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Divide and Rule: Class, Hate, and the 2016 Election

By Paul Street
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Listen and you can hear the sneering “elite” liberal left narrative about how the big dumb white working class is about to get screwed over by the incoming multi-millionaire- and billionaire-laden Trump administration it voted into office. Once those poor saps in the white working class wake up to their moronic mistake, the narrative suggests, they’ll come running back to their supposed friends the Democrats.

Trump Didn't Really Win Over Working Class America: Clinton Lost it

It's true, of course, that Trump is going to betray white working class people who voted for him in the hope that he would be a populist champion of their interests – a hope he mendaciously cultivated. But there are three basic and related problems with the scornful liberal-left storyline. The first difficulty is that the notion of a big white proletarian “rustbelt rebellion” for Trump has been badly oversold. “The real story of the 2016 election,” the left political scientist Anthony DiMaggio notes, “is not that Trump won over working class America, so much as Clinton and the Democrats lost it...The decline of Democratic voters among the working class in 2016 (compared to 2012) was far larger than the increase in Republican voters during those two elections” If the Democrats had run Bernie Sanders or someone else with “a meaningful history of seeking to help the working class,” DiMaggio observes, they might well have won.

Populism-Manipulation is a Bipartisan Affair

Second, betraying working class voters (of all colors, by the way) in service to concentrated wealth and power (the “One Percent” in post-Occupy Wall Street parlance) is what presidents and other top elected officials from *both* of the reigning capitalist U.S. political parties do. What did the white and the broader (multiracial) working class experience when the neoliberal corporate Democrats Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama held the White House? Abject disloyalty towards egalitarian-sounding campaign rhetoric and a resumption of (big) business (rule) as usual. An ever-increasing upward distribution of income, wealth, and power into fewer hands.

It's an old story. In his 1999 book on Bill and Hillary Clinton, *No One Left to Lie To*, the still left Christopher Hitchens usefully described “the essence of American politics, when distilled,” as “the manipulation of populism by elitism. That elite is most successful,” Hitchens added, “which can claim the heartiest allegiance of the fickle crowd; can present itself as most ‘in touch’ with popular concerns; can anticipate the tides and pulses of public opinion; can, in short, be the least apparently ‘elitist.’ It is no great distance from Huey Long’s robust cry of ‘Every man a king’ to the insipid ‘inclusiveness’ of [Bill Clinton’s slogan] ‘Putting People First,’ but the smarter elite managers have learned in the interlude that solid, measurable pledges have to be distinguished by a reserve’ tag that earmarks them for the bankrollers and backers.”

True, the Republicans don't manipulate populism in the same way as the Democrats. The dismal, dollar-drenched Dems don the outwardly liberal and diverse, many-colored cloak of slick, Hollywood-, Silicon Valley-, Ivy League-and Upper West Side-approved bicoastal multiculturalism. The radically regressive and reactionary Republicans connect their manipulation more to white “heartland” nationalism, sexism, hyper-masculinism, nativism, evangelism, family values, and (to be honest) racism.

But in both versions, that of the Democrats and that of the Republicans, Goldman Sachs (and Citigroup, JPMorgan Chase, Bank of America et al.) always prevails. The “bankrollers and bankers” **atop the Deep State** continue to reign. The nation's unelected deep state dictatorship of money (UDSDoM, UDoM for short) continues to call the shots. That was certainly true under the **arch-neoliberal Barack Obama**, whose relentless service to the nation's economic ruling

class has been amply documented by numerous journalists, authors (the **present writer included**) and academics.

Obama ascended to the White House with record-setting Wall Street contributions. He governed accordingly, from the staffing of his administration (chock full of revolving door operatives from elite financial institutions) to the policies he advanced – and the ones he didn't, like (to name a handful) a financial transaction tax, the re-legalization of union organizing, single-payer health insurance, a health insurance public option, tough conditions on bankers receiving bailout money, and the prosecution of a single Wall Street executive for the excesses that created the financial meltdown.

