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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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25.07.2021

Rise of the Right: White Supremacy and the Myth of the “White Working-Class”



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

America's battle over “critical race theory” reminds us of an ugly truth about the enduring white supremacy that's long defined this country. In a potent racist backlash moment against the rising Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, many states have moved in Orwellian “Big Brother” style to entirely ban discussions of structural and institutional racism from K through 12 and college classrooms. And much of the public is on board with this agenda, as July polling from *Ipsos* reveals that 36 percent of Americans support “a ban on CRT in public schools.” This includes 23 percent of Democrats, 34 percent of

independents, and 54 percent of Republicans. The opposition is based on toxic ignorance. In the case of the one group in which a majority supports the CRT ban – Republicans – only an average of 30% of respondents can provide correct answers across 7 factual questions that *Ipsos* asked about CRT. This is hardly surprising – when has bigotry ever been about being factually informed about the people you dehumanize?

America's culture of white supremacy is longstanding, and not confined to the Republican-right. Recent polling reveals that large numbers of Americans can be classified as white nationalists, including members of both parties. An October 2019 *Associated Press* poll found that 22 percent of Democrats and 51 percent of Republicans agreed that “a culture established by the country's early European immigrants” is “important” “to the United States identity as a nation.” Such sentiment draws on classic white nationalist sentiments that identify white “European immigrants” as central to the national “culture” and “identity” and what it means to be American.

Similar to *AP*'s 2019 poll, a University of Virginia poll from 2018 revealed that 35 percent of Americans, including 26 percent of Democrats, 29 percent of independents, and 51 percent of Republicans, agreed that “America must protect and preserve its White European heritage.” The poll revealed much about American denialism, as only 8 percent of respondents were willing to admit in the survey that they support “white nationalism,” despite the alternatively worded question above serving as a functional equivalent for white nationalism, and demonstrating that 35 percent of respondents agreed that “America” as a nation should define “its” identity via “White European heritage.” Put another way, the discrepancy here suggests that while only 8 percent of Americans admit they are white nationalists, another 27 percent “fit the bill,” but are unwilling to openly identify as so for fear of the stigma that comes along with it.

Donald Trump's rise to power was notable, not because he created a nation of white supremacists, but because he empowered many closeted white supremacists to show their true colors. Consider that polls from immediately before his election found that majorities of his supporters accepted various abhorrent racial attitudes. As I discussed prior to Trump's election in 2016 in an essay, “White Supremacist America,” the evidence was always there for those who chose to see it. As I summarized at the time, national polls revealed that 54 percent of Republicans and 61 percent of Trump supporters believed (in 2015) in the “birther” conspiracy theory that Obama was born in another country; 65 percent of Trumpeters (2016) thought Obama was a Muslim and 59 percent believed he was born outside the U.S.; 58 percent of Trumpeters (2016) held “unfavorable” views of

Islam; 76 percent (2016) supported a blanket ban on Muslims entering the U.S.; 70 percent agreed (2015) with Trump's gross (and false) generalization that Mexico is "sending people that have lots of problems...they're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists"; and two-thirds of Trump supporters agreed (2016) with blanket attacks on "immigrants" who "today are a burden on our country because they take our jobs, housing, and health care." And as the *Pew Research Center* found, two-thirds to nearly 80 percent of Trumpeters and 14 to 24 percent of Clinton and Biden supporters believed from 2016 to 2020 that "Newcomers from other countries" "threaten traditional American customs and values."

Mass Denialism

Despite an abundance of evidence that Americans have a white supremacy problem, much of the nation remains wedded to romantic depictions of the right. As I documented in detail in my book, *Rebellion in America*, mainstream journalists in venue after venue routinely repeated the narrative in 2016 that Trump's campaign was "populist" and that his support base was the "working class." This narrative has been embraced on the right as well, as it plays into the position that Trumpeters hold legitimate grievances – that they are angry about being forgotten and left behind, rather than primarily driven by misogyny, xenophobia, racism, bigotry, and a cultist blind devotion to an aspiring fascist demagogue who sought to overturn the 2020 election through violence and extremism. Take, for example, the famous writer of the much-hyped book (and now movie) *Hillbilly Elegy*, J.D. Vance. The book was endlessly promoted by journalists and intellectuals for enlightening us about how Trump's America lives. It told the story of Vance's family troubles in rustbelt America with alcoholism, poverty, low-wage work, drug abuse, and addiction. Vance himself recently appropriated this narrative to launch his 2022 Senate electoral bid, drawing on Trumpism as his foundation. At a steel-tube factory in his hometown of Middletown, Ohio, Vance cultivated the working-class mythology and populist rhetoric, lamenting that "the elites plunder this country and then blame us for it in the process." By tying his campaign explicitly to Trumpism, Vance perpetuates the "working class" narrative and ongoing efforts to link it to the Republican Party.

