

Trump, Liberalism and the White Working Class

December 2, 2016

We all know very well by now that the white working class did not cause Trump to win the elections. Article after article have made the case, typically pointing to Nate Silver's finding that the median household income of Trump supporters in the Republican primary was \$72,000, roughly \$10,000 more than the median household income for all whites. In the general election, Clinton won the majority of all voters earning \$50,000 or less. Trump supporters are many things. They are undoubtedly whiter. They are also less likely to be educated and more likely to work in blue-collar jobs. But there's one thing they're not: overwhelmingly working-class.



Instead, we're told, we should blame the far less sympathetic white middle class, whose bigotry cannot be understood as a product of economic distress. It was these whites in the lower-middle and middle class – the *petit bourgeoisie* – who formed the backbone of Trump's support, as they have done for fascist, pseudo-fascist and rightwing populist movements throughout history and across the globe.

Why revisit this narrative that has been practically beaten into our skulls these last few weeks since the election? Here are two simple reasons: It's mostly true, and the truth bears repeating, but it's also partly false, and needs to be corrected.

1. It's true, and the truth bears repeating.

Supporters of Stein, Sanders, Clinton and those who stayed home in disgust all need to come together to fight Trumpism.

We need unity, but on what basis? It's like the old saying: If you're too open-minded your brains fall out. Coalitions that are too broadly built inevitably fail. To succeed they must share an analysis – where we're at, how we got here and what to do next. That's why, over the protests of many of her supporters, so much ink has been spilled analyzing Clinton's loss. It's a critical task.

And the question of who's to blame is central to it.

It can't be said enough: Liberal elitism was the main factor that cost Clinton the election. Not Comey. Not Sanders. Not Stein. Not the media, fake news, Russian interference, or those who stayed home either. No. The main reason that Clinton lost the election was the same liberal elitism that now leads many of her supporters to – wrongly – blame the white working class and its purported ignorance and bigotry.

But it is the Russians and Russian President Vladimir Putin who have become the Clintonites' *bête noir*, their purported interference in the election increasingly honed in on over the last several weeks by the Clinton campaign as the main cause of Hillary's loss. It now seems likely that the Russians engaged in hacking during the election and the hacks – of the DNC as well as Clinton campaign chair John Podesta's email account, among others – clearly did take a toll. But it was just

one of many factors in a complicated election and has been blown entirely out of proportion.

The Clinton campaign is simply trying to save face – and one is left to wonder whether the FBI and CIA, pillars of a political establishment that Trump may overturn, aren't helping her in an effort to defend the existing order. There is no love lost between the CIA and the president-elect, who has joined with WikiLeaks' Julian Assange in attacking the agency's claims of interference. He's not a huge fan of the FBI either.

But liberal elites continue to also blame white working people and their disdain is a self-fulfilling prophecy. We urbanite liberals on the coasts look down our noses at middle America; we assume that rural Americans – both working people and the middle class – are all racists and sexists, homophobes and Islamophobes and ignorant, bigoted rednecks, and when they don't vote the way we want we take that as proof that we were right.

No doubt these -isms and phobias played a tremendous part in the election. Racism is, after all, part of the fabric of America. But while there's no moral equivalency, working people in this country despite being the majority also face a form of prejudice – “classism” – that is ingrained in the dominant liberal culture. The structural challenges workers face from a rigged economy are no less real than the all-too-real consequences of structural racism. Yet many liberals who will, rightly, go to the barricades over racial or social injustice can't seem to muster up the same righteous indignation about economic injustice against displaced workers.

We've ceded that ground to the Donald Trumps of the world.

Just consider David Brooks' vile comment days before the election that Trump voters “are just going with their gene pool.” Or the defense by Jamelle Bouie – who has otherwise had some very smart things to say about Trump's white nationalism – of Hillary's assertion that half of Trump's supporters belong in a “basket of deplorables,” which he offers up without addressing the economic despair that has led some of them to adopt their deplorable views.

Liberals were outraged by Mitt Romney's “47 percent” comment. Where was that outrage in defense of the “deplorables”? There wasn't any, and it's no surprise. Romney's remark about “those people” who take no “personal responsibility” had racial undertones whereas Clinton's comment was about class. She effectively wrote off a full quarter of the electorate as irredeemably bigoted – and we wonder why she lost?

Nor was Clinton's elitism limited to her comments. Derived from a brand of neoliberal politics that accepts – in fact, promotes – economic inequality, it also impacted how she campaigned. Clinton was warned by allies – including her husband – in both the primary and general election that she was perceived as out of touch and needed to do more to win over downwardly mobile whites in places like Michigan – but she and her campaign chiefs ignored them.

The meteoric rise of underdogs in both primaries – Sanders was to the left as Trump was to the right – was an indication that Clinton was facing a change election, and that she herself would have to change or face the consequences. Bernie was the proverbial canary in the coal mine, a warning that Democratic voters and not just Republicans wanted to upend the establishment. Hillary saw it. She knew it. But, a committed defender of the establishment, she couldn't *do* it.

Agreement on what went wrong and who is to blame must serve as the basis for the anti-Trump coalition we so desperately need.

