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What's Wrong with the White Working Class?

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Does the category of the white working class help us grasp the roots American fascism, or does it distract us from the seeded revolutions at hand? In this piece, I reflect on how easy it has become to think with the “white working class” and what such a term presumes within the white, rural, and downwardly mobile region I call home.

A few days after the 2016 election, a colleague from the small liberals art college where I teach brought together local leaders to discuss what the Trump administration might mean for southern Vermont and how we could prepare “to support the most vulnerable.” State senators, local entrepreneurs, college presidents, and an heiress or two gathered in the loft of a renovated mill. Beneath hewn oak beams, we drafted a statement condemning hate and compiled resources to combat racism. Yet our attention kept drifting toward a more unsettling question: Who are these people who elected Trump?

A surfacing unease—“Why do they hate us?”—eventually found its footing in the dim sense that our corner of Vermont was being overrun. Although the US Census shades this region as 95 percent white, lines of difference were quickly unearthed: those crowds in the Walmart parking lot, that mentally ill woman screaming obscenities in the park, those di-

lapidated streets with crowded houses sagging under years of neglect, that family in a broken RV down by the railway tracks, those men in battered pickup trucks. The owner of a local art gallery had come across hunters in the woods. “Are they allowed to carry guns in public?” Someone chimed in, “Should *those people* even be allowed to have guns?” Painted in the darker shades of poverty unhinged from historical reason, a portrait soon appeared of the pathology that threatened our well-being: the white working class.

While a few suggested conversion therapy for those downtrodden workers with MAGA caps—perhaps an invitation to an art gallery opening or even a catered farm-to-table meal might help them see the error of their ways—others were more militant about what the moment called for: “We need to protect ourselves.” It was a call to arms that echoed across the past four years. A college administrator asking me how we might keep mobs of Trump supporters off our campus, wondering if a roadblock would be too much. A guest speaker calling for the eradication of the white working class “as a subject position and a population” as the only way to safeguard our democracy, an invocation met with applause from faculty and students. The response to my talk at a distinguished university about the rising rates of testicular cancer in factory towns nearby: “Well, maybe that’s a good thing, especially in rural America. There’s too much masculinity out there anyway.” Whether to protect us or punish them, a kind of liberal elite consciousness has laid sins of Trumpism at the feet of the white working class and condemned most of rural America accordingly.

The only problem with this narrative are the facts. As many commentators have pointed out, the narrative that Trump rode to victory on a wave of white working-class enthusiasm “just doesn’t square with election data.”¹ The cultural truths emergent in this economy of disregard, however, are trickier to sort out. Although bearing a strong demographic resemblance to Rust Belt swings toward Trump, this portion of southern Vermont and upstate New York voted overwhelmingly for Hillary Clinton in 2016 and Joe Biden in 2020 (and voted overwhelmingly for Bernie Sanders in both Democratic primaries). Here, as elsewhere, polling data from 2016 and 2020 attributes Trump’s support to an aggrieved middle class while the working poor held their place in the forgotten ranks of the Democratic Party. Who, then, actually supports Trump? Over the past four years my work has brought me into conversation with a handful of local Trump supporters: young entrepreneurs at the Rotary Club, racist retirees on the school board, urban expats building luxurious second homes, a few militia-minded misanthropes, and a handful of workers in the plastics factories. With oversized trucks, sprawling estates, and a penchant for guns, most did not strike me having an entirely adverse relation to wage labor. Yet almost to a T, these Trump supporters all dressed, acted, and strongly identified as a besieged working class.² The working class, E.P. Thompson famously wrote, “is defined by men as they live their own history, and, in the end, this is its only definition.”³ But what if they have the wrong definition?⁴

Gaining a new lease on life, the white working class has reversed its long forecasted extinction and erupted on the political scene: as

the complete account of what went wrong in 2016; as an insurgent identity of far-right protests against democratic institutions; and, not unrelated, as the principled reason why many progressives don’t need to know much more about the worsening economics of most. Yet in the region I know best, a stretch of southern Vermont and upstate New York often described as postindustrial, the categorical certainties of the white working class distorts far more than it clarifies. While the white working class advances a potent political anthropology of the present, it is one detached almost entirely from the lived realities of the working poor.

