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Joel Kotkin, *The New Class Conflict* with a forward by Fred Siegel

Candor, NY: Telos Press, 2014. 215. \$29.95 ISBN-978-0914386285

Geoffrey M. Vaughan

In a polarized age, what is one to do with an author who as eagerly draws upon the work of Thomas Picketty as upon the Mercatus Center, and cites Elizabeth Warren as approvingly as representatives of the Tea Party? Not hope for a coming political harmony. Joel Kotkin's analysis of what he variously describes as "the new class," "the Clerisy," and "the new oligarchs" could be one of the most discouraging books of recent years.

A cottage industry among conservatives has developed in which authors trace most or all of our contemporary problems to the Progressive movement. On the other side, liberals have made hay with the rising levels of inequality and persistent poverty among the underclasses, reaching an apotheosis in Picketty's *Capital*. Kotkin ingeniously combines both arguments, focusing attention on the collusion among all the leading forces vilified by both left and right to entrench their positions and protect their privileges. It is public choice theory applied to the whole economic and political system. Yet it is curious he neither makes that explicit nor draws upon this body of work.

While his focus on class conflict might seem foreign to most American social analyses, Kotkin's argument will appeal to those of Tocquevillian inclinations. As he writes in the concluding chapter, "America's unique culture rests on the twin pillars of widespread dispersion of property and a pattern of voluntary collaboration." The class most associated with these is what he calls "the yeomanry," which he intends as a more refined category than "the middle class." Unfortunately, it is not much more refined than the term it replaces, for it includes "small

business owners, sole proprietors, and those with small property holdings,” but also “peasants or immigrants.”

According to Kotkin, the success of the American system relied upon the independence of the large middle-class, which in turn depended upon a large property owning class. Property ownership leads to independence by freeing the individual or, more importantly, a family from dependence upon the landlord. The land available for development throughout the country, new space to farm or ranch or simply put up a small house, meant that there was always an escape from the overwhelming influence of powerful men. Perhaps the best expression of this view of America is to be found in the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*. In providing homes for the middle class, the Bailey Building and Loan offers the quality of life that would be impossible in the Pottersville the hero's absence would make real.

Characteristic of the terms he uses, the emerging class structure that the author sees is largely feudal. At the top, are to be found the amazingly wealthy hedge fund managers and other financial wizards, largely on the East Coast, and the even more wealthy tech moguls on the West Coast. These are the oligarchs, the holders of vast amounts of wealth and influence in the country. Kotkin assiduously avoids the term aristocracy when discussing this group, undoubtedly for the purpose of avoiding further lauding them, but also because there is something very different from this new class. Unlike the older generation of oligarchies that preceded them, the new oligarchs run businesses that directly employ very few people. Accordingly, “Google at the end of 2013 had a market cap six times that of General Motors while having one fifth as many American workers.” There are no union negotiations to endure or workers picnics to attend for the leaders of these new industries. At least in Bedford Falls, Mr. Potter knew the people of the town.

Kotkin's account of the yeomanry and the oligarchs are probably the least contentious parts of. Very few would argue that the working classes and middle-class are thriving at the moment. Nor can the astronomical wealth of a very few be denied. And yet, there have always been rich and poor in every society so identifying them is nothing new. The author's real interest is with the group stationed between the yeomen and the oligarchs, those who manage a system that is inimical to the interests of the lower classes. This group he calls "the clerisy."

The clerisy is a bit harder to define because its members are not so much identifiable by wealth or occupation so much as outlook or, one might say, bossiness. According to Kotkin, "The power of the Clerisy stems primarily not from money or the control of technology, but from persuading, instructing, and regulating the rest of society." One can be a member of the clerisy while working at a museum for very little pay or as anchor of a nightly news show. What unites the members of the clerisy is the remarkable uniformity of opinion on political, social, and especially environmental matters.

