Contested Majority: The Representation Of The White Working Class In US Politics From The 1930s To The 1990s

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Abstract
This dissertation examines the representation of the white working class in US politics from the 1930s to the 1990s: how politicians, journalists, pollsters, pundits, political commentators, social movement groups, and others have studied, written about, and claimed to speak for white working class people and how this work has shaped American politics. Most existing literature on the role of the white working class in American politics has examined political opinion and political identity formation among white working class people, too often treating the “white working class” as a homogenous group with uniform political views. This project takes a different approach, focused on elite engagement with the white working class as a social and political category. It traces how prominent elite-level understandings of white working class identity, politics, and culture—from progressive workers combating economic elites to culturally conservative “Middle Americans” opposed to liberalism—emerged and impacted political contestation. In doing so, it stresses the importance of the white working class as a political symbol, one that has consistently been at the center of conflict around fundamental issues in US politics, including the nature of privilege and disadvantage, challenges to racial, gender, and class inequality, the state’s sphere of responsibility, and the contours of national identity.

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ABSTRACT

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Christopher Cimaglio
Carolyn Marvin

This dissertation examines the representation of the white working class in US politics from the 1930s to the 1990s: how politicians, journalists, pollsters, pundits, political commentators, social movement groups, and others have studied, written about, and claimed to speak for white working class people and how this work has shaped American politics. Most existing literature on the role of the white working class in American politics has examined political opinion and political identity formation among white working class people, too often treating the “white working class” as a homogenous group with uniform political views. This project takes a different approach, focused on elite engagement with the white working class as a social and political category. It traces how prominent elite-level understandings of white working class identity, politics, and culture—from progressive workers combating economic elites to culturally conservative “Middle Americans” opposed to liberalism—emerged and impacted political contestation. In doing so, it stresses the importance of the white working class as a political symbol, one that has consistently been at the center of conflict around fundamental issues in US politics, including the nature of privilege and disadvantage, challenges to racial, gender, and class inequality, the state’s sphere of responsibility, and the contours of national identity.
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Introduction

On November 8, 2016, Donald Trump was elected President of the United States, an outcome that came as a shock for most professional political observers. The dominant explanation for Trump’s win focused on his appeal to one specific group: the white working class. “Working-class whites give Trump the White House,” read a CNN chyron. For ABC News, “A revolution against politics shook the country, [with] working class whites venting their economic and cultural frustration by lifting…Trump to the presidency.”

By November, this frame was nothing new; for most of the campaign, Trump supporters and Trump opponents with almost nothing in common could agree that Trump’s candidacy was a bottom-up revolt of blue-collar whites against the political establishment. One prominent Democrat called Trump the “staunchest champion of the white working class that American politics has seen in decades.”

Signs reading “The Silent Majority Stands With Trump” were fixtures at campaign rallies. Trump championed coal miners, factory workers, and cities and towns harmed by trade deals. “I am your voice,” he promised “the forgotten men and women of our country.”

Donald Trump’s rise to the presidency was unique in recent American political history. The symbolism around the white working class that accompanied it was deeply rooted in that history. Trump’s promise to restore high-wage manufacturing jobs tapped

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cultural memory of the period between the 1950s and 1970s, when a (usually white, male) worker with a high school education could securely support a family on a single wage. “Forgotten Americans” is a longstanding trope invoked by politicians as diverse as Franklin D. Roosevelt, Richard Nixon (the Trump campaign’s most obvious inspiration), and Bill Clinton. Observers on the left and right have, over many decades, condemned journalists and political elites as out of touch with the (white) working class. Present-day elite observers commenting on the political importance of working class whites tend to see their arguments as novel responses to the urgency of the moment. From a historical perspective, patterns are very clear.

White workers have long been central to elite political contestation in the United States. Liberals have invoked them as chief beneficiaries of a liberal agenda, as the backbone of the liberal coalition, and (in more recent decades) as those voters most responsible for the rise of conservatism. Conservatives have figured them as dupes of liberal elites and (in more recent decades) as the mass base for populist resistance to liberalism. White workers have been, as consistently as any other social group, identified as “average Americans” and as representative of the “public.” They have also been, more than any other group, symbolic of racism, nativism, and unease about modernity and social change. In sum, representations of working class whites among US elites have been complex and ambivalent, marked by ascriptions of both normativity and inferiority. Even deeply negative representations have been often tinged with normativity, though, and positive ones with condescension.
Most existing literature on the role of the white working class in American politics has examined political opinion and political identity formation among white working class people. Here, I take a different approach, focused on elite engagement with the white working class as a social and political category. This dissertation examines the representation of the white working class in US politics from the 1930s to the 1990s: how politicians, journalists, pollsters, pundits, social movement groups, and others have studied, written about, and claimed to speak for white working class people and how this work has shaped American politics. The project traces how prominent elite-level understandings of white working class identity, politics, and culture emerged and impacted political contestation. In doing so, it stresses the importance of the white working class as a political symbol, one that has consistently been at the center of conflict around fundamental issues in US politics. Talk about working class whites has been a medium through which elites have grappled with and debated large questions about their own positions in society, the nature of privilege and disadvantage, challenges to racial, gender, and class inequality, the state’s sphere of responsibility, the legitimacy of capitalism, and more.

This introduction lays the groundwork for the study and is divided into three parts. First, a literature review details existing historical, ethnographic, and quantitative literature on white working class politics and frames my intervention in that context. Part Two outlines the theoretical framework for the project. It introduces Pierre Bourdieu’s work on class formation (the centerpiece of that framework), discusses how “white working class” is conceptualized in the context of this project, defines the key concept of
“elite public discourse,” and details how that concept was operationalized via the study’s methods. Finally, Part Three provides a road map of the chapters to follow and a summary of the dissertation’s broad narrative.

I. Literature Review

This literature review outlines existing work focused on the white working class in American politics. It is divided into two broad sections: a discussion of research focused on understanding the political and social views of white working class people and a discussion of predominant themes in existing writing about the representation of the white working class. The central enduring theme in existing literature is the extent to which unease with cultural change, especially gains for people of color, drives the politics of a broadly drawn white working class. Though scholars’ treatment of this theme has become more nuanced over time, the question of why white working class voters support conservative politics remains dominant in the literature. There are clear limits to what research oriented around this question can explain, and a focus on how elites have talked about the white working class can open up new dimensions for analysis. In existing work on the representation of the white working class, I argue below, there are two predominant themes—normative constructions of white workers defined against people of color and stigmatizing constructions of white workers on the part of white elites. In existing writing, these perspectives sometimes appear opposed to one another, but they do not need to be: a synthesis of the two is both important and very achievable.
Research focused on the political and social views of white working class people

Any understanding of existing work on the white working class in American politics starts with the concept of “backlash.” In simplest terms, the backlash frame posits that white working class voters support a conservative agenda because of anxiety about or opposition to cultural change, particularly the advancement of people of color. Over many years, the concept of backlash has undergirded both historical analysis and analysis of contemporary politics.

According to a longstanding narrative, political shifts among working class whites—to the left in the 1930s and to the right, as part of a backlash beginning in the 1960s—explain a great deal of the political history of the twentieth-century US. “The backbone of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal Democratic coalition, working whites put Ronald Reagan in the White House,” one historian writes. In this narrative, the gains liberals made during the 1930s and 1940s were made possible by progressive views and political unity among working class voters. Workers underwent a “gradual shift in attitudes and behavior” in which they rejected the individualistic ideology of the business class and placed their trust in an activist government responsible for its citizens’ security. They also united in a multiracial, multiethnic political majority, as the forces pushing them toward common ground, including the “culture of unity” cultivated by the industrial union movement, made possible collective action that overcame the racial

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divisions exploited by employers. The New Deal coalition (African Americans, the Northern white ethnic working class, the white South, and professional-class white liberals) made Democrats the dominant force in American politics for thirty years.

One of the most influential understandings of why the New Deal coalition collapsed, both inside and outside the academy, is what’s often called the “backlash narrative.” The key period in most backlash accounts is the 1960s, when white working class voters left the Democrats as part of a reaction against the civil rights movement, the counterculture and radical left, and Democrats’ association with both. The old Democratic coalition split into two opposing factions—“a coalition of blacks and middle-class whites committed to an agenda of racial and sexual equality, social welfare, and moral modernism” and a group of “working-class and lower-middle-class whites…calling for a reassertion of such traditional values as patriarchy, patriotism, law and order, hard work, and self-help.” By exploiting the backlash and adopting “a populist stance around the issues of race and taxes,” Republicans were able to “persuade working and lower-middle-class [white] voters to join in an alliance with business interests and the affluent.” The result was a period of conservative dominance. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, as scholars sought to understand the decline of liberalism and

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6 Fraser and Gerstle, introduction to The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, xxii.
the rise of conservatism in the late twentieth century, this narrative became central to the academic literature. Works in this backlash tradition largely took a top-down approach and stressed conservative politicians’ use of racially charged rhetoric to attract white voters, typically assuming a uniform reception.

Importantly, the backlash frame has been applied consistently in reference to periods other than the 1960s, and it remains central to journalists’ and liberal pundits’ work on the white working class. What specifically is understood to have alienated working class whites has changed over time as issues enter and exit the discourse—busing, Vietnam, affirmative action, illegal immigration, “God, guns, and gays,” transgender rights—but the argument remains basically the same: appeals to racial and/or cultural identity push lower and middle-income whites towards conservatism. The basic claims of the backlash narrative—that racial/cultural grievances altered the trajectory of American politics and pushed whites to the right—are clearly persuasive. Because of its one-dimensional causal mechanism, in which non-elite white sentiment is almost wholly responsible for the rise of conservatism (or, in some cases, neoliberalism or mass incarceration), it cannot stand as a comprehensive explanation of any of these developments. Rather, the backlash narrative’s ubiquity in elite public discourse owes to the fact that it can support inflections acceptable to both liberals and conservatives. Because it frames conservatism as driven by a bottom-up revolt against elite liberals, it can mesh with anti-elite populist conservative frames. When it understands conservatism as driven above all by racism and cultural bigotry, it accords well with liberal criticism.
In journalism and political commentary, the backlash narrative remains hegemonic; in the scholarly literature, its position is more complex. It remains influential, and scholars continue to center it in their literature reviews—sometimes to define their work against it (as I am doing here). However, academic analysis over the last twenty years has pushed back on or superseded significant elements of the backlash narrative, without transcending its basic role in the symbolic construction of the white working class. Recent academic literature on white working class politics can be divided into three broad categories—historical work, primarily within the field of history; quantitative studies looking at voting and party affiliation, primarily in political science; and ethnographic and interview-based studies, primarily in sociology.

A recent quantitative literature on white working class politics in political science and political sociology has primarily focused on testing central claims of the backlash narrative: whether the white working class supports the Republicans and whether social or economic issues primarily explain that support. Several of the most notable academic critiques of the backlash narrative have come out of this literature: scholars (most notably Larry Bartels) have argued that Democratic support among working class whites outside the South has been flat or has even increased since the 1950s, with the decline in Democratic support within the white working class attributable to the breakup of the one-party South. It is important to stress, though, that Bartels’ argument relies on an overly narrow definition of the white working class: whites in the bottom third of the income

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distribution. More broadly, most of the debate in the quantitative literature on white working class politics rests on how the “white working class” is defined statistically: by income, education, occupation, self-identification as “working class,” or a combination of the above.\textsuperscript{9} An income-based definition yields the most progressive “white working class”; all other approaches suggest some degree of shift to the Republicans. An education-based definition (whites without a four-year college degree, the metric most commonly used by journalists and pollsters) yields the most conservative “white working class.”

Scholars looking at significantly different populations, though, all generalize to
the “white working class.” Their investment in doing so suggests the high stakes and
considerable meaning attached to the category, but it also illustrates the conceptual
problems posed by treating a unitary category as the focus of research. Studies whose
findings do not actually conflict with each other are opposed to one another in literature
reviews, and it is necessary to read against the grain to get a sense of variation within
the group. The picture that emerges from considering the literature as a whole is more
complex than the backlash narrative. It suggests a decline in white working class support
for Democrats large enough to be impactful but not large enough to support the thesis
that the white working class “abandon[ed]” the party. The turn to the Republican Party
appears to be larger in the South, among relatively high-income individuals without
college degrees, among men, and among individuals working in traditional blue-collar
occupations. That trend is smaller among Northerners, relatively low-income people, and
women. Several studies suggest that a preference for Republicans’ managing of the
economy has driven the conservative trend (an argument that has seldom appeared in
journalism and punditry), while others emphasize race. The importance some backlash

10 “On one hand, there is evidence that the White working class has shifted to vote Republican, and on the
other hand, there is evidence that the White working class continues to vote Democratic.” Brady, Sosnaud,
and Frenk, “The Shifting and Diverging White Working Class,” 119. It should be noted that studies’
divergent findings are also partly explained by the years that they choose as starting points—starting in
1964, an artificial high point for white support for Democrats due to Lyndon Johnson’s landslide, yields a
much more dramatic decline than 1952, perhaps a low point, although Democrats did not win a majority of
the white vote in 1952, 1956, or 1960. African American voters were crucial to Democratic electoral
success from the New Deal through the 1960s as well as from the 1960s to the present day.
11 As Kenworthy et al. convincingly suggest, identification with the Democratic Party declined among
working class whites from approximately 60% to 40% from 1970 to the early 2000s, a finding that holds
across multiple measures of “white working class.” Kenworthy et al, “The Democrats and Working-Class
Whites,” 6. For the “abandon[ed]” claim, Abramowitz and Teixeira, “The Decline of the White Working
Class.”
accounts afford to “social issues” such as abortion has not fared as well in this
literature.\textsuperscript{12}

Within the historical literature, the backlash narrative has been substantially
decentered. The basic construction of a unitary, anxious white working class has not
been sufficiently problematized, though, and there has been relatively little emphasis on
the white working class as a political symbol deployed by elites. The literature on
conservatism has grown a great deal since the key backlash works appeared in the late
1980s and early 1990s. It contains major strands that deemphasize working class whites
and emphasize the efforts of professional- and upper class conservative social movement
activists, religious conservatives, and business elites.\textsuperscript{13} However secure liberalism
appeared from the 1930s to the 1960s, much of this work stresses, a significant
countermobilization among powerful adversaries was taking shape. Other more recent
studies share the backlash narrative’s emphasis on white working class discontent as a
key force behind the success of conservatism, but they argue that this began much earlier
than the 1960s and that it is best understood as a local politics rooted in urban and
suburban space. In other words, white workers’ turn to the right was not a product of
1960s liberalism’s strong association with African Americans; the same racial politics
was evident on the local level decades earlier. Homeownership and neighborhood,
central to white working class identity for these studies, encouraged an ideology centered
on maintaining segregated neighborhoods and schools, protecting property values, and


keeping taxes low. These essential studies take a nuanced and empirically grounded approach, moving past the model of isolated voters responding to conservative rhetoric to portray a bottom-up populist conservative politics.

The literature over the last twenty years also includes a number of ethnographic and interview-based studies of white working class politics, primarily in sociology. Consistent themes in these studies include the importance of homeownership, neighborhood, community, and work in shaping white working class people’s political


identities; the stress many white working class people place on morality and personal responsibility; resentment of and lack of trust in government and elite institutions; and the frequency with which white workers define themselves against African Americans, immigrants, Muslims, and other whites they consider dangerous or less deserving. These studies underscore the extent to which economic and cultural issues are intertwined in political consciousness, with economic views informed by cultural constructions of the groups benefitting from government programs. Broadly, studies differ less in their characterizations of white working class cultures than the tone they take to describe them—in other words, how sympathetically scholars treat the grievances they describe.

Two recent studies—both cited by journalists and elite commentators as insightful in explaining the Trump phenomenon—give a good sense of the current dominant scholarly view of the white working class. For sociologist Justin Gest, writing in 2016:

I find that white working class people’s rebellion is driven by a sense of deprivation—the discrepancy between individuals’ expectations of power and social centrality, and their perceptions of fulfillment. More specifically, white working class people are consumed by their loss of social and political status in social hierarchies, particularly in relation to immigrant and minority reference groups. Their politics are motivated and pervaded by a nostalgia that reveres, and seeks to reinstate, a bygone era.16

For sociologist Arlie Hochschild, also writing in 2016:

You’ve suffered long hours, layoffs, and exposure to dangerous chemicals at work, and received reduced pensions. You have shown moral character through trial by fire, and the American Dream of prosperity and security is a reward for all of this, showing who you have been and are—a badge of honor…Look! You see people cutting in line ahead of you! You’re following the rules. They aren’t. As they cut in, it feels like you are being moved back. How can they just do that? Who are they? Some are black. Through affirmative action plans, pushed by the federal government, they are being given preference for places in colleges and universities, apprenticeships, jobs, welfare payments, and free lunches…Blacks,

16 Gest, The New Minority, 16.
women, immigrants, refugees…all have cut ahead of you in line. But it’s people like you who have made this country great…You’ve suffered a good deal yourself, but you aren’t complaining about it.\textsuperscript{17}

In the most common view, the politics of the white working class is backward-looking, moralistic, and founded on a sense of unjustly lost normativity.

Taken as a whole, existing work is very strong in documenting the existence and significance of white working class conservatism and capturing how conservative views arise among whites of modest means. In existing literature, however, broad and rigid understandings of white working class identity and culture are asked to carry a heavy conceptual load, to the detriment of the analysis. Take the following two representative claims in existing scholarly literature: “In the aftermath of the [1960s], white working people felt themselves to be coughing up their taxes to support the poor minority”…“The conservatism of America’s working people leads them to reject a social democracy in order to vote for officials whose policies favor laissez-faire economics and corporate interests.”\textsuperscript{18} These characterizations are certainly true—at least in broad strokes—of some portion of the group. As even the authors would certainly concede, they cannot possibly be true of the entire group, but the language used implies it.\textsuperscript{19} To be sure, categorization is fundamental to scholarship, and there is no alternative. It is also

\textsuperscript{17} Hochschild, \textit{Strangers in Their Own Land}, 137.
\textsuperscript{18} Cowie, \textit{The Great Exception}, 181; Kefalas, \textit{Working Class Heroes}, 133.
important to avoid losing grasp on the power of race to shape perception and experience in consistent and identifiable ways. But the suggestion that these views were shared universally within the group and are particular to, reflective of, or explained by white working class-ness (as opposed to, for instance, whiteness) works against well-rounded analysis.

To be very clear, my intention is not to argue that these studies’ arguments are “wrong,” or that anti-liberal, conservative, nativist, and racist views are not prominent among white working class people. They are, and they are prominent among Americans generally, especially white Americans—it is irresponsible to suggest otherwise. This is not intended to be glib or dismissive of the consequences of those views, which are severe. It is important to ask, though, how well the dominant approach to understanding the politics of the white working class situates them within a broader analytical picture. “Backlash encougres certain analytical practices of ‘finding’ racial power in a post-civil rights context,” Naomi Murakawa writes.\(^\text{20}\) It places the emphasis on conservatism rather than liberalism, on non-elite rather than elite whites, and on electoral politics rather than a broader structural view. There are clear limits to what research oriented around understanding white working class conservatism can explain.

That basic research question—why white working class people gravitate to right-wing views—has likely been so common because the seeming incongruity of white working class conservatism calls out to researchers as a puzzle in need of investigation. Arlie Hochschild frames her recent study around what she calls the “Great Paradox”: anti-statism within struggling areas where “one might expect people to welcome federal

help.”

“Why is it that many low-income voters who might benefit from more government redistribution continue to vote against it?” asks political scientist Katherine Cramer. New studies of the political views of white working class people, taking particular interest in their support for politicians like Trump, will likely emerge in the coming years. A continued focus on different iterations of the same research question—why (why are they alienated? why do they support conservatives?)—will likely yield results consistent with existing literature. Put differently, the patterns in existing academic and nonacademic literature on the white working class encourage a circular or cyclical dynamic: research periodically finds the same attitudes within the white working class, prompting similar debates about how to respond to those attitudes. In order to move the conversation forward, it is necessary to ask different questions.

“Contested Majority” foregrounds one set of alternative questions, focused on how elites have talked about working class whites and what the white working class as a political symbol has meant within elite-level political and media discourse. This approach opens up additional dimensions for the study of white working class politics. First, it brings a focus on media and communication into a literature where they are rarely present. Work in political and labor history has not placed very much emphasis on media, and the media history literature known to communication scholars remains too siloed from mainstream historiography. As John Nerone argues, part of the value of communication history (and of other historical work conducted outside of the field of

21 Hochschild, Strangers in Their Own Land, 8-9.
22 Cramer, The Politics of Resentment, 4-5.
history) lies in its ability to bring a different perspective to familiar material. My project reengages a familiar historical narrative—the rise and fall of New Deal liberalism—and places communication at the center of it. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to an interdisciplinary communication history research agenda.

Second, this approach sheds light on the importance of the white working class as a political symbol—to invoke an academic cliché, what political observers talk about when they talk about the white working class. Elite-level debates about how to understand or appeal to the white working class generate so much conflict and attention because they are only partly (and often superficially) about the white working class. They have consistently touched on large, fundamental, and controversial issues: who has power in society and who is victimized; what responsibility the state has in combating inequality; what makes a good citizen. These discussions are also very often about the responsibilities and failures of elites—to maintain prosperity, to show fairness, to demonstrate awareness of and regard for non-elite groups.

To my knowledge, there are not any book- or dissertation-length studies looking at the representation of the white working class over the full period this project covers. There is little work in this vein within the field of communication, though there are small literatures looking at representations of unions in news media, representations of workers in film and popular culture, and unions’ strategic uses of media. However, this is a

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topic and a theme that has been the subject of important and pointed analysis within and outside the academy. I am certainly not the first to emphasize the significance of white working class representation or to problematize elite constructions of a homogenous white working class.

Existing perspectives on representations of the white working class

Two predominant points of emphasis are most evident in existing writing focused on elite representations of the white working class. One centers on the normativity tied up in representations of white workers, the other on stigmatizing views of white workers. Both are prominent in the present day, but both also have longer roots. What follows is my work of synthesis; it should be read as an effort to capture two enduring lenses rather than as a straightforward presentation of the view of any specific scholar or group of scholars.

One perspective, which might be called white working class normativity, emphasizes the valorization of white workers, especially at the expense of workers of color. In this framework, white elites have accorded white workers and their grievances a level of respect and legitimacy deeply tied up in the interpenetration of whiteness with

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understandings of the democratic majority. American history has seen a consistent
“juxtaposition between the valid and even virtuous interests of the ‘working class’ and
the invalid and pathological interests of black Americans,” Ta-Nehisi Coates argues in a
2017 essay. Where white workers were figured as “virtuous and just, worthy of
citizenship, progeny of Jefferson and, later, Jackson,” black workers were figured as
“servile and parasitic, dim-witted and lazy, the children of African savagery…The
dignity accorded to white labor was situational, dependent on the scorn heaped upon
black labor.”26 In the period between the 1930s and the 1990s, this dynamic manifests
particularly clearly in the normative contrast drawn between a white working class
culture centered on family, stability, hard work, and close-knit community and a
“subculture…of the Negro American” marked by sexual pathology and dysfunctional
family life.27

Scholars root the valorization and recognition white workers have received from
elites in the context of a bargain central to the history of race in America. In a pattern
beginning as early as the eighteenth century and repeating consistently thereafter, elites
retained social control and staved off interracial working class revolt through a tacit
contract with white workers: Working whites would never fall to the level of the “Negro”

27 A particularly well-known example is the Moynihan Report, which made these kinds of claims about the
“subculture…of the Negro American”: Daniel Patrick Moynihan, The Negro Family: The Case for
National Action (Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, March
1965). On normative treatments of white workers in the context of post-civil rights and post-feminist
politics, Matthew Frye Jacobson, Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America
Ethnicities, Identity Politics, and Baby Bear’s Chair,” Social Text 41 (1994): 165-191; Sally Robinson,
Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Hamilton
Carroll, Affirmative Reaction: New Formations of White Masculinity (Durham: Duke University Press,
2011).
and would be accorded respect as full members of the polity.\textsuperscript{28} W. E. B. Du Bois’ canonic formulation of the “public and psychological wage” received by white workers, for instance, centers partly on how elites talked publicly about working whites: “Their vote selected public officials, and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment and the deference shown them…The newspapers specialized in news that flattered the poor whites and almost utterly ignored the Negro except in crime and ridicule.”\textsuperscript{29} Scholars and writers in this tradition stress that the bargain is ultimately a bad one for white workers, morally and materially, and whites in the power structure gain the most. The bargain provides working class whites with real gains, however, from access to better jobs and housing to a sense of personhood. By far, those harmed most by this treatment of working class whites are workers of color.


\textsuperscript{29} This quote fits in the context of Du Bois’ larger argument as follows: “It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent upon their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage lawlessness. Their vote selected public officials, and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment and the deference shown them. White schoolhouses were the best in the community, and conspicuously placed, and they cost anywhere from twice to ten times as much per capital as the colored schools. The newspapers specialized in news that flattered the poor whites and almost utterly ignored the Negro except in crime and ridicule.” Du Bois, \textit{Black Reconstruction}, 700.
A second perspective stresses the persistent stigmatization of the white working class on the part of white elites and professionals. From a longer historical standpoint, in this framework, negative representations of laboring whites have served to prop up the political economic status quo by naturalizing inequality: Nancy Isenberg’s recent account, for instance, situates the classification of “poor whites…as a distinct breed” in the context of an enduring need to explain away class disadvantage in an ostensibly egalitarian society. Scholars and writers focused on stigmatization in recent decades have emphasized the construction of “the white working class as a discrete bigot class responsible for America’s social and political ills.” The majority of existing work on the representation of the white working class, often coming from scholars and writers on the labor/social-democratic left and in the field of working class studies, has focused on historicizing and critiquing representations of a racist, nativist, and/or conservative white working class, particularly among professional-class liberals. The historical narrative

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that emerges from this work is one of decline: Professional-class (white) liberals who valued (white) workers’ contributions to society in the 1930s and 1940s turned during the 1950s and 1960s to an image of these workers as affluent, bigoted, and unconcerned.

In this framework, only white elites and professionals gain from the dominant cultural construction of the white working class. There is nothing positive in it for white workers, who are subject to immense condescension and classism. By emphasizing white working class bigotry, “elite whites” are able to “displace the blame for racism” (or sexism or homophobia) onto the white working class, as “professional-class racism slides conveniently out of sight.”

Put differently, by defining themselves against a retrograde white working class, white professionals enjoy all the privileges of whiteness without being marked as racists. By attributing white workers’ disadvantage to moral and intellectual shortcomings, others stress, elites avoid placing scrutiny on capitalism or their own position within the status quo.

As primary analytic frames, white working class normativity and stigmatization can yield very different and seemingly opposing takes. One clear example comes from present-day politics: the vast journalistic and pundit literature on white workers produced during and after the 2016 election. For those who emphasize stigmatization, media coverage of white working class voters evinced the “moral superiority affluent Americans often pin upon themselves,” as it “routinely conflated” notions of “poor

15, 2016; see also the work of Metzgar and other authors on the Working-Class Perspectives blog at https://workingclassstudies.wordpress.com/.
whiteness and poor character.”

“For the national news media, the working class hordes who were Trump’s base of support were a kind of malignancy, not a constituency,” one journalist writes. “They were racists. Jerks. An oddity, the Other, their problems to be examined with disdain.” For those focused on normativity, the problem was not that (predominantly white professional-class) pundits were unfair to working class whites, but that these pundits were too sympathetic and attentive to white workers, unjustly foregrounding white workers’ pain. Articles “tell[ing women and people of color] to stop being terrified about the very sanctity of our bodies and listen to the plaintive whines of the white working class,” one observer contended, amounted to “telling the disenfranchised to pay more attention to the over-franchised.” In this view, liberals who took themselves to task for elitism falsely suggested that “Donald Trump is not the product of white supremacy so much as the product of a backlash against contempt for white working-class people”; constant invocations of the white working class were a means through which concerns around race, gender, and sexuality could be dismissed as “identity politics” and decentered as progressive priorities.

The tension between normativity and stigmatization in analysis of white working class representation reflects distinct views of white workers’ position within the social hierarchy: For some observers, what is most important is the status of white workers (especially white working class men) as junior members of dominant groups; for others,

37 Coates, “The First White President.”
what is most important is their status as members of a clear subordinate group, the working class. The proper weight to give to distinct but intersecting vectors of power and marginalization has been and will continue to be the subject of intense, controversial, and difficult debate. For the purposes of a study of white working class representation, it is important to stress that these two primary perspectives—white working class normativity and stigmatization—are compatible. Both perspectives capture key pieces of the work done by representations of white workers. Neither alone is sufficient for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, but they are complementary—in the sense that each tends to miss what the other emphasizes. As a political symbol, the white working class has been positioned in multiple overlapping and conflicting ways, figured as normative and inferior (sometimes at the same time). One of the primary goals of this project is to accomplish a synthesis of these themes in a nuanced, balanced, and comprehensive account.

II. Theoretical Framework and Methods

Part Two lays out the fundamentals of the theoretical framework and methods employed in this study. It begins (in a section designated #1 below) by stressing the importance of the representation of non-elite groups in elite-level politics and outlining the major theoretical model that guides the analysis, Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “classification struggles.” Next (2), I define the “white working class” for the purposes of this project—a social category that actors can speak for or speak about and that has meaning within this discourse, independent of the actions of the people it designates. The
next-to-last section (3) defines the key concept of “elite public discourse”—a mediated space of representation where elites discuss and debate politics for an audience imagined as comprised of elites and professionals. The final section (4) details the methods for the study, focusing in particular on how texts were selected for analysis.

1. Representing the White Working Class: An Alternative Framework

How does political opinion and political identity formation among white working class people matter politically? While this question is often not explicitly addressed in existing literature, the guiding presumptions can be usefully understood through an opposition between elite-level and grassroots-level politics. Frameworks like micropolitics, infrapolitics, and the “grassroots” capture the political significance of everyday, informal, interpersonal interactions.38 This realm comprises family life, social relationships, the workplace (for non-elite workers), neighborhood, the day-to-day experience of being in the world. At the other end of the spectrum is what might be called macropolitics, elite-level politics, or national politics: “the dimension of political life where the powerful are most dominant, and where the expression of politics in its institutional forms is most prevalent.”39 The realm of macropolitics includes the White House, Congress, the courts, major political parties, national media, and the apparatus of lobbying firms, advocacy groups, and think tanks seeking to influence elite actors. For the purposes of this project, “elites” are those whose decisions impact the lives of a

significant number of people; those who can consistently communicate their views widely or to a select, powerful audience; and/or those with significant power, wealth, or professional credentials.

In much of the existing literature on white working class politics, the connection between elite and non-elite realms is assumed to be straightforward and direct. The conventional narrative of the rise and fall of New Deal liberalism accords non-elite whites substantial national-level political power. They exercise that power through their vote—selecting candidates who speak to and represent their identity and political views. Public opinion places clear boundaries around what elites are able to achieve. In the less nuanced backlash texts, elite political rhetoric directly shapes white working class identity. In many of the best studies of political identity formation among white workers, an identity primarily formed at the grassroots translates straightforwardly to how worker-actors engage in national politics.

At the other end of the spectrum is the enduring argument that there is very little connection between mass and elite-level politics. In Walter Lippmann’s classic account, the voter “lives in a world which he cannot see, does not understand and is unable to direct.”

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40 Two examples help to illustrate how this framework shapes historical narratives. “For FDR to have any traction at all,” Jefferson Cowie writes, the “voters had to put aside their deep-seated individualism and their many antipathies and hatreds that historically had divided them in so many ways.” “The neoliberal revolution usually attributed to Thatcher and Reagan after 1979 had to be accomplished by democratic means,” David Harvey argues in his often-cited *Brief History of Neoliberalism*. “For a shift of this magnitude to occur required the prior construction of political consent across a sufficiently large spectrum of the population to win elections.” Cowie, *The Great Exception*, 7; David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 39.

follow elite political discourse, do not have well-defined opinions on many political
issues, and do not understand politics using the same frameworks that elites use.\textsuperscript{42} A
recent literature also suggests that public opinion, for all income groups but the most
affluent, has little to no influence on policy.\textsuperscript{43} Here recent American political history
becomes, as Larry Bartels argues, “a story of powerful public officials pursuing their own
ideological impulses, ignorant or heedless of the public sentiment.”\textsuperscript{44}

The framework that guides my analysis maintains a conceptual opposition
between elite-level and micro-level politics while admitting a connection between the
two realms. Each can and in many ways does strongly shape the other, but there is often
a profound divide between the two. The connection between them requires work to build
and maintain; it is not frictionless or assured. For instance, political elites frequently
invoke group identity with the aim of mobilizing mass support around it. However, as
Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper argue, scholars cannot assume that elite
identification “will necessarily result in the internal sameness, the distinctiveness, the
bounded group-ness that political entrepreneurs may seek to achieve.” A great deal of
what happens in elite-level politics does not involve the input of non-elites in any
meaningful way, and identity claims can have meaningful effects at the elite level
independent of their reception within the broader public. “Self-identification takes place

\textsuperscript{42} For discussions of this literature and the stakes see e.g. Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, \textit{What Americans Know About Politics And Why It Matters} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); Arthur Lupia and Matthew McCubbins, \textit{The Democratic Dilemma: Can Citizens Learn What They Need to Know?} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).


\textsuperscript{44} Bartels, \textit{Unequal Democracy}, 198.
in dialectical interplay with external identification, and the two need not converge,” Brubaker and Cooper note.\textsuperscript{45} Similarly, the fact that a set of political views or social distinctions exists at the micro level is not in itself sufficient to bring attention to them at the macropolitical level. There are a far greater number of subject positions than there are political identities deemed meaningful in national politics.\textsuperscript{46} Walter Lippmann’s classic depictions of the political world as distant and murky aptly capture the way many elites perceive the non-elite realm. The evidence they have to work with—public opinion research, journalistic profiles of voters, election returns—is imperfect and subject to multiple interpretations and confirmation bias.

This project understands the work of representation in this context: of making something outside elite-level politics present within it. In order to shape elite behavior and elite-level discourse, non-elite opinion must be communicated, represented, or made binding in a way that is meaningful for that audience. I mean representation in the double sense of speaking for and speaking about, delegation and depiction. First, representation (speaking for) refers to political actors who claim to speak in elite spaces, or are designated to speak in elite spaces, on behalf of broader constituencies outside those spaces.\textsuperscript{47} Representatives in this sense include elected members of Congress, advocacy

\textsuperscript{46} Take, for instance, one woman’s explanation to a scholar of class distinctions within the trailer park where she lives: “Even in the trailer park, you have some people who think they’re better than others. The double-wides are better off than the single-wides. People who own their trailers—not to mention their land, too—are real high society in the trailer park versus people who rent…But in general no matter what they have in here, people who don’t live here think we’re all low-class scum.” Moss, \textit{The Color of Class}, 83.
\textsuperscript{47} On “representation” as standing for, see e.g. Hanna Pitkin, \textit{The Concept of Representation} (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967); Adam Przeworski, Susan Stokes, and Bernard Manin, eds., \textit{Democracy, Accountability, and Representation} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Ian Shapiro, Susan Stokes, Elisabeth Jean Wood, and Alexander Kirshner, eds., \textit{Political Representation} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
Second, representation (speaking about) in this project also refers to the work of actors who seek to understand and portray a non-elite constituency. Journalists, pollsters, strategists, and others engage in this work.

This work of representation shapes the dominant view of the social and political world, including the nature of the groups that make up that world, their similarities and differences, what they seek to achieve, what alliances and coalitions are possible, and more. While it is not the primary goal of this project to make strong arguments about what causes historical change, the representation of non-elite groups can motivate or shape elite actions—the policies candidates or parties adopt, the constituencies they choose to pursue—as elites respond to prevailing constructions of the political world. Even when it does not directly shape decision-making, this work of representation matters very deeply on a symbolic level—shaping how events are narrated and understood and which claims are recognized as true or legitimate.

I want to suggest that a particularly productive approach for understanding group representation in elite political spaces can be found in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, specifically Bourdieu’s concept of “classification struggles.” While much of Bourdieu’s analysis of class (such as habitus) is at the level of everyday practice, this concept is focused at the level of production. It’s important to note up front that Bourdieu’s analysis has clear limitations—it works based on the assumption that class is

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the only major vector of stratification, does not adequately address race or gender, and
does not adequately capture the way identity is marked on the body. It is very useful,
though, for analysis of group representation in elite spaces. The analysis gets at three
guiding principles for this project: First, understanding the construction of and
contestation around social categories is fundamental to politics. Second, elite claims to
speak for or speak about broader constituencies have an importance independent of their
reception among non-elites. Third, these claims can be understood in the context of
political contestation among elites in the spaces where elites work.

Bourdieu and classification

For Bourdieu, classification is a fundamentally political act and an extremely
important form of political power. “Knowledge of the social world and, more precisely,
the categories that make it possible, are the stakes, par excellence, of political struggle,”
he writes.\footnote{Bourdieu, “Social Space,” 729.} In democratic societies, multiple political actors compete for what is
variously phrased as the power to “make groups by making the common sense, the
explicit consensus, of the whole group,” “the power to make people see and believe, to
get them to know and recognize, to impose the legitimate definition of the division of the
social world,” “symbolic power as worldmaking power,” a “struggle to impose the
legitimate view of the social world,” a “symbolic struggle over the production of
common sense, or, more precisely, for the monopoly of legitimate naming,” a “struggle
for the monopoly of the legitimate expression of the truth of the social world.” 51

Classification struggles are contests in which opposing groups seek this power.

This framework maps well onto established themes in analysis of media and journalism. Media power can be understood as the “power to define, allocate, and display” the “scarce resource” of “reality,” as James Carey writes. 52 Journalism, perhaps more than any other field, claims a monopoly on the legitimate expression of the truth of the social world. 53 The news media serve as the chief arena where competing political actors seek to raise their constructions of reality to dominant status. Investigative reporters, experts quoted in news stories, opinion writers, and critics of media bias or “fake news” are all engaged in promoting or contesting constructions of reality. Journalists can be said to “play a double role as purveyors of meaning in their own right and as gatekeepers who grant access or withhold it from other speakers.” 54

Actors who compete in classification struggles and seek visibility for their perspectives in media do not compete on an equal playing field. While classification in democratic societies is subject to competition, it is strongly shaped by existing power

relations. Existing power relations bear on the resources groups have to contend, and they bear on the way political actors see the world in the first place. First, actors’ perceptions of the world stem from their positions in social space, even (or especially) in the case of those whose expertise gives them a claim to the universal—intellectuals, academics, or journalists. Second, groups are “very unequally armed in the fight to impose their truth,” and so actors who possess more capital have an advantage. Typically (as a large literature in critical media studies suggests) “those who occupy the dominated positions within the social space are also located in dominated positions in the field of symbolic production.” While outcomes are not preordained, they are constrained by a basic paradox at the heart of any attempt to address structural power through mass communication—the distribution of the power to communicate depends on “the very structures of economic and political power that democratic processes of debate were intended to control.”

It’s important to stress that the concept of classification struggles focuses not only on meaning generally, but specifically on the existence and the nature of groups. Groups are “made” through classification struggles, rather than simply existing prior to them; these are “not merely struggles between existing groups over how to interpret the social

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55 As Bourdieu argues, “The classificatory schemes which underlie agents’ practical relationship to their condition and the representation they have of it are themselves the product of that condition… Position in the classification struggle depends on position in the class structure; and social subjects—including intellectuals, who are not those best placed to grasp that which defines the limits of their thought of the social world, that is, the illusion of the absence of limits—are perhaps never less likely to transcend ‘the limits of their minds’ than in the representation they have and give of their position, which defines those limits.” Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 484.
57 Bourdieu, “Social Space,” 735.
world, but struggles that help form groups in the first place.” Groups (“real” or mobilized groups, as Bourdieu describes them) are formed when mass support coalesces around an identity. Groups can also be formed, in this framework, in a manner more disconnected from non-elite opinion.

First, when elite political actors make an appeal to or interpellate a certain political identity, they provide a language that others can use as a basis for self-identification and mobilization. Any system of classification draws boundaries of affinity and difference in certain ways, so drawing those lines in a different way can open up new possibilities for movement- or coalition-building. In this line of reasoning, the power of classification is akin to

the evocative power of an utterance which puts things in a different light…or which modifies the schemes of perception, shows something else, other properties, previously unnoticed or relegated to the background (such as common interests hitherto masked by ethnic or national differences); [or] a separative power…drawing discrete units out of indivisible continuity, difference out of the undifferentiated.

Difference can be both produced and muted as part of this process.

Second, one of the major strengths of Bourdieu’s framework for the purposes of this project is its understanding of how individuals or institutions can claim to speak for groups independent of extensive mass support or mobilization. This is aptly captured in Bourdieu’s detailed discussion, over the course of several articles, of whether (more appropriately, how) “the working class” exists. The crux of the argument is as follows:

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60 Bourdieu, Distinction, 479. It’s worth noting that Bourdieu sometimes suggests a deterministic link between classification and political mobilization, implying that the second follows straightforwardly on the first. This obviously elides the extensive institutional and organizational legwork entailed in building a political movement. I have geared this summary around his more nuanced articulations of the argument.
The mode of existence of what is nowadays called, in many societies (with variations, of course), “the working class,” is entirely paradoxical: it is a sort of existence in thought, an existence in the thinking of a large proportion of those whom the taxonomies designate as workers, but also in the thinking of the occupants of the positions remotest from the workers in the social space. This almost universally recognized existence is itself based on the existence of a working class in representation, i.e., of political and trade-union apparatuses and professional spokespersons vitally interested in believing that it exists and in having this believed both by those who identify with it and those who exclude themselves from it, and capable of making the “working class” speak.  

At its most basic, this is a simple constructivist argument—the working class exists because large numbers of people believe it exists. It does not exist in the sense an orthodox Marxist might dream—a homogenous, fully unified group—but it is “no less real.” What I want to draw out, though, is the concept of the “working class in representation,” produced by a long history of intellectual work and political mobilization (an “immense historical labor of theoretical and practical invention”) and “endlessly re-created through the countless, constantly renewed, efforts and energies that are needed to produce and reproduce belief.”

The work involved in creating and maintaining a “working class in representation” takes several forms. One is ascribing agency to the group in discourse: “Any predicative proposition having ‘the working class’ as its subject disguises an existential proposition (there is a working class).” A second is “demonstration, a sort of theatrical deployment of the class-in-representation.” This implies real bodies in real space whose identification with the group is conveyed in a ritualistic fashion; an example

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62 Ibid., 742.
63 Ibid., 741-742.
in the US context is an early twentieth-century Labor Day parade, with workers carrying flags and banners that underscore their affiliation.

The most important work in creating a group-in-representation, in this framework, is performed by institutions or individuals who are understood to speak for the group as a whole. The working class (in this case) “exists in and through the corps of mandated representatives who give it material speech and visible presence, and in the belief in its existence that this corps of plenipotentiaries manages to enforce.” Bourdieu goes so far as to suggest that no group can exist without a spokesperson: “A class exists insofar…as mandated representatives…can be and feel authorized to speak in its name” …“Any otherwise elusive social collective exists, if and only if there exists one (or several) agent(s) who can assert with a reasonable chance of being taken seriously…that they are the ‘class,’ the ‘people,’ the ‘Nation,’ the ‘State’ and so on.” This formulation raises the important question of who needs to “take[s] seriously” the spokesperson’s claims to speak for the group. Bourdieu’s conceptualization of the role of the spokesperson is focused primarily on actors speaking for subordinate groups in dominant political spaces. In that context, and for the purposes of this project, “being taken seriously” means being taken seriously in the elite space where the spokesperson works.

For members of the group represented, representation by a spokesperson creates a tradeoff that can be simultaneously empowering and disempowering. On the one hand, the spokesperson brings the group’s concerns to an arena where they otherwise would not be heard, in a manner in which outsiders can understand them. The spokesperson’s claim

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64 Ibid., 742.
works to “make public (i.e., render objectified, visible, and even official) what had not previously attained objective and collective existence and had therefore remained in the state of individual or serial existence—people’s malaise, anxiety, disquiet, expectations.” As a result, “the group represented…escapes from the powerlessness attached to serial atomization and…can mobilize all the force, material and especially symbolic, that it contains in potentia.” The cost is twofold. First, the group is understood as a single entity (“capable of acting and speaking ‘as one man’”); it is flattened and treated as homogenous. Second, the spokesperson gains substantial power that those the spokesperson claims to represent cannot easily check:

Personifying a fictitious person, a social fiction, he raises those whom he represents from the state of separate individuals, enabling them to act and speak, through him, as one man. In exchange, he receives the right to take himself for the group, to speak and act as if he were the group made man.

There is inevitably a “break with the ‘people’…implied by gaining access to the role of spokesperson.” The spokesperson works in the dominant political space, at a distance from group members, and has access to opportunities that they do not have—as a direct result of being recognized as a representative of the group. If some within the group find their views and interests poorly represented, their only option is to contest the claims of the dominant spokesperson by putting forward a competing alternative.

How does someone become a spokesperson? Bourdieu at times phrases his argument in a way that suggests an element of agency is involved for the group as a

67 Bourdieu, “Mystery of the Ministry,” 40.
whole; the “mandators” can choose their “mandated.” In other formulations, he understands spokespersonship as a claim made within the dominant political space. “The ‘people’,” as a political symbol, is “first of all one of the things at stake in the struggle between intellectuals,” Bourdieu writes, and the “principle of different ways of situating oneself in relation to the ‘people’…resides in the logic of the struggle within the field of the specialists.” In other words, to understand why elites claim to speak for and speak about the “people” in the ways they do, it is necessary to look at the dynamics of elite-level politics. This is the insight I follow here.

As Sun-ha Hong notes, no political figure is “consecrated with a right to publicity or to public spokespersonship,” but rather “seize[s] it.” Political actors make claims to represent larger collectives, and those claims can be justified or evaluated based on multiple criteria, some of which have more of a connection to rank-and-file opinion of group members than others—correspondence between the spokesperson’s views and the views of group members as measured by polling or election results, the spokesperson’s personal history, leadership in a mass membership organization. A substantial amount of mass support is not necessary, though Bourdieu points to the importance of “the most convinced fraction of the believers, who, through their presence, enable the

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71 Sun-ha Hong, “The Other-Publics: Mediated Othering and the Public Sphere in the Dreyfus Affair,” European Journal of Cultural Studies 17, no. 6 (2014): 11.
72 Take, for instance, this statement by longtime United Mine Workers president John L. Lewis: “I know the psychology of the coal miner. I know about his dreams and his ideals and trials and tribulations. I have lived with coal miners. I am one of them. My family has been associated with the mining industry for a century and a half and an understanding of the miners’ problems is inbred in me if anything is inbred in me…I have laid down in a mine tunnel with my face in a half inch of water, and pulled my shirt up over my head, expecting to die the next minute in an explosion I heard coming toward me…So, I understand some of the thoughts of the coal miners of America…And when I speak, I speak the thoughts of the membership of the United Mine Workers of America, because I understand them.” In “The Thundering Voice,” United Mine Workers Journal, June 15, 1969.
representatives to manifest their representativeness.” In this formulation, the appearance of mass support is most important in making those outside the group more likely to judge a spokesperson credible. It is “belief in the existence of the class,” not the specifics of non-elite opinion, “which is the basis of the authority of its spokesmen.”

The connection between representation in the sense of speaking for and representation in the sense of speaking about comes into play here as well. In political conflict, Luc Boltanski argues, struggles “over social taxonomies and representations” play the critical role of “staking out the legitimate sphere of influence of each of the competing forces, that is, in practical terms, by defining which classes rival organizations or parties may legitimately claim to represent.” The way in which a social group has been defined impacts which political actors can credibly claim to speak for that group. Becoming accepted as a spokesperson, then, is wrapped up in the broader struggle to define the truth of the social world and to define the nature of groups.

This understanding of group formation points towards an alternative angle on the importance of the white working class in American politics. Rather than focusing on “the ideological clash of liberalism and conservatism” as the two ideologies seek public support, this project foregrounds how liberals, conservatives, and others have claimed to speak for and speak about the white working class. From this perspective, the white

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73 Bourdieu, “Social Space,” 742. An activist at a press conference surrounded by several dozen supporters provides one example of how “believers…enable the representatives to manifest their representativeness” in this framework.

74 Ibid., 727.


working class is a group-in-representation, a category that has meaning within elite public discourse, connected to but not bound by the activities of the people it designates. Like the “working class-in-representation” described by Bourdieu, the white working class in this sense is the product of a long history of intellectual labor. Groups often “present themselves with [the] air of eternity that is the hallmark of naturalized history,” Bourdieu writes, but “they are always the product of a complex historical work of construction.”\textsuperscript{77} The task of this dissertation is to uncover that “complex historical work of construction” in the case of the white working class.

\section*{2. Defining and Conceptualizing the “White Working Class”}

The usage of “white working class” in this dissertation differs from the norm, reflecting the fact that this is a study of elite talk about white workers, not a study of the white working class. In this project, I use the term “white working class” to refer to a social category that actors can speak about or claim to speak for and that has meaning within this discourse, apart from the activities of the people it designates. I do not use “white working class” (or “working class”) to refer to an actor with agency. When I am referring to white working class people as political actors, I use the suffix –actors (e.g. worker-actors).

The project is framed around the representation of the “white working class” because that frame allows for the best intervention in present-day media and academic discourse, where “white working class” is used extensively. It is also intended to counter the use of ostensibly race-neutral class categories, particularly “working class” or “blue

“white working class,” to refer only to whites, a longstanding (and continuing) bad habit in American political discourse. However, it’s essential to be very clear up front about the way I use “white working class” and the conceptual hitches, challenges, and concerns the “white working class” poses as a unifying concept for this project. First, it is important to differentiate clearly between the “white working class” as a construct or symbol—the primary focus of this project—and the “white working class” as a way of naming people existing in the world and capable of acting politically. Second, most of the actors this study spotlights did not primarily use the term “white working class”: the study has to navigate a range of related but not interchangeable categories.

The real-life referent of the “white working class”

While this study is focused on the white working class as represented in elite discourse, it is important not to lose sight of an understanding of whiteness as a historically constructed category that yields material and psychological “wages” for those recognized as white (a category that changes over time), or an understanding of class as


79 W. E. B. Du Bois, Black Reconstruction in America (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1935); David Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class (London: Verso, 1991). It should be noted that some scholars discourage the use of the term “white working class” itself, arguing that it reinforces the right-wing notion that “the White Working Class [is] a political group with its own distinct interests” divorced from the interests of working class people of color or implies that the precarity white working class people face results from their whiteness. Lisa Tilley, “The Making of the ‘White Working Class’: Where Fascist Resurgence Meets Leftist White Anxiety,” Wildcat Dispatches, November 28, 2016; see also e.g. David Roediger, “Who’s Afraid of the White Working Class?: On Joan C. Williams’s ‘White Working Class: Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America,’” Los Angeles Review of Books, May 17, 2017; Abdullah Shihipar, “Why Americans Must Stop Talking About Trump’s Mythical ‘White Working Class’ Voters,” Quartz, July 4, 2017. Concerns about the use of the term “white working class” in present-day discourse are very well founded. The term is used in a profoundly essentialist
a political economic category rooted in a shared structural position in the economy. Here “working class” means a lack of power at work, precarity, wage work, low-paying and/or undesirable (monotonous, exhausting, or dangerous) work, and a lack of wealth or substantial economic/cultural capital. It is important not to treat the working class as an undifferentiated category (such that all working class people are on equal ground). In many cases, access to jobs has been dictated so strongly by gender and race that white male worker-actors occupied a political economic position clearly distinct from the position occupied by working women and workers of color. Whiteness has also meant greater opportunity to move out of the working class. I am a middle class white man; my family, like millions of other descendants of European immigrants, reached the middle class in the midcentury era when the American state intervened very directly to the benefit of non-elite citizens through programs (veterans’ benefits, low-interest home loans) that either excluded or delivered far fewer gains to working class people of color.

While reifying and ascribing agency to the white working class is conceptually problematic, white people who are in a working class position do have agency—they can vote, protest, form or join social movements, run for political office, and participate in manner, and when political elites are encouraged to respond to the “white working class,” they tend to focus on “white” rather than “working class.” No responsible politics can be built around an appeal to the “white working class,” but the term’s use in scholarship and political analysis is a different question. “White working class” needs to be used carefully, and it is made to do far too much work in present-day discourse, but I do not argue for eliminating it. If used responsibly, it can capture divergence in experiences and political views along racial lines within the working class, and it helps to discourage commentators and journalists from using an unmodified “working class” to refer only to whites. This project grapples with representational issues around the “white working class,” with an eye toward achieving a better public discourse about the actually existing “working class.”

Debates about objective definitions of class generally or the white working class specifically are bracketed in my work. An introductory discussion can be found in Erik Olin Wright, ed., Approaches to Class Analysis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Wright, The Debate on Classes (London: Verso, 1998). Work in the field of working class studies is very useful for thinking through the multiple understandings of class. See e.g. Sherry Linkon and John Russo, eds., New Working-Class Studies (Ithaca: ILR Press, 2005); Michael Zweig, The Working Class Majority (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).
less formalized political activity. A full assessment of white worker-actors as political agents between the 1930s and 1990s incorporates a range of efforts, from progressive to reactionary. As voters, white worker-actors empowered some of the most progressive politicians of the era as well as politicians who appealed to their whiteness and promised to protect them from others of color. Especially as members of unions, worker-actors took great risks and made sacrifices seeking change, both in periods conventionally associated with a progressive white working class and periods that are not. The extent of workplace militancy in the 1960s and 1970s, for instance, was comparable to that of the 1930s. While the diversity in the white working class is obscured by conventional images of backlashing heterosexual males, white working class people took part in and supported the antiracist, antiwar, women’s, and queer people’s movements of the period. In periods where (white) workers were strongly associated with liberal politics, white worker-actors took steps to preserve their racial privileges in the workplace and in their neighborhoods, often through informal and organized harassment and violence. In one of many incidents that followed the integration of all-white neighborhoods (this one taking place in early-1960s Philadelphia), mobs drove away a black family, the Wrights, chanting “Burn, niggers, burn” and throwing stones, eggs, and potatoes at the Wrights’ house, breaking the windows.81 During organized labor’s midcentury heyday, the hiring of black workers in previously all-white departments precipitated walkouts (“hate strikes”) and harassment; in one factory, “tools mysteriously disappeared, a Negro was

81 Misc. notes, Box 5, “Negroes” folder, Peter Binzen Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA.
pushed into a machine, or other ‘accidents’ occurred,” such that “the Negro worker was either withdrawn or quit voluntarily.”

It is important to ask how this history should inform a study of white working class representation. The most straightforward answer, in my view, is that an extreme constructivist position—in which what is said about white workers in elite discourse is only a product of elite invention—is unworkable. It is irresponsible to take an agnostic posture on whether, for instance, the backlash reported in the 1960s “really” existed, or to argue that its interpreters invented it. (An example of an irresponsible formulation is Barbara Ehrenreich’s claim that “the working class as discovered” in the 1960s—“dumb, reactionary, and bigoted”—was “the imaginative product of middle-class anxiety and prejudice.”) But foregrounding representation does not require this steep a claim. As Barbie Zelizer writes, “Recognizing that there is a reality out there and that, in certain quarters, truth and facts have currency does not mean letting go of relativity, subjectivity, and construction. It merely suggests yoking a regard for them with some cognizance of the outside world.” This is the approach I seek to follow here. Asking why a cross-class backlash against 1960s dissent was understood in elite discourse as a white working class phenomenon, for instance, does not require a claim of racial innocence for white workers.

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The analysis in this project is framed around the claims prevalent in elite public discourse. I ask questions that focus less on what *is* than on what is seen, how it is seen and why, how this changes over time, and why that matters. What lenses did contemporaries use to understand politics, and how did those lenses influence what they saw and wrote? Why were certain people or behaviors taken as representative of the white working class in one period and not another? These kinds of questions allow for a focus on representation and construction that retains a “cognizance of the outside world” and will not be entirely foreign to scholars with different methodological approaches and different source bases. In this framework, journalism and elite discourse on the white working class cannot be dismissed as invented or pure ideology, but neither can it be taken at face value as an unproblematic depiction of reality.

It is important to be clear that this is not a social history project. My original research does not support any new claims about the political views of white working class people. Though I refer to existing literature on that subject at certain junctures where I feel it would be irresponsible not to (as in the paragraph above), I have not comprehensively undertaken to compare a “real” white working class to the one envisioned by elites or to “fact check” claims made by the analysts I spotlight. An effort to do so would raise problematic methodological questions in its own right. To some degree, it is useful for perspectives that see social groups as necessarily constructed and perspectives that aim to describe the concrete behaviors, attitudes, and opinions of real people to sit alongside each other in a productive tension, as complements.
The challenges posed by terminology

Over the period this study covers (the 1930s to the 1990s), observers used multiple labels and categories to describe blue-collar whites. The meaning of “white” was not static in this period; the most important change was the incorporation of Americans of southern and eastern European descent (Italians, Poles, Greeks, Slavs, etc.) into a homogenous whiteness, a single category “white.” Existing scholarship dates the culmination of that change in the 1940s, particularly the years around World War II. “White working class” has only been the term most commonly used by elites to refer to blue-collar or lower-income whites since the early 2000s, when it was widely adopted by journalists and pollsters. It only began to appear consistently in the 1960s. The chapters that follow feature elites speaking about “workers,” “the workingman,” “the worker,” “the white worker,” “labor,” the “working class,” “working Americans,” the “middle class,” “Middle Americans,” the “majority,” and more.

This presents a clear challenge for clear writing and conceptualization, and there is no ideal solution to that challenge. Deemphasizing the differences between terms certainly risks oversimplification. However, overemphasizing those distinctions risks obscuring the relatively small and identifiable range of claims made about white workers in the discourse. Problems of terminology are primarily addressed in a manner specific to each chapter and outlined in the introductory sections of the chapters. As a general principle, however, this work posits (based on empirical research) that the differences between terms are modest enough to permit treating them as part of one narrative, the “representation of the white working class.”
The task of this project is to historicize a sense of groupness broader and more durable than a single term. A good way to get a sense of this durable sense of groupness is to look at the discourse itself. When elite commentators refer to labels used in the past or to newly emergent labels, they typically treat them as different names for a familiar group of voters: “The angriest and most pessimistic people in America are the people we used to call Middle Americans” (2016)…“Think the ‘white working class’ sounds a lot like the ‘Reagan Democrats’? Exactly” (2002). Commentators also use seemingly distinct terms interchangeably to refer to the same group. In one infamous piece from the 2016 election cycle, *National Review* contributor Kevin Williamson jumps from “white working class” to “white middle class” to “poor white America” to “white American underclass” within four paragraphs as he decries “dysfunctional, downscale communities…[that] deserve to die.” In this usage, there is no meaningful difference between “poor” whites, the “white working class” and the “white middle class”; they are different labels pinned to the same set of tropes.