My approach to this conundrum of class, for better or worse, unfolds within the scale of my own environmental advocacy. For the past five years, I have collaborated with local residents in southern Vermont and upstate New York to fight against petrochemical contamination. In the 1970s, my adopted hometown of Bennington rebranded itself “Teflon Town” as this area remade itself as a global hub of plastics manufacturing. In 2015, local residents forced the recognition that the plastics industry had contaminated a sprawling swathe of this region with a class of toxins known as “forever chemicals” for their stubborn refusal to degrade.⁵ This work has provided me an inside look at town meetings, state responsibility, corporate malfeasance, and the everyday lives of many residents. While perhaps an unconventional frame to approach the question of class, the fight for environmental justice is giving rise to unexpectedly broad horizons of solidarity while unmasking the petrified conceits of the factory as the sole representative of working people.

The census tracts that encompass this region of Vermont and New York are over-

whelmingly white, rural, and poor, and on most socioeconomic measures they are indistinguishable from that other stronghold of American poverty: the inner city. In Bennington and Hoosick Falls, decent jobs have been slipping away for a generation. New York state estimates that a family of four should earn at least \$56,800 to secure what it wistfully calls “self-sufficiency” in this region. For most households, such figures remain aspirational at best. Poverty rates in both towns have topped 20 percent in the past few years, stubbornly defying the modest prosperity of nearby areas and nearly double what they were 20 years ago. With earnings perennially short of the surging costs of housing and hunger, one in four households in Bennington now relies on SNAP benefits. In some Bennington public schools, 96 percent of students are eligible for free lunches, a fact that led the district to adopt a model of “universal school lunches.” Before it closed in 2019 due to budgetary woes, Southern Vermont College was the only community college in the region. 65% of its students were the first in their family to attend college and over half were Pell Grant eligible. Just across the border in New York, one in six residents of Hoosick Falls survives below the egregiously out-of-touch federal measure of poverty: \$12,490 a year for an individual or \$25,750 for a family of four. Demonstrating just how insulting prevailing wages have become, most folks living under the poverty line indicate they work full-time. While factories still occupy a place of privilege in each town, most employment in Bennington and Hoosick Falls falls into that catch-all bin of shitty jobs, the service industry, earning about \$30,000 a year. But even these jobs are in steep decline,

with COVID-19 decimating restaurants and retail (the past six months obliterated over 10 percent of jobs in this sector). The only employment sector still qualifying as a veritable growth industry in Bennington and Hoosick Falls is found in managing the deepening despair. The administrative challenges of endemic poverty now accounts for one in three jobs in this region.

The working poor of this region are legion and can be found scraping by as home healthcare nurses, special needs classroom aides, privatized social workers, dollar store cashiers, Walmart associates, and in various temporary gigs. While such splintered and often fleeting occupations may not provide a factory floor for political mobilization, the experience of this solid majority is not without coherence. By and large, the working poor are white, young, and stopped their education at some point in college. Their fashion leans toward Carhartt dungarees and faded flannels. With kids in tow, they drive older cars and trucks and reside in faltering farmhouses long stripped of land, motels repurposed as transitional housing, trailer parks rarely visible from the road, and decrepit Victorians sectioned into apartments. Some of the working poor have become more active in local politics after the discovery of contamination. A handful have starting edging out an entrenched managerial class in recent elections for the school board, town council, and mayors office, pivoting local government away from the bipartisan dogma of low taxes and sweetheart deals for the old boys club, and toward the profound need of now. Many are enthusiastic supporters of Bernie Sanders. Although almost entirely white, neighborhoods are home to as many

Black Lives Matter signs as Trump flags (a balance that extends into the wealthier districts). The largest gathering in recent memory came in the protests that occupied Main Street after George Floyd's murder.