It's obvious why rightwing Americans would want to obscure the racism, sexism, and (yes) classism that was exposed during the Trump era via their support for his militantly racist, misogynistic, and plutocratic politics. Trump gave his supporters permission to "let it all hang out" – and it must have been a relief to let all that bigotry loose after sucking it in for all those years under Clinton, Bush, and Obama. But that doesn't mean Trumpeters

appreciated critics pointing out that they were bigoted, or that prejudice remains core to Trumpism as a political ideology.

Among those feeding romantic myths about Trumpism, we can add Democratic Senator Bernie Sanders, who recently conversed with *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd about the “need to speak to the struggles of the white working class” and Trump supporters. In Sanders’s words, Trump “very effectively” drew on “the anger and angst and pain that many working class people are feeling.” “The Democratic [Party] elite,” Sanders lamented, “does not fully appreciate” the hardships of the Trumpeters... “We’ve got to take it to them...I intend as soon as I have three minutes, to start going into Trumpworld and start talking to people...It’s absolutely imperative if democracy is to survive that we do everything that we can to say, ‘Yes, we hear your pain and we are going to respond to your needs.’ That’s really what this is about. If we don’t do that, I fear very much that conspiracy theories and big lies and the drift toward authoritarianism is going to continue. You got all these folks out there who are saying, ‘Does anybody pay attention to me?’”

Trumpism and the Myth of White Working-Class Insecurity

As with any powerful propaganda, the “white working-class insecurity” myth exists independent of verifiable evidence. As I’ve documented for the last half-decade, the case that Trump supporters are disproportionately economically insecure was always anemic to non-existent. In my most recent research, and responding to Sanders’s claims, I find there is little to no evidence to suggest a link between support for rightwing extremism and economic insecurity. Through various “regression” analyses drawing on national surveys from the early to late 2010s, and controlling for factors such as respondents’ gender, race, education, political party, ideology, and age, I find that there is simply no statistically significant relationship between economic insecurity – as measured by Americans’ incomes – and support for various conspiratorial and rightwing extremist movements, including the militia movement, QAnon, “alt-right” neofascism, and neo-Nazism.

Furthermore, a large and growing body of research from social scientists such as Diana Mutz, Nicholas Carnes and Noam Lupu, John Sides and his co-authors, Lilliana Mason, and others finds that Trump support is not tied to economic insecurity, that it is driven by reactionary socio-political attitudes, or both. Many self-described leftists I hear from are under the impression that Trump voters are suffering disproportionately from financial insecurity, leading them to conclude that this group could be mobilized by the left in favor of progressive economic causes. It’s a bizarre assumption, since Trump support has never

been linked to leftwing economic views. As I show in *Rebellion in America*, Trump supporters are significantly more likely to embrace rightwing plutocratic views, opposing increases to the minimum wage, opposing regulations on fossil fuel emitters to tackle climate change, resisting government efforts to aid the poor and the needy, agreeing that government regulation of business does more harm than good, and supporting cutting taxes on affluent households (making more than \$250,000 a year). They are also not generally motivated by concerns with inequality and the gap between rich and poor as a “major national problem.” The vast majority of Trumpeters – nearly three-quarters – see the rich as virtuous, as deserving of their wealth, and as having “worked harder” than the rest of us to obtain their wealth. Put another way, Trump’s support base is very much grounded in the traditional rightwing neoliberal and plutocratic values of the GOP, so efforts to romanticize his supporters as aggrieved proletarians ready to rebel against capital run very much in the face of observable reality.

