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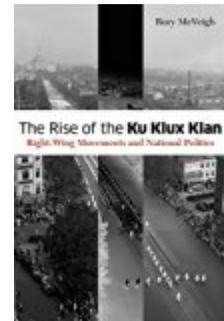
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Rory McVeigh. *The Rise of the Ku Klux Klan: Right-Wing Movements and National Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. 244 pp. \$67.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8166-5619-6; \$22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8166-5620-2.

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## The Second Ku Klux Klan and the Dynamics of Right-Wing Mobilization

In the early 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan reached the height of its popularity, boasting up to five million members in four thousand local chapters across the nation, and exerting considerable political influence in numerous states and localities. Despite its strength, scholars through the mid twentieth century largely regarded the Klan as akin to the Klans of the Reconstruction era and civil rights era, a radical movement, attracting racial extremists motivated by irrational animosities. In the 1990s, a number of scholars came to challenge this view in order to make sense of the Klan's widespread appeal amongst many middle-class, white Protestants in every state of the nation, especially in the Midwest.[1] The Klan, after all, promoted itself as an all-American, family organization, hosting picnics and parades, and did so quite effectively, despite the secrecy of its membership, its eerie costumes and unnerving initiation ceremonies, and, in some places, members' not infrequent use of violence and intimidation against perceived wrongdoers. In what was known as the "new Klan scholarship," which is now simply the standard Klan scholarship, these scholars revealed how the Klan fashioned a vision of white Protestant nationalism that spoke to the values and concerns of millions of ordinary citizens. Not that these scholars downplayed the pernicious aspects of the organization, namely its nativism, religious bigotry, and white supremacy; rather they showed how those beliefs came to be accepted as mainstream amidst a host of social and economic changes in the early twentieth century. Industrial and corporate expansion, the massive political influ-

ence wielded by financial powerbrokers, as well as cultural changes stemming from trends like feminism and rising consumerism, all led the Klan's constituents to see themselves as under assault. Jews, Catholics, and African Americans became easy scapegoats for larger fears that, in modern America, traditional moral values were on the decline and the standing of the white, Protestant middle class had become endangered, giving rise to the Klan's particular brand of reactionary populism.

Rory McVeigh's portrayal of the second Klan in this new sociological study of the organization does not differ substantially from these studies. What he has offered is the first in-depth analysis of the Klan's appeal on a national scale. To date, the best Klan scholarship has revolved around state or local studies, and those books that have looked at the Klan nationally have tended to be narrative accounts.[2] Klan recruiters did regularly focus on local concerns as a means to attract members, but McVeigh shows how the Klan "articulated the grievances of many native-born, white Protestants ... [that] were to a great extent rooted in national rather than localized conflicts" (p. 180). Throughout this lucidly written and well-thought-out book, he lays out those conflicts, connecting macro-structural changes in U.S. society at the time to the Klan's extraordinary growth in a more systematic way than previous scholars have done.

McVeigh's national scope has the particular advantage of shedding light on the curious matter that the

Klan's nativist and white supremacist rhetoric resonated most strongly in places with relatively low immigrant and minority populations. This fact contradicts well-established theories that ethnic conflict is most likely to arise in places where different groups are competing for jobs or resources, which was certainly not the case in the towns and small cities across the Midwest where the Klan had its greatest hold. By looking at structural change nationwide, McVeigh is able to assess why Klansmen in these places would perceive immigrants and African Americans as threats without being in direct competition or contact with them.

As a sociologist, McVeigh also seeks to understand why the Klan mobilized into collective action at the time that it did in light of various theories on social movements. Most existing theories, however, pertain to left-leaning movements that represent marginalized and oppressed groups seeking recognition, rights, or access to resources within the dominant society, and thus they fail to account for the mobilization of dominant groups who have opportunities and resources already available to them. To make sense of the Klan's rise, McVeigh devises a new theoretical model, what he calls "power devaluation theory," which he hopes can be applied to other right-wing movements.

This theory, simply put, asserts that members of a dominant social group will only mobilize into social action when they believe that the power they hold has been shaken, that is, that it has been devalued in some sense. The Klan, in this regard, appealed to white Protestant men who felt they were losing political, economic, and cultural capital in a rapidly changing society. The central chapters of the book then examine the dynamics of power devaluation in these three areas—economic, political, and cultural status—in turn, while still paying attention to the ways in which these three arenas overlapped.

