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## The Class Dynamics in the Rise of Donald Trump

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The elites believe they are privileged because they are convinced they are the smartest, most creative, most talented and hardest working. They cap this grotesque narcissism with a facade of goodness and virtue. They turn their elitism into a morality play.

— Thomas Frank (paraphrased by Chris Hedges)

The powerful establishment interests vested in the continuation of the status quo and, therefore, the election of Hillary Clinton, have created a campaign narrative that tends to stereotype and stigmatize the white working class as racist, sexist and xenophobic. This was most colorfully

expressed recently by Clinton herself when in an unguarded moment before her wealthy donors in Manhattan she stated that half of all Trump supporters consisted of a “basket of deplorables.” Those backing Trump, she continued, were “racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic—you name it.”

Implicit in this narrative is that support for Donald Trump is driven largely by innate, primordial prejudices and personal characters; and that economics or class issues have nothing or very little to do with his ascendance. Accordingly, the narrative maintains that to the extent that economic conditions of the white working Americans have steadily deteriorated in recent years they have no one to blame but themselves: their laziness, their lack of drive, their moral failures, their sense of entitlement, and the like.

Commenting on this narrative, Conner Kilpatrick of the *Jacobin* magazine writes, “Somehow liberal pundits have gotten it into their heads that white workers . . . are just an aggrieved, pissed off, outnumbered minority” [1].

The narrative is propagated by both Republican and Democratic elites and operatives. For example, Anthony DiMaggio, a purported liberal political scientist supporter of Hillary Clinton at Lehigh University writes, “Hillary Clinton caught a lot of flak for referring to half of Trump Supporters as ‘the deplorables.’ She was being far too generous. Public opinion surveys over the last year or so suggest that the white supremacist contingent of Trump voters is even larger.” DiMaggio further writes, “The ascendance of Donald Trump tells us much about the quality of American character – particularly about our enduring and toxic legacy of hate, ignorance, bigotry, and white-supremacy” [2].

Likewise, Jonathan Chait, another liberal intellectual, writes:

“Then there are the voters, whose behavior provided the largest surprise. . . . As low as my estimation of the intelligence of the Republican electorate may be, I did not think enough of them would be dumb enough to buy his [Trump’s] act. And, yes, I do believe that to watch Donald Trump and see a qualified and plausible president, you probably have some kind of mental shortcoming. . . . His appeal operates not at a low intellectual level but at a sub-intellectual level” [3].

Conservative elitists are even more indignant of Trump supporters. Writing in the avowedly conservative *National Review* magazine, Kevin Williamson writes:

“It is immoral because it perpetuates a lie: that the white working class that finds itself attracted to Trump has been victimized by outside forces. It hasn’t. . . . Nothing happened to them. There wasn’t some awful disaster. There wasn’t a war or a famine or a plague or a foreign occupation. Even the economic changes of the past few decades do very little to explain the dysfunction and negligence — and the incomprehensible malice — of poor white America. . . . The truth about these dysfunctional, downscale communities is that they deserve to die. Economically, they are negative assets. Morally, they are indefensible. Forget all your cheap theatrical Bruce Springsteen crap. Forget your sanctimony about struggling Rust Belt factory towns and your conspiracy theories about the wily Orientals stealing our jobs. . . . The white American

underclass is in thrall to a vicious, selfish culture whose main products are misery and used heroin needles. Donald Trump’s speeches make them feel good. So does OxyContin. What they need isn’t analgesics, literal or political. They need real opportunity, which means that they need real change, which means that they need U-Haul” [4].

Williamson’s colleague and conservative co-thinker David French (also writing in the *National Review*) similarly explains how some poor white people he had known were utterly lazy, irresponsible and obnoxious:

“If they couldn’t find a job in a few days—or perhaps even as little as a few hours—they’d stop looking. If they got angry at teachers or coaches, they’d drop out of school. If they fought with their wife, they had sex with a neighbor. And always — always — there was a sense of entitlement” [5].

These kinds of statements, disparaging and dismissing the white working class, are the name of the game for the establishment elites and courtiers. The problem with this line of argument is that it is not just vulgar and elitist, it is also untrue. The considerable support that the white wage-earning voters in

States such as West Virginia and Indiana gave the self-described socialist Bernie Sanders showed that they do, indeed, vote for a progressive populist agenda (more on this later). Their substantial support for Sanders revealed that many Trump voters do not necessarily subscribe to his bigoted and demagogic agenda, but that they are so disgusted with the status quo that they nonetheless vote for him, largely as an act of revenge or protest. They seem to be instinctively cognizant of the fact that “Trump is the Symptom, Clinton is the Disease,” as Roger Harris put it.