As a result, it is most important to differentiate between representations of different “kinds” of white workers, or different complexes of images—Northern urban/suburban industrial workers, rural Southerners, southern and eastern Europeans, Anglo-Saxon Protestants. This project focuses most on industrial workers, the source

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88 Compare, for instance, “blue-collar Catholics, the backbone of auto factories, construction crews, and police departments…who wrested citizenship from a nativist nation, rose from privation into the middle class, and swung the pendulum of ideology from left to right” to white working class Southerners whose “cultural markers” include “low Protestant churches and Dale Earnhardt Sr.…Scotch-Irishness and
of much of the iconic imagery around the white working class—union militancy, high-wage manufacturing jobs, the middle-income family headed by a single breadwinner, the conservative “hard hat”—but is careful not to entirely neglect a broader picture of elite representations of laboring whites.

3. Defining Elite Public Discourse

Elite public discourse can be defined as a mediated space of representation distinguished both by who speaks and who is assumed to be listening—crudely put, a space where elites talk to other elites. Most speakers within elite public discourse hold positions of influence (politicians, government officials, businesspeople) and/or speak as educated professionals with claims to expertise (journalists, pollsters, political commentators, academics). Speakers who make claims within elite public discourse often have the intention of, and have at least a chance of, shaping public policy or shaping debate within influential circles. They can at least expect to narrate or explain current events for an elite audience.


Elite public discourse, importantly, is also publicly available to a non-elite audience. Conversations behind closed doors or eyes-only memos are excluded—unless they leak to the press. The majority of listeners may not belong to influential publics, but speakers assume they are in conversation with an attentive public whose members share their interpretative frames. Specific logics for talking about and understanding politics—for instance, breaking voters down into the categories (including “white working class”) used by journalists and pollsters; understanding politics as a battle between competing ideologies—prevail within elite public discourse. Those logics can be learned and mastered by consistent followers of the discourse, whether they can be termed “elites” or not. Nonetheless, most speakers assume that the attentive relevant public is predominantly professional and college-educated.  

I use the term “discourse” rather than “public sphere” to encompass the content within the space as well as the space itself, but this is not an attempt to create a radically new concept. Elite public discourse can be understood as a subcategory of the broader public sphere (in Nancy Fraser’s definition, “a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk…an institutionalized arena

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90 Again, to be clear, this does not mean that speakers’ assumptions about their audiences are necessarily accurate—I’m instead making an argument about the kind of address that prevails in these spaces. In the case of representations of working class groups, for instance, the address tends to assume that readers are not working class and do not have personal knowledge of the subject matter. “For a lot of members of the WWC, [welfare] is personal in a way it just isn’t for the kind of people who read this blog,” one liberal commentator presumes. A slightly more subtle trope in the discourse is the use of “we” to refer to a circle smaller than the broader public, where “we” are the people who pay attention to current events (“precisely the moment when we most need to deepen our understanding of America’s white poor”), most likely concerned professionals. Kevin Drum, “Can We Talk? Here’s Why the White Working Class Hates Democrats,” Mother Jones, November 13, 2014; Richard Reeves, “If You Read Hillbilly Elegy, You Should Read This Paper Too,” Brookings, March 7, 2017. My understanding of “address” draws from Michael Warner, Publics and Counterpublics (New York: Zone Books, 2002).
of discursive interaction”91). Analogous concepts include the “dominant public sphere” and what Ronald Jacobs and Eleanor Townsley call the “elite political public sphere”: “the public communicative infrastructure in which the elites of our huge, complex societies debate serious matters of common concern.”92

The news media—particularly media institutions with the greatest claim to national-level stature—are the centerpiece of my understanding of “elite public discourse.” (How the concept was operationalized in the research is discussed in the methods section). News is the chief medium through which elite and non-elite observers follow and debate the daily developments of politics. News media also hold a “specific role in circulating to a wider audience the knowledges of other, more specialized fields”: they aggregate a wide range of expert discourses, frame them in accessible terms, and distribute them widely.93 As a result, news media serve as the nexus for the other kinds of texts central to elite public discourse as defined here, including nonfiction books, pollsters’ reports, academic works, and public speeches by politicians. Journalists have reported consistently on polls and political speeches; book reviews point readers in the direction of more in-depth material; pollsters have been consistently featured as political experts.

The kind of discourse that prevails in these spaces is not monolithic, but it follows predictable patterns. First, it is often superficial, as Ari Adut notes: this is a world that

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91 Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” in Habermas and the Public Sphere, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992): 110. See also e.g. Jeffrey Alexander, The Civil Sphere (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
“reduces singular beings to appearances and types.” In the private sphere, we “relate to intimates in singular terms: they are not fungible, and it is cognitively and morally hard to reduce them to a type.” By contrast, “people who appear in the public sphere instantiate types or represent groups for spectators—this synecdochic tendency being the stronger, the more social distance there is between those who appear and those who watch.”

Second, it is ordinary. Elite public discourse exercises influence in an everyday and unexceptional fashion. The concept is intended to get at the importance of the quotidian flow of the discourse, not only the most influential texts. That ordinariness is aptly captured in James Carey’s description of the role of communication in “the construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful cultural world that can serve as a control and container for human action.” Reading a daily newspaper, in this “ritual” view, is a situation not unlike attending a mass, in which “nothing new is learned but in which a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed…What is arrayed before the reader is not pure information but a portrayal of the contending forces in the world.”

Elite public discourse’s attentive publics encounter a familiar world filled with familiar actors who operate under a predictable set of rules. When those rules do not seem to explain what is happening, a palpable sense of concern about where the conventional wisdom went wrong and how it can be fixed is visible in the discourse.

Third, and perhaps most obviously, elite public discourse is skewed towards elite perspectives. It displays identifiable biases and blind spots as a result. As Michael Warner notes, dominant discourses (in contrast to counterpublics) often take on a

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universalizing tenor, not because speakers’ subject positions do not inform the discourse, but because speakers often do not recognize the particularity of their way of understanding the world.

Most of the actors who are highlighted in this dissertation are professional-middle to upper class white men. Over much of the period, they inhabited a realm where they were primarily in conversation with others like themselves and saw this state of affairs as natural. In the primary source material, men unabashedly refer to the gendered division of labor implicated in intellectual work. Scores of acknowledgements sections feature authors thanking their wives for typing the manuscript or managing childcare while they wrote. A Newsweek reporter thanks “three pretty and talented Newsweek researchers” for their contributions to what wound up under his byline. As the political circumstances changed and women and people of color had greater access to elite discursive spaces, they faced tokenism and were often positioned as representatives of a broader group, not as individuals. Observers still often speak about “journalism” as an entity entirely shaped by urban, professional-class whites. To capture the power dynamics that shaped access to elite discursive spaces, what is included under the umbrella of “elite public discourse” depends on where it appears—intellectual engagement with the white working class in alternative media oriented to African American, radical-left, or other countercultures is generally left out of “elite public discourse” as defined here, but the same authors and arguments are included when their work appears in dominant discursive spaces.

Studying elite public discourse raises a fundamental tension from a critical media studies perspective. Fundamentally, exclusion makes elite public discourse what it is; it
deeply shapes the conversations that take place there. However, the process of excluding inherent in researching an exclusive space can very easily reinscribe a narrow view of the intellectual milieu of a period. Put differently, a focus on elite discourse skews a project in a way that mirrors the exclusions in the discourse itself. Presenting a history of discourse within dominant publics yields an incomplete picture and is much more likely to exclude texts by authors who are members of marginalized groups. It is important to mark it for what it is—particular.


This project follows conventional methodological approaches in the study of communication & culture and cultural history—gathering and conducting close analysis of relevant texts and constructing a historical narrative based on primary and secondary source material. “The great question of communications history, I think, revolves around how people make sense out of things,” John Nerone argues. “This entails reconstructing mentalities that no longer exist, assumptions that are no longer commonly held.” “It is the job of media historians to identify what the common sense was in past media environments, what the dominant sensibilities were, and which coexisting discourses challenged that common sense,” Susan Douglas writes.96 This objective—reconstructing the discursive environments of the past—guided the research for this project. For each

period, the goal was to gain mastery of the patterns in elite public discourse—what different camps were identifiable, and what views or objectives distinguished them; where there was debate and where there was consensus; what language authors used in reference to working class whites and other groups. To do so, I employed an inductive approach founded on “prolonged, unstructured soaking”\(^97\) in the material.

The central methodological challenge centers on the selection of texts—how to define “elite public discourse” for the purposes of research. The texts examined primarily fall into the following categories—news stories, nonfiction books for a nonacademic audience, academic work, pollsters’ reports, and public speeches given by politicians. This is an admittedly narrow understanding of political discourse, one that excludes popular culture or entertainment media. This project will not investigate representations of the white working class in film, television, or literature to keep the scope of the project manageable and because nonfiction material’s claim to present factual representations makes it more important for the purposes of the arguments here. The emphasis is on print media for reasons of access and because print news media were a primary prestige news source throughout the period.

The first stage in the research was to identify a set of publications and conduct intensive reading within them. The research foregrounded the following daily newspapers, journals of opinion, and business magazines: *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, the *Nation*, the *New Republic*, *Chicago Tribune* (Chapters 1 and 2), the *Saturday Evening Post* (Chapters 1 and 2), *Survey Graphic* (Chapter 1), *Fortune* (Chapter 2), *Business Week* (Chapter 2),

National Review (Chapters 3 and 4), and Commentary (Chapters 3 and 4). After this initial set of publications was selected, articles were obtained through keyword searches (an effective tool for tracking contestation around specific language) and/or by reading through each issue published over a particular time period.

These media were selected to ensure representation of multiple elite political perspectives in each period. Much of the dissertation overlaps with what Daniel Hallin calls the “high modern” period for American journalism, in which national media were heavily centralized and professional journalism was at its strongest. In this period (roughly between the end of World War II and 1980), it is relatively easy to identify the specific media that best fit “elite public discourse.” Contemporary scholars pointed to a small subset of media called “quality media” or “the prestige press”; as described by political scientist V. O. Key in a 1961 study, such media “command the attention of a highly politicized and very influential audience…These people talk to each other through these papers; thus they provide, in a sense, an arena for the continuing discussion of politics among those principally concerned.” In the US context, media cited as typical “prestige papers” included the New York Times, Washington Post, and Wall Street Journal—“eastern metropolitan newspapers of higher quality and better coverage”—alongside newsmagazines Time and Newsweek. Publications like the National Review,
*New Republic*, and *Nation* shed a great deal of light on conservative and liberal elite opinion.

The centralized, professionalized media environment of the mid-twentieth century is historically atypical, and it is important to avoid naturalizing it. The most recent period (1990s/2000s-present) obviously presents a much more siloed, fragmented, and dispersed elite discursive space. Because the project’s major narrative ends in the early 1990s, the changes in elite public discourse since that time have not been foregrounded. A more complex elite discursive landscape is also present in the earliest period the project covers (1930s to mid-1940s). The newspaper industry was less concentrated, and elite political media were more siloed by ideology—most of the top daily newspapers had a conservative bias and were viewed with distrust by liberals, who turned to their own media seeking reliable information. This issue is addressed in more depth in the introduction to Chapter 1.

To identify relevant books and other primary source material, the overall research strategy sought to take advantage of a snowball effect—adding books to the sample if they were reviewed in magazines and newspapers; reconstructing conversations among writers and scholars by following citations and quotes in books or news stories. If one book seemed to be in conversation with another, I consulted the other book. If secondary literature pointed to the importance of a particular primary source, I consulted the source directly. I also mined databases (e.g. JSTOR and Google Scholar) for relevant books, as

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101 Anecdotally, despite a considerable increase in the visibility of non-elite voices in elite discursive spaces, the dominant view of the white working class has not meaningfully changed.
well as the footnotes of primary and secondary sources. Archival research focused on notable and representative journalists, political commentators, and union officials also made up an important part of the research process. A full list of archival collections consulted is available in the bibliography. This research expanded the project’s core source base of books, news articles, press releases, public speeches, and other publicly available texts. Personal papers, particularly correspondence, also give a sense of aspects of intellectual work (personal relationships, unguarded or “backstage” speech) that cannot be easily ascertained by looking at public discourse.

III. Road Map

This project’s main narrative is developed over the course of four chapters. The timeframe—the 1930s to the 1990s—was chosen to encompass three critical transition points in the history of white working class representation over the last century. First, in the 1930s, ascendant liberal forces employed the (white) worker as a central symbol of the need for reform and the mass constituency that would bring it about. In the 1950s, the middle-income white worker (against the backdrop of the Cold War) became predominantly symbolic of the broadly distributed prosperity produced by the American system. Amid resistance to the civil rights movement and challenges to traditional cultural norms in the mid- to late 1960s, the white working class became the predominant symbol of cultural traditionalism and anti-black backlash. The four chapters look specifically at these periods of transition and their significance.
The first chapter, “The Rise of the Progressive Worker,” covers the 1930s through the mid-1940s and examines how the strong link between (white) workers and progressive politics developed in that period. The predominant question in elite public discourse, especially during the Depression years, asked how a just and proper economic system could be built in a modern, industrial society. Very broadly, liberals and leftists who emphasized the need for an expanded role for the state confronted conservatives who saw an expansion of state power as a threat to liberty and justice. Representations of (white) workers were closely implicated in that conflict. Industrial workers, for liberals and leftists, stood in for the future—a future in which the majority of Americans lived in urban areas, worked for wages, and had little agency over their own lives. To place industrial workers at the symbolic center of society was to call for Americans to abandon the individualistic principles long central to national identity and recognize the importance of cooperation and collectivism. Liberals also pointed to images of poor and suffering whites—especially native-born rural whites, who made for effective victims—to suggest the failures of the existing system. Meanwhile, conservatives sought to cast deserving, self-sufficient workers as harmed by an expanding welfare state and cast liberal constituencies as selfish or unfit. The dominant elite understanding, in a period marked by the Depression, the rise of the New Deal Democratic Party, and the onward march of the industrial union movement, defined (white) workers and other nondominant groups against economic elites.

Chapter 2, “The Rise of the Affluent Worker,” covers the late 1940s through 1950s, when the dominant elite view figured (white) workers as part of a new and vastly
expanded middle class. The broadly shared prosperity of the post-World War II economy was a central theme in elite public discourse, and the tone was usually triumphalist—Americans had solved the industrial problems they had fought over for decades, enfranchising workers and expanding the role of the state while preserving the free enterprise system. The secure, satisfied (white, male) worker was central to this narrative—underprivileged during the 1930s, he and his family now enjoyed leisure, homeownership, and a good standard of living. The dominance of this view of the (white) worker was due above all to the imprint of the Cold War on domestic politics. The Second Red Scare exerted an enormous chilling effect on left-of-center opinion; anything that could be interpreted as a critique of American capitalism was dangerous, and the suggestion that (white) workers remained disadvantaged fell out of mainstream liberal discourse. In this climate, the affluent worker was a critical symbol for business elites emphasizing their social responsibility and labor-liberals stressing their support for the American system.

The emphasis on (white) workers’ integration into a prosperous mass middle class fundamentally altered the dimensions of political contestation around the white working class. In multiple ways, Chapter 2 stresses, the affluent worker was a key waypoint in the migration of the (white) worker—as a political symbol—from left to right. Even as these workers’ upward mobility served as evidence of labor’s success, their newly middle class status placed labor and liberals’ claims to represent them in question. When they had something to protect, (white) workers could no longer be an unproblematic symbol of progressive change—they could instead suggest the benefits of the status quo, or even
hardheaded resistance to change. In this period, influential pollsters and liberal observers identified white workers as complacent or conservative, and an image of the (white) working class as rigid, authoritarian, and prone to high levels of prejudice and violence took shape among social scientists, laying the groundwork for the emergence of the white worker as the central symbol of backlash in the 1960s.

Chapter 3, “Rethinking Middle America,” examines the rise of the white worker as the central symbol of white backlash. It does so through a case study of the construction of “Middle America” in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Middle America is generally understood as a political identity created by conservatives (especially Richard Nixon) to appeal to discontented white voters. Chapter 3 focuses instead on (predominantly white and professional-class) liberals and journalists who sought to understand and respond to the backlash. Informed by preexisting understandings of working class culture as rigid and traditionalist and by arguments rooting racism in low education & economic deprivation, contemporary liberals assumed that the backlash would be concentrated among working class whites and conducted their research and analysis accordingly. Some, following on the conventional wisdom of the post-World War II period, argued that blue-collar whites were secure economically, and their reaction stemmed from a desire to protect their gains. Others countered that white workers faced significant economic disadvantage and legitimately felt forgotten by liberals who showed them condescension. Elites of all stripes, for different reasons, coalesced around the view that white workers were uniquely driven by cultural and racial anxiety and might form an explosive right-wing constituency. Fundamentally, Chapter 3 argues, in order to
understand the rise of the persistent frame pitting a conservative white majority against a liberal white elite, it is necessary to understand why that conventional wisdom made sense to left-of-center actors.

Central to my understanding of white working class representation after the 1960s is the concept of an “elite consensus.” One of the primary reasons why white workers have become so strongly symbolic of anti-black and culturally conservative views, this concept suggests, is because it made intellectual and/or strategic sense for opposing elites to position them that way. (To be clear, this is not to dispute the prominence of those views among white workers; the goal is to show why views pervasive among professionals, workers, elites of all sorts, and within society generally were so often debated through the figure of the white worker). While Chapter 3 asks why this positioning made sense to liberals, Chapter 4, “The New Liberalism and the Victimized White Worker,” focuses on its utility for critics of liberalism. It looks at the role of the white working class as a symbol of opposition to liberal politics after the mid-1960s (what the chapter calls, for the sake of clarity, the “new liberalism”). In the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, conservatives and alienated Democrats often argued that changes within liberalism had produced a new liberal politics dominated by white elites and African Americans and unconcerned with the physical safety, economic wellbeing, or cultural values of middle-income whites. Speaking on behalf of the white worker helped to invest arguments against liberal policy on welfare, integration, gender politics, or crime with a sense of disempowerment rather than privilege. Ultimately, Chapters 3 and 4 imply, the consensus elite-level understanding of the white working class was a clear
boon for conservatives and other critics of liberalism, who now held a strong claim to speak in elite public discourse for white workers.

The dissertation concludes with a summary of the project’s major interventions and a brief discussion contextualizing white working class representation in the age of Trump within the narrative developed here. The rise of Trump has brought the white working class back to the center of elite public discourse—where white workers have been for most of the past eighty years. A historical lens is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of how the symbolic construction of the white working class functions in present-day American politics.
Chapter 1: The Rise of the Progressive Worker

“American labor is being reorganized on a scale and with a speed which is unprecedented in American social history,” economist Robert R. R. Brooks wrote in 1938. For “half a century,” Brooks explained, mass production and finance capitalism, in the hands of the “great leaders of industry,” had been “the major sources of social power…Millions of workers, traders and professionals have found their fundamental loyalties directed toward management and finance.” Recent developments, however, had “sapped the foundations of the old loyalties” and prompted “the reorientation of workers’ attitudes and beliefs.” Put simply, “the leadership of industrialists and financiers is being discarded…for the leadership of union officers and organizers.”

The period Brooks chronicled has long provided the most indelible imagery of a progressive white working class. “I remember 1937 and ’38 so well, how much hope I had,” recalled a socialist organizer in the early 1960s. “The auto strike seemed to make people see the light; when I went into a community I didn’t have to explain there was a class struggle. No doctrine. The struggle was in the men.” A longstanding commonplace holds that the Democratic Party and the union movement earned the overwhelming loyalty of white workers. One recent article describes the New Deal Democrats as “the undisputed party of the white working class. Their dominance among these voters was, in turn, the key to their political success.” The Depression and New Deal era also tend to be remembered as a period in which white workers were seen as an

invaluable resource for left/liberal politics. “In the 1930s and 1940s progressives romanticized the working class, largely to the exclusion of women and racial minorities,” one liberal argues. 105 1930s politics, a recent commentator argues, was marked by “idealized portrayals of noble blue-collar workers.” 106 Liberals were once in harmony with the (white) working class, many have assumed—for good (liberals commanded a powerful majority) or otherwise (a focus on white working class men contributed to racial and gender inequality).

This chapter examines the strong link between white workers and left/liberal politics as it developed in elite public discourse in the 1930s and 1940s. The emergence of that link is among the most critical developments in a history of white working class representation in the twentieth- and twenty-first-century US: it is not an exaggeration to say that nearly all elite engagement with the white working class since has taken place, implicitly or explicitly, against that backdrop. Most of all, the robust link between white workers and progressive politics in the period owes to the rise of powerful political forces that spoke for workers in a new way: the New Deal Democratic Party and the industrial union movement. More broadly, the chapter argues, the importance of the (white) worker as a progressive political symbol must be understood in the context of elite debate on how to respond to the changes brought by the industrial age— incredible wealth and power for industrial elites and insecurity and Depression for the bulk of the population.

For left/liberal elites of the 1930s and 1940s, this was the singular challenge of the day.

Liberals and leftists raised to dominant status the view that modernity required—and the electoral majority demanded—an activist state and the protection of unions. The individualistic ethic long central to American identity, in this framework, could not secure justice in the modern world. (White) workers, especially urban industrial workers, were representative of both the needs of a modern workforce and the aroused public that would bring about reform.

The structure of this chapter is as follows: Part One details how (white) workers were incorporated into understandings of the political majority in the years just prior to the Depression and New Deal. In the 1920s and early 1930s, dominant understandings of the American worker were advantageous to a libertarian or classical liberal politics. Common arguments held that most valued prosperity and the ability to consume almost above all else; deserving workers’ political views would not differ significantly from those of their employers; and the majority of Americans were middle class in lifestyle and mindset. Parts Two and Three detail how liberals and leftists figured (white) workers, especially urban industrial working men, as beneficiaries of and forces for progressive reform. Urban workers epitomized the liberal argument about the changing circumstances of American life, in which the majority now worked for wages, lacked economic security, and faced the arbitrary power of industrial elites. These workers were important in elite understandings of the liberal electoral majority and central to the imagery of working class agency emerging from the industrial union movement. Gains for labor and liberals in the 1930s and 1940s brought about major changes in the dominant view of the majority, with the new dominant understanding advantageous to a
liberal politics. From this perspective, the average American was a citizen of an industrial society without significant wealth or power; the interests of most Americans were opposed to the interests of a small group of industrial elites; and inequality could best be redressed via the collective power of the state.

It is important to be clear, though, that the central significance of (white) workers for 1930s and 1940s left/liberal politics should not be equated with a “romanticized” view. The extent to which liberals romanticized the (white, male) working class is overstated in academic literature and popular memory. Deep concerns about the unsophisticated political views of (white) workers, their susceptibility to right-wing politics, and their reliability as a progressive constituency hide in plain sight in 1930s and 1940s left/liberal discourse. A coda section following Chapter 1 develops this argument. Fundamentally, that section suggests, what held together the commitment to the (white) worker’s cause among liberals and leftists was not the belief that workers were virtuous or intelligent, but the belief that they were disadvantaged, that their objective interests (even if sometimes unrealized) were progressive, and that they had legitimate claims to make on employers and the state.

**Terminology and source selection**

“Worker” was the term most commonly used in contemporary discourse to refer to white male wage workers, especially industrial workers. “Wage earner” was interchangeable. Unless modified (“the Negro worker”), “worker” usually referred to a white man. “Working people” referred to white men and women. White working class women were often incorporated into the discourse through their relationship to men (“the
worker and his wife”). It is important to counteract the still-prominent tendency to use “worker” and “working class” to refer only to whites, particularly white men. However, an argument framed around the “white worker” as a progressive symbol can easily be problematic—the progressive part comes from “worker,” not “white.” Whiteness is also not what was most significant about white workers for contemporary elites—their status as workers was (and nationality second; see the following paragraph). To mediate between these concerns, I primarily use “worker” and “(white) worker” interchangeably to capture the arguments contemporaries made. Parentheses are used to capture distinctions that are important for present-day academic analysis but did not appear in contemporary discourse. I also incorporate the phrasing “laboring whites” and “poor whites” to include farmers and other disadvantaged groups who did not work for wages. All of these categories are used to capture contemporary elite discourse. In the cases where I am referring specifically to rank and file workers (for instance, strikers) as historical agents, I use “worker-actors.”

At the outset of this period, workers of European descent were not necessarily viewed as racially or culturally similar enough to constitute a single bloc. According to a powerful racialist discourse that reached its apex in the 1910s and 1920s, southern and eastern Europeans (for instance, Poles, Slavs, Italians, Greeks, often called “new immigrants” because they came to the United States in large numbers later) were inferior to northern Europeans (e.g. Anglo-Saxons, “Nordics”). Even within those categories, individual racial/nationality groups were understood as having unique and distinct characteristics that (for instance) suited them for different types of work. In this
discourse, there were multiple European races, and an individual could be white and simultaneously inferior to other whites. This brand of race theory was on the decline by the 1930s and was almost universally rejected by elites by the 1940s. The idea that European-descended industrial workers could be understood as a single group—and could act politically as a group—became more or less axiomatic. A comprehensive understanding of white working class representation in this period must take these distinctions into account, however. To do so, I use “new immigrants” and “southern and eastern European” synonymously. “Old stock” or “native-born” referred to whites of northern European (especially Anglo-Saxon) descent whose ancestors had been in the United States for generations.

Contemporaries also spoke frequently about the “middle class” in relation to “workers.” As in the rest of the dissertation, I do not use “middle class” to describe an actually existing social group. When contemporaries argued that most Americans were “middle class,” that generally meant that they enjoyed middle-income status, did not identify as part of a fixed working class, and held to a moderate political ideology supportive of the capitalist system. Workers could be “middle class,” and for many observers they were. To refer to people at a middling income level, I use “middle-income”; to describe middle to upper-income educated elites, I use “professionals” or “professional class.”

In this chapter (as compared with the later chapters), it is more difficult to identify a small group of media that meet the definition of “elite public discourse.” There is less

107 It is important to take care in identifying (for instance) the New Deal Democratic Party as the party of the “white working class”—it might be more accurate to say the party helped to create the “white working class” by enfranchising southern and eastern Europeans.
of a sense in this period of ostensibly objective elite media as a consensus meeting point for alternative perspectives. Most of the top daily newspapers had a conservative bias, which ranged from restrained (the *New York Times*) to strident (*Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times*). To compensate, the analysis in this chapter draws more on liberal alternative media (particularly the *Nation* and the *New Republic*) than the analysis in the other chapters. While their readerships were much smaller than the top dailies’ readerships, these media serve aptly as indexes of left-of-center elite opinion. The greater focus on periodicals and books on the socialist left in this chapter reflects the atypically large mainstream influence of the left during the period.

I: The (white, male) worker as a symbol of the strength of the existing system

The dominant view in the years just prior to the New Deal understood American society as business-centered and individualistic. Most Americans, in this view, identified as middle class, and consumer capitalism had created a broadly distributed prosperity that respectable American workers valued and wanted to share. The predominant perspective from organized labor echoed this view, as did disappointed liberal intellectuals skeptical of the prospects for an independent working class movement. Egalitarian consumer capitalism was one of the prominent resolutions proposed for what might be called the problem of industrial modernity—how to deal with the changes industrial elites, large corporations, wage work, and urbanization had brought to a society in which liberty and equality were historically linked to independent proprietorship. The problem of industrial modernity was one of the predominant themes in elite public discourse over the first half
of the twentieth century, and the importance of the (white) worker as a progressive
symbol must be understood in that context.

**American exceptionalism and the middle class**

Perhaps the most durable argument about class in the US context is that it does
not exist. According to a longstanding set of arguments for “American exceptionalism,”
the United States had no hereditary or fixed class distinctions; it valorized formal
equality, opportunity for the individual, and self-made elites. A key corollary has held
that nearly all Americans were and understood themselves to be middle class. In the
years before the New Deal, elites often argued that the very rich and the disadvantaged
represented small minorities vastly outnumbered and dominated in political and cultural
terms by a middle-income majority. “The outstanding characteristic of American
civilization is the large size of the middle class,” Princeton historian T. J. Wertenbaker
put it in 1930. “This group, in many countries but a small fraction of the population, in
the United States tends to swallow up all the others.”

In economic terms, the emphasis on the middle-class character of the United
States meant that most Americans enjoyed a good standard of living and that wage
earners were not held down in a semi-permanent “working class” (as they were, for
instance, in the UK). In cultural and political terms, it meant that most Americans held to
values like individualism, thrift, hard work, and entrepreneurship and did not identify
themselves as members of a subordinate, fixed class. “In the United States the average

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108 On American exceptionalism and class, see e.g. Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New
Class Formation in an International Context* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997); Benjamin DeMott, *The
Imperial Middle: Why Americans Can’t Think Straight about Class* (New Haven: Yale University Press,

man has always played a prominent part in popular thinking, and a substantial portion of
the masses of the people have come to think of themselves as average persons,”
particularly as compared with European countries where Marxism had gained a
substantial toehold, political scientist A. N. Holcombe argued in 1933. In “thinking of
themselves as average persons they have made the middle class more comprehensive and
more important than it would have been otherwise.”  
Membership in the middle class,
in this framework, was partly a matter of self-identification, but economic circumstances
made possible and encouraged that middle class self-identification.

The historical reasoning that supported the view of the US as middle class
suggested that the lack of a feudal history, the agricultural basis of the early American
economy, and the availability of new land on the Western frontier had created a nation of
self-sufficient small producers. By the 1930s, these arguments had been offered
consistently for more than a century. For much of the history of the United States, liberty
itself had been firmly linked to independent landownership. In this framework, an
independent farmer would gain a range of practical skills that equipped him for
democratic decision-making, and with property came a stake in the welfare of the
community key to the responsible exercise of democratic rights. Wage work was most
acceptable on a temporary basis as a means of gaining the capital needed to become an

111 Aziz Rana, The Two Faces of American Freedom (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Rogers
Smith, Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in US History (New Haven: Yale University Press,
1999); David Wrobel, The End of American Exceptionalism: Frontier Anxiety from the Old West to the
New Deal (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993); a classic primary text is Frederick Jackson
published 1893.
independent entrepreneur.\textsuperscript{112} This rural ideal retained immense power as popular history in the 1930s, with adherents across the political spectrum. Though it depended on the subjugation of African Americans and Native Americans and the appropriation of land, its early-twentieth-century champions imagined the settler society of the past as largely devoid of inequality, want, or illegitimate power. “The existence of a vast unconquered frontier made effective democracy relatively easy, offered limitless opportunity and a large measure of economic security to every able-bodied citizen,” one put it.\textsuperscript{113} In frontier mythology, land and hard work were all that were needed for a secure and egalitarian society.

By the 1930s, however, understandings of American identity based around independent landownership were firmly tied to the past. As a guiding force for modern life, they had been under deep threat since at least the late nineteenth century. The frontier was thought to prevent class conflict by offering opportunity for men facing a lack of prospects in the city. It was also thought to cultivate American norms among immigrants, to serve as a “transmuting force,” political economist Henry George put it, “turn[ing] the thriftless, unambitious European peasant into the self-reliant Western farmer.”\textsuperscript{114} The “closing” of the Western frontier (in the 1890s, in many accounts) raised concern that the equality it had enabled would erode. The rise of industrial capitalism brought with it an as-yet-unseen concentration of economic power, violent labor conflict,

\textsuperscript{112} An 1859 speech by Abraham Lincoln frequently cited by later generations captures this frame: “There is no permanent class of hired laborers among us. Twenty-five years ago I was a hired laborer. The hired laborer of yesterday labors on his own today, and will hire others to labor for him tomorrow.” Under such a system, Lincoln suggested, anyone who remained a hired laborer did so either through “a dependent nature which prefers it, or improvidence, folly, or singular misfortune.” William Barton, \textit{Abraham Lincoln and His Books} (Chicago: Marshall Field, 1920), 54.


and an expanding urban workforce increasingly composed of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. “The development of capitalistic industry, and of the class of industrial wage-earners who could not hope to become their own masters,” political scientist A. N. Holcombe wrote, “tended to bring to the front a new kind of labor problem such as had not been known in the earlier years of the Republic.”

While immigrants made up the bulk of the unskilled labor force, no demographic, including old-stock whites, could expect to view wage work as a temporary condition. No group of elites could escape the need to grapple with what might be called the problem of industrial modernity. Four of the predominant elite-level prescriptions centered on cutting off immigration; expanding the role of government to check industrial power; ensuring that upward mobility remained possible; and emphasizing mass consumption and upward mobility for workers.

**Elite responses to the problem of industrial modernity**

One elite-level response centered on the dangerous character of the new immigration. Elite political and intellectual discourse over the first three decades of the twentieth century was saturated with claims about the danger southern and eastern Europeans posed to an Anglo-Saxon civilization. A 1909 book by the influential education theorist Ellwood Cubberley captures the broad argument: “These southern and eastern Europeans are a very different type from the north European who preceded them” in immigrating to the United States. “Illiterate, docile, lacking in self-reliance and initiative and not possessing Anglo-Teutonic conceptions of law, order, and government,

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their coming has served to dilute tremendously our national stock, and to corrupt our civic life.”

Because these “other races and peoples” were “accustomed to despotism and even savagery, and wholly unused to self-government,” economist John Commons worried, their ability to exercise independent citizenship was in question.

Social workers, industrialists, and reformers sought to improve new immigrants’ circumstances and instill in them middle-class “American” norms; eugenicists and others who viewed them as inassimilable or invariably dangerous campaigned for restrictions on immigration. These efforts culminated in the adoption of the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924, in which Congress imposed severe quotas that largely cut off immigration from southern and eastern Europe and Asia until the 1960s.

Another set of responses—by no means incompatible with the previous one—prescribed a revised understanding of American individualism and an increased role for government as a counterweight to corporate power. “The utterly changed conditions of our national life necessitate changes in certain of our laws, of our governmental methods,” Theodore Roosevelt argued, such that “the people through their governmental agents” could exercise sovereignty and escape the grip of “a few ruthless and

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domineering men.” In this view, the conditions that had once made it possible for individuals acting alone to enjoy equality—the availability of land on the frontier, personal relationships between workers and the employers who labored alongside them in a small shop—had changed for good. “A simple and poor society can exist as a democracy on a basis of sheer individualism,” Roosevelt put it elsewhere, “but a rich and complex industrial society cannot so exist; for some individuals, and especially those artificial individuals called corporations, become so very big that the ordinary individual…cannot deal with them on terms of equality.” It was thus necessary for “these ordinary individuals to combine in their turn,” to act collectively through the government and through voluntary associations. Roosevelt’s argument here understands the state as the tool of the public (“the people through their government agents”) for combatting the industrial elite (“ruthless and domineering men”). Most New Dealers, including Franklin Roosevelt, came out of this broad tradition.

Other elites countered that the coming of industrial modernity had not eliminated the equal opportunity that distinguished the United States. Because no fixed class system existed, American citizens enjoyed absolute political equality and could rise as far as their talent and hard work allowed. It was unreasonable, in a democratic capitalist

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120 Scottish-born industrialist Andrew Carnegie dedicated his 1887 book Triumphant Democracy “to the country which has removed the stigma of inferiority which his native land saw proper to impress upon him at birth, and has made him in the estimation of its great laws…the peer of any human being who draws the
society, to expect “all the runners to end the race equally,” as Herbert Hoover put it in a 1930 radio address, simply by virtue of the unequal distribution of talent and drive. Rather, it was necessary to “give them an equal start” and ensure that no ossified system of privilege restricted talented men from joining the ranks of the elite. Classical liberalism’s victory over royalist privilege remained the critical world-historical event, in this view, opening careers to talent, enabling fair rewards for individual initiative, and “constantly refreshing the leadership of the Nation by men of lowly beginnings.”

Upward mobility was an index of character and the key to maintaining a just society.

American exceptionalism’s claim to the good society had never rested solely on formal equal opportunity, however, but on broadly distributed material wellbeing. The industrialized United States saw an immense emphasis on the mass bounty made possible by American consumer capitalism and the share that wage earners could gain from it. Middle class Americanism increasingly came to mean the ability to consume, a meaning compatible with wage work. “To be a middle class American,” the Chicago Tribune editorialized in 1926, “is to work eight hours a day, bring home a comfortable pay envelop every week, and ride in one’s car on Sunday.” High wages and workers’ access to mass-produced consumer goods served as primary evidence that the “American system” had not empowered a few at the expense of the majority but had harnessed talent and ingenuity for broad benefit.


122 “Red Propagandists in American Colleges,” Chicago Tribune, September 7, 1926.
Employers placed a particular emphasis on conveying to the public and to their employees the benefits workers could expect from American capitalism. In a practice known as “welfare capitalism,” employers and managers in the late 1910s and 1920s sought to stave off unionization and win worker-actor goodwill by offering employees perks and concessions such as membership in company unions, higher wages, medical benefits, and firm-sponsored recreational activities.\textsuperscript{123} By adopting a paternalistic posture towards workers, employers also sought to communicate to other elites that they could behave responsibly and could solve industrial problems without interference. Welfare capitalism acknowledged that concerns about the dangers and harms of industrialism were entirely legitimate. Employers would need to behave in a responsible and community-oriented manner and take on new responsibility for workers’ welfare, in this framework, but wholesale changes in the system were not necessary. As distinguished from industrial unionism, for instance, welfare capitalism appealed to workers through an individualistic framework. “Modern technology has tended to create class cleavage, by making the wage earner believe that…he has slight prospect of getting ahead as an individual, and that his welfare depends upon the welfare of his class”—the precise belief that made unionization appealing to workers, economist Sumner Slichter explained. “Modern personnel methods,” Slichter emphasized, aimed “to counteract the effect of modern technique upon the mind of the worker,” in large part by allowing better opportunities for individual advancement: an abundant package of consumer goods,

\textsuperscript{123} On welfare capitalism, see e.g. David Brody, \textit{Workers in Industrial America: Essays on the Twentieth Century Struggle} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Sanford Jacoby, \textit{Modern Manors: Welfare Capitalism Since the New Deal} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). Cultivating worker-actor loyalty had become more urgent for industrialists by the 1920s. Technological advances (rather than keeping labor costs as low as possible) could now most reliably increase profit margins; the proportion of skilled or semiskilled jobs had increased, making turnover a more serious problem.
advancement up the company ranks for talented workers, stock ownership.\textsuperscript{124}

Importantly, the connection between American identity and entrepreneurship could be maintained even in a modern society, with the industrial worker imagined as an incipient capitalist. The “wage earner,” one contemporary insisted, was “not satisfied any longer to be a wage earner; he wants to be a partner.”\textsuperscript{125}

\textit{The dominant 1920s view: “American” workers supported the existing system}

One of the most basic claims running through discourses on the benefits of consumerism, welfare capitalism, and the dangers of the new immigration held that respectable American workers’ political views would not differ substantially from those of their employers. They understood the benefits they gained from the “American system” and would not be drawn to the siren song of foreign radicalism. Class cleavages in a “European” sense would not predict their political views, and they would reject demagogic appeals or the promise of direct aid from the government. Conservative columnist Frank Kent, touring the country in 1925, noted “the completeness with which all liberal thought has vanished, the astounding degree to which the country has become conservatized, and the strong hold” of Calvin Coolidge’s business-centered appeal “on all classes of society, whether rich or poor.”\textsuperscript{126} Those workers who did not subscribe to a middle class politics could not be seen as fully “American” under this framework. Elites reflexively linked foreignness and radicalism, with immigrants, especially eastern European Jews, falling under the greatest suspicion. “One pair of ears is enough to prove

\textsuperscript{125} Editor/journalist William Allen White, in Edward Gale Agran, \textit{“Too Good a Town”: William Allen White, Community, and the Emerging Rhetoric of Middle America} (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1998), 107.
\textsuperscript{126} Kent quote in “Another Soldier of Common Good Deserts Cause,” \textit{Chicago Tribune}, June 26, 1925.
the great majority of the agitators completely foreign born," labor relations investigator Whiting Williams reported from Detroit, “and one pair of eyes and ears soon learn that most of their hearers are Europeans who have come here too recently to get a satisfactory toehold.”127 These newcomers were susceptible to demagoguery, in this view, in part because of their poverty and racial status, but also because they did not yet understand the opportunity the American economic system (in contrast to the economic system of the old country) provided them.

The benefit of these arguments for a business-dominated, anti-statist political culture is straightforward. They offered a persuasive claim to represent the majority and figured opponents as alien to the polity. Great wealth did not disqualify an employer from speaking for workers in elite public discourse, particularly if he could claim humble beginnings and an interest in workers’ welfare. Self-made industrialists, most notably Henry Ford, were among the period’s most acknowledged elite-level voices for workers. “Mr. [Henry] Ford represents better than any living person the American industrial worker,” one progressive commented in 1926.128 In the dominant framework, there was no necessary conflict between the interests of workers and the interests of business; rather, the two were deeply intertwined.

Importantly, while the framework was most beneficial to their claims, employers and their allies were far from alone in assuming that political views did not differ significantly along class lines. Left-of-center intellectuals often saw farmers and workers as almost entirely taken in by the dominant ideology. “We have no labor movement and

127 Whiting Williams, “The Hopeful American Worker,” Saturday Evening Post, June 17, 1933.
128 Rexford Tugwell, “Henry Ford in This World,” Saturday Review, August 7, 1926.
no agrarian movement,” the *New Republic* declared in 1929. “Neither farmers nor industrial workers, as such, possess sufficient self-awareness or status to make qualitative contributions to our culture. Their standards and aspirations are swallowed in the gigantic maw of middle-class ascendency.” Workers did not perceive their separate interests, liberals argued, for two primary and related reasons. First, “in this day of movies and automobile,” they had been seduced by consumer capitalism and were primarily concerned with making as much money as possible. Second, they were in thrall to the pioneer individualism of the past: political culture remained, as John Dewey put it, “saturated with traditions of liberty and self-help.” “Cultural lag,” one of the most central concepts in progressive discourse, offered an explanation for why these seemingly outdated values remained so powerful: ideology changed far more slowly than objective conditions. In Dewey’s words, the “development of physical instrumentalities has far outrun the present development of corresponding mental and moral adjustment…We are carrying old political and old mental habits into a condition for which they are not adapted, and all kinds of friction result.” In other words, for these progressives, individualism became a guiding creed for Americans in a period where a self-sufficient rural life was the norm. Even though that was no longer the case, the complex of beliefs held by the majority of the public had not yet caught up.

It is important to draw out the connection in contemporary discourse between rural imagery and consumer capitalism. At first glance, the link appears incongruous,

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129 “Trade Unionism as Social Technique,” *New Republic*, April 10, 1929.
with the rural associated with the past and capitalism with the future. The chief connection lies in the importance both placed on individualism and self-sufficiency. For conservatives, the achievements of individual ingenuity in the industrial age demonstrated continuity with the self-sufficient rural past. For liberals, the new industrial powers had exploited the much-revered memory of the pioneer days for ideological purposes. Basing the doctrine of “least possible interference by government…on the plea that certain persons or interests should have the chance to become quickly rich and powerful” would have been politically ineffective, popular historian James Truslow Adams emphasized. Instead, “the doctrine of laissez-faire had to be linked with the preservation of the self-reliant virtues of the farmer and the frontiersman, the ‘typical’ American virtues which otherwise, it was claimed, might be ruined by paternalism.” For many liberals, this strategy had been very effective, with individualism remaining in its place of valor as a guiding principle of American political and economic life.

Liberals’ sometimes-despairing assessments of the prospects for a majoritarian reform coalition reflected the dire conditions for their side at the macropolitical level. Without discounting the appeal of conservative and consumerist politics to white worker-actors, it is important to stress that the elite discursive environment of the decade prior to

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133 “There will always be a frontier to conquer so long as men think, plan, and dare,” Herbert Hoover insisted. The “days of the pioneer are not over…The very genius of our institutions had been given to them by the pioneer spirit. Our individualism is rooted in our very nature.” Wrobel, The End of American Exceptionalism, 102. For this argument see also e.g. Thomas Dewey, “Defeatism Must Go,” Vital Speeches, December 15, 1939; on the long-term importance of the rural ideal for American business, an informative source is David M. Anderson, “The Battle for Main Street, U.S.A.: Welfare Capitalism, Boosterism, and Labor Militancy in the Industrial Heartland, 1895–1963” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, 2002).

the New Deal was such that their resistance to the dominant ideology was hidden from view. The two major parties did not differ substantially in ideological terms. Wall Street and Southern planter class interests shaped the Democratic Party, a divided minority coalition of Northern urban political machines and the Solid South. Within organized labor, the dominant American Federation of Labor (AFL) articulated its claim to speak for workers in a manner congenial to dominant discourses. The labor movement had been crushed in the aftermath of World War I, and radicals like the International Workers of the World (IWW) and the Socialists were much less prominent than they had been early in the twentieth century. The AFL’s base comprised craft unions representing the most skilled workers, largely Protestant white men of Northern European heritage. AFL unions sought to win concrete gains in wages and working conditions for members by bargaining directly with employers and avoided association with militancy or stigmatized groups of workers. The objective, AFL president Samuel Gompers explained, was to “make labor a contented and prosperous partner of business in this American system of

135 In one of many contemporary calls for a new liberal party, the Nation in 1931 derided the Democratic Party as the GOP’s “weaker twin,” different “only in that its desire to become the party of privilege has never been satisfied…Essentially there is no difference between the two major parties except that the bankers and businessmen have found the Republicans more dependable.” “A Party for the People,” The Nation, January 28, 1931.

136 The AFL’s racialized masculinity largely excluded Asian American workers and the African American and southern and eastern European workers who predominated in the largely unorganized mass production industries. An 1898 article in the AFL’s newspaper suggested that African Americans could not be unionized because they displayed an “abandoned and reckless disposition” and did not possess “those peculiarities of temperament such as patriotism, sympathy, sacrifice, etc., which are peculiar to most of the Caucasian race.” An infamous 1902 AFL pamphlet in support of Chinese exclusion, “Meat vs. Rice,” pitted “American Manhood against Asiatic Coolieism: Which Shall Survive?” AFL head Samuel Gompers pledged in 1905 that “the Caucasians are not going to let their standard of living be destroyed by negroes, Chinamen, Japs, or any others.” One AFL official attributed the federation’s lack of effort to organize in the auto industry in the early 1930s to the fact that autoworkers were not “intelligent enough to be organized at that time.” “You can’t organize the hunkies out there,” another remarked. Alexander Saxton, The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 272-273; Nelson Lichtenstein, State of the Union (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 41.
acquisition and enjoyment.”137 “In America there is no such thing as a working class as distinguished from a capitalist class,” one AFL union insisted, pledging “to show its members and workers generally how they can become capitalists as well as workers.”138 The figure of the industrial worker as incipient capitalist and contented middle-income consumer was not beneficial only to business interests; it carved out limited space for the most privileged workers to make claims on employers about getting their fair share.

Redefining the American worker – the New Deal, the CIO, and the Popular Front

Prevailing understandings of “workers” were permanently altered by the politics of the 1930s. In the understanding dominant by the end of the decade, the chief cleavage in American politics pitted workers, the “people” or the majority against economic elites; the political interests and views of the majority differed sharply from those of the most advantaged. To be clear, the language pitting workers or the “people” against an elite was not in any way new in the 1930s; republicanism, agrarian Populism, the Marxist tradition, industrial unionism, the farmer-labor movement, and Progressivism (to name a few) had drawn on that language. In the 1930s, this oppositional view of the worker became dominant to an unprecedented degree in mainstream elite political discourse, through the intersecting efforts of three primary political forces: the New Deal Democratic Party, the CIO, and the Popular Front.

Under the leadership of Franklin D. Roosevelt (president from 1933 until his death in 1945), the Democratic Party became clearly defined as the liberal party in a two-

party system. The New Deal Democratic Party’s pioneering social legislation included the National Labor Relations Act, or Wagner Act (1935), which guaranteed the right to organize; the Social Security Act (1935), the foundation of the American welfare state; the Works Progress Administration (1935), a large-scale government jobs program; and the Fair Labor Standards Act (1938), which set wages and hours requirements for employment. The party remained a problematic vehicle for reform, as liberals within it well understood, and scholars stress the tension between radicalism and conservatism in the New Deal order. In particular, conservative Southern Democrats in Congress retained a substantial limiting influence over policymaking, forcing the exclusion of most African Americans from Social Security and other key programs and, by the late 1930s, forming an alliance with Northern Republicans to restrict and roll back liberal gains. The policy limitations of the New Deal did not significantly limit Roosevelt and his allies’ success in defining the Democratic Party as the party of the “people” and the Republican Party, conversely, as the party of wealth and privilege.

The CIO (originally the Committee for Industrial Organization, later the Congress of Industrial Organizations) was formed in 1935 by a group of union leaders, led by United Mine Workers president John L. Lewis and Amalgamated Clothing Workers president Sidney Hillman, who broke with the AFL leadership over its unwillingness to

aggressively pursue the organization of industrial workers. A surge of organization followed the passage of the Wagner Act in 1935; by 1938, CIO affiliates had largely organized the key industries of autos and steel. The CIO disrupted the industrial status quo in multiple well-documented ways, but it is essential for the purposes of this narrative to stress its immense importance in altering public discourse around American workers. "There is no other instrumentality set up or created through which Labor can speak its mind or express itself except through the American Federation of Labor," AFL president William Green had insisted in 1933. Four years later, CIO national director John Brophy claimed that "the CIO…has brought to American political life the voice of the great mass of American workers—a voice for the first time organized and forceful." If both organizations claimed the near-exclusive right to speak for workers, the CIO spoke for a different group of workers and represented workers in a different way. Its leaders endorsed an antidiscrimination agenda and claimed to represent the "great mass of American workers" as a whole, not the most privileged segments of the working class. They adopted an often-combative public posture that defined workers against employers. In contrast to the AFL’s policy of voluntarism (which warned against close ties with any political party and favored bargaining with employers without state

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interference), the CIO formed an alliance with the Democratic Party and linked workers’ interests to an activist state.

Political forces to the left of New Deal and CIO leadership also greatly shaped elite-level understandings of working class identity in this period, through the upsurge of rank-and-file militancy and the cultural and intellectual production of the Popular Front, a broad, social democratic movement comprising a wide ideological range of liberals, socialists, communists, and other leftists and based on the premise that all left-of-center forces should work together in an alliance against fascism and reaction. The Popular Front was strongly committed to both industrial unionism and antiracism, key parts of an antifascist project. Though most leftists saw themselves as allied with the New Deal and the CIO during this period, they generally saw New Deal liberalism and CIO unionism as first steps toward a significantly more ambitious agenda.

All of these political efforts, of course, took place against the backdrop of the Great Depression. The mass poverty and unemployment of the Depression ran directly counter to the claims made in support of the existing system. For a significant segment of elite opinion, the Depression was an inexorable demonstration of the failures of the “individualist creed of everybody for himself and the devil take the hindmost.” The assumption that capitalist democracy would continue for the foreseeable future was deeply shaken, and radical views gained an atypical level of purchase in elite liberal

circles. It is important to stress, though, that a significant group of elites did not see the Depression as disqualifying for the existing system and saw an increase in state power in response to the Depression as a much greater threat. Familiar arguments about the broad benefit of capitalism—in which the “many,” not the “few,” were its beneficiaries—remained remarkably prominent in elite public discourse even at the height of the Depression. “The American system…has provided bountifully for all but an unfortunate ten percent,” protested a representative 1936 Chicago Tribune editorial. 144 Contemporaries pointed to workers’ high wages; their ability to buy new products and to own stock; the middle-income lifestyle ostensibly enjoyed by the majority of Americans; the common interests of labor and capital; the fact that capitalists rose from the ranks of workers; the dangers of statism. AFL president William Green warned against welfare (“the dole”) on the grounds that it would make the worker “a ward of the state.”145 Ultimately, then, while the Depression was central to changing elite constructions of the “worker,” its influence on elite public discourse was not predetermined. The interpretation of the Depression was subject to political conflict.

The most basic claim in left/liberal discourse in the 1930s held that the economic system as presently constructed served the interests of elites but did not meet the needs of the majority of Americans. Leftists and liberals advocated a wide range of alternatives, ranging from basic reforms of the existing system to socialism. Many of those farther to the left wanted a greater degree of coordinated and centralized economic planning; in this view, individualistic, decentralized decision-making by corporate interests would never

144 “The System Mr. Roosevelt Condemns,” Chicago Tribune, April 19, 1936.
allow for the nation’s productive capacity to be used in the best interest of its citizens. Others championed measures that would increase the purchasing power of workers and give citizens protection against the vicissitudes of industrial society. No matter the scope of the change advocated, a consistent and fundamental claim throughout the discourse held that a more activist role for the state would be needed to secure justice in the modern world.\[146\]

Also broadly shared in left-of-center politics was a frame opposing a small group of industrial elites to the majority of citizens. These were the “robber barons” and “malefactors of great wealth” targeted by earlier generations—businessmen who had taken advantage of the affordances of industrial capitalism to amass immense power unknown in the early years of the republic. Contemporaries put forward class politics at different levels of explicitness, with those most euphemistic in their framing closest to the center of elite public discourse. New Deal Democrats did not identify a “capitalist class,” but they did argue explicitly that a small group of industrial elites had interests that diverged from the interests of the majority. In 1936, FDR boasted that his administration had “earned the hatred of entrenched greed” and decried the “domination of government by financial and industrial groups, numerically small but politically dominant.” “Never before in all our history have these forces been so united against one candidate as they stand today,” he exclaimed later the same year. “They are unanimous in their hate for

me—and I welcome their hatred.” His acceptance speech at the 1936 Democratic National Convention introduced the New Deal’s best-known term for its adversaries: “economic royalists.” Similar language appeared consistently across the full range of left-of-center opinion. Liberals and leftists denounced the “predatory power of the oligarchs,” “Wall Street and its minions…here full panoplied for battle,” “the small class whose one aim is profits,” a “financial and economic dictatorship,” “industrial autocracy.”

Most often, liberals opposed these oligarchs and autocrats to “the people,” “the majority,” the “plain people,” the “many,” the “common people,” the “average American”—constituencies defined by little other than their ordinariness and their numbers. These categories were broad and vague, expansive enough to suit a wide range of ideologies and accommodate the disparate groups in the New Deal coalition. African Americans and new immigrants could be explicitly included or left unmentioned. The many-versus-few frame could support explicitly antiracist politics, but opposing the people to the interests had also been commonplace in a Southern politics characterized by the amalgamation of progressivism and white supremacy. In broadest terms, categories like “the majority,” “the common man,” and the “people” included all groups without

power or wealth: “the worker,” “the farmer,” “the housewife,” “the small businessman,” 
“the immigrant,” “the Negro.” For some speakers, they referred to non-elite whites.¹⁴⁹

To be clear, then, liberals did not speak only on behalf of a contemporary 
equivalent to “the white working class.” To an important degree, though, white, male 
workers stood at the forefront of the imagery around the liberal public. This chapter 
frames the importance of white working class representation in this period around two 
basic but central questions in elite public discourse. First, was reform of the existing 
system—understood by elites on both sides as individualistic, anti-statist capitalism—
needed and legitimate? Second, how were the politics of workers (and non-elite 
Americans generally) changing, and what would they demand from their government and 
their employers? Parts Two and Three look at these questions, respectively.

Plan of the chapter

Part Two seeks to underscore the importance of the (white) worker as a symbol of the 
legitimacy of liberal reform. Representations of (white) workers were closely 
implicated in debate around fundamental questions in elite public discourse—the proper

¹⁴⁹ A 1944 CIO pamphlet, “The Negro in ’44,” gives a sense of the “people” in the broadest left-of-center 
sense: “In this year of decision, 1944, Negro Americans find themselves at a crossroad. They are not there 
alone. The small farmer, the small businessman, the white collar worker, the professional, the housewife, 
both white and colored, are there. The foreign-born are there. So are all the people who live by the sweat of 
their brows. All the ‘little people’ are at the crossroad this year.” An example of the “people” in the 
narrower sense—non-elite, non-immigrant whites—can be found in Oklahoma congressman Paul Stewart’s 
claim that “the people are going to take over…They are getting tired of this minority stuff, and labor is the 
predominant minority group that is trying to wreck the government.” In between was the vague, unmarked 
“people” most common among New Deal Democrats. Roosevelt’s purpose, interior secretary Harold Ickes 
role of government in the economy, the appropriate responses to the changes brought by industrialism. Rural whites primarily appeared in liberal discourse as evidence of the wrenching poverty the vaunted “American system” had failed to alleviate. Urban industrial workers epitomized the liberal argument about the changing circumstances of American life, in which the majority now worked for wages and needed state intervention to assure security.

Part Three seeks to capture how contemporaries understood and narrated the emergence of (white) workers, particularly industrial workers, as a crucial progressive political force. Longstanding imagery of the progressive worker emerged from the electoral successes of the New Deal and the dramatic victories of the burgeoning industrial union movement, the source of the period’s most indelible images of working class agency. In the early days of the CIO, sympathetic observers saw the labor movement’s gains as the beginning of a sustained forward drive towards a vastly changed and more just society. Even as the political agenda associated with union workers became significantly less ambitious (basic reform as pursued by the Democratic Party), the frame depicting (white) workers as a vital force for progress remained in an altered form. This imagery of “labor on the march” provides the centerpiece for Part Three. Part Three concludes by noting elite resistance to the dominant progressive worker frame—from observers who contended that deserving workers opposed liberalism or that any kind of class politics would not take hold in the US context. Part Three covers the same period as Part Two from a somewhat different angle; the two could be read in either order.
II. The (white) worker as a symbol of the need for reform

“It is generally agreed by competent analysts of current affairs that the great issue of these times is how far the state should go in organizing and directing the nation’s economic activity—or conversely, how much of this organizing and directing should be left to individuals and groups of individuals (business) competing for public favor in a free market,” a mid-1940s National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) pamphlet argued. The majority of elites, even those strongly opposed to the staunch business conservatives of NAM, held to the same basic understanding of “the great issue of these times.” The central questions in elite public discourse in the 1930s and 1940s centered on the proper role of government and private business in a modern economy. Liberals and leftists who advocated a more activist role for the state confronted a deeply rooted antistatist tradition holding that “individuals and groups of individuals (business) competing for public favor in a free market” should determine the direction of the economy. Representations of laboring whites were directly tied up in that debate.

As Part One detailed, employers and other conservatives had placed a great deal of emphasis on the prosperity workers enjoyed as a result of American capitalism. The system was just, they argued, because it allowed for individual talent and drive to be harnessed for broad benefit. Liberals and leftists sought to demonstrate that state intervention was both needed and legitimate, in keeping with the traditions of the American founding. They too drew consistently on representations of workers, but they figured them much differently—as disempowered and deprived for the benefit of a few.

Liberals sought to underscore the depth of poverty in America, and their spotlight often focused on poverty suffered by the rural native-born white agricultural laborers central to the national imaginary. Liberals also argued that urbanization and industrialization had created a fundamentally altered society where justice could not be secured via long-revered individualistic principles; here urban industrial workers were symbolic of the chronic insecurity and lack of agency that had made an activist state necessary. Importantly, though, the (white, male) industrial worker had clear limits as a symbol of the needs of a modern workforce—contributing to a separation of “labor” issues from issues of race and gender.