Around here, few if any of the working poor have ever set foot in a factory. And yet so often when inquiring minds want to know about the state of the working class in this region, they turn to factory workers. Depending on how you count it, manufacturing now employs between 5 percent and 15 percent of the regional working population. The plastics industry, to which Bennington and Hoosick Falls pinned all their economic hopes in the 1970s, has shed about half of its total employment in the past 20 years, today reaching an all-time low of about 120 remaining jobs. In this region there are now more gas station attendants than workers in plastics production. The factory jobs that remain, however, have ascended to the upper echelon of local salaries. The median earnings for a worker in plastics manufacturing now tops \$76,000 a year, a perch that looks down on government, tech work, and even college professors. By and large, these factory workers are white, are middle-aged with an education that culminated in high school, and reside in suburban estates just outside of town. The fashion of these factory workers is indistinguishable from the working poor—the Carhartt dungarees and faded flannels—but in terms of wealth, these factory workers are the elite (and they have the conservative politics to prove it). Factory parking lots are filled with newly minted trucks and vintage muscle cars, many adorned with Trump paraphernalia. On the few occasions I've had to talk with these workers, they frequently re-

hearse Fox News talking points about high taxes and environmental protections killing the middle class and bemoan what immigration is doing to America. Who, then, do these factory workers speak for?

In the past four years, such a white factory worker (or white coal miner) has been trotted out again and again to give voice to working people in nonurban America. Taking a rather Marxist imaginary mainstream, we have seen a barrage of talking heads, think tanks, and best-selling portrayals treat the outlook of these white industrial workers as a stand-in for the economic life, cultural outlook, and political pivot of what Marc Edelman calls the “hollowed out heartland.”⁶

How might we understand the growing mismatch between the deteriorating realities of working people and the representational authority of the white working class? The “aristocracy of labor” offers some insight. In *Capital*, Marx briefly considers “the best paid section of the working class” as an “aristocracy” with confused allegiances.⁷ Engels saw the sizeable achievements of unionized factories in England as forming “an aristocracy among the working class” that distracted from “the ever-spreading pool of stagnant misery and desolation” of the poor.⁸ In the aftermath of WWI, these descriptive threads were knotted together into “the aristocracy of labor” by Lenin, Lukács, and W.E.B. DuBois to explain how radical possibilities were bottled up and the fuse of fascism ignited. Then, as now, it remains a deeply pessimistic concept. Lukács cursed how social democracy preemptively scuttled the very sensible revolutionary demands of the poor to instead seek the endorsement

of the “workers aristocracy,” believing such an appeal could win elections without tipping the boat of national prosperity: “the imperialist exploitation of the whole world.”⁹ Fueled by the “super-profits” of imperialism, Lenin wrote that the “labor aristocracy” served as “a prop” that screened the destitution of most workers by keeping a national spotlight affixed on the “philistine” income, lifestyle, and patriotism of select factory workers.¹⁰ W.E.B. DuBois went even further, explaining how “the aristocracy of labor” provided a platform for select white workers to proudly advertise the national spoils of empire while racial apartheid tightened its grip at home and abroad.¹¹ For each of these trenchant revolutionaries, the “aristocracy of labor” explained a revolution denied. The cultural celebrity of well-paid white factory workers was not evidence of labors’ success but of labors’ failure. The “aristocracy of labor” demonstrated how the imperial coordinates of accumulation were so easily ignored, how spring soil of internationalism was poisoned by patriotism, and how the worsening condition of most never became a class in and for itself. And it was from these deferred possibilities that world war was guaranteed.

Today, perhaps it is no accident that workers in the fossil fuel industry most closely fit “the aristocracy of labor” in America. Whether as coal miner in Appalachia or a roustabout in the fracking fields of West Texas or North Dakota or a hard hat technician in the petrochemical plants along the Mississippi or Ohio River, well-paid workers in the fossil fuel industry are iconic representatives of labor today.

Their endorsement remains highly sought in elections. While Trump gathered burly coal miners as the backdrop of his populist campaign, Biden visited new petrochemical plants and widely advertised his heartfelt appeal to these workers as evidence of his commitment to the white working class.¹² Yet employment in these industries accounts for only a handful of workers in each of these regions, and even those are in automated decline. Yet the jobs that remain earn wages at the very top of regional income brackets. Like the Lukács, Lenin, and DuBois’ imperial definition of the “aristocracy of labor,” these outsized wages are underwritten by coercive annexation. Not only do unequal geographies of extraction remain at the foundation of petro-capitalism, but a new frontier of theft has been added: the future. Imperialism of a different order, with its own planetary contradiction already underway. Echoing Lukács, a democratic politics that seeks to appease privileged workers in the fossil fuel industry as the premier representative of labor helps edge our world towards total catastrophe “with open but unseeing eyes.”¹³