McVeigh's primary database is the Klan's official weekly newspaper, the *Imperial Night-Hawk*, which he uses to ascertain the ways in which the Klan leadership framed and interpreted larger social and political issues. He is careful about how he uses this source and he recognizes its limits, as he cannot determine the sentiments or motivations of ordinary Klansmen, or, without examining local Klan records, make claims about Klan membership or activities. Here he relies on the studies of numerous other scholars. His methodology also leads him to a top-down conceptualization of the organization, in which its ideology and strategies were devised by Klan leaders and then sold to its members. Klan leaders diag-

nosed national problems and then motivated Klansmen to act upon them, though, certainly, as McVeigh makes clear, the Klan would not have been successful had its diagnoses not resonated with the lived experience of its constituents.

McVeigh argues that mass industrialization and the enormous spread of corporate power in the early twentieth century threatened the economic position of small merchants and farmers, as well as skilled laborers—the middle-class men who were mostly likely to join the Klan. Klan rhetoric that deplored both corporate power-brokers and unskilled workers, namely those immigrants and African Americans who through their labor supported industry, resonated strongly with these men in the middle. They did not need to be in immediate economic competition with immigrants or African Americans to sense that their labor had been devalued in the modern industrial order. The Klan framed this sense of economic devaluation in terms of Jeffersonian republicanism, arguing that something central to American identity had been lost when small farmers and businessmen had little economic clout anymore. This feeling was not new in the early 1920s; after all, these same concerns had inspired both agrarian populism and elements of the Progressive movement, though the Klan had important differences from these earlier movements. To explain then why the Klan was able to mobilize its constituents when it did, McVeigh positions World War I as a pivotal moment, since manufacturing decreased after the war and new tariffs that were implemented after the war benefited big business at the expense of farmers and consumers.

Klansmen also believed that their political clout had diminished in this new economic order. Political power, in their view, was now concentrated in the nation's urban industrial core, wielded by both financial powerbrokers and machine politicians, the latter supported by immigrants and ethnic minorities. Moreover, McVeigh contends, immigration, black migration, and women's suffrage had added millions of new voters, all of which devalued the votes of white Protestant men. The Klan political activities were all tactics to bolster and restore the political capital of these men, by creating powerful voting blocs or supporting politicians who represented their interests.

The Klan's moral crusades on behalf of core Protestant values were not disconnected from these political and economic concerns. Fitting these crusades into his theoretical model, McVeigh argues that they stemmed from Klansmen's sense that their cultural status had been

devalued as well. In this section of the book, he focuses on the Klan's campaign on behalf of public education, a fascinating aspect of Klan activity that has been understudied. Klan rhetoric painted a picture of a failing and underfunded school system, which threatened middle-class aspirations for social mobility and, moreover, according to republican ideology, put the nation as a whole at risk. McVeigh shows, however, that education was not at all in crisis in this period: more students were going to school than ever before and funding for education was increasing nationwide. The threats that the Klan perceived were thus not grounded in fact, but, rather, stemmed from fears that as groups that had been previously excluded from education, namely women, African Americans, and the poor, were gaining access to it, education as a marker of social status had been devalued. Furthermore, Klansmen, McVeigh theorizes, feared that public schools were not as effective as the many parochial schools that Catholic immigrants had established to circumvent the Protestant focus of public schools, and, therefore, their children were losing ground to the children of groups they considered subordinate. The Klan's rhetoric and appeal, in this sense, derived from status anxiety, the alarm that their cultural capital was threatened in an increasingly diverse and cosmopolitan America.

McVeigh's careful development of this "power devaluation" theory and his methodical analysis of how it operated in terms of Klan ideology are welcome and thought-provoking. He tends to draw lines, however, between his theory and other scholars' analyses a bit too starkly. What he has done is provide a model that illuminates the Klan's reactionary populism and adds in

substantive ways to our collective scholarly understanding of the Klan's national appeal in the 1920s. But that model does not revise that understanding to the extent that McVeigh at times claims. Still, power devaluation theory has a lot of value as an explanatory model for not only the Klan, but other right-wing movements, historical or otherwise. Indeed, as one read this book, it is difficult not to think about present-day conservative movements, like the Christian Right or the Tea Party movement, as springing from similar kinds of power devaluation.

#### Notes

[1]. The most notable of these were Leonard J. Moore, *Citizen Klansmen: The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, 1921-1928* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Kathleen Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); and Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[2]. Besides Moore and MacLean, other local studies include Shawn Lay, *Hooded Knights on the Niagara: The Ku Klux Klan in Buffalo, New York* (New York: New York University Press, 1995); and Glenn Feldman, *Politics, Society, and the Klan in Alabama, 1915-1949* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999). The most well-known narrative accounts of the nationwide Klan are Wyn Craig Wade, *The Fiery Cross: The Ku Klux Klan in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); and David M. Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987).

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