**Rural laboring whites as symbolic of the depth of American poverty**

During times of crisis, journalists have often become particularly disillusioned with journalism reflecting the activities of dominant institutions. During the Depression, liberals and leftists saw an elite-centered approach as an abdication of responsibility, a way to conceal an urgent reality. “If we” professional-class Americans “had to walk through street after street of dingy tenements, looking at thousands of undernourished children,” one radical journalist wrote, “if these things were brought squarely under our noses, we might be moved…But the trouble is that we don’t see. Our

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lives are so arranged that we don’t have to see.” The 1930s saw a flowering of journalism written by liberals and leftists with the aim of documenting the poverty and disadvantage hidden from elite view, making elites “see.”

Of all disadvantaged groups, this body of work spotlighted rural, native-born whites most of all. In the mid-1930s, a series of texts dramatized for a middle-class audience the predicament of white Southern agricultural laborers—sharecroppers and tenant farmers. Journalists, novelists, and photographers depicted the human costs of the Dust Bowl and the plight of migrants to Southern California. (The most famous photograph of the era, Dorothea Lange’s “Migrant Mother,” comes out of this tradition).

In this discourse, rural whites were one thing above all—they were poor, incredibly poor:

In parts of the South human existence has reached its lowest depths. Children are seen deformed by nature and malnutrition, women in rags beg for pennies, and men are so hungry that many of them eat snakes, cow dung, and clay.

The children, dressed in scraps of dirty rags, stood around the table dipping their hands into bowls of a watery liquid with grease congealing on the surface and bits of broken crackers floating on it. There was no milk on the table, no vegetables,

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no fruit, no meat.\textsuperscript{155}

In a country now capable of producing enough that no one would go hungry, for liberal and leftist observers, it was an utter disgrace that people lived this way.

The prominence of native-born white poverty in left/liberal discourse reflects the contemporary racial hierarchy. Anglo-Saxon whites were closer to the symbolic center of the polity than African Americans or immigrants. Their suffering was more destabilizing for antistatist ideologies and more difficult to ignore or explain away. Liberals and leftists (even those who rejected the view that Anglo-Saxons were the realest Americans) were abundantly aware of this and made strategic decisions on its basis. Writer Sherwood Anderson, seeking to rebut the claim that “this [is] the land of opportunity” and “there is a good deal of nonsense about all of this poverty,” consistently stressed the pervasiveness of poverty among “whole generations of white men, their wives, daughters, sons,” people who were “American to the bone”: “These are not the foreigners of whom we Americans can say so glibly—‘If they do not like it here, let them go back where they came from.’ These men are from the oldest American stock we have.”\textsuperscript{156} One New Deal official urged a magazine editor running a story he had written on tenant farming to “see to it that most of the pictures cover white subjects, for as my article will show nearly two thirds of the cotton tenants are white and it is very important that the nation as a whole should realize that cotton tenancy is not a Negro problem.”

Another official suggested to photographer Dorothea Lange that she “take [pictures of]

\textsuperscript{156} Sherwood Anderson, \textit{Puzzled America} (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1935), 18, 71, 29, 56, 57. A concise discussion of the connection between imagery of rural whites and the contemporary racial hierarchy can be found in Gerstle, \textit{American Crucible}, 156ff.
both black and white, but place the emphasis on white tenants, since we know that these will receive much wider attention.\(^{157}\)

The calculation is clear—if policymakers did not dispel the assumption that tenancy was “a Negro problem,” it would be difficult or impossible to generate the necessary concern among elites to address its evils; if elites assumed that only African Americans and immigrants were poor, they would not view the problem as endemic. This dynamic is suggestive of an enduring tension: White disadvantage drew more elite attention because it tapped a sense that suffering was not “supposed” to happen to these people. Making it visible was also necessary to force elites to recognize poverty as something more than marginal.

**Urban industrial workers as symbolic of the needs of a modern America**

In recent years, white industrial workers have been firmly tied to the past—as symbols of bigotry, or in the deeply nostalgic imagery around midcentury manufacturing jobs. In the 1930s and 1940s, they were just as strongly associated with the future. The census first found a majority of Americans living in urban areas in 1920. This, one contemporary noted, was a “striking revelation”; the United States, “from the beginning…had been a land in which most of the people lived in the rural districts.”\(^{158}\) For contemporaries, the transition from a rural to an urban society was ongoing,


Similarly, prior to the Dust Bowl migrations, the majority of agricultural laborers in California were of Mexican, Chinese, and Japanese descent, but the exploitation of seasonal workers by California landlords did not generate significant elite outrage until Midwestern whites arrived.

immediate, and disruptive. It generated both optimism and concern (much of it nativist in nature), but few doubted it would bring change.

Liberal claims about the need for reform focused heavily on the changes brought by the urban industrial age. In a very prominent narrative, equality, liberty, and security—ideals that the United States claimed as central to national identity and that had once been widely enjoyed—had been placed in jeopardy for the bulk of the population by increasing economic concentration, irresponsible corporate power, and precarious wage work. The rise of industrial capitalism had brought about a level of interconnectedness—in the modern corporation, in mass production and distribution—that could not be dealt with according to the individualistic principles of the past. Because individuals were now at the mercy of vast, complex forces that they could not influence, in this framework, justice required an increased role for collectives large and powerful enough to counterbalance corporate power, namely unions and the state.

This narrative of the transition to industrialism can be found in roughly the same form across the entire range of left-of-center opinion. The narrative is significant for a history of white working class representation for two primary reasons: first, it helps to explain the long-term symbolic importance of the (white, male) urban industrial worker; second, it helps to explain the enduring discursive separation between “working class” issues and issues of race and gender. The narrative undergirded some of the most far-reaching left/liberal interventions of the period—that governments have responsibility for their citizens’ welfare, that political liberty means little without economic security, that those able to work should have the right to a job. It is also suggestive of the limits of the
understanding of class and power that supported liberals’ claims on behalf of the working population. The fundamental tension lies in the treatment of the preindustrial United States as simultaneously a good society and a chapter that needed to be closed to achieve justice in the modern world.

In liberal argumentation, preindustrial America frequently served as an idealized backdrop to a more troubled present. Contemporaries implied that equality and democracy had existed naturally in the pioneer days; slavery and settler colonialism were absent or downplayed. Put differently, liberals seldom argued that the ideal of a smallholding independent middle-income rural society was unjust, exclusive, or an inaccurate depiction of the American past. Most often, they argued that it was obsolete. “No matter how deeply we may yearn to return to the splendid simplicity of our log-cabin and town-meeting era, here in America, there can be no turning back,” Roosevelt aide Rexford Tugwell put it.159 Tugwell was typical in understanding the rural past as simple and the present as infinitely more complex. During the frontier era, Roosevelt himself argued, individualism had its day as “the great watchword of American life,” and “the happiest of economic conditions made that day long and splendid.” On “the Western frontier, land was substantially free…Starvation and dislocation were practically impossible.” But these conditions had irrevocably changed, FDR stressed: “Our last frontier has long since been reached, and there is practically no more free land. More

than half of our people do not live on the farms or on lands and cannot derive a living by cultivating their own property.”  

The widespread security and “equality of opportunity” of the past, in this narrative, was directly attributable to the availability of land (for white settlers) on the frontier. Anyone who could access land had agency and could earn a living. The same condition did not apply to a landless wage worker. For W. Jett Lauck, an economist and close advisor of John L. Lewis, the need for reform “had its origin and development in the marvelous changes in industry and industrial life since the American Revolution,” especially the rise of “large scale production” directed by “artificial legal personages, known as industrial corporations.” Where an individual worker in a small shop could exercise agency through a personal relationship with the employer, a worker employed by a large corporation could only exercise agency as part of a collective, by “meeting organization with organization…The individual wage-earner was helpless.”

An increased role for government or for unions, in this framework, did not violate longstanding American norms because conditions the Founders could not possibly have foreseen had rendered it necessary. “The rush of modern civilization…has raised for us new difficulties, new problems which must be solved if we are to preserve to the United States the political and economic freedom for which Washington and Jefferson planned.

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and fought,” Roosevelt argued. Because economic inequality was so vast, formal political equality had become “meaningless.”

The importance of the industrial wage worker in this discourse is straightforward: first and foremost, this worker epitomized the changing conditions faced by non-elite Americans. For leftists, industrial workers felt the pressures of capitalism most acutely; they faced the oppression in the present that white-collar workers and others would face in the near future. For liberals and labor leaders closer to the political center, framing politics and policy around the needs of the modern public required recognizing the United States as urban and wage-earning, not rural. “We have long ceased to be an agricultural people,” John L. Lewis argued, noting that the workforce now comprised three times as many wage workers as agricultural workers. It “is obvious that the future of our country is indissolubly bound up with the economic and social advancement of its industrial workers,” Lewis stressed. The time had come, New Dealer Harold Ickes claimed, to “modify or even to discard certain social, economic and political concepts appropriate to a pioneer people.” Libertarian concepts that might have been appropriate when most Americans were self-employed landowners were now, in this perspective, badly out of date.

One clear example of this reasoning can be found in the case made by John Winant, the first chair of the Social Security Board, for why it was foolish and unjust to

stigmatize Social Security as an invitation to idleness. “There was no need for social insurance in [the] early days of the Republic,” Winant argued. “Security depended on the individual’s own efforts…Poverty was a very relative term and was generally born of shiftlessness.” However, Winant stressed, “that period in our history is over,” displaced by an “economic revolution which has altered fundamentally the status of the average American. Most of our population are wage earners, living in urban areas, working for corporations whose owners are strangers to them…The worker is no longer a free agent, who can provide for his own security by his own initiative.”

The liberal understanding of industrial modernity, as Winant’s argument typifies, justified an expanded role for the state by stressing the limits of agency. Security was not a guarantee no matter how industrious a worker might be. But Winant also presumed that security had existed for all who did not succumb to “shiftlessness”—it was only industrialism that had taken it away.

This discourse helps to explain the constrained understanding of “class” and “economic issues” that has long shaped elite political discourse. In the predominant liberal narrative, the social injustice workers faced could be attributed to industrial elites and the workings of industrial society. The narrative did not highlight other sources of power, including those that might benefit its typical worker, or other kinds of labor (e.g. agricultural, domestic, or reproductive). The exclusion of slavery from the dominant understanding of the development of US capitalism encouraged a conceptual separation between the “Negro problem” and the problem of industrial modernity. Some liberals and leftists in the period were very attentive to these. But the dominant frame linked the changes brought by industrialism to work largely performed by white men. Many of

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them were of southern and eastern European descent, and they became recognized as “American” by becoming recognized as typical American workers. A few decades later, when this group’s position had obviously improved, the continued subordination of women and African Americans did not prevent elites from claiming that the problems brought by industrialism had been largely solved (see Chapter 2).

It is important to stress that (white, male) industrial workers were useful as a symbol of liberal reform because they suggested continuity as well as needed change. To be clear, these workers appeared to many contemporaries as an “other”: Though nativist language directed at southern and eastern Europeans was declining, it remained very prominent in opposition to the ascendant liberalism. But European men—unlike others confronted with the implication that they were not quite American—could lay claim to one of the most important elements of the normative understanding of Americanness: breadwinning white masculinity.166

Breadwinning white men were understood as the average American, the basic democratic subject. One of the most infamous examples of Depression-era propaganda is a National Association of Manufacturers billboard showing a white family—father, mother, and two children—happily riding in a car. The text reads, “World’s Highest Standard of Living”…“There’s no way like the American Way.” An iconic photo featured in *Life* magazine captures a group of African American workers standing in a

breadline, against the backdrop of this billboard. For NAM and its cohort, the patriarchal family ideal and the “American Way” were deeply tied together; Americans’ high standard of living made possible a contented, normative family life. As a political symbol, the patriarchal family ideal was not the property of the right, however; liberals and labor laid claim to it as well.

What workers in an industrial age needed above all, liberals argued, was security—stability in employment, enough food and shelter to live a decent life, a fair wage, and income in old age or in the case of disability. Security was an ideal that could directly challenge the existing economic system. “The ideals of the labor movement must be security for every man and woman in the country,” Sidney Hillman argued. “If capitalism can’t give us security, then let another system do it.” Security was also an ideal firmly tied in with normative understandings of the family. “What do the people of America want more than anything else?” Roosevelt asked in a 1932 speech. Work, he answered, and “security for themselves and for their wives and children.” Where FDR figured of breadwinning men as equivalent to “the people of America,” the labor movement and its supporters framed the “worker” as a male with a wife and children.

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169 Lichtenstein, State of the Union, 27.
Liberals and organized labor argued that justice in an industrial society depended on the family wage—a wage high enough that a single wage earner could support a family on one income. “The American standard of living is based upon the earnings of the main breadwinner,” argued a 1945 United Steelworkers release. “It rejects the concept that other members of the family have to work in order to provide the family with the necessary living essentials.” The Steelworkers here invoked an ideal held as normative for Americans of all classes (“the American standard of living”) to argue that workers deserved the same.

Stressing security for the individual family also helped unions to push back on right-wing claims of dangerous radicalism. When labor officials wanted to convey that organized workers were not a threatening other, they consistently emphasized that workers sought above all to support their families. In a 1941 radio address clearly intended for a skeptical professional-class public, CIO legislative director John T. Jones described union workers as “good, upright patriotic American citizens, just like you and your neighbors…Like you, they are also deeply concerned with protecting the welfare and security of their families.” One unionist urged CIO publicity officials to emphasize “that a C. I. O. man is likely to be the Sam or Bill around the family table; no more alien

170 Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 154. The expectation that each family would include multiple wage earners was beneficial only to employers, in this framework, because it allowed them to pay the primary earner lower wages. Comments made by John L. Lewis in 1937 capture this reasoning: “Normally, a husband and father should be able to earn enough to support a family. This does not mean, of course, that I am not opposed to the employment of women or even wives when of their own free choice. But I am violently opposed to a system which, by degrading the earnings of adult males, makes it economically necessary for wives and children to become supplementary wage earners, and then says, ‘See the nice income of this family.’” Ellen Mutari, “The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 and Competing Visions of the Living Wage,” *Review of Radical Political Economics* 32, no. 3 (2000): 413.

171 John T. Jones, address on NBC’s Blue Network, April 22, 1941, text in box 15, folder 2, De Caux Papers.
to the American scene than the most average and desirable type of American. If this idea were driven home to the great majority of Americans do you think any politician would dare to get up in Congress and talk against him?"  Here, racial signifiers ("alien"..."desirable type of American") were rearticulated around (and rendered unnecessary by) an image of averageness tied to breadwinning masculinity ("Sam or Bill around the family table").

Ironically, this focus on security for the individual male-headed family can be read as an updated version of the rural ideal of individualism and self-sufficiency. When 1930s and 1940s observers remembered the preindustrial United States, they envisioned independent families as its typical citizens: "The closely knit family group—its prosperity determined by what could be wrested from the soil—was the unit of the new society"..."The sovereign authority rested with a great middle class, whom we like to term the typical Americans. They were the people whose ideal of life was to own a home, and rear and educate a family in the fear of the Lord and in obedience to law."  In one interpretation, liberalism promised the opportunity to achieve the same ideal through modern means. An industrial worker could aspire to own his own shop or even farm or, at the very least, his own home, and many worker-actors understood the New Deal’s promise to its constituents as a "white entitlement to a home in a racially homogenous neighborhood."  Even "the trade-unionist of urban America" was drawn to "the old Jeffersonian tradition of the farmer as a free man on his own homestead," liberal Harold

172 Joseph Gollomb to Len de Caux, April 11, 1942, box 2, folder 16, De Caux Papers.
Laski observed. Here the limits of the (white, male) industrial worker as a progressive political symbol came into sharp relief. While a deprived worker who prized security could be a symbol of radical change, the picture was much cloudier once that worker had made some gains. As the next two chapters will detail, a (white male) worker dedicated to securing what he had gained would become a chief symbol of conservatism and anti-black backlash.

III: The (white) worker as an agent of change

The most indelible imagery of a progressive (white) working class comes out of the politics of the 1930s and 1940s and its legacy—union organizers socked by Henry Ford’s goons at the Battle of the Overpass in Dearborn, Michigan…little houses in rural West Virginia or South Boston where one of the only pictures on the wall was of FDR…“My father always said, stick with the Democrats, they’re the party of the working man.” The legacy of this imagery is only palely reflective of the major imprint it made on elite public discourse in the 1930s and 1940s. The strong association between liberal politics and the (white) worker owes most to two parallel developments, both taking place against the backdrop of the Depression—the rapid gains made by the industrial union movement in the mid- to late 1930s and the rise of the New Deal Democrats to majority status in the same period.

The dominant elite view in the 1930s and early 1940s identified a leftward trajectory within the electorate, a broad ideological shift away from individualism and towards liberalism and the state. The Democratic Party, which had appeared marginal as recently as 1928, became the clear majority force in American politics. Amid a rush of unionization and sometimes-violent labor conflict, workers’ trajectory became an inescapable concern for all politically active groups. Collectively, these developments raised to the level of conventional wisdom an understanding of American politics in which the majority supported an expanded role for the state and saw its interests as opposed to those of an economic elite. From the standpoint of contemporary elite discourse, this was a significant shift from the view of workers (and voters generally) as sympathetic to business-led governance. The first section below, “The Old Gods Are Tumbling,” sketches out that transition.

A significant number of liberals and leftists believed that they were witnessing the birth of a sustained working class radicalism, and much of the enduring imagery of the progressive (white) worker comes out of their work. The second section below, “Labor on the March,” focuses in particular on labor reporting in liberal and left periodicals, where left/liberal labor journalists pictured workers as on the march against injustice, anonymous but incredibly brave, facing down violence from employers to win their rights. Imagery of a militant working class declined after the late 1930s as industrial unions became an accepted part of the economic landscape, but it left an imprint on elite-level politics. Liberals and organized labor continued to figure workers as a key force for
social progress, but indicated that they would realize their gains within the bounds of the formal political system and without violence.

Even at the height of the progressive worker’s power in elite discourse, some elites remained skeptical. The view that workers as a group embraced liberalism never went uncontested. Many observers saw workers as moderate or “middle class” in their political views. Some argued that responsible workers resented labor, liberalism, and undeserving workers and were basically conservative in their views. The third section below, “Resistance to the Progressive Worker,” gives a brief sketch of this discourse, with an eye toward foreshadowing arguments that follow in the ensuing chapters.

“The Old Gods Are Tumbling”: The Liberal Electoral Majority

In the dominant elite view, workers and the public broadly shifted to the left over the course of the 1930s, amid the victories of the New Deal and the burgeoning industrial union movement. The Democrats, clearly defined as the liberal party, replaced the Republicans (defined as the business party) as the majority party. The dominant lines of division going forward, in this view, would center on income, with the “have-nots” opposing the “haves.”

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Political analysis in the 1920s and early 1930s understood the United States as “normally Republican.” Syndicated columnist Paul Mallon explained the conventional wisdom: “that this is a Republican country; that the Republicans alone can bring prosperity; that the voters merely chastise them occasionally, but always restore them to
favor after a brief, unsatisfactory experience with the Democrats.” Belief in a natural Republican majority followed on Republican victories in all but two presidential elections since 1896. It was also tied up with assumptions about the composition of the electorate—that most voters valued business-led prosperity; that political views did not differ significantly based on income; that the Republicans’ middle-income Protestant base was the dominant political force; and that the Democrats’ major constituencies, the Solid South and immigrants in Northern cities, were marginal. Two Roosevelt victories turned that conventional wisdom on its head. The Democratic Party’s “triumph now reaches even greater heights, with the prospect that it will be the dominant factor in American life for at least another decade,” a Washington Post correspondent commented after 1936. “Talk abounds that the Republican Party is finished.”

The new conventional wisdom rooted Democratic strength in an income-based division pitting the disadvantaged majority against the better off minority. “Today we have a new main cleavage of political opinion which, whether for good or ill, will be with us as far as we can see into the future,” wrote Wall Street Journal editor Thomas Woodlock in 1936. That cleavage “is deeper than any heretofore experienced since the Civil War,” based “upon lines largely of economic class divisions.” “Any full understanding of politics today must take account of the fact that there has been a significant and far-reaching change in the political line-up of the country since the New


Deal came to power,” pollster George Gallup noted in 1938. “This change has taken the form of a cleavage of political opinion along economic lines, a split between the high and low income brackets, a struggle for political power between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots.’”\textsuperscript{180} This was the root of one of the most enduring truisms in American political history—Democrats are the party of working people, Republicans the party of the rich.

It’s important to note that “class” in this context means the argument that the interests of economic elites were opposed to the interests of the bulk of the population. This was the argument that (for both supporters and opponents) New Dealers mainstreamed. Allegations about Roosevelt’s legitimation of “class warfare” began as early as his 1932 campaign and intensified by the mid-1930s. “Efforts to stir up class-antagonism” had been made in the past, conservative columnist Frank Kent noted, but they had always come from “those on the outside trying to get in…It is the first time in history that a President of the United States has…initiated, encouraged, and promoted a fight along those lines.”\textsuperscript{181} Initially, a significant segment of elites in both parties believed that this kind of combative talk would turn off most voters. Some interpreted FDR’s victory in 1932 as a one-time reaction to the Depression. By the time he won the 1936 election in a landslide (61% of the popular vote and all but two states, with a clear income gap identifiable in the voting), few disputed that a dramatic shift had taken place.

Broadly, the dominant view in elite public discourse held that public esteem for liberals and activist government was rising sharply, while esteem for business had declined precipitously. The frame in which liberals deliver more government and

\textsuperscript{181} Frank Kent, “If The New Dealers Win,” \textit{American Mercury}, April 1936.
conservatives less has been pervasive since the New Deal and was especially central in the 1930s and 1940s. More recently, it has often been argued that this frame is inaccurate and advantageous to the right: it fails to capture the fact that government is always involved, including when policy is written for the benefit of corporate interests. During the Depression, when business leadership was at its most embattled and the federal welfare state undeveloped, liberals saw the government vs. laissez-faire frame as politically effective. Whether they approved or not, elites of all political perspectives understood the electorate as demanding more government.

An argument prominent among conservatives held that business was currently on the losing end of an ideological contest with advocates of liberal government. “The recently enfranchised masses and the leaders of thought who supply their ideas are almost completely under the spell of [the] dogma” that “government with its instruments of coercion must, by commanding the people how they shall live, direct the course of civilization and fix the shape of things to come,” lamented Walter Lippmann, best known to 1930s elites as a leading conservative syndicated columnist.182 Liberals identified the same trajectory but saw it as encouraging. Voters had been skeptical of government intervention in the past, in this view, but were starting to recognize the necessity of a different approach. Liberal Stuart Chase interpreted the 1936 election as evidence of “wavering public support for the religion of business”: “The old gods are tumbling…The people have turned to a new god—the government, led by Mr. Roosevelt. The new god

works.” Notably, while Lippmann only uses religious language (“dogma”) to describe the views he opposes, Chase uses it in reference to his own side as well. The “people,” in this framework, did not draw on critical thinking so much as faith. Their political role was to place their trust in the right group of elites, and the chief indication of their changing views was the worshipful attitude many adopted towards Roosevelt.

Chase’s phrasing is suggestive: the progressive majority built by the New Deal, as many liberals imagined it, exercised agency through elites. It was a dispersed public:\textsuperscript{184} millions of people in little towns and big cities listening to the president on the radio or talking with their neighbors about the need for change. That dispersed public made it possible for reform to take place because voters demanded it at the ballot box. The imagery of agency that came out of the industrial union movement was much different. Here workers exercised agency directly and as an embodied group, putting their livelihoods or lives on the line to secure their rights.

The rush of labor organization was among the most central stories in American media and politics in the period, and that story proceeded at incredible speed. As\textit{ New York Times} labor reporter Louis Stark recalled, the period saw a “Niagara of news” about labor enter the top headlines “over night.”\textsuperscript{185} Labor news appeared prominently in mass

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[184] This public bears more than a small resemblance to the public described by John Dewey in \textit{The Public and Its Problems} (New York: Henry Holt, 1927).
\item[185] Philip Glende, “Labor Makes the News: Newspapers, Journalism, and Organized Labor, 1933-1955” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2010), 183. Glende’s comprehensive dissertation is the best secondary source on print journalism and organized labor during the CIO’s heyday. For a longer narrative see Troy Rondinone, \textit{The Great Industrial War: Framing Class Conflict in the Media, 1865-1950} (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2010). This chapter’s arguments about labor and print media also draw on the papers of Len De Caux, Edward Levinson, and Mary Heaton Vorse, all in the Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.
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publications and elite-oriented periodicals, and actors on both sides were deeply invested in shaping public opinion about the new unions. The key strikes of the period—including autoworkers in Toledo, truck drivers in Minneapolis, and longshoremen in San Francisco in 1934, autoworkers in Flint and steelworkers in Pennsylvania and Ohio in 1936 and 1937—were reported extensively in a range of media, as were CIO involvement in electoral politics and conflicts between the nascent CIO and the AFL. The tenor of labor reporting varied across and within publications. Unfavorable press often claimed to “expose” communist influence in unions or painted strikers as a small minority of workers egged on by “outside agitators” against the wishes of the majority.\textsuperscript{186} Some coverage was dry and straight-ahead, with a focus on political machinations within unions and the political strategy of industrial relations. Some coverage, even in mainstream publications, treated the CIO story favorably, as a compelling drama.

The new unions worked aggressively to shape their publicity. Nearly all CIO affiliates had on staff a former newspaper journalist who knew how to write slick copy and attract press attention, and unions made strategic use of radio at both the national and local level. The CIO’s chief public voice in the mid- to late 1930s was its president, John L. Lewis, who was quoted frequently in the daily press and delivered a series of national radio speeches in which he claimed to speak for “labor” as a whole. As Lewis and other elites argued, the power of the CIO’s claim to represent workers grew from the work of

non-elite actors as well as elite actors. Rank-and-file worker-actor struggle supported the claims of the CIO’s leaders and publicity operation, which in turn shaped the meaning of that struggle at the elite level. The predominant frame put forward by the CIO mirrored and reinforced the anti-elite rhetoric coming out of the New Deal (and from figures farther to the left). “The organization and constant onward sweep of [the CIO] exemplifies the resentment of the many toward the selfishness, greed and the neglect of the few,” John L. Lewis insisted in a 1937 speech.187

In understanding contemporary discourse on organized labor, it is important to stress that contemporaries responded not only to labor’s immediate, concrete achievements, but also to what it might achieve in the future. The CIO, journalist C. L. Sulzberger wrote in 1938, “was the militant voice of the workers, the guide to the unorganized, a movement whose implied threat of power was beyond immediate measure.”188 As much as anything, it was its “implied threat of power” that made the CIO so important in contemporary discourse. Nearly all journalistic and intellectual work on organized labor dealt in some form with the question of how far the workers might go, what the unrest stirring across the country might portend. As the next section details, some saw an entirely transformed society as more than possible.

“Labor on the March”: Union Militancy and (White) Working Class Representation

Leftists often saw the industrial union struggles of the 1930s as the beginnings of a sustained working class radicalism. The New Deal and the CIO, in this view, were key

initial stages in the left’s struggle to gain working class support.\textsuperscript{189} Leftists differed on the kind of transformation they wanted, but many believed that workers would ultimately go beyond the modest, reformist goals unions initially sought (the right to collective bargaining, higher wages). The gains made by workers and unions would continue, in this view, and workers’ political consciousness would grow. As inaugural CIO publicity director Len De Caux (a journalist pushed out for radical affiliations during the late 1940s Red Scare) recalled, the “working class became a concept to conjure with when newly organizing millions seemed to promise a movement capable of transforming society.”\textsuperscript{190} Sympathetic observers used a persistent phrase to describe the trajectory of those “millions”: “labor on the march.”

This section examines imagery of an onward-marching, militant working class as it emerged from liberal and radical labor journalism. It is important to stress that the lines between liberal and left in this period were blurry and were not strictly policed. The drive to create a liberalism purged of any association with the radical left did not begin in earnest until the late 1940s. In the 1930s in particular, radical reporting and radical opinions appeared consistently in most left-of-center publications, including the liberal \textit{Nation} and \textit{New Republic}. While this work does not fit as neatly under the umbrella of “elite public discourse” as the reporting in the \textit{New York Times}, left/liberal journalism was known to observers outside of radical left circles.

\textsuperscript{189} As Communist Party head Earl Browder argued, the CIO “expresses in all fields a process which may be described as the birth of the American working class as an independent and conscious force.” To be sure, it lacked “full maturity,” and its political role was “far from being fully developed; it is only taking shape,” but it represented a tremendous step forward, in this view. Earl Browder, “The Communists in the People’s Front,” report delivered to the Plenary Meeting of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, USA, held June 17-20, 1937 (New York: Workers Library Publishers, 1937).

\textsuperscript{190} De Caux, \textit{Labor Radical}, 273.
For liberal and leftist journalists, the archetypical imagery of an onward-marching 1930s working class emerged from strikes and labor conflict. Strikes took center stage in liberal publications like the *Nation* and *New Republic*, in radical outlets like *New Masses* and *Partisan Review*, and in the book-length accounts of sympathetic labor journalists, including Charles Rumford Walker’s *American City* (1937), Mary Heaton Vorse’s *Labor’s New Millions* (1938), Edward Levinson’s *Labor on the March* (1938), and Benjamin Stolberg’s *The Story of the CIO* (1938). Strikes offered obvious manifestations of class conflict—violent combat between workers and police or employers’ hired thugs—and solidarity, as workers marched together, ate together, and fought together. Left/liberal labor reporting spotlighted both, treating them as (in one chronicler’s words) “expressive of the class awakening, of a mass soul in birth.”

The chief theme in left/liberal labor reporting is the collective unity and power exerted by scores of workers standing up for their rights. “Jesus, we got some power, us workers, when we make up our mind to use it,” as one worker-actor quoted by a journalist put it. That power was evident in the huge numbers unions mobilized, in their coordination, bravery, and unity. This account of a Detroit march led by the United Auto Workers (UAW) is typical:

The workers arrived in tens of thousands. They packed Cadillac Square, and overflowed down the side streets. It was estimated that there were 150,000. But they maintained perfect order. Bursts of song came from them. *Now the Boss Is Shivering in His Shoes, Parlez-Vous*, and again, *The Star Spangled Banner*, followed by *Solidarity*…The crowd was always in gentle motion, adding new groups of workers with their banners flowing through the crowd like a river in a sea. Huge slogans moved perpetually through the people: *G.M.—Chrysler—Ford*

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In this passage, “the crowd” and “the workers” seem to have an agency all their own; individual actors are absorbed into the collective (“new groups…flowing through the crowd like a river in a sea”). The collective is simultaneously calm (“perfect order…gentle motion”) and threatening, at least for the boss “shivering in his shoes.” Workers were not looking for a fight, in this framework, but they were not afraid of anything they might face.

Reporters explicitly depicted—and at times, celebrated—violence between strikers and employers’ forces. With makeshift weapons, workers displayed incredible bravery in the face of police brutality, in these accounts. “Thousands of workers, many women among them, came with squared jaws to take their places” on the picket line, the New York Post’s Edward Levinson reported from Flint. “Men and women carried clubs and stout sticks; several had crowbars, stove pokers, and lengths of pipe. A few had knocked the base off clothes-trees, and carried the poles, with metal hangers, on their shoulders.” Levinson positioned the strikers as heirs of the American revolution; like “the Minute Men of ’76…[and] as fully determined that their cause was righteous, they had seized whatever weapon lay at hand and rushed off to do battle.”194 Journalists made explicit the consequences of workers’ bravery and the brutality of their adversaries. “They flowed directly into that buckshot fire, inevitably, without hesitation…And the cops let them have it as they picked up their wounded,” Meridel Le Sueur reported from

193 Mary Heaton Vorse, Labor’s New Millions (Concord, NH: Modern Age Books, 1938), 95.
194 Edward Levinson, Labor on the March (reprint Ithaca: ILR Press, 1995), 165. The New York Post was at the time one of the most liberal daily newspapers in the United States.
Minneapolis. “Lines of living, solid men, fell, broke, wavering, flinging up, breaking over with the curious and awful abandon of despairing gestures, a man stepping on his own intestines…another holding his severed arm in his other hand.”195 “The class line was drawn in blood on the streets of the city,” the Nation’s James Rorty wrote.196 These stark depictions of violence against strikers were intended to draw sympathy for workers and condemnation towards the employers and authorities responsible. As one unionist explained, “Often there is nothing that throws as bright a spotlight on the sufferings and unrest of the workingman as a flareup of violence. The worker is not news when he quietly starves.”197

Radical labor reporting’s focus on battle also reflected a broader understanding of working class militancy in a masculinist idiom: the same strength that allowed workingmen to perform hard physical work prepared them to stand against their adversaries. Some in Pennsylvania steel country cited a mythical, Paul Bunyan-esque steelworker named Joe Magarac, “made of steel all the way through” and seen as “the symbol of the men who have long been masters of metal and fire and machinery, and who only recently began to be masters of their own lives.”198 But reporters also emphasized the strength of working class communities broadly, the organization and collaboration required to keep the strikers fed and the bosses under pressure. “Between four and five thousand persons ate at strike headquarters and slept in or near it for the strike’s duration,” Charles Rumford Walker reported from Minneapolis. “Fourteen or

fifteen hours of the day they were on the picket line, while at night they listened to the news of the strike, the status of negotiations, the bosses’ latest move.”199 While women were at times featured in supporting roles, they also consistently appeared as direct participants in the battle—wielding potato mashers against gun-wielding deputies, braving tear gas to get food to sit-down strikers, walking picket lines and coordinating picketing.

The work of Mary Heaton Vorse offers a model example of the kind of journalism practiced by leftwing correspondents. Vorse was a fearless reporter who witnessed much of the iconic labor history of the 1930s firsthand as a freelance correspondent for the *New Republic* and Federated Press (a labor-left wire service created as an alternative to the Associated Press). Her reporting in this period—most notably her 1938 book *Labor’s New Millions*—told the story of the rise of the CIO as an upsurge of rank-and-file heroism, with individual “struggles” treated “not as isolated conflicts but as part of a great forward thrust.” “The C.I.O., with its form of industrial unionism, its dynamic leadership, was an answer to the unspoken wish which had existed in the hearts of literally millions of workers,” Vorse wrote in a passage that might be read as a thesis. “Labor’s new millions” believed that “it is the function of good government to promote the welfare of people, rather than that of the small class whose one aim is profits,” and they were quickly gaining the power to make that vision of government a reality.200

Vorse, like other like-minded journalists, consistently depicted violence in very stark terms. “Piled on top of each other in [a] patrol wagon were sixteen dying and

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seriously wounded,” she reported from Youngstown, Ohio. “They lay every which way, on top of each other. They couldn’t stand, they couldn’t sit. The blood dripped upon the floor of the wagon.” A striker tried to help a dying man, who “made a gesture that he wanted to smoke. She searched in his pockets to try to find his cigarettes, but they were soaked in blood.” One critic surmised that Vorse had an “eighth sense” for where and when strikes and violent confrontations would take place. More likely, though, she relied on correspondence with organizers and local union officials, with all involved keenly aware of the strategic value of depicting brutal violence against workers. One Pittsburgh unionist, for instance, gave Vorse names to contact for an unspecified “blood curdling” story and proposed a “Black Legion story which can be made sensational. New strategy of attacking it, forcing big shot provocations into the open is in the making…Story in it sure.” In a separate skirmish, Vorse herself was wounded when a bullet grazed the side of her head, and a newspaper picture of her with “blood streaming down [her] face,” Vorse’s agent wrote her, had “all New York…buzzing.”

Undeterred, Vorse described the injury to her daughter as “the merest scratch.”

Though Vorse’s agent at times stressed her “completely objective” view in pitching stories—making a living writing for leftist and liberal publications on a freelance basis was a constant struggle—Vorse in much of her reporting was unapologetic about her own sympathies. When apprehended by authorities, she dared them to “Kill me, if

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201 Ibid., 123.
203 Hugh Wing to Vorse, n. d., box 63, folder “July-August 1936,” Mary Heaton Vorse Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI (hereafter cited as “Vorse Papers”). The Black Legion was a white supremacist terrorist group analogous to and split off from the Ku Klux Klan, frequently involved in violent clashes with labor and left forces.
204 Ruth Aley to Vorse, June 22 1937, box 63, folder “1937 – June,” Vorse Papers.
205 Vorse to Ellen, June 1937, box 63, folder “1937- June,” Vorse Papers.
you are not too yellow, I would rather die a martyr fighting for Democracy under the flag of the Socialist party and the C. I. O. than to ever turn traitor.”

Her bravery and sympathy for labor’s cause won Vorse’s work a very warm reception from union leaders and left/liberal publications. “A vast movement such as that which is embodied in the Committee for Industrial Organization has epic connotations whose spirit you have caught admirably,” John L. Lewis wrote to her in a letter of thanks. Another unionist praised Labor’s New Millions as “one of the most outstanding contributions to the labor movement on the North American Continent.” Others more suspicious of the CIO, though, found Vorse’s focus on its heroism off-putting. As one blunt reviewer put it, “The whole thing is pictured as a mighty uprising of labor’s millions. It is a folk movement, a crusade. The leaders are idealized. The followers multiply as they come one million treading on another’s heels. The writer is like a child watching a circus parade.”

This review, however uncharitable, called out a very real feature of radical labor reporting: while it drew labor leaders as dynamic personalities, it treated rank-and-file workers as anonymous. The protagonists were “the workers,” not individual workers. “This book has no hero or heroes; it is a story of the rank and file,” UAW-affiliated reporter Henry Kraus began his account of the Flint strike. Radical labor reporters typically gave rank-and-file workers’ names only if they were killed in the struggle (not, 206 Vorse, Labor’s New Millions, 150.
207 John L. Lewis to Vorse, June 3, 1938, box 64, folder “1938 – June,” Vorse Papers.
208 Harold Pritchett to Vorse, July 18, 1938, box 65, folder “1938-July 15-31,” Vorse Papers.
210 These examples from Vorse’s work are typical: “John L. Lewis made his first C. I. O. speech for the rubber workers and it helped put courage into them for their battle…[Harry] Bridges, lean, impatient, is a passionate believer in the voice of the rank and file.” Labor’s New Millions, 5, 219.
for instance, if they were quoted). Further, while some treated the rank and file as intellectually gifted and perceptive, for many chroniclers, workers’ heroism drew on a strong and single-minded devotion to basic truths: as Kraus put it, “an immense collective unity and power based on simple loyalty to group interest.” In this framework, workers did not need a deep understanding of politics; they needed to understand that they were workers and that their interests were with the union.

To be sure, some argued that workers did desire a deep understanding of politics. Vorse, for instance, saw an almost superhuman intellectual curiosity motivating a “steady drive from beneath, by the rank and file…for more workers’ education”: “What the workers want to know about most is the economic side of the world they live in…They want courses in economics, the history of the labor movement, industrial situations, government, economic history, legislation, community problems…parliamentary law…and social philosophy.” More often, though, radical labor reporting featured workers advancing leftist slogans in dialect or broken English. “It’s a state of war—capital agin labor,” a Toledo worker exhorted his cohorts. Meridel Le Sueur, reporting from Minneapolis, reproduced a letter from a striker to his girlfriend (“dere emily”) that exemplifies the untutored radicalism of this idealized worker:

Here i am at strike head 1/4 an its plenty hot. Hell emily i bin thinkin the last few days. theze here bosses we got in town keep yellin in the papers and over there radios that communism and payin 54 1/2 [cents] an hour is one an the same thing. well if thats what communism is, why i gess I’m a Communist an I expec most evry one in the world excep a small bunch of potbellyd and titefisted bosses must

212 Ibid., 293.
213 Vorse, Labor’s New Millions, 226.
be to.\textsuperscript{215} Not only has the striker begun to consider communism, in a common trope, the experience of the strike has brought him around to that position (“i bin thinkin the last few days”). Here the boundaries between authenticity, normativity, and inferiority become very porous.

The connection between the working class and the body, so evident in radical depictions of workers marching and fighting, reflected an often-stigmatizing understanding of working class life which leftists did not escape. Both radicals and conservatives might define working class culture as visceral and physical, in opposition to the intellectual and rational culture of the professional class. For Le Sueur, a novelist and journalist recognized as one of the leading “proletarian writers” of the period, the working class world was a welcome contrast to her own origins. “I do not care for the bourgeois ‘individual’ that I am,” Le Sueur explained: while she had been born into the bourgeoisie, she sought to be “born whole out of it.” Despite her radical views, she experienced a jarring transition “stepping into a dark chaotic passional world of another class, the proletariat…stirring, strange, and outside the calculated, expedient world of the bourgeoisie.” Le Sueur called on middle class readers, for whom “words are likely to mean more than an event,” to recognize that if “you are to understand anything [from the proletarian perspective] you must understand it in the muscular event, an action we have not been trained for.”\textsuperscript{216} This is an archetypical example of what historian Grace Hale

\textsuperscript{215} Meridel Le Sueur, “What Happens in a Strike,” \textit{American Mercury}, November 1934.

calls the “romance of the outsider”\textsuperscript{217}—a common set of tropes in which professional-class people imagine underprivileged people to have a more immediate, gratifying, sensual life. In many such cases, an obvious investment in the wellbeing of the “outsider” tends to be accompanied by an ascription of inferiority. Le Sueur does not prize workers for their ability to think or verbalize.

The “romance of the outsider” is not so evident in the discourse of CIO leaders, who tended to be from working class families and did not view outsider status as their ultimate goal. But the frame preferred by those to their left—the labor movement as a great forward march of ordinary people standing up to power and asserting their right to justice and control over their lives—was also advanced by CIO elites. “No strength will suffice to curb the onward march of American labor,” John L. Lewis insisted in a 1937 speech. “The workers of America are aroused. They are conscious of their rights and their privileges and they intend to secure them.”\textsuperscript{218} In the 1930s, CIO officials sometimes framed violent combat as part of labor’s struggle. They largely shied away from doing so thereafter, however. Aside from a few holdouts, business elites largely accepted by the late 1930s that hardline opposition to unionization (attempting to break strikes by bringing in law enforcement, hiring replacement labor, and beating up strikers) was no longer a workable option. As a result, worker-actors did not need to face down violence just to force employers to recognize the union, as they had in the most famous strikes of the period. Celebrating picket line militancy also gave off a whiff of radicalism that became extremely dangerous for unions over the course of the 1940s.

\textsuperscript{217} Grace Elizabeth Hale, \textit{A Nation of Outsiders} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

\textsuperscript{218} John L. Lewis, “Labor and the Supreme Court,” address delivered on CBS Radio, May 14, 1937, reel one, Lewis Papers.
Ultimately, though, in order for the “labor on the march” frame to apply, the workers did not need to be moving toward the radical left. The CIO built a close alliance with the Democratic Party in the late 1930s and early 1940s, which helped to create a strong link in elite public discourse between workers’ political goals and the agenda of the Democrats. By the late 1940s, most of the radical-leaning officials in CIO unions had been pushed out, but traces of left’s militant worker remained. Shortly after his election as United Auto Workers (UAW) president in 1947, Walter Reuther roused listeners in passionate terms: “We are the vanguard in America in that great crusade to build a better world. We are the architects of the future, and we are going to fashion the weapons with which we will work and fight and build.” Reuther, who had campaigned promising to take a hard line on communists in the union, drew on powerful imagery associated with the tradition he sought to expel.

Union leadership and the Democrats put forward what might be read as a reined-in version of the left’s onward-marching, militant worker. In this framework, workers’ gains would be beneficial to all but a selfish few. They would “lead…a national movement devoted to the general welfare just as much as to the particular interests of labor groups,” as CIO president Philip Murray put it in 1944. Most importantly, in this

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219 CIO officials recognized that their success was dependent upon favorable legislation and that they could draw on Roosevelt’s popularity to appeal to the rank-and-file; organized labor could mobilize voters for the Democrats, provide campaign workers, offer financial support for liberal candidates, and help the Democratic Party stave off challenges from the left. On the CIO-Democratic party alliance, see e.g. Fraser, Labor Will Rule; Boyle, Organized Labor and American Politics; James Caldwell Foster, “The Union Politic: The CIO Political Action Committee” (Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1972); Fay Calkins, The CIO and the Democratic Party (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952).


framework, they would accomplish their goals within the contours of the formal political system and through their union representatives. 1940s CIO materials suggested one primary way for a worker to be a force for progress: becoming a reliable Democratic voter. A suggestive CIO poster of the early 1940s depicts a muscular white arm placing a ballot into a ballot box. The text reads, “The ballot is a power in your hands. Use it—and you help to secure good government. Fail to use it—and you score for the other side. Your vote is the key to your freedom.”

The view of the progressive worker as a Democratic voter was most clearly embodied in the CIO Political Action Committee, founded in 1943. CIO-PAC was tasked with registering worker-actors to vote and educating the rank and file about politics. The CIO’s opponents seized on CIO-PAC as evidence that labor wanted to take over American democracy by delivering a bloc of voters marching in lockstep, “an attempt…by high-powered pressure groups to seize the people’s government from the majority of the people.” While CIO officials rejected this view and insisted that they did not control a “bloc” vote, they did at times frame the labor vote as a homogenous

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progressive force. CIO president Philip Murray touted PAC as “a mighty force devoted to keeping the great majority of Americans vigilant and alert in guarding their proper political interests”; CIO-PAC leader Jack Kroll promised that in order to “defeat its enemies,” labor would “get out 60,000,000 votes.” The use of war analogies in reference to electoral politics suggests the mainstreaming of the militant worker ideal.

By the end of the 1940s (see Chapter 2), only a handful of radicals believed there was any chance that workers would support a politics to the left of the Roosevelt-Truman Democratic Party. Nonetheless, the view of union workers as a reliable liberal vote survived until the mid-1960s, when white worker-actor support for backlash politicians made it no longer credible (see Chapter 3). Ironically, though, portrayals of the white working class as the vanguard of white backlash bear a distinct resemblance to the imagery of “labor on the march.” In each case, (white) workers act as a homogenous group, marching the nation towards a changed politics.

Resistance to the Progressive Worker

It’s useful to conclude this chapter by spotlighting discourse that does not fit the dominant trajectory of the period—the growing association between white workers and progressive politics. While the view that the majority of (white) workers opposed liberalism was a minority view in this period, it was not an insignificant one. Many observers argued that optimistic liberals and leftists read too much into the events of the decade; workers might support modest reforms that would raise their standard of living,

but they were not motivated by ideology. Prominent arguments among conservatives held that “honest” workers understood that labor leaders were not their friends and that liberalism harmed the interests of deserving workers in favor of the undeserving. The purpose of this section is not to undercut or contradict the larger argument of the chapter, but to nuance its triumphalist tone and provide a brief sketch of alternative views in New Deal-era elite discourse.

The most prominent elite-level rebuttal to the assumption that (white) workers would be consistently progressive in their politics followed on the longstanding commonplace of American exceptionalism: the vast majority of Americans remained individualistic and moderate in their politics. Particularly in the years most marked by labor struggle, centrist and right-leaning periodicals often reassured readers that the nation was still overwhelmingly “middle class.” While “class consciousness…has been read into” developments like the rise of the CIO, one 1937 New York Times article explained, what “one finds…as one goes about the country is evidence that we are still overwhelmingly a middle-class nation…There are no signs whatever [whatsoever] that the huge middle class layer is being crushed between the plutocracy and the proletariat.”

Industrial workers, contemporaries argued, were overwhelmingly “middle class” as well. Workers wanted to be treated fairly as individuals; they did not want a fundamentally different system. New York Times labor reporter Louis Stark reported from the Flint sit-down auto strikes that the workers “would be well satisfied with a

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workable plan of collective bargaining…The American worker is middle class in his viewpoint and outlook, not revolutionary.” Sociologist Alfred Winslow Jones led a 1941 interview-based study seeking to uncover “to what extent the American people have preserved the sameness of economic viewpoint that we may assume existed in the early days”—in other words, whether Americans’ “middle class” outlook was only a product of the relative equality found in small rural communities. Jones concluded that the same perspective survived in industrial society: “The workers do not want to be set off as a class apart, and if the agencies of public opinion were to attempt to set them off, the result would be nothing but resentment.” In this view, liberals and leftists who expected anything more than basic reform (e.g. the right to bargain collectively, social insurance for old age or disability) had projected their own hopes onto workers.

Some conservatives drew on the notion that workers wanted a middle-class life above all to suggest that a significant portion of the working and non-elite population was out of sympathy with liberalism. To be clear, these elite voices were not representative of conservative discourse as a whole. As labor and liberalism gained momentum, many conservatives expressed deep pessimism about the purchase liberal ideas had gained. In fatalistic terms, they figured themselves as part of a thinking minority overcome by a tide of mass emotion and demagoguery and predicted that liberals could maintain power indefinitely simply by giving voters goodies from the public purse. Taken as a group,

227 Alfred Winslow Jones, Life, Liberty, and Property (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1941), 19, 349. Another typical articulation of this view came from an AFL-affiliated labor journalist who flatly rejected the view that “Labor is a class”: “It would be hard to convince an American locomotive engineer who owns his own home, perhaps some shares of stock in a good company, and whose son is studying in college, that he belongs to the proletariat…American workers just do not think in those terms.” Chester Wright, Here Comes Labor (New York: Macmillan, 1939), 2.
though, conservative elites did not abandon the notion that they possessed (or could gain) majority support.

One common argument held that liberals had not achieved majority support at all—rather, they had gained power by catering to the self-interest and greed of minorities at the expense of the majority. A range of conservatives, from business circles to rural Christian circles, gravitated to a frame opposing idle and selfish minority constituencies to a modest self-sufficient middle-income majority. Publisher Frank Gannett hoped to assemble “a great middle-class bloc…[of] thrifty, frugal, hard-working, self-respecting and God-fearing men and women who built America” to oppose the liberals’ constituencies, “the slackers, the shirkers, the incompetent, and the unfortunate.”228 "The great body of normal, uncomplaining, hard-working, thrifty, self-sustaining, and somewhat self-satisfied Americans,” “the great economic middle class…[that has] worked and saved to secure the homes, farms, insurance policies and savings which build and sustain the productivity of this country,” “the great middle class…given little political attention save as the source of taxes, the supplier of funds, the producer of votes”: these were the true victims of New Dealism, in this framework.229 In most accounts, this “great middle class” included skilled workers alongside professionals, small businessmen, and farmers. Though it comprised the vast majority, the middle-income constituency was not vocal, in this view, and a left catering to the less deserving had ignored its interests.

Particularly symbolic of this line of argumentation were efforts to reclaim the symbol of the “forgotten man” from liberals. Figuring white workers as “forgotten” is one of the most notable recurring devices in the long history of white working class representation. Gilded Age social theorist William Graham Sumner coined the term to valorize the quiet, deserving, productive member of society, defined against the idle poor. When Roosevelt adopted it in 1932, promising economic policy built around the needs of the “forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid,” it came to mean any underprivileged American. In response, conservatives who knew the original context cried foul and attempted to return the term to its earlier meaning. Yale professor A. G. Keller, a former student of Sumner’s, argued that the New Dealers had “pervert[ed]” the term, applying it to the “willing or eager, and always whining, parasite on society who possesses no social virtues such as thrift, industry, fairness, self-respect, and honor,” the “whiner, who is never forgotten because he is so constantly dinned into the ear.” The true forgotten man, Keller suggested, was not a “pauper” or “a member of the proletariat.” Rather, he was the self-sufficient “tax-paying consumer” who “asks no favors. He makes no trouble. He emits no squeals. He marches no marches on Washington nor maintains a lobby there.” He simply wanted “to be let alone.”

“The type and formula of most schemes of philanthropy or humanitarianism is this: A and B put their heads together to decide what C must be made to do for D….C is not allowed a voice in the matter, and his position, character and interests, as well as the ultimate effects on society, through C’s interests, are entirely overlooked. I call C the Forgotten Man...The Forgotten Man and the Forgotten Woman are the real productive strength of the country. The Forgotten Man works and votes—generally he prays—but his chief business in life is to pay...Anyone who cares for the Forgotten Man will be sure to be considered a friend of the capitalist and an enemy of the poor man.” In *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1883).

“the whiner...constantly dinned into the ear” is A. G. Keller, “The Discoverer of the Forgotten Man,” *American Mercury*, November 1932; all others A. G. Keller, “Keller Sees Sumner As Anti-New Dealer,” *Washington Post*, November 1, 1936. See also Keller, “Forgotten Man’s Task is to Pray Some, Pay
This is the same basic claim that would underlie appeals to Middle America several decades later: A deserving middle-income cultural mainstream (or “silent majority,” as Richard Nixon would call it) had seen its political influence eclipsed by vocal minorities. There is also an ironic resonance in this discourse with the enduring argument that liberals direct specific appeals to individual minority groups rather than appealing to a universal national interest. This argument is not a product of the age of “identity politics” as conventionally understood—the period after the 1960s and 1970s. It is evident in response to New Deal efforts to make the government more responsive to nondominant groups (including white workers, who are now usually identified as those left out when liberals pursue “identity politics”).

The chief difference lies in the groups held to constitute the mainstream and the margins. Here (unlike in the 1960s) a substantial proportion of the white working population was relegated to the margins. One of the major minorities held to be seeking control over national politics was organized labor, and conservatives who spoke for a silenced mainstream were often reaffirming older understandings of that mainstream centered on a self-sufficient Protestant middle class. “Clean,” “sober,” “thrifty,” “industrious”: the adjectives applied to liberalism’s victims were longstanding signifiers of white Protestant masculinity. Excluded were “peasants and parasites” or (more

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232 “The trouble with this recognition of the class war is that it spreads like a grease stain and every group formed around a special and selfish interest demands the same sort of recognition,” one conservative Democrat complained of the Roosevelt administration. In such a system, the role of government became “the mere tossing of tubs to each whale as it grows bold enough to stick its head out of the water.” The framework opposes a presumed universal interest to “special and selfish” interests. Organized workers, for many, stood outside that presumed universal interest. Newton Baker, a former Wilson administration official, in William Leuchtenberg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 178.
explicitly) “the poor Pole…the illiterate Italian.” To be sure, it would be inaccurate to frame the argument as pure nativism—Al Smith, the 1928 Democratic presidential nominee and the first Catholic nominee of a major party, objected to the New Deal on similar terms, and explicitly nativist criticism declined over the course of the 1930s.

At bottom, in this framework, the key economic division pitted responsible against irresponsible rather than rich against nonrich. “The dividing line runs not between Capital and Labor, but between the kind of Labor that works and saves, and the kind that doesn’t,” one conservative put it. Thrift, prosperity, and upward mobility were indicators of virtue, in this view, while poverty was not. It was bad politics and bad policy to condemn someone for having more. A thrifty and responsible skilled worker would see his interests as aligned with the interests of his employer more readily than with the interests of his irresponsible fellow-worker. In this framework, a conservative did not need to be wealthy, but merely needed to have more to lose than gain from irresponsible change. “Very often the smaller the amount of property the voter owns the more intense is his conservatism,” columnist Frank Kent emphasized in a compelling piece titled “America Is Conservative.” Kent contended that “the common characteristic of all conservatives is that they have something—at least a little money or property,

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234 Smith advanced this argument in a high-profile 1936 speech: “There are three classes of people in this country—the poor and the rich, and in between the two what has ever been referred to as the great backbone of America. That is the plain fellow, the fellow who makes up to $100 a month or up to five or six thousand a year. Forget the rich; they can’t pay this debt...This debt is going to be paid by that great big middle class we refer to as the backbone and rank and file.” Chesly Manly, “New Deal Fraud: Al Smith,” Chicago Tribune, January 26, 1936.
acquired through inheritance, or thrift, or plain hard work.”

In this view, liberals erred in assuming that all non-elite constituencies had common interests, or would see themselves as having common interests. Distinctions that appeared unimportant from afar—that one worker had a little money saved, while another did not—were vitally important.

A related line of argumentation held that most workers recognized that unions and union leaders did not have their best interests at heart. Especially by the 1940s, those who sought to stem the growth of organized labor’s power often claimed to be defending the rights of the individual worker against mandatory union membership (the “closed shop”) and malfeasance in the union hierarchy. It was deeply unjust, in this view, for workers to be forced to give up a portion of their wages to the union, and for the union to take up political activity its members did not endorse. In this context, antimonopoly language typically directed at employers could be repurposed as a rebuke of labor leaders. “The American working man has been deprived of his dignity as an individual. He has been cajoled, coerced, intimidated and on many occasions beaten up…His whole economic life has been subject to the complete domination and control of unregulated monopolists,” read a 1940s Republican House committee report.

Unionism in itself was reasonable and necessary, in this line of argumentation, but thugs and opportunists posing as friends of the worker could easily seize power.

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One of the most zealous conservative defenders of the worker victimized by unions was syndicated columnist Westbrook Pegler, whose exposés of union corruption and organized crime involvement in the late 1930s and early 1940s drew considerable attention. Pegler believed that “the honest American workingman needs a labor union to protect him from the greed of his employer,” but he maintained that unions could victimize “honest” workers just as much. “It is bad when the honest workman is spied upon and denied his human rights by agents of a soulless corporation,” Pegler argued. “But it is at least that bad, if not worse, when he is spied upon, robbed of his earnings and coerced into strikes by men who cleverly appear to be acting in the interest of the oppressed.” Union leaders—“parasite incompetents who live by their unionism”—enriched themselves at the expense of the workers they viewed as unthinking “robots.”

Most workers were not “orators or parliamentarians,” Pegler emphasized; they did not have the publicity skills of the “smart professionals” who staffed the union hierarchy. Even though many to most workers inwardly dissented from labor-liberalism, for Pegler, their views went unheard in public discourse because they had been rendered “voiceless” by unions.239

Pegler’s description of rank-and-file workers as “voiceless” has an odd resonance with the claims of the most famous voice of organized labor in the period, John L. Lewis. “The workers are still inarticulate,” Lewis told a journalist in 1938. “They are incapable of influencing Congress, industry or anyone else.” The mission of Lewis and the CIO

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was to exert influence on their behalf: “I speak for millions of the inarticulate workers of the United States”… “My voice tonight will be the voice of millions of men and women employed in America’s industries, heretofore unorganized, economically exploited and inarticulate.” For Pegler, Lewis and his cohort rendered workers voiceless; for Lewis, they were voiceless without organization. Both spotlighted the mechanisms by which labor and liberals claimed to represent a mass constituency. This chapter has sought to do the same—and in doing so, to provide an alternative angle on some of the best-remembered events in the history of the US white working class.

**Conclusion**

In the 1920s, the dominant elite-level views of the majority and the American worker were unfavorable to liberal politics, this chapter has argued; they stressed the middle-income lifestyle most Americans, including workers, enjoyed and valued. In the 1930s and 1940s, liberals and leftists championed a new understanding of the majority with urban industrial workers at its center. (White) workers, especially industrial workers, were symbolic of the need for American politics to move beyond the antistatist traditions it had inherited. The insecurity industrial workers faced, their inability to secure decent lives through their own agency, underscored the need for dramatic changes in government to meet the changes brought by industrial capitalism, for liberals. Industrial workers—from the striker charging into battle with makeshift weapons to the

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worker voting a straight Democratic ticket—were also symbolic of the immense political force that disenfranchised Americans could assert when they recognized their power. In the newly dominant elite view, workers and the public at large had turned away from business leadership in favor of liberals, organized labor, and the activist state.

