

Research Article

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The White Working Class and the Politics of Race in the United States

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Abstract: The Declaration of Independence asserts that “All men are created equal, and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Nevertheless, the United States, at its foundation has been faced with the contradiction of initially supporting chattel slavery --- a form of slavery that treated black slaves from Africa purely as a commercial commodity. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, both of whom had some discomfort with slavery, were slaveholders who both utilized slaves as a commodity. Article 1 of our Constitution initially treated black slaves as three-fifths of a person for the purposes of apportioning representation in order to increase Southern representation in Congress. So initially the Constitution’s commitment to “secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity” did not include the enslaved black population. This essay contends that the residue of this initial dilemma still affects our politics --- in a significant manner.

Keywords: race, politics, caste

1 The White Working Class and a Strategy of Coalition for Social Development, 2020

In an earlier paper, I noted that: “The development of social welfare programs and policies to adequate national standards of health, education, housing, employment, income maintenance and social services has been a major goal of social welfare professionals and many other Americans. Part of the difficulty in enacting reforms has been the failure of those concerned with social reforms to develop a viable political coalition. Particularly neglected in consideration of such a coalition has been a cohesive working class” --- particularly including the white working class (Palley 1973, 241). In recent literature, the white working class is characterized by workers who generally are not salaried and also lack a college education. I am particularly concerned with how one can integrate a major section of the white working class into a coalition for significant social reform.

2 Towards A Working Class Coalition

A majority of white voters without a college education support the re-election of Donald Trump to the Presidency while Trump has supported major cutbacks in the availability of healthcare benefits --- especially for poor women, as well as cutbacks in the food-stamp program, nutritional levels in the school lunch program and the curtailing of Medicaid benefits. Isabel Wilkerson in an incisive piece in *The New York Times Magazine* makes the argument that the failure to absorb a significant majority of the white working class into a viable coalition for social development is related to a subtle race-based caste system (Wilkerson 2020a, 31). She goes on to note that in this race-based system “we have been trained to see humans in the language of race” that is “[encoded] as children, as when learning our mother tongue.”

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And this caste system affects “...how we process information, the autonomic calculations that figure into a sentence without our having to think about it” (Wilkerson 2020a, 31).

This white working class is characterized in a number of studies by falling life expectancy that is accompanied by rising suicide rates, the overuse of opioids and chronic liver-disease related to alcoholism. Nevertheless, within this group, identification with “white populism” may reflect a misinformed view that health and social welfare benefits are primarily focused on non-white populations while in actuality numerically and in terms of public revenues, whites benefit greatly. Such “white populism” leads less-educated whites to support politicians who actually support public policies adverse to the economic interests of such less-educated whites (Krugman 2020). In a situation where the environment in which overall opportunities for blue-collar labor are declining, many white workers view black progress as an unfair usurpation of their work opportunities “rather than as a weakening of the privileged racial position they held” (Charlin 2014, 172; also cited in Case and Deaton, 2020, 166). Furthermore, it appears that there is the presence of a class split in the white population as to whether discrimination affects white Americans or black Americans more. A 2017 Pew Survey noted that over 50 percent of white working-class Americans viewed discrimination against whites as big a problem as discrimination against black Americans and other minorities while 70 percent of white college-educated Americans disagreed with that view (Cox, Lienesch and Jones 2017).

Wilkerson feels that white working class racism is largely due to a “white working-class narcissism”. She cites Erich Fromm as noting in 1962 that racial narcissism that existed in Nazi Germany, is similar to that of the American South. And she comments that this particularly led historically to low-income white Southerners’ harboring an “...inflated image of itself... and of being superior to another racial group that is singled out as inferiors” (Wilkerson 2020a, 53; also see, Wilkerson, 2020b). In order to develop a coalition for social development it is necessary to overcome this type of white working class narcissism.