### **Are Trump’s Supporters Driven by Racism and Xenophobia?**

In a real sense, the juxtaposition between economic and non-economic factors in the rise of Trump is a false dichotomy: both evidence and logic point to the fact that high levels of unemployment and economic hardship are breeding grounds for the escalation of racism and xenophobia.

It was no accident that the *classic* European fascism rose in conjunction with the harrowing economic conditions of the Great Depression. Nor is it altogether fortuitous that fascistic manifestations have become rampant in many core capitalist countries that are grappling with the ongoing financial turbulence that was set off by the 2008 financial implosion in the U.S., and has since spread to many other countries.

This is not to say that racist or xenophobic sentiments are always or altogether precipitated by economic factors. It is rather to point out that to the extent that there exist such prejudices they tend to remain largely latent during periods of high employment and economic prosperity. Many Trump supporters have economic difficulties that they misguidedly view through the prism of racism and xenophobia. Certainly, xenophobic rhetoric has played an important role in the rise of Donald Trump but, as Daniel Denvir of the *Salon* magazine put it, “it is the admixture of economic populism, however phony, that makes him so potent” [6].

The claim that Trump owes his electoral victory mainly to non-economic factors such as racism xenophobia lost much of its credibility when Bernie Sanders won handily against Hillary Clinton in States such as Indiana and West Virginia. According to this claim, as a self-described socialist who advocated a multiracial, multicultural, inclusive and relatively equitable society, Sanders was not supposed to win in places like West Virginia, the whitest (93.7 percent) of all states. But there he was, winning big against Clinton among men, women, young, and old.

The outcome of such primaries, indicating that large numbers of white working Americans voted for Sanders was quite discomfoting to the powerful interests vested in the status quo. Not surprisingly, the Clinton campaign (and the elitist courtiers of the establishment in general) became childishly creative: claiming that somehow West Virginia's vote for a Jewish socialist Brooklyn native was prompted by racism!

“Instead of acknowledging the size and importance of this part of the electorate, Democratic Party elites have simply constructed a new narrative to suit their interests—a narrative that was on display after West Virginia. Following Sanders's win, a significant chunk of the punditocracy came to the conclusion, mostly by abusing the hell out of exit polls, that a vote for the Jewish socialist was actually a vote for white supremacy. . . . After decades of being told white workers would never support socialism because they're racist, we're now told that they support the socialist candidate *because* they are racist. Yes, this is where liberals are in the year 2016” [7].

To downplay the role of the white working voters in Trump's campaign, some proponents of the status quo have gone as far as arguing that Trump supporters are not actually working class because the median household income of his supporters is above the national median household income [8].

This is a highly misleading argument. Since black, Latino and other non-white workers/households are more marginalized economically, and still make significantly less than white people, the median income of Trump voters would, accordingly, show a higher figure than the median national income. Furthermore, better-off-than average does not necessarily translate into economic security. A snapshot or static picture of median income does not tell us much; more importantly, it is the trend or change in people's economic conditions over time that matters most.

Median household income and wealth have drastically fallen in recent years. Wages have been stagnant, and in many cases fallen in real terms. At the same time, healthcare, childcare, higher education, housing, and retirement costs have escalated. A recent Pew Research Center survey shows that in 1971 about 61 percent of American households were categorized as middle class. Today, that number is barely 50% [9]. As a number of observers have pointed out, Trump support is highly correlated to areas where the death rates of middle-aged white people, fueled by opioid overdoses, are spiking [10].

### **Why Are the Establishment Elites so Eager to Reject Economic/Class Explanations?**

The establishment elites and corporate media pundits tend to stigmatize the white working Americans in order to sanitize the brutal neoliberal policies of austerity economics of the past

four decades. The plan and the hope is that in so doing they can exonerate the policy-makers of the establishment—both Republican and Democratic—of the responsibility for the unsavory state of affairs that has given rise to Donald Trump. When racism and bigotry can be blamed capitalism is exonerated.

U.S. economic policy of the past 40 years or so has consisted of a steady escalation of neoliberal austerity economics while its foreign policy has consisted of a steady escalation of war and militarism. Neither Bill Clinton deviated from Ronald Reagan’s policies of supply-side economics at home and military aggressions abroad, nor has Barak Obama deviated from those of George W. Bush.

