Over the last few years, increasing numbers of historians have attempted to explain the phenomenon of the 1920s Ku Klux Klan. The primary thrust of these studies has been to place the Klan within the context of both contemporary culture and the evolution of American political ideology – especially as a potential link between Populism and postwar conservatism. These newer interpretations have provided a framework that not only incorporates local conservatism into the larger narrative of American political culture, but also challenges older arguments that stress the Klan as an anomalous collection of backward yokels clinging to provincialism.

Glenn Feldman’s *Politics, Society, and the Klan in Alabama* follows this historiographic trend. He deftly demonstrates how the Alabama Ku Klux Klan offered a clear alternative to a political agenda established by an alliance of industrial leaders and plantation owners, what Feldman calls the “Big Mule/Black Belt Alliance” (p. 9). It is important to note that Feldman’s study differs from many other recent works; he is primarily concerned with the Klan’s impact on Alabama politics. He does not examine closely the ideology or philosophy of the Klan. Rather, he builds on the existing literature and then expands the chronological narrative of the Klan beyond the 1920s to explore the links between the Klan’s three main incarnations – Reconstruction, the 1920s, and the 1950s. Secondly, he presents the Klan as a mainstream social movement exercising political power.

From its revival in 1916 to its incredible political success in the 1926 elections, the Klan in Alabama enjoyed widespread support. Its membership crossed class lines and city limits. In 1926, as a source of political power for the petite bourgeois, Klan members elected a United States Senator, a Governor, and an Attorney General. The Klan’s potential for political power, however, threatened the hegemony of the Big Mule/Black Belt alliance, a group of wealthy elites who dictated the course of Alabama politics, and which quickly sought to destroy the Klan as a political foe. The political conflicts and contests between the Klan and Mules are the strength of the study.

Originally, the Klan had the support of the economic elite. The Mule press and prominent leaders praised this new version of the Hooded Order with favorable comparisons to the Reconstruction-era Klan. Chapters formed
throughout Alabama. These “Klaverns” sponsored parades, picnics, and barbecues. They gave to charity and supported law enforcement and public education. Klan members believed that they had a responsibility to promote Americanism and civic pride; they practiced an “active, hands-on citizenship that would remedy the shortcomings and preserve the virtues of the respective communities in which Klan members lived” (p. 38). Deploitably, their remedies, with an alarming frequency, involved inexpressible violence. They whipped, flogged, beat, and lynched those they felt violated their peculiar moral code: prostitutes, bootleggers, drinkers, and other men and women for a variety of excuses. African Americans, Catholics, Immigrants, Jews, and labor union members also became Klan victims for no reason other than being in Alabama.

Those familiar with the history of the 1920s Klan in other places will recognize a familiar trajectory in Feldman’s history. Klan recruiters take advantage of the patriotic fervor created during the First World War to enlist thousands of new members. Local residents concerned with rapid changes in American society and enticed by the secrecy and ritual join the group in droves. Klan leaders promote Americanism at rallies and other carnivalesque activities and promise to protect the morals and values of their communities. Some Klan members turn to politics to take advantage of a built-in bloc of votes while others take advantage of the group’s secrecy by using extralegal violence to punish those who threaten their concept of a moral community. Klan candidates, running on a “progressive” platform, win enough elections to threaten the political status quo. Public outcries over escalating violence convince many of the “better elements” to leave the group. Thus, just as the Klan reaches its zenith of political power, violence provides the opposition with the tools it needs to turn public opinion against the Klan.

Feldman, however, begins to unravel what has become a too-familiar tale by tracking the trajectory of what he describes as a “multiplicity of Klans” (p.88). He is also more successful than most recent historians at chronicling the public response to the Klan over time. The Alabama Klan, according to Feldman, was both provincial and progressive, violent and intolerant yet obsessed with law and morality. Rather than simply describing the political rise and fall of the Alabama Klan, Feldman uses the political contests and struggles for power to demonstrate how the Klan fit into the political pattern of twentieth-century Alabama politics. He is also successful at reintroducing the significance of violence, incredible levels of violence, that differentiated the Klan from other groups dedicated to middle-class ideals. Feldman then goes on to show how political defeat and the loss of its middle-class, “respectable” status mutated the Klan into a smaller, angrier instrument for the protection of the racial, social, and economic status quo. Klansmen attacked labor union organizers, Communists, and contentious sharecroppers. In the 1930s and 1940s, the Klan became, in effect, the shock troops of the Big Mule/Black Belt alliance that stifled many challenges to the economic and political elite.

Viewing prewar politics and society in Alabama through the lens of the Klan offers an interesting perspective on southern politics. Politics, Society, and the Klan in Alabama, however, suffers from some organizational and analytical limitations. Bluntly, the first half of the book is too long and overly repetitive. The political conflict between the economic elite and the middle-class Klan loses its intensity as it stretches out over eight of the first ten chapters. A more significant problem is Feldman’s argument that the Klan represented a “Progressive” alternative to Big Mule/Black Belt power; at one point, he claims that the Klan was “progressivism carried to its logical conclusion” (p. 326). While I would argue that Progressivism can still prove useful as an analytic tool, I would add that it is a delicate tool, not a hammer. As recent historiography has shown, “progressivism,” as a term and as a movement, should be defined carefully.

Ironically, the most problematic section of Politics, Society, and the Klan in Alabama is also its greatest strength. Feldman’s extension of Klan history into the 1930s and 1940s, the era of the “lost [or bridge] Klan,” makes an important contribution to American political history (p. 220). His thesis that the Klan transformed from a middle-class proponent of change into an agent of repression against radicalism offers a crucial link in the history of right-wing political behavior. What is missing is an analysis of an accompanying shift (or lack thereof) in Klan ideology. Exploring the attitudes of Klansmen during this period beyond their devotion to white supremacy and anticommunism could provide a critical link between the civic-minded middle-class of the 1920s and the rise of right-wing politics in the South in the 1960s.

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