From the perspective of a study of white working class representation, it is important to stress that the association between the white working class and progressive politics had a great deal to do with the progressive elites and institutions speaking on behalf of workers in elite public discourse. There is no question that the changes in elite public discourse owed in part to worker-actors putting their bodies on the line. However, few of those worker-actors had any influence over the way elites interpreted their actions. Progressive views among white worker-actors were mostly obscured at the elite level in the 1920s because there was no institution powerful enough to highlight them there. In the 1930s, the rise of powerful elite-level political forces speaking for workers from a progressive perspective produced the appearance of a rapid shift to the left. Changes at the level of elite public discourse are often rapid and sharp; micro-level changes are rarely so fast or neat.

How elites saw workers as a political constituency—what they believed, which elite-level voices could be taken as their representatives—changed in this period, and changed for the long term. Industrialists who had once pressed strong claims to represent workers were now defined as their antagonists. Until the 1960s, liberal politicians and labor leaders exerted the strongest claim to speak for (white) workers at the elite level. By the same logic, nonliberal views among white worker-actors were obscured (to a degree)
as a result. In particular, it is difficult to overstate how deeply unions shaped dominant views of (white) working class political consciousness at the height of their power: contemporaries often spoke about the views and interests of “workers” as interchangeable with the interests of unions. At their midcentury peak, unions represented roughly a third of the national workforce.

The same discourse that altered elite understandings of the American worker limited the scope of the liberal intervention. Industrialists and industrialism were so central to left/liberal understandings of the political challenges before the nation that other sources of power received comparatively little emphasis. The image of the average working American remained centered on the male worker and the patriarchal family. When it expanded to include eastern and southern Europeans, African Americans were excluded. It is important to stress, though, that liberals’ claims appear significantly more limited from the standpoint of twenty-first century elite discourse than they generally did from the standpoint of 1930s and 1940s elite discourse. For a number of supporters and opponents, what was at stake was nothing less than a transformation of American political life. The association between (white) workers and progressive politics developed in a period where the dominant debates within elite public discourse centered on economics narrowly understood—the role of unions, capital, and the state in an industrial society. When the problem of inequality was defined narrowly around those issues, the (white male industrial) worker in need of security was clearly a symbol of change, even stark change. When the discourse changed, that was no longer the case.
In the late 1940s and 1950s, that worker remained a symbol of change, but it was a different kind of change—a transformation of American capitalism, led by both business and labor, into a tool for equality and broadly distributed prosperity. As Chapter 2 will stress, liberal successes challenged and altered the commonplace that America is a middle class country, but that commonplace remained powerful. It was entirely compatible with a labor/liberal politics that enabled individuals to better their economic position and allowed a greater percentage of the population to reach middle-income status. Between the late 1940s and mid-1950s, depictions of poverty and economic disadvantage among working whites almost entirely disappeared from elite public discourse. The newly dominant view held that labor-liberal gains and prodigious post-World War II economic growth had raised nearly all white workers into the middle class. These developments fundamentally changed the politics of white working class representation, and that is where Chapter 2 turns.
Coda: The (White) Worker as a Latent Progressive Force

A longstanding commonplace about 1930s and 1940s culture and politics holds that liberals and leftists romanticized white workers, treating them as virtuous and politically perceptive. That claim was made at the time\(^{241}\) and has appeared consistently in historical work since. Notable works on the 1930s describe “the laboring of American culture”; “a fascination with the folk and its culture, past and present”; a tendency “to romanticize the intuitive knowledge of the ‘people,’ to decide that the common man was really wiser and closer to ‘reality’ than those with formal education.”\(^{242}\) “Few public figures questioned…whether average Americans were too apathetic or confused about the sources of their collective problems to take up the burden of solving them,” Michael Kazin writes.\(^{243}\) In a common declension narrative, liberals’ idealized view of white workers in the 1930s gave way to a disdainful and condemnatory view in the 1950s, 1960s, and after.

This commonplace captures an identifiable strain of left culture and opinion, but it is misleading if left to stand on its own. Most of all, it misses the extent to which 1930s and 1940s liberals and leftists expressed sharp concern about the current political

\(^{241}\) In a 1935 book, for instance, liberal Alfred Bingham disputed what he saw as the dominant view among his contemporaries, that the radical movement could be founded on trade unions. “The factory worker is given every virtue,” he complained; this “glorification of the manual worker” even extended to “the enshrining of the beefy biceps of the iron-puddler or miner as a symbol.” In a 1947 essay, anticommunist liberal Arthur Schlesinger Jr. chided contemporaries for their “worship of the proletariat”; for Schlesinger, the “mystique of the proletariat” was a “myth…to which the liberal has clung in the face of experience with the imperturbable ardor of an early Christian.” Alfred Bingham, *Insurgent America* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1935), 12, 15; Arthur Schlesinger Jr. in “The Future of Socialism, III: The Perspective Now,” *Partisan Review* 14, no. 3 (1947): 236-237.


capabilities of (white) workers. That a liberal program benefited the vast majority of Americans was, for all liberals, obvious. To what extent they recognized this—and what role they might take in bringing about or implementing a new order—occasioned a much greater range of opinion. Left/liberal assessments of disadvantaged whites might be usefully understood as falling along a spectrum. On one end was a belief that they could act almost instinctively to bring about a better world (evident, for instance, in some of the radical strike reporting profiled in Chapter 1). At the other end was an understanding of poor whites as passive, beaten-down populations in need of an outside intervention to drag them towards responsibility or political consciousness. Most interpreters fell somewhere in the middle: if the majority of Americans were or would be basically progressive in their views, that majority was embryonic and could be easily led astray.

This coda section sketches out contemporary left/liberals’ concerns about current working class politics as well as their reasons for optimism about (white) workers’ future political trajectory. For many observers, (white) workers held tightly to dominant individualistic norms, were unable to see through misinformation in the media, and were apathetic and disengaged from political life. Some raised the possibility that white workers would be drawn to fascism. These concerns were tempered, though, by the ways in which contemporaries contextualized the views they saw as problematic. For many, the political impoverishment of underprivileged people could be ultimately attributed to the power of the dominant class. Many contended that (white) workers would develop a more progressive politics over time, particularly if reform gave them the opportunity to truly develop as human beings. What was broadly shared in left/liberal discourse, this
section suggests, was the view that white workers’ objective interests were progressive and that they were crucial to any political strategy.

**Teleology and (white) working class representation**

A deeply held majoritarianism could be reconciled with concern about the current intellectual and political capacity of laboring whites for one primary reason: those who put their faith in white workers as a revolutionary force or a progressive force did not need to believe that these workers had broken through the walls of the dominant ideology or had developed a fully-formed politics—only that they would or could do so in the future. The starting point for understanding this is the teleological framework central to left discourse in the period.

Belief in the “improvement” of underprivileged people was deeply rooted among left/liberal elites. As schools of thought based in Enlightenment traditions, Marxism and liberalism held to a firm faith in human progress and even perfectibility. Teleological language suffused leftist characterizations of working class politics—“primitive” or “elementary” forms of class action, “backward” or “advanced” workers, workers awakening (as from sleep) and learning. An emphasis on “improvement” also emerged as a direct response to the eugenicist view that individuals and groups possessed of bad genetics were inherently limited in their development. (The non-normative behavior of those belonging to ostensibly superior races—particularly poor rural Anglo-Saxon

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whites—could be understood using this framework, on the grounds that “feeble-mindedness,” slothfulness, promiscuity, and other negative traits were genetically heritable.\(^{245}\) The chief response to this school of thought emphasized that culture, circumstances, and environment shaped behavior and life outcomes far more than genetic endowment. As a result, if two individuals or groups had not been given the same opportunities, one could not be deemed inferior to the other: Very different environments would produce very different human beings. By the late 1930s, this culturalist explanation of group differences had become hegemonic among academics and intellectuals.

It was also a commonplace among early twentieth-century progressives and New Deal-era professional-class reformers that a life of hardship and lack of opportunity produced undesirable behavior. “Their ideas and resources are cramped,” Jane Addams wrote of new immigrant industrial workers in 1930. “The desire for higher social pleasure is extinct. They have no share in the traditions and social energy which make for progress. Too often their only place of meeting is a saloon, their only host a bartender; a local demagogue forms their public opinion.”\(^{246}\) The way to address these cultural and


\(^{246}\) Addams quoted in Gwendolyn Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 10. The separation of mental and physical labor inherent in industrial work, John Dewey argued in a similar formulation, yielded “a complete separation of mind and body” for workers, “and the result is a depressed body and an empty and distorted mind.” John Dewey, “Capitalistic or Public Socialism,” *New Republic*, March 5, 1930.
moral shortcomings was not to take punitive measures against underprivileged people, in this view, but to change the societal conditions that had shaped them in the first place. A major part of the rationale for social and economic reform was thus to create a system in which people who would otherwise be turned to pathology by their circumstances could live fulfilling and productive lives. As Bertrand Russell put it, “If it were indeed the case that bad nourishment, little education, lack of air and sunshine, unhealthy housing conditions, and overwork produce better people than are produced by good nourishment, open air, adequate education and housing, and a reasonable amount of leisure, the whole case for economic reconstruction would collapse.”

The clear moral distinction made here (“better people”) was very common in this period. In recent decades, elite discussions of poverty have often pivoted on the question of whether structural inequality or the culture of disadvantaged people is ultimately responsible. Those who judge culture most important tend to argue against state-led structural interventions. This opposition between culture and structure is a post-1960s phenomenon. In earlier decades, reformers calling for a structural intervention often pointed to cultural deficiencies among underprivileged people. Their pathological behavior served for reformers as evidence of their dire situation, not of any inherent inferiority or wrongdoing.

As a result, lurid depictions of poor whites were repeatedly deployed in projects that attempted to aid them. The most obvious example of this during the New Deal period centered on the plight of Southern sharecroppers, which became a major concern.

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in mid-1930s elite public discourse. In the dominant elite view, poor Southern whites were interested in fighting, fornicating, drinking, and not much else. In this view, as epitomized by journalist W. J. Cash, the “cracker” was “a remarkable romantic and hedonist...steadily tumbling down the slope into degeneracy, waxing ever more shiftless,” marked by “an intense individualism.” Deeply invested in white supremacy, he would never strike at his true adversaries because “to succeed in revolt he must join forces with the Negro. And rather than do that, he prefers to starve and to rot.”

Sharecroppers’ professional-class advocates did not dispute this portrayal. They contended that the behavior stemmed from an agricultural system that enriched large landowners and subjected the vast majority to extreme poverty with no chance of escape. “We hear on all sides that the share-cropper is shiftless and worthless, but how could he be otherwise?” one asked. “By the conditions under which he lives his character is daily attacked and destroyed.”

If the region achieved agricultural reform, another wrote, “many of the rural South’s disinherited people may be rehabilitated into useful and intelligent citizens”; a change in the objective conditions, in this framework, would necessarily precede any growth in “intelligen[ce].”

The South had long appeared in national-level discourse as an exceptional and pathological space; non-Southern laboring whites rarely appeared so distant from the norm. For leftists, poor Southern whites displayed in heightened and undiluted form all the traits that militated against a more enlightened public opinion: individualism, racism,
suspicion of outsiders, inability to recognize their real interests and rise up against their oppressors. But the same patterns are evident in representations of other working whites. Louis Adamic, for instance, is best remembered as an advocate for the inclusion of new immigrants in American culture, but Adamic’s work is also marked by a very sharp pessimism about the political potential of the working class. “If Marx saw this ‘proletariat’ in America today he would see precious few who might encourage him in his idea…that the impetus for the great change toward a new collectivist social order would come directly from this class,” Adamic wrote. Most workers, he suggested, were “mainly done for as positive human material,” ground down by the Depression and unable to see a way out of their predicament. They were “preponderantly individualistic…not very conscious of the world in which they live…licked by the chaos of America, by the machine, by industrialism; by regimentation on the one hand and by their futile, frustrated individualist psychology on the other.”

For Adamic and many others, the dominant individualistic views continued to exert an immense amount of power, and many of those most devoted to them were workers whose interests were ill served by individualism.

**The power of the dominant ideology—and how to break it**

In recent years, liberals have often lamented working class whites’ seemingly inexplicable penchant for voting against their interests (as liberals perceive them). This is by no means a new concern. It is consistently present in left-of-center discourse in nearly any period. “It is the merit of Marxian theory that…it stresses the psychological factors resulting from the way in which the world lives and works,” Communist Party head Earl

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Browder argued in 1937. “Marxists know, and it is their duty to explain whenever possible, the factors which make people act contrary to their better interests and the practical consequences which flow therefrom.”

“What…baffled” many of his contemporaries, economist George Soule wrote the same year, “is why men are reluctant to act in a rational manner. Why, when social change is necessary, when external institutions are outworn, are men so often hesitant to see the truth and act upon it?”

The most prominent answer in contemporary discourse held that industrial society and the interests of capital worked to keep most workers, through no fault of their own, at a low level of intellectual development. First, poverty and long hours of mind-numbing labor were not conducive to critical thinking; second, the dominant class maintained control over ideological channels—schools, churches, popular culture, and the press.

*Nation* editor Max Lerner framed the problem as follows: “Between those who stand for corporate capitalism and those who stand for democratic collectivism there is a mortal struggle going on today, a struggle for the minds and souls of the common people.” Progressive views, Lerner continued, “must enter the consciousness of the vast majority before that majority can become an effective force to displace minority rule. And the ironic fact is that, for the present at least, it is the minority that is in control of the

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methods of influencing the majority’s mind.”255 The effects of media here were understood as direct, predictable, and very difficult to overcome.

Press bias was perhaps the preeminent answer to the enduring question of why workers continued to act against their interests. It is difficult to overstate the prominence of the press in the demonology of the 1930s and 1940s left. New Dealers, faced with near-constant criticism from leading daily newspapers and syndicated columnists, recognized the daily press as among their most powerful adversaries and critiqued it accordingly.256 The rising CIO saw the press as among its primary threats as well, and many unionists argued passionately for a labor-funded daily paper. Conservative publishers William Randolph Hearst and Colonel Robert McCormick served as archetypical villainous economic royalists. In basic terms, the left/liberal critique held the press was owned and controlled by a small group of economic elites (“part of the financial oligarchy that is trying to rule America,” one critic put it257) who operated it in the interests of their class rather than in the public interest. The commercial press featured editorial opinion, news commentary, and ostensibly objective news stories significantly weighted toward conservative views. It also, for many, occupied readers

255 Max Lerner, It Is Later Than You Think: The Need for a Militant Democracy (New York: Viking Press, 1938), 128. John Dewey’s press criticism followed a similar line of reasoning; for Dewey, the task of “accomplishing [society’s] needed reconstruction” could “hardly be accomplished in an orderly and peaceful way without knowledge of existing evils and of the causes that produce them. But the very set-up of the system that nourishes these evils is such as to prevent adequate and widespread realization of the evils and their causes.” John Dewey, “Our Un-Free Press,” Common Sense, November 1935.


with lurid and trivial stories and features—crime, celebrities, sports, comics—that
distracted them from more important issues.  

Left/liberal press criticism consistently displayed a tension between majoritarian
language and bluntly pessimistic assessments of the majority’s capacity. For most
left/liberal press critics, the mass audience for radio or the daily press was passive and
suggestible. George Seldes, one of the foremost press critics of the 1930s and 1940s,
staunchly advocated a majoritarian labor-left politics on behalf of “the great mass-
majority of the American public” while holding to a view of that public as largely
incapable of resisting the machinations of the capitalist press. “Public opinion is made by
the newspapers,” Seldes claimed. Press lords were “little known to the people of the
country whose minds they rule.” “The reader,” he noted, “is generally fooled, and likes
being fooled.” He pitted the “intelligent minority” of workers who had begun to see
through press propaganda against the “ignorant and betrayed workingmen who…blindly
follow Huey Longs and Father Coughlins rather than those who teach them their own
self-interests.” Nation editor Max Lerner, who called intellectuals to put aside their
fear of the “mass mind” and become an “organic part of the life, the thinking, the striving
of the common people,” also expressed a deeply ambivalent view of mass literacy:

“Literacy for the common people is a fine thing. But it is also a dangerous thing unless

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258 This critique drew from both the longstanding classical liberal argument that the press’s normative role
in a democracy is to provide the public with accurate information and a Marxian understanding of media as
tools of capital. The arguments differed little according to the critic’s degree of leftism: in each case, a
small group of reactionary elites manipulated the press to their benefit, and the press possessed substantial
power to shape public opinion in a manner advantageous to the right.
260 “Labor Must Challenge the Press Lords,” n.d., George Seldes Papers, Kislak Center for Special
Collections, Rare Books, and Manuscripts, Van Pelt Library, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.
I am grateful to the staff at Van Pelt for allowing me to access these unprocessed papers.
261 George Seldes, Lords of the Press (New York: Julian Messner, 1938), 221.
the common people can have some control over what is given them to read in the press and to hear over the radio. Literacy may only make the cattle ripe for slaughter."262

That striking claim suggests one primary reason for the commercial press’s prevalence in left/liberal discourse: bluntly put, the corrupt press worked to reconcile a faith in the majority with exasperation at majority decision-making. In this period, to be on the left was to be on the side of the workers, the majority, the common people. But the majority often made mistakes. As Joli Jensen has argued, placing blame on the media allows critics to “avoid a direct attack on ‘the people’” and maintain a “faith in [their] natural goodness.”263 Contemporary left/liberal media criticism often follows Jensen’s pattern—workers were capable of making sound decisions, liberals argued, but were prevented from doing so by misinformation.264 Seldes and Lerner, for instance, preserved their “faith” in the “people” by implicating the inaccurate information disseminated through the media. But they also assumed that in order to bring about a just economic system, the public would need to attain a level of political consciousness that was very difficult to attain under the current system. That raised the question of how, if at all, the cycle could be broken. For Seldes, the answer was clear—alternative media would be needed to circumvent and counteract the “poison” of the conservative press.

264 Illustrative is this argument from Ralph Ingersoll, editor of the liberal newspaper *PM*, for why poor majority decision-making did not disprove the basic premises of democracy: “The essence of a democracy is the belief that the intelligence, judgment, and character of a majority of the people will produce a better and more satisfying solution of their problems that any permanent leader or group of leaders can achieve. But the people of a democracy can only thus function, wisely and for their own best interests, if they are continuously supplied with accurate factual knowledge of the world they live in. The reverse is equally obvious. If people are not being told the truth about their problems, the majority not only may, but invariably must, make the wrong judgments. If their problems are not stated clearly to them, they must come out with answers that are not in their best interests.” Ralph Ingersoll in Harold Ickes, *Freedom of the Press Today: A Clinical Examination by 28 Specialists* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1941), 137-8.
Contemporary leftists offered several other explanations for how workers might progress to a greater level of consciousness. One line of argumentation suggested that workers would become aware of their real interests as their social position gave them what one journalist called a “practical education…in the principles of Capitalism.”\(^\text{265}\) A worker did not need book learning to grasp the need for change, in this view, only a lived experience of capitalist social relations. Leading American Marxian theorist Lewis Corey, for instance, cited the “unemployment, mass starvation, and capitalist repression” of the Depression as forces that could rapidly push the mass of workers to the left: “The situation is so acute that revolution is on the order of the day; the conservative worker of to-day may become the revolutionary worker of to-morrow…As the objective conditions are favorable for the development of an American revolutionary labor movement and communism, the ideological backwardness of the workers must disappear.”\(^\text{266}\) The dominant ideology simply could not maintain public support indefinitely, in this view, when real social conditions proved it so demonstrably false.

Others emphasized the critical role of organization and education. “We have a long and arduous task of education ahead of us, before we can lead a majority of the American people to the establishment of Socialism,” Communist Party leader Earl Browder explained.\(^\text{267}\) In a prominent left perspective, workers who began simply by voting for New Dealers and seeking collective bargaining would, through their reformist struggles, come to recognize the inadequacy of what they could achieve working within the system (in other words, the concessions they could win from capital). Radicals


\(^{266}\) Lewis Corey, *The Decline of American Capitalism* (New York: Covici Friede, 1934), 511, 568.

needed to be involved in basic, unglamorous trade union work in part for that reason, in this view—as workers desired more radical change, they would look to the organizers who had worked alongside them and earned their trust.268

Actors outside the radical left, including CIO operatives who hoped to convince the rank and file to register and vote for Democrats, also stressed education. “Arousing our people from their political apathy and their economic ignorance” was the key initial step, one official bluntly put it.269 In general, CIO leaders were consistently frustrated by the political disengagement of the rank and file. However, they believed that apathetic workers would be progressive if they became politically aware; the basic problem was one of understanding and motivation. As CIO president Philip Murray argued in 1944, “We, of the CIO, and of labor generally, believe in the democratic system. We believe that the people, once they understand the issues, will decide them wisely.”270 This is a very suggestive and even startling phrasing. It obviously begs the question of how (and by whom) sufficient understanding of the issues would be determined. More broadly, though, it suggests that the “people” in whom Murray placed his faith were not the people as existing at that moment; his faith was based in an as-yet-unrealized future.

The white worker and the threat of fascism

Most of the analysis reviewed in this section so far has held in one way or another to a teleological framework in which laboring whites’ political consciousness would

268 As one leftist phrased it, socialism “is inevitable because the very struggle for the maintenance and extension of democracy will teach [the] millions the limitations of the present system and the necessity of supplanting the incomplete and insecure capitalist democracy.” A. B. Magil, “The New Deal and Tomorrow,” New Masses, July 19, 1938.
improve over time. Not all analysis held to this assessment. If, as many leftists argued, political change was ultimately contingent on human agency, workers’ suggestibility and lack of sophistication could easily cripple the left, even if structural conditions were favorable. “Socialism is not inevitable,” Marxian intellectual Sidney Hook put it. “It is something to be accomplished when objective conditions are ripe…by men and not by economic forces.” Conceding for the sake of argument “Marx’s claim that the working class is, and has been, in a position to lead a successful socialist movement,” Hook continued, “unfortunately, being in a position and being able to move from that position are two different things. The test of events has shown that the working class has been petrified in its position of potential movement.”

At its more innocuous, this meant that workers would only support reformist measures and that socialism would not take hold in the American context; at worst, it meant that workers might be attracted by the far right. For some, workers’ inability to understand the true causes of their discontent might lead them to support a radical right-wing politics. It is important to understand this analysis in the context of very real and deeply felt concern about the potential for fascism in the United States. Fascism for 1930s and 1940s leftists did not only or primarily refer to the Nazi regime; it meant a ruling class-led program of rabid nationalism, xenophobia, and violence intended to reestablish social control and stave off progressive change.

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272 “Fascist” was also an all-purpose epithet for a right-wing political figure. For typical accounts see e.g. Lewis Corey, “The Crisis of the Middle Class: I. The Middle Class Under Capitalism,” *The Nation*, August 14, 1935; J.B. Matthews and Ruth Shallcross, “Must America Go Fascist?,” *Harper’s*, June 1934; Benjamin Stolberg, “Vigilantism, 1937,” *The Nation*, August 14, 1937. This account from Stolberg, *The Story of the CIO* (New York: Viking Press, 1938), 87, gives a good sense of the concern with the lower middle class: “Since no movement can beat the masses without a mass base, such a mass base must be created. It is recruited from the most backward layer in the social pyramid. In modern society this is the
the dominant class’s control over the existing system of nominal bourgeois democracy had begun to slip, in this view, it would be forced to reveal the iron fist under the velvet glove. In the American context, a campaign of scapegoating and violence against Jews, blacks, immigrants, and radicals would be the likely outcome. The group thought to be most susceptible to fascism was the lower middle class (petite/petty bourgeoisie), defined by structural position in the economy (e.g. small-scale employers, shopkeepers) rather than income level. White workers would not be the leading participants in a fascist drive, in this view, but they might very likely be caught up in it.

The radical right would take advantage of workers’ anger, in this view—anger created by the ruling class—by misdirecting it towards the most vulnerable. Joseph Schmetz, a Woonsocket, RI textile unionist and the leading protagonist of Gary Gerstle’s *Working-Class Americanism*, rejected the notion that feelings of oppression would necessarily push workers to the left. “The working class is ordinarily conservative,” Schmetz explained, and the “bitterness which eats away at the heart of a man who feels himself the victim of circumstances renders him easy prey to Fascism and Nazism.”

In a key recurring argument, economic hardship pushed people to vent their frustration on a scapegoat. “Our people are bewildered by economic problems which most of them do not understand and cannot solve,” radical journalist John Spivak explained. Unable to

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lower middle class, a true mongrel class, linked to both capital and labor, yet an integral part of neither. Its objective interests are impossible to tell, for the various strains which make up its heterogeneous bulk—farmers, shopkeepers, small professionals, and clerks—are mutually hostile. Yet its fancied interests are with the big bourgeoisie, whose mortgagor it is, and whom it envies. This lower middle class is permanently confused by the split between its ignorance of what it needs and the reveries of what it wants. Incapable of resolving its economic contradictions, it has no political program, and is therefore the tool of every demagogue who plays on its prejudices and resentments.”

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comprehend their circumstances, “they seethe with an ever-growing bitterness.” Thus, “when they cannot reason themselves out of a situation they turn their resentment, like a child who stubs his toe on a stone and kicks it, against the immediate thing which hurt them.” The targets of that resentment could be the villains identified by the left or the scapegoats identified by the right: “If he is told a banker or millionaire is responsible for his ills he can understand it and vent his hate on them. If that hate can be deflected from ‘millionaires,’ ‘bankers,’ and ‘politicians’ into another channel, the financiers and industrialists would get a breathing-spell.”274 The angry, alienated, benighted (white) worker as a potentially explosive right-wing force appears repeatedly in twentieth-century American political analysis, particularly after the 1960s. Its prevalence in the 1930s has gone mostly unnoted.

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The discourse detailed in this coda section is unexpected and counterintuitive, and it is important to ask what it says about the broader context of the period. I want to suggest that the most important takeaway is the idea of a latent or embryonic progressive working class majority. The declension narrative in which liberals sour on a white working class they once romanticized is overstated. Concerns about (white) workers’ susceptibility to bigoted, right-wing political appeals were present well before the 1950s or 1960s. But many contemporaries expected white workers’ politics to change, and perhaps change a great deal, under a different political economic system, a different media system, or after a period of organization and workers’ education. It was this belief that white working class politics and culture would significantly change for the better that

declined by the 1950s. What appeared in a teleological framework to be initial, groping
steps toward greater understanding appeared to be enduring limitations without that
framework. Chapters 2 and 3 show how the abandonment of that teleological framework
changed liberal elites’ understandings of the political potentialities of white workers.
Chapter 2: The Rise of the Affluent Worker

“What is often described as ‘The March of the Masses’ is usually thought of as a radical, even insurrectionary development,” journalist Samuel Lubell remarked in his 1951 book The Future of American Politics, one of the acclaimed political texts of the 1950s. It was not, Lubell insisted. Ten years earlier, Lubell had argued that the New Deal “has drawn a class line across the face of American politics. That line seems to be there to stay.” Now he saw the enfranchisement of white workers as “an almost complete refutation of the Marxian thesis. Our class struggle, if it can be called that, arises not from the impoverishment of the masses but from their progress. It is evidence not of the failure of the American dream but of its successes.” The chief demand pressed by “the masses,” after all, was “acceptance into our predominantly middle-class society.” The changes brought by the New Deal could thus be said to have “strengthened rather than weakened the traditional middle-class basis of American politics.”275

The claim that (white) workers had become part of a broad, prosperous middle class appeared again and again in 1950s political discourse, as observers of all stripes testified to Karl Marx’s irrelevance. Dwight Eisenhower, addressing an AFL-CIO audience in 1955, labeled the “Class Struggle Doctrine of Marx…the invention of a lonely refugee scribbling in a dark recess of the British Museum. He abhorred and detested the middle class. He did not foresee that, in America, labor, respected and prosperous, would constitute—with the farmer and businessman—his hated middle

In 1950s media and elite political discourse, the “worker” was nearly always a white man who worked steadily in a unionized industrial sector, owned a home, and amply supported a wife and children, as in a 1955 *Newsweek* profile of “The Union Man”: “He owns a new and well-equipped home, a new car, and he and his wife and 6-year-old son live well, indeed…[The] “portrait of the worker that Marx and Engels painted” all those years ago “bears as little resemblance to Harold Giebel as a surrealist’s nightmare.”

“If Marx were able to visit the United States today,” economist Sumner Slichter quipped, “he would undoubtedly be amazed at the trouble enterprises have in providing adequate parking space for the ‘proletariat.’”

This chapter examines the emergence of the middle-income worker figure and its significance in late 1940s and 1950s political contestation and political analysis. It is not a new argument that the postwar economic boom preoccupied and did key ideological work for a range of elites, or that it was exaggerated as a result of changes in elite-level politics and political discourse. In a discursive environment shaped by the Cold War and the entrenchment of basic liberal reforms, liberals, moderate conservatives, organized labor, organized business, and the foreign policy establishment had a significant stake in touting the material benefits American workers enjoyed. The scope of this project allows for an argument that goes somewhat further (and continues beyond this chapter): The

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277 “The Union Man,” *Newsweek*, December 5, 1955.

belief in (white) working class affluence was a crucial factor driving the migration of the white worker, as a political symbol, from left to right.

Once a view of the majority as secure rather than needy became hegemonic, the contours of political representation fundamentally changed. In the 1930s and early 1940s, images of laboring whites had primarily served as evidence of injustice in American society and as symbols of the resistance to that injustice. By the 1950s, white workers had become almost universally symbolic “not of the failure of the American dream but of its successes,” in Samuel Lubell’s words. It became more difficult to justify fundamental political economic reform—and, just as important, difficult to envision a majority constituency that would support such reform. As white workers approached “have” rather than “have not” status—moving to the suburbs and living a lifestyle nearly identical to that of professionals—they would have much less interest in liberalism, many interpreters assumed. As the incomes of unionized white workers and white professionals converged, contemporaries also began to place more emphasis on cultural differences between blue-collar and educated whites in a manner that generally privileged the educated and tied working class whites to intolerant politics. In sum, a secure (white) majority could be much more easily figured as disadvantaged by or hostile to further change—or victimized by those seeking to alter what had worked in the past.

This chapter is divided into two parts. Part One details the emergence of the affluent worker figure as part of a broad elite consensus—among liberals, conservatives, labor, and business—around the existence of widely distributed prosperity. Part Two outlines the predominant elite-level assessments of what this mass affluence would mean
for white workers’ engagement in national politics; some observers predicted that (white) workers would remain solid liberal voters, while others predicted a turn to the right among upwardly mobile blue-collar whites, centered on a desire to protect economic gains or on cultural antagonism towards liberals. As a whole, the chapter seeks to both underscore the importance of the middle-income worker for postwar politics and lay the groundwork necessary to convey the importance of the affluent worker figure in a longer story of white working class representation.

**Terminology and the collective memory of the midcentury blue-collar middle class**

As in the period detailed in Chapter 1, “worker” was the term most often used to refer to white, usually male workers. “Wage earner” was interchangeable. White working class women were more often integrated into the discourse as “the worker’s wife” than as workers themselves. Perhaps the most difficult terminological question for this chapter is how to refer to blue-collar whites who had reached middle-income status. Contemporaries were not always sure what to call this group; several analysts, finding no satisfactory term for the group’s present position, resorted to “ex-masses.” The most common approach, however, was to call them “middle class.” In midcentury elite public discourse, it was common for (white, male) workers and their families to be described as both “workers” and “middle class”; “worker” referred to occupation and “middle class” to income and lifestyle. A worker who was “middle class” held a stable job, earned a moderate income, owned a car, and owned a home filled with modern appliances, most likely in the suburbs. I use “middle-income (white) workers,” “upwardly mobile workers,” “middle-income blue-collar whites,” and similar formulations to refer to this
group. Because “middle class” is such a fraught and flexible term, I use it to reflect and represent contemporary discourse, not to describe a real social position. To refer to middle- and upper-income professionals, I use “professionals” or “professional class.”

Postwar constructions of the postwar middle class left a legacy that extends to the present day, and I would be remiss not to mention that here. In 2017, the decline of the same “middle class” celebrated by Eisenhower, Slichter, and Lubell has become a powerful and multifaceted narrative in American politics. Liberals often identify a racially unmarked middle class as the victim of corporate greed—inequality was modest then, in this view, unions were strong, and blue-collar workers earned incomes that could comfortably support a family. “Previous generations of Americans built the greatest economy and strongest middle class the world has ever known on the promise of a basic bargain: If you work hard and do your part, you should be able to get ahead,” Hillary Clinton claimed. “And when you get ahead, America gets ahead. But over the past several decades, that bargain has eroded.” Meanwhile, Donald Trump and his populist/nationalist conservative supporters claim to speak for a more explicitly white working/middle class victimized by cosmopolitan political and corporate elites.

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280 See e.g. Donald Trump, first inaugural address, January 20, 2017, http://www.vox.com/a/president-trump-inauguration-speech-transcript-annotations. Some Trump supporters explicitly link immigration restrictions to the growth of the postwar middle class, as Jeff Sessions did: “When the numbers [of foreign-born residents] reached about this high in 1924, the president and Congress changed the policy, and it slowed down immigration significantly; we then assimilated…and created really the solid middle class of
same period has served, for authors like Robert Putnam, Charles Murray, and J.D. Vance, as a backdrop to claims about the decline in morality, family stability, and social capital among white working class people. The temptation to see the world of the 1950s middle class through a nostalgic lens is widespread, though for different reasons.

The powerful and varied politics attached to the legacy of the middle-income (white) working class underscores the importance of looking at postwar constructions of white workers with sensitivity and nuance. While this chapter focuses, like the rest of the dissertation, on issues of representation, it is important not to dismiss—or to overstate—white workers’ economic, social, cultural, and political gains. This period remains simultaneously one of the most powerful illustrations of “whiteness as property” in American history and a glimpse at an alternative governing philosophy to the one that now holds sway. From the 1930s to the 1970s, the state intervened on behalf of non-elite Americans to an extent exceptional in the history of the United States. Yet the postwar middle class, nostalgically envisioned, connotes much more than relative economic equality, as a result of the racial and gender inequality built into its growth. Many of the interventions that allowed citizens of modest means to attain protection in old age, attend college, purchase homes, and build wealth—Social Security, the GI Bill, FHA and VA

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loans—substantially or almost entirely excluded citizens of color until the 1960s. In a profoundly segregated labor market, white men in unionized industrial sectors gained the most as organized labor won extensive “firm-centered, job-dependent benefits” for workers that generated “islands of security, with high waters all around.”

Yet while white worker-actors as a group clearly fared better in this period than they did in decades before and after, it appears as a golden age only by comparison. They encountered a diversity of experiences, too seldom noted at the time (or since). The best-paid (male) workers and their families appear as typical in collective memory, but women (and men outside the unionized industrial heartland) were less likely to hold stable and decent-paying jobs. Social programming was designed around the needs of employed males and their dependents, leaving others less secure. Further, even by the standard of the independent male-headed household, material hardship clearly remained a significant part of the lives of many white working class people, and middle-class lifestyles were often more apparent than real. In 1951, the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ yearly budget for a “modest but adequate” standard of living was $3,750; the average family income was $3,700.

According to historian Mark McColloch’s calculations, the average steelworker’s family moved above the poverty line in 1953 and did not reach a

283 Lichtenstein, “From Corporatism to Collective Bargaining,” 123.
284 “There were choices. There were prospects. There were possibilities,” one writer who grew up in a white working class family in the 1950s recalled. “Few of these had been there before. Now they were…If what we lived through in the 1950s was not liberation, then liberation never happens in real human lives.” “It couldn’t have been so unusual to be a family with no money in that time and place,” another wrote, “but there was no acknowledgement of it as a human problem. It was just assumed that people had enough to pay the mortgage and the bills and buy food, and if they didn’t—well, the polite thing is not to notice.” Metzgar, Striking Steel, 39; Peggy Noonan, What I Saw at the Revolution: A Political Life in the Reagan Era (New York: Random House, 1990), 10.
“modest but adequate” standard of living until the late 1960s. Many workers took on significant consumer debt to afford the goods associated with middle class status. Meanwhile, the postwar tax structure became increasingly regressive, and inflation cut into rising incomes. For many, the gains were obviously and tangibly real. At the very least, though, it is fair to say that the elite discursive environment exaggerated those gains and rendered other experiences essentially invisible. The consequences are the focus of this chapter.

I: The Affluent Worker’s Origins

In August 1946, Time-Life’s glossy business magazine Fortune published one of its semi-regular profiles of “typical” American workers, this one focusing on Detroit autoworker Bill Nation. The magazine found it necessary to explicitly stress that Nation was no radical: “[he] likes his job…and he does not want to destroy General Motors or the capitalist system.” Nonetheless, Nation was “a loyal union man and an admirer of Walter Reuther” who believed that “there are plenty of things wrong with the world, and that working people can do a lot to make the world a better place.” He was “not too sure” of his security and concerned about his ability to support his large family. By 1951, Fortune’s assessment of the typical worker’s position had changed significantly, with “the worker” figured as “a middle-class member of a middle-class society.” In 1953, the magazine heralded “the rise of a huge new moneyed middle-income class,” a “New

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287 “Detroit Auto Worker,” Fortune, August 1946.
Bourgeoisie” comprised, “to a startling extent, of groups hitherto identified as proletarians.” The archetypical middle class American was no longer a small town landlord or small businessman, *Fortune* emphasized, but “a machinist in Detroit.”

“Cars, refrigerators, sailboats, travel, places in the country, tennis, swimming pools, and a host of other things started out as the perquisites of the well-to-do and now belong to the masses,” competitor *Business Week* claimed the same year. “The Detroit factory worker” now “flies to Europe for his vacation.”

The stark gap between Bill Nation and the “Detroit factory worker” vacationing in Paris is suggestive of the rise of a new elite-level paradigm for thinking about (white) workers.

The basic narrative advanced in the latter three articles became dominant by the early 1950s: American capitalism had delivered broad-based prosperity, raising nearly all Americans to middle class status. An extremely common device in mid-century journalism compared the United States of 1950 or 1960 to the United States at the turn of the century or the outset of the 1930s. In its more modest articulations, the narrative held that the once-poor majority had now reached secure middle-income levels. As former *New Republic* editor Bruce Bliven put it, “When the century began, there was…a well-defined class structure in this country. At the base of the pyramid were the working

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289 *The Changing American Market, by the Editors of Fortune* (Garden City NY: Hanover House, 1953), 52, 57, 60.
class and most of the farmers; together, they were practically identical with ‘the poor.’” By 1960, however, “most of us really are beginning to approach the classless society we were always supposed to be…The new American society is centered upon the middle-income group.”

In its most triumphalist iterations, the narrative suggested that poverty and the working class had been abolished. “There are no workers left in America; we are almost all middle class as to income and expectations,” suggested Herbert Gold’s suggestively titled *The Age of Happy Problems.*

“Poverty was all but eliminated, a large measure of security provided for all,” *US News and World Report* claimed in 1957. One commonplace likened the progress of the first half of the twentieth century to a revolution: “the permanent revolution,” “half-century revolution,” “bloodless revolution,” “near revolution,” or “Second U. S. Revolution.” The primary evidence for this claim, and the linchpin of the entire conceptual structure, was the movement of (white) workers into the middle class.

“Middle class,” as argued in Chapter 1, was a fraught term with overlapping cultural, racial, political, and economic connotations. Most simply, when contemporaries identified (white) workers as middle class, they were referring to the incomes and lifestyles these workers had gained. The dominant narrative was one of homogenization:

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“a narrowing of the difference between rich and poor”—and between workers and professionals—“in their ways of living.”

In this discourse, the most important evidence for the gains the worker (understood as a white husband and father heading a nuclear family) had achieved was his ability to provide his wife and children with the standard package of modern conveniences, on a single income. “The wage earner’s way of life is well-nigh indistinguishable from that of his salaried co-citizens,” a 1959 Department of Labor report claimed. “Their homes, their cars…the style of the clothes their wives and children wear, the food they eat…their days off, the education of their children, their church—all of these are alike and are becoming more nearly identical.”

Contemporary elites also used the category “middle class” to describe the erosion of distinctions marking off whites of southern and eastern European descent from whites of northern European descent. Becoming “middle class” or “American” meant becoming incorporated into a homogenous whiteness. The suburbs, which contemporaries accorded nearly unlimited power to homogenize, were critical in this regard. (White) workers had been identifiable as workers in part because of where they lived—workers’ housing in company towns, urban neighborhoods marked as immigrant

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spaces. Suburbia functioned as a “second melting pot,” contemporaries suggested, turning urban working class Catholics and Jews into middle class Americans. “People may come out of the new suburbs middle class; a great many who enter, however, are not,” journalist William H. Whyte put it. 298 “In the suburb the Catholic is regarded, at last, as a full-fledged American,” priest-sociologist Andrew Greeley explained. “The ghetto walls are crumbling…Suburbia, with its conglomeration of nationalities and religions, seems the ultimate melting pot.” 299 Pollster Louis Harris’s account of the same process captures the racial transition at work especially explicitly: “The third- and even fourth-generation offspring no longer had the telltale markings of the immigrant home. In speech, they were hard to tell from any son or daughter of the Revolution…This was civilization out in the suburbs, and Jimmy Ripple, the grandson of Lladislaw Repukski, could pass with the best of them.” 300 Once Jimmy had Anglicized his name and moved to the suburbs, in this framework, he was no longer identifiably Polish, and he felt only pride in leaving the “immigrant home” behind.

While contemporaries who stressed (white) workers’ middle class status were most concerned with life outside work, “middle class” status had a related connotation in the context of workplace and labor politics—workers had moved beyond an oppositional working-class consciousness. Notably, business organs chronicling this transition applied traits long mapped to native-born Protestants—thrift, hard work, self-sacrifice, patriotism—to union workers. When Fortune introduced a dedicated labor section in its

300 Louis Harris, Is There A Republican Majority? Political Trends 1952-1956 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950), 120. It’s worth noting here that if they remained in the cities, Italians or Poles might continue to be framed as members of distinct “nationality groups” or “minority groups,” but not distinct “races.”
October 1948 issue, it cited concerns that workers might “come to rely more on group security and group loyalty, the group being the work team and the union”—an obvious challenge to management’s “faith in the Protestant ethic emphasizing individual responsibility, risk, and competitiveness.” Three years later, the gap between workers’ views and management’s views seemed to Fortune much narrower: “American labor is not ‘working-class conscious’; it is not ‘proletarian’ and does not believe in class war.” Instead the union was the worker’s “tool for gaining and keeping as an individual the status and security of a full citizen in a capitalist society…There are no Wobblies today, no Jewish Bund, no Italian anarchists, no Debs, no Mother Jones”—largely symbols associated with a specifically foreign radicalism. A Fortune profile of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU)—a union with a predominantly Jewish and Italian immigrant membership founded on the New York garment industry—compared the rise of the ILGWU and its president David Dubinsky to a Horatio Alger story.

The claim that workers had moved into the middle class obviously relied on a very limited understanding of the “worker.” The white working class woman generally appeared in this framework as a beneficiary of the family income, able to perform her normative role more easily with the goods her husband could afford: “Housework is not drudgery for Mrs. Dupas with the aid of modern appliances…Her food budget allows her to feed [her] family an ample and varied diet.”

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301 Introduction of labor section, Fortune, October 1948, 139.
American affluence either ignored African Americans altogether or dismissed their situation as the great blemish on an overall healthy society. *Fortune* did the latter, drawing on longstanding tropes of Southern exceptionalism: “The South is problem country. It grew up differently from the rest of the nation...It still has with it the problem of the Negro.”

What elites called the “Negro problem” was understood separately from issues of industrialism and organized labor—or at least separately enough that the dominant story of broad equality remained untroubled by African American disadvantage.

Yet the vision of the worker as white and male did not in itself make possible the widespread belief in working class affluence. A similar understanding of the worker had been dominant in the 1930s, but it had still allowed for passionate claims about the injustice workers faced. Above all, what allowed the narrative of the affluent worker to gain the prominence it did was the near-unanimity with which elites embraced it. It emerged from the work of business groups engaged in public relations, liberals endorsing postwar capitalism, unions emphasizing their role in the rising standard of living, government officials stressing the superiority of the American system in a Cold War context, and journalists chronicling the dramatic changes they perceived. Together, a wide range of voices portrayed a secure United States that experienced little to no social conflict on political economic matters.

For a number of years, scholars often understood the period between the late 1940s and early 1960s as characterized by a “liberal consensus” in which a low level of

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conflict and dissent, particularly on economics, characterized American politics.\textsuperscript{306} Contemporaries who made this claim pointed to conservatives’ accommodation to the active role of the state and the majority of New Deal reforms, liberals’ disavowal of socialism, and the rise of professionalized, bureaucratized labor relations marked by negotiation rather than violence. “The fundamental problems of the industrial revolution have been solved,” sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset declared in 1960. “The workers have achieved industrial and political citizenship, the conservatives have accepted the welfare state, and the democratic left has recognized that an increase in state power carries with it more dangers to freedom than solutions for economic problems.” These developments heralded “the end of ideology,” as Daniel Bell put it.\textsuperscript{307} The liberal consensus interpretation also appeared in later historical work, though often lacking the triumphalist inflection of Bell and Lipset. In the mid-1970s, for instance, Godfrey Hodgson popularized a pessimistic version of the argument, in which the “liberal consensus” represented a kind of straightjacket indicative of the defeat of the left, a “strange hybrid, liberal conservatism” that “blanketed the scene and muffled debate.”\textsuperscript{308}

In more recent decades, the consensus interpretation has been challenged and largely unseated by scholars pointing to the prevalence of aggressive anti-labor efforts by business interests, conservative activism against the New Deal order, and opposition to

\textsuperscript{306} A closely related argument suggests that labor relations were characterized by a labor-management accord—in other words, that corporations accepted the legitimacy of unions, unions gave up radical designs, and the two interests bargained in a professional and orderly manner.


liberal policy on race among white liberal constituencies.\textsuperscript{309} “Even at its zenith, liberalism was far less secure than it appeared to be,” Kim Phillips-Fein notes, if scholars “loo[k] beneath the surface.”\textsuperscript{310} Recent defenders of the consensus interpretation respond that the dissenters did not have the influence to command a substantial following or win substantial gains and that “the sharpest conflicts did not dominate the mainstream.”\textsuperscript{311}

Without question, the consensus interpretation does not capture the full range of the period’s politics. It remains, however, very apt for understanding elite constructions of the white working class in the late 1940s and 1950s. Again, simply put, the imagery of the affluent (white) worker attained the prominence it did because it appeared persuasive to and made strategic sense for a wide range of elites.

The years immediately following World War II, as scholars have noted, seemed promising for a social democratic politics in the United States; in the aftermath of the wartime experience, planning, full employment, and other left-liberal priorities enjoyed considerable public support. The Popular Front was largely defeated by the late 1940s, however, amid a resurgence of anticommunism. A few dates give a rough sense of the timeline: in 1947, the Truman administration adopted a policy requiring government employees to sign a loyalty oath, and the antilabor Taft-Hartley Act passed; in 1949, the


\textsuperscript{310} Phillips-Fein, \textit{Invisible Hands}, xi.

CIO banned communists from leadership positions in member unions; the next year, it dismissed eleven communist-led unions.\(^{312}\) The narrative of widespread prosperity became hegemonic in the wake of the Popular Front’s defeat and the shift to the right within the labor movement and within mainstream liberalism. It is instructive, for instance, that the texts spearheading the narrative appeared in the early 1950s, including Peter Drucker’s *The New Society* (1950); *Fortune*’s series *USA: The Permanent Revolution* (1951) and *The Changing American Market* (1953); and Frederick Lewis Allen’s *The Big Change* (1952). The foremost driver of the narrative of mass prosperity was the influence of the Cold War and anticommunism on domestic politics and media.

The Cold War had a paradoxical effect on American liberalism. On one hand, it sliced off its left wing and discredited the more ambitious aspects of its agenda; on the other, it linked the legitimacy of the American state to the position of subordinate groups in American society. The Soviet state’s legitimacy was staked on its claim to represent working class and marginalized people, and Soviet elites repeatedly invoked racial and economic inequality in the United States.\(^{313}\) In a period where the two powers competed


for the allegiance of European, African, and Asian nations, the American state needed to vehemently challenge those claims. International propaganda consistently cited American workers’ high standard of living, often in comparison to Soviet workers. The United States Information Agency (USIA) drew on one typical frame in its traveling international exhibit on “People’s Capitalism,” a “dynamic new kind of capitalism which benefits all the people.” Richard Nixon’s “kitchen debate” with Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev inside the American National Exhibition in Moscow in 1959 may be the most famous example of the ideological value of the affluent (white) worker and working class housewife for Cold Warriors. The exhibit featured a model home identified as affordable for the average American family and packed with modern conveniences. “Can only the rich in the United States afford such things?” Nixon asked, walking Khrushchev through the exhibit. “If this were the case, we would have to include in our definition of rich the millions of America’s wage earners…Any steel worker could buy this house.”

In this climate, liberals who strayed outside acceptable contours risked serious danger; those who worked within those contours could see real gains. For African American elites, this meant pressing for racial equality in a language of US nationalism, accepting an optimistic interpretation of the progress blacks were making in the United States, and being careful not to link American capitalism or imperialism to racial inequality within the nation’s borders. For organized labor, it meant employing a

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314 Wall, Inventing the “American Way”, 198.
nationalistic frame of reference, excluding radicals from positions of influence, and adopting a language of cooperation with business when appropriate. The view that white workers as a group were disadvantaged—or that the “American system” did not work for a majority of its citizens—was increasingly excluded from the mainstream.

Journalism: “A True and Honest Picture of Our Civilization”

Journalism spotlighting poverty and inequality was generally at a low ebb in the postwar period. A broad-based media reform movement, flourishing during the 1940s, had largely been defeated by the end of the decade. The view that journalism had a duty to reinforce American values, particularly during wartime, was widespread among journalists, publishers, and government officials. For some, this aligned with an anti-New Deal domestic agenda. In 1945, Frank Gannett urged his fellow publishers to “tell our readers what we stand for”—“the American way of life…a system of competitive enterprise.” “Our best promotion will be the re-selling of that American system,” Gannett insisted. “In doing so, we will be selling ourselves.” The ties between the foreign policy apparatus and the media industry ran deeper than partisan politics, however. Former newspaper journalists staffed government propaganda operations, and

journalists working in the private sector had wartime propaganda experience. FBI
director J. Edgar Hoover cultivated relationships with journalists, and about two dozen
media outlets, including the *New York Times*, *Time*, and CBS, cooperated with the
CIA.  

Certainly most journalists touting the prodigious growth of the American
economy firmly believed in their reporting. “I believe we might all agree that a
distinguishing factor of our own particular period in history is the rapidity of change,”
American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) president Kenneth MacDonald told an
industry audience in 1956. “A new revolution is altering rapidly the social, economic,
and cultural life in this country…[Our economy] is tending to produce a classless
society.”  

“Magazine liberalism and iconoclasm” had declined since World War II, one
journalist claimed the same year, in part because “most of the immediate social gains
have been gained.”  

Journalists understood, though, that they were not simply reporting
on the American economy for an audience of everyday American readers. It was
commonplace for news accounts to contain direct refutations of Soviet allegations about
American society, often with a non-American audience in mind. One American
journalist, chagrined at the tendency of some Europeans to “depict the American system

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as a horror to be rejected equally with the Soviet horror,” insisted that “we learn to draw
for Europe a true and honest picture of our civilization.”\(^{321}\) “The European does not see
the rapidly changing, socially conscious capitalism of 1950,”\(^ {322}\) \textit{Fortune} worried. “He sees
Wall Street, Mammon—and he trembles aloud over all the false dilemmas it would imply
for Europe.”\(^ {322}\)

If this sense of duty motivated positive portrayals of American life, the dangers
associated with leftism also militated against comprehensive attention to inequality.
Subscriptions to liberal magazines and newspapers such as the \textit{Nation, New Republic, PM,} or \textit{In Fact} raised suspicion in loyalty investigations. Journalists understood that they
could be fired at any time if evidence of unacceptable leftism came to light. Anyone
within journalistic or media reform circles who had a radical past or continued to work
from a Popular Front perspective was particularly at risk. Over a hundred journalists were
brought before Congressional committees investigating communist influence, where
rhetorical tropes seen as mainstream during the New Deal could be read as evidence of
communist ties.\(^ {323}\) One of those journalists was inaugural CIO publicity director Len De
Caux, who had been asked to resign from his CIO post in 1947 amid concerns about his
radical history. Another was media critic George Seldes, who had been forced to suspend
publication of his newsletter \textit{In Fact} when resources dried up amid allegations of

\begin{flushleft}321\end{flushleft} Lewis Galantière, “America Today: A Freehand Sketch,” \textit{Foreign Affairs}, July 1950.
\begin{flushleft}322\end{flushleft} Davenport, \textit{USA, The Permanent Revolution}, 6.
\begin{flushleft}323\end{flushleft} Alwood, \textit{Dark Days in the Newsroom}, esp. 53, 77; Ralph Johnson and Michael Altman, “Communists in
The Newspaper Guild, which had significant communist and fellow-traveler influence in the 1930s,
removed communists from leadership in 1941, issued a statement emphasizing its “deep conviction that the
fight against the proved communist conspiracy at home must continue” in 1949, and voted to exclude
communists from membership in 1954.
communist involvement. At his hearing, Seldes encountered questioning from McCarthy lieutenant Roy Cohn on a story he had written about industrial tycoons: “Cohn read one paragraph, something about the DuPonts, Mellons and Rockefellers getting monopolies in industry while there was unemployment and poverty. ‘Do you think that is the right kind of reading matter to send to European countries we want as friends?’”

This view was by no means confined to the hard right wing of anticommunists. A 1948 exchange between Seldes and liberal journalist Ferdinand Lundberg is suggestive. Ten years earlier, Lundberg had worked in the same vein as Seldes: his 1937 bestseller *America's 60 Families* tracked the control exerted by a handful of immensely wealthy and powerful families over American industry, government, and journalism. Seldes continued to focus his attention almost exclusively on the American right, American capitalism, and the commercial press—entities, in the eyes of Lundberg and many liberals, considerably less dangerous than the Soviet Union. “No liberal that I know of objects in the slightest to [your] running critique of the newspaper press or the skullduggery of the higher-ups,” Lundberg explained in a letter to Seldes:

What they object to, in short, is the clear implication in *In Fact* [Seldes’ magazine, which ran from 1940-1950] that the U.S. press and U.S. higher-ups, and [their] friends abroad…are about the worst things politically in the world. This isn’t so, isn’t a fact. There is worse, much worse, and it centers in the Kremlin, about which you preserve a strange silence…By failing to put its critique of the American scene into the proper perspective against the world background *In Fact* merely does what it can to promote disaffection in the U.S. In so doing it becomes an instrument in the ideological warfare of the USSR against those countries not under its control.

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Bringing the injustices in the United States into sharp relief would be harmful on multiple fronts, Lundberg implied: it would diminish the legitimacy of elites who could fight communism, it would aid the Soviets in their outreach to unaffiliated countries, and it would “creat[e] disaffection” on the home front. In short, it would be “helpful only to the Kremlin.”

None of this meant that objectivity was abandoned or that no diversity of views could surface: part of what distinguished the American press from the Soviet press, in its anticommmunist backers’ views, was its openness to the free exchange of ideas. Alternative perspectives on communism or the Cold War were simply outside the sphere of legitimate controversy. In a particularly illustrative turn of phrase, Lawrence Spivak of NBC News explained the political perspective of his show *Meet the Press*: “Ideologically I never really took a position…and of course we carried on the most vigorous anticommmunism campaign from the beginning.” “There is always room for divergence of opinion within the bounds of basic principles, but there is no room to compromise those principles,” one publisher insisted. Liberals had a very prominent place in the elite discursive environment of the period, but that discursive environment generally included only moderate and respectable elite perspectives.

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326 Ferdinand Lundberg to Seldes, likely February 1948, Seldes Papers.
327 For the classic articulation of this contrast, see the essays in Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm, *Four Theories of the Press*; Nerone, *Last Rights*; Piotr Szpunar, “Western Journalism’s ‘Other’”: The Legacy of the Cold War in the Comparative Study of Journalism,” *Journalism* 13, no. 1 (2012): 3-20.
Contestation within acceptable boundaries also serves as a good one-sentence characterization of the fate of labor, liberal, and left articulations of working class identity after the late 1940s. On one hand, basic claims—that the Democrats held the allegiance of ordinary people, that workers saw their interests as opposed to those of big business—remained strong throughout the period. At the same time, mainstream liberals, labor leaders, moderate conservatives, and business elites could increasingly agree that American capitalism had evolved from the tycoon days of the past and that the United States was a basically just society in which the majority of workers enjoyed security and a reasonable opportunity for happiness.

The dominant narrative of business-labor relations in the period stressed the broadly shared benefits made possible by an evolved capitalism. In this narrative, the events of the past twenty years had brought about a transfer of power from employers to workers and the public, allowing for a reasonable balance of interests. Workers and non-elite groups were getting more of the gains, contemporaries stressed, and corporations had embraced social responsibility. As a result, an egalitarian society had been achieved without recourse to coercive statism. Americans had developed “a system which not only helps the underdog, and brings about a dynamic redistribution of income in his favor, but also maintains the freedom of business enterprises and other private institutions,” Harper’s editor and popular historian Frederick Lewis Allen put it. This narrative had a great deal to offer both labor and business groups, and their claims overlapped substantially. It suggested that criticism of a selfish, antisocial capitalism was outdated.

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330 Frederick Lewis Allen, “What Have We Got Here?,” *Life*, January 5, 1953.
and that there was no need for further encroachment (by unions or the state) on management’s privileges. It also recognized unions’ legitimacy, respectability, and role in the American system, in a period where the appearance of radicalism was deeply dangerous.

Business groups’ public relations efforts were one chief impetus behind elite discourse’s emphasis on broadly shared prosperity. Business elites concerned that liberal successes had turned public opinion against capitalism and toward an activist state invested significant time and resources in persuasive efforts aimed at workers, schoolchildren, and the broader public. In 1952, *Fortune* editor William H. Whyte estimated that corporate spending on public relations and educational materials promoting “free enterprise” stood at more than $100 million per year. These efforts often rested on a view of workers as credulous, easily misled by simplistic anti-business arguments, but persuadable: if workers truly understood how business worked (why corporations should not be condemned for making profits, for instance) and what they gained from it, they would view business positively. “When you talk to the people in lower income levels you find a large majority who wonder if the American capitalistic system is really right,” one advertiser worried, advocating that business “educat[e] the general public on why our economic system has been able to do what it has for them…on how and why it works so that they would have sufficient knowledge of its basic

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principles, to be able to judge future issues.”  

“The story of business economics and philosophy needs to be told simply, understandably, repetitiously and without dilution or distortion—to broad masses of the people,” another businessman insisted. 

