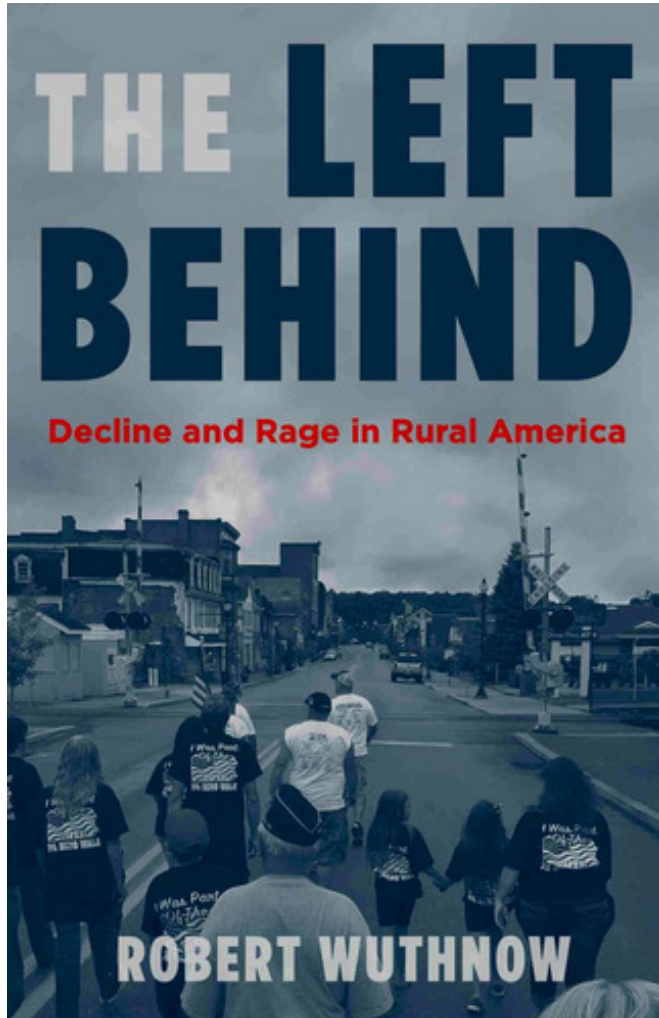


IN THE ‘HEARTLAND’

Wuthnow offers more than a superficial understanding

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“The Left Behind: Decline and Rage in Rural America” by Robert Wuthnow. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2018. 200 pages, \$24.95 (hardcover).



“I’ve spent the past decade studying and writing about rural America,” Robert Wuthnow explains near the beginning of “The Left Behind: Decline and Rage in Rural America,” his new treatise on the cultural, economic and political revolution taking place in the United States. “It’s a world I grew up in but have not lived in for many years. It’s the world of politically and religiously conservative people who live in small towns, on farms and in sparsely populated areas far from either coast.

“They consider their communities the heartland of America,” he continues. “I’ve visited hundreds of these communities, studied their histories and collected information about them from surveys, election results, exit polls, censuses, business statistics and municipal records. My research assistants and I have conducted well over a thousand in-depth qualitative interviews.”

So begins the author’s deep dive into a way of life that is eerily familiar to those who were raised in rural America. Being from a small agricultural community in West Tennessee, I could instantly relate to much of the narrative, as well as the underlying philosophy and quasi-religious themes embedded in this truly remarkable investigative primer. Many of the places Wuthnow describes so

eloquently seem hauntingly familiar to me; certainly, he describes many of my relatives who chose to remain in our hometown in astonishing detail. His vivid articulation of many of the characteristics that seem to define the rural mindset (personal responsibility, frugality, cooperation and common sense) rings true to my experience – as I am sure it does for many readers.

At the heart of “The Left Behind” is the undeniable anger that many who live in these economically depressed regions tend to exhibit with increasing regularity. The many complaints voiced by this powerful sector of our citizenry include the rage of farmers who feel an unwarranted intrusion of government into their lives with disastrous consequences, the disillusionment of production workers who feel companies have reneged on the social contract, the frustration of local leaders who feel the needs of their communities are consistently overlooked and the anguish of clergy who feel the traditional morals on which this nation was built are being systematically undermined by those who do

not appreciate the full ramifications of their actions. The author interprets – correctly I believe – the crescendo of this ire as being manifest in the election of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States in 2016.

Then there is the issue of racism and bigotry, which both historically and stereotypically has been more pronounced among the rural population. From my experience, which is reinforced by Wuthnow both anecdotally and through more formal research, those who live in small towns do tend to display attitudes and dispositions that can often be described as encompassing a robust aversion to diversity; i.e., to those who are different. There is an undeniable closeness and affinity among those who have been raised in smaller communities and it helps to explain the intolerance for “outsiders” that the author seems to capture so powerfully.

“The 2016 presidential campaign raised but left unanswered the question of whether anger was festering among people who feel left out and left behind to the point that bigotry against immigrants, Muslims, African-Americans and even women played a role in the election,” Wuthnow posits in “Bigotry,” the sixth chapter and one of the most thought-provoking. “The best evidence suggests that it did not, at least not on a large scale, but there seemed to be plenty of people who, given the chance, were eager to seize the opportunity to proclaim their concern that ‘whiteness’ was under attack.”

Wuthnow is Gerhard R. Andlinger Professor and chair of the Sociology Department as well as director of the Center for the Study of Religion at Princeton University. He has a B.A. from the University of Kansas (1968) and a Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley (1975), both in sociology. A recipient of the first Tufts University Civic Engagement Prize in 2007, he is currently editor of *The Encyclopedia of Politics and Religion*. His previous books include “After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion,” “Small-Town America: Finding Community, Shaping the Future,” “American Misfits and the Making of Middle-Class Respectability,” “The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II (Studies in Church and State)” and “The God Problem: Expressing Faith and Being Reasonable.”

In an age best characterized by intense polarization on virtually every dimension you can identify, it is refreshing to read a book in which the author is trying to go beyond a superficial understanding of the underlying causes, considerations and consequences of the self-perpetuating paralysis that defines this particular moment in the still-evolving American experiment. Wuthnow is obviously much more interested in understanding the viewpoints and perspectives of a relatively large segment of the population that is often written off by those who see themselves as more rational and enlightened. I am confident most readers will find numerous passages that speak to them; this is one that spoke to me:

“My message for fellow academics and ‘producers of knowledge’ in the liberal elite is that rural America is not crazy. To be sure, they live in a world constructed by Rush Limbaugh and Fox News and Donald Trump. They overwhelmingly vote Republican, in many instances like they have for decades. Some of them participate in rallies where people scream invectives at Democrats and the media. Some of them publicly condone racial slurs and homophobia. Most of them do not. Their outrage is quieter. It remains hidden most of the time. It is built into the conversation at the coffee shop and the co-op. It surfaces at odd moments in candid interviews and sometimes with surprising vehemence.”

I know the folks Wuthnow is describing here. I grew up with them. They are not bad people; they just see their way of life as being threatened. Within this context, their thoughts, feelings and behaviors make perfect sense. If you really want to understand what’s going on behind the headlines, pick up a copy of “The Left Behind.” You won’t be disappointed.

– Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.