

The transformation of Heartland America: a success story?

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When it is not considered as the heartland of conservatism, Middle America is looked down on as backward and regressive. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow challenges this narrative of decline by looking at innovative local communities and stressing their impressive adaptability. But one can regret that he does not consider that alternative paths could have been taken.

Reviewed: Robert Wuthnow, *Remaking the Heartland. Middle America since the 1950s*, Princeton University Press, 2010.

When William Allen White asked “what’s the matter with Kansas?” in 1986, he was neither the first nor the last to be perplexed by the American Midwest.¹ Critics have accused the region of never moving beyond a benighted history, while others have lamented its downfall from an idealized past. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow initially found himself in the latter group as he researched his latest book, *Remaking the Heartland: Middle America since the 1950s*. But rather than writing the story of “withering decline” that he had expected, Wuthnow instead concludes that Midwesterners have positively transformed the heartland since the 1950s and built a healthier relationship with the nation (ix).

Remaking the Heartland is Wuthnow’s attempt to understand how his native Midwest has changed. He argues that Midwesterners’ history of flexibility and persistence, the richness of their land, and their community institutions allowed them to transform the region without the expected negative consequences. Wuthnow defines the Midwest as the heart of the Louisiana

¹ William Allan White, “What’s the Matter with Kansas,” *Emporia Gazette*, 15 August 1986.

Purchase, the 1803 acquisition from France that doubled the United States' landmass. It stretched from North Dakota and Minnesota south along the Mississippi River to include South Dakota, Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Arkansas. Within these states, the book focuses on communities, because, he argues, they are Midwesterners' identity and what they know. As a self-described outsider who long ago left his midwestern community, Wuthnow had to approach the region as a scholar drawing on statistical data and qualitative information to piece together the story of the region's transformation. Within this framework he identifies what the matter is — small towns are shrinking, college graduates are moving away, and many jobs pay poorly and place workers in dangerous conditions. Yet, by focusing on Midwesterners' optimism, innovation, and economic development, Wuthnow shows how they forged a new self-image and adapted to change.

The Surprising Resilience of Midwesterners

The book's thematic chapters use an impressive array of data reinforced by engaging personal stories and well-told community histories. Wuthnow begins by dispelling notions of postwar farm prosperity. He points out the rise of capital-intensive agriculture that pushed marginal farmers off the land and made increased production with fewer farm workers possible. The following chapter argues that Midwesterners remade their identity from the 1940s to the 1960s through popular cultural images like the adventure and natural beauty of the Wild West, pioneer ingenuity, and perseverance through the natural and economic struggles of the Great Depression. These images, Wuthnow contends, allowed Midwesterners to change the heartland by integrating the region into mass culture and providing a portable identity that helped Midwesterners cope as social and economic changes displaced them. The four subsequent chapters focus on the rise of agribusiness, the surprisingly central role of education in the Midwest, the decline of small towns, and the corresponding rise of edge cities. Each is rooted in a history reaching back to nineteenth-century settlement and explains the causes of ongoing change and Midwesterners' attempts to adapt to it. In his chapter on the rise of agribusiness, for example, Wuthnow shows how these often-criticized firms have not simply exploited desperate communities to take advantage of inexpensive labor and favorable business conditions. He instead argues that agribusiness found welcoming communities where a history of large-scale food production and available infrastructure allowed them to operate profitably. These thematic

chapters explore the principal social and economic shifts that have pervaded midwestern life and astutely ground them in the persistence of historical patterns and the adaptability of Midwesterners.

Collective Improvement at the Cost of Individual Suffering?

In his preface, Wuthnow contends that the danger of writing about one's childhood home is to either romanticize it or treat it too harshly. He does neither, but in following an alternative path, *Remaking the Heartland* reaches surprising conclusions. The book is a catalog of heartland struggles. Farm employment has fallen by 75 percent, 64 percent of towns have lost population since 1980, 58 percent of college-educated people born in Kansas and Iowa have left their states, agribusiness provides declining wages and poor working conditions, and edge cities grow at the expense of civic disengagement and environmental destruction. But Wuthnow draws these facts into a conclusion of positive change by combining the big picture with details about individuals and their communities. This methodology works two ways. First, for example, marginal farmers forced off the land by their inability to increase efficiency are counterpoised by regional growth in agricultural productivity, non-farm employment, and sales tax revenue. From this perspective, individual costs are part of the churn of adaptation that leads to overall improvement. Second, Wuthnow balances societal trends, such as population loss and economic restructuring, with individual feelings of optimism, community pride, and neighborliness. When the personal or community economic picture looks bad, a broader perspective ameliorates it. When the broader economic picture still portrays struggle, qualitative evidence provides a favorable contrast. This perspective combining broad strokes and fine-grained detail is necessary to explore the many implications of change that Wuthnow examines, but it is difficult if not impossible to compare these implications to one another in order to assemble a comprehensive evaluation of the Midwest's transformation as positive or negative.