The liberal establishment has failed. It's entirely discredited. Its one-percenter donors may still back it, but ordinary Americans on both sides of the aisle now reject it. We on the left – and those

erstwhile liberals who can be won over – need to offer something different and that means waging war on liberalism as well as Trumpism.

The point isn't to revive the rivalry between Bernie and Hillary supporters but to highlight that it was the elitism embedded in liberalism itself that led to Clinton's loss, and that the enemy isn't the working people or lower-middle class that so many liberals love to deride, but the establishment. Liberals need to learn this lesson and move to the left. Because those who don't learn from their mistakes are doomed to repeat them.

2. It's false, and needs to be corrected.

Here's the tricky part. The emerging consensus that white workers aren't to blame isn't entirely correct, either, and Hillary's comment about the "basket of deplorables," as obnoxious as it was, isn't entirely wrong.

After all, some Trump supporters no doubt *do* belong in the "basket of deplorables," and plenty of white workers *did* vote for him. Just consider: If the median household income of Trump supporters was \$72,000, that means half of his supporters earned less. And those supporters *are* part of the white working class. The question then becomes not whether but why they voted for him.

No doubt racial, ethnic and religious bigotry was an important factor. Polling suggests that Trump supporters harbor some heinous views. A majority of Trump supporters hold unfavorable views of Muslims and support banning them from entering the country. Most also agree with Trump's characterization of Mexican immigrants as criminals and support proposals to severely restrict immigration from Mexico. And many, although not a majority, believe that blacks are less intelligent and more violent than whites.

It's true that many white voters who supported Obama in 2008 voted for Trump. But that's a red herring. All it tells us is that those voters were willing to vote for a black president. It doesn't mean they don't harbor racist views. Nor should the Democrats have assumed that votes for Obama, who campaigned as a change agent, would necessarily go to Hillary, who campaigned on more of the same.

But if we accept that a vote for Obama doesn't mean someone isn't bigoted, we also must acknowledge that a vote for Trump doesn't mean they are. All it tells us is that they were willing to vote for a bigot. It's entirely possible in both cases that these voters sized up the candidates' economic programs and, ignoring Obama's race and Trump's bigotry, voted for the candidate whom they thought would best serve their material interests. Or at least wasn't a repeat of the status quo.

That's precisely what Gregory Schneider found in interviews with white Trump voters in southwest Virginia, a conservative area where coal is king. Many of those voters said they backed Trump reluctantly – because of his support for the coal industry, not his bigotry. They didn't even like him, they said. But Hillary had promised to put the coal industry out of business, and they knew that their few remaining jobs would go with it.

Election day polling confirms Trump's unpopularity among all voters: Just 38 percent had a favorable view of him, significantly less than the proportion of the electorate that voted for him.

It's fair to say, then, that many Trump supporters voted their pocketbooks – despite, not because of, his bigotry. In fact, the economy was their top issue, with 90 percent saying that it was very important to their vote compared to 80 percent of Clinton supporters.

Many white Trump supporters are justifiably angry at a system that has left them behind,

shortchanging them economically and deriding their culture, and we can acknowledge this fact without excusing bigoted attitudes many have adopted. It's no wonder that in the face of stagnant or declining wages and incomes, a housing crisis that has cost many their homes and a dominant liberal culture that looks down on them as ignorant and backwards that many downwardly mobile whites cling desperately to tradition and, in some cases, embrace bigotry.

After all, poor people hating other poor people, immigrants hating other immigrants, is as American as the fourth of July, a tradition of hate encouraged by the bosses to divide us against each other. The "wages of whiteness" – the psychological comfort that downwardly mobile whites derive from their white skin – are real. Bigotry isn't just hate for the other; it also reflects the bigot's own profound insecurity, which politicians like Trump gleefully exploit. The subtext is clear: *You may be poor, but at least you're not black.*

It's easier to accept this argument when we're talking about white *workers*, but it's true of the white middle class as well. They're motivated, above all, by fear: the fear that they too will lose what little they have and be forced into the ranks of the working class. Proletarianization has always – and will always – terrify the petit bourgeoisie.

Anger and fear require someone to blame – and if he gave them nothing else, Trump gave his supporters that someone. Mexicans. Blacks. Muslims. Women. LGBTQ folks. Take your pick. The best we can say for his 59 million supporters is that they were willing to overlook his bigotry because of their economic anxieties. In other cases, Trump stoked the flames of a latent racism that was already there.

But even most of those who embraced his racism in their anger at the establishment are not irredeemably bigoted. Just consider those voters who supported Sanders in the primary but switched to Trump. The same anger and fear drove them in both cases. But Bernie gave them someone other than their neighbors to blame: the establishment.

The "irredeemables" – the alt-right and those committed to ideologies of white supremacy and white nationalism and who truly *do* belong in Hillary's "basket of deplorables" – thankfully remain few. There's no hope for them. They are, without a doubt, the enemy. But, for the sake of our collective future, we must believe that, for the rest, there *is* hope. If the bulk of Trump's 59 million supporters are irredeemably bigoted – if they cannot be persuaded to change their views – then we may as well just give up now.

Micah Landau is a graduate student and longtime union staffer in New York. He is a member of the New Politics editorial board and the Democratic Socialists of America and a sympathizer of Solidarity.

Updated Jan. 9, 2017.