This impressive and accessible book is of interest to anyone who wants to understand how right-wing social and political movements mobilize constituencies, recruit members, and influence local and national politics. While McVeigh’s focus is the 1920s Ku Klux Klan (KKK) in the United States, the book is a detailed articulation of his groundbreaking “Power Devaluation” model for understanding the dynamics of right-wing movements. It is volume 32 in the series “Social Movements, Protest, and Contention”, which has emerged as a significant outlet for contemporary sociological research on movements around the world.

Most people think of the KKK in its late 1800s incarnation as a Southern terrorist group bent on terrorizing newly-freed Black former slaves back into a system of White dominance. The Klan, however, has returned as a significant social movement in the United States several times since its inception. During the 1920s millions of Americans joined the Klan and it became a major electoral force in several states and played an important role in national politics.

For most of the 1920s the U.S. economy flourished, and this has long posed a problem for social scientists looking for an economic explanation for the growth of the KKK during this period. Beginning in the 1950s, several social science models were advanced to account for right-wing mobilizations which were seen as irrational outbursts by angry people unable to play by the rules of modern civil society. Participants were cast in a role as politically dysfunctional, anxious about their falling social status, alienated from societal ties, psychologically maladjusted, and attracted to “paranoid” conspiracy theories. These theories in various combinations are known as the Classical Theory of collective behavior, the Pluralist School, or Centrist/Extremist theory.

McVeigh picks the valuable nuggets out of the earlier Classical theories and discards much of the rest. He recasts what appears to be irrational and conspiratorial rhetoric in right-wing groups into new sociological explanations of how movement activists “Frame” political struggles from certain advantageous perspectives and tell stories or “Narratives” to teach their recruits about who is an enemy, who is an ally, and what behavior is considered heroic. Scholars have been nibbling around the edges of these ideas for several decades. McVeigh offers a full meal and recipes. His work on his theoretical model dates back to the early 1990s when he was an (under)graduate student, which resulted in his dissertation on the “Power Devaluation Model” in 1996.

Starting in the mid 1970s, sociologists began to rebel against the older collective behavior theories, and in researching left-wing social movements began to examine the role of the mobilization of economic and other resources by social movement leaders to build their struggle, as well as how the expansion and contraction of political opportunities needed to be managed by these leaders. In a superb overview of these trends in
sociological research, McVeigh brings us to his Power Devaluation model as a necessary tool to understand why right-wing movements behave differently from left-wing movements in certain respects.

McVeigh argues that it is shifts in power dynamics and hierarchies in economic, political, and social spheres that launch the processes in which right-wing groups attract members and sometimes a mass base large enough to intrude into the larger society. According to McVeigh, the Resource Mobilization and Political Process models work better with left-wing movements and movements in which relatively oppressed groups are seeking equality or liberation. Using as his analytical example the Klan in the 1920s, McVeigh demonstrates that the right-wing KKK in the 1920s was composed of White people attempting to defend their relatively more privileged position in the social, political, and economic life of their communities.

Research has shown there is no direct causal relationship between national economic indicators such as unemployment or wage levels and the growth of ethno-nationalist groups and ethno-violence. Something more complicated is involved. Studies since the 1990s have teased out a role for economic competition and anxiety coupled with other factors in prompting ethnic conflict promoted by the political right, but no over-arching coherent explanation emerged. McVeigh uses his Power Devaluation model to explain why White Protestant Klan members in the 1920s would fear losing economic power at a time of national prosperity, and argues the same model can help explain the dynamics in other right-wing groups at different historic periods.

McVeigh's work gives a boost to the growing scholarly lens called Race, Gender, Class analysis in which all three are seen as inextricably woven together in societal struggles over power. Add in the role of ethnicity and religion in certain geographic areas and we have a well-stocked toolkit for studying social movement conflict around the world.