The scope of business elites’ investment in communicating to workers is strong evidence of how seriously many took labor-liberal claims to represent workers. Ironically, much like liberals, they assumed that views they saw as mistaken were the result of misinformation and could be dispelled through education.

In their public argumentation, moderate business groups in this period moved away from the hardline approach adopted by much of the right wing during the Depression: attacking New Deal liberalism and industrial unionism as utterly contrary to American principles. Instead, they accepted a role for unions and the modern state but warned against class conflict. In a narrative advanced by groups like the Advertising Council and appearing consistently in news media, capitalism had once undeniably

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332 “Plan for Action Program,” n. d., box 1, folder 7, UAW Political Action Department: Roy Reuther Records, Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI (hereafter cited as “UAW Political Action Records”). Part of what rankled, in this view, was that business’s legitimate claim to represent workers’ interests had been successfully displaced by other interests remote from workers’ lives: “Here you see two great forces—politicians on one hand, union leaders on the other—doing everything they can to gain workers’ goodwill and making real progress at it, while those who are really close to them, who are their natural leaders and friends, the industrial managers who have the opportunity of legitimate daily contact with them, are recognized as managing the properties capably but are nevertheless made to seem against the workers!”

333 Fones-Wolf, Selling Free Enterprise, 40.

334 A multi-session program on “People’s Capitalism” conducted by Yale and the Advertising Council is an archetypical illustration of the consensus thesis. As the summary booklet explains, “it took place in an attempt to create a consensus that could become the possession of the average man; to help fill a serious vacuum and to meet a need made clamorous by the challenge of international communism.” It brought together “brilliant minds from the Yale faculty, and from business and labor, to examine the American economy and, so far as practical, to reach conclusions on (a) the manner in which the American form of capitalism differs from older (and less enlightened) forms; (b) the degree to which it has spread the material benefits to all our people, and obtains its supply of capital from the people; (c) The interrelationships of our economic and political systems; (d) The methods that keep power in the hands of the people.” “An economy based on private property, profit and free enterprise has actually achieved the socialistic goals of welfare for the people at large more effectively than any socialistic regime has yet been able to do,” the
generated unacceptable inequality and hardship for workers, but no longer. American capitalism at the turn of the century “seemed to be what Marx predicted it would be and what all the muckrakers said it was,” a typical account in *Fortune* held, and the United States of the 1930s was “a society that could not solve, did not know how to solve, internal problems that threatened to destroy it.” A resolution came, this narrative suggested, through a revised understanding of individualism that recognized “the right to organize and bargain collectively” and acknowledged “that ownership carries social obligations.” The magazine conceded that “the American capitalistic system still works injustices” but insisted that “to think about it in terms of exploitation is to think in terms of a past century...It is not the capitalists who are using the people, but the people who are using the capitalists.”

In a period where capitalism had become cooperative rather than coercive, in this framework, the responsibility incumbent on workers was to recognize the need to “pull together.” The implicit bargain posed was that corporate leaders would deliver broadly shared prosperity for all if they could direct the economy without significant unrest or interference from labor or the state.

A significant group of moderate Republicans—including the first Republican president since the New Deal, Dwight Eisenhower—made similar arguments.

Eisenhower was associated with an ideology called “modern Republicanism,” a centrist

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As one Advertising Council advertisement put it: “Sure, our American System has its faults. We all know that. We still have sharp ups and downs in prices and jobs. We’ll have to change that—and we will! It will continue to take teamwork, but if we work together, there’s no limit on what we can all share together of even greater things.” “Sure, America’s going ahead...if we all pull together!,” Advertising Council ad as it appeared in *Life*, November 8, 1948, 162.
approach that (for its supporters) transcended both libertarianism and New Deal liberalism and emphasized cooperation between labor and capital for shared prosperity. Eisenhower aide Arthur Larson identified the “New Republicanism” as “a set of ideas keyed explicitly to contemporary mid-century facts” in which “wellworn niche[s] like ‘liberal’ or ‘New Deal’ or ‘prolabor’ or ‘probusiness’ or ‘left’ or ‘right’” were obsolete. “This Administration is against neither” labor nor business, Larson insisted, “but is for both.”

Modern Republicanism accepted the basic liberal understanding of industrial modernity—that workers in an industrial society required the protection of unions and the state—but argued that antagonistic attitudes toward business were as obsolete as the tycoon.

To be clear, this approach was not representative of all conservative discourse—right-wing critics saw modern Republicanism as a slightly watered-down version of liberalism, and the most vehement voices on the right continued to assail organized labor in stark terms. NAM warned its members of the dangers posed by the “spread of Collectivist thinking in America,” particularly among “such large groups as labor…people in large cities…and the lower-income segment of our population,” and

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338 As a presidential candidate, Eisenhower himself promised “that the social gains achieved by the people, whether enacted by a Republican or Democratic administration, are not only here to stay but are here to be improved and extended…I pledge that I will support and strengthen, not weaken, the laws that protect the American worker. I will defend him against any action to destroy his union or his rights. I will enlist every resource…to protect him against the awful consequences of depression and joblessness.” “The Meaning of the Election,” *The Nation*, November 15, 1952.
deemed labor elites “professional propagandists for powerful, totalitarian-inspired organizations…bent upon destroying everything this nation has achieved in the last 150 years.” As unions became an entrenched feature of the political economic landscape, allegations about labor leaders’ immense, illegitimate power only increased. The much-distributed 1957 book Labor Union Monopoly claimed that “the greatest concentrations of political and economic power in the United States of America are found” not among corporate interests but “in the underregulated, under-criticized, under-investigated, tax-exempt, and specially privileged labor organizations—and in their belligerent, aggressive, and far-too-often lawless and corrupt managers.” From a presentist perspective, it’s instructive to note that conservative anti-union argumentation followed a logic that continues to be prominent on issues of race and immigration (see also Chapter 4)—labor’s right to exist and the value of its role in the social order, only holds by comparison to what came before and after. The


1940s and 1950s saw consistent efforts to undercut union power.\textsuperscript{341} For a powerful segment of the business community in the midcentury United States, however, it made strategic sense to adopt a labor policy that offered good pay and benefits and recognized unions as a natural facet of industrial society. Large firms in capital-intensive industries (archetypically autos and steel) faced little international competition, which had been decimated by World War II. For these firms, continued labor unrest and union demands for input on managerial decisions appeared far more destructive than generous and consistent wage and benefit increases. From this perspective, middle-income worker-consumers with a stake in the existing system were desirable employees; they would work steadily and dependably and would be uninterested in radicalism. “The first requirement of a functioning industrial order is to get rid of the proletarian,” management theorist Peter Drucker emphasized. “Industrial society cannot afford him…[It] demands the active and real citizenship of the worker. It demands acceptance of the principle of profitability from the worker. It loses its social cohesion if the worker is a proletarian.” The affordances of a “modern industrial order,” for Drucker, made it possible to “get rid of the proletarian,” to “convert the socially destructive proletariat into the very basis of social strength and cohesion.”\textsuperscript{342} For radicals in later decades, the power structure in this period made concessions that “integrated [workers] into American capitalism”\textsuperscript{343} and snuffed out labor militancy in the process. Drucker called for just such an approach and framed it as a great positive.

\textsuperscript{341} Concise discussions of employers’ approach to unions in this period can be found in Lichtenstein, \textit{State of the Union}, chapter 3; David Brody, \textit{Workers in Industrial America: Essays on the Twentieth Century Struggle} (New York: Oxford University Press: 1980), 173ff.
\textsuperscript{343} Mike Davis, \textit{Prisoners of the American Dream} (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), 8.

The arguments made by labor officials overlapped substantially with the arguments made by moderate business groups and in the business press. Certainly there were differences: where business gave productivity and innovation most of the credit for the increase in workers’ incomes, labor and liberals stressed collective bargaining and
New Deal reforms. What was shared was the implication that American workers were the beneficiaries of a revolutionary social transformation that obviated the need for class conflict. In the preface to a 1956 reissue of Edward Levinson’s *Labor on the March*, a chronicle of the early CIO, Walter Reuther readily consigned 1930s militancy to the past in a tone that would have been familiar to readers of *Harper’s*, *Fortune*, and other newsmagazines. The sit-down strikes described in the book, Reuther wrote, would seem to the mid-1950s reader “as far away as the Whiskey Rebellion, the Dred Scott Decision or…the Haymarket riots…[The] improved income of millions of wage earners has made the 1950’s as unlike the 1930’s as the 20th century is unlike the 19th century.”

This emphasis on prosperity and middle class status reflected the primary postwar course pursued by organized labor. Though inflections differ, as do assessments of whether a course farther to the left would have been possible, the literature emphasizes the tradeoff inherent in this trajectory. Unions gained mainstream status, respectability, and considerable security for members but did not realize the transformative agenda many had desired for them. Briefly, they generally adopted a strategy of bargaining with employers to secure firm-specific benefits for their workers (higher wages, health insurance, vacation time, etc.) rather than making claims for a broad public welfare state of the European variety, aggressively attempting to organize the most underprivileged.

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347 Walter Reuther, 1956 preface to Edward Levinson, *Labor on the March* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 1995), iv. A similar example can be found in CIO-PAC’s *Speaker’s Book of Facts* for 1952, which features a passage that could easily have been drawn from the pages of *Fortune*: “There has been no murderous uprising, no desperate revolt of the masses against a wicked ruling class. Our revolution has been handled through the ballot boxes, through the processes of democracy and under self-government…under the regime of Presidents who have led us to a better capitalism—not to socialism or to communism.” CIO Political Action Committee, *A Speaker’s Book of Facts, 1952* (Washington, D.C.: Congress of Industrial Organizations, 1952), 25.
workers, or seeking worker representation in firms’ decision-making.\textsuperscript{348} Organized labor’s embrace of the existing system was firmly in line with the broader trajectory of liberalism, as liberals based policy around the assumption that strong economic growth within a mixed economy would meet the needs of the vast majority.\textsuperscript{349}

It is important to note that some leftists and labor advocates disputed the dominant, sunny interpretation of working class life. Workers were not, in fact, secure and happy, these contemporaries stressed. Instead, a surface affluence (often financed by steep debt) concealed tension and malaise. Breadwinners with alienating and repetitive jobs sought a “progressive accumulation of things” because they had no other way to feel that they were moving forward, sociologist Ely Chinoy emphasized.\textsuperscript{350} The stay-at-home “wife of the…worker” lived a life of “quiet desperation,” not contentment, labor intellectual Patricia Cayo Sexton argued; her time was occupied by “Junior’s whooping cough, the week’s ironing, the plugged sink, the wet pants, the runny nose, the pay check that can’t cover expenses, the kids who won’t stop yelling and fighting—and the husband


\textsuperscript{349} On liberals embracing growth politics, Robert Collins, \textit{More: The Politics of Economic Growth in Postwar America} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Meg Jacobs, \textit{Pocketbook Politics} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). This transition had two primary causes, liberal and former Marxist Granville Hicks suggested. First, “the Cold War has taught [liberals]...to measure American civilization not by an absolute standard but in comparison with Soviet communism, and, between the two, they have no doubt which they prefer”; second, “they can see as clearly as anyone else that certain major evils have been eliminated or reduced in the past twenty years.” Granville Hicks, “Liberalism in the Fifties,” \textit{The American Scholar} 25, no. 3 (1956): 284.

\textsuperscript{350} Ely Chinoy, \textit{Automobile Workers and the American Dream} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 126.
who offers little affection or attention in payment for her drudgery.”\textsuperscript{351} Above all, in this framework, life in the working class family was marked by a basic sadness, exacerbated by families’ inability to comfortably afford “the things they want and need—or are pressured into believing they must have.”\textsuperscript{352} These critical voices were far from the center of elite public discourse, however, often confined to liberal and left periodicals like the \textit{Nation, Dissent,} and \textit{Monthly Review}. The dominant voices in organized labor were far more optimistic.

It’s important to note that the demands of the Cold War, the dismissal of radicals from mainstream institutions, and the extensive focus on (white) workers’ upward mobility did not mean that labor could no longer oppose workers to industrial elites. In some contexts, pitting workers against employers could be dangerous, particularly if the speaker had a suspect past. In other contexts—supporting Democrats over Republicans, articulating the union’s case during strikes, or calling out industry for going back on a bargain—it became a well-worn language that elites could offer almost ritualistically when it made strategic sense to do so. “The National Association of Manufacturers and Big Business are waging a class struggle in America as Karl Marx wrote it would be

waged,” Walter Reuther railed in 1959 against an anti-labor bill being considered in Congress. “They are working overtime to prove Karl Marx was right.”

Though workers continued to be defined against economic elites, prevailing elite-level understandings of working class identity had fundamentally changed since the days of “labor on the march.” White working men putting their bodies at risk now played a much-diminished role in public representations of labor. Language of bargaining displaced language of war and combat; when combat was necessary, it would not require physical violence. “There were no mass picket lines; no flying squadrons swept through the city; few meetings were held,” Mary Heaton Vorse reported from a 1950 Chrysler strike. The “conflict was a bitter one, in which neither side pulled any punches. But the blows were struck through full-page advertisements, radio speeches, newspaper releases, and endless and often acrimonious negotiations.” A different kind of (white) working class masculinity, one less associated with bravery in combat or feats of strength than with breadwinning, homeownership, and consumerism, now took center stage. An early CIO poem had featured a striker telling the young child of a fallen comrade that “Daddy’s on another picket line tonight.” In the predominant midcentury framework, the breadwinner’s battle would take place in the voting booth. “CIO members owe it to themselves, their wives, and their children to accept the political challenge thrown at them,” union officials fighting Taft-Hartley urged workers in a 1947 appeal.

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353 B. J. Widick, “Anti-Labor Day,” *The Nation*, September 5, 1959. Importantly, Reuther aimed to pressure business to rein itself in; he specifically warned against the dangers that would ensue if labor responded in kind with a “class struggle” of its own.


This breadwinning (white) working class masculinity was simultaneously a powerful symbol of respectability for labor and legitimacy for business. The narrative of capitalism’s evolution was linked far less to changes in the nature of industrial work itself than to the claim that workers now had the time and money to live a fulfilling private life. “Shorter hours [and] vacation time give the breadwinner plenty of time to enjoy his family and the comforts he has bought for them,” a Business Week profile of a “typical” worker read.\footnote{356} From labor’s perspective, a worker seeking to provide for his family—“Joe Smith needs more money to buy his kids food and get them adequate clothing and provide decent shelter”\footnote{357}—was less threatening than a worker whose unionism was motivated by political ideology.

By the early 1950s, the worker, narrowly defined, had been incorporated into the symbolic center of American identity and was often interchangeable with the “average” American. That meant a great deal. But unions’ and liberals’ emphasis on (white) workers’ middle class status worked at cross-purposes even to their relatively modest aims. Conceding that the injustices faced by white working class people had effectively been resolved, or were resolvable under the existing system, sapped the moral urgency of the labor-liberal cause. “The political chemistry of the New Deal worked a double transformation: the ascendancy of labor and the eclipse of the ‘labor question,’”\footnote{358} Steve Fraser has argued. The “labor question” could be eclipsed because white working class disadvantage all but vanished from elite discourse. As argued in Chapter 1, the

\footnote{356}“Worker Loses His Class Identity,” Business Week, July 11, 1959.  
\footnote{357}Walter Reuther in Cohen, A Consumer’s Republic, 155.  
dominant New Deal-era narrative of industrialism’s social consequences centered on white workers, especially male industrial workers. It did not incorporate in any meaningful sense slavery or the experiences of workers of color and treated pre-industrial America as an egalitarian and largely just society of independent producers undone by the rise of industrial society and the greed of industrial tycoons. The industrial order of the 1950s could easily be read as a resolution to that inherently limited story, in part because the workers it spotlighted the most had seen the most conspicuous gains.

A more capacious understanding of the problem of industrial modernity would have required much more attention to (in modern terms) the intersection of class, race, and gender than mainstream left-of-center elites offered. Most political figures who could offer it were under suspicion of radicalism and/or unable to access mainstream forums. One of the long-term consequences of the narrow understanding of the American working class has been that issues of class narrowly understood—unionization, the workplace, corporate power—often do not appear in elite discourse unless disadvantaged white men appear in elite discourse. When the institutions chiefly responsible for bringing white working class grievances onto the front pages of newspapers rarely did so any longer, the urgency that had been attached to those issues declined. Organized labor, at the height of its power, had an extremely strong claim to speak at the elite level for “labor” and the “worker” as homogenous categories. The power of unions’ claims to represent workers now served to minimize the visibility of (white) working class disadvantage, as the heterogeneity of experiences even among white workers went unnoticed.
II: Affluence and (White) Working Class Politics

While few mainstream elites disputed the existence of mass prosperity, more disagreement surrounded the political implications of (white) workers’ upward mobility. Contemporary analysis can be usefully condensed into three broad narratives, detailed below. (To be clear, these were not mutually exclusive, and the differences were sometimes subtle; the analysis below aims to draw out differences and points of overlap.) First, a significant number of observers thought newly affluent (white) workers likely to retain their labor-liberal allegiance. Even if their circumstances had changed, in this view, these voters still understood their interests as opposed to those of the wealthy, and they still had more to gain than lose from liberal programs. They remembered the Depression vividly and would not abandon unions and the Democratic Party, so central in their rise to prosperity.

For others, however, the sharp income-based divisions that had marked national politics during the Roosevelt period would not last. In the second narrative detailed below, as white workers eagerly seized the opportunity to assimilate to the broad (white) middle class through suburban homeownership and consumerism, they would adopt the conservative views typical of professional-class homeowners concerned about taxes and inflation. The third narrative outlined below predicted a different kind of conservative turn: politics in a period of economic abundance would focus less on immediate material interests and more on issues like civil rights, civil liberties, and enlightened administration, where lower-income and less educated whites would likely be more conservative than their more educated counterparts. While #2 and #3 both predicted a
turn to the right among white workers, they drew on different understandings of class and politics. #2 remained situated within the dominant framework in which a middle class mentality was tied to conservatism and a working class mentality to liberalism. #3 pushed back on that conventional wisdom in a way that foreshadows discourse of the 1960s and after.

1. (White) workers would remain a central part of a solid liberal majority

From the mid-1930s to mid-1940s, the understanding of the American electorate as “normally Democratic” pitted a nonaffluent majority against an affluent minority. “The strength of the Democratic Party is evidenced by the hold which it has upon the middle and lower economic levels,” George Gallup explained in early 1946. “The majority of voters look upon the Republican Party as the party of wealth and consider the Democratic Party as the party of the people.” While its influence fluctuated and it certainly did not go unchallenged, this basic mapping of the electorate retained strength throughout the 1940s and 1950s, with interpreters convinced that liberalism would remain a majority force for the foreseeable future. Admittedly, (white) workers had more than before, but they would not cease to identify as workers, in this view; the few would always have more than the majority, and workers’ gains needed protection from elites continually eager for a larger share of the pie.

Harry Truman’s victory in 1948 was interpreted as one of the most significant pieces of evidence for this claim. To be clear, by the late 1940s, only a few would

contend that white workers desired or would come to desire an agenda significantly to the
left of the New Deal.\textsuperscript{360} White workers could still be positioned as a force pushing for a
more progressive future within the framework of postwar liberalism. Truman, by no
means a favorite of labor-liberals early in his presidency, had adopted an electoral
strategy that called for him to emulate FDR’s indictments of “economic royalists” (“If
you let the Republicans get control of the government, you will be making America an
economic colony of Wall Street”…“The battle lines of 1948 are the same as they were in
1932”).\textsuperscript{361} His victory—stunning to journalists and political insiders, who had been
almost unanimously convinced that Republican Thomas Dewey would win—suggested
that the Roosevelt coalition could hold without Roosevelt and perhaps indefinitely.
Truman’s victory “confirms an old revolution,” \textit{Fortune} commented—making clear, in
other words, that the political cleavages of the New Deal still held. The magazine
dubbed Truman “Our Laboristic President” and predicted that Republicans would not
regain power “until they have found a way to interest the workingman and the farmer in
the Republican cause.”\textsuperscript{362}

The most common explanation for liberalism’s continued appeal to (white)
workers pointed to material self-interest. This could be framed negatively, as in the ever-
present conservative allegation that New Dealers won by doling out benefits to voters, or
positively, as when Democrats ran on the narrative that they had led the country from

\textsuperscript{360} In the CIO’s early years, leftists and labor activists had debated whether or not they ought to work
within the Democratic Party or attempt to build a farmer-labor or labor-left third party. The mainstream of
the labor movement invested heavily in working within the Democratic Party. The disastrous 1948 third
party candidacy of former Roosevelt vice president Henry Wallace, backed by attenuated Popular Front
forces and assailed by anticommunist liberals, served as a final death knell for hopes of a labor-left third
party.

\textsuperscript{361} Mark Byrnes, \textit{The Truman Years, 1945-1953} (London: Routledge, 2000), 124.

\textsuperscript{362} “Our ‘Laboristic’ President,” \textit{Fortune}, December 1948.
poverty to prosperity (“You never had it so good”…“Truman and Prosperity—or Dewey and Depression”). In either case, the implication was that the labor-liberal program obviously offered the majority more material benefits than did the opposition. 1952 press reports noted a refrain among Detroit autoworkers: “Vote Democratic and live like a Republican.”363 A 1952 New York Times feature identified as key Northern Democratic constituencies “the masses of urban workers and wage earners” and “the national and racial minority groups.” These groups, the Times suggested, were “‘liberal’ in a largely material and selfish way,” with “more to gain than to lose through high wages, greater Government benefits of whatever sort, effective labor legislation and laws to improve the social and economic status of minorities.”364 The analysis reflected an assumption that would collapse within fifteen years: urban white and black workers were natural political allies, and both would gain from liberal programs whatever those were.

While the dominant view linked majority support for liberal programming to simple self-interest, some saw Northern white workers as genuine adherents to a liberal creed who wanted justice and progress, not simply “more.” In a telling mea culpa published shortly after the 1948 election, New York Times political reporter James Reston suggested that journalists had believed in a certain Dewey victory because they had not accorded enough weight to a few simple facts: Americans had enjoyed prosperity under Democrats, more voters had become “sensitive to the influences of organized labor,” and “a whole generation had grown up under the strong influences of the Roosevelt era.”

Because journalists had missed the overriding “political influence of the Roosevelt era on the thinking of the nation,” Reston concluded, “we were wrong, not only on the election, but, what’s worse, on the whole political direction of our time.” In a 1956 study of Detroit autoworkers, social scientist Arthur Kornhauser and his colleagues argued that these UAW members’ “predominant political outlook or ‘philosophy’ is clearly one that conceives of workers’ and unions’ goals as opposed at many points to those of business and wealthy groups.” To be sure, many workers were relatively “passive and unaroused” politically, but “if they go conservative, it will not be because economic prosperity compels it but because liberal leadership…fails to reach them with convincing alternative social-political interpretations that fit their own fundamental needs.” America would not revert back to pre-New Deal politics because prosperity had come, in this view; the successes of liberals and organized labor had left a broad and lasting imprint on public opinion.

For political observers who saw white workers as a reliable liberal constituency, that faith had deep roots; it did not fall apart in the face of unfavorable political outcomes. This has a great deal to do with the way liberals thought about (white) working class politics. As argued in the coda to Chapter 1, many liberals held to a teleological understanding of (white) working class political consciousness; they expected workers to become more aware and politically sophisticated over time. In this framework, problems in the near term would be less problematic in the long term: for

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instance, racism would lessen as whites came to understand that it was wrong and counter
to their own self-interest. In the short term, however, (white) workers could be readily
misled by external forces working against their interests—advertising, the conservative
press, deceitful politicians, business-funded campaign messaging. CIO political officials
generally held to this basic framework. They saw the rank and file as generally liberal—
though apathetic and uninformed—and sought to educate workers about politics and
motivate them to vote. “Once they know the facts there is no doubt about how they will
vote,” CIO Political Action Committee director Jack Kroll argued:

> Will any man knowingly vote to pay heavy taxes, just so others who make much
> more than he will be able to pay small taxes? Will any man knowingly vote to
> pay higher prices for his food and clothes and shelter in order to pile up huge
> profits for big business? Will any man knowingly vote to give away his
> property…so that a few people can make money out of it? Knowingly, people do
> not do such things. Our major job is to see that they know.367

Beyond the key assumptions of CIO political action—the CIO worker/voter is a
breadwinning male concerned with the costs of domestic life; the chief political cleavage
pits the wealthy against the majority—what is particularly suggestive about this quote is
its repetition of “knowingly.” Attributing conservative votes among workers to a lack of
knowledge (essentially, false consciousness), as Kroll did here, made it difficult for
liberals to understand workers drawn to conservative politics as acting with full
consciousness or exerting agency.

This way of thinking about political agency comes through clearly in CIO
political analysis from the late 1940s to mid-1950s, which typically credited favorable
political outcomes to the self-assertion of a natural liberal majority and unfavorable

outcomes to factors like low turnout and misinformation. The 1946 Congress had assembled “a record of benefit for the few and injustice for the many,” a 1947 pamphlet explained, because “56,000,000 Eligible Americans Failed to Vote…The majority of us did not elect this Congress. WE DIDN’T VOTE AT ALL.” Two years later, the “Victory Edition” of PAC’s newsletter celebrated Truman’s victory in typical majoritarian terms: “The people took back control of the United States on November 2.” National CIO-PAC’s 1950 midterms postmortem noted Democratic weakness on issues like inflation, taxes, anticommunism, and foreign affairs, but continued to emphasize voter apathy and confusion: “While Democrats have good, defensible positions…their arguments are mainly intellectual, while the charges of the Republican opposition are loaded with emotion,” and “assisted by almost unanimous support from the daily press.” Eisenhower’s victory in 1952, national CIO-PAC emphasized, “was a personal one in every sense of the word… It was victory for a popular hero, constantly

370 CIO-PAC Research Department, “Report on 1950 Elections,” March 9, 1951, box 14, folder 28, CIO-PAC Papers. Similar readings can be found in Americans for Democratic Action, “House of Representatives 1950 Election Analysis,” December 7, 1950 (“If the…[Democratic Party in Congress] construes the ’50 election as a mandate of disapproval of the liberal policies of the Truman Administration, the political task for the Democrats, and especially liberal Democrats, will be much more difficult in ’52”) and UAW-CIO Legislative Department, “Analysis of the 1950 Off-Year Election,” November 15, 1950 (“By no stretch of the imagination can the 1950 results be considered as an anti-Fair Deal mandate”), both box 52, folder 2, UAW Political Action Department: Roy Reuther Records, Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI (hereafter cited as “UAW Political Action Records”); Republicans would be “taking a long chance” if they interpreted their victories in the 1946 elections as “a mandate to destroy the achievements of the Roosevelt era,” the New Republic argued. “They won control of Congress not because the country longed for Republicanism…but because in almost every state in the country a vote for G.O.P. was the only way in which a hazy discontent could be expressed.” “Picking Up The Pieces,” New Republic, November 16, 1946.
before the electorate in a heroic role since 1942, and cannot be construed as a repudiation of the principles of the New Deal and the Fair Deal.”

The weaknesses of this framework—in which liberals won when the natural majority voted its interests and lost when that majority stayed home or was misled—came into sharp relief on issues of race. One suggestive example can be found in 1940s Detroit, where UAW-backed candidates lost to race-baiting conservatives in three mayoral elections over six years. In 1949, liberal George Edwards faced Albert Cobo, a conservative businessman running on opposition to so-called “Negro invasions” of white neighborhoods. The UAW-led labor campaign against Cobo played in the typical key of labor-liberal populism (“Who is the Big Business Candidate? ‘Cobo, the Republican Tax Collector’”…“Edwards has been in the peoples corner. Big business wants Cobo”). One flyer put the issue succinctly, in the words of a classic union song: “The question in this election is which side are you on? You know which side you are on—the same side with George Edwards and the Union.”

The election result reflected the fact that the union was not the only “side” to which white workers belonged—Cobo won by approximately 100,000 votes, the largest margin in any Detroit mayoral election to that point.

Several groups of UAW officials met shortly after the election to discuss what had gone wrong. They offered a wide range of explanations, collected in two compelling

371 “Election Results” [internal 1952 document], box 14, folder 12, CIO-PAC Papers.
373 1949 campaign leafleting, box 62, folders 6, 7, and 10, UAW Political Action Records.
documents. Some attributed the result to their side’s campaign missteps (“I think we would have won if we had a program…a concrete program”…“Ringing door bells on Monday when women were in the basement was bad. I am convinced that sound cars should be at busy intersections rather than making noise in residential communities and waking babies up”…“[Canvassers] stop ringing door bells and have a few drinks and by the time noon arrives they are pretty tight”). One saw a manifestation of the power of the media (“I think we got the vote out but…the people were conditioned wrong. I don’t know who conditioned them, whether it was the newspapers or radio”). Several officials identified more a deeply rooted problem for union political action—a political consciousness rooted in the intersection of race and homeownership. “I think…we are dealing with people who have a middle class mentality. Even in our own UAW, the member is either buying a home, owns a home or is going to buy one,” one unionist noted. “It boils down to this,” another remarked bitterly, “that the Union helps their economic condition until they can have a front porch and for that they become capitalists.” This imposed obvious limits on the political influence of the union: “You can tell them anything you want to but as long as they think their property is going down, it is different”…“The fellow is not going to go along with you because you give him a leaflet or because Philip Murray says to do so.”

What these unionists were getting at, at bottom, was the viability of assuming that (white) workers were or would become liberal voters. In a prominent liberal understanding of working class political consciousness, shared membership in the

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374 West Side Coordinators Meeting, November 16, 1949 and East Side Meeting, November 17, 1949, box 62, folders 11 and 13, UAW Political Action Records. All quotes in this paragraph are taken from these documents.
“people,” shared economic interests, and shared opposition to big business and reactionary politics would ultimately outweigh divisions within the liberal coalition. The organizer who stressed that he and his colleagues were “dealing with people who have a middle class mentality” expressed a different view. Workers would support the union insofar as it helped them to increase their standard of living, in this view, but they would have no interest in a labor-liberal program that appeared to threaten their gains. This reading of white workers’ relationship with liberalism would not become dominant until the 1960s. Even in the midcentury period sometimes remembered as the height of liberal influence, however, prominent political analysts devoted considerable attention to factors motivating a turn to the right among (white) workers. The next two sections turn to those arguments.

2. White workers as part of a right-leaning middle class majority

A second prominent argument about the political consequences of mass affluence predicted that white workers’ rapid absorption into a broad middle class would erode the income-based cleavages that had undergirded liberal success since the New Deal. In this view, a liberal program drawing an opposition between the majority and the privileged few would appeal to voters only in a period of Depression and scarcity. As their circumstances changed, their politics would change as well. “The real roots of the Roosevelt coalition were established along economic lines,” pollster Louis Harris argued. “As we move into an increasingly middle-class society, these lines are disappearing.”375 “The proportion of the population who can easily identify themselves with ‘the common

375 Harris, Is There a Republican Majority?, 213.
man’ is declining,” political scientist Angus Campbell put it in 1956. “If the current high level of economic activity in this country is maintained for a sufficient period to bring about a significant upgrading in class identifications, the Republican Party is likely to collect a sizable dividend.”376 One Democratic official offered a succinct version of the thesis: “The trouble is, we ran out of poor people.”377

For some observers who held to this view, the prosperity of the postwar period had already transformed millions of urban Democrats into Republicans. This transformation was a matter of lifestyle, not simply income, with suburbanization the chief cause. In the dominant interpretation, suburban life produced political and cultural homogeneity. *Newsweek* offered a typical formulation in 1957: “When a city dweller packs up and moves his family to the suburbs, he usually acquires a mortgage, a power lawn mower, and a backyard grill…Often, although a lifelong Democrat, he also starts voting Republican.”378 The New Deal, liberal historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. argued, “gave millions of people new economic and social status and enabled them to become ‘respectable’…They moved out of the cities into the suburbs, abandoned tenements for bungalows, bought automobiles, and became Republicans.”379 In most accounts, new suburbanites (consciously or unconsciously) jettisoned their liberal views chiefly because

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they wanted to fit in with their neighbors. By changing political affiliations, they could leave their immigrant past behind and blend into an affluent, homogenous existence.

When liberals made this argument, it typically came with a note of bitterness—they suffered politically because of the gains they had made possible. Conservatives gave the argument a different inflection: workers who became part of a middle-income suburban mainstream would easily see through liberal promises and demagoguery. “The fairly well-paid industrial worker today…has his home, his automobile, his insurance, and his children are getting a good education,” New Dealer turned conservative columnist Raymond Moley explained. “He has too much money and too much sense to believe the guff of John L. Lewis or William Green or Philip Murray about wage slavery. He knows that no one is grinding his face at the work bench. In fact, he is beginning to resent this talk that puts him in a class apart from his neighbor the white-collar worker or the small independent businessman.”

These workers had moved into what Moley called the “middle interests” of society, the symbolic center he identified “with such concepts as self-help, personal liberty, individual enterprise, and opportunity.” As a result, in this view, they could be expected to vote like small businessmen or professionals, regardless of union leaders’ efforts to persuade them otherwise.

In contemporary elite public discourse, one the most notable analysts of the consequences of white workers’ ascension to the middle class was journalist and pollster Samuel Lubell. Lubell made his name with his work on the New Deal coalition,

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381 Raymond Moley, How to Keep Our Liberty (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), 70.
especially as developed in his 1951 book *The Future of American Politics*, and with an idiosyncratic methodology viewed with skepticism by traditional pollsters but compelling to a popular audience: He parsed election returns to identify areas that would be representative of demographics of interest, visited those districts on foot, interviewed as many voters as he could, and then generalized from his interactions. Looking in depth at Lubell’s work is useful, most simply, because he was an influential figure in his own right. Though not as well known in the present day as comparable figures (Kevin Phillips, for instance), Lubell was hailed in the 1950s as “one of the top political analysts in the nation today,” “one of the accomplished political writers of this generation,” and “the nation’s leading political analyst...something of a major prophet.” More broadly, looking at Lubell’s work helps to shed light on the reasoning of contemporaries who were convinced that the era of liberal dominance was a thing of the past.

Lubell saw the changes and tensions within the New Deal coalition as the fundamental story in 1950s politics. His central research question, as he explained to an editor, centered on the “varied elements making up [the] new Democratic majority, what brought them together, the struggle now raging among these diverse groups to shape and control the destiny of this new majority, [and] whether it will hold together or split,

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382 Methods described in detail in Lubell draft, box 122, folder: “Revolt of Moderates,” Samuel Lubell Papers, Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT (hereafter cited as “Lubell Papers”). He contended that they were superior to traditional random-sample based survey research because they got at the communal rather than individual basis of public opinion.

giving the Republicans a chance to ‘come back.’”

Perhaps most of all, Lubell sought to push back on the view that the Democratic coalition would “remain [a] ‘leftist’ force”; rather, he implied, it contained “the seeds of its own conservatism.”

For Lubell, the class polarization characteristic of the New Deal was a product of a particular place and time. “When Roosevelt first took office, no segment of the population was more ready for ‘a new deal’ than the submerged, inarticulate urban masses,” he wrote. As the Democratic Party successfully brought urban new immigrant workers into the political mainstream, “awaken[ing]” them “to a consciousness of the power in their numbers,” they became “the chief carriers of the Roosevelt Revolution.” Anticipating the “culture of unity” argument later made by social and labor historians, Lubell argued that the New Deal had “drawn the same class-conscious line of economic interest across the entire country” and “subordinated the old nativistic prejudices of race and religion, which had divided the lower half of American society for so long,” bringing working Americans “a greater degree of social unity than they had ever shared before.” These two developments—working class unity and the emergence of the urban vote—brought about “the transformation of the United States from a nation with a traditional Republican majority to one with a normal Democratic majority.”

For Lubell, it was a serious mistake to assume that these changes in the electorate would mean Democratic dominance for the foreseeable future. By the beginning of the 1950s, the Democrats were no longer “an aggregation of economic ‘have-nots.’”

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385 Lubell application for Guggenheim fellowship, October 14, 1949, box 147, folder “Guggenheim Fellowship,” Lubell Papers.
Democratic groups, especially labor and urban immigrant-descended workers, had been lifted to “a ‘have’ status” and desired “not to get more but to preserve the gains of the last twenty years.” As a result, Lubell suggested, the “inner dynamics of the Roosevelt coalition” had “shifted from those of getting to those of keeping.” This introduced an inescapable instability into the Democratic coalition. When voters had nothing to lose, they experienced liberal programs, taxation, and spending as largely cost-free. When they had something to lose, they became sensitive to the costs: “Once the bite of taxes was felt, the Welfare State took on a new aspect.” Yet while the new middle class—the old Northern urban working class, in other words—had become “conservative in the manner of all middle classes,” for Lubell, its conservatism did not manifest in the traditional way, as reflexive antistatism. For voters whose “memories of discrimination, poverty and the Great Depression” were vivid, the Democrats, not the Republicans, would be the “conservative” choice—at least for a time.387 “Because we have slipped into the habit of considering the Republicans as the nation’s conservative party and the Democrats as the liberal party,” this “conservative turn within the Democratic coalition” had been obscured.388

As they moved forward, Lubell emphasized, none of the key Democratic constituencies could advance further without imperiling the gains of the others. The core of the Democratic appeal had been based on the principle of government helping “have-not” Americans to rise. When Democrats offered new gains to the most disadvantaged members of their coalition, they risked “taking it away from somebody else through

inflation.” Further, while the emphasis Lubell placed on anti-black views as a factor in Northern politics is modest by 1960s standards, it was substantial by 1950s standards. Lubell saw potential peril for the liberal coalition in the fact that whites perceived blacks’ struggle for upward mobility and better housing as a threat to their efforts to assimilate and achieve middle class status. “The emotions stirred by the civil rights issue assume their most violent form,” he suggested, among whites struggling to reach middle class respectability, living in areas “along the line where expanding Negro settlement pushes in on those unable to rise higher on the social ladder…Wherever the Negro appears on the urban ladder, he puts to test the relative strengths of the economic ties binding the Roosevelt elements and the racial prejudices tugging them apart.” This model of white workers as torn between their racial prejudice and their close ties to the Democratic Party would be central to elite understandings of the political landscape from the 1960s through the 1990s. Lubell essentially arrived at this conventional wisdom ten years earlier.

Lubell and the other analysts featured in this section positioned their arguments chiefly in response to liberals who assumed the political cleavages of the New Deal would continue indefinitely. Importantly, though, the argument that financially better-off workers would turn to the right was consistent with the labor-liberal assumption that economic interest was the driving force in politics. “Keeping,” in Lubell’s terms, had simply become more important than “getting.” In this framework, economic interest trumped ideology, and the latter could quickly change to fit the former—as in the archetypical new suburbanite’s switch to the Republican Party. Further, importantly,

narratives #1 and #2 both drew on an association between conservatism and middle class norms and between liberalism and working class norms. Here a worker who turned conservative had become less like “workers” as a group. The erosion of these dual associations—middle class/conservative and working class/liberal—is one of the critical events in a study of white working class representation. It began earlier than the traditional backlash narrative lets on, as the next section shows.

3. (White) workers as more conservative than (white) professionals

The third broad narrative of postwar white working class politics raised the possibility that (white) workers might become more conservative than a (white) professional class increasingly understood as liberal. Presenting this as a single narrative requires more synthesis and indulgence than the previous two. Doing so, though, helps to show how the opposition between liberal white elites and a conservative white working class—the dominant view since the 1960s—built on intellectual work conducted in the 1940s and 1950s. In 1940s and 1950s discourse on anticommunism, racial prejudice, cultural differences between social classes, mass culture, intellectual identity, and more, it is possible to discern emergent images of (white) workers as rigid and traditionalist and of (white) professionals as elitist liberals.

Before the 1960s, a clearly established narrative suggested that the liberal governing class was different from the “average American.” A common interpretation of the New Deal in contemporary elite discourse held that liberal intellectuals had dislodged businessmen as the predominant governing elite. Critics of this trend argued that
intellectuals had no practical skills, whereas those who had been successful in business had proven their ability as leaders and administrators. Conservatives consistently argued that the New Deal empowered a dangerous and unqualified clique of intellectuals bent on intruding into Americans’ private lives. Conservative columnist Frank Kent derided them as “third rate college professors and unsuccessful welfare workers”; H. L. Mencken as “obscure and impotent fellows” raised to “the secular rank of princes of the blood.”

This line of argumentation flourished as the prominence and prestige of intellectual occupations grew: government money poured into research universities, the GI Bill swelled undergraduate enrollment, and intellectuals maintained high-level, prestigious positions in government. The 1952 Dwight Eisenhower-Adlai Stevenson campaign brought to prominence the term “egghead,” a derogatory label for a liberal intellectual. Eisenhower’s victory, charged one conservative, “demonstrated...the extreme remoteness of the ‘egghead’ from the thought and feeling of the whole of the people.” The majority, in this view, disdained those who “treated mankind as if it were a large lump of dough to be molded into shape by the confused and pushing fingers of those who, however lacking in experience, were persuaded beyond all argument that they knew best.”

For their critics, liberal intellectuals were also distinguished by their tendency to push the boundaries of conventional morality on issues of gender and sexuality. “The

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average American just does not want some expert running around prying into his life and
his personal affairs and deciding for him how he should live,” Ohio congressman
Clarence Brown commented in a 1946 hearing on the creation of a national social
scientific foundation; it would be a nonstarter, Brown stressed, if liberals hoped to
“establish some sort of organization in which there would be a lot of short-haired women
and long-haired men messing into everybody’s personal affairs and lives.”

“Nonconformity in politics is often the handmaiden of the same proclivities in sex,” two
Hearst journalists alleged in a 1951 tract deeming the nation’s capital a “femmocracy”
populated by call girls, “crackpots from the campuses, Communists, ballet-dancers and
economic planners.” In the culture of the liberal governing class, they charged, “the
women wore flat-heeled shoes and batik blouses, and went in for New Thought. The
men, if you could call some of them that, wore their hair longer than we do, read
advanced literature, and talked about the joys of collectivism.”

One of the surest ways
to identify a radical, in this discourse, was to look for signs of unconventional personal
behavior—grooming or dress associated with homosexuality, marriages in which wives
held high-level professional jobs.

This understanding of “nonconformist” liberal culture was particularly prominent
in anticommunist discourse, which typically identified wealthy Eastern liberals as most
prone to communist involvement. “It has not been the less fortunate, or the members of
minority groups, who have been traitorous to this nation,” Joseph McCarthy alleged, “but
rather those who have had all the benefits that the wealthiest nation on earth has had to

394 David Paul Haney, The Americanization of Social Science: Intellectuals and Public Responsibility in the
offer…the bright young men who were born with silver spoons in their mouths.”

A prominent stereotype of communist sympathizers in government centered on an effete, homoerotic clique of State Department officials from old New England WASP families: a “conspiracy of the gentlemen”…“the pompous diplomat in striped pants with phony British accent”…“striped-pants snob”…“dilettante diplomats…with kid gloves in perfumed drawing rooms”…“boys in striped pants.” Anticommunism and the persecution of gay men proceeded in parallel, with allegations of homosexuality and disloyalty in the State Department prominent in the same period.

The common claim that communist ties were concentrated at the top of the social hierarchy typically came with the corollary that American workers had no interest in the false promises of the radical left. Communists might claim to speak on behalf of workers, in this view, but workers were loyal to the United States. John Birch Society founder Robert Welch dismissed communism’s claim to be a “movement of the proletariat” as “one of the biggest lies in all history. For Communism has always been imposed from the top down by the very rich, the highly educated, and the politically powerful on the suffering masses.” In the contemporary United States, Welch charged, “I can find you a lot more Harvard accents in Communist circles…than you can find me

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overalls.” 398  *American Legion* magazine, commenting on suspected Soviet collaborators brought before the House Un-American Activities Committee, stressed that the group included “no farmer or workman or so-called ‘common man.’  Without exception they were college graduates, Ph.D.’s, *summa cum laudes* and Phi Beta Kappas from Harvard, Yale, Princeton and other great colleges.” 399 Ex-communist Whittaker Chambers, whose explosive allegations of communist involvement against former State Department official Alger Hiss prompted a high-profile 1949 trial, saw the Hiss case as significant for the “jagged fissure, which it did not so much open as reveal, between the plain men and women of the nation, and those who affected to act, think and speak for them”—the elites, and only the elites defended Hiss, Chambers suggested, while ordinary Americans saw through his disloyalty. 400

One of the most consistent patterns in liberal discourse in the New Deal era is the use of the language of averageness (“common people,” “plain people”) to mark off liberals’ majority constituency from the wealthy and well connected. The more identifiable liberals became as an elite, the more that same language (“common man,” “plain men and women,” as in the previous paragraph) could undercut their claim to speak for the majority. In this context, to be “average” meant to lack significant power or wealth—which prominent liberals now had—and to remain within a cultural and political mainstream where radicalism and non-normative sexual practices had no place. It is important to stress, though, that the work of defining liberals against the “plain people”

was not performed by conservatives alone: in a pattern that would become increasingly prevalent in the 1960s, liberals who themselves felt a sense of alienation from the (white) majority adopted frames that mirrored the conservative claims against them.

Liberal intellectuals, like their political adversaries, advanced a frame in which liberal leadership meant leadership by intellectuals instead of businessmen. (“Intellectuals” is effectively synonymous with “liberals” in contemporary discourse). For contemporary liberals, there was no workable alternative to intellectuals in government—their expertise was needed to direct the complex programs of the modern state. Liberals did, however, identify intellectuals as a distinctive elite class with an unconventional outlook. “New Dealism” was not only a set of policies, historian Eric Goldman argued, but a way of looking at the world. It was “the assumption that the new was better than the old; that intellectuals ought to be leaders; that morals and religion as well as economics and politics were constantly to be re-examined…that the cocked eye was man’s most proper expression.”

Liberals also expressed concern that the growing power and prestige of intellectuals would set off dangerous anti-intellectualism within the broader public. “The practical, non-intellectual man feels uneasy” under liberal leadership, intellectual David Riesman hypothesized. “He resents the fact that his own importance, as well as his own understanding of the world, are threatened by the intellectual and the intellectual’s ability to change ideas.” Riesman predicted that American politics would increasingly be marked by “a new status warfare” between “the better educated upper middle class people” and “the groups which, by reason of rural or

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small-town location, ethnicity, or other parochialism, feel threatened by ideas." It is not difficult to see here the familiar frame in which liberalism and sophistication accompany upper middle class status.

For Riesman and his contemporaries, this kind of anti-intellectual politics manifested most clearly in the anticommunist conservatism exemplified by Joe McCarthy. The dominant liberal reading understood McCarthyism as a populist revolt against elite liberals. In a compelling 1955 essay, Riesman and Nathan Glazer framed the rise of McCarthyism as a bookend to liberals’ claim to speak for the majority. “During the New Deal days a group of intellectuals led and played lawyer for...a mass of underprivileged people,” they suggested. Now, however, “many who were once among the inarticulate masses are no longer silent” and had “reject[ed] the liberal intellectuals as guides” in favor of “right-wing demi-intellectuals.” Riesman and Glazer posited that the relationship between the liberals and the “masses” was only a temporary alliance—it relied on white workers’ submerged status, their lack of anything to protect, and their inability to speak for themselves. “The earlier leadership by the intellectuals of the underprivileged came about through a program of economic changes,” they stressed. Now raised to security, these groups remained “discontented,” but for reasons more

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difficult to alleviate—the fear of losing what they had gained, the desire to be recognized as fully American. In a prosperous but somehow still unsatisfactory existence, Riesman and Glazer wrote, these “ex-masses” “must continually seek for reasons explaining their unrest—and the reasons developed by intellectuals for the benefit of previous proletariats are of course quite irrelevant.”

The literature on McCarthyism formed part of a broader reappraisal of working-class politics among liberals. Concerns about workers’ susceptibility to dangerous, emotion-laden politics were nothing new, as emphasized in the coda to Chapter 1. However, these concerns became more central after Nazism, as it became (understandably) far more difficult for liberals to view mass politics through a rosy lens. Fascism was in part a “popular mass movement,” sociologist Talcott Parsons argued in 1942, in which “large masses of the ‘common people’ have become imbued with a highly emotional, indeed often fanatical, zeal for a cause.”

Nazis’ use of radio and film intensified concerns about the uncritical mass media audience and its susceptibility to elite manipulation (see coda to Chapter 1), a concern that came through particularly clearly in postwar criticism of industrialized popular culture. Broadly speaking,

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405 Mass culture would absorb workers’ newfound leisure time, critics warned, and would keep them at a low cultural and intellectual level. “There can be no doubt that the mass media present a major threat to man’s autonomy,” sociologist Bernard Rosenberg wrote. Before “man can transcend himself he is being dehumanized. Before he can elevate his mind, it is being deadened…At its worse, mass culture threatens not merely to cretinize our taste, but to brutalize our senses while paving the way to totalitarianism.” Bernard Rosenberg, “Mass Culture in America,” in *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, ed. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (Glencoe, Ill: Free Press, 1957), 4, 9. This volume is the most comprehensive collection of postwar mass culture criticism. Notable contemporary criticism of the mass culture critics includes Edward Shils, “Daydreams and Nightmares: Reflections on the Criticism of Mass Culture,” *Sewanee Review* 65, no. 4 (1957): 587-608; Paul Lazarsfeld, “Mass Culture Today,” in *Culture for the Millions*, ed. Norman Jacobs (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959); secondary discussions can be found in Paul Gorman, *Left Intellectuals and Popular Culture in Twentieth-Century America* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Patrick Brantlinger, *Bread
contemporaries emphasized the power of hatred to motivate political mobilization. Led by historian Richard Hofstadter, liberal scholars in the 1950s popularized a reappraisal of the populist history of the United States, in which Populism was an antimodern movement driven by psychological strains and anti-Semitism.\textsuperscript{406} A vast social scientific literature on prejudice\textsuperscript{407} identified a link between class status and tolerance and implied that lower-income American whites posed the greatest impediment to racial equality.

One key common thread in this analysis—and a key difference between understanding white workers as becoming conservative \textit{like} professionals (section #2) and becoming \textit{more} conservative than professionals (#3)—was an emphasis on psychology-based frameworks for understanding politics. These frameworks, in comparison to political economic frames, tended to yield a more pessimistic assessment of white workers’ potential as a progressive force. If political behavior ultimately


\textsuperscript{407} Particularly influential was the “Studies in Prejudice” series released in 1950 and led by Frankfurt School scholars: Theodor Adorno et al., \textit{The Authoritarian Personality} (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950); Nathan Ackerman and Marie Jahoda, \textit{Anti-Semitism and Emotional Disorder: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation} (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950); Bruno Bettelheim and Morris Janowitz, \textit{Dynamics of Prejudice} (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950); see also e.g. Samuel Stouffer, \textit{Communism, Conformism, and Civil Liberties} (New York: Doubleday, 1955); James Martin and Frank Westie, “The Tolerant Personality,” \textit{American Sociological Review} 24, no. 4 (1959): 521-28; Nathan Glazer, “The Study of Man: The Authoritarian Personality in Profile,” \textit{Commentary}, June 1950. The initial \textit{Authoritarian Personality} study suggests the continued relevance of an older understanding of the bigoted American: Adorno et al. wrote that their findings were representative of “non-Jewish, white, native-born, middle-class Americans.” This figure of the homegrown authoritarian would become displaced by (and partly incorporated into) a stereotype of the bigoted white worker.
depended on emotional and often irrational drives, whether a constituency’s objective interests were progressive was less important. What mattered most was how that constituency perceived and acted on its political interests in present-day politics.408

As the coda to Chapter 1 showed, concerns about how white workers perceived and acted upon their interests had been prevalent in left-liberal discourse throughout the Depression era. But liberal discourse in previous decades had often attributed socially undesirable behavior to material deprivation: If most workers were currently at a low level of political or cultural sophistication, that would change as their socioeconomic circumstances improved. By the 1950s, a far greater percentage of leftists and liberals had abandoned these kinds of teleological assumptions about (white) workers. The foremost reason for this was, again, the widespread belief that the formerly underprivileged had achieved economic security. As one liberal explained, “It has not been many years since [liberals] could concentrate on removing the economic and social disabilities suffered by the people, while telling themselves that when this was accomplished the proletariat would raise itself from its intellectual and cultural degradation.” Now he and his cohort were like “climbers who discover, on attaining what they had taken to be the summit, that they have only reached a plateau…We are separated from the good society by terrain far more forbidding than any we had

408 For critics, the psychologically-inflected vocabulary of status anxiety, mass culture, the “paranoid style,” authoritarianism, and so on were products of disappointed ex-leftists who sought to blame the “masses” for their own failings. As Samuel Lubell uncharitably put it, “In the Thirties ‘liberals’ tended to interpret everything in economic terms, of masses, classes, and fascists. Since the economic trends have turned against their political ideas, some…seem to be seeking solace by blaming it all on psychiatric aberrations of the public.” Samuel Lubell, “The Question is Why,” New York Times, December 11, 1955.
While “today’s material conditions of life are fantastically better than we ever thought possible,” another contemporary wrote, there “would be much less cause for concern if levels of taste, thought and morals had come as far from what they were in 1933 as the average income has moved from what it was at the same time.” For these elites, once white workers’ obvious material deprivation seemed to have been eliminated, it was more difficult to overlook concerns about “taste, thought, and morals” and continue to view white workers sympathetically.

Taking multiple literatures broadly, mid-1940s through 1950s social science and political commentary offered at least four explanations for (white) workers’ higher susceptibility to racism and right-wing politics. One line of reasoning centered on education. In the dominant postwar framework—often called “racial liberalism” and exemplified by Swedish social scientist Gunnar Myrdal’s 1944 book *An American Dilemma*—racism was understood as an irrational set of beliefs in the head of the individual, reducible through education and persuasion. The idea that existing racial

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inequality did not stem from biological inferiority was difficult to grasp for the uneducated “masses of white Americans,” Myrdal wrote. Environmental explanations for social inequality, he suggested, “tax knowledge and imagination heavily…To conceive that apparent differences in capacities and attitudes could be cultural in origin…requires difficult and complicated thinking about a multitude of mutually dependent variables, thinking which does not easily break into the lazy formalism of unintellectual people.” More broadly, in this view, effective democratic citizenship required critical thinking and respect for free expression and the rights of others—skills that required cultural capital. “A liberal outlook is much more likely to emerge among people in a somewhat secure social and economic situation and with a background of education,” Myrdal argued. “The problem for political liberalism…appears to be first to lift the masses to security and education and then work to make them liberal.”

In a second common line of argumentation, poor whites vented or displaced frustration with their economic status through racism, and they held most tightly to racism simply because they possessed little aside from whiteness. The economically insecure white man was “afraid to lose his own feeling of superiority,” the Journal of Social Issues explained. “If he did he might have to face the fact that he wasn’t succeeding as well as he wished—that he was unable to realize the American dream.” If a man invested in white supremacy felt “downhearted and uncertain of his job, [or] if he is living in poverty and squalor—at least he can feel that he has something in his make-up

\footnotesize{House, 2008); or compare Myrdal to the essays in Rayford Logan, ed., *What the Negro Wants* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944). Also instructive is the comparison between Myrdal and Ralph Bunche, the lead American researcher on the project. Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal*, 121ff.

\footnotesize{Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, 97-99, 73. See also e.g. Herbert McClosky, “Conservatism and Personality,” *American Political Science Review* 52, no. 1 (1958): 27-45.}
that is superior to others.”*⁴¹³ It is important to note that leftists also generally attributed white working class racism to economic deprivation and competition for scarce resources.⁴¹⁴ A key difference lies in the implication that educated and economically secure whites would make better allies precisely because they did not compete with blacks and thus felt less threatened by them. As Myrdal put it, “the Negro’s friend—or the one who is least unfriendly—is still rather the upper class of white people, the people with economic and social security who are truly a ‘noncompetitive group.’”⁴¹⁵

Third, contemporaries suggested, those who had recently attained middle-class or middle-income status would be most opposed to anything that seemed to threaten it. Political scientist Robert Lane’s work on “why the American common man believes as he does” found that these (white) working class men—as distinct from the “lower classes”—did not “want equality.” These “stable breadwinners, churchgoers, voters, family men” had achieved stability “through hard work and sometimes bitter sacrifices,” Lane

⁴¹⁴ White workers’ susceptibility to racist appeals, for most Popular Front activists, did not mean that African Americans should not ally with them. Blacks’ position was ultimately most contingent on the gains of workers in general, in the predominant view. Racist attitudes among white workers were irrational and damaging, but the whites chiefly responsible for racial inequality were elites who profited from a divided working population. Progressives would need to educate white workers and turn them towards unity, Popular Front liberals stressed; however, because racism was in large part a product of economic deprivation and competition for scarce jobs, the problems of both black and white workers could only be truly resolved through a broad-based economic agenda. Walter Reuther offered a characteristic version of this argument when he identified “hostility toward minorities” as “a product of irrational emotions and impulses…bred and grown strong in an economic environment of scarcity.” “Only in…a new society” marked by a “fundamental [economic] reconstruction” could “the Negro hope to end his tragic search for justice.” Nelson Lichtenstein, *Walter Reuther: The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 210. On Popular Front frameworks for understanding racism among white workers see e.g. Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Singh, *Black is a Country*. These views retained some influence in postwar prejudice research. The “cause of irrational hostility is in the last instance to be found in social frustration and injustice,” Max Horkheimer and colleagues wrote in their influential *Studies in Prejudice*. Zoltán Tarr, *The Frankfurt School: The Critical Theories of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2011), 102. The psychological approach was not incompatible with this belief; Horkheimer wanted to emphasize.

stressed; the idea of seeing the “lower orders raised and one’s own hard-earned status
given…as a right and not a reward for effort, seems to them desperately wrong.”416
Lane’s argument here pushed back on the liberal view of all nondominant groups as part
of the same “people” or “majority”—distinctions that elites overlooked meant a great
deal to those who had worked hard for modest gains.

A fourth prominent line of argumentation held that working class cultural norms
and ways of life—family life especially—drew workers to right-wing politics. A
growing academic literature in the 1940s and 1950s focused on understanding class
differences in cultural terms. One scholar writing in 1947 outlined the basic premise:
“Social classes in America constitute somewhat separate sub-groups in American society,
each with its own cultural attributes of behavior, ideas, and life-situations.”417 Studies
examined differences across a range of areas, from childrearing to mental health to
participation in political activity.418 Where the dominant view in elite public discourse
tied rising incomes and consumerism to cultural homogenization, this social scientific
literature stressed that workers with higher incomes did not cease to be distinctively
working class. While “today’s wage earners do have tremendous buying and consuming

416 Robert Lane, “The Fear of Equality,” American Political Science Review 53, no. 1 (1959): 35, 48; Lane,
Political Ideology: Why the American Common Man Believes as He Does (New York: The Free Press,
1962).
417 Milton Gordon, “Kitty Foyle and the Concept of Class as Culture,” American Journal of Sociology 53,
no. 3 (1947): 210. For examples of this literature, see e.g. Walter Goldschmidt, “Social Class in America—
America (Chicago: Science Research Associates, 1949); Walter B. Miller, “Lower Class Culture as a
Generating Milieu of Gang Delinquency,” Journal of Social Issues 14, no. 3 (1958): 5-19; August
Hollingshead and Frederick Redlich, Social Class and Mental Illness (New York: John Wiley and Sons,
1958); Allison Davis and Robert Havighurst, “Social Class and Color Differences in Child-Rearing,”
American Sociological Review 11, no. 6 (1946): 698-710.
418 “‘Low status people,’” one social scientist explained in a typical account, “participate less in the thought
and social life of their community…are more naive and credulous; have less confidence in their ability to
learn new skills; are disinclined to express an opinion.” Genevieve Knupfer, “Portrait of the Underdog,”
power,” one researcher put it, “they are not just like everyone else”—meaning educated white professionals—“now that they have money to spend.”