Indeed, masterfully masquerading as liberals, Bill Clinton and Barak Obama have proven to be much more effective engineers of demolishing the New Deal Economics, of substituting corporate welfare for public welfare, and of deregulating and strengthening the parasitic financial sector than their Republican counterparts. Likewise, using harebrained pretexts such as “humanitarian intervention” and/or “responsibility to protect,” Clinton and Obama have proven to be more successful architects of “regime change” in more countries than Reagan and Bush ever were.

This explains why the liberal elites of the Democratic Party (like their conservative counterparts in the Republican Party) are promoting the obfuscationist narrative that sidesteps the decades-long policies of neoliberalism and militarism, or the fundamental injustices of capitalism, and instead blame the rise of Donald Trump on “moral failures” or “personal characters” of the white working Americans. As Daniel Denvir points out, “If there is no economic context, and Trump’s supporters are just mired in primordial racism, then they are forever lost in the morass of right-wing politics . . . [and] progressives can forget about the angry white guys” [11].

### **Concluding Remarks**

Capitalism has always employed the age-old tactic of *divide-and-rule* to pit various strata of the working class against each other in order to keep them docile. This tactic has especially been used more effectively in the United States because as a country of immigrants it has always benefitted from the flow of successive waves of migrant workers who, due to the vulnerability of their circumstances, could easily be exploited more compared to the workers who had arrived before them.

Not only has U.S. capitalism handsomely benefitted from this perennial competition between successive generations of migrant workers, between the old and new migrants, but also elite politicians have often taken advantage of this competition for their own nefarious political and economic purposes. “Slave owners did this by getting laws passed that required white indentured servants and black slaves to be treated differently. Richard Nixon did it by employing the cynical ‘Southern strategy.’ Now Trump is following in this long tradition by pitting struggling white people against immigrants and Muslims” [12].

Hillary Clinton has employed a different tack in pitting the working people against each other: while Trump is guilty of peddling racism and xenophobia, she is guilty of touting moralities,

identity politics and wedge issues. Feigning an artificial moral high ground, she (and other elites of the establishment) argues that the worsening of the economic conditions of the white working Americans is mainly the result of their own personal and/or moral failures: laziness, racism, sexism and xenophobia.

While often misplaced or misdirected, the white working Americans' economic grievances are real. Hillary Clinton and the powerful by-partisan supporters of her campaign tend to dismiss this reality because acknowledging it would be tantamount to acknowledging their own guilt: the fact that their economic policies of the past four decades have been disastrous for working Americans.

Blaming white American workers (as Clinton does) or migrant workers (as Trump does) for the sins of neoliberal austerity economic policies of the past forty years or so represent a blatant effort on the part of the two presidential candidates to scapegoat the working class in order to sanitize the capitalist class. Despicable as these attempts at deflection and deception are, however, one cannot really blame Clinton or Trump for pursuing such self-serving policies of diversion and obfuscation in the service of their class, *the reach and powerful*.

The real blame goes, instead, to the bureaucratic labor/union leaders who have betrayed the working class by supporting the capitalist class, largely through their support for Hillary Clinton and, more generally, the Democratic Party. The combined number of voters for Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump is much higher the number of voters for Hillary Clinton—perhaps 50% higher. This is an obvious indication that a clear majority of the American electorate are ready for radical changes; they prefer anti-establishmentarian candidates to the establishment candidate, even when one of the alternative candidates is a self-described socialist and the other is an avowed bigot.

This is also an indication that were the bureaucratic labor leaders really committed to the interests of the working class, and entered the election contests with their own candidates at both local and Federal levels, independent of the two corporate parties, such independent labor/grassroots candidates could win unimaginable victories in the interest of the overwhelming majority of the people, the so-called 99%.

Political lessons for the working class and other dispossessed masses are unmistakable: To challenge and (ultimately) change the status quo, the labor and other grassroots need to decisively break with the two-party system and the bureaucratic labor leaders. What is needed to reverse the weakening of labor and the declining living standards of the overwhelming majority of the people is a new type of labor organization, a new labor movement and new labor politics.

The new labor/grassroots politics would aim at exposing the lies and deceptions of both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. Champions of the new politics would explain that both migrant workers and white workers, which essentially means migrant workers of today and yesterday, are victims, first and foremost, of the woes and vagaries of the capitalist system—of neoliberalism and militarism. They would further explain that the workers and other grassroots need to extricate themselves from the divisive setups of the fraudulent two-part system and, instead, forge an alliance that would safeguard their interests against the ills and injustices of neoliberal

economics, and chart a political course that would, ultimately, supplant the crisis-prone and unjust capitalist system with a more humane civilization. Fighting against the ills of capitalism is crucial to labor and other social layers suffering from them. But it makes little sense to fight symptoms without challenging the system that produces them.

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