In so doing it is important to recognize the various interrelationship of groups in modern societies and that:

“ [Antagonistic] attitudes engendered by group concerning group form the greatest social menace of our civilization... [also] we have to remember that a modern society is a multi-group society. It is composed of many interrelated groups. It is not homogeneous. All the conditions of modern life make this impossible. The scale of modern society, the mobility, the range of communications, the variety of interests, the necessities of specialization, and many other things --- all these combine to make a modern society in a peculiar sense that did not hold in simpler societies, a multigroup society” (MacIver 1951, 6; cited by Palley 1973, 244).

Also it is important to remember as Martin Luther King did in a 1961 speech to the convention of the AFL-CIO that there is a congruence of interest between the goals of the black working class and those of the white working class. King observed:

“Negroes are almost entirely a working people.... Our needs are identical to Labor’s needs --- decent wages, fair working conditions, livable housing, old-age security, health and welfare measures, conditions in which a family can grow, have education for their children and respect in the community” (Cited in Brooks 1971, 17-18).

3 Developing a Commonality of Interests

As I stated in my 1973 piece, in some circumstances commonality of interest may transcend tensions between racial and ethnic groups. If such commonality of interest can be noted in issues regarding health care, housing, education, employment and other areas, a political strategy sufficient to bring about greater social equity is possible. A movement to encompass such reforms constitutes a movement for social development. Wilson notes that the problem of joblessness and inadequate income has increasingly affected both low-income blacks and low-income whites. Programs such as wide-scale employment programs would benefit less-educated whites as well as economically marginal non-whites (1996, 235). Wilson complained that the U.S. Congress had retreated from utilizing public policy to address issues of social inequality. He argued that: “Groups ranging from the inner-city [and non-white] poor to those of working and middle class Americans who are struggling to make ends meet will have to be effectively mobilized in order to change the current course and direction taken by policymakers. Perhaps the best way to accomplish this is through coalition politics that promote race neutral programs such as job creation, further expansion of the earned income tax credit, public school reform, child care programs and universal health insurance” (1996, 235). He went on to note that:

“A broad-based political coalition is needed to successfully push such programs through the [national] political process” (*Ibid.*). He also felt that low-income black Americans would be major beneficiaries of the enactment of such programs. (Wilson was subject to a great deal of criticism for advocating this approach and in a later book he also favored vertical equity programs centered on alleviating problems specifically focused on black inner city issues [2012].)

Also recently Susan Rice in a *New York Times Op-Ed* noted similarly that as part of a program to counter racial injustice one might include “comprehensive remedies” such as “... universal prekindergarten, competitive teacher salaries... reliable broadband in rural and urban digital deserts ... no-debt access to community colleges, scale up apprenticeships and Pell Grants and make tuition free at public universities for all families earning under \$125,000 annually” (Rice 2020, A23). Such a program would have appeal to many marginal less educated white persons as well as low-income non-white minorities. In a piece also published in *The New York Times* after his death when commenting on public protests following the killing by the police and others of unarmed blacks, Congressman John Lewis also made an appeal to politically transcend racial and class divisions. He noted that: “Millions of people [who are] motivated simply by human compassion laid down the burdens of division. Around the country...[they] set aside race, class, age, language and nationality to demand respect for human dignity “ (Lewis 2020, A23).

4 The Plight of the White Working Class

The white working class consisting primarily of a major portion of whites without a college degree makeup 40 percent of the adult population, down from 70 percent in 1975 (Picchi, 2019). This decline is due to a number of factors.

