

*Patrick J. Deneen*

## THE CASE FOR SAM'S CLUB REPUBLICANS

*Grand New Party: How Republicans Can Win the Working Class and Save the American Dream* by Ross Douthat and Reihan Salam  
(New York: Doubleday, 2008).

Thomas Frank's 2004 *What's the Matter with Kansas?* was one of those rare books with a significant intellectual afterlife, still cited and debated years after its publication. In his polemic, Frank sought to expose the grounds for the decades-long success of the Republican Party among those segments of the American electorate known as "Reagan Democrats." This part of our population is marked by concerns that are partially addressed by each major party. They are generally people of modest economic means, often blue-collar workers who have been buffeted by the wrenching dislocations experienced especially in the American industrial sector during this age of "outsourcing" and globalization. They stand to benefit from the social safety net of a compassionate welfare state and hence have natural affinities with the Democratic Party—the party they generally favored until the presidency of Ronald Reagan. They are also socially conservative, however, deeply hostile to liberal policies that seek to effect "social justice" such as (in an earlier period) forced bussing and school integration, and more recently, the stripping of Christian symbols and language from the public square, court-approved

abortion-on-demand, and efforts to redefine marriage. Thomas Frank sought to address an important question: Why in recent years have these erstwhile Democratic voters overwhelmingly supported the Republican Party?

His explanation was at once penetrating and deeply flawed. He argued that these Americans were voting against their economic and class interests based on an insidious Republican appeal to conservative values. For Frank, such social and moral values could only be epiphenomenal: compared to the cold, hard substance of economic interests, conservative values are secondary, even fanciful. The Republican appeal to conservative values served as a sly electoral diversion away from the real economic interests of this portion of the electorate. What's more, Frank argued, Republicans only too gladly harvested the votes of "Kansans" while offering only the

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merest symbolic blandishments in return. The wealthy got cuts in top marginal tax rates; social conservatives got to watch the president appear on a giant video screen on the anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*.

Frank's analysis stemmed from classical Marxist assumptions. The undereducated working class is vulnerable to ideological deceptions by the elite; they labor under "false consciousness" even as they neglect their real (i.e. economic) interests. His analysis was most profoundly Marxist in assuming that all true human interests are economic, with class resentment and aspirations for financial equality the most basic motivation for human behavior. What he failed to notice is that the values the "Kansans" support are reality-based, but not fundamentally "interest"-based: they highlight commitments to family, community, and traditional ways of life that not only endorse self-sacrificial bonds but actually reject presuppositions of personal self-seeking that certain economic theories presume.

Still, Frank's analysis remains important because he correctly observed that the traditionalist commitments of "Kansans" have not been well served during recent periods of Republican rule, in considerable part because the economic policies of Wall Street Republicans (and Wall Street Democrats, for that matter) have often had destructive effects on the fabric of social life that supports traditional and conservative institutions and associations. While Frank's Marxist assumptions ignored this connection, the main architects of Republican and Democratic policies alike have been equally neglectful of the ways in which economic policies can prove to be supportive, or destructive, of social mores. "Kansans" have been poorly represented by both parties.

Herein lies the great virtue of Ross Douthat and Reihan Salam's *Grand New*

*Party*, an expansion of their seminal *Weekly Standard* essay, "Party of Sam's Club" (Volume II, No. 9, November 14, 2005). Douthat and Salam—young conservatives who are willing to break ranks with their elders and think in new directions—concentrate their attention on this segment of the electorate, those who seek savings by buying in bulk at Sam's Club and who aren't embarrassed about it. In contrast to Frank's Kansans, the working class they describe is less blue-collar and less rural, more likely to work in health-care or office administration than on the farm, and above all, more likely to live in one of America's far-flung "exurbs" rather than on the land. They are not poor, but given the massive dislocations engendered by the modern global economy, they are insecure, their wages have stagnated, and the prospects for their children's future look dimmer than ever.

Douthat and Salam rightly note that, for this segment of the electorate, traditionalist social issues are intimately connected with their economic concerns and anxieties. "Safe streets, successful marriages, cultural solidarity, and vibrant religious and civic institutions make working-class Americans more likely to be wealthy, healthy, and upwardly mobile. Public disorder, family disintegration, cultural fragmentation, and civic and religious disaffection, on the other hand, breed downward mobility and financial strain—which in turn breeds further social dislocation, in a vicious cycle that threatens to transform a working class into an underclass."

Douthat and Salam—unfashionably, even heretically, in contemporary Republican circles—recognize that the new globalizing age, with the attendant dislocations being experienced by the "Sam's Club" citizenry, calls for some considerable amount of government intervention. Given that Sam's Club citizens are in many

respects the backbone of the American citizenry, the nation has a decided interest in actively protecting the increasingly fragile institutions that support the values of hard work, self-sacrifice, family values, communal norms, and good citizenship.