Anyone who thinks that any of that might have changed to any significant degree under a Hillary Clinton presidency is living in a fantasy world. She gave every indication that a president Clinton 45 would be every bit as friendly to the finance-led corporate establishment (the UDoM) as the arch-neoliberal Clinton⁴² and Obama⁴⁴ presidencies. She was Wall Street's golden/Goldman/Citigroup girl.

We are Not the 99 Percent

Third, elite liberals and left liberals often miss a key point on who white (and nonwhite) working class people most directly interact when it comes to the infliction of what the sociologist Richard Sennett called “the hidden injuries of class.” It is through regular contact with the professional and managerial class, not the mostly invisible corporate and financial elite, that the working class mostly commonly experiences class inequality and oppression in America.

Working people might see hyper-opulent “rich bastards” like Trump, Bill Gates, and even Warren Buffett on television. In their real lives, they carry out “ridiculous orders” and receive “idiotic” reprimands from middle- and upper middle-class coordinators—from, to quote a white university maintenance worker I spoke with last summer, “know-it-all pencil-pushers who don't give a flying fuck about regular working guys like me.”

This worker voted for Trump “just to piss-off all the big shot (professional class) liberals” he perceived as constantly disrespecting and pushing him around.

It is not lost on the white working class that much of this managerial and professional class “elite” tends to align with the Democratic Party and its purported liberal and multicultural, cosmopolitan, and environmentalist values. It doesn't help that the professional and managerial “elites” are often with the politically correct multiculturalism and the environmentalism that many white workers (actually) have (unpleasant as this might be to acknowledge) some rational economic and other reasons to see as a threat to their living standards, status, and well-being.

The **Green Party** leader and Teamster union activist Howie Hawkins put it very well last summer. “The Democratic Party ideology is the ideology of the professional class,” Hawkins said. “Meritocratic competition. Do well in school, get well-rewarded.” (Unfortunately, perhaps, his comment reminds me of the bumper sticker slogan I've seen on the back of more than a few beat-up cars in factory parking lots and trailer parks over the years: “My Kid Beat Up Your

Honor Student.”) “The biggest threat to the Democrats isn’t losing votes to the Greens,” Hawkins noted. It is losing votes to Trump, who “sounds like he’s mad at the system. So they throw a protest vote to him.”

The white maintenance worker is certainly going to get screwed by Trump’s corporate presidency. You can take that to the bank. He would also have gotten shafted by Hillary’s corporate presidency if she had won. You can take that down to your favorite financial institution too. And the worker’s anger at all the “big shots” with their Hillary and Obama bumper stickers on the back of their Volvos and Audis and Priuses is not based merely on some foolish and “uneducated” failure to perceive his common interests with the rest of the “99 percent” against the top hundredth.

We are the 99 Percent, except, well, we’re not. Among other things, a two-class model of America deletes the massive disparities that exist between the working-class majority of Americans and the nation’s professional and managerial class. In the U.S. as across the world capitalist system, ordinary working people suffer not just from the elite private and profit-seeking capitalist ownership of workplace and society. They also confront the stark oppression inherent in what left economists Robin Hahnel and Mike Albert call the “corporate division of labor”—an alienating, de-humanizing, and hierarchical subdivision of tasks “in which a few workers have excellent conditions and empowering circumstances, many fall well below that, and most workers have essentially no power at all.”

Over time, this pecking order hardens “into a broad and pervasive class division” whereby one class — roughly the top fifth of the workforce — “controls its own circumstances and the circumstances of others below,” while another (the working class) “obeys orders and gets what its members can eke out.” The “coordinator class,” Albert notes, “looks down on workers as instruments with which to get jobs done. It engages workers paternally, seeing them as needing guidance and oversight and as lacking the finer human qualities that justify both autonomous input and the higher incomes needed to support more expensive tastes.” That sparks no small working class resentment.

It comes with ballot box implications. Many white workers will “vote against their pocketbook interests” by embracing a viciously noxious and super-oligarchic Republican over a supposedly liberal (neoliberal) Democrat backed by middle- and upper middle- class elites who contemptuously lord it over those workers daily. The negative attention that dreadful Republican (Trump) gets from “elite” upper-middle class talking heads in corporate media often just reinforces that ugly attachment.

