abortion clinics prohibitively expensive to operate, waiting period and counseling requirements that force women to make more than one trip to the clinic. (Evidently, for all his class consciousness Frank is unaware of how heavily these restrictions weigh on poor and working-class women, who can't afford to travel or take time off from their jobs, and must often delay their abortions beyond the safest period to save enough money for the fee.) And then there are the extra-legal tactics—the right's

relentless stigmatizing of abortion (helped along by apologetic liberals), its harassment of clinic patients and staffs, its hit-list websites posting “murderers” names and addresses, and its terrorist assassinations of doctors.

As a result large sections of the country have few or no abortion providers. Many clinics close because they can’t afford to comply with regulations, can’t get insurance, or are kicked out by landlords. Fewer and fewer doctors are willing to perform abortions, and most medical schools do not even teach the procedure. Increasingly, women who exercise their legal right do so in an atmosphere that encourages guilt, shame and fear. At the Little Rock abortion clinic women worried about being ostracized were their secret to be known. “I’d lose my job,” one said. “My family’s reputation would be ruined. It makes me nervous even being in the waiting room.” Nor should we imagine that such sentiment is confined to the likes of conservative Arkansas (where, nevertheless, Kerry got 45% of the vote). What are we to make of the recent cases of high school girls in the northeast, bastion of the cultural elite, who could find no solution to their unwanted pregnancies but to kill their newborn infants? Tom: is this real enough for you?

The idea that cultural radicalism is antithetical to egalitarian class politics—that it is at best a divisive distraction, at worst a weapon of the bourgeoisie—is not new. It has been floating around the socialist and communist movements since the 1880s and has been predominant on the left for the past century (except, perhaps, for a brief period during the 1960s). One strand of the argument rests on a populist identity politics that associates conventional morality with “working class values.” For most of history, only aristocrats had the power to avoid work, pursue pleasure and flout with impunity the moral norms that applied to their inferiors; sexual rebellion in particular has been identified with domination (see the writings of the Marquis de Sade). In the modern era, feminist and other cultural radical movements have typically been founded by people who are economically secure enough to be free of day-to-day worry about survival and so able to focus on what’s wrong with the quality of their lives. At the other end of the class hierarchy, since the emergence of the “lumpenproletariat” in the 19th century, “vice” has also been associated with social outcasts who have nothing to lose. It is therefore supposed to be a point of working-class pride, solidarity, and salt-of-the-earth status to reject the “decadence” of the rich and the upper middle class as well as the fecklessness of

the very poor. The contemporary right's incitement of working people to direct their class anger against the "cultural elite" was in fact anticipated by the venerable and still prominent left tradition of charging cultural radicals with trespassing on the values of workers. Its exponents do not see—because they are blinded by their own guilt and fear of freedom—that subjection to sexual conformity and bromides about the "dignity of work" is if anything part of working-class oppression; that sexual happiness and freedom from alienated labor are universal goods to which everyone is entitled.

Another left rationale for rejecting cultural politics is rooted in the historical connection of cultural movements to the marketplace. The rise of capitalism, which undermined the authority of the patriarchal family and church, put widespread cultural revolt in the realm of possibility. Wage labor allowed women and young people to find a means of support outside the home. Urbanization allowed people the freedom of social anonymity. The shift from production- to consumption-oriented capitalism and the spread of mass media encouraged cultural permissiveness, since the primary technique of marketing as well as the most salient attraction of mass art is their appeal to the desire for individual autonomy and pleasure and specifically to erotic fantasy.

Accordingly, left cultural conservatives have argued that feminism and cultural radicalism, in weakening traditional institutions like the family, have merely contributed to the market's hegemony over all spheres of life. Many leftists, including Frank, see the cultural movements through the lens of their hostility to consumerism: observing that commercial exploitation of sex is ubiquitous and that rock and roll, feminism, and other countercultural artifacts have been used to sell everything from cars and fashions to credit cards and mutual funds, they conclude that cultural liberation, like the backlash against it, is a tool of capitalist domination. That capital is promiscuous in its zeal to reduce human impulses to selling points—willing to dish up feminism or family values, sex or religion as the occasion demands—is interpreted to mean that there is no real opposition between cultural left and right.

Again, this mindset puts a progressive political gloss on what is really a form of puritanism, offended by the fleshpots of the market, not just the profits. What it ignores, or denies—as Marx never did—is the paradoxical nature of capitalism. In destroying the old patriarchal order, in making all that was solid melt into air, in fomenting constant dynamism and change, capital made space for the revolutionary ideas that would challenge its

own authority. In letting loose the genie of desire in the service of profit, consumer culture unleashes forces that can't reliably be controlled. Frank and his fellow anti-culture-warriors sneer at the idea that there can be anything subversive about popular culture, and indeed, these days the process of channeling potentially rebellious impulses into safe activities like shopping seems to be working well. Yet in the very different political and social context of the '60s, the invitation to pleasure that pervaded mass culture, from its advertising to its music, played an important role in the cultural revolt: it peeled off the repressive, security-oriented surface of post-World War II America and suggested to young people that another way of life was possible.