Echoing older observations of Tocqueville, Douthat and Salam repeatedly note the likelihood that as democratic citizens are forced onto their own devices and are shorn of the bulwark of extended family and community, they will of necessity turn to the government for assistance, potentially ushering in a “massive tutelary state” that will gladly assume the functions of soft despotism. In the absence of public policies aimed at undergirding the unsteady pillars of civil society, the authors rightly suggest that truly collectivist policies of dependence will be the likely outcome if the only alternative on offer is a cold insistence on free markets and self-reliance alone.

Douthat and Salam are at their best when they articulate policies that would assist those endangered associations that ought rightly to be at the heart of what a social order sustains and what in turn sustains that order, but which in recent years have been hard hit by a combination of economic and philosophic assaults. Above all they argue on behalf of the family, calling for significantly increased tax credits for children of married parents and tax credits for those who stay home to rear children. While economic hardship is doubtlessly threatening the stability of the modern family—placing it under stresses rarely before encountered, which for many includes the necessity of two working parents and attendant financial and time pressures—the greatest threat to the traditional family in our time is nonetheless philosophical.

The liberal tradition assumes the existence of the family as the cradle of decent

and trustworthy citizens, but it cannot give an account of why self-interest-maximizing individuals who give a priority to autonomy would be willing to compromise their independence by forming families. Prosperous elites—those perhaps best situated to support large families—increasingly see childrearing as optional and even a burden, while working-class families—particularly those of strong Christian belief—remain the sole segment of America's non-Hispanic white population that reproduces above replacement rates. Douthat and Salam rightly call for policies that emphasize public support for families with children.

Further, the authors admirably resist the temptation by many contemporary elites to champion a complete submission to the logic of globalization, with a compensatory cure-all call for some form of “education” or “retraining” aimed at preparing displaced workers for a globalized future. Rather, they recognize that elite emphasis on a certain form of cosmopolitan upward mobility has led to an implicit denigration of the traditional dignity accorded to skilled manual labor. They call, therefore, for an alternative to the four-year academic credentialing system, and in particular “a greater emphasis on teaching craftsmanship,” as well as greater incentives for, and social approbation of, “highly skilled manual laborers, from carpenters and painters to masons and electricians.” Our compassionate elites—on those rare occasions when they do notice the havoc wrought on the working classes by globalization—too easily convince themselves that “retraining” will transform displaced workers into cosmopolitan success stories. That ideologically pat “solution” at once ignores the dignity, and necessity, of manual labor—and then consigns those who don't succeed in the global sweepstakes to the wardship of government welfare.

These and other specific policy recommendations are surely worthy of consideration as we enter a new national debate over the appropriate place for government and what deserves public approbation and support. From health care to immigration policy, Douthat and Salam are sensible new voices who retain a vigorous commitment to self-government while recognizing that our changing economy demands greater public investment to shore up its unsteady foundations.

However, one aspect of their overall argument seems wildly out of tune with contemporary reality: namely, their call for further investment in the exurban build-out, greater expenditure on the infrastructure supporting automobile transportation, and a call to take advantage of America's "wide open spaces." While they doubtlessly are correct to see a degree of censorious scolding among critics of exurban sprawl—the current reviewer among them—the debate on where and how people should organize their lives is now being rapidly outstripped by the reality of mounting energy and transportation costs. To the extent that they seek to invigorate an American sense of optimism by means of further massive investment based on cheap transportation, their book unfortunately reads as already dated at the time of its publication.

In these passages, one wonders if Douthat and Salam don't in fact fall into the same error as Thomas Frank—to consider economic wealth and mobility as fundamentally more important than those institutions that may or, more likely, may not flourish in a highly prosperous and necessarily mobile society. If we are to credit the strength of commitment to tra-

ditional values that the working class has manifested (that is, why they have been inclined to support Republican candidates, to Thomas Frank's chagrin), we must conclude it is not because they are seeking more economic gain (else they would more regularly be voting Democratic), but rather that they value greater social stability for their families and communities above all. To the extent that Douthat and Salam emphasize policies that encourage a new form of mobility and expansion into "wide open spaces," they appear as inclined as Frank to ignore the deepest significance of their own traditionalist understandings and commitments.

This oversight may not be a fatal flaw, but it does mean that Douthat and Salam's legitimate concern—how to preserve the shaky institutions of family and community—will need to be further considered in light of unprecedented pressures on the suburban and mobile way of life that arose in the mid-twentieth century and may be passing away a mere half-century later. A return to more local economies and communities will happily mean less government intrusion in the daily affairs of the citizenry; however, the transition from our energy-intensive and wasteful society of sprawl and exurbia will also certainly require ingenuity and responsiveness on the part of government—just not in the form of continued investment in a way of life that has no future. The sooner that Douthat and Salam themselves come to this realization, the sooner they may be able to offer creative new solutions based not on a misplaced sense of optimism, but on a real sense of hope for the health of local communities, vibrant and living traditions, and networks of families.