The increase of a multi-racial group of non-whites into the “working class” (Palley 1973, 241). The mobility out of the working class of children from white working class families (Vance 2016, Westover 2018)). And the death rates of white working class individuals due to drug overdoses and suicides (Geronimus, Bound, Waidmann et al. 2019). The Geronimus, Bound, Waidmann, *et al.* study also found that this growing mortality rate is associated with increases in cardiovascular disease, and non-lung cancers (2019). This study examined quartiles of education but considered low education to be education through high school. Another study which examined data from the National Center for Health Statistics between 1990 and 2016 interpreted this growth in mortality rates with “tenacious high effort coping with chronic stress” (Caffrey 2019, Elo, Hendle, Ho, *et al.* 2019). The biggest declines in this group have been in the Northeast and the West. The percentage of the white working class in the Midwest remained at 52 percent. Low education in this study was considered to be less than a college graduate. Furthermore such white working class incomes decreased to 27 percent of overall income in 2016 from 45 percent in 1989. Moreover, whites without a college degree over a 30 year period has been characterized by declining life expectancy and rising mortality rates (Case and Deaton 2020). Among middle-aged whites without a college degree, deaths from suicides, drug overdoses and alcohol-related illnesses grew from 30 per 100,00 in 1990 to 92 per 100,000 in 2017 (Case and Deaton 2020, Mencimer 2020). Case and Deaton characterize this situation as “deaths of despair.” Most of this decline occurred among the white working class. Also among women, white middle-aged women, alcohol-related deaths between 1999 and 2015 increased by 130 percent. (Case and Deaton, 2020). Case and Deaton attribute these declines in health due a number of factors: the decline of the median wages for men without a college degree by -0.2 percent a year from between 1979 and 2017 as well as the spread of technological change and globalization that undermined U.S. manufacturing as well as community networks (Case and Deaton 2020, also see Menciner 2020). While they use multiple sources to review data such as *Current Population Survey*, *Gallop Polls* and *National Institute of Drug Abuse Data* all of which do not necessarily use a college degree as a white working-class marker, Case and Deaton specifically indicate that: “A four-year degree has become *the* key marker of social status...” (*Ibid.*, 3). This setting contributed significantly to the unique position of the U.S. in comparison with similar developed nations, in that prior to the coronavirus pandemic, it experienced a decline in life expectancy from 78.9 years of life expectancy in 2014 to 78.8 years in 2017 (Woolf and Schoomaker 2019).

Another study utilizing 1990-2015 data from the National Center for Health Statistics found that drug overdoses contributed importantly to the loss of life for white men --- but was a trivial factor for black men (Geronimus, Bound, Waidmann, *et al.* 2019). Another analysis of this data found that a higher rate of cardiovascular disease and non-lung cancers also were reflected in life expectancies between the white working class and other Americans (Caffery 2019,

Geronimus, Bound, Waidmann, *et al.* 2019). Geronimus, Bound, Waldmann *et al.* interpreted these health disparities as reflecting tenacious high effort coping with chronic stressors on a white marginal population (2019).

Also high health care costs have undermined stable employment for a considerable segment of this group. Corporate management has shifted low-level salaried and wage workers on to outside contractors who offer lower wages and benefits and little opportunity for advancement. Another factor affecting such workers is the lack of a reliable social safety net --- particularly in Republican dominated states.

5 Examining Some Trends in Voting

In the Presidential elections of 2008 and 2012, Barak Obama won the popular and electoral college vote without a majority of the white non-Hispanic vote. In 2016, Donald Trump further cut into the white non-Hispanic vote and further won a significant portion of the white non-college educated vote. According to the Pew Research Center, Trump won non-college educated white voters in 2016 by a margin of 39 points (Letter from Washington 2020) . In his campaign, Trump promised to maintain social benefits and health benefits --- promises he has not pursued --- as well as supporting extreme positions against gun reform, and extreme ant-abortion restrictions. Perhaps ironically given his personal reputation, Trump also won a majority of the white, non-Hispanic female vote, white women who constituted 41 percent of the electorate supported Trump with 47 percent of their vote, while voting for Clinton with 45 percent of their vote.

In the 2018 Congressional election, exit polls indicated that there was some erosion of white male working-class support for Republican candidates. Whereas in 2016 , there was - 48 point Democratic/Republican margin in 2018 that margin had been reduced to - 34 (Frey 2018). According to CNN exit polls, 49 percent of white women voted for Democrats in the 2018 Congressional election (2018). However in 2018, 59 percent of college educated women supported Democratic House candidates as compared to 49 percent in 2016 (CNN 2018, North 2018).