This finding was of particular interest to marketers hoping to appeal to white workers, the impetus behind much of the research on working class culture in this period.

The most infamous argument about the political distinctiveness of the working class was developed in the late 1950s by sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset, under the title of “working class authoritarianism.” Briefly, Lipset contended that the “lower-class way of life produces individuals with rigid and intolerant approaches to politics.” Workers’ “unsophisticated perspective…greater suggestibility, absence of a sense of past and future…inability to take a complex view, greater difficulty in abstracting from concrete experience, and lack of imagination” excluded them from meaningful participation in political debate, in this view. Because of the rigidity of working class parenting practices, the “lower-class individual” was “likely to have been exposed to punishment, lack of love, and a general atmosphere of tension and aggression since early childhood”; all experiences likely to “produce deep-rooted hostilities” that emerged later in life as “ethnic prejudice” and “political authoritarianism.” Individuals with a “relative lack of economic and psychological security” also tended to relieve tension via “the

419 Burleigh Gardner, introduction to Lee Rainwater, Richard Coleman, and Gerald Handel, Workingman’s Wife: Her Personality, World and Life Style (New York: Oceana Publications, 1959), xi. On this point, see especially Bennett Berger, Working-Class Suburb: A Study of Auto Workers in Suburbia (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960), which challenged the notion that white workers’ move to suburbia would cause a distinct working class culture to disappear; for Berger, if “a whole stratum has collectively raised its standard of living…by buying new homes in the suburbs,” the “nature of the stratum itself…remains largely unchanged,” and it would be “a great mistake to equate an income which permits most of the basic amenities of what the middle class calls ‘decent’” with [with] becoming middle class.” Berger, Working-Class Suburb, 23.

venting of hostility against a scapegoat,” Lipset argued. In sum, the working class tended towards a view of “politics and personal relationships in black-and-white terms, a desire for immediate action, [and] an impatience with talk and discussion.”

Lipset’s view of the working class was more alarmist than the literature as a whole but generally consistent with it. The imagery that emerged from social scientific and marketing literature portrayed (white) workers as rigid, traditionalist, family-centered, and distrustful of the outside world. Because they were the primary target of advertising, white working class women drew more attention than white working class men. Marketers understood the white working class woman as a housewife who lived an exceedingly narrow life focused on her home and family and had little knowledge of or inclination towards the outside world. Journalist Vance Packard, summarizing the consensus in 1957, identified her as “Mrs. Middle Majority”:

Mrs. Middle Majority has a fine moral sense of responsibility and builds her whole life around her home. On the other hand she lives in a narrow, limited world and is quite timid about the outside world….She works harder than other women, her life has very narrow routines, she likes to deal only with familiar things and tends to view anything outside her narrow world as dangerous and threatening…She finds it difficult to manipulate ideas in an original way and is not very adventurous.
“Mrs. Middle Majority” had no identity beyond her role as wife and mother—to researchers, she was, in the words of the title of one of the most notable 1950s studies of working class culture, *Workingman’s Wife*. White working class men, as they appeared in the social scientific literature, tended to be figured as “traditional, ‘old-fashioned,’ somewhat religious, and patriarchal.” 423 Above all, in this discourse, working class life was simple, routinized, and repetitive. Here white workers had some admirable qualities—though rigid and not particularly intelligent, they were devoted to those within their circle. But there was little in this emerging vision of (white) workers that supported an understanding of the white working class as an essential part of an informed or progressive citizenry.

Liberal scholars in the postwar period worked to understand very difficult and important questions—why people could follow an ideology like Nazism, what caused racial prejudice, why bullies with no regard for the truth could gain such incredible power. Their concerns about mass politics should not be written off as simple elitism. But a significant takeaway from this work, particularly as it bled into social commentary and journalism, was that educated and sophisticated thinkers about politics could not have faith in what one contemporary called “the basic assumption of democracy—that ordinary men and women possess good sense.” 424

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the postwar middle class—as a symbol and (in part) as an actually existing social formation—gained such power because a wide range of political actors had a stake in incorporating white industrial workers into the symbolic center of the American polity. Secure, happy workers occupied a crucial position in the vision of America that elites hoped to convey to prospective international allies. Their advancement proved capitalism’s evolution from tycoon days and the social responsibility exercised by modern business. It also served as vital evidence of unions’ successes and mainstream status. Even in a period of substantial consensus, though, contemporaries could read the ascent of (white) industrial workers to middle-income status quite differently: as proof of the long-term dominance of American culture by a middle class mentality, for instance, or, conversely, the consolidation of the changes brought by the new liberal governing philosophy.

As Chapter 1 argued, one of the achievements of the labor-liberal alliance was to fundamentally alter how elites understood the American electoral majority. It is useful to conclude this chapter by asking to what extent the widespread emphasis on mass affluence undermined, reversed, or solidified those changes. The view that modernity required and the majority demanded the protection of unions and the state maintained hegemony throughout the period. The widespread emphasis on working class affluence heightened the symbolic importance of (white) workers, as their prosperity and contentment served for so many as chief evidence of the goodness of American society. No mainstream elites accorded them—publicly at least—anything less than full
citizenship. As has long been noted, the first Republican presidential administration since the New Deal accepted the basic New Deal understanding of the modern electorate. Even conservatives who opposed New Deal reforms in general could not display indifference to industrial workers’ welfare; they argued instead that those who claimed to represent workers undermined workers’ wellbeing.

The view that the majority might support a far-reaching left/liberal politics did not fare so well, even while the continued power of the labor-liberal understanding of working class identity helped to consign libertarianism to the margins. Interpreters identified clear limits on the kinds of politics that would be realistic in a post-scarcity age. To be sure, there were significant differences of opinion about the future course of (white) workers’ politics. Some predicted that the basic cleavages of the New Deal era would continue, in somewhat muted form, for the foreseeable future; for others, domestic politics would be centered on a broad, comfortable suburban middle class primarily focused on protecting its gains; alternatively, the material divisions of the New Deal period would be supplanted by cultural antagonisms that placed white workers ever more on the right side of the ledger, opposed to liberalism. But only strong partisans could imagine majority support for a politics to the left of New Deal liberalism or to the right of moderate Republicanism. Left/liberal faith in white workers as a key progressive force was a faith founded on those workers’ objective economic interests. When their economic interests appeared well served by the existing system, that faith could not be easily sustained.
“New Dealism, having labored mightily to lift low-income Americans, found that it had created a nation of the middle class,” historian Eric Goldman wrote in 1956. The dominant view prior to the New Deal had understood the United States as a “nation of the middle class,” but the middle class Goldman referenced was different. Labor-liberalism had a great deal of success in shifting dominant understandings of American identity such that proud unionism, support for “big government,” or non-Nordic ancestry did not disqualify an American from membership in the normative middle class and the values mapped to it—individualism, self-reliance, the work ethic. A white steelworker who prized his seniority and distrusted his employer did not violate the work ethic. A white autoworker who bought a suburban home on a VA loan and a union wage was no collectivist. These workers, whatever the role collective economic rights had played in their enfranchisement, could be seen as advancing as individuals in a way that was less true for working class people of color. The chief symbol of their advancement was the single-family home, and the policies that supported them remained relatively invisible. The new middle class was more urban and suburban, less rural; it included Poles, Czechs, Italians, and Jews. It did not, as Samuel Lubell emphasized, share the old-stock middle class’s reflexive distaste for statism. But it was still a middle class; it valued moderation, stability, and self-sufficiency. The normativity of the great middle class, individualism, and the work ethic proved durable, as did their link to whiteness and the patriarchal family.

In the short term, a limited labor-liberal agenda could benefit from that normativity. As the triumphalist narrative of American prosperity was replaced in the 1960s by a focus on racial and cultural inequality and division, this was no longer the case. When longstanding understandings of middle class Americanism appeared to be under deep threat in the 1960s, belief in the political and cultural dominance of a broad, secure white majority served few left-of-center aims. As Chapter 3 details, the prevailing elite imagery of middle-income white workers changed significantly by the late 1960s—picturing them as deeply angry and alienated from society, not incorporated smoothly within it. Yet 1950s intellectual work on working class affluence deeply informed the analysis of backlash politics that displaced it.
Chapter 3: Rethinking Middle America

Since the late 1960s, “Middle America” has been one of the more durable tropes in American politics, used to refer to a traditional Americanism and a politics of resentment most often associated with the white working class, rural America, and the Midwest. Donald Trump is only the latest in a long line of populist conservatives to be deemed “Middle America’s messenger.” Yet while Middle American culture is sometimes imagined as fixed in time, the concept of “Middle America” has a history, and a significant one. It dates to the late 1960s, when the anger and alienation spurred by the civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement, and an increasingly high-profile radical left rose to the forefront of elite public discourse. “In recent years we have become aware of the emergence of Middle Americans,” sociologist Murray Friedman wrote in 1971. “Newspaper and magazine articles have been written about them, social scientists are starting to study this group, and politicians have developed elaborate strategies in an effort to use them to gain or keep power.”

The conventional story of the construction of Middle America focuses on the conservative politicians who saw opportunity in the turmoil of the period. In the conventional account, conservative electoral strategy in the late 1960s centered on appealing to the cultural values and racial fears of white working class and lower middle class voters who felt threatened by the rise of the civil rights movement and the dissent and cultural change of the period. “Middle America” was both a name for this constituency and a rhetorical trope that contemporaries, most notably Richard Nixon,

427 Murray Friedman, Overcoming Middle Class Rage (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), 15.
used to appeal to it. Reworking liberal and left populism by substituting journalists, academics, and liberal politicians for the economic elites targeted by the left, they developed a political identity that defined white workers against (white) liberal/cultural elites and African Americans. Emphasizing “their solidarity with the concerns of an imprecisely defined ‘silent majority’ of…taxpayers, white ethnics, housewives, [and] ‘Middle Americans’ who felt scorned by the New Left and besieged by powerful liberals” allowed Republicans to “capture” formerly Democratic constituencies like “ethnic Catholics…blue-collar workers, union members…Out of this maelstrom of defection there emerged a new social formation, Middle America,” the backbone of a new conservative electoral majority.\textsuperscript{428}

Nixon remains the political figure most associated with Middle America in both academic literature and popular memory. He is sometimes positioned as possessed of a unique insight into the psyche of alienated white workers. “Nixon knew in his very soul that working people would rally against a new kind of elite,” Jefferson Cowie writes.\textsuperscript{429} In both scholarly and popular accounts, he is credited with almost singlehandedly originating the “two Americas” frame that has opposed Middle America to intellectual elites, Red States to Blue States, and so on. For Rick Perlstein, “What Nixon left behind


\textsuperscript{429} Cowie, \textit{Stayin’ Alive}, 127.
was the very terms of our national self-image: the notion that there are two kinds of Americans. On the one side: Nixon’s ‘Silent Majority,’ the ‘non-shouters’: the Middle Class, Middle America…On the other side are the ‘liberals,’ the ‘cosmopolitans,’ the ‘intellectuals.’”

With one rhetorical stroke,” Matthew Lassiter argues, referencing Nixon’s 1969 speech introducing the term “Silent Majority,” “Nixon identified a new populist category that redefined how political groups strive for influence.”

The conventional account of the construction of Middle America, this chapter suggests, only captures part of the story. Middle America was as significant for liberals and journalists—the elites defined against Middle America in conservative criticism—as it was for conservatives, and the claims Nixon and his supporters made about white workers were not unique in the broader elite public discourse of the period. This chapter develops an alternative origin story for Middle America, spotlighting the work of journalists and liberal commentators who sought to understand and respond to what they saw as a sharp turn to the political right among white workers. Placing the focus on these actors suggests that Middle America—as an identity category in elite political discourse—was not the product of conservative strategy alone. Rather, it was the product of the mutually reinforcing discourses of disparate and often competing elites. Many liberals, like conservatives, argued that a vast cultural divide separated well-off and professional whites from an increasingly conservative white majority; like their

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contemporaries, they characterized this majority’s politics as marked by anxiety about change, support for traditional Americanism, and hostility to black Americans.

The centerpiece of my understanding of white working class representation since the 1960s is the notion of “elite consensus.” This is meant in the most straightforward descriptive sense: elites of divergent aims and perspectives coalesced around the same basic understanding of the politics and culture of white workers. To be sure, some elites (often conservatives) championed and romanticized white workers, while others (often liberals) were disdainful of them. However, whether white workers were viewed as reactionaries or defenders of rightful tradition, the fundamental assumptions about the group’s politics and culture were largely the same. Conservative efforts to define, claim, and appeal to a majority constituency consistently dovetailed with liberal and journalistic efforts to understand the voters many saw as the most important force in American politics. The elite consensus frame foregrounds this basic alignment. It sheds light on one of the most fundamental questions for a history of white working class representation since the 1960s: why and how the white working class became the predominant symbol of cultural traditionalism and anti-black backlash.

The short answer to this question, the next two chapters suggest, is that it made intellectual and/or strategic sense for elites leading the reaction against 1960s dissent, and for those seeking to quell that reaction, to place the white working class at the forefront of their claims. Liberal analysis of the backlash understood resistance as concentrated within the white working class, Chapter 3 suggests, in part because that reading was consistent with prevailing understandings of racism and working class culture and
because it fit a vision of society favorable to white, professional-class liberals. By placing white workers at the center of their appeals, Chapter 4 suggests, conservatives and other critics of liberalism could invest their claims with a sense of underdog status. Framing the analysis in this way should not obscure the fact that resistance to the civil rights movement and to social change was widespread within the white working class, as it was among higher-income whites and white America broadly. One key goal of Chapters 3 and 4 collectively is to convey the causes and consequences of the assumption that anti-black and traditionalist views would be found almost exclusively within the white working class. This frame allows for sounder analysis than (for instance) asking whether the stereotype of the bigoted white worker is “true” or not.

Chapter 3 is divided into two parts. Part One lays out the political context that prompted elites to speak to, for, and about Middle America—the growing elite awareness of Northern white resistance to the civil rights movement and resistance to the counterculture & anti-Vietnam War movement. Against that backdrop, both liberals and conservatives sought to label and describe those Americans who were most opposed to dissent and most dedicated to the preservation of the older ways of life dissent seemed to threaten. Part Two focuses on how contemporary liberals’ engagement with what might be called the problem of the white working class—how to explain white working class backlash and support for right-wing politicians, and what to do about it—helped to redefine the dominant elite-level view of the white worker.
**Terminology**

In this chapter, I use “Middle America” to refer to a political identity, constituency, and social type defined by middle-income whiteness, cultural and social conservatism, cultural mainstream status, anti-black racism, and/or antipathy to white liberal elites. While the boundaries of Middle America were never rigidly delineated, Middle America clearly included certain “kinds” of people and excluded others. White men doing blue-collar work—“hard hats”—stood at the forefront of the imagery around Middle America. For some interpreters, Middle America also included lower-status segments of the white-collar working white population, such as clerks and salespeople. Occasionally, conservative businessmen or professionals might be included. Excluded were African Americans, white liberal, urban, or cosmopolitan elites, feminists, political radicals, and others seen as antagonistic to traditional, mainstream Americanism.432 “Traditional” is always a fraught concept, but it had a clear meaning in contemporary discourse. Norms of hard work, self-sufficiency, the patriarchal family, heterosexuality, chastity, and a restrained self-presentation were collectively described as “traditional” values, “older” American values, or “middle class” values.

Contemporaries used other language to refer to the “kind” of people who made up Middle America: the “working class,” the “white working class,” the “lower middle class,” the “middle class,” the “Forgotten Americans,” the “Silent Majority,” the “New

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432 A comprehensive contemporary description of the key political cleavages indicated by the term Middle America can be found in political scientist Walter Dean Burnham’s *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970), 169: “Black against white, peripheral regions against the center, ‘parochials’ against ‘cosmopolitans,’ blue collar whites against both blacks and affluent liberals, the American ‘Great Middle,’ with its strong attachment to the values of the traditional American political formula, against urban cosmopolitans, intellectuals, and students who have largely left that credo behind.”
American Majority,” the “majority,” the “people,” the “workingman,” the “worker,” and the “white ethnic.” These terms were not entirely interchangeable. “White ethnic,” for instance, referred to a white worker of southern or eastern European (or sometimes Irish) descent; the “Silent Majority” and “Middle America” were more inclusive of professional or managerial-class conservatives than was, say, “working class.” Very often, though, these terms were not clearly differentiated in analysis. Here “middle class” and “working class” are not two distinct political economic categories; they are two ways of naming a group of middle-income whites distinguished by a shared cultural orientation. I have framed my argument around “Middle America” because it was both entirely new in this period and used consistently across the political spectrum. When I am referring specifically to white working class people as historical agents, I use “worker-actors.”

One of the central frameworks in the analysis of American politics after the 1960s opposes “social” and “economic” issues. That framework has been particularly common in analysis of the politics of the white working class, which is not coincidental—it entered the discourse to explain the breakup of the New Deal coalition.433 Prior to about 1970, “social issues” meant any issues of societal importance, particularly as related to social justice. Earlier in the twentieth century, the “social question” had been synonymous with the “labor question”—how to deal with the changes brought about by industrial capitalism. The first influential use of “social issues” as opposed to economic

433 To be clear, the idea that political issues could be divided under two headings—one materialist-rational-economic, the other cultural-identitarian—well predated the 1960s. It appears in the Marxian base-superstructure model, for instance, as well as in the work of 1950s observers who suggested that a different set of concerns had emerged to displace the liberalism that had characterized white workers’ politics in the 1930s and 1940s. The material/cultural split became particularly prevalent in political analysis after the 1960s, however. For a cogent critique of the material/cultural dichotomy in US liberal politics, see Lisa Duggan, The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003).
issues came in the 1970 book *The Real Majority*, written by a pair of conservative Democrats who warned that any party losing touch with the “unyoung, unpoor, unblack” majority would be promptly removed from power. Here the “Social Issue”—also called “law and order, backlash, antiyouth, malaise, change, alienation”—was understood as “a new...issue powerful enough that under certain circumstances it can compete in political potency with the older economic issues”\(^{434}\) that had ensured Democratic dominance.

It is important to note that the opposition between “social” and “economic” issues—as with any conceptual framework opposing economics and culture—has clear limitations. The framework largely restricts the realm of the “economic” to the issues most associated with New Deal liberalism—organized labor, regulatory policy, government intervention in the economy as a basic principle. From the 1970s to the 1990s, analysts repeatedly designated as “social issues” issues with obvious political economic significance, including busing, welfare, efforts to improve the representation of women and people of color in the workplace, the Equal Rights Amendment, and the gay rights movement.\(^{435}\) In some cases, conservatism on “social issues” seems to be simply a euphemism for racism.\(^{436}\) There has been a clear tendency to understand “economic issues” as in effect what the imagined average voter (typically a middle-income white heterosexual man) might see as economic. The effect was to detach issues associated


\(^{435}\) A 1981 article by Seymour Martin Lipset gives a good sense of what was wrongly relegated to the realm of the “non-economic” in this discourse: “Post-industrial politics is increasingly concerned with non-economic or social issues—a clean environment, a better culture, equal status for women and minorities, the quality of education, peaceful international relations, greater democratization, and a more permissive morality.” Seymour Martin Lipset, “Party Coalitions and the 1980 Election,” in *Party Coalitions in the 1980s* (San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1981), 23-24.

\(^{436}\) As commentator Chris Matthews remarked during the 2016 election cycle, “I don’t want to say it, but West Virginian voters are, you know—conservative on social issues—but there’s another word for that.” Connor Kilpatrick, “Burying the White Working Class,” *Jacobin*, May 13, 2016.
with people of color, women, and LGBTQ people from political economy. The framework also encourages a reading of liberal politics among white workers as motivated by straightforward material rewards alone rather than solidarity or the pursuit of dignity and fairness.

In short, my view is that the social vs. economic issues framework can be, if not handled in a careful way, very often counterproductive. I often refer to “social” and “economic” issues in the next two chapters, though, because it is difficult to accurately represent the discourse without using these concepts as contemporaries used them. It has often been argued that white workers began to be understood as conservative in the 1960s, but this is not specific enough. The emerging elite consensus framed white workers as conservative on social issues. Very few elites saw white workers as economic conservatives devoted to a business or austerity agenda or the sanctity of free enterprise. For contemporaries, it was precisely this bifurcated political identity that made white workers a significant swing constituency—cultural issues pulled them to the right, while economic issues pulled them to the left.437

I. The Roots of Middle America

What I call the “elite consensus” view of white working class identity—in which white workers were understood as the foremost opponents of racial and cultural liberalism—developed out of disparate elites’ overlapping responses to the political

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437 Republican strategist Lee Atwater’s formulation gives a good sense of the conventional wisdom: “Populists [Atwater’s term for white workers] have always been liberal on economics [but] populists are conservative on social issues…When Republicans are successful in getting certain social issues to the forefront, the populist vote is ours.” Atwater quoted in Thomas Edsall, “New GOP Chief Renowned for Dividing Foes,” Washington Post, January 20, 1989.
context of the mid- to late 1960s. Staunch opposition to the civil rights movement, the
counterculture, the anti-Vietnam War movement, and the rapid pace of change, including
and especially among Northern white workers, became one of the central themes in elite
public discourse; as a result, older political assumptions—about Democrats’ advantage
with white workers and Northern whites’ basic support for civil rights—eroded
considerably. By the late 1960s, multiple observers—most notably Richard Nixon and
his supporters—saw blue-collar whites as the core of a patriotic, moral, and traditionalist
anti-liberal majority held together by opposition to dissent. New political categories
(“Middle America,” the “Silent Majority”) emerged to describe this constituency, while
older ones (“workers,” the “middle class”) took on new meaning.

Resistance to the civil rights movement among Northern whites

The immediate roots of Middle America’s rise to prominence lie first and
foremost in the increasing salience for 1960s white elites of Northern white resistance to
the civil rights movement. For decades, Northern white worker-actors had been
“defending” their neighborhoods against integration, often violently, and Northern
politicians had been successfully drawing on racial appeals\(^{438}\), but a significant majority
of white elites simply did not grasp the political implications of race outside the South, in

part as a result of the discursive environment they inhabited. Before the 1950s, coverage of racial issues or black communities in the Northern white press was minimal and typically stigmatizing. This began to change dramatically when the civil rights movement in the South became a major national story in the mid-1950s. As a substantial literature has documented, Northern white media and Southern black activists developed a symbiotic relationship in which, as Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff put it, the media “held in common with the civil rights movement an interest in a simple, live, electrifying story in which good confronts evil.” Through the mid-1960s, the dominant understanding of race and politics among white Northern elites hewed heavily to a frame of Southern exceptionalism, in which the problem of race in America was a Southern

439 To be clear, my argument is not that white politicians had no understanding of anti-black views among white constituents or no fear of an association with aid to African Americans. However, in early-to-mid 1960s national-level media discourse, it was still possible for white elites to believe that Northern whites were generally supportive of civil rights measures or at least not so hostile to them that the issue would entirely reshape American politics. In one 1963 column, for instance, George Gallup predicted that civil rights might be roughly equal in import to John F. Kennedy’s Catholicism in the 1960 presidential race, which was the subject of a great deal of attention (and a high-profile speech by Kennedy intended to assuage concern) but did not ultimately prove very significant in the final election results. In 1964, public opinion researchers Hyman and Sheatsley optimistically argued that “the unbroken trend of the past 20 years, and particularly its acceleration in the past decade of intensified controversy, suggests that integration will not be easily halted. In the minds and hearts of the majority of Americans the principle of integration seems already to have won. The issues that remain are how soon and in what ways the principle is to be implemented.” George Gallup, “Integration Pushed ‘Too Fast,’ Say 50%,” Los Angeles Times, September 11, 1963; Herbert Hyman and Paul Sheatsley, “Attitudes Toward Desegregation,” Scientific American, July 1964.

problem and most white Northerners were sympathetic (at worst, indifferent) to African Americans’ claims.

It was against this backdrop that elite-level observers understood what came to be called the “backlash” as new and motivated by 1960s political developments—urban rioting, the visibility of black radicalism, and (first and foremost) the national Democratic Party’s increasing ties to the civil rights movement’s agenda. Elite public discourse noted clear rumblings of resistance, for instance, after John F. Kennedy took a newly strong stance in a nationally televised 1963 speech on civil rights. Politicians noted newly unfavorable reactions to the prospect of new civil rights legislation from their white constituents: “For the first time I’m getting mail from white people saying ‘wait a minute, we’ve got some rights too,’” a Democratic senator told the Washington Post in 1963. Robert Kennedy revealed after his brother’s death that JFK had been concerned that civil rights legislation would harm the party’s prospects “even in the suburbs” and “the big cities in the North.” For the first time and even suggest the apparent novelty of this concern. As Democrats expressed unease about the political implications of Northern resistance, some Republicans saw a new strategic opportunity. “A year ago it was said that Kennedy was unbeatable,” commented one Republican strategist in 1963. “But people are not thinking that way now.” “The hostility to the new Negro militancy has

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443 Frymer, Uneasy Alliances, 97.
seemingly spread like wildfire from the South to the entire country,” wrote an advisor to Arizona senator and 1964 GOP presidential nominee Barry Goldwater.\footnote{Both quotes in Edward Miller, \textit{Nut Country: Right-Wing Dallas and the Birth of the Southern Strategy} (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 125, 128.}


In this view, Republicans’ path to a national majority ran through the South, the nation’s most conservative region, which was locked into supporting the Democrats in national elections because of its entrenched one-party system. Liberals and moderates within the Republican Party recoiled from what they saw as an openly racist strategy and emphasized the need to reduce Democrats’ margins in the industrial cities among white ethnic and African American voters. In general, in the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s, white ethnic and Southern white constituencies were championed by two different groups of Republicans and linked to two different kinds of political appeals in a running debate one historian calls “The South versus the City.”\footnote{Reinhard, \textit{Republican Right}, 168.} Northern white workers were associated with the brand of politics conservatives derided as “me-tooism”—cultivating support among interest groups along the lines suggested by the New Deal. Conservative
stalwart Robert Taft wrote to one correspondent that his moderate rivals “never had any interest in the South because it interferes with their idea that we should appease the minorities of the North”\textsuperscript{447}—labor, African Americans, and white ethnic groups. A decade later, liberal Republican Nelson Rockefeller attacked the Southern Strategy on the grounds that it would, by “writ[ing] off the Negro and other minority groups…deliberately write off the great industrial states of the North.”\textsuperscript{448} “Other minority groups” could refer equally to Italians, Jews, and Puerto Ricans, and the phrasing suggests an assumption that Northern white ethnic workers had more in common with Northern African American workers than they did with white Southerners. This assumption—evident, to name only a few examples, in one journalist’s casual reference to the “Negro and labor vote” and a segregationist newspaper’s attacks on “labor, the minorities” and “the gimmecrats”\textsuperscript{449}—is indicative of labor-liberal success in linking labor’s cause to the civil rights cause at the discursive level (if not as much in practice).

The 1964 election cycle, in one prominent elite-level frame, was a test of the political potency of anti-black sentiment in the North. It was during the 1964 campaign that the term “backlash”—which initially referred specifically to the threat posed by the “race issue” to Democratic prospects, especially in Northern, urban white

\textsuperscript{447} Lowndes, \textit{From the New Deal to the New Right}, 46.
neighborhoods—began to appear regularly in the media. 1964 was the first presidential run for segregationist Alabama governor George Wallace, perhaps the single individual most responsible for drawing elite attention to Northern white working class backlash. Wallace, whose level of Northern support shocked and disturbed many observers, “demonstrated…for the first time the fear that white working-class Americans have of Negroes,” journalist Theodore White wrote in his election postmortem.

Republican nominee Barry Goldwater adopted a strategy explicitly pitched at anti-black sentiments among white voters, emphasizing the need for “law and order” and states’ rights. In contemporary elite discourse, one of the key questions raised by the Goldwater campaign was whether conservatives could bring about a realignment in which the parties would be defined by opposing positions on race, and in which the Republicans would be the party of the white majority. “The race issue” was unique, columnist Stewart Alsop argued, in that “it permits Goldwater to reach across party lines for votes in areas normally heavily Democratic.” Alsop noted a “growing belief that


white votes for Goldwater might at this time of racial crisis vastly outnumber black votes for Kennedy, in the North as well as in the South.”

Lyndon Johnson’s landslide victory in 1964, accompanied by substantial gains for the liberal wing in Congress, reduced the salience of liberal concerns for a short time. Johnson won 44 states and 61% of the popular vote, the largest margin for a Democratic presidential candidate since FDR. Goldwater won only South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, along with his home state of Arizona. Most observers framed the result as a repudiation of conservatism and as confirmation that anti-black racism was not a determinative issue in Northern politics. “The vote in 1964 must be taken as a decisive setback to the cause of segregation and what came to be named the ‘white backlash,’” pollster Louis Harris told an audience shortly after the election. “For other than in the deep South, people turned their backs on prejudice.”


The view that the problem of race was a Southern problem, and that “white backlash” would not infect Northern politics, collapsed rapidly in the mid-1960s. Riots in African American neighborhoods in multiple cities outside the South (typically in response to incidents of police brutality, and beginning in August 1965 in Watts, Los Angeles) came as a shock to most white elites and shifted the focal point of elite attention from the rural South to the urban North. Northern whites who “for many a long year…could look down their noses at the South,” Newsweek editor Osborn Elliott wrote

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454 Remarks of Louis Harris before APME, Phoenix, Arizona, November 18, 1964; box 147, folder “Harris, Louis & Associates,” Samuel Lubell Papers, Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT.
in 1967, “came to realize that their own vision was similarly impaired.”

One of the consequences of increased elite attention to issues like housing segregation, employment discrimination, and educational disparities in the North was greater elite awareness of white resistance there. When Martin Luther King and other activists marched through white ethnic Chicago neighborhoods in 1966 as part of an open housing campaign, they were met with slurs, jeers, death threats, and thrown projectiles. King, who was hit by a rock, told reporters that he had never seen such a display of hatred before: “The people of Mississippi ought to come to Chicago to learn how to hate.”

Electoral politics was also critical in drawing elite attention to the scope of the backlash. In the mid-1960s through early 1970s, prominent politicians in multiple cities (including Louise Day Hicks in Boston, Mario Procaccino in New York, Charles Stenvig in Minneapolis, Sam Yorty in Los Angeles, and Frank Rizzo in Philadelphia) built careers on appeals to white grievances. At the national level, Democrats suffered steep losses in the 1966 midterm elections, including 47 seats in the House. Daniel Patrick Moynihan described the result as “a bruising declaration that the electorate is fed up to the teeth with demonstrations and riots,” a message to elites that “the country has gone about as far as it wishes in providing social welfare and economic assistance to the Negro masses…The voters think Negroes have received enough for the time being.”

For Moynihan, “the electorate, “the country,” and “the voters” were all interchangeable with white America; this reflects both an enduring inability to understand blacks as full

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members of the public and a growing sense that any political program would only proceed at the sufferance of the white majority. Moynihan’s assessment of the new political reality was shared by a significant number of Democratic elites. One aide, for instance, urged that 1968 nominee Hubert Humphrey “not talk about anti-poverty programs, racial integration, civil rights, welfare handouts, or social justice…stay out of the ghettos and away from minorities.”

As Richard Nixon prepared for his 1968 presidential run, some within his circle of advisers continued to urge the liberal Republican line of leadership on civil rights, but others advocated an appeal to discontented white voters in the North and South. “Take it easy on the pro-negro speeches,” publisher William Loeb wrote to Nixon in early 1968. “Neither the popular vote nor justice is in that direction. You have no idea how stirred up the people in the metropolitan cities are on this subject, especially those in the north.”

“All this endless talk we have been getting about [Nixon] losing unless he gets the Negro and Jewish vote is a pile of crap,” Pat Buchanan put it in a July 1968 memo. “We have let ourselves be sold a bill of goods.” Instead, Buchanan emphasized, Nixon needed to win the “Wallace Protestants,” the traditionally Democratic white working class vote in the South, and the “Humphrey Catholics,” the traditionally Democratic white ethnic voters in the North. Buchanan’s pairing of these constituencies suggests that the

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“South vs. the City” debate was becoming moot: the two constituencies might be brought together under one program and one political identity.

**Resistance to the new youth culture**

This chapter understands Middle America as first and foremost a symbol of racial grievance. It is important to be clear, though, that the backlash central to contemporary political discourse was not only a reaction against African Americans’ advancement. It was also understood as a reaction to the counterculture, anti-Vietnam War movement, and changing conventions on gender and sexuality, all of which were blurred together and understood as part of an emergent rebellious culture among young, educated whites.

“The child of prosperity and the past decade,” Theodore White put it in a typical account, the “new culture” was defined “by its contempt and scorn of what the past has taught” and its opposition to “all laws, manners, mores, institutions which restrict such areas of individual expression as drugs, sex, [and] obscenities.”

The highest-profile manifestations of this “new culture” and its divisiveness included the student protests that shut down Columbia University (1968), the beating of anti-Vietnam War protestors by the Chicago Police during the Democratic National Convention in Chicago (1968), and the “hardhat riots” (1970) in which a counter-protest group led by construction workers beat up antiwar protestors on Wall Street in New York City.

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For contemporary elite observers, the counterculture, antiwar protests, the civil rights movement, and urban rioting were firmly tied together under the broad umbrella of “change,” “dissent,” “unrest,” or “disorder.” All the elements of the “social turmoil that has gripped the country”—“racial disturbances and urban unrest, antiwar demonstrations and revolutionary talk by dissident intellectuals, the soaring use of drugs and an apparent collapse of conventional values”462—were seen as having arisen at roughly the same time, ran counter to engrained modes of behavior, and had been heavily covered in the media. As a result, in a prominent view, voters experienced them as a collective and visceral threat. “Between 1964…and 1968, the average middle class American has gone through many wrenching experiences,” NBC News president Reuven Frank argued. “He has seen the ghetto riots in his living room; he has watched with horror young people of good background expressing contempt for his dearest values in the way they dress and act and what they say…What he has seen…has shaken him physically and morally, made him fear for his safety, his savings, his children, his status.”463 Issues of race, sex, gender, and culture were also tied together because they cut across conventional lines of major-party political contestation. They gave Republicans a chance to make inroads among Democratic voters, and they collectively raised the possibility that a (white) majority angered by the direction of the country would dictate the future course of American politics.

Conservatives and Middle America

The conservative claims central to the conventional account of Middle America came out of this context. Chapter 4 focuses more explicitly on conservatives’ championing of white workers; liberals and journalists are the focal point of this chapter. In order to situate liberal representations within a broader context, however, it is important to briefly outline how the most influential conservative voices of the period understood white workers and Middle America.\footnote{The following pages draw on the strong literature on Nixon and Middle America, including Cowie, “Nixon’s Class Struggle” and Stayin’ Alive; Mason, Richard Nixon and the Quest for a New Majority; Lassiter, The Silent Majority; Kazin, The Populist Persuasion; Joshua Freeman, “Hardhats: Construction Workers, Manliness, and the 1970 Pro-War Demonstrations,” Journal of Social History (1993): 725-744; Dean Kotlowski, Nixon’s Civil Rights (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Theodore White, The Making of the President 1968 (New York: Atheneum House, 1969) and The Making of the President 1972 (New York: Atheneum, 1973).} Above all, conservatives claimed a majority constituency that had been wrongly drowned out in public discourse by vocal but marginal groups. Nixon, who spoke on behalf of “forgotten,” “quiet,” and “silent” Americans, provides the archetypical example. In his acceptance speech at the 1968 Republican National Convention, he defined his constituency as “the great majority of Americans, the forgotten Americans—the non-shouters, the non-demonstrators…They give steel to the backbone of America. They are good people, they are decent people; they work, and they save, and they pay their taxes, and they care.”\footnote{Richard Nixon, address accepting the presidential nomination of the Republican Party, August 8, 1968, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25968.} In a November 1969 speech on Vietnam policy, he famously appealed to the “great silent majority of my fellow Americans,” defined against the “vocal minority” who advocated immediate withdrawal from Vietnam “and who try to impose it on the nation by mounting
demonstration in the street.” It is difficult to overstate how rapid and substantial an imprint these categories made on conservative discourse and elite public discourse generally. Almost immediately, conservative activists and rank-and-file citizen-actors engaging with elite discursive spaces—writing letters to the editor or petitioning politicians, for instance—began to identify themselves as part of the Silent Majority.

For conservatives, categories like Middle Americans, forgotten Americans, or the Silent Majority were not equivalent to the “worker”; they were broader. They allowed for a populist claim on behalf of workers against an elite but did not exclude the sympathetic professional-class and wealthy whites long central to the conservative coalition. Above all, for conservatives, “Middle America” meant a dispersed national majority united by a traditionalist point of view. In a basic argument running through much conservative discourse, there had been a consensus way to be a good American, rightfully held up as normative for decades. Recent years had seen a dangerous challenge to this older understanding of Americanism, in this view, a spreading sense “that our values are false,

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467 “PBS is long on airing homosexuals, lesbians, radicals, draft dodgers, communists etc. or any type of program that will tear down the home and this country,” one public television viewer protested. “We silent majority are very much opposed to this type of broadcasting.” “The time is NOW! The silent majority can no longer remain silent,” an anti-busing group declared. “Stand Up and Shout. Let the cry be Heard. We, the silent majority will no longer tolerate the politicians, the courts nor anyone else abridging or abolishing the personal freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution.” Laurie Ouellette, *Viewers Like You? How Public TV Failed the People* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 184; William Gillis, “Say No to the Liberal Media: Conservatives and Criticism of the News Media in the 1970s” (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 2013), 222.

468 Nixon put it this way: “Our New American Majority appeals across the board—to Italians, Poles, Southerners, to the Midwest and New York—for the same reasons, and because of the same basic values. These are people who care about a strong United States, about patriotism, about moral and spiritual values.” Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive*, 126.
that there is something wrong with being patriotic, honest, moral and hard working.”

Middle Americans, very simply, were those who continued to hold to the “‘old values’ of patriotism, hard work, morality, and respect for law and order,” “the traditional values of middle class America—hard work, individual enterprise, orderly behavior, love of country, moral piety, material progress.” In “its values, its virtues, its instinctive grasp of what the United States and the West have always stood for…Middle America is the last heir of Western civilization,” exclaimed National Review's Frank Meyer. As a result, for Meyer, Middle America met with “utter contempt” from liberals who viewed these values as passé.

Conservatives claimed white workers (in the North and the South) as part of this national traditionalist majority. Though formerly a liberal constituency, they argued, the white working class rejected the excesses of 1960s liberalism. “The Catholic and ethnic and Southern conservative foot soldiers who gave FDR those great landslides are in fundamental disagreement with the isolated, intellectual aristocracy and liberal elite who now set the course of their party,” Pat Buchanan argued, on issues ranging from the war to “marijuana, school prayer, welfare, [and] campus disorders.” The sense that white workers were rebelling against liberal leadership—shared, as this chapter stresses, by liberals—was unambiguously encouraging for conservatives. As “anti-proletarian feeling

469 1968 speech by Spiro Agnew, Nixon’s vice president and one of the leading backlash voices in the period, in Where He Stands: The Life and Convictions of Spiro Agnew (New York: Hawthorne, 1968), 40.
470 “Old values” from a memo produced by the Nixon White House’s “Middle America Committee,” a committee dedicated to “reaching the Middle America group for the president and the long-term advantage of the Republican Party,” in Richard Reeves, President Nixon: Alone in the White House (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 138-139; “traditional values” in James Reichley, “Elm Street’s New White House Power,” Fortune, December 1969.
on the intellectual Left” increased, one National Review contributor explained, conservatives “discovered” the “blue collar” and became “full of admiration for his instinctive patriotism, his mistrust of the reigning liberal abstractions and his neo-Puritan work ethic.”

This ironic phrasing—tying predominantly Catholic industrial workers to a “Puritan” work ethic—is suggestive of a broader trend.

Conservatives claiming to speak for white workers in this period sought to blur or de-emphasize distinctions like North/South, Protestant/Catholic, and union/non-union. In a framework especially prevalent during the 1970s and 1980s, white workers in the South and white workers in the North were very similar politically: socially conservative and alienated by permissive liberalism. “There has come into being a vast middle American constituency, which increasingly transcends regional and ethnic differences,” argued one conservative in 1974. “A…conservative Southerner whose grandfather might have been riding around in a white sheet now feels quite comfortable with [New York] Irish and

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473 C.H. Simonds, “Blue-collar Blues,” National Review, June 23, 1972. On conservative views of white workers’ politics in this period, see also e.g. “Referendum ’70,” National Review, January 20, 1970; Kevin Phillips, The Emerging Republican Majority (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1969); George Nash, The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945 (Wilmington DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute 1998), 234ff; Lisa McGirr, Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), chapter 5. Historians of conservatism have suggested that conservatives’ embrace of populism in the late 1960s represented a sharp turn for a movement previously marked by concerns about mass democracy. That argument captures the trajectory of the modern conservative movement that formed in the 1950s around William F. Buckley and National Review and has been the centerpiece of much scholarly work. However, as Chapter 1 argued, the basic frame put forward by Nixon and his contemporaries—a traditionalist middle class majority wrongly displaced by vocal minority groups and their liberal allies—appeared consistently during the New Deal period. The difference lies in how the mainstream and the margins were understood. Conservative opposition to New Deal liberalism pitted a middle-income, predominantly Protestant majority against organized labor, European immigrants, and their liberal champions. When publisher Frank Gannett in 1938 looked to a “great middle-class bloc…[of] thrifty, frugal, hard-working, self-respecting and God-fearing men and women who built America” to oppose “the slackers, the shirkers, the incompetent, and the unfortunate,” he would have included urban industrial workers and Southern farmers who gravitated to the New Deal in the latter camp. Nixon’s version of the “great middle-class bloc” included the descendants of the workers Gannett excluded.
Italian Catholics.”474 Nixon, though opponents assailed his “Southern Strategy,” rarely if ever made arguments directed to a specifically Southern identity. By the late 1960s, no mainstream national politician who appealed to white Southerners argued in favor of segregation or against legal equality. Instead, a common argument stressed that the South was reflective of the national mainstream view. “This is the heart of America, out here in Middle America,” Nixon began a 1974 speech at the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville.475 (White) Southerners were “in the mainstream of American political thought,” George Wallace stressed. “The people of Arkansas and Alabama speak the language the great majority wanted to hear politicians speak for so long.”476 In collapsing the South into Middle America and stressing the nationwide scope of their message, conservatives sought to rebut the claim that their intent was to make a racist appeal to white voters.

It’s important to be clear that observers who understood social conservatism as central to the politics of white workers, both North and South, rarely saw these workers as conservative on economic issues. In the predominant view, cultural and economic issues fell into two distinct categories, with the latter favorable to liberals and the former favorable to conservatives. Most conservatives in the late 1960s and early 1970s saw cultural issues as much more salient than economic issues. These contemporaries assumed that mass prosperity had raised blue-collar (white) workers to a secure economic position and that the liberal and radical challenge to basic American norms was such a far-reaching and immediate threat that other concerns paled in comparison. “The real

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issues...are the ones like patriotism, morality, religion—not the material issues. If the issues were prices and taxes, they’d vote for [the Democrats],” Nixon commented in explaining his working class support.\textsuperscript{477} Conservatives’ claims to speak for white workers in this period did a great deal to shift dominant elite understandings of white working class identity, but the basic association between white workers and distrust of the rich remained.

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Stressing white workers’ strong commitment to “middle class” values was not new in the 1960s, as the material in Chapter 2 indicates. However, when 1950s observers stressed (white) workers’ movement into the middle class, they implied that these workers had become just like other Americans (implicitly, white professionals). For late-1960s observers who saw white workers as strongly committed to “traditional” or “middle class” values, the point was that they were not just like all other Americans. They were positioned against other groups thought to depart from these norms, as those who did not shout or protest, as those who did not take welfare or drugs, as Democrats who were not drawn in by their party’s foolishness.

Put differently, the strong association between white workers and “middle class” or “traditional” American norms crystallized at a moment when these norms could not be understood as something that nearly all Americans aspired to or shared. From one angle, uncritical patriotism was to blame for the disgrace of Vietnam; rigid and patriarchal

\textsuperscript{477} Mason, Richard Nixon and the Quest for a New Majority, 98, 238. While he rejected calls from aides and outside advisors to pursue new social welfare programs aimed at white workers, Nixon accepted the basic popularity and legitimacy of the post-New Deal economic consensus and did not believe that a candidate could win national office running afoul of that consensus. He sought explicitly to convey that his administration was not opposed to labor in the way that stereotypical Republicans had been. Cowie, Stayin’ Alive, 133-134; Mason, Richard Nixon and the Quest for a New Majority, 73-74.
family norms yielded unhappiness and injustice toward women; the work ethic was a screen for a racist society. From another, America remained the greatest country in the world; the traditional family made for happy homes and good citizens; the work ethic ensured a well-functioning economy and a moral society. Traditional norms were understood as divisive, opposed by vocal and powerful groups. They were no longer normative in a taken-for-granted way, and it was clear that those who supported them would have to explicitly defend them. In this political moment, drawing a connection between white workers and cultural conservatism proved appealing to political actors on opposing sides. Even as business, government, the press, and the white-collar world generally remained marked by segregation and professional and managerial-class whites railed against the student left, what was by any fair assessment “a cross-class backlash against dissent” was “represented synecdochically by the [white] working class.”

For conservatives, the strategic benefits of that connection are easier to see. Political actors who spoke on behalf of white workers could make a powerful elite-level claim to represent the majority against an elite. Conservatives’ “classic populist interpellation,” as one scholar terms it, rested on “the construction of a (implicitly majoritarian) popular opinion whose views are embodied in the agenda of the…Right itself against the socially and politically isolated elite liberals.” The elite consensus frame calls attention to the role the “isolated…liberals” played in that process of construction. The mid- to late 1960s saw a reshaping of the dominant elite-level mapping of the American electorate in a way that placed white workers and liberals on

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opposing sides. That reshaping cannot be attributed only to conservative electoral strategy or the substantial mass appeal of backlash politics. It is also necessary to look critically at liberal political analysis. As the next section suggests, understanding the backlash as concentrated within the white working class fit with understandings of class and racism central to contemporary liberal discourse. It made it easier for liberal professional-class whites to distance themselves from culpability for racism and inequality. The scope and the importance of the backlash, including among white workers, should not be in question. However, the broadly shared assumption that political reaction would predominantly be found among low- and middle-income whites pushed elite discussions around fundamental issues—race, gender, sexuality, equality, morality, good citizenship—in a specific direction, foreclosing other possibilities.

II. Liberals, Journalists, and Middle America

As the scope of the backlash and its political implications came into focus beginning in the mid- to late 1960s, journalists and liberal activists & intellectuals produced a substantial body of work seeking to document white discontent and make sense of its causes and consequences. This work emerged in the same period as the conservative claims central to the conventional understanding of Middle America. Liberal syndicated columnist Joseph Kraft coined the term “Middle America” itself in June 1968. The highest-profile news media treatments of the subject appeared beginning in fall 1969: Newsweek’s forty-page “The Troubled American: A Special Report on the White Majority,” published in October 1969, and Time’s January 1970 issue naming
“The Middle Americans” Man and Woman of the Year. In the same period, the Ford Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, and Carnegie Corporation began to fund research on working class whites. Multiple notable books on white workers from a liberal perspective appeared in the early 1970s, including Peter Binzen’s *Whitetown, U. S. A.* (1970), Louise Kapp Howe’s *The White Majority* (1970), Patricia and Brendan Sexton’s *Blue Collars and Hard Hats* (1971), Sar Levitan’s *Blue Collar Workers: A Symposium on Middle America* (1971), Michael Novak’s *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* (1971), Robert Coles’ *The Middle Americans* (1971), and Murray Friedman’s *Overcoming Middle Class Rage* (1971).

Above all, this work was motivated by the urgency of the moment. Simply put, it was clear to contemporaries that white discontent imperiled the full range of left-of-center political goals, from continued progress for left movements to continued incumbency for Democrats. Journalistic work on white working class discontent was motivated by the clear electoral implications of the backlash and the broad sense that white workers had become a major social problem in need of attention. Trends within the media industry also played a role. Major elite media institutions were significantly more sensitized to covering issues of race by the late 1960s, when the media industry saw a “wave of vigorous endeavor…to penetrate the urban and racial crisis.”\(^{480}\) Reporting on white resistance was part of this effort. As they increasingly spotlighted inequality and division, however, news organizations confronted a spiraling backlash from conservative politicians, viewers, and readers who saw their reporting on radicalism and dissent as excessive. Journalism faced pressure to self-correct, to devote more attention to (in the

words of trade publication Editor & Publisher) “the views of what is called ‘the silent majority’ who feel that television has devoted too much time to the role of the militant and the agitator and has given too little coverage to the quiet hard-working Americans of all races.”

It’s important to emphasize that while conservatives were careful to include higher-income conservative constituencies within their “Silent Majority,” liberal and journalistic analysis of the backlash generally focused narrowly on white workers, for several reasons. Professional-class whites conducted most of the research. Conservative views among white workers appeared more anomalous—and thus more in need of analysis and explanation—than conservative views among well-off whites who drew more obvious material benefit from a conservative agenda. Most of all, as the last section of Chapter 2 argued, notable intellectual work in the postwar period had helped to mainstream a view of white workers as more conservative than white professionals. Prevailing understandings of what racism was and what caused it encouraged white professionals to interpret racism as concentrated in the white working class, and preexisting understandings of working class culture associated the white working class with rigidity, traditionalism, and anti-intellectualism.

Two longstanding and widely accepted arguments linked working class whites to higher levels of racial prejudice. First, the framework dominant since World War II understood racism as a set of individual-level irrational attitudes reducible through education; in this view, less educated whites lacked the intellectual training that would help them to grasp the true causes of racial inequality and adopt a sympathetic view of

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marginalized racial groups. A second longstanding argument understood racism as rooted in job competition and economic hardship; in this view, lower-income whites felt more threatened by blacks because they would compete more closely with them. Both explanations remained prominent in the 1960s. “It’s the man who thinks that his neighborhood will be damaged or his job placed in jeopardy by the disenslavement of the Negro who is the center of the ‘white backlash,’” one liberal argued. “In many Northern college-educated and ‘sophisticated’ circles, at least a kind of superficial antiracism is the norm,” another contemporary noted. For those who inhabited “worlds in which a strong civil-rights position is not an accepted social convention, it takes either an extraordinary compassion, or else a certain ability to deal with abstractions, to grasp it.”

Fundamentally, most contemporary liberals assumed, antiracist norms had not penetrated working class culture.

An established line of social research understood working class culture as narrow and rigid, centered on the patriarchal family and tending toward authoritarianism in politics. Typical 1960s accounts of the “working-class subculture” understood (white)

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workers’ world as “distinguished by the dominant role of the family circle” as “the outside world…is faced with detachment and…hostility”…“reminiscent of the past…insulated from contemporary currents of thought…narrowly circumscribed by the family, the relatives, a few friends, the union, the boss, the church”…marked by “a desire for stability and security and an unwillingness to take social and economic risks…an anti-intellectualism which aspires for the understood result.”

The most notorious concept in the literature on working class culture, Seymour Martin Lipset’s “working class authoritarianism,” had a clear imprint on late 1960s analysis. “Working-class authoritarianism goes far to explain the rigid and intolerant approach many blue-collarites take to American political affairs,” one social scientist wrote in 1969. “Unable to understand how politics works, and contemptuous of conciliation and compromise, working-class authoritarians seek to impose on society some sort of ‘fundamental truth’ that will liberate America from its soft-headed illusions.”

Traditional values, in this view, were appealing to white workers because they offered a black-and-white sense of right and wrong; challenges to those traditional norms unsettled white workers because they undermined that moral clarity.

In sum, the intellectual environment encouraged elite-level liberal interpreters to presume that anti-black and socially conservative views would be most widely held among blue-collar whites and seek answers accordingly. “I started this study with the assumption that America is a racist society and that the most overt expression of that

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racism is to be found among working-class and lower-middle-class people,” sociologist Lillian Rubin flatly declared. “It was not my intention to spend more than two years to document the obvious.” That assumption, on the part of professional-class whites, encouraged a sense of cultural division, of entering an unfamiliar space to understand something far from the researcher’s lived experience. “For an upper-middle-class professional like me to view the world from the perspective of what the media call Middle America is, to say the least, difficult,” Rubin admitted. “The requisite empathy is elusive because too many experiences, beliefs, and values divide us.”487 In the predominant framework, the world of the white working class—marked by its explicit and unabashed racism, its emphasis on rigid patriotism and moral rectitude—was utterly distinct from white professionals’ day-to-day world.

This assumption comes through clearly in most journalism focused on white workers. Reporters (even for middlebrow publications that no doubt counted Middle Americans among their readers) wrote as outsiders interpreting unfamiliar experience for a politically attentive public that was assumed to be non-Middle American. “In this book we hope to bring before the reader something about the lives of millions of American citizens,” two contemporaries began 1971’s The Middle Americans.488 Some writers plumbed the quotidian details of working class life: “Once a week his wife leaves him at home when she goes to play bingo. There is usually a Christmas party for the men on the job.”489 Most often, late 1960s reporting on the white working class afforded starring

roles to men who sprayed their speech with racial epithets and showed no interest in norms of civility: “None of them politicians gives a good goddamn. All they worry about is the niggers. Everything is for the niggers. The niggers get the schools. The niggers go to summer camp. The niggers get the new playgrounds…And they get it all without workin’. ” …“Bastards don’t want jobs. If you offered them jobs now, 90 per cent of them would run like hell. They ought to take machine guns and shoot the bastards.”

Above all, in this discourse, what distinguished white workers was their anger and their willingness to vent it freely and widely—towards “integration and welfare, taxes and sex education…the rich and the poor, the foundations and students,” but above all towards African Americans.

Looking closely at the research process of one prominent study of Middle America, Peter Binzen’s *Whitetown, U. S. A.*, provides insight into the cultural dynamics at work in research on the white working class. *Whitetown* is a 1970 study focused on urban white working class neighborhoods (“Whitetowns”) and their schools; Binzen was an education reporter and later an urban affairs reporter at the *Philadelphia Bulletin*. Though he made trips to “Whitetowns” in several other major cities, Binzen conducted the majority of his research in the Northeast Philadelphia neighborhood of Kensington. He taught in several schools, interviewed dozens of teachers, staff, parents, and children, played bingo at area Catholic churches, and spent time in bars listening to neighborhood men sound off about politics. Binzen, a Yale graduate whose father was an executive at

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492 As one point of reference, Kensington is where the first *Rocky* movie is set.
JC Penney, grappled with a strong sense of cultural difference from his subjects throughout the reporting. He worried that he would be seen as a “do-gooder, ivy liberal from Yale with a Carnegie grant.” As he attempted to secure interviews, he found the cultural mores of Kensington’s inhabitants irksome: “When you enter one of these houses at midday you can be sure a TV soap drama will be filling the room…And the lady of the house, even while sitting for an interview, will not turn off the TV or even turn it down. She’ll keep watching between questions.” Most of all, Binzen’s observations of Kensington were shaped by his own identification as a white liberal professional-class suburban dweller with progressive views on race. Though he readily admitted that his own neighborhood was as segregated as Kensington, Binzen began his research under the impression that white professional-class suburbanites were liberal on race issues, while urban white ethnic workers as a group were not. “As an outsider, a WAP (white Alsatian Protestant) and a middle-class suburbanite, I went into Kensington with preconceived prejudices,” he acknowledged.

Binzen, like many of his contemporaries, had a sincere desire to draw sympathetic elite attention to white workers. He saw Kensington as a neighborhood with serious needs that had been wrongly overlooked by the press and city government. Throughout his reporting, he also understood “Whitetown” as a distinctive, isolated space distinguished by its residents’ resistance to any kind of change: their “alienation from the

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493 Peter Binzen, interview by Walter Phillips, 1, November 27, 1979, Walter Massey Phillips Oral Histories, Special Collections Research Center, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA.
495 Binzen notes, n.d., box 3, “Kensington” folder, Peter Binzen Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA (hereafter cited as “Binzen Papers”).
496 Binzen, early draft of Whitetown, box 3, “Kensington” folder, Binzen Papers.
American ‘mainstream,’” their “contempt for white rich and black poor,” and their “bristling defensiveness and yearning for the recent past when life was simpler and loyalties less complex, when children were reared by the Bible and the beltstrap, when the schools stuck to the three R’s, and when patriotism meant ‘My country right or wrong.’”

Binzen made the decision not to foreground ideological diversity within Kensington, even when he encountered differences of opinion during his interviews. The significant unit of analysis was Kensington itself, “home to a hundred thousand proud, irascible, tough, narrow-minded, down-to-earth, old-fashioned, hostile, flag-waving, family-oriented ethnic Americans.”

As he later put it in a turn of phrase that characterizes elite writing on Middle America as a whole, “I was trying to look at a whole mass of people.”

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One of the most common arguments made about liberal politics in this period held that (white professional) liberals viewed white workers with condescension and disdain. Conservatives and fellow liberals charged liberals with “class snobbery,” a tendency to “savage” white workers “as rednecks, ethnic clods, Archie Bunkers, and the like.” Many of the arguments white professional-class liberals made about white workers in this period are self-evidently classist. However, simply labeling them as classist or elitist misses a broader story—the intellectual context that supported the prevailing view of white workers; the element of self-criticism in liberal discourse on Middle America; the importance of symbolic constructions of the white worker for the political claims liberals

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497 Binzen, Whitetown, U.S.A., 10-11.
498 Ibid., 81.
499 Femminella, Power and Class, 48.
made; and the extent to which liberal representations of white workers dovetailed with conservative claims to represent them.

The remainder of this chapter seeks to shed light on that broader story. It is organized around the two primary arguments liberals and journalists made in diagnosing the political grievances of the white working class. Though both arguments can be understood as under the umbrella of a broad elite consensus, the differences were significant. The dominant argument (#1) suggested that white workers were a middle-income group, economically secure and culturally & racially conservative, and their primary political concern centered on protecting what they had gained. While in earlier decades they had been animated by economic concerns, they now voted based on anxiety about integration and cultural change. The first section below (#1) outlines this view. Joseph Kraft, the liberal syndicated columnist who coined the term “Middle America,” serves as the primary case study.