While never devolving into the madness of conspiracy, Kotkin is unafraid of charging the antagonists in the story with collusion. This is where the narrative becomes most compelling and yet hardest to explain. As he points out, the dominant view of the clerisy is "gentry liberalism," which bolsters the power of the oligarchs while undermining the independence of the yeomen. One example Kotkin details with great precision is land-use policy, not surprising given that urban issues are his specialty. On this point, what unites the clerisy and the oligarchs is an antagonism towards suburbia. Most Americans want to own their own home, ideally a single-family home with a yard. The clerisy and oligarchs abhor what they disparagingly describe as sprawl and, accordingly, direct large amounts of money to programs and policies that would return suburban dwellers to the cities their grandparents and great grandparents abandoned at the

beginning of the 20th century. High density urban environments are their ideal and yet are clearly a reversal of the trends of American history. Whether moving into the Ohio Valley, the Great Plains, or California, the yeomanry of this country has moved in order to build and live apart from one another.

Urbanization plays into the hands of the oligarchs because, of course, they tend to own and develop rental properties. Oligarchs can also afford to live in such expensive cities as New York and San Francisco while maintaining a lavish lifestyle. By contrast, the yeomanry cannot live as well in an urban environment as it can in a suburb. So the advantage of urbanization to the oligarchs is as clear as is the helplessness of the yeomanry to resist. The motivations for the clerisy, however, remain the most difficult for Kotkin to address.

Why would the clerisy aid the oligarchs in developing an impoverished former middle-class? As Kotkin explains near the end of the book, part of the process of impoverishment involves the staggering debt accumulated in pursuit of higher education. Yet higher education is a characteristic of the clerisy, so they are only hurting themselves or, more specifically, their children and grandchildren. The same is true of the antagonism towards suburbia. Members of the clerisy are pricing themselves, or their children, out of their homes. The phenomenon exists in the case of environmental policy as well. Accordingly, “To ‘save the planet,’ the Clerisy and most of their tech Oligarch allies seek to limit consumption by eliminating cheaper energy sources in favor of expensive, highly subsidized renewables, or the chance to profit from various mitigation matters.”

While one can appreciate and learn a great deal from his aggregation of information on the struggles of the yeomen and the contrasting advantages of the oligarchs, Kotkin’s real contribution is his analysis of those people who are making possible the new economy with all of

its inequities. Rich and poor we have always had with us. The new enablers are the curiosity. Yet the group responsible, in his argument, is also the only group likely to read his book and (full disclosure) review it. Herein lies the most significant obstacle in addressing the problem as the author would like to do: he is asking for unilateral disarmament on the part of the clerisy.

Another way to put this is that Joel Kotkin is drawing our attention to a problem of individual rationality leading to collective irrationality. This is a characteristic of (almost) all class-based analyses of political phenomena. At some point the author wants to scream, “Can’t you see what you are doing to yourselves?!” The closest we get to that as a title was Thomas Frank’s *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* But all these analyses ignore something that the earliest one did not. According to Aristotle, the rich and the poor act in ways designed to further their interests yet will frustrate them if ultimately successful. Pointing this out is not enough, and has never been enough, because each act from an idea of justice not simply out of self-interest.

Consider the restrictive land-use policies that Kotkin argues are so counterproductive to the present yeomen and future generations of the clerisy. Why would the current clerisy support these initiatives? It is not because they particularly enjoy cramped living spaces, noisy neighbors, and sitting on busses rather than in their own cars. They do this because they think the sacrifices are right even if they make their lives poorer. A vegetarian by conviction will not change her mind when someone points out that meat tastes too good to give up. The sacrifice based upon a notion of justice is the whole point.

Many, but not all, of the policies Kotkin finds counterproductive are based upon the predictions of climate change. If the catastrophes imagined might come true, it would be the right thing to do—a matter of justice—to limit private transportation, detached houses and inexpensive forms of energy to the extent that they contribute to this. While Kotkin does not

want to take on the whole climate change issue, to address it only tangentially, only insofar as the response to it might economically harm large numbers of people, is to sidestep a significant part of the problem he wishes us to confront.

The argument of this book is compelling and the studies it brings together are invaluable for anyone trying to understand how American society, or advanced democracies more generally, are changing. More significantly, the author transcends partisan divisions that too often inhibit insight by drawing out trends that disturb both sides. This may be its singular contribution. So, while I think that more attention needs to be paid to the different understandings of justice animating the positions of the various classes, there is no better guide to how those classes are currently arranged or what the new class conflict looks like.

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