Casting aside the trim coherency of the white working class and its petrochemical pedestal, a different struggle comes into view among the working poor in Bennington, Vermont, and Hoosick Falls, New York. Confronting the plastics factories that contaminated their environment, these communities have taken a stand. In the past four years, these communities have hosted mothers from Flint, Michigan; sent care packages to the water protectors at Standing Rock; collaborated with high schoolers from East Los Angeles working on drinking water issues;

and reached out to communities around similar plastics plants in India and China. Their confrontation with petrochemicals has keyed them in to the wider struggles against fossil fuels and for justice today. In Hoosick Falls, the congressional district long held by Republicans flipped in 2018, largely on the issue of water protections. While Bennington and Hoosick Falls represent some of the poorest areas of their respective states, state legislatures from both towns have introduced some of the most progressive legislation in their states in the past few years around racial equality, economic justice, and environmental protections.

Something is afoot. And yet everything we think we already know about class holds these rumblings at bay. Part of this is surely due to how the aesthetics of the white working class are deployed relentless in political campaigns today, whether as a camouflage for extreme conservative agendas, or as an electoral fulcrum for the neoliberal center, or as the whipping boy of the identitarian left. Each views the people implied by the term at a safe distance. Each uses the term to imagine the coherence of the world is found less in existential commonalities than in partisan interpretations. And each uses the tidiness of the term as justification for not needing to understand people themselves or do much to meet their grasping need.

Where does anthropology stand today? Should ethnography bring us closer to the realities of working people in rural America, or should it step away from everyone tainted by association with Trump Country? In moments of totalitarian drift, C. Wright Mills once wrote, the task of engaged research is “the maintenance of an

adequate definition of reality.”¹³ The white working class seems less an adequate definition of reality in these trying times than an ideological project to obscure the dire realities of the working poor for partisan gain while the world slides into ecological crisis. Holding us close to these downtrodden worlds, ethnography is primed to craft a new understanding of class adequate to the radical horizons of now.

Notes

1. Elizabeth Catte, *What You Get Wrong About Appalachia* (Cleveland, OH: Belt, 2018), 25. See also Mike Davis, “Trench Warfare,” *New Left Review*, December 2020.
2. This recalls Arendt’s crucial point: totalitarianism grew from the mobilization of masses, not classes. The “negative solidarity” of fascist crowds was held together less by any coherent social relation to exploitation than from a viral mood of privatized despair and socialized distrust. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1948), 315.
3. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1963), 11.
4. As Daniel Bell once quipped, the effort to grasp the working class has perhaps done more to advance “social cleavages” and “sociological theory” than any historical instance of the working class. The question itself is socially productive. Daniel Bell. 1999. *The Coming of the Post-Industrial Society*. New York: Basic Books. Pp. 1xiv.
5. David Bond, “Understanding PFOA,” *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, November 16, 2020.
6. Marc Edelman, “Hollowed out Heartland, USA: How Capital Sacrificed Communities and Paved the Way for Authoritarian Populism,” *Journal of Rural Studies* 82 (2021): 505–517.

7. Karl Marx, *Capital* (New York: Penguin, 1990 [1867]), 822.

8. Frederik Engels. "New Preface," in *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: International Publishers, 1892), 368.

9. Georg Lukács, "The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg," in *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1921), 32.

10. Vladimir Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (London: International Publishers, 1920), 13–14.

11. W.E.B. DuBois, "The African Roots of War," *The Atlantic*, May 1915, 6.

12. On the right, the aesthetics of the white working class provides an award-winning set design for conservative dissent. Dressing up muzzled science and shackled democracy in the feeling of working-class resentment, the insurgent right gives the impression that fascist dictates from high are really surging demands from below.

13. Lest my point by misunderstood, I am not arguing that well-paid workers should take a severe paycut if they want to consider themselves part of the working class. Far from it. While acknowledging that petro-capitalism is premised on geographic and temporal theft, I would argue that the care work should be foregrounded in our understanding of working people today, and compensated according to the vital role they play in holding together these broken worlds. If this displaces profit as the basis of remuneration, so be it. Lukaés, p. 32.

14. C. Wright Mills, "On Knowledge and Power," *Dissent* 2, no. 3 (1955).

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