The major challenge to this construction of the white working class came from a group of liberals who diagnosed the situation in a different way, arguing that white workers were far closer to poverty than affluence. Their anger, in this view (#2), was motivated by economic deprivation and the rightful sense that they had been forgotten by liberal elites. To combat it, liberals needed to address the real economic and social needs of white workers and work to bring them together in a coalition with working class people of color that would pursue an agenda to benefit all. For these liberals, white workers’ ongoing conservative turn could be reversed. The second section draws out these arguments through the example of what contemporaries called the “white ethnic
movement”—understood here as a small group of liberal activists and intellectuals who advocated for increased elite attention to disadvantaged ethnic whites.

1. White backlash stems from economic security and racial/cultural antagonism

The dominant view in journalism and liberal discourse understood blue-collar whites as defined less by any underdog class status and more by a shared cultural anxiety. In this view, white workers had little need for progressive reform themselves, little interest in government measures designed to aid those below them on the social ladder, and considerable concern about further change. The archetypical white worker, as pictured in this discourse, was a homeowner and breadwinning male who had achieved a (perhaps tentative) middle class lifestyle and seethed with anger at those he saw as threatening his gains:

The forgotten man of Roosevelt’s day has made spectacular progress. He not only has a job a generation later, but he has property. He has benefited from the welfare state and the planned economy and has now moved out of the slums of the cities into the suburbs…The vast army of the unemployed of Roosevelt’s day…have bought houses and now resent taxes, and are now indifferent and many of them even hostile, to the militant poor whites and blacks who are left behind.  

He is almost out of his mind with frustration — call it hate. He sees his Government, with programs for blacks and for the indigent and programs for everyone except him, and he figures, “God dammit, I’m paying for this out of my pocket.” He’s got some bungalow in a development and a whole bookful of installment payments and he is mad as hell.

Frustration, anger, and fear are his natural reactions to blacks, the government and middle-class liberals. He holds strongly conservative views in politics, religion, and education. The rebellious blacks and dissident students fill him with rage. They threaten everything for which he worked and fought. Patriotic, proud,

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family-loving, authoritarian, generous, anti-intellectual, he is being left behind in the turmoil of our society.\textsuperscript{502} This figure might be understood as the dark underside of the “typical” worker as pictured in triumphalist 1950s discourse. Then, his position as the king of his own castle served as evidence, for business and labor alike, of the basic fairness of American society. In this period, for many liberals, the picture was much less optimistic.

It is essential to understand 1960s liberal views of the white worker in the context of the still-dominant affluent society discourses discussed in Chapter 2. For most elite-level observers, including liberals, 1960s America offered the majority a secure and even prosperous life. This view remained remarkably durable despite the period’s critical and contentious political discourse. The narrative of mass affluence survived the civil rights movement’s intervention into elite public discourse, in part because it had never treated African Americans as full members of the polity. Contemporary elites could understand poverty and racial inequality within an affluent society as a disgraceful injustice while remaining convinced that the political economic status quo basically worked.\textsuperscript{503} Some continued to hold to the triumphalist view that a wealthy United States could eliminate

\textsuperscript{503} Lyndon Johnson, signing the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, hoped to “eliminate the paradox of poverty in the midst of plenty”; a 1966 book investigated \textit{Poverty Amid Affluence}; one of the central claims of the 1968 report of the Kerner Commission on urban rioting held that “our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal…one, largely Negro and poor, located in the central cities; the other, predominantly white and affluent, located in the suburbs and in outlying areas.” Robert Bauman, \textit{Race and the War on Poverty: From Watts to East L.A.} (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014), 4; Oscar Ornati, \textit{Poverty Amid Affluence} (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1966); \textit{Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders} (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968), 1, 23. This frame fit with the dominant view that private sector job creation rendered full employment-oriented public policy unnecessary; instead skills training and antidiscrimination measures were needed to enable unemployed and underemployed workers to attain jobs. For criticism of this turn within elite-level liberal politics see e.g. Judith Stein, \textit{Running Steel, Running America: Race, Economic Policy, and the Decline of Liberalism} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Adolph Reed Jr., “The Kerner Commission and the Irony of Antiracist Politics,” \textit{Labor} 14, no. 4 (2017): 31-38.
social problems in relatively short order. “Hell,” Lyndon Johnson told aides in 1964, “we’ve barely begun to solve our problems. And we can do it all. We’ve got the wherewithal…There’s nothing we can’t do, if the masses are behind us.” The assumption of mass affluence also undergirded much of the highest-profile social criticism of the period, including Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and Students for a Democratic Society’s *Port Huron Statement* (1962). In an increasingly influential frame, America was an affluent but unhealthy society that overvalued material gain and tolerated inequality and injustice that it had the resources to resolve.

Pessimistic views of affluent America were tied to pessimistic views of the most obvious beneficiaries of postwar affluence, middle-income white workers. The sharpest examples can be found in New Left discourse, where the dominant view understood blue-collar whites as economically secure, dulled by prosperity and consumer culture, and adamantly opposed to further change. “The working class today shares in large measure the needs and aspirations of the dominant classes,” Frankfurt School theorist and New Left intellectual leader Herbert Marcuse argued, and was most concerned with “the need to buy a new car every two years, the need to buy a new television set, the need to watch television five or six hours a day.” Charles Reich’s 1970 radical manifesto *The

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506 1968 interview in Douglas Kellner, ed., *The New Left and the 1960s: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse, Volume 3* (London: Routledge, 2005), 106. See also “Marcuse Defines His New Left Line,” *New York Times*, October 27, 1968; Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966). Drawing an inflexible opposition between an anti-(white) working class New Left and laborist Old Left is not accurate—some New Leftists came from Old Left backgrounds and drew on the resources and experience of labor officials; more New Leftists were daughters and sons of the white working class than predominant stereotypes acknowledged; and significant
Greening of America depicted an American public “in their sullen boredom, their unchanging routines, their minds closed to new ideas and feelings, their bodies slumped in front of television to watch the ball game Sunday.” Radical students, one activist complained, “frequently claim that all workers live in the suburbs, own two cars and a color television set, and that the main problem of the working class is overconsumption.” Above all, in New Left discourse, the white worker epitomized a society that had met the basic needs of most of its members but had left them intellectually and spiritually impoverished.


507 Charles Reich, The Greening of America: How the Youth Revolution is Trying to Make America Livable (New York: Random House, 1970), 139. Later in the book, Reich chides leftists for writing off working class whites as “fascists”; instead, he argues, they should take a more sympathetic approach. This yields one of the most condescending descriptions of the white worker in a discourse full of them: “Look again at a ‘fascist’—tight lipped, tense, crew cut, correctly dressed, church-going, an American flag on his car window, a hostile eye for communists, youth, and blacks. He has had very little of love, or poetry, or music, or nature, or joy. He has been dominated by fear. He has been condemned to narrow-minded prejudice, to a self-defeating materialism, to a lonely suspicion of his fellow men. He is angry, envious, bitter, self-hating. He ravages his own environment. He has fled all his life from consciousness and responsibility. He is turned against his own nature; in his agony he has recoiled upon himself. He is what the machine left after it had its way.” Reich, The Greening of America, 261.

508 Putnam, “From ‘Resistance’ to Student-Worker Alliance,” 322.
security white workers had attained, to understand the secure white majority as an immense and potentially immovable obstacle to further progress. Liberalism had been so successful in raising white workers’ incomes, many suggested, that it had created a conservative majority.

This dynamic comes through particularly clearly in the work of Joseph Kraft, the political analyst who coined the term “Middle America” in 1968. Kraft was a former journalist and John F. Kennedy speechwriter who had become a well-known columnist and news commentator by the mid-1960s. Looking in depth at Kraft’s understanding of Middle America is useful for several reasons. Most simply, he was an influential figure whose work gives a good sense of the dominant view among liberals in his cohort. Kraft was based in Washington, D.C., and his papers make clear that he possessed a substantial network of politicians, government officials, and journalists who read his column regularly and whom he saw socially; in the period detailed in this chapter, his column appeared in over 200 newspapers. More broadly, Kraft’s work on Middle America helps to illustrate the sense of urgency tied up in liberal writing about white workers, the sense that white working class anger would halt progress and that liberal elites themselves bore some responsibility. Kraft’s work also serves as a particularly

509 Kraft was a “liberal” in the sense of “liberal consensus” or “liberal establishment” and certainly was not a leftist. He supported civil rights and the New Deal but was leery of mass movements and believed that the 1960s status quo as he saw it—leadership by highly educated elites, primarily white men—was desirable.

510 To name only a few, he received correspondence from figures such as Hubert Humphrey, Gerald Ford, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Sargent Shriver, Donald Rumsfeld, David Riesman, Norman Lear, and Norman Podhoretz (“It was good seeing you and Polly in East Hampton the other night”). He also conducted interviews with multiple presidents and foreign heads of state and displayed considerable range as a commentator, covering both domestic and international politics extensively. Box 1, Joseph Kraft Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York, NY (hereafter cited as “Kraft Papers”). Details for Kraft bio from Herbert Seckler, “An Insight to Joseph Kraft,” graduate seminar paper, California State College at Long Beach, fall 1968, box 1, “Kraft – Biographical Data” folder, Kraft Papers; James Fallows, “The Most Famous Journalist in America,” Washington Monthly, March 1975.
clear illustration of how liberal and conservative claims intersected to create “Middle America” as a political category. Kraft was a prominent liberal and a member of the “Georgetown cocktail party” circle assailed by conservatives. When Nixon’s “enemies list” was uncovered during the Watergate investigation, Kraft’s name was included. It is significant and instructive that Nixon, and generations of populist conservatives after him, could profitably use a term invented by Kraft.

Kraft first began to argue that white discontent was central to the future of American politics in 1967 and wrote about the theme consistently for the next several years. He understood Middle America as the vast majority, the “ordinary” American of the 1960s—and, like many contemporaries, equated ordinariness with whiteness and middle-income status. As their incomes rose, Kraft argued, “American workers have come to personify the national majority”\textsuperscript{511}, and for Kraft the archetypical Middle American was an industrial worker. Middle Americans had achieved “security,” in Kraft’s view, but nonetheless felt their economic position to be precarious. They desired “ease of life”\textsuperscript{512} but found it difficult to find. There were always new expenses, constant pressure to “keep up with the Joneses for better cars and homes and other appurtenances of the good life.”\textsuperscript{513} Middle Americans also confronted, Kraft suggested, “a sense of having worked steadily and hard for naught...of having been conned somehow”\textsuperscript{514}—that perhaps working hard to buy more did not bring happiness after all.

\textsuperscript{511} Kraft, “Labor’s Identity Crisis,” \textit{Washington Post}, September 3, 1972. This summary of Kraft’s arguments blends together columns from 1967 to 1972 because his analysis of Middle America changed little over that time period.


Kraft’s analysis of Middle America’s politics followed the left-to-right trajectory characteristic of the emerging dominant narrative—what would be known to later journalists and scholars as the backlash narrative. “As the backers of Roosevelt and Truman, and the supporters of the unions and their broad social welfare programs, [white workers] stood for decades on the forward frontier of politics,” he emphasized.\footnote{Kraft, “Scrambled Politics,” filed October 5, 1967, box 19, Kraft Papers.}

However, as economic prosperity “dissolved the harsh lines of opposition between economic groups, and diminished the appeal of bread-and-butter issues,”\footnote{Kraft, “Happening Politics,” filed July 9, 1967, box 19, Kraft Papers.} their chief political goal became preserving what they had gained and opposing anything that appeared to threaten their newfound security, particularly African Americans’ advancement. “The ordinary white worker,” Kraft argued, “feels that the value of his home is seriously threatened by the enormous migration of Negroes to the cities. He may feel the same about his job, and his social standing, and the safety and education of his children.” Asked to “pay more for social services which serve him only slightly,” the white worker’s response was to “dig in against higher taxes for more welfare spending.”\footnote{Kraft, “Scrambled Politics,” filed October 5, 1967, box 19, Kraft Papers.}

White workers’ relative economic security also increased the salience of noneconomic issues in their politics, Kraft emphasized, particularly “fear of the new culture with its drugs and sloppy clothes, rhetorical violence, and love of minorities.”\footnote{Kraft, “Republican Tide,” filed November 1, 1970, box 21, Kraft Papers.} In sum, Kraft argued in a representative articulation of the dominant view, “the basic tie of economic interest that bound working-class America to the Democratic Party of the New Deal has progressively come unstuck. Now this group—the group which I have
called Middle America—is up for grabs and the stakes are tremendous. Who wins the support of Middle America dominates American politics.”

Though contemptuous of a class struggle frame that opposed workers to employers (which he dismissed as “Depression politics—not to say Populist stuff out of the 1890s”), Kraft gravitated towards a class struggle frame that opposed Middle Americans to wealthy liberals. He posited a deep divide between Middle Americans and the progressive upper-income whites he labeled “Upper Americans”: where the latter were “sure of themselves and brimming with ideas for doing things differently,” the former were “traditional in their values and on the defense against innovators.”

“Upper America, in countless ways, is always sticking its finger in the eye of Middle America,” he wrote in 1970. Upper-income whites placed themselves at odds with Middle Americans in multiple ways, in Kraft’s framework: their desire to “improve the status of the Negro, at the expense of Middle America, to raise taxes, also at the expense of Middle America; and to circumscribe the power used in wars fought chiefly by the sons of Middle America,” their “assault on the Army and police” and “mockery of the kept hair, tidy clothes, and harmonious music which Middle Americans identify with decency.”

It’s important to note that this framework allows for the populist positioning conservatives undertook in pursuit of the Middle American vote: the righteous middle

522 Kraft, “Many of Society’s Problems Caused by Middle Americans.”
victimized by arrogant and misguided liberal elites. Kraft, however, believed that the liberal elites were right, while Middle American political views were unsophisticated and wrong. “The upper-income whites have got, I believe, a good grip on the problems of the Nation,” he wrote in a 1968 column. Since “notions of restraint and balance that are intrinsically hard to grasp, have not been fully absorbed” by Middle America, however, “there is no majority in the country for sophisticated ideas about race relations, economic policy, and defense.”

Kraft had deep concerns about populism, influenced by the work of Richard Hofstadter, Seymour Martin Lipset, and like-minded scholars. Drawing on Lipset’s term, he characterized George Wallace’s campaign as indicative of the “awful threat of working-class authoritarianism.” The United States had a dark populist history, he stressed, and the political environment of the late 1960s threatened another outbreak of mass intolerance against blacks and Jews. Kraft also offered unselfconscious support for elite leadership in politics, which he considered a necessity in the twentieth century given that “the stuff of public life eludes the grasp of the ordinary man.”

In sum, Kraft’s work on Middle America is not about Middle America in a vacuum; it is very directly about the relationship between Middle America and his own cohort of educated, liberal whites. “The central problem” in American politics “is not the visible problem of disaffected Negroes and young people,” he wrote in 1968. “The central problem is that the lower middle class whites who comprise the great body of the electorate have lost confidence in the upper-middle-class whites who have been running

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for the past decade.”  This is a striking statement, reflecting a view of politics as a game played by elites who ultimately served at the sufferance of the mass public. For Kraft, many of the dire consequences of “a new wave of folk malevolence” would be realized through electoral politics. Because Middle America was the majority, it had the power to expel the incumbent, enlightened governing class and replace it with a dangerous one: “Backed by the great mass of middle Americans, the conservatives could come to power” and “could plunge the country in cataclysm.”

Kraft presented Middle Americans as victimized by Upper Americans despite his belief in Middle America’s backwardness because he felt that liberal elites bore a substantial responsibility for the emerging backlash. For Kraft, elites had a responsibility to promote a fair, stable, and orderly politics and to be cognizant of the needs and views of other groups—above all, to recognize their own privilege and particularity. He argued that most of his cohort had failed in this regard, instead adopting “an overconfident attitude of snobbish contempt,” because they had failed to take into account how civil rights, Vietnam, and cultural change impacted the lives and psyches of non-elite whites. Journalists, Kraft argued, had displayed a “systematic bias towards young people [and] minority groups” and needed “to make a special effort to understand Middle America,” “the great mass of ordinary Americans.” White elites generally, in his view, had failed to recognize the “terrible tensions” faced by working class whites “being called upon to share their neighborhoods with the blacks, to accept Negro children in the schools with

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529 Kraft, “Nixon and Humphrey Reflect American Political System.”
531 Kraft, “Daley and Police Have a Point in Claiming Press is Biased.”
their own kids, and to yield up hard-won job privileges to Negro workers.” Kraft reserved his sharpest criticism for young, affluent student protestors, whom he saw as classist and needlessly provocative, inclined to “rub the country’s nose in a ‘superior’ lifestyle at odds with traditional notions of morality and patriotism.”

Kraft’s work illustrates the contradictory nature of much liberal discourse on the white working class. He saw Middle American views as destructive and unsophisticated, but nonetheless called on liberal elites to be more attentive to them. He argued that Middle Americans’ anger threatened racial retrenchment but conceded that they faced “strains” better-off and better-educated whites did not. He both criticized and effectively mirrored fellow liberals’ “snobbish” view towards working class whites. Kraft’s work on Middle America reveals, simultaneously, concerns about the dangers posed by the white majority; concern about the political and social consequences of straying too far from the white majority’s views; and an understanding of professional, liberal identity as defined against Middle America.

Understanding the majority as white, economically secure, and invested in the status quo left Kraft, and liberals generally, with only one plausible solution to the problem of the white working class: put forward a more restrained politics that would not

533 Kraft, “Blue Collar Blues Contain Seed for Political Trouble,” Washington Post, July 7, 1970. “Though they may not think so,” Kraft argued elsewhere, “the university students – especially those at the better colleges – are a distinct elite. They don’t work, they don’t – for the most part – fight, and they are not subject to the discipline most people accept. Without having worked for it, they are in possession of the education that practically guarantees success in this country. They have the essence of privilege – something for nothing. Moreover, what the protesting kids value most strikes many ordinary Americans as instances of snobbish contempt. Their anti-war protests verge on the unpatriotic. Their sympathy for blacks often looks like hatred of low-income whites. And their clothes, language, music and hair-style mock the achievements of most ordinary men.” Kraft radio address, n.d. 1970, box 11, folder “Westinghouse Broadcasts,” Kraft Papers.
antagonize white workers. Kraft argued explicitly that liberals had no chance to win if they allowed themselves to be defined by support for African Americans’ and students’ claims; rather, it was only through a moderate approach that they could keep Middle American discontent at a manageable level. If they continued to press policies that could not gain majority support, they would only worsen the backlash. He was more optimistic about liberals’ long-term prospects (in an argument with ironic presentist resonance in 2017) because of demographic change: the college-educated population was growing, while “blue-collar workers and white ethnic groups…are now shrinking relative to the rest of the population.” Kraft therefore urged that “enlightened convictions” be “put forward” for a period of time until the composition of the electorate was more favorable. In the meantime, “unless all of us are careful about pushing our claims, the country is going to go agog with demagogic appeals to the lower middle class.”

The great irony in the history of “Middle America” is that a term so closely associated with populist conservatism was coined by a liberal who described himself as an “antipopulist.” Kraft had none of the political goals usually associated with the rhetoric of “Middle America.” Rather than hoping to break apart the New Deal coalition or polarize the country by race, he sought to avert this outcome. It is clear from Kraft’s columns that “Middle America,” when it emerged on the national stage, did not have the positive connotation that it would attain for Nixon and his supporters. Yet generations of conservatives and other sympathetic observers have valorized Middle America and

535 Kraft, “Many of Society’s Problems Caused by Middle Americans.”
536 Kraft, “Blue Collar Blues.”
538 Kraft, “Many of Society’s Problems Caused by Middle Americans.”
claimed it as their constituency, taking the term in a direction Kraft never intended. It’s important to consider what made this possible.

Certainly “Middle America” has a pleasingly egalitarian ring, and middleness has long been valorized in American politics. Most importantly, though, Kraft defined Middle American identity—and social divisions in America broadly—in a way that overlapped with and largely bolstered the claims of conservatives, pitting white workers against white liberal elites and African Americans and identifying them as defenders of traditional American values. It is not surprising, for instance, that Pat Buchanan admired Kraft’s writing on the “forgotten” white working class (sending a series of Kraft’s pieces to Nixon in fall 1967 with the comment that “these columns…make some damned interesting points about what is needed at this point in time in the way of political leadership”). As the two continued their very separate work, Buchanan’s arguments on the cultural divide between liberal elites and conservative masses became nearly indistinguishable from Kraft’s. “The most explosive social tension in the country now lies along the fault line that separates Middle America from Upper America,” Kraft wrote in 1970. Three years later, Buchanan claimed that the “most serious political rupture in the nation” was the “ideological fault” running “between the lower and middle class Democratic center and right, and its upper-middle-class elite and left.”

Populist conservatives had a deep stake in the claim that they represented a popular revolt against a liberal elite. Kraft (and many other liberals in his cohort) put

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539 This is well argued in Kazin, The Populist Persuasion, 258.
540 Buchanan, The Greatest Comeback, 142.
forward the same reading. Some saw white workers’ patriotism as dangerously uncritical, while others saw it as praiseworthy, but few disputed the link between white workers and staunch patriotism. Pat Buchanan celebrated “traditional America, ‘Middle America,’” where Kraft saw those “traditional in their values and on the defense against innovators” as a regressive force in society, but both drew the link between Middle America and traditionalism. To be clear, this is not a simple story of appropriation, in which the concept of “Middle America” was detached from its original context and put to work by conservative elites. Rather, the arguments made by disparate political actors in the same period overlapped to produce a consensus elite-level view of the white worker—a view most favorable to conservatives.

2. The needy white worker as a symbol of the urgent need for further change

It’s important to stress that some prominent liberals directly contested the dominant view—or at least a significant piece of it. For this second camp of liberals, white workers’ reaction stemmed not from economic security but from economic insecurity. White workers were not at all affluent, in this framework, and they were not inevitably conservative. Rather, the movement of white working class voters to the right could be reversed if elites took the appropriate lesson from it: that they needed to pay attention to the very real problems of disadvantaged whites and work to address them. Though this argument is distinct from the dominant view of the period, it can still be understood under the umbrella of a broader elite consensus. Liberals who worked to stop white workers from turning to right-wing demagogues made arguments that overlapped
substantially with the conservative claim that white liberal elites had overlooked traditionalist whites in favor of vocal and marginal minority groups.

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One result of the increasing visibility of white discontent in this period was increased elite attention to economic precarity among white working class people—a trend also visible in elite public discourse in the post-Trump era. In the 1960s, as in recent years and months, this attention grew out of elite-level efforts to answer the why question—why white workers were so discontented and (for liberals) why they were moving to the right. White workers were thought to be the chief beneficiaries of thirty years’ worth of change, and their unhappiness called out to elites for an explanation in a way that other groups’ pain did not. “We know the United States is an affluent society, and it goes against our preconceptions to think that the American worker is in a bind,” one contemporary put it.542 Much of the research liberals conducted on the white working class in this period, including projects funded by the Ford Foundation and Rockefeller Foundation, set the explicit goal of understanding and finding solutions to white workers’ resentment. “Great numbers of working-class Americans have not been at the center of recent social concerns...It is important to know more precisely the economic and social roots of their anxiety and to explore ways of mitigating their discontent,” Ford Foundation president McGeorge Bundy explained.543 “We will have to

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542 Jerome Rosow, assistant secretary of labor in the Nixon administration, quoted in Maria Graciela Abarca, “‘Discontented but Not Inevitably Reactionary’: Organized Labor in the Nixon Years” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 2001), 188.
understand far more about them before we can expect to stop their move to the right,” for sociologist Louise Kapp Howe.544

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a notable cohort of liberals with ties to the civil rights movement, the labor movement, and the white ethnic movement coalesced around a clear understanding of the problem of the white working class: White workers were lashing out because of basic economic deprivation and unhappiness. An increasingly visible narrative stressed that blue-collar whites’ gains from postwar prosperity had been heavily overstated. Family expenses strained the paycheck; men worked multiple jobs and felt emasculated by the need to “send the wife to work”; consumer goods conveyed a surface affluence, but they had often been financed through steep debt. As one contemporary stressed, “the home, the car, the paid vacation,” and the other “outward signs of affluence…that celebrants of American society have publicized are deceptive indices of security. Purchased to give security, as often as not they have only increased anxiety.”545 Contemporaries argued, drawing on deeply rooted social democratic analysis

of race and class, that racism grew out of this insecurity. In a 1966 speech, for instance, civil rights and labor activist Bayard Rustin urged listeners not “merely to [condemn]” the group of white Chicagoans who had thrown rocks at Martin Luther King during an open housing march. These whites’ “racial prejudice…was permitted to come to the surface by objective economic and social conditions,” Rustin stressed: these were “people who were buying homes that were only one-third paid for, who were saving money to send their children to college, who were sending their wives to work…It was this economic fear that made it possible for their latent prejudice to come to the surface and be politically organized.”

This understanding of what caused the white backlash pointed to a clear solution: strike at the source by working within a multiracial coalition towards economic security for all. African Americans, Rustin argued, “can either spend the rest of this century denouncing these people as racist and being denounced by them in turn. Or we can attack the root causes of their fear…We can eradicate white fear and black rage by satisfying the real needs of all our people.” Rustin and like-minded progressives had a clear view of what the needed agenda would be, rooted in the longstanding priorities of the black-labor-left alliance: an ambitious government-led structural intervention that followed on high-profile strikes, including New York City postal workers and Appalachian coal miners in 1970 and autoworkers in Lordstown, Ohio in 1972. See e.g. Judson Gooding, “Blue-Collar Blues on the Assembly Line,” *Fortune*, July 1970; William Serrin, “The Assembly Line,” *The Atlantic*, October 1971; Irving Bluestone, “Boredom on the Assembly Line,” *Harper’s*, August 1972; “The Spreading Lordstown Syndrome,” *Business Week*, March 4, 1972.


547 Levine, *Bayard Rustin and the Civil Rights Movement*, 217.
would ensure jobs and a livable income for all citizens. Voices within the civil rights movement and the left wing of organized labor pushed back on the dominant elite-level view that the private sector would create the necessary jobs, while government’s role was to assist the minority of poor Americans to increase their skills and become integrated into the affluent society. The 1963 March on Washington was a March for Jobs and Freedom; the messages on marchers’ placards included “We March for Jobs For All Now.” The Freedom Budget, put forward in 1966 by a coalition of civil rights, labor, and other progressive groups, was an ambitious set of policy proposals centered on full employment, fair wages, the right to medical care, and the right to decent housing; it called for the government to allocate $185 billion towards these priorities over ten years.\(^{548}\)

For contemporaries who sought this kind of fundamental economic reform, the white working class was a crucial constituency, numerous enough to force major action in national politics. The disadvantage white workers faced and the common interests they shared with African Americans provided strong ground for an alliance, in this framework, but the racialized political consciousness many working class whites adopted stood in the way. The challenge, as contemporaries saw it, was to turn disadvantaged

\(^{548}\) A summary of the proposals can be found in “A ‘Freedom Budget’ for All Americans” (New York: A. Philip Randolph Institute, 1967). “The tragedy is that the workings of our economy so often pit the white poor and the black poor against each other at the bottom of society,” Randolph commented in the pamphlet’s introduction. “The tragedy is that groups only one generation removed from poverty themselves, haunted by the memory of scarcity and fearful of slipping back, step on the fingers of those struggling up the ladder...[A]ll Americans are the victims of our failure as a nation to distribute democratically the fruits of our abundance.” For a recent discussion, see Paul Le Blanc and Michael D. Yates, *A Freedom Budget For All Americans* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2013). On civil rights organizations’ commitment to universalistic social welfare programming, see e.g. Dona Cooper Hamilton and Charles V. Hamilton, *The Dual Agenda: Race and Social Welfare Policies of Civil Rights Organizations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).
whites away from the psychic salve of conservative rhetoric and toward a liberal agenda that could actually meet their needs. Key to the solution, in the predominant view, was the reform agenda itself—providing jobs for all would neutralize the resistance that stemmed from whites’ fears of losing their jobs to blacks. “We must develop a federal program of public works, retraining, and jobs for all—so that none, white or black, will have cause to feel threatened,” Martin Luther King Jr. argued.\(^549\)

White workers also played a key symbolic role for liberals seeking fundamental economic reform. As Chapter 1 and its coda section argued, liberals in the 1930s and 1940s consistently drew on imagery of needy and troubled whites to stress the need for reform. As Chapter 2 showed, the widespread belief in (white) working class affluence convinced many elites that further change was not needed. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, liberals once again pointed to white working class disadvantage as evidence of the failure of the existing system. The anger raging among blue-collar whites was indisputable proof that the affluent society was a myth, many argued. For Gus Tyler of the ILGWU, the backlash was the price elites should have expected to pay when “the basic and burning need to redistribute the wealth of America [was] forgotten…It is precisely this continuing maldistribution of income and wealth” that had “turn[ed]…poor against near poor; white against black.”\(^550\) White working class anger also testified to the need for immediate action: if progressives could not reach disadvantaged whites quickly, some argued, the backlash would halt or reverse the progress that had been made. If

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policymakers did not respond to the “real needs of these people,” one contemporary warned, the result would be “a sharp move to the right—even beyond Wallace.”  

There was, importantly, a clear tension running through efforts to employ the white worker as a progressive political symbol. White working class discontent served as evidence of the continuing unfairness of American society, but it also suggested that the liberals who had been in power for most of the preceding thirty years had failed to meet white workers’ needs. The tension lies in how contemporaries explained why liberalism had failed working class whites. In one line of argumentation, white workers’ needs had been rendered invisible in elite public discourse because of the widespread belief in working class affluence. “The myth that all Americans are affluent has made us unobservant of middle America,” Patricia and Brendan Sexton of the UAW argued. In another—adopted often by white progressives, rarely by black progressives—they had been overlooked because of a narrow elite-level focus on black disadvantage. The white worker “was ignored—consciously, carefully, and, many believed, necessarily,” argued sociologist Louise Kapp Howe. With “pressures from civil rights groups mounting,” Democrats chose “to move…on behalf of those most in need, the black and the poor, without waiting any longer to assuage the fears and prejudices of those one notch higher on the economic ladder.” These two arguments often appeared together, but they were very different in their implications. One placed the blame on postwar liberal elites who adopted a triumphalist take on the American economy. The other rebuked 1960s liberals

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553 Howe, introduction to *The White Majority*, 5.
for not giving sufficient attention to the needs of white workers during the civil rights revolution.

To be clear, those in this camp who argued that 1960s liberals had overlooked disadvantaged whites did not want to slow the progress of the civil rights movement. They wanted to prevent white backlash—which they saw as rooted in unrecognized economic deprivation—from wrecking that progress. The advantage of the elite consensus frame is that it recognizes that actors with different aims could coalesce around a set of arguments more beneficial to some political projects than others. One of the ironies of white working class representation in this period is that liberals who explicitly sought to prevent white workers from being captured by the right adopted many of the discursive tropes employed by their adversaries—defining white workers against blacks and professional-class white liberals.

Useful examples of this dynamic can be found by looking at the work of major figures in the white ethnic movement. While its political moment has mostly passed, whites’ ethnic identity was a prevalent theme in elite public discourse in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. The reassertion of ethnic identity among whites emerged as a response to and an attempt to mirror the efforts of African Americans, Latinos/as, Native Americans, and others who pressed claims as marginalized minority groups and rejected assimilationist ideologies in favor of pride in their group identity. It also drew from a conviction that white ethnics had been denied the promises of the postwar affluent society and should not be treated as part of a homogenous, dominant whiteness. Ethnics had been promised the good life in return for assimilating, in this view, but had ended up
culturally and economically deprived. White ethnic organizations sought to make ethnic-identity-based political claims, disaffiliating from a generic white middle class identity and demanding recognition as Poles, Italians, or ethnics generally.554

Existing literature has often linked the white ethnic movement to conservative politics. In this view, the reassertion of white ethnicity was primarily about racial grievance: Italians, for instance, demanded recognition in an effort to undercut claims made by blacks or Chicanos/as. This is too narrow an interpretation.555 White ethnic advocates did not want to displace other social movements. They wanted disadvantaged ethnic whites to be more explicitly included in liberal programming and in elite public discourse. It is not necessary to draw a straightforward connection between white ethnic grievances and conservatism to recognize that liberals sympathetic to white ethnics talked about white working class disadvantage in a way that undermined their own goal of defining white workers as a potential progressive force.


555 For a critique of the interpretation of white ethnicity as conservative, see Merton, “Rethinking the Politics of White Ethnicity.”
Speaking about a “movement” as a whole is obviously harder and riskier than representing the arguments made by Joseph Kraft or any single individual. It is possible to speak somewhat broadly about the white ethnic movement, though, because this movement can be understood as a loose coalition of elite-level actors who spoke for white ethnic workers from a liberal perspective. “A small coterie of about twenty people gave birth to what was called the ‘ethnic movement,’” recalled Richard Krickus, a sociologist active in that cohort.\textsuperscript{556} Elite-level actors prominent in the white ethnic movement included the American Jewish Committee (AJC), a liberal Jewish advocacy organization, and two of its staff members, Irving Levine and Murray Friedman; Geno Baroni, a Catholic priest and activist who led the National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs and later served in the Carter administration; Andrew Greeley, a priest and sociologist; Barbara Mikulski, a Baltimore activist and politician; and Michael Novak, a writer and intellectual. For clarity, I refer to these actors as “white ethnic advocates.”

The major figures in the white ethnic movement were motivated by two primary concerns: first, that white ethnic workers were moving to the racist right; second, that the dominant view of these workers among professional-class white liberals was inaccurate, unjust, and politically destructive. To address the threat of the populist right, they argued, liberal organizers needed to channel the anger and anxiety white workers felt towards material solutions—which white ethnic organizations sought to do at the local level in cities like Baltimore, Chicago, and Philadelphia. “If we don’t get these people

first, Wallace will,” one advocate put it.\textsuperscript{557} White ethnic advocates also stressed the urgent need for an alliance between white ethnics and people of color.\textsuperscript{558} “The interests of the lower-middle-class white and the poor non-white are identical,” Michael Novak argued. “Both together, they need a larger slice of the American pie. United, they can prevail; divided, they doom each other.”\textsuperscript{559} A 1970 statement by advocate Geno Baroni gives a good two-sentence summary of the chief intervention the movement sought to make: “We must stop exploiting the fear of the ethnic Middle American and consider his legitimate needs. We must bring together a new coalition to press for new goals and new priorities for all the poor and the near poor.”\textsuperscript{560}

Standing in the way of this objective, for white ethnic advocates, was the all-too-frequent liberal assumption that white workers did not have legitimate grievances. Organizations active in the ethnic movement sought to combat that perception, producing reports on white workers’ problems (including a “Middle America Pamphlet Series”), sponsoring conferences, and facilitating connections between like-minded liberals. As Richard Krickus recalled, they conducted a coordinated effort to “sensitize middle-class urban experts, journalists, government bureaucrats, and progressive politicians to the unmet needs of residents of white working-class communities,” drawing on connections

\textsuperscript{558} While their arguments often resembled the labor refrain “black and white, unite and fight,” it’s worth noting that white ethnic advocates encouraged members of ethnic and racial groups to proudly express their heritage and identity, not simply to identify as workers. They saw traditional labor politics as too narrowly focused on economics and insufficiently attentive to cultural and spiritual identity.
\textsuperscript{560} Geno Baroni, “Ethnicity and Public Policy,” in \textit{Pieces of a Dream: The Ethnic Worker’s Crisis with America} (New York; Center for Migration Studies, 1972), 8. The agenda advanced by organizations in the white ethnic movement included broad social democratic concerns (jobs) as well as concerns more specific to the urban environment: fighting redlining, securing revenue for cities as the tax base fled, promoting toughness against crime (which was framed as supported by and in the interest of the vast majority of white and black urbanites), securing more city resources for urban white ethnic neighborhoods.
in government and the press to “inundate[e] government agencies, the media, and politicians with pertinent information.”\textsuperscript{561} They had a significant influence on funders like the Ford Foundation and Rockefeller Foundation, who underwrote multiple projects proposed by white ethnic organizations beginning in the late 1960s as part of an effort to put resources behind political leaders who could tamp down white resistance.

White ethnic advocates also directly, and often combatively, argued that the snobbery and blind spots of upper-income white liberals were partly responsible for the backlash. First and foremost, white ethnic advocates charged, white professional-class liberals had wrongly scapegoated white ethnics for racism. Second, they suggested, these same elites had only paid attention to black disadvantage and had ignored the disadvantage white ethnics faced (Chapter 4 deals with this theme in more depth). “The ethnic American is sick of being stereotyped as a racist and dullard by phony white liberals, pseudo black militants and patronizing bureaucrats,” Barbara Mikulski insisted in a widely publicized piece. “He pays the bill for every major government program and gets nothing or little in the way of return.”\textsuperscript{562} Often, legitimate critiques of the often-insistent focus on white working class racism—“They’re not the people in the executive suites who would not hire a single Jew or Negro for so long,” one advocate noted—slid into a complete elision of any privilege or culpability for white ethnics: “Nobody has

\textsuperscript{561} Krickus, \textit{Pursuing the American Dream}, xii-xiii. While often angered by sensationalistic media imagery of angry white working class men, white ethnic advocates also recognized that they gained from it. “The misperception that the white ethnics were ‘backlashers’ flooding to George Wallace’s side helped us gain the attention of foundations,” Krickus recalled.

done anything for ethnics since Social Security.”

Some ethnic advocates reinforced the broader cultural mappings marking white workers as socially conservative and white elites as liberal, arguing that liberals had wrongly derided the traditional values dear to ethnics. “The white ethnic’s commitment to his family, home and neighborhood is profound in a way few who are part of the more cosmopolitan elite understand,” Andrew Greeley insisted.

White ethnic advocates did not champion white workers in pursuit of populist conservative political goals. They mounted a direct challenge to the prevailing notion that an affluent America had met the needs of the majority of its citizens, and they sought to build a multiracial liberal coalition in support of a universalistic policy agenda. Yet in seeking to convince other liberals of the need for a different political strategy, they echoed some of the key arguments made by conservative critics of liberalism—a coalition of white elites and African Americans dominated liberalism, leaving the white working class out; blacks received government largesse but hardworking whites did not; cosmopolitan liberal elites were chiefly responsible for the wrongs suffered by white workers. Writing in 1972, for instance, George Meany expressed his hope “the new focus on ethnicity” would mean a “renewed and serious concern for the lives and problems of ordinary Americans—following a period of undue attention to the antics of the rich, the marginal, and the bizarre.”

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Taken as a whole, elite discourse on Middle America returns again and again to a single frame—ordinary whites who comprise the majority have been forgotten in elite public discourse, displaced by marginal minority groups. This frame proved both seductive and flexible. It was useful for those who wanted to remove liberals from power (Nixon and his supporters) and those who wanted liberals to be more responsive to white workers (Joseph Kraft). It was compatible with an emphasis on the economic disadvantage white workers faced and the need for fundamental economic reform. But the frame also suggested that advocacy on issues of race and gender would necessarily alienate white workers. It encouraged zero-sum, either-or frames in which liberals could either be vocal champions of the new social movements or representatives of the white working class, not both. The dominant elite-level view defining white workers as anti-black and anti-liberal placed clear limits around what the white working class could mean in elite public discourse—limits that persist to the present day.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to challenge the close association between the concept of Middle America and the populist conservative politics identified with Richard Nixon. It presents a narrative rooting Middle American identity in the overlapping responses of a range of elites to white reaction against the civil rights movement and the dissent and cultural change of the mid-to-late 1960s. Liberals and journalists largely framed working class whites as those who were most enraged by dissent and most anxious about or hostile towards integration and political gains for African Americans, and their
characterizations of white working class identity mirrored those of conservatives. The notion that white workers comprised a homogenous group increasingly opposed to social change became widespread throughout media and intellectual discourse and was adopted by figures from across the political spectrum.

Placing liberals and journalists alongside conservatives, via an elite consensus frame, reorients the traditional narrative of the rise of Middle America in a few ways. First, it stresses that the longstanding culture-wars discourse that opposes “Middle America” to “liberals, cosmopolitans, and intellectuals” cannot be attributed to conservatives alone. In order to understand its longevity as a feature of American political discourse, it is necessary to understand its appeal to liberals and the role they have played in perpetuating it. The history of Middle America was deeply bound up with white-liberal anxieties around straying too far from the white majority on issues of race, but it also placed the blame for regressive policy and racial inequality at the feet of the mass of less enlightened whites and allowed “Upper Americans” to enjoy the privileges of whiteness without being marked as racists. Liberals defined themselves against Middle America in the same moment that conservatives sought to define Middle America against liberals, and the two trends reinforced each other.

Second, the elite consensus frame suggests the value of viewing the late 1960s as a period in which what the white working class meant in elite political discourse changed rather than a period in which white workers as a group changed their political affiliations. As scholars such as Thomas Sugrue, Becky Nicolaides, and Kenneth Durr have emphasized, none of the “backlash” behavior so central to late 1960s reporting on the rise
of Middle America—whether resistance to integration, opposition to government programs perceived as aiding African Americans at the expense of whites, or attachment to religious or ethnic values—was new. In the period examined in this chapter, it became more visible on a national stage. The civil rights movement forced Northern whites to think more rigorously about racism and racial inequality outside the South. Backlash was more directly at issue in national-level contestation between the Democratic and Republican parties, as the Democrats became the party of new social movements and the Republicans the party of the opposition. The news media began to cover race, dissent, and cultural turmoil more consistently. Elite understandings of the preeminent social divisions in American politics were relatively new in the 1960s; the real-life referents were not.

By the late 1960s, ethnicity, religion, patriotism, traditional values, racism, and other signifiers of cultural affinity were seen as more central to working class identity than the bread and butter political economic concerns emphasized by labor, not because they were not central to the political views of white working class people in previous decades, but because national-level understandings of what class meant in US politics were still heavily informed by the New Deal era’s opposition between workers and economic elites. Republicans, once viewed as partisans of business and the middle class, could now stake persuasive claims to speak for white workers. The emergent

understanding of white working class identity cut across traditional regionally- and religiously-based divisions and allowed Southern and Midwestern Protestants and Northern ethnic Catholics to be claimed under the same political identity. The realignment of the prevailing elite-level mapping of the electorate was as abrupt and long-lasting as any that emerged from the 1960s, and it was made possible by elite consensus.

Crucially, the emergence of the white worker as the chief symbol of cultural traditionalism and white backlash did not sever the association between white workers and New Deal-style economic populism. Labor and liberal understandings of working class political identity were founded on an opposition between workers and economic elites, and this was in no way incompatible with a focus on racism or cultural antagonism. While the notion that white workers as a group could be progressive on race or on cultural issues did not survive the 1960s, the notion that they could be progressive on economic issues certainly did. This is particularly clear in the decades of calls from the left for staunch economic populism as the antidote to backlash politics. In the prevailing understanding of white working class identity after the 1960s, material interest and cultural grievance were opposing forces, each with the ability to override the other. White workers were defined against economic royalists, white liberal elites, and African Americans simultaneously—as an anxious and elusive swing constituency ill at ease with either major party but critical to the hopes of both.
Chapter 4: The New Liberalism and the Victimized White Worker

At a 1989 conference sponsored by the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), a centrist group working to move the Democratic Party away from its liberal image, political scientist William Galston delivered a speech critical of the state of the party. Afterward, he recalled, “all hell broke loose,” as party elites in attendance broke into heated disagreement in full view of the media. The speech that had generated such heat was a sharply worded call for Democrats to increase their appeal to middle-income whites. “The inescapable fact is that the national Democratic Party is losing touch with the middle class, without whose solid support it cannot hope to rebuild a presidential majority,” Galston and coauthor Elaine Kamarck wrote in a corresponding memo. With the party “increasingly dominated by minority groups and white elites…the public has come to associate liberalism with tax and spending policies that contradict the interests of average families; with welfare policies that foster dependence rather than self-reliance; with softness toward the perpetrators of crime and indifference toward its victims…and with an adversarial stance toward mainstream moral and cultural values.”

The arguments in Galston and Kamarck’s paper were intensely controversial—centering a “middle class” synonymous with the “public” and defined against “minority groups and white elites”—but they were not new. The paper drew on a recognizable critique that had developed over the course of several decades. In the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, criticism of liberalism’s treatment of those Americans contemporaries most often

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called the “middle class,” the “lower middle class,” or the “working class” was never far from the center of elite public discourse. Elites of multiple stripes objected to the trajectory of liberalism since the late 1960s, and they often cast blue-collar whites who had worked hard to achieve a tenuous middle-income lifestyle as those most harmed by the new liberal politics. Critics charged that leniency on crime and misguided integration policies had placed white working class people and their children, especially in cities, in danger. An antagonistic attitude towards traditional cultural norms—the patriarchal family, chastity, heterosexuality, hard work, personal responsibility—had undermined what working class whites valued most, others argued. Government had spent freely on misconceived social policy targeted to African Americans, many charged, placing the tax burden on middle-income whites who gained nothing from the programs they were asked to support.

This chapter provides a detailed treatment of the argument that liberalism after the 1960s neglected the interests and needs of its blue-collar white constituents, with an eye toward illuminating why working class whites have served as such a consistent and useful foil for elites critical of liberalism. Where Chapter 3 explored the elite consensus on Middle America from the perspective of liberals and journalists, Chapter 4 focuses on the work of critics of liberalism. For those who sought to defend traditional values as they understood them, oppose the cultural left, or oppose liberal policy on race, it made sense to place Northern working class whites, especially white ethnics, at the forefront of their appeals. Blue-collar whites’ grievances could not be (as) easily dismissed by liberals as an attempt by the privileged to harm the underprivileged. Advocates could
point to working class whites’ immigrant histories and modest lifestyles as evidence that their claims came from a position of disempowerment, not a position of power. A populist frame opposing (white) workers to a liberal elite was more palatable than a direct attack on African Americans or other marginalized constituencies. Positioning white workers in this way was not necessarily baldly strategic (though it often was)—it was simply easier (at least or especially for white elites) to see their grievances as sympathetic.

This chapter, unlike the previous one, does not focus on a specific, tightly bounded time period. It attempts to capture a set of recurring arguments put forward consistently from the late 1960s through the 1990s. These arguments did not change markedly over that time period, and the chapter is structured in a way that brings together material from the late 1960s through the 1990s. The first section provides a brief background on the national-level political actors who were particularly influential in taking liberalism to task for a bias against working class whites, including conservatives who sought to make white workers a permanent conservative constituency and centrist Democrats who sought to moderate the party’s position on issues of race and culture. The second section clarifies what these actors meant when they talked about “liberals”—affluent, college-educated professionals who did intellectual or “verbal” work, held political priorities centered on “post-materialist” issues, and cultivated an elitist attitude toward non-elite citizens, especially white workers. The remainder of the chapter focuses on three primary arguments contemporaries made against liberalism: 1) Liberal urban policy unfairly placed the burden of integration onto white workers, exempting suburban
white elites; 2) Cultural liberalism, especially the feminist movement, chipped away at the traditional family norms prized by white workers; 3) Liberal programs gave unearned benefits to African Americans and nothing to working class whites, who were taxed to pay for them anyway.

A note on terminology and white working class exceptionalism

Contemporaries used different language to refer to the same basic “type” of people. As in the previous chapter, it is that “type” that is most important to the argument here. Galston and Kamarck, for instance, argued that liberals had lost touch with “the middle class,” “mainstream values,” “lower middle-class voters,” “lower middle-class white voters,” “working-class voters,” “middle-income voters,” and “the demographic and political center”—seemingly distinct terms used interchangeably in this context. As employed by contemporaries, “middle class,” “Middle America,” and “mainstream” were slightly broader in income terms than “working class,” but the differences are modest. The “middle class,” “Middle America,” the “mainstream,” the “working class”: these are flexible, empty terms that were defined more by what they were not—e.g. black, poor, rich, liberal, queer—than by what they were. They referred to lower-middle to middle-income whites, typically homeowners, non-college educated and working blue-collar or low-level white-collar jobs. The use of “middle class” reflects blue-collar whites’ more central symbolic position within the polity in the 1980s and 1990s (as compared with the 2010s), as well as the continued elite assumption that most blue-collar whites were economically secure. I use “blue-collar whites,” “middle-income whites,” “white workers,” “working class whites,” “white working class,” and “white
working class voters” interchangeably to refer to this group as talked about by elites. As in previous chapters, if I am making reference to white workers as political actors with agency, I use the suffix “actors” (white worker-actors). I use “professional” or “professional class” to refer to upper-middle-income educated elites.

In any period, the multiple meanings of “liberal” make it easy to lose the thread of an argument, and that problem is especially pressing in this period, when what it meant to be a “liberal” was explicitly contested and in flux. From the late 1940s to early 1960s, the dominant “liberalism” had been welfare state-oriented, pro-union, pro-civil rights, nationalistic, anticommunist, and hawkish if necessary in its anticommunism. As understood in contemporary discourse, the emergent “liberalism” was opposed to the Vietnam War, anti-nationalistic, much less union-oriented, in favor of affirmative action rather than strict legal equality, and much more oriented to challenging traditional norms around gender and sexuality. Many elites who had identified with the former did not identify with the latter. During the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, “liberal” came to refer to a distinct social type—elitist, professional, college-educated, upper- or upper-middle-income whites—as much as an ideology. This poses a challenge for clarity in writing. While the dissertation as a whole uses “liberal” as a descriptive term, the negative construction of “liberalism” as defined by its alienation from white workers is so pervasive in this period that it becomes difficult to capture the discourse without using it as contemporaries used it. To clearly differentiate references to “liberalism” in this chapter from the analysis in the previous chapters, I use “new liberal” and “new liberalism” to refer to the emergent liberal ideology and the social type associated with it.
I use “progressive” as a descriptive term to refer to any person with left-of-center views. The analysis of the “new liberalism” in this chapter should be read as an effort to historicize a caricature, not to make descriptive claims about changes in liberalism or progressive politics.

For a significant portion of elite opinion, it has long been axiomatic that working class whites are more prejudiced and more socially conservative than the white population as a whole. As Thomas and Mary Edsall’s 1991 bestseller *Chain Reaction* puts it: “It has been among the white working and lower-middle-classes that many of the social changes stemming from the introduction of new rights—civil rights for minorities, reproductive and workplace rights for women…and the surfacing of highly visible homosexual communities—have been most deeply resíssted.”\(^{568}\) From this perspective, it is easy to understand why critics of the new liberalism invoked disadvantaged whites so frequently: these whites were most angered by the new liberalism and were the most receptive audience for critics’ claims.

The Edsalls’ argument is not footnoted and is presented as self-evident. This is not to say, of course, that no evidence could be cited in support of it. Over many decades, one of the most consistent findings in public opinion research on whites’ racial attitudes is that whites with lower levels of education are more likely to express prejudiced views.\(^{569}\) The predominant explanation has held that education confers


training in egalitarian norms and a better grasp on the structural causes of inequality. A dissident reading attributes the gap to cultural capital; in this view, educated people are more likely to know the “right” answer, and education equips members of the dominant group “to promote their interests more astutely.” It’s also important to note that interpretations of the same data can vary significantly depending on how much emphasis is placed on differentiating between white subgroups. To take one very simple example: in General Social Survey data from 1977-1989, part of the period this chapter covers, 67% of whites with a high school education and 51% with more than a high school education agreed with a statement attributing racial inequality to a “lack of motivation or willpower” among blacks. These figures support the argument that less educated whites were more likely to choose the prejudiced view. They also support the argument that the prejudiced view was prominent among whites in all educational categories. They do not support the argument that less educated whites as a group were prejudiced, while educated whites were not.

Understanding resistance to new-liberal perspectives on issues of race, sex, gender, morality, and the work ethic as widespread throughout American society and white America in particular—and as frequently pressed by elites contesting other elites in elite public discourse—suggests that the arguments detailed in this chapter should not be


Mary Jackman and Michael Muha, “Education and Intergroup Attitudes: Moral Enlightenment, Superficial Democratic Commitment, or Ideological Refinement?,” American Sociological Review 49, no. 6 (1984): 752. One consistent argument holds that the gap between educated and less educated whites is wider on questions relating to abstract tolerance than on questions dealing with specific policies intended to reduce inequality.

understood only or primarily as political appeals to non-elite whites. This chapter draws on an alternative explanation for the prominence of white workers in anti-liberal discourse: The most seductive and politically effective way to respond to a claim of marginalization is with a counter-claim of marginalization.

In existing literature, the theme of “white victimhood” captures the prevalence of imagery of wounded or disadvantaged whites in contesting threats to white normativity. As Sally Robinson argues, in a period where whiteness and white masculinity cannot be normative in the everyday, uncontested way they had been in the past, whites and white men have often responded politically by “claim[ing] a symbolic disenfranchisement.” Robinson understands the rise of Middle America in this context, as “Middle Americans, so angry at others’ use of the logic of victimization, position themselves as victims.” This positioning allows them to pursue a kind of “identity politics of the dominant” in which they “compete with various others for cultural authority bestowed upon the authentically disempowered, the visibly wounded.”

This is a very useful framework, but it also raises questions in the context of a longer study of white working class representation. It is important to stress that victimization claims on behalf of white workers have a long and varied history. That history includes a wide range of claims, from the consistent comparison of wage work to slavery (the upshot being that free whites should not be treated as “slaves”) to depictions of strikers beaten and shot at the behest of employers (see Chapter 1). Further, if working

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class people, including whites and men, are understood as “authentically disempowered,”
there is nothing necessarily problematic in their claims to disempowerment. What is
most important is how white disadvantage is made visible, contextualized, and explained.
Over the last fifty years, this has very often taken place in elite discourse in a manner
favorable to the right. This chapter aims to shed light on that dynamic.

Advocates for the White Working Class Against the New Liberalism

The argument that the new liberalism gave the white working class a raw deal was
advanced by political figures associated with both major parties and with disparate
ideological traditions. It cannot be easily mapped to any one single political project.
While the chapter as a whole emphasizes this broadly shared critique of the new
liberalism and deemphasizes the specific goals of the actors who contributed to the
critique, this section outlines the basic political context. Significant criticism of the new
liberalism’s treatment of working class whites came from conservative activists and
politicians who sought to win blue-collar white voters to their cause. It also came from
left-of-center elites—intellectuals, Democratic politicians, and labor leaders—who
sought to make the new liberalism more responsive to white working class views as they
understood them. Through the period, the dominant elite-level view understood the white
working class as a discontented swing constituency, “an unpredictable force in American
political life, an uneasy ally for either the Left or the Right.”

Criticism of the new liberalism had very clear electoral (as well as symbolic) stakes for all involved.

**Conservatives: Converting opposition to the new liberalism into a durable majority**

Richard Nixon and his aides had worked towards a goal they called the “New Majority”—a durable conservative electoral majority founded on substantial white working class support. When Nixon resigned in 1974, the New Majority project was very much unfinished, but influential conservatives continued to work towards that goal. Writing in 1975, *National Review* publisher William Rusher saw in the mid-1970s electorate an “imposing (though not yet politically united) conservative majority.” Critical to that majority were the “hard-hats, blue collar workers and farmers” who had once been the backbone of the Democratic coalition. These workers were deeply alienated from the “verbalist elite” and the “semi-permanent welfare constituency” that dominated the new liberalism, Rusher and other contemporaries argued, and they made up a latent conservative constituency key to success.

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Few conservatives believed that any national political force had fully capitalized on the rightward trend among white workers, however, or that doing so would be an easy or frictionless project. Rusher and his counterparts cited several major obstacles to their pursuit of the blue-collar white vote: many voters angered by the new liberalism held a deep and emotional attachment to the Democratic Party, inherited from their parents and grandparents; the Republican Party remained associated with wealth and Eastern elitism; Democrats who recognized their vulnerability on social issues could simply moderate their positions; even deeply socially conservative voters were often skeptical of big business; Watergate had eroded the progress made under Nixon, as identification with the Republican Party dropped to extreme lows. The challenge for conservatives was to overcome white workers’ longstanding ties to the Democrats and build a conservative politics that appealed to alienated blue-collar whites.

The conservatives who most consistently and passionately spoke for white workers in the 1970s and 1980s came out of the populist conservative social movement often called the New Right. New Right organizations were most associated with activism on what were called the “social issues”—feminism, busing, abortion rights, school prayer, pornography, and gay rights. In the predominant contemporary framework, passionate social conservatives tended to be blue-collar whites; more affluent conservatives were willing to talk about abortion or busing at election time but cared far more about lowering the tax rate. The New Right sought to build a conservative program in which “social issues”…[received] more than lip service” and in which social
conservatives and economic conservatives were “equal partners.” In their public criticism of liberalism, and in their calls for their fellow conservatives to recognize the moral and electoral importance of social issues, New Right activists frequently stressed the harm new liberals had done to blue-collar whites. Among the most visible New Right-associated voices in the period were analyst/strategist Kevin Phillips, former White House aide Pat Buchanan, *National Review* publisher William Rusher, North Carolina senator Jesse Helms, televangelist Jerry Falwell, and activists/strategists Phyllis Schlafly, Richard Viguerie, and Paul Weyrich.

The most influential conservative critic of the new liberalism was without question Ronald Reagan. For both supporters and opponents, Reagan epitomized white working class voters’ turn against the new liberalism, as reflected in the demographic that bears his name (“Reagan Democrats”). In the dominant elite-level interpretation, his victories in 1980 and 1984 were glaring proof of the electorate’s rejection of new liberals: for decades, elites in both parties had assumed a candidate with his views would be too conservative to win the presidency. Reagan was a former Democrat who had idolized FDR as a young man and served as president of his union (the Screen Actors’ Guild). He continued to see value in the liberalism of the past, which he associated more with

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common purpose and cultural traditionalism than with activist government or economic reform. He also consistently criticized 1970s and 1980s liberalism from the perspective of a disappointed true believer and sought to convey to disillusioned former Democrats that the Republican Party was a hospitable place for them. “When the left took over the Democratic Party, we took over the Republican Party,” he claimed in a 1988 speech. “We made the Republican Party into the party of working people, the family, the neighborhood, the defense of freedom, and, yes, the American flag and the Pledge of Allegiance to one nation under God.” “Working people,” in this framework, were defined by their attachment to family, neighborhood, and nation and their aversion to the “left.”

**Democrats: Mounting opposition to the new liberalism**

When Reagan in 1988 decried the Democrats for their alienation from “working people,” Democrats unhappy with the new liberalism had been expressing the same concern for two decades. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Democrats worked to maintain and regain support among white working class voters. Candidates followed two primary approaches—placing the emphasis on economic issues and moving to the center/right to lessen their vulnerability on race and cultural issues. For the purposes of

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this chapter, it’s most important to spotlight those Democrats who argued that the key to winning working class whites was (in a common contemporary phrasing) a “mainstream” cultural positioning—in other words, an appeal more in line with majority views on issues of race, work, sex, and gender.

