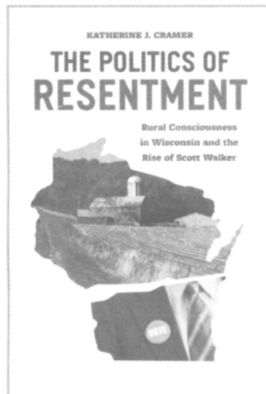




## What's the Matter with Wisconsin?



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

BY POLLY CLEVELAND

Katherine Cramer, professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, thought she was perfectly suited for her project of interviewing upstate Wisconsin residents on their political views. Wisconsin born and bred, she felt deeply connected to her state. So she was quite stunned by the open hostility she encountered. If she was a professor, the locals demanded, how come she was here upstate with her tape recorder, rather than teaching her students? Who was teaching her students in her absence? It often took Cramer several visits to gain trust.

Upstate Wisconsin, north of Milwaukee and Madison, is mostly rural, overwhelmingly white, and accounts for about half the population of the state. From 2007 to 2012, Cramer interviewed some forty different groups, many repeatedly. These were people who met regularly, around the coffee machine in a service station, in the back room of a café, and so on. There was even a group that met to play a special Wisconsin dice game, at which Cramer excelled. The interviewees ranged from working class loggers in the north, to middle-class small-business owners. Over half were men, and many were older or retired. They appeared to be stable, established community members, sometimes political leaders. Cramer's interviews bridged

the election of Scott Walker in 2010 and the unsuccessful recall election against him in 2012. She published her findings in 2016 BT (Before Trump) as *The Politics of Resentment*.

She quickly identified a perspective she called "rural consciousness": Her interviewees highly prized a self-sufficient outdoor lifestyle of low pay, privation, and hard physical labor; they viewed Madison and Milwaukee—"the M&Ms"—with suspicion and contempt. City folks, including professionals, government employees, and academics—these led an easy life sitting behind desks, for which they were grossly overpaid. "Madison" (the capital) did not listen to rural folks, did not care about them, and looked down on them; it simply took their tax money and did not return their fair share in services. Just look at the empty streets and shuttered stores of declining small towns! In short, rural people, were "deserving"; those others were "undeserving."

Cramer explored this resentment. Did rural areas really pay more in taxes than they got in benefits? In fact, the opposite—but that was irrelevant, since the locals regarded much government spending as "waste." Was it the 2008 collapse and Great Recession? No. Small towns had been declining for decades; maybe only a bit more after 2008. Was it an ideological preference for low taxes and small government? No. They would gladly pay taxes for new school computers, but not on salaries for those lazy undeserving school teachers! Yes, even local school teachers were regarded as agents of "Madison"! Was it racism? Cramer did hear some openly racist remarks—directed at "lazy" residents of an upstate Native American reservation. Negative remarks about "those people in Milwaukee" may have meant racial minorities, but more often designated the despised urban elites, especially government bureaucrats. Cramer did discover one striking fact: in upstate communities the pay, benefits, and job security of public employees significantly exceeded those of private sector

workers. Perhaps that helped make them lightning rods for resentment—and led to support for Governor Walker's cuts in their pay and benefits.

Cramer probed: Why did people who complained of the high cost of health insurance in rural areas nonetheless oppose government efforts to expand health services? Over and over she heard something like, "the government must be mishandling my hard-earned dollars, because my taxes are going up and clearly they are not coming back to benefit people like me. So why would I want an expansion of government?"

In the end, Cramer was left with a mystery: rural resentment towards cities was hardly new. Nor was it new for politicians like Scott Walker to play to that resentment. But what made that resentment so powerful today and so focused on government at all levels?

Bitter resentment of government might seem plausible in a state like Louisiana, given its inequality, corruption, and poor public services (see my review of Arlie Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land* in the November/December 2016 issue of *Dollars & Sense*). But in squeaky-clean Wisconsin? While the British Equality Trust rates Louisiana among the worst states on both inequality and social and health problems, it rates Wisconsin among the best. Wisconsin boasts excellent schools and health services statewide. Until Scott Walker, it was a reliably progressive Democratic state. What happened?

To me, it feels almost like a gathering religious movement, a rebellion against evil oppressors sometimes disguised as school teachers, postal clerks, and firemen. Is it in some twisted way a response to growing national inequality? There's at least one small glimmer of hope: In the Wisconsin primary of April 5, Bernie Sanders got significantly more votes than any other candidate, including Donald Trump. **D&S**

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