A crucial ingredient of that '60s context was unprecedented mass prosperity. In the post-war years the great majority of the white population had attained a middle-class standard of living; they produced a generation of children—a particularly large one, at that—who had never known the Depression and grew up taking economic security for granted, greatly expanding the pool of people likely to notice their cultural discontents. Though black people remained poor relative to whites, they too benefited from the general prosperity, enough so that a critical mass of students, clergy, and other middle-class activists was available to start the civil rights and black power movements (which in turn became a template for feminism and a major influence on the white left and counterculture). At the same time, the success of the post-war economy muted class conflict. Although '60s radicals did raise class issues, they did not gain much traction; most people were satisfied with their economic status, while liberals regarded the persistence of poverty and racial discrimination as occasions for a cleanup operation rather than evidence of any systemic problem. In contrast, cultural issues—feminism especially—tapped into widespread dissatisfaction and quickly became the signature of the time.

As I've suggested, the very nature of the cultural rebellion provoked a backlash; it was well underway by 1968—even as the radical feminist movement was getting off the ground—and four years later George McGovern sank under the weight of the slogan "Acid, Amnesty, and Abortion." But the reaction accelerated and intensified after 1973, when the economy contracted amid the first conspicuous domestic symptoms of what would come to be called globalization. Just as economic security had encouraged cultural experimentation and dissidence, economic anxiety had the opposite effect. In addition the renewed class warfare that marked this period was presented as a cultural offensive. Politicians and corporate spokespeople

justified lower wages, layoffs, and assaults on public goods and social welfare programs as moral correctives to Americans' hedonism, profligacy, and excessive expectations.

Until 1980 this offensive was bipartisan (it reached its height under Jimmy Carter) and targeted the American people in general. It was the Reagan administration that began scapegoating the cultural elite (Spiro Agnew's "effete snobs" and "nattering nabobs") along with the "welfare queens" of the underclass. But Reagan also did something the left, to its great misfortune, has never understood: with his paean to "morning in America" and call for an "opportunity society" he coopted the yearnings that had been aroused by the '60s movements and stifled by the nonstop pull-up-your-socks lecture of the Carter years. Freedom, as recoded by the Reagan right, meant pursuing unlimited wealth, at least in one's dreams, and so identifying with the rich, their desire for low taxes, and their aversion to "big government"; it meant embracing America's mission to make the world safe for democracy; it meant license to express rage. Pleasure in sex might be restricted, but pleasure in aggression was encouraged, including uninhibited bashing of black people, poor people, criminals, deviants, and liberals. The cultural elite, on the other hand, was portrayed as not only immoral and unpatriotic but repressive, what with its guilt-mongering attacks on greed and its allergy to guns and its lectures about bigoted language. Ever since, the right has won elections with some version of this formula. Its success has depended on convincing working-class swing voters not only that liberals are their class enemy, but that their own aspirations for "opportunity" and "ownership" are best expressed by policies that favor the rich. It's true that during this time American workers have not been offered a serious alternative to the right's plutocratic program. But neither have they been offered *any* alternative to the right's conception of freedom. The disastrous trajectory of American politics should long since have made clear that this second lacuna is as ruinous as the first—if not more so.

What little intra-left debate there has been on *What's the Matter with Kansas?* has centered on the question of "false consciousness." Does it exist? And do working-class cultural conservatives really suffer from it, or have they just figured out that there's no significant difference between the parties on economic issues so they may as well vote to defend their privileges as white people or men or Christians? I find the latter view reductive and not very interesting. On the other hand, I can't go along with Frank's implicit judgment that the right is more deluded than the left. I've already argued that leftists' refusal to take on the culture war has more to do with

their own conservative impulses than with any rational strategy for a progressive revival. But what of the other trait the anti-culture-warriors appear to have in common—their mystifying attachment to the Democratic Party? Consider that the last Democratic administration to profess the philosophy of the New Deal—Lyndon Johnson’s—held office before Tom Frank was born. A few years later, capital pulled out of the business-labor-government coalition that in response to the Depression and the Cold War had committed itself to maintaining a prosperous, stable middle class with high wages, social benefits, and government regulation. From now on, Americans were told, we would have to submit to the discipline of the free market. Carter embraced the neoliberal order with its mantra of austerity; he presided (with the help of Ted Kennedy) over decontrol of oil prices and deregulation of the airline, trucking, and banking industries. Clinton supported the pro-corporate program of the Democratic Leadership Council and abolished the entitlement to welfare. The Democratic establishment is firmly center-right, as its last two presidential candidates have been. The party has no economic-populist faction with any organization or influence; in any case the party of Roosevelt was the product of a particular set of conditions that are gone and will not return. Ironically, the Democrats do exactly what Frank accuses the Republicans of doing: they use cultural issues to get the base to swallow their economic policy (“We have to keep to the center or those swing voters will elect the lunatics, and there goes the Supreme Court”). *Vote to protect Roe v. Wade; receive NAFTA.*

Is the fantasy of the Democrats’ renaissance just a matter of naivete, or is something deeper going on? I suspect it’s of a piece with the denial that culture is important—a defense against the terror of radicalism that must be warded off at all costs. For some, there is also nostalgia for a time when white liberal men like Tom Frank were heroes, before they were robbed of the spotlight by blacks, women and gays, forced to confront private conflicts as public issues, and ultimately pushed aside by the right. There is something poignant about this, given the political bleakness of the day, but it’s an indulgence the American left cannot afford. We need to look not to the New Deal but to a new politics, one that recognizes equality and freedom, class and culture, as ineluctably linked. That we’re so far from this recognition makes Kansas the least of our problems.