2016: Hate Trumped Hate

It doesn’t help the Democrats when their top candidates channel elitist contempt of the working in their campaign rhetoric. Here’s how the silver-tongued Harvard Law graduate Obama referred to white working-class voters in old blue-collar towns decimated by industrial job losses in the early spring of 2008: “They get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren’t like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations.” Amusingly enough, these reflections were seized on by his neoliberal

compatriot and rival for the Democratic nomination, the Yale Law graduate Hillary Clinton. She hoped to use Obama's condescending remarks to resuscitate her flagging campaign against a candidate she now accused of class snotty-ness. "I was taken aback by the demeaning remarks Senator Obama made about people in small-town America," she said. "His remarks are *elitist* and out of touch." Clinton staffers in North Carolina even gave out stickers saying "I'm not bitter."

How darkly ironic is to compare that (failed) campaign gambit from nearly nine years ago with the campaign Hillary ran in 2016! Hillary's latest and hopefully last campaign was quite consciously and recklessly about contempt for the white working class. As John Pilger recently reflected:

"Today, false symbolism is all. 'Identity' is all. In 2016, Hillary Clinton stigmatised millions of [white working class and rural – P.S.] voters as 'a basket of deplorables, racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic — you name it'. Her abuse was handed out at an LGBT rally as part of her cynical campaign to win over minorities by abusing a white mostly working-class majority. Divide and rule, this is called; or identity politics in which race and gender conceal class, and allow the waging of class war. Trump understood this."

The "deplorables" comment was a great gift to Trump, whose staffers gave people buttons saying "I'm an Adorable Deplorable."

Disappointed Hillary voters have chanted "Love Trumps Hate" while marching against the incoming quasi-fascist president. But, really, the 2016 U.S. presidential election was *about one kind of hate* – the "heartland" white nationalist Republican version – *trumping another kind of hate*, the more bi-coastal and outwardly multicultural and diverse Democratic version.

Let us not forget former Obama campaign manager David Plouffe's comment to the *New York Times* last March on how the Hillary campaign would conduct itself against a Trump candidacy: "hope and change, not so much; more like hate and castrate."

Meanwhile, the nation's UDoM rules on, whichever party holds nominal power atop the visible state. Pardon my French, but the working class (of all colors) is fucked either way.

Goldman Sachs Wins Either Way

We might also think of the essence of American politics as the manipulation of identity politics – and identity-based hatred – by elitism. Reduced to a corporate-managed electorate (Sheldon Wolin), the citizenry is identity-played by a moneyed elite that pulls the strings behind the duopoly's candidate-centered spectacles of faux democracy. As the Left author Chris Hedges noted three years ago, "Both sides of the political spectrum are manipulated by the same forces. If you're some right-wing Christian zealot in Georgia, then it's homosexuals and abortion and all these, you know, wedge issues that are used to whip you up emotionally. If you are a liberal in Manhattan, it's – you know, they'll be teaching creationism in your schools or whatever... Yet in fact it's just a game, because whether it's Bush or whether it's Obama, Goldman Sachs always

wins. There is no way to vote against the interests of Goldman Sachs.” (We can update that formulation to say “whether it’s Trump or where it’s Hillary.”)

For all their claims of concern for ordinary people and beneath all their claims of bitter, personal, and partisan contempt for their major party electoral opponents, the Republican and Democratic “elites” are united with the capitalist “elite” in top-down hatred for the nation’s multi-racial working-class majority.

The resistance movement we need to develop cannot be merely about choosing one of the two different major party brands of Machiavellian, ruling class hate. The reigning political organizations are what Upton Sinclair called (in the original *Appeal to Reason* newspaper version of *The Jungle*) “two wings of the same bird of prey.” We must come out from under both of those two noxious wings and their obsessive and endless focus on the quadrennial candidate-centered electoral extravaganzas, which have replaced the recently closed Ringling Brothers show as the greatest circus in the world. We cannot fall prey anymore to the reigning message that meaningful democratic participation consists of going into a voting booth to mark a ballot once every four years and then going home to (in Noam Chomsky’s words) “let other [and very rich] people run the world [into the ground].”