

The current paper summarizes the main points of the book “The Left Behind: Decline and Rage in Small-Town America”. Adopting a view heavily influenced by conflict theory, this paper illuminates how rural residents are both victims and perpetrators. It is important to keep in mind that rural Americans constitute a large proportion of the total population in the United States, and their values and core beliefs may differ dramatically from one another. Instead of looking at rural Americans as a whole, it is perhaps wiser to know that they are made up of different individuals just as diverse as those living in urban or suburban areas. Analyses were made in terms of how the views expressed by some of the pro-life rural Americans solidify gender inequality and how the socioeconomic disadvantage experienced by rural Americans is reinforced and perpetuated.

In his book, Wuthnow starts with an argument, or rather, a clear conclusion, that given that the majority of voters in favor of Donald Trump are from rural areas that are predominantly white, the result of the 2016 election is a reflection of the current urban-rural divide, which can be attributed to differing sociocultural norms between rural and urban areas, socioeconomic disadvantages facing rural areas, and social problems that are hard to be mitigated or solved due to the characteristics inherent to rural towns. Above all the aforementioned disparities and inequality and beyond is the notion of moral community, which underlies much of how rural populations view themselves through a collectivistic lens and mobilize to secure and possibly further their interests.

Knowing the notion of moral community is essential for any reader who tries to gain a coherent and clear comprehension of this book. Specifically, the notion of moral community is omnipresent in the three rural towns from which Wuthnow collected his qualitative data

and drew conclusions. On the surface, moral community may come across as some sort of communal ideology that promotes the ideas of being conscientious, moral, principled, etc. However, what it really means is that people living in a particular community tend to feel an obligation to maintain and uphold their ways of life. Through this sense of obligation, people are able to reinforce and perpetuate the status quo within the community they live in. In other words, rural Americans are community-oriented and largely influenced by sociocultural norms embedded in the community they live in, and any attempts made by outsiders, the government, and big corporations to diversify, monetize off of, or change the current dynamics of the community can be perceived as a threat. Moral community, a concept present in nearly all chapters, serves as a thread that rationalizes the motives behind rural towns' ways of mobilization.

The early chapters are mainly dedicated to explicating the notion of moral community by incorporating its manifestations in three rural towns: Fairfield, Newborough, and Gulfdale, all of which have a population less than 30,000. In the author's view, these three rural towns share several commonalities, some of which include close-knitted community ties, shared spirit, customs and rituals, informal and formal leadership structures, and a sense of obligation towards each other. The readers are able to get a general picture of certain dynamics within rural areas as well as some of the features of the rural population.

Afterwards, the book introduces some prevalent values and quintessential dilemmas of the rural population, including drug abuse, cultural threat, population decline, unemployment, teen pregnancy, and less access to decent education resources. Notably, Wuthnow states that rural residents are well aware of their predicament but also know that their chance of

improving the situation is bleak. Following the previous chapter, “Makeshift Solutions” illuminates what potential solutions there are to make a change in the current dilemmas facing rural areas and how they can be met with resistance and misunderstanding from rural residents.

As the book progressed, it became quite apparent that although the notion of moral community propels some of the rural residents to maintain the status quo, frustration, fear, and anger are oftentimes experienced by rural residents. There are several reasons as to why they feel that way. First of all, Washington, a term that mainly refers to the federal government in the book, seems unfit for addressing the rural population’s needs and demands. Not only is Washington paying little attention to rural areas compared to it is to suburban and urban areas, but its bureaucratic nature has made intrusions into rural areas that are deemed non-desirable, unfit, and threatening in the eyes of certain rural residents, especially during the Obama administration. Besides, the rural population expresses that there has been a moral decline within the nation in terms of how homosexuality and abortion have become acceptable in the eyes of many, and this repression towards the radical feminist and LGBTQ movements has further marginalized the rural population, causing outrage among them. In the final chapter, a range of attributes of some of the rural residents and actions taken by them to reinforce their interests are explained, including racism, misogyny, hatred towards immigrants, anti-Muslim sentiment, and the murder in Garden City, Kansas.