It is important to take a closer look at the white working class (and the perhaps closely aligned white middle class also without college degrees). In much data analysis, the white working class is defined as voters without a college degree --- thus the category is not “neat and clean” as this includes voters who by income and neighborhood are not working-class. These two groups are estimated to have made up between 48 percent and 54 percent of the entire 2016 electorate (Edsall 2019). According to polling data collected by Expedition Strategies, Democratic members of this white working class were 59 percent female and 41 percent male (Edsall 2018a). AFL-CIO data indicated that there was very high favorability by working class white Democrats for the Affordable Care Act, the Black Lives Matter movement and Medicare for All. Working class white Republicans had extreme unfavorable rating for these items (Edsall 2018a). The methodology of the AFL/CIO study involved face-to-face interviews in neighborhoods in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Missouri, North Carolina and Florida (Working America 2017). Sixty-three percent of the households in these studies had an income of \$75,000 or less. 83 percent of the voters interviewed were white, 10 percent were black and 6 percent were Hispanic (*Ibid.*).

As Edsall has noted, studies using the figure of white voters without a college degree as an indicator of being “working class” is a rough indicator of such status --- as it includes many small business owners and some large ones --- even multimillionaires. Nevertheless, Trump support by a substantial segment of non-salaried, less educated Americans does occur among a substantial segment of this working class group. One example is the very high level of support in 2016 for Donald Trump in West Virginia, an economically poor state with a substantial poor white population attests to this phenomenon (Knisely 2020, May 2017). In this election in West Virginia, a state with a substantial poor white population, Donald Trump received 67.9 percent of the vote for President and Hillary Clinton received 26.2 percent of the vote (Election 2016, updated 2017). Also, a recent piece discussing the Southwest Louisiana town of Lake Charles noted that one quarter of the town’s population of 78,000 was below the poverty line and that the [white] metro area voted overwhelmingly for Trump in 2016 (Sioleau 2020, A7).

The phenomena of social and economic breakdown among the white working class that Case and Deaton indicate has resulted in “deaths of despair” has been increasing from 1999 through 2017. While this is a widespread phenomenon, regional indicators of this situation occurred much earlier. In his 1963 book, *Night Comes to the Cumberland: A Biography*

of a Depressed Area, Harry Caudill describes this similar phenomenon in the Cumberland Plateau region of the eastern and southeastern area of Kentucky (1963).

In the *Working America* report, Republican working class white voters were characterized by a mindset suspicious and rejecting of science with regard to climate change, suspicious of the need for some control of reproduction, opposed to registration of automatic weapons, and also skeptical about the need to acknowledge indications of racial inequity. While such views are not limited to a substantial segment of the white working class, they represent a significant segment of working class support for the Republican Party and Donald Trump.

According to Pew, the white working class characterized as voters without a college degree caste 44 percent of the 60.1 million votes caste in the 2012 Presidential election. Hillary Clinton won only 28 percent of the white working class vote (Edsal 2018b, Pew Research Center, 2018). Whites with college degrees constituted 30 percent of this electorate and whites with college degrees favored Clinton by 55 percent to 38 percent (Edsall 2018b).

So one might ask, why in general does a significant segment of white working class voters not align with black and Hispanic working class voters politically. For this segment of the U.S. population that gets its “information” from Breitbart News, Sinclair Radio and Fox TV, there is an inaccurate belief that most social benefits go to non-whites --- although white non-Hispanics are the primary recipients of Food Stamps (the SNAP program), and nursing home and in-home chronic care benefits under Medicaid (Delaney and Scheller 2017, Parolin 2019, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2019). So how does one overcome this divide?

6 Public Policy and Developing a Coalition

The approach that William Julius Wilson and others have suggested and ---as has been noted --- for which Wilson was severely criticized --- was to primarily emphasize social programs that were broadly available but would be very helpful for lower income white populations as well as low-income black and Hispanic populations. Such programs would include universally available healthcare, adequate minimum wages, family support benefits and broad work programs encompassing fixing bridges, improving airport facilities, modernizing railroad lines and light rail, etc. Such a program emphasis would help create the multiracial coalition for social development that Martin Luther King envisioned. Such an approach would offer a significant opportunity for a broad coalition including significant participation by the white working class that could result in significant national governmental support for such social development.

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