It is useful to situate the arguments that follow in the context of the deep party divisions Democrats confronted beginning in the late 1960s. The 1968 convention, where violent confrontations between protestors and police in the streets of Chicago received more attention than the convention speeches, brought these divisions into sharp relief. Antiwar Democrats were outraged by the nomination of pro-Vietnam War candidate Hubert Humphrey, the sitting vice president who (having entered the race late after the incumbent, Lyndon Johnson, dropped out) had not entered any primaries, while the majority of primary votes had been cast for Eugene McCarthy and the late Robert Kennedy, both antiwar candidates. In the wake of this crisis, the party yielded to calls for reform of the convention process. The reforms developed by the McGovern-Fraser Commission beginning in 1969 changed the process of delegate allocation for the convention, requiring that states award delegates based on public participation and in proportion to the votes won by candidates. States were now required to hold primaries or caucuses open to the public, and candidates could no longer win the nomination at the convention without running in primaries. More controversially, the reform committee endorsed quotas to increase the representation of African Americans (and Latinas/os in some states), women, and young people in state delegations to the convention.577

577 On the McGovern-Fraser reforms see e.g. William J. Crotty, *Decision for the Democrats: Reforming the Party Structure* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Byron Shafer, *Quiet Revolution: The*
For their supporters, the reforms made the party more responsive to its rank-and-file constituents and opened up opportunities for previously excluded groups. To opponents, most vocally the AFL-CIO, they were an unjust and politically disastrous power grab at the expense of white workers. The reforms worked “to favor the affluent liberals within the party and to diminish the influence of its lower-middle and working-class constituents,” one labor advocate argued. The reforms, the typical argument held, made the party less responsive to (white) working class views by failing to ensure proportionate representation for workers in state delegations and by reducing the influence of politicians and labor leaders responsive to them, who would no longer enjoy substantial power to influence candidate selection and other decisions by bargaining on the convention floor. Instead, critics argued, the new primary system was designed to

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579 Opponents of the reforms had considerable success in framing them as anti-working class, and this argument has persisted for decades after the fact, with authors as prominent as Thomas Frank continuing to interpret them as evidence of the Democrats’ decision “to reach out to the affluent and to turn their backs on workers.” The party reforms are better read as reducing the influence of elites who leveraged their claims to represent the (white) working class in opposition, not the other way around. The argument linking McGovern-Fraser to the abandonment of the working class makes a highly dubious transposition in equating the interests and views of labor, white workers, or the working class broadly with the interests and views of existing union leadership, particularly the conservative wing of the labor movement led by George Meany. It presumes that (white) workers were well represented by the state party elites and labor officials empowered under the existing system. “The effect of the new rules was to disenfranchise working-class and lower-class Democrats, who relied on representation at conventions by union leaders and professional politicians,” Ronald Radosh puts it. Ronald Radosh, Divided They Fell: The Demise of the Democratic Party, 1964-1996 (New York: Free Press, 1996), 177, emphasis added. While top AFL-CIO leaders had a great deal to lose from party reform, reform opened up different possibilities for rank-and-file members and union leaders lower down the hierarchy (more rank-and-file union members served as delegates to the 1972 convention than the 1968 convention, for instance), and substantial dissension took place within the ranks of labor over the best orientation to take toward party reform. This reading draws on Taylor Dark, The Unions and the Democrats: An Enduring Alliance (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 84ff; see also Battista, The Revival of Labor-Liberalism; Cowie, Stayin’ Alive, 105-113; Robert Self, All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy since the 1960s (New York: Macmillan, 2012), chapter 9; Jerry Wurf, “What Labor Has Against McGovern,” New Republic, August 5, 1972; Paul Weick, “Labor’s Al
give excessive weight to the views of engaged activists and would produce candidates too far to the left to win. The most inexorable demonstration of this, for many, was the 1972 election. South Dakota senator George McGovern, the Democratic nominee, was associated with the political program of (in his own words) “the poor and the minorities and the young people and the anti-war movement.” Nixon, who dubbed McGovern the candidate of “acid, amnesty, and abortion,” won 49 states and 60% of the electoral vote. For decades afterward, Democrats pointed to the “McGovern coalition” as an indication of the drubbing they would receive if they alienated the moderate white vote.

The early to mid-1970s saw a passionate effort by moderate Democrats to push the party back towards the center, toward the internationalist, anticommmunist, pro-union, welfare state agenda identified with Democrats from Truman to Hubert Humphrey. Many of the critics of the new liberalism gathered around the AFL-CIO; this camp included AFL-CIO president George Meany; Al Barkan, head of the AFL-CIO’s Committee on Political Education (COPE); Washington senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson, a presidential candidate in 1972 and 1976; and analysts/strategists Ben Wattenberg and Penn Kemble. In the same period, a group of formerly liberal intellectuals often called “neoconservatives” (Irving Kristol, Nathan Glazer, Norman Podhoretz, Jeane Kirkpatrick, and Michael Novak, among others) gained considerable elite-level


prominence as cutting critics of the new liberalism, particularly the core liberal approach of using government programs for the benefit of underprivileged people. As one observer noted, these groups were united in their opposition to “what they see as the liberal excesses of the sixties…too much government intervention, too many demands by blacks…social and political changes by ‘the kids’ and their sympathizers of the late sixties.” They were also united in the belief that those “excesses” were absolutely anathema to white working class voters and would prevent the Democratic Party from ever regaining a national majority.

It is important to be clear that moving towards the center/right was not the only option put forward by Democrats seeking to regain white working class support. In the early to mid-1970s, advocates of a “new populism” argued that a focus on combatting corporate power could overcome whites’ racial fears and unite “a majority coalition of economic self-interest…across race, age, sex, and regional lines.” For notable voices


on the left wing of the labor movement, white workers were disillusioned and
disengaged, but not conservative; they could be engaged by a revived social democratic
politics. When AFSCME president Jerry Wurf urged progressives to enter the
“competition for the political loyalties and the support of middle America,” he disputed
the assumption that this would require a move to the right: “I have not given up on the
basic decency of the American people…I believe you can still rally a majority in this
country around an ideal.”\textsuperscript{584} To overcome disengagement, in this view, the Democratic
Party and progressives generally needed to make political participation meaningful. For
UAW president Douglas Fraser, “People stay home and don’t vote because they have lost
faith that casting that vote will impact on the course of the nation…The proclaimed shift
to the right has occurred not so much among the public as among those who have been
elected to serve it.”\textsuperscript{585}

The view dominant in the Democratic Party by the 1990s held that an electoral
majority did not exist for the kind of politics new liberals had embraced. Centrists who
argued that the party was too far left to win in national politics gained in influence over
the course of the 1980s as Democrats continued to lose, and the party as a whole shifted
to the right. These “New Democrats”\textsuperscript{586} defined themselves against what this chapter

\textsuperscript{584} Jerry Wurf, “Competing for a Majority,” \textit{Vital Speeches} 39, no. 16 (1973): 498. On labor politics in this
Andrew Battista, \textit{The Revival of Labor-Liberalism} (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Dark, \textit{The Unions and the Democrats}; Kim Moody, \textit{An Injury to All: The Decline of American
Press, 1999); Thomas Geoghegan, \textit{Which Side are You On? Trying to Be For Labor When It’s Flat on Its

\textsuperscript{585} Douglas Fraser, “The Road to 1980,” \textit{In These Times}, June 12, 1979.

\textsuperscript{586} The most comprehensive history of the New Democratic movement is Kenneth Baer, \textit{Reinventing
Democrats: The Politics of Liberalism from Reagan to Clinton} (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas,
calls the “new liberalism,” which they viewed as outdated and ineffective. Collectively, New Democrats argued that the liberal Democratic tradition as they saw it—problem-solving through government programs, attentiveness to minority constituencies like “blacks, feminists, gays, [and] organized labor”—was no longer workable as politics or policy. They championed a group they most often called the “middle class”—middle-income whites skeptical of big-government solutions, particularly those they associated with aid to people of color. These were the voters Democrats had alienated, New Democrats argued, and the voters they would need to regain to return to power.


587 “Blacks, feminists…” in Randall Rothenberg, The Neoliberals: Creating the New American Politics (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 108. New Democrats were united more by their perception of what was wrong with the party than by their policy goals. Some argued that the party needed to adopt a universalistic, class-first economic populism to counter the perception that it only responded to marginal minority groups and to reverse the downward slide of middle-income living standards. The New Democratic movement also included centrists who found the economic populist tradition counterproductive—in this view, liberals’ antagonism to business, reflexive advocacy of government programs, and focus on redistribution rather than growth was inadequate. Compare, for instance, Stanley Greenberg, “From Crisis to Working Majority,” The American Prospect, September 21, 1991; E. J. Dionne Jr., Why Americans Hate Politics (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991); Stanley Greenberg and Theda Skocpol, eds., The New Majority: Toward a Popular Progressive Politics (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997) with Rothenberg, The Neoliberals; Charles Peters, “A Neoliberal’s Manifesto,” Washington Monthly, May 1983; Paul Tsongas, The Road from Here: Liberalism and Realities in the 1980s (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981). As Democrats continued to lose at the national level, even some of the national Democrats most associated with old-style liberalism began to distance themselves from the old nostrums. Liberal stalwart Ted Kennedy embraced a series of talking points drawn from the reform wing in a remarkable 1985 speech. Liberal programs, he claimed, “have done too little to break the cycle of poverty and dependence, and too often they have proved to be counterproductive.” Kennedy touted his work on airline and trucking deregulation, touted a message focused on economic growth, and endorsed the charge that the party had become dominated by special interest groups: “We must understand that there is a difference between being a party that cares about labor and being a labor party. There is a difference between being a party that cares about women and being the women’s party. And we can and we must be a party that cares about minorities without becoming a minority party.” Fay Joyce, “Kennedy Says Democratic Party Must Change to Regain Support,” New York Times, March 31, 1985.
The chief institutional engine of the New Democratic effort after 1985 was the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), headed by Al From. The most influential New Democratic voices on the needs of blue-collar whites (the “middle class,” in their terms) included pollster Stanley Greenberg and Bill Clinton, who served as the chair of the DLC in 1990 and 1991 and drew substantially on New Democratic ideas and rhetoric in his campaigns and his presidency. Clinton ran as a “different kind of Democrat” (a Democrat not defined by the new liberalism, in other words), promised to “end welfare as we know it,” and pursued center-right policy on criminal justice and welfare reform. While their new-liberal critics accused them of capitulating to a right-wing agenda, Clinton and like-minded Democrats saw themselves as building a center-left politics that could work in an irrevocably changed political landscape. In their efforts to refashion the Democratic Party in that image, they consistently critiqued the new liberalism’s treatment of the white working class.

**Deindustrialization and the political economic context**

It is critical to stress that these elite debates took place against the backdrop of deindustrialization and the collapse of the Keynesian economic order organized labor had helped to build. The postwar economic boom had brought about a great deal of confidence in Keynesian economic expertise. By the mid-1970s, elites perceived major signs of trouble. The United States ran a trade deficit in 1971 for the first time in the twentieth century. Unemployment in 1975 sat at 8.5%, as compared with 3.5% in 1969.

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588 The central question for the New Democrats, as phrased by William Galston, was how “a party with progressive ideals can be practical and progressive in practice under the economic and social and political circumstances of the 1980s”—in other words, how liberalism could be refashioned to succeed given new demographic and economic realities. Galston oral history.
Where conventional wisdom for decades had implied a tradeoff between inflation and unemployment (if one was high, the other would be low, and policymakers could keep the economy in balance by adjusting spending and interest rates accordingly), the 1973 oil crisis and 1973-5 recession were marked by rising inflation as well as rising unemployment—“stagflation.”

Elites understood that something was wrong but, collectively speaking, were unsure how to articulate it or address it. “The economics profession, in sharp contrast to its position 10 years ago, is divided and unsure as it contemplates these problems….It knows neither what ails the economy nor what should be done about it,” one observer noted in 1979. Multiple alternatives gained purchase in elite circles. On the left, microeconomic planning measures prescribed a significantly more active role for government, which would intervene in specific industries to achieve goals around wages, prices, and employment. Others advocated reworking trade policy to better protect domestic firms and workers in industries (archetypically autos and steel) now facing vastly increased international competition. “The present trade policy is slowly but surely

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converting America into a service industry country,” George Meany stressed in 1978. “It is possible that we will lose our position as a major manufacturing nation.”

On the right, supply-side economics, growing in influence in the pages of the Wall Street Journal and among policymakers like New York congressman Jack Kemp, understood unemployment as an outgrowth of insufficient capital rather than (as Keynesians had argued) insufficient demand from the rank-and-file consumer. Growth came from the private sector, in this framework, and policymakers needed to incentivize private sector investment by getting rid of overly burdensome taxes, regulation, and deficit spending. The period saw a wide-ranging political mobilization on the part of American business, including a growing investment in Washington, D.C. lobbying and campaign contributions and a more aggressive stance against organized labor.

Employers by the 1980s sought steep concessions from workers during contract negotiations and saw strikes as an opportunity to break unions. Broadly speaking, the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s saw a shift in the dominant economic reasoning toward deregulation, cuts to the social safety net, and tax cuts tilted to the highest income groups, while the economy as a whole shifted away from manufacturing and towards financial services.

It’s important to note here that elite public discourse, particularly in periods where the economy seemed (according to the standard indicators) to be doing reasonably well, was not altogether pessimistic about economic change. To be sure, it is possible to find interpretations very familiar to a present-day reader in the discourse. “The system that seemed to be capable of providing a steadily growing standard of living during the turbulent 1960s [has] become totally incapable of providing people with a simple home mortgage, a stable job, or a secure pension,” two labor-left economists argued in a 1982 book, with the decline of “productive investment in our basic national industries” giving way to “shuttered factories, displaced workers, and a newly emerging group of ghost towns.” Especially during the 1990s, however, a current of optimism and even triumphalism ran alongside a current of pessimism and concern. In a 1992 analysis, R. W. Apple of the New York Times stressed “the tremendous increase in the size of the middle class and the concomitant shrinking [of] the working class…The have-nots are still there, and still vocal, but there are far more haves now, and many are less and less prepared to

593 Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, The Deindustrialization of America (New York: Basic Books, 1982), 4-6.
help the have-nots.” 594 “There is every reason to believe that this new era will see a revolution in goods and services that will empower and enhance most people,” House Speaker (and futurist) Newt Gingrich told an interviewer later in the decade. 595

The impact of deindustrialization and the rise of neoliberalism on the history of white working class representation has been significant to a degree beyond the scope of this chapter. For the purposes of the argument here, though, it is important to first stress that the dominant understanding of white working class identity continued to foreground cultural traditionalism and anti-black views. The disadvantage white workers faced amid deindustrialization and economic transition came into the discourse against that backdrop. Contemporaries suggested that economic stagnation was likely to make middle-income whites even more focused on protecting their own gains. Blue-collar whites’ “social anger…turned downward as the economy stopped expanding,” Massachusetts senator Paul Tsongas argued, directed at “the have-nots,” now a “minority…whose desires seemed seriously to threaten the achievements of the newly arrived middle class.” 596

Second, deindustrialization might be understood as an invisible actor within the discourse traced in this chapter. Critics of the new liberalism referred consistently to the disadvantage suffered by white workers, but they paid little attention to the causes of inequality and of disinvestment in cities and industrial towns. Rather, criticism of the new liberalism spotlighted the consequences (crime, urban blight, high unemployment, precarity), explaining them through the racialized frame of personal

behavior. Critics made white workers’ pain visible not to address it materially but to portray white workers’ response to it as normative.

This chapter has been organized around specific, distinguishable arguments central to a broader critique of the new liberalism’s treatment of the white working class. Individual sections of the chapter deal with three overlapping attacks, phrased here in language reminiscent of new liberals’ critics: (1) New liberalism was indifferent to the physical safety and wellbeing of its urban constituents; (2) New liberalism undermined the traditional values prized by the white working class; (3) New liberalism was indifferent to white disadvantage and forced working class whites to pay for new-liberal favoritism toward blacks. Before turning to these specific claims, however, it is necessary to clarify and contextualize what critics meant when they talked about liberals, liberalism, or liberal elites. That is the goal of the next section.

The “New Class”: The Historical Context of the New Liberal Elite

In this period, criticism of liberalism as elitist was not nearly as well worn as it has been in more recent decades—there was a level of novelty to the argument. Contemporaries put forward a specific historical narrative explaining the new liberalism’s turn toward elitism, and most understood themselves to be describing a relatively recent development. In the key narrative, the transition from an industrial society to a postindustrial society had empowered a new group of college-educated white liberal elites, sometimes called the “New Class.” These elites, many of them influenced by new-liberal campus culture and the New Left, were disdainful of mainstream America, in this
view, and especially disdainful of working class whites. They held a different set of political views than liberals had held in New Deal days, critics argued, and were indifferent to material issues like physical and economic security. Critics charged that the new liberals sought to use their influence in government, influence over intellectual institutions (particularly journalism and academia), and influence over the Democratic Party to move national politics to the left, through undemocratic means. This section should be read as an attempt to historicize a critique of the new liberalism, not to evaluate the critique’s validity.

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The vision of the new liberalism that came under fire in this period was in many respects a straw man. It is most easily grasped as a still-familiar set of images: urban liberal elites, “affluent, well-educated cosmopolitans who judge the factory worker and mill hand from their high-rise foundation offices, TV studios, and tweedy campus retreats,” journalistic snobs, denizens of the ivory tower. While these images have outlasted their earlier context and now suggest an ahistorical elitism, 1970s and 1980s critics of liberalism had a very specific cohort in mind: affluent, college-educated white professionals, many young enough to have grown up in the prosperous 1950s and 1960s, empowered by the rising status of fields like government, journalism, academia, and social services. Contemporaries often used a term to describe this cohort that has since dropped from the discourse: the “New Class.”

Like the “economic royalists” of the 1930s, the new liberal elite was understood as having emerged as part of a large-scale socioeconomic transformation. In this case,

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that large-scale transformation was the transition to a postindustrial society, in which the
service sector and the professions increased in importance as manufacturing declined.
While industrial society had empowered conservative elites, New Class theorists held, the
coming of postindustrial society empowered a new group of liberal elites distinguished
by their ability to manipulate language and claim intellectual expertise. As Kevin
Phillips argued in a typical account, “America’s new mandarins are not the people who
sell manufactured items but the people who shape and market ideas and information.”
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The New Class construct was broadly inclusive of “college-educated people whose skills
and vocations proliferate in a ‘post-industrial society,’” as Irving Kristol wrote in a 1975
op-ed, but the archetypical new elites, in this framework, included liberal intellectuals,
journalists, academics, government bureaucrats, and foundation officials. 599

Critics of the new liberal elite argued that its emergence was a recent
phenomenon and a unique phenomenon: it was historically atypical for a privileged class
to hold liberal views. “Until the rise of a large, distinct knowledge sector, broadcast
networks, major newspapers, and fashionable Ivy League colleges tended to reflect the
conservative views of the industrial establishment,” Phillips emphasized. 600

598 Kevin Phillips, Mediocrity: American Parties and Politics in the Communications Age (New York:
Doubleday, 1975), 17. For summaries of the New Class concept see Barbara Ehrenreich, Fear of Falling:
The Inner Life of the Middle Class (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 146-185; Christopher Lasch, “The
New Class Controversy,” Chronicles, June 1990; on the appeal of the framework to business elites,
Benjamin Waterhouse, Lobbying America: The Politics of Business from Nixon to NAF (Princeton:
Princeton University Press, 2014), 42ff; for representative New Class criticism, Michael Novak, “Needing
1979; B. Bruce-Briggs, ed., The New Class? (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1979); the best-
known contemporary work on postindustrial society was Daniel Bell, The Coming of Postindustrial Society
and referred to a Soviet bureaucracy that claimed to represent the workers while arrogating power to itself.
599 Kristol, “Business and ‘The New Class.’”
600 Phillips, Mediocrity, 17.
delivering the commencement speech at Harvard in 1936, had been booed. In explaining the rise of the new liberal elite, contemporaries cited liberalism’s successes since the New Deal; the growth of the state; the larger and more prestigious social role played by expert administrators, bureaucrats, and public intellectuals; the growth of higher education during the affluent postwar period; and the creation of a national media establishment concentrated in Washington and New York. Critics tended to picture younger members of the elite as children of affluent America, shaped by liberal campus cultures in the 1960s and 1970s and the intellectual currents of the New Left. Older members of the new liberal elite tended to be pictured as 1930s and 1940s radicals who had become elitists as their status rose in the 1950s and 1960s. “The ex-underdogs, the ex-outcasts, the ex-rebels are satisfied bourgeois today, who pay $150 a plate at Americans for Democratic Action dinners,” journalist Howard K. Smith claimed.601 Amid the incredible changes in the country and in their own lives, in this view, these elites had remained liberals, in part as a status symbol. They wanted it known that they supported liberal causes and organizations like Americans for Democratic Action (and that they could afford to support them). However, as liberalism became the ideology of an elite, in this view, the meaning of liberalism itself had changed.

**The ideology of the new liberal elite**

For critics, the new liberal elite held to an ideology distinct from the liberalism of the past. It was less focused on bread-and-butter issues, more negative about American life, and much more contemptuous of working class whites. First, in this view, elite liberal politics was distinguished by its post-materialist focus: its assumption that

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economic security and a decent standard of living were no longer the most pressing political issues. “There are now two Lefts—the materialist and the postmaterialist—which are rooted in different classes,” Seymour Martin Lipset put it in a typical account. Traditional, working class-centered liberalism prioritized “satisfying material needs, i.e., with sustenance and safety” and pursued a “high standard of living, a stable economy...an enduring family life, crime fighting, and maintenance of order.” In contrast, the issues prioritized by educated liberals included “a clean environment, a better culture, equal status for women and minorities, the quality of education, peaceful international relations, greater democratization, and a more permissive morality.” Lipset deemed these “non-economic or social issues,” a particularly clear demonstration of what the culture/economics binary falsely excluded from the realm of the “economic”—the environment, education, “equal status for women and minorities.” In this framework, voters would only become concerned with these issues when they no longer had concerns about their economic stability and wellbeing. That made it easy to dismiss concern with “social issues” as elitist.

Second, critics argued that the New Class held a basically negative view of America itself—as racist, imperialist, and culturally bankrupt. “A few fashionable intellectuals and academics,” Ronald Reagan charged in a 1976 address, would “have us believe ours is a sick society—a bad country.” Where the old liberalism had been proudly patriotic, in this view, the new liberalism saw the history of the United States as a

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history marked by slavery, consumerism, and unjust war in Vietnam. The term “adversary culture,” coined by literary critic Lionel Trilling, was widely adopted to describe this orientation. For Trilling, writing that cultivated an adversary stance had the objective of “detaching the reader from the habits of thought and feeling that the larger culture imposes, of giving him a ground and a vantage point from which to judge and condemn…the culture that produced him.”

604 Intellectual life, in this view, was fundamentally critical and oppositional; it required intellectuals to stand at a distance from the broader culture to identify and point out its flaws. The value of the concept for critics of the new liberalism was clear—it identified a powerful cohort hypocritically distinguished by its opposition to majoritarian norms. When conservatives like Irving Kristol, Kevin Phillips, and Pat Buchanan referred to “adversary culture,” they meant a culture “hostile to the prevailing middle-class values of work, patriotism, and traditional morality,” as Phillips put it.605 For many, that adversary stance extended to capitalism. At bottom, it meant that new liberal intellectuals treated negativity toward American society as a means of class distinction.606

Third, for critics, the new liberal elite held a contemptuous view of lower and middle-income whites as narrow-minded, bigoted, and unconcerned. Critics most often


605 Phillips, Mediacracy, 29.

tied these views to the influence of the 1960s New Left. Contemporary discourse understood the New Left as a movement of professional-class white students who “have all ‘had it made’ in economic terms,” as the AFL-CIO News alleged, and for many, the New Left (and student radicalism generally) left an egregious class bias in its wake. Penn Kemble, an intellectual and strategist close to the AFL-CIO, charged that the New Left had mainstreamed the idea “that the average American had been brainwashed by the Establishment and was tainted by racism” and therefore “could [not] be fully trusted to make the best decisions for himself or the nation.” Instead, “political decision-making had to be shifted into the hands of those who by virtue of superior education and the possession of ‘conscience’…could give some civilized shape to the malleable politics of the masses.”

For Kemble and other critics, New Left-inspired intellectuals did not only see education as an index of competence and expertise; they saw it as an index of purity and intelligence. They saw themselves as entitled to lead for both reasons. Their emphasis on the intractable bigotry of the white working class, in this view, served their professional interests.

A common corollary held that liberals took a patronizing and paternalistic attitude towards a range of marginalized minority groups, whom they blatantly favored over all others. “Liberals are obsessed with the need to rectify, by federal intervention, the injustices historically perpetrated by whites against the black population of the country,

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607 See chapter 3 for a discussion of New Left views of the white worker. As argued there, while drawing an inflexible opposition between an anti-(white) working class New Left and pro-labor Old Left is not accurate, the dominant view emerging from the New Left did understand white workers as economically secure, narrow-minded, and opposed to further change.


as well as other wrongs allegedly committed against a whole series of newly-discovered and acutely self-conscious ‘minorities,’” William Rusher charged, “ranging from homosexuals and American Indians to Spanish-speaking citizens, flower people, prison inmates, and women.” Any semi-organized minority could get something from liberal elites simply by proclaiming itself as such, critics complained. While similar charges had been directed at 1930s and 1940s liberalism and organized labor (see Chapter 1), in this period, working class whites were not mapped to any minority group in elite public discourse—they were instead understood as those most excluded in any discussion focused on “minorities.”

The new liberal elite’s sources of power

The New Left had figured itself as an oppositional social movement working against the Establishment from the outside. For critics of the new liberalism, New Left-influenced professionals were part of the Establishment. They sought to deny their class interests, in this view, even to themselves, but their power was very substantial. Broadly, within discourse critical of the New Class, liberal elites exercised power in three primary ways: their influence in government; their influence in dominant intellectual institutions, particularly news media and universities; and their influence over the Democratic Party.

First, fundamental to the conservative critique of the New Class was the view that the most significant, coercive power was now the state, not business. Conservatives charged that the increasing size and scope of the administrative state had empowered a powerful group of liberal bureaucrats insulated from the wishes of the electorate. The courts were similarly unaccountable to the democratic process, in this view. Because

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they lacked faith in the majority, critics charged, new liberals pursued reform through these and other channels where they could circumvent the need to get majority support. They sought, Kristol argued, to have “a set of ideals and values that are not shared by the majority of the American people…imposed on them through legislation, regulation and judicial decree.”

It is critical to stress the connection between the language of “impos[ition]” and issues of race and integration, the subtext of Kristol’s comments here: Elites who envisioned an integrated society of a certain kind used state power to force the less powerful (white) majority to comply with their vision, regardless of consent. Liberalism had begun as a defense of ordinary people against powerful and coercive elites, in this framework, but had evolved into an equally coercive power. “In 1928, the average industrial worker in Cleveland was as helpless against his autocratic factory owner as his grandson is today against court-ordered busing,” populist conservative Bob Whitaker argued.

New liberals did not only use the state to impose their desires on others, in this framework; they also exploited it to support themselves financially. Most versions of the thesis tied the New Class to the creation of a vast, powerful, self-serving state apparatus claiming to ameliorate social problems. A system of glorified cronyism took place, as bureaucrats in control of government resources created “federal initiatives making hundreds of thousands of jobs and opportunities available to those whose hearts itch to do good and who long for a ‘meaningful’ use of their talents, skills, and years.”

As a result, in this view, taxpayer money ostensibly intended for the poor primarily served to

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enrich elites. Americans working in the private sector picked up the tab. This, businessman and former Treasury secretary William Simon claimed, was a “politics of stealing from productive Peter to pay nonproductive Paul, creating a new class of Americans which lives off our taxes and pretends that its institutionalized middle-class pork barrel is all for the sake of the ‘poor.’”614 Central to criticism of the liberal elite was the view that new liberals camouflaged and justified their desire for power by claiming to work on behalf of the marginalized. They cloaked their naked ambition in a heavy dose of moralism, in this view, and imagined themselves as the forces of light and their opponents as the forces of darkness.

Conservatives who sought to bring about an alliance between working class whites and business-focused economic conservatives cited New Class power in government as a key unifying issue. In a 1976 book, Pat Buchanan called on the Republican Party to become “the party of the working class, not the welfare class,” to “champion the cause of producers and taxpayers, of the private sector threatened by the government sector, of the millions who carry most of the cost of government and share the least in its beneficence.” His besieged constituency comprised “producers and laborers, blue collar and white collar,” asked to carry “upon their backs” an “expanding army of millions, utterly dependent upon government for education, medical care, food and shelter.”615 The slippage in this account between the interests of the (white) working class and the interests of business (“the private sector threatened by the government sector”) is clear and intentional. Buchanan and like-minded conservatives argued that the

615 Buchanan, Conservative Votes, Liberal Victories, 132.
key economic divide in American politics pitted “producers” and “taxpayers” against nonproducers. Because (white) workers and their employers worked, produced things of value, and were overtaxed to pay for those who did neither, in this view, they had a common interest in opposing “intellectuals,” the “welfare class,” and the statist apparatus that supported them.

Second, in this framework, the New Class exerted power through its influence over the intellectual establishment, especially the news media and universities. Both, for contemporaries, were realms where liberal elites had displaced an old conservative elite. Universities had once defended the social order; students were now pushed to question the foundations of capitalism and American society. Similarly, contemporary critics of liberal bias in the media did not dispute that the press had been conservative during New Deal days. They argued that a new generation of journalists, more educated and more liberal, had attained positions of influence as news production became centralized in Washington and New York. The result was a milieu in which elite journalists inhabited closed professional circles unwelcoming to alternative views. “Unlike his predecessor of a generation ago, the adversary journalist is less at home in the neighborhood tavern than the college seminar,” Pat Buchanan charged, and that “adversary journalist” had “ceased playing the neutral observer and reporter and [taken] up the more exciting and satisfying role of pleader, partisan, and advocate.”

For Buchanan and other critics, new-liberal
journalists sought not to report the news but to convert the audience. Television news, the greatest offender for most conservatives, portrayed America as a troubled society marked by constant conflict and an endless parade of social problems.

Liberals’ growing influence in the Democratic Party comprised a third leg of New Class power. When Reagan and centrist Democrats charged that “the left took over the Democratic Party” via the McGovern-Fraser reforms, the culprit was a Democratic Party faction then called the “New Politics.” The New Politics was understood to comprise younger, college-educated activists, often connected to anti-Vietnam War, civil rights, feminist, and queer people’s movements—in the words of one critic, “educated, prosperous people, members of the professional and technical intelligentsia.”617 “New Politics” Democrats differed from New Left radicals in their belief that change could come through mainstream institutions. For their critics, they were just as antagonistic to majoritarian American norms, to white working class people, and to organized labor. Opponents defined the New Politics against the “majority,” the “ordinary” American. When they called for increasing the influence of women, one critic charged, new liberals meant not “Catholic women or ordinary housewives” but “politically untypical

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women”—liberal well-to-do white professional women. “I honestly believe that these new politics types get a psychological comfort out of losing,” remarked the AFL-CIO’s Al Barkan. “They don’t want to be identified with the majority.”

For critics, the outsize influence of the new liberal elite in government, media, academia, and the Democratic Party had serious negative consequences. Individuals and groups who had little sense of life as most Americans lived it occupied positions of power, they argued, and their decisions harmed those with less privilege. The remainder of this chapter examines three separate charges: 1) New liberal urban policy placed white workers and other non-elite urbanites in danger; 2) The pressure new liberals placed on conventional moral norms harmed working class whites most; 3) New liberals overlooked white disadvantage and created a welfare system whereby the most deserving workers paid heavy taxes to support the least deserving. The goal of this chapter is to stress the importance of the white worker as a symbol of resistance to the new liberalism. Contemporary elites consistently invoked white workers in debating many of the most contentious issues of the period—feminism, busing, integration, crime, welfare, and more. A full treatment of the political history around these issues is beyond the scope of the chapter. I have focused primarily on portraying contemporary arguments and analyzing them in the context of a history of white working class representation.

1: The new liberalism places the body at risk: Integration and crime

A prominent line of attack on post-1960s liberalism held that new-liberal policies placed the bodies and lives of lower- and middle-income constituents in danger. This critique focused heavily on Northern cities, understood as home to the white (predominantly ethnic) working class. Upper-income new-liberal whites, critics charged, lived in the suburbs, removed from the real-life consequences of their policies, particularly policies dealing with crime and integration. New liberals, opponents argued, blamed social injustice for crime (rather than criminals themselves) and were unwilling to support the strong anti-crime measures necessary to protect law-abiding citizens. They supported desegregation busing plans, despite the harms inflicted on the children affected, in this view, but kept their own children out of integrated lower-income schools. Law-abiding urbanites were the ultimate victims. Simply put, in this discourse, the chief privilege afforded by class status is understood as the ability to avoid dangerous urban spaces—less obliquely, the ability to avoid mixing with blacks, or as mainstream critics of new liberals more often framed it, mixing with any dangerous “lower class” regardless of color.

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The starting point for understanding discourse on crime, integration, and the white working class is the common argument that white elites compelled the least well-off whites to take on a disproportionate amount of what observers often called “the burden of change,” “the costs of integration,” “the price for racial integration.” The “burden” of change, as understood in this framework, could be seen in heightened competition among
the less advantaged for jobs and resources—if the courts or the mayor’s office mandated that a certain percentage of jobs on a construction project go to blacks, a white construction worker would be put out of work, not a white city planner. Most of all, it could be seen in a deteriorating and dangerous school experience for children and in the changing culture of neighborhoods. “The vast mass of white citizens…see change as taking place at their expense,” neoconservative Aaron Wildavsky wrote in a typical account. “It is their jobs which are sought for blacks, their schools which are invaded by other people, and their children who are bused to strange locations.”620 As Wildavsky’s phrasing (“invaded,” “other people”) made particularly clear, the burden of change in this framework ultimately came down to sharing space with African Americans.

Contemporaries, especially critics of new liberal urban policy, often argued that class, not race, was the issue—urbanites with stable family lives, regardless of race, reasonably did not want to live alongside others, regardless of race, who were dangerous and loud. New York politician Mario Cuomo, for instance, framed controversy over the construction of public housing in Forest Hills, New York as “a clash between working and nonworking people, many of the unemployed being black…The objection is to crime and deterioration and not color. The coincidence [sic] that most of the lower economic class are black is what produces confusion.”621 This argument was rooted in a common elite-level opposition between two very different cultures found among lower- to middle-income urbanites. One was orderly, family-centered, quiet, clean, traditional; the other was loud, violent, crime-ridden, lacking in stability, marked by sexual promiscuity and a

desire for immediate gratification.\textsuperscript{622} These clearly fit conventional imagery around white ethnics and blacks, respectively, but observers often framed the opposition in race-neutral language (e.g. “working class” versus “lower class” or “poor”).

For critics, lax law enforcement, public housing and neighborhood integration, and busing had all chipped away at the barriers neighborhoods had built to insulate themselves, bringing pathology closer and closer into the sphere of once-stable neighborhoods. Journalist Jim Sleeper described the problem from the perspective of Italian New Yorkers:

\begin{quote}
The Italians knew—and these were, indeed, incontestable facts—that at eight each morning, when the men in their families had gone to work and their sidewalks and stoops were already hosed down and the wash was hanging out back, garbage covered the sidewalks in front of the “welfare” buildings, whose residents were sleeping off another night of noise and mayhem. The nightly screams and shatterings of glass, the inevitable police sirens and bubble gum lights ricocheting through the Italians’ blinds and around their parlors, had brought the block to the edge of war. Puerto Rican and black boys urinated against the fronts of the block’s two abandoned buildings in broad daylight and strode down the street bearing boom boxes at full blast.\textsuperscript{623}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{622} Many observers understood a “culture of poverty” as crossing racial and national boundaries—the “lower class” culture claimed some whites, while some African Americans were in the stable working class. In other cases, the use of class categories as proxies for racial categories is clear: “In the lower class, they don’t take care of property; in the working class they do. In the lower class, the men don’t work; in the working class, they’re trying to get overtime. It’s the difference between the rioter and the cop.” Daniel Patrick Moynihan in Irwin Isenberg, ed., \textit{The City in Crisis} (New York: H.W. Wilson, 1968), 163. On poverty discourse in this period, particularly comparisons between African Americans and the white working class, see e.g. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, \textit{The Negro Family: The Case for National Action} (Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, March 1965); Kenneth Clark, \textit{Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power} (New York: Harper and Row, 1965); the essays in Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey, eds., \textit{The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy}, (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1967); and in Arthur B. Shostack and William Gomberg, eds., \textit{Blue-Collar World: Studies of the American Worker} (Englewood, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1964); Michael Harrington, \textit{The Other America: Poverty in the United States} (New York: Macmillan, 1962); Herbert Gans, \textit{The Urban Villagers: Group and Class in the Life of Italian-Americans} (New York: The Free Press, 1962); Alice O’Connor, \textit{Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century US History} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

In this framework, cleanliness attests to respectable domesticity (“sidewalks and stoops…hosed down” and “wash…hanging out back”); pathology is evident in the dirtiness of a living space (“garbage covered the sidewalk”; “boys urinated…in broad daylight”). Sleeper and like-minded critics charged that new liberals did not confront the problems brought by pathological lower class culture with clear eyes, under the wrongheaded impression that doing so would be racist. Because their daily lives were touched by the pathological culture, working class whites—and, in many accounts, law-abiding, working class blacks and Latinos/as—paid the price. Deindustrialization here was an invisible actor; the discourse depicted the consequences of racial inequality and the disinvestment in cities but foregrounded bad behavior.

**Crime**

First, in this framework, lower-income urbanites paid for the blindness of suburban new liberals when they were victimized by crime. When New Democrats Galston and Kamarck charged Democrats with “softness toward the perpetrators of crime and indifference toward its victims,” they echoed the longstanding argument that new liberals were too quick to attribute crime to poverty and injustice rather than to the agency of the criminal and (as a result) unwilling to support strong law enforcement measures. A 1972 article by George McGovern suggests the type of reasoning they had in mind. “The purse-snatcher, the mugger and the car-stripper” committed crimes primarily because they had no other means of getting money, McGovern argued. The “dismal fact is that the street criminal is almost always the product of poverty and alienation. To deplore street crime and not deplore the conditions that provoke it is
senseless.”624 For critics, this kind of argument gave criminals more indulgence than their victims. It was both unjust and politically damaging, and it was primarily a product of new liberals at a safe distance from the very real and legitimate worries of the urban street.

One of the most influential treatments of crime, white workers, and new liberal politics can be found in sociologist Jonathan Rieder’s 1985 book Canarsie, an ethnographic study of a predominantly Jewish and Italian neighborhood in Brooklyn. The book asked why urban white ethnics—people whose parents and grandparents had provided the “élan” and “ballast” for the New Deal—had turned against their political heritage. Rieder rooted urban white ethnics’ turn to the right in a “distinctive politics of space” forged by concerns about integration, mugging, and “crime in the streets.” Canarsie residents, he argued, “began to see liberalism as being out of key with the requirements of urban living and to equate it with a self-destructive idealism...[that] ignored the demands of bodily survival.”625 New liberals, for Rieder and other contemporaries, had unfairly dismissed these concerns as illegitimate. Instead of incorporating the “need for law and order” into a broader progressive program, they had ceded the issue to the right. As a result, Rieder argued, “left-liberalism hardened into an orthodoxy of the privileged classes.” Privilege, in this framework, is idealistic, soft,


unwilling to accept difficult truths, more interested in appearing righteous or pure than in acting practically.

Centrist Democrats consistently stressed that calling for “law and order” was not equivalent to racist backlash politics. In their view, crime was “a real problem” that constituents needed policymakers to address, and the law-abiding African American and Latino/a majority had the same concerns as the whites new liberals reflexively deemed racist. As those most victimized by crime, in this view, urban voters naturally wanted strong policing. Washington senator Scoop Jackson epitomizes the argument: “Well, first the absolute left said that law and order was a code word for racism. Then they said it was a code word for repression…[But] who takes it on the chin? Not the fellow in the new high rise downtown” or “the fellow in the exclusive suburb…No, it is the vulnerable little guy again who is victimized. There are elderly people, there are poor people, there are black and Chicano people in this country who are afraid to walk out in the street at night or during the day. Talk about repression!”

In this view, liberals’ traditional mission had been to safeguard the welfare of the “little guy”; “law and order” was consistent with this heritage, and anything else was not.

Never far from view, however, was a discourse in which urban working class whites were the primary white victims of crime, with blacks and Latinos understood as the primary perpetrators. “In suburbia…a distant sympathy for the black condition can be aroused,” journalist Theodore White argued, as “the white middle class can insulate

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itself—by zoning and money—from the stress and strain of experiment, from the fear of violence.” Urban whites, however, understood crime as “a peculiar, savage condition brought about by Negroes.” White conceded that “blacks who live in black ghettos are most in danger,” but stressed that “those who live close to black precincts are also in danger…and those who live close to the black precincts are by and large the white poor, the white working class, largely of recent immigrant stock themselves,” dismayed as “the streets on which their old ladies walk to midnight mass…[became] dangerous because of purse snatchers.”

The association of blackness with criminality is obviously among the most deeply rooted tropes in American politics, as is the need to protect the white body from black intrusion. This discourse specifically turns on which white bodies are in danger and which are not. White implies that “distant sympathy for the black condition” is only possible for those (affluent) whites who do not share space with African Americans on a daily basis. In this framework, it is not simply that new liberals can insulate themselves from urban strain; liberals can only remain liberals because they are untouched by street violence. Working class whites are in danger, in this logic, and therefore cannot possibly remain liberal. A pair of jokes best captures this connection between ideology and street violence: “A conservative is a liberal who’s been mugged…A liberal is a conservative who hasn’t been mugged—yet!”

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628 Rieder, *Canarsie*, 78-79. The second line has been attributed to former Philadelphia mayor Frank Rizzo, one of the preeminent backlash politicians of the era.
Neighborhood and school integration

Contemporaries cited busing, perhaps more than any other issue, as evidence that working class whites bore the burden of integration. Particularly after the 1974 *Milliken v. Bradley* Supreme Court decision held that metropolitan desegregation plans could not touch the suburbs, the chief argument against busing from white parents and politicians held that it placed the burden on the least privileged urban families (whites and, for some, blacks too). These children endured long bus rides to unfamiliar or dangerous neighborhoods, in this view; at school, they faced inferior instruction and violence. The most central charge in this case against busing was a charge of basic hypocrisy: The elites who designed and imposed the busing plans exempted their own children. For one conservative, liberal stalwart Ted Kennedy’s support of busing was easily explicable and deeply unjust: “No Kennedy has ever had to experience the horrors of having himself or his children bused into the ghetto. The Kennedys of America…created a system whereby the rich could *buy* their way out of racial trauma.”

It is difficult to overstate the pervasiveness, in antibusing discourse, of a “class struggle” frame stressing the unfairness of upper-income whites treating white working class families differently than their own. “Busing is a strategy devised by the *haute*

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bourgeoisie to force the working class to pay the price for racial integration while their kids bask in lily-white suburban or private schools—with, of course, a few upper-middle-class blacks around to make it look good,” white ethnic advocate Andrew Greeley argued.\textsuperscript{631} Boston antibusing activist Louise Day Hicks focused her criticism on “rich people in the suburbs,” “the establishment,” “the outside power structure.”\textsuperscript{632} The same frame is foregrounded in journalist J. Anthony Lukas’s 1985 Pulitzer Prize-winning treatment of the Boston busing crisis, \textit{Common Ground}: “class resentment did more than anything to feed the fires of white resistance in the inner-city neighborhoods,” Lukas argued. Framing busing as a class-based conflict between the affluent and the working class was beneficial for antibusing activists. It allowed them to claim underdog status and to soften any direct attack on African American children or activists who had worked to desegregate schools. Racism was not the motivating factor, they implied; class unfairness was. More broadly, in this framework, the only group with any power or agency within urban politics was the white elite, and this group imposed busing (or any policy intended to promote integration) from the top down. The longstanding work local civil rights movements had done on education issues was elided. This is characteristic of much of the discourse on liberalism’s unfairness to working class whites. In a customary framework, African Americans do not have any political agency; the white elite champions them, at the expense of the white working class.


For contemporaries, the outsize burden borne by working class whites also manifested in the changing nature of urban white ethnic neighborhoods. It’s important to note that sympathetic contemporaries framed these neighborhoods as warm, communal spaces home to an almost timeless culture. “These are places…where the white worker gets back his face and his name, where he ‘has a say,’ where he experiences participation and community,” one scholar explained.633 A common corollary held that residents of these neighborhoods did not want other groups to move in because they wanted to preserve the ethnic homogeneity central to their identity. “The pattern of Italian-American life is continuous with that of their ancestors,” Italian-American advocate Richard Gambino argued; with “outsiders” understood as “threats to neighborhood stability which is necessary to the close-knit life and culture of the people.”634 In this view, opposition to integration was not about anti-blackness, but about preserving (in this case) Italianness. This argument was prominent enough in the period to inspire one of the highest-profile controversies of the 1976 presidential campaign, in which Democratic candidate Jimmy Carter averred that “I see nothing wrong with ethnic purity being maintained” in a neighborhood. Government should not, Carter suggested, “break down an ethnically oriented community by interjecting into it a member of another race,” “alien groups,” or a “diametrically opposite kind of family.”635 Carter’s inartful phrasing underscores the obvious subtext behind references to ethnicity and “family” norms in this

context—“another race,” “alien groups,” and a “diametrically opposite kind of family” are effectively synonymous.

Urban elites, critics charged, were indifferent to white ethnics’ legitimate worries about change in their neighborhoods—loss of ethnic distinctiveness, fears about safety and disruptive neighbors—instead writing them off as racism. These concerns were “not merely irrational, and over skin color,” white ethnic advocate Michael Novak argued (following a common contemporary framework in equating racism with irrational psychological attitudes). Rather, “in the present system, the only thing one gets for integration is punishment: higher crime, worse schools, the diminishment of basic services, and the rest.”

Furthermore, Novak and like-minded critics stressed, neither white ethnics nor their ancestors had created the American racial regime, and they had been victimized by it themselves. “Racists? Our ancestors owned no slaves. Most of us ceased being serfs only in the last two hundred years,” Novak insisted. This argument had a clear corollary: it was unjust for the white ethnic, “who is living on the margin himself,” to be “asked to pay the entire price for the injustices done to blacks”—to redress the sins perpetrated by white Anglo-Americans before his ancestors had even arrived in America—“while those who were enriched pay nothing.” The ultimate class privilege, in this view, was the ability to reap the benefits of racism while displacing the blame and the costs onto others.


Since the 1960s, white working class anger at the liberal elite has sometimes been attributed to an abstract sense of condescension or bias. In mid-1960s-1980s discourse on integration and crime, the cause is often much more explicit: new liberals designed urban policy based on their own self-interest or their sense of moral righteousness, without regard to the practical, immediate, and bodily concerns of non-elites. Working class whites were harmed as a result, as their neighborhoods and schools deteriorated—in large part because they were forced to share space with African Americans. In this framework, white liberals are liberals predominantly because they lack direct experience with the consequences of their policies, a luxury not afforded to most—only a white person with class privilege can “afford” to be liberal.

2. The erosion of traditional norms hurts the (white) working class most

The victimized white worker was first and foremost a symbol of racial grievance. Because of the association between the white working class and traditional values, however, white workers could be defined against anything ostensibly threatening to those values—changes within the family structure, women in the workplace, “women’s liberation,” normalization of homosexuality, increasingly nontraditional norms in schools and in popular culture. This pattern manifests particularly clearly in elite public discourse around the Christian conservative movement and the feminist movement. Contemporaries argued that the changing norms brought by feminism and the new liberalism harmed white working class people. Working class whites found meaningful
lives through stable and close-knit family life, in this view, and the new liberalism took an adversarial approach to their major source of agency and happiness.

**Feminism and the white working class**

It was a commonplace in elite public discourse that second-wave feminism was primarily a movement of professional-class white women. Progressive white working class women and women of color argued as much; so did observers from other perspectives. Those who framed feminism as out of touch with white working class women made two primary arguments: first, the movement’s economic agenda focused too heavily on equal access to professional jobs, a priority only for professional-class women; second, professional-class feminists’ leftwing social views ran counter to socially conservative working class norms.

In one prominent line of argumentation, the women’s movement was too heavily focused on workplace equality with men, which it assumed to be necessarily liberating. “Women’s Lib periodicals assume that the majority of women are college-educated, endowed with superb talents they are churning to express to a reluctant world, eager to enjoy a fascinating career,” one white ethnic activist wrote.\(^{638}\) That assumption, in this critique, did not reflect the needs and experiences of women who did not have professional men in their families and were not in a position to choose whether or not to work out of the home. “We’re not after the jobs that our men have because we know how our men feel,” Baltimore politician Barbara Mikulski explained. “We know that when they come home from work every day they feel they’ve been treated like the

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machines they operate.” When the only jobs a woman could conceivably hold were low-paying and boring with little chance for advancement, subsidized childcare, family leave, and job training were more pressing concerns than workplace equality, in this view.

A second line of argumentation held that white working class people found the “role-changing” associated with feminism offensive. Since at least the 1950s, social researchers had understood white working class women as heavily focused on stability and the family. While new research conducted in the mid-1970s was significantly more nuanced, often stressing the agency and activism of white working class women in their families and in local politics, that emphasis on the close-knit family remained. “The working-class and lower-middle-class subculture…and dominated by an inner-family orientation; members are expected to find both social and emotional gratifications within its bosom,” sociologist Lillian Rubin wrote in a 1976 study. “No woman worthy of the title Mother would wish to do otherwise.”

In this framework, role changes posed a particular challenge for white working class people, both men and women, because they were less likely to find fulfillment or self-actualization in their jobs. Now, in this view, cultural change imperiled their ability to find it in family and community too. The movement had “unsettling” implications for

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both “the male breadwinner whose self-esteem derived mainly from that role, and to the woman whose life’s commitment was to husband, children, and home,” noted Nancy Seifer, a leading researcher on white ethnic working class women.  

“It [women’s liberation] doesn’t relate to us,” one New Yorker argued. “You can’t agitate women without agitating men. It’s destructive to the family. Most of us were poverty families—the men were put down as much as women. They need support too.” 

In this framework, those who could not easily attain social status outside of traditional roles were hurt the most as titles like “mother,” “father,” and “wife” no longer carried automatic regard. Women who suffered class disadvantage also, in this view, reasonably did not see men or the family as oppressive. Men dealt with the same pressures women faced, and the family was their refuge against the outside world.

In looking at this discourse, it is important to stress that there has been a longstanding connection between economic security (particularly for workers) and traditional norms around gender and family. For instance, some of the earliest labor laws limiting the power of employers had governed the hours and conditions under which women could legally work; while they were grounded in paternalism, they also provided real gains. A significant number of feminists in the first half of the twentieth century opposed the Equal Rights Amendment (“Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex”) on the

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grounds that it would take away these protections. In the 1970s, conservatives, most notably Phyllis Schlafly, led opposition to the ERA. Schlafly was less insistent than many of her social conservative allies in linking her claims to the welfare of white workers. Much of her public argumentation featured lurid and homophobic allegations directed at “radicals,” “man-haters,” and “lesbians.” But she and her supporters did tap the notion that seeking to be treated exactly like men would disadvantage women by removing protective measures designed for their benefit: “In the face of the double cost, industry just takes the benefits away from the women so men and women can be equal on a lower level.” Traditional roles, for Schlafly and like-minded conservatives, protected women and privileged them over men.

More broadly, the notion of economic security and the “good life” has historically been deeply tied to the breadwinning father/homemaker mother model, which had been normative for workers and professionals alike for decades. During the heyday of


organized labor’s power, officials argued strongly in favor of the family wage system, which they saw as central to economic security and justice. Staunch support for the family wage within labor circles certainly did reflect norms proscribing wage work for women who had a choice in the matter, but it was not read as “conservative.” The expectation that multiple members of the household would work for wages, in this framework, was most advantageous to employers (and harmful for working class men), because it allowed employers to defend paying the primary earner lower wages.

When critics framed the new liberalism as classist, they tapped (implicitly or explicitly) the connection between (white) working class economic security and patriarchal family norms. “The culture wars that have convulsed America since the sixties are best understood as a form of class warfare,” Christopher Lasch argued in a typical account, pitting an “enlightened elite (as it thinks of itself)” against “the majority.” The “working and lower middle classes,” Lasch continued, “favor limits on abortion, cling to the two-parent family as a source of stability in a turbulent world, [and] resist experiments with ‘alternative lifestyles.’” Lasch here played on the longstanding connection between the white working class and stability. (White) workers, in his view, had a healthy understanding of limits that elites lacked. They regarded strict moral norms as protection from the vicissitudes of “a turbulent world,” not as oppressive.

**Christian conservatism and the white working class**

More broadly, the value of “class struggle” frames on issues of sexuality and gender, as with race, is straightforward: they undercut a frame in which the conservative

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position is the position of dominant groups (Christians, heterosexuals, men) and identify it instead as the position of the (white) working class. This dynamic can be seen in the public claims-making of the New Right, which championed working class and middle-income whites more vocally than any contemporary conservative group. The movement, leader Richard Viguerie claimed in 1983’s *The Establishment vs. the People*, “represents the class of Americans variously referred to as ‘the little people,’ ‘the forgotten men and women,’ ‘the working class,’ and ‘the silent majority.’”646 The “establishment,” the “cultural elite,” and the “intellectual elite” were customary adversaries for Christian conservatives. “Over the last 15 years, Middle America’s fabric of beliefs, conventions, norms, customs and moral values has been torn apart,” charged one conservative, with a “new intellectual elite…carrying out the process of demolition.”647

An understanding of the social conservative constituency as a previously “silent” majority was advantageous for the New Right. While many of the leaders of the New Right had grown up in (white) working class America, they were also seasoned activists and operatives who saw an opportunity to win gains for their brand of conservatism by mobilizing support among evangelical Christian and Catholic voters. In a frequent narrative, however, social conservatives and Christian conservatives had only become involved in politics recently, as the nation took a sharp turn to the left. They were not professional politicians with an ax to grind or a thirst for power, in this framework. They

646 Richard Viguerie, *The Establishment vs. the People: Is a New Populist Revolt on the Way?* (Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1983), 14. 1982’s *The New Right Papers*, a collection featuring essays by most of the major figures in the movement, characterized the New Right as a “Middle American Revolution,” a movement “articulating the frustrated hopes of Middle America,” and a message from the “Middle American Radicals.”

simply wanted to defend the moral system that most Americans supported and that had been accepted as the natural order until recently.

In a 1986 interview, New Right leader Paul Weyrich offered a representative articulation of this narrative. The movement’s base, he argued, “is comprised largely of people who, for many, many decades, were very quiet politically.” Weyrich defined a “cultural conservative” as “someone whose main concern is family, neighborhood, community and church. These are people very much wrapped up in their children and the family network. They are mainly ethnic blue-collar people who have worked in the same factory or the same job for a long period of time.” Cultural conservatives were forced to speak out, Weyrich argued, because they could no longer live quiet and contented lives by keeping to themselves. The tide of recent events—sexual education in schools, the *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion, the *Engel v. Vitale* decision banning prayer in public schools, acceptance of “homosexual affirmative action”—“cause[d] these people to feel that they were under siege.”

“Siege” suggests a distant, external authority exerting its power to reshape local or private space—home, school, church, neighborhood—against the wishes of locals. In this framework, new liberals were unwilling to allow ordinary Americans to live their lives and raise their children the way they saw fit; they sought instead to impose the views they considered best, regardless of consent. The power of the “Big Media,” for many, lay in its ability to break down the barriers citizens had built to keep out dangerous material, to “pour violence and filth and anti-Americanism into our homes and places of

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work,” as Richard Viguerie charged. This understanding of liberal power also came through particularly clearly on education issues—textbooks with liberal bias, liberals “distributing sexual propaganda to our third and fourth graders.” This emphasis on the power of the new liberalism to break down barriers suggests a key continuity across issues of race and sexuality. From busing to integration (North and South) to sex in the media, illegitimate power is understood as distant, external, and imposed against the wishes of locals without consent.

3. White workers pay for new liberal programs and get nothing in return

In 1985, pollster Stan Greenberg conducted a study in an industrial suburb north of Detroit that yielded one of the most influential portrayals of white working class voters in the post-civil rights era. Macomb County, Michigan was a former labor-liberal stronghold where Ronald Reagan had won roughly two-thirds of the vote in 1984, and the Michigan Democratic Party and the UAW had hired Greenberg to make sense of that result. During focus groups with Macomb County Democrats who had voted for Reagan, Greenberg recalled, “we raised the race issue, and unbelievable emotion came pouring out.” The argument he put forward to explain these voters’ “defection” from the Democrats was straightforward: Macomb County’s white working class voters held a

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649 Viguerie, The Establishment vs. the People, 134.
651 Greenberg describing his Macomb focus groups during an interview on CSPAN’s “Booknotes,” April 9, 1995.
“profound distaste for blacks, a sentiment that pervades almost everything they think about government and politics.” Macomb voters’ anti-black racism manifested in opposition to a range of liberal policies, in Greenberg’s account, but especially welfare and affirmative action. They perceived “the special status of blacks as a serious obstacle to their personal advancement”—insisting that they had lost out on job opportunities and loans because of racial favoritism—and viewed government “as a black domain where whites cannot expect reasonable treatment.” Macomb voters also saw themselves as heavily taxed but receiving nothing in return, “ignored by the government but forced to support social programs that did not benefit them,” for Greenberg. In sum, “blacks constituted the explanation for their vulnerability, for almost everything that has gone wrong in their lives.”

Greenberg put forward a particularly extreme and explicit version of an argument that had been made consistently for twenty years prior to his Macomb study: the white working class received, or felt that it received, nothing from new liberal social policy geared only towards African Americans. This argument undergirded much discourse on Middle America (see Chapter 3). It deeply shaped the politics of the 1980s and 1990s, including the efforts of Republicans to appeal to “Reagan Democrats” and the efforts of Clinton and the New Democrats to win them back. Throughout the period, working class whites appeared consistently in elite public discourse as those most harmed by and most opposed to new liberal welfare and affirmative action policy. In each case, what most

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distinguished working class whites was the fact that they faced disadvantage but did not receive preferential treatment or assistance from the government.

All of the arguments outlined below elided the central role of the stratified post-New Deal welfare state in creating the postwar white middle class, as well as the assistance that white worker-actors received from government since the 1960s. Homeownership is historically the chief means by which working class people can build wealth. Under the New Deal Democrats, government-backed Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and Veterans Affairs (VA) mortgage programs excluded people of color but allowed whites of modest means to buy homes at low interest rates and with little money up front. The GI Bill’s higher education benefits vastly increased the size of the professional class by allowing scores of working class servicemen, disproportionately white, to attend college. The Wagner Act, the law most crucial in the growth of unions after the 1930s, did not exclude from government protection unions that kept out African Americans or permitted them only in the worst jobs. Despite the prevailing caricature of 1960s liberalism as a set of programs with “no appeal” for “ordinary whites,” whites (especially senior citizens) benefited considerably from Great Society programs, including Medicare, Medicaid, and