Gender inequality has long been and continues to be a prevalent social issue in the United States. Although in the past several decades a series of feminist movements have enabled women to gain greater independence, rights, and upward social mobility, challenges

remain. These challenges are manifested through several domains. Across the U.S., women are disproportionately affected by intimate partner violence compared to men (CDC, 2022). Besides, “U.S. women who work full-time make on average about 82 cents per every dollar a man makes” (Korgen & Atkinson, 2023, p. 150). But that is not the only inequality women experience in the workplace. A substantial number of women tend to experience “glass ceiling” and “maternal wall” at work, meaning that more men occupy the upper positions of an organization and that women tend to receive less wage as the result of becoming mothers (Korgen & Atkinson, 2023). These issues surely are open to statistical interpretation suggesting discrepancies in the data and analysis methods, but now an even more serious issue emerges from what Wuthnow observed among rural populations, which is the view that abortion is not justifiable by any means, a conservative, Christian-upholding view to have, to put it mildly, an absolutely preposterous view, to be frank.

According to Wuthnow (2019), a group of men from Newborough, including a Catholic priest, expressed that under no circumstances is abortion justified, not even when the pregnancy is the result of rape or serves the purpose of saving a mother’s life. Just like Wuthnow (2019) points out in the book that in rural America, the quintessential gender role that men ought to be the breadwinner while women are meant to remain housebound is “built into the social fabric of rural communities”, some of the men living in rural areas expanded upon this gender role, denying women’s right to abortion without a single regard as to what consequences could ensue in certain circumstances. One of the worst-case scenarios is that an already underpaid woman without a strong social support system gets raped and becomes pregnant, and then she abides by the principle set forth by those akin to men in Newborough

and produces the baby. Now, she faces multiple challenges at the same time. Presumably, she has to access the healthcare system to receive treatments for physical injuries and psychological distress from the rape. On top of that, she has to set aside a certain amount of her monthly salary to pay for the expense of that infant, which could be offset by a simple abortion. Furthermore, she will probably be reminded of the grueling process she went through when she looks at that infant. It is easy for those who are against abortion to judge, but it is extremely difficult for certain women to not choose abortion when the subsequent outcomes are in every way counter-intuitive and distressing. The fact that anti-abortionists are so prevalent in rural America just reflects how misogyny is entrenched in certain people and how polarized the U.S. has become.

“People have dealt with many of the problems before, and they’ve made accommodations that were never quite as satisfactory as they had hoped—waiting another year to paint the house, dining at McDonalds, driving farther to see the doctor” (Wuthnow, 2019, p. 45). It is quite apparent that rural populations are socioeconomically disadvantaged in many regards. Rural Americans are at increased risk of dying prematurely (Wein, 2022). The rate of drug overdose and teen pregnancy is higher among rural Americans than it is among suburban and urban American residents (Wuthnow, 2019). Compared to their suburban and urban counterparts, rural Americans are also, on average, less well-educated (Wuthnow, 2019). Although these issues may be attributed to some of the values and beliefs that rural Americans possess, it is not like rural Americans at large have total control over these matters. The inaccessibility of decent healthcare services and decent education resources, population decline, and disproportionate wealth distribution in some way reinforce

and perpetuate these issues. To put it into perspective, people born in rural areas who want to attain upward social mobility are bound to leave the place for a better education and career, causing a scarcity of highly educated, competent individuals within the area. Those who choose to stay are oftentimes less educated, and it is through this demographic shift that the quality of healthcare, education, and other social institutions within rural areas remains the same year after year, if not decline. 1% of people control 50% of the wealth (Bell, 2023). It is hard to picture how the U.S. government is able to divert more resources towards developing rural areas when the competition is already in a white-hot phase in urban areas. A country led by oligarchs and big corporations surely tilts its main goal towards technological, economic, and military advancement without giving too much attention to what the rural population is experiencing.

In conclusion, Wuthnow's book is a decent example demonstrating how symbolic interactionism, structural functionalism, and conflict theory are intertwined. The ethnographic approach to the matter and qualitative data shed light on the intricate dynamics both within rural communities and between rural communities and the larger social and political system. To me, Wuthnow's work is significant and eye-opening. On a macro level, he uncovered the political significance manifested through the association between the 2016 election and the rural population. On a micro level, he did a good job detailing the intricacies within the rural communities. I have to say that I learned a lot about America, both as a country and as a land of diversity.

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