Another challenge of the book's methodology is that its focus on adaptation and the indigenous roots of change sometimes obscures how change happened, where it came from, or whether it was welcomed. For example, Wuthnow correctly acknowledges the state's extensive role in agribusiness through land management, irrigation development, and building a wartime infrastructure that remains economically and geographically pervasive still today. But it remains

unclear what role the state played in encouraging efficiency and squeezing out marginal farmers. Why, alternatively, did it encourage growth into the countryside rather than reinvesting in cities? Although Wuthnow carefully follows the work of the state, without an exploration of local and national politics, we can neither fully understand the motivations for adaptation nor the limits and resistance to it. One would think that the region whose history included the Populists, the Non-Partisan League, the Farm-Labor Party, the National Farmers Union, and the National Farmers Organization, must have produced some challenge to the economic transformation. Wuthnow repeatedly acknowledges the role of the state and often gestures to international influences, but a deeper exploration of these motivations may clarify why people made the choices they did as well as what other options they may have had. Wuthnow suggests a response to this by arguing that Midwesterners decided to not “hunker down and opt for poverty” (2). He argues that there were few strikes, work stoppages, or protests, so we can conclude that Midwesterners embraced change. But how do we distinguish between choosing to change and capitulating to forces that seem to be beyond one’s control? Were Midwesterners who left their farms in the 1950s adapting or pushed out? Why did the poor who remained in shrinking communities not adapt to take advantage of the opportunities of the new Midwest? And is the willingness to change necessarily a positive contrast to the implied futility of resistance? Wuthnow writes that this book is in part a personal reflection on the road not taken when he decided to leave Midwest. If we also consider the road not taken by Midwesterners as they adapted in postwar America, we could perhaps find an alternative route that would have led somewhere other than embracing a post-agricultural future or resistance leading to decline. This route may help us further understand how these changes came about and how individuals reacted to them.

A Key to the Understanding of America

Situating *Remaking the Heartland* within the historiography of agricultural adaptation eases some of these tensions and elaborates on the sources and consequences of change. Scholarship over the last fifteen years traces the history of Midwesterners who tried to preserve local sovereignty while they took advantage of the marketplace and modernization. Historians have demonstrated how adaptation and accommodation were survival strategies rather than choices and that they were necessitated by an industrial logic that was transforming agriculture.

On a more individual scale, these studies also show how agricultural change restructured families and how change itself was rooted in competing visions of domestic and social life.² The global context of American agriculture further helps us understand international influences that remade the Midwest and how this transformation in turn reverberated overseas. For example, when midwesterners were reshaping their cultural identity between the 1940s and 1960s they pushed beyond national boundaries to define themselves within a global system in which they were the world's breadbasket and technological leader. They led famine relief efforts after World War II, argued for agriculture's importance in the early Cold War, and helped modernize farms around the world. Wuthnow pays careful attention to midwestern history within the temporal and geographical bounds determined by his narrative, but pushing beyond these would help the reader better understand the motives and implications of a changed heartland.

As a history of the Midwest since the 1950s, *Remaking the Heartland* is a rich account that forces readers to reconsider the dominant narrative of decline. It provides historical depth to challenge the notion of unwanted outside forces altering the region and it upends assumptions of Midwesterners desperately clinging to backward ways of life. The book provides a mountain of data, intriguing community studies, and valuable insights that explain the Midwest's last half-century. Although readers may reach different conclusions, they will agree that the heartland has profoundly changed since World War II and that it remains central to our understanding of the United States.

Article published in [Books and Ideas](#), 17 June 2011.

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² See especially Catherine McNicol Stock, *Main Street in Crisis: The Great Depression and the Old Middle Class on the Northern Plains* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Deborah Fitzgerald, *Every Farm a Factory: The Industrial Ideal in American Agriculture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Mary Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900-1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Jon Gjerde, *The Minds of the West: Ethnocultural Evolution in the Rural Middle West, 1830-1917* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).