

Cramer, Katherine J. (2016) *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.

Review by Donald P. Taylor

‘Why do working class people vote against their own interests?’ is a chronically vexing question in liberal and academic circles. In Wisconsin, Scott Walker was elected governor in 2010, and then, after a legislative assault on public employees, he prevailed in a recall election in 2012 and won re-election in 2014. These events led many to cry: ‘How could this possibly have happened? Don’t people understand what he has done?’ In her book *The Politics of Resentment*, University of Wisconsin-Madison political science scholar Katharine J. Cramer presents a reply to this conundrum: rural working class voters did indeed have an understanding of at least part of what Walker was doing – and they supported it.

Cramer’s research approach was to identify a variety of rural communities around Wisconsin, then visit each to seek out ‘groups that met regularly and in a place in which I could easily introduce myself’ (29-30), such as local diners, restaurants, gas stations, and other places. She ultimately visited twenty seven communities where she very openly identified herself as a professor from Madison, and wrestled, with varying degrees of success, with the barriers created by her subjects’ perceptions of that identity. In pursuing these dialogues, she has uncovered a significant frame of perception not visible to those who are confused by the voting behavior of rural working class people: resentment, springing from an insider-outsider identity that focuses political questions around who gets what, who doesn’t, and who is to blame. In the author’s words, the book ‘shows people making sense of politics in a way that places resentment toward other citizens at the center’ (5). Her book speaks to a middle-class audience: those seeking to understand, from some distance, the perplexing political behaviors of the rural poor and working class.

According to Cramer, there is a ‘rural consciousness’ that combines identities of class and place. She describes rural consciousness as having three elements: perceptions of power, perceptions of values and lifestyles, and perceptions of who gets what. From within this framework, rural people see themselves as hard working yet not getting a fair shake, and powerless to do anything about it. Meanwhile, people in Milwaukee and Madison – especially government bureaucrats and university faculty – are perceived as not working hard and yet receiving a greatly

disproportionate share of reward, in large part because they have the power to make decisions about who gets what.

Cramer provides enlightening samples of the remarks she heard, illustrating people's sense of separateness and victimization, largely at the hands of government and public employees. One subject plainly emphasized resentment toward public employees, saying, in reference to Walker's stripping of public employees' collective bargaining rights, 'I'm glad Walker did what he did. It's about time someone takes something away from those bastards' (27). Other conversations brought forth similar sentiments about public employees. One person said, 'You name me one thing that they've given up in the past 45 years. It's nothing, nothing, nothing... I'm sick of collective bargaining' (187). Another, a former Democrat, asserted, 'Those folks downstate have little understanding of what life is like up here. Enough is enough. Public employees gotta pay their share' (193). The sense of victimization by government was also captured in people's perception that the two main urban areas of Madison and Milwaukee get preferential treatment from government, while rural areas receive back less than they contribute. In one of these conversations, one person said, 'All the things they do, based on Madison and Milwaukee, never us,' to which another replied, 'They don't understand how rural people live and what we deal with and our problems' (71). In another, a subject stated, 'The money is collected here, it is sent to Madison, and it is dispersed to Milwaukee and Madison primarily, and so our return on what we spend is very little, you know?' (160).

What Cramer shows is that the subjects have constructed an us-versus-them worldview in which the 'us' is 'rural people' and the 'them' is not the wealthy, not immigrants, but fellow citizens who are perceived as powerful, privileged urban liberals. So while many are perplexed and assume that working-class people are tricked into voting against their own interests by the lure of conservative social issues, Cramer demonstrates that for many, their patterns of voting and political engagement are directly in line with their perceived interests: going after the people who unduly benefit and/or don't work hard:

rural folks like me = hard-working people = non-public employees = deserving
versus
urbanites = people who don't work hard = public employees = undeserving (189)

Viewed through this lens, Walker's attacks on public employees 'were a victory for small-town Wisconsinites like themselves' (186).

A problematic aspect of Cramer's research method is that it is not possible to generalize her results to a larger population. Hers was not a representative sample derived using traditional social science methodologies; it was a series of informal conversations held with 'coffee klatch' groups in twenty seven Wisconsin communities. The people in these groups tended to be white, male, and older – near or past retirement age. Cramer recognizes the limitations of this approach, asserting 'my purpose was to better understand how people in particular places prescribed meaning to their political world. This study should not be judged, therefore, on the basis of whether the results are sufficiently generalizable to a broader population...' (214).

If we cannot generalize the results to a broader population, how much actual value does the book have to the field of working-class studies, or any other? Despite our inability to scientifically

generalize its results, its value lies in the fact that it opens up a different way of thinking about the political behaviors of the rural working class. We are unable, from her ‘data,’ to draw any strong conclusions, but Cramer poses an important alternative way for us to consider the questions at hand. Agonizing over working-class people voting against their own interests is an analytical dead-end; considering the possibility that identity frames and resentment may lie behind political behavior points an important possible way out of that dead end. Accordingly, despite this limitation, Cramer’s book poses a more useful analytical schema than another recent book, J.D. Vance’s memoir *Hillbilly Elegy*, which constructs a view of the poor and working-class world solely through the personal, anecdotal experiences of its author, without developing a framework for a broader, thoughtful analysis of any aspect of working class life.

A second problematic aspect of Cramer’s book is her narrow, and ultimately incomplete, analysis of the origins of rural consciousness and resentment. She tests the theory that media messages are a significant factor, but does this primarily through an examination of local newspapers. Initially hypothesizing that local papers would tend to be anti-government and critical of public employees, she instead found the opposite: that local newspapers tended to be more supportive than metropolitan papers. She thus concluded that newspapers are not a contributing factor to rural resentment. She surprisingly has little to say about the influence of the Internet or national news media such as Fox News. Bypassing these seemingly important factors, she concludes that ‘It is likely that rural consciousness exists not because it is communicated via news media but because we teach these things to each other,’ (110), through a ‘bottom-up process of people teaching in-group/out-group categorizations to each other, including the many layers and associations that those distinctions contain, that clarifies, reinforces, and keeps alive these divisions that politicians can then exploit’ (219). Her conclusion on this point is thus incomplete and unsatisfying, leaving important questions unexplored.

Reading *The Politics of Resentment*, one very quickly realizes that Cramer is not just posing useful questions about Wisconsin. Although written before the 2016 election, the book provides a thought-provoking framework for discussing the election of Donald Trump – an election that once again triggered hand-wringing over the voting patterns of working-class whites. While some observers blame the economic status of the working class and others point to the influence of conservative social issues, Cramer has provided a vocabulary and framework for discussing whether identity and resentment might be important factors as well.

Reviewer Bio

Donald P. Taylor is an Associate Professor of Labor Education at the School for Workers, University of Wisconsin-Extension. He teaches in the areas of union leadership, organizational development and change, and public sector labor relations. He has published in journals including *Labor Studies Journal* and *Labor Law Journal*. His current book project examines the experiences of workers in a now-closed New Hampshire sneaker factory.