Attitudes aside, I’ve also documented the lack of a link between financial insecurity and support for Trump and far right extremism over the last five years (see [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#)). Most recently, my book, *Rebellion in America* exhaustively examined support for Trump before and during his presidency, across dozens of financial metrics for both Trump supporters overall and white Trump supporters specifically, finding virtually no evidence of a link between financial insecurity and Trumpism. Trump voters, tend to be heavily middle to middle-upper income, with two-thirds coming from households earning more than \$50,000 a year and more than a quarter from households earning more than \$100,000. Contrary to the white working-class myth, I found in *Rebellion in America* that financial insecurity was consistently linked, not with Trumpism, but with support for Sanders’s leftwing populism, particularly among younger Americans who expressed concerns with improving the quality of education in America and who worried about the nation’s rising education costs. These relationships should hardly be a surprise; Sanders was the only candidate in 2016 who offered a comprehensive political agenda to help the poor, working-class, and the disadvantaged.

Importantly, the GOP’s “white working-class” narrative runs contrary to the reality of how financial insecurity affects political attitudes. As I’ve documented through an analysis of dozens of questions from national surveys covering political and economic attitudes in my last book, *Unequal America*, Americans who report suffering from “poor finances” and from “worsening finances” are statistically more likely to hold progressive-left attitudes,

not right-wing ones. And as I documented in *Rebellion in America*, rising inequality and economic insecurity are associated with increased support for progressive-left social movements like the 2011 Madison protests, Occupy Wall Street, and Fight for \$15, not with right-wing ones like the Tea Party.

If Sanders wants to learn more about pain on “Main Street” America, he should start by talking to people in the rustbelt and elsewhere that the Democratic Party has spent the last few decades demobilizing via its plutocratic policies, which resulted in millions of former supporters flocking from the party and migrating toward non-voting. This was the primary lesson of the 2016 election, with evidence from rustbelt states demonstrating that the Democratic Party lost 3.5 times more votes from 2012 to 2016, when looking at turnout for Clinton compared to Obama, than the Republican Party gained, comparing votes cast for Romney and Trump. As recent evidence has shown (see [here](#) and [here](#)), voting in economically depressed regions of the U.S. tends to favor Trump, not because the “white working-class” gravitates toward Trump, but because relatively privileged people in these areas are more likely to vote Republican (as they always do). This outcome should shock no one, considering that affluent Americans are more likely to vote, translating into a serious advantage in favor of Trump in depressed areas, since economic depression is associated with depressed voter turnout among poorer Americans. These poorer Americans are more likely to identify with the Democratic Party, but are less likely to turn out to vote, and as a result, less likely to turn out in depressed regions.

Republicans and Joe Six Pack: An Old Con

The narrative that the Republican Party is the true representative of your average joe and jane is not new. We can look back to the Rush Limbaugh years of the 1990s and his laments of “limousine liberals” as out of touch with the common man, a term that was replaced in later years with references to out of touch “coastal elites” with little interest in the struggles of Joe six pack in “flyover America.” For Limbaugh, terms like limousine liberal and coastal elites were red meat for the Republican base, to be paired with attacks on the Democratic Party, which he claimed no longer helped “white working class, Reagan Democrats,” but instead preferred “minority” constituents with a “massive welfare state” over the “job creation” supposedly favored by working whites. Limbaugh’s efforts to portray Democrats as enemies of the common person continued over the years, with his references to the “four corners of deceit” – in which he included “government, academia, science, and the media.” Obviously, Limbaugh was referring to Democrats, not Republicans, when he railed against “government” “deceit.”

Portrayals of Republicans as defending Main Street America continued under Bush, who cultivated an image of himself as a sort of everyman's President – the kind of guy you'd want to have a beer with. The “Bushisms” of the era certified that he was a straight shooter, not an elitist – a common guy with a southern drawl who hung out on his ranch in Crawford, Texas clearing brush, with little time for the liberal, brainy elites – the Al Gores of the world who “invented the Internet” and who were too smarmy and out of touch to be bothered with the rest of us. Bush's image as a dude's dude was, of course, total nonsense – he was a millionaire of multi-generational wealth who made his money in the oil industry, among other investments and business holdings. He infamously told a group of elite wealthy donors that “this is an impressive crowd, the haves and the have mores. Some people call you elites; I call you my base.” There was nothing common about Bush, contrary to his efforts to cultivate the image of a President who was of, by, and for the working-class.

The right's efforts to nurture a working-class Republican image continued into the Obama years, with growing intensity. As Reece Peck documents in *Fox Populism*, *Fox News* during the late 2000s onward routinely “interpellated its audience as the ‘authentic,’ working-class majority, thus allowing it to effectively re-present narrow conservative political demands as popular and universal.” For *Fox*, Democrats are out to punish the innovators and the job creators through crushing taxes, while confiscating the hard-earned incomes of the middle and working-class, handing out free benefits to the poor, poor people of color, and the immigrants who want something for nothing.

This brings us up to modern times and Trump's efforts to brand his support as based in white working-class insecurity. Those efforts were never more than half-baked. Even as he launched his presidential campaign in his infamous June 2015 speech at Trump Tower, the President-to-be never laid out a coherent or tangible agenda for how he was going to aid working-class people in need. He railed heavily in the speech against Mexican immigrants, widely characterizing them as drug dealers, criminals, and rapists. He complained about China's “victories” against the U.S. and about Mexico “beating us economically.” He briefly mentioned unemployment, and then moved on to talking about what a “disaster” “Obamacare” was for the nation. He promised to “Make America Great Again,” and insisted that the country needed great leadership. The closest he came to saying anything substantive about employment was his insistence that that the U.S. needed to bring back jobs and manufacturing “from China, from Mexico, from Japan,” yet he provided no road map or plan for how to do that. Contrary to popular myth, he spoke *in*

favor of free trade, calling it “wonderful,” claiming that the nation needed “really talented people to negotiate” the free trade deals and “great leadership” and “smart people” to win in beating other nations. There was nothing meaningful in any of this rhetoric to suggest Trump intended to help the average American who was down on his or her luck in an era of rising inequality and worker insecurity. The only specific proposals he put forward in the speech were promises to build a wall and repeal the Affordable Care Act, the latter of which would have deprived tens of millions of Americans of health care.

The Con Rides Again

With Trump’s defeat, Republicans got to work again on resuscitating their propaganda campaign to market the party as the savior of “working” Americans. Nowhere was this clearer than in the official planning record, reflected in the Republican Study Committee’s memo between House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy and Representative Jim Banks, revealingly titled “Cementing the GOP as the Working-Class Party.” The document bluntly admitted that the goal of such marketing was to aid the party in challenging the longstanding “narrative and the perception that the Republican Party was the party of big business or the party of Wall Street,” and to help it “take back the House by enthusiastically rebranding and reorienting” Republicans “as the Party of the Working Class.”

“The Agenda” the party put forward for this branding contains no actual economic policies that will improve the living standards of working-class Americans, but rather a laundry list of previous Republican talking points that rose to prominence during the Trump years. These include: a white nationalist plank that officially rejects not only “illegal” but “legal immigration,” and which specifically targets Mexico as the focus of Republican animosity; generic “opposition to China,” which is condemned as “communist” and “an economic threat to America’s working class”; “anti-wokeness” via explicit opposition to BLM and expansion of civil rights law via the “Equality Act,” which would prohibit discrimination across the U.S. based on sexual orientation and gender identity in public accommodations; pro “main street” positions such as opposition to “regressive coronavirus lockdowns” that “harm working class Americans” (although no such lockdowns are currently in place, making such rhetoric meaningless); and a promise to “curb” the power of “Big Tech” and its “egregious suppression of conservative’s free speech.” Based on this review, it’s abundantly clear that the Republican Party is offering nothing of substance to working-class Americans in an era of rising and record inequality and chronic working insecurity. None of these items will significantly improve the

material lives of working Americans by increasing their incomes – nor are they designed to.

It's difficult to combat the aggressive and reactionary classism, racism, and sexism that plague modern America when much of the country insists that none of these things exist. Americans have always fed themselves denialist notions that they're a classless society, and delusions that we had become "post-racial" grew increasingly prominent during the Obama years, although such propaganda should have been finally put to bed with the rising white supremacy that was mainstreamed during the Trump years. One of the most noxious developments of all is the persistent propaganda narrative that the GOP – and by extension its supporters – are the savior of the working-class. This myth must be demolished if those of us who genuinely care about reducing poverty and inequality are to build a mass movement to address the economic challenges of our time.

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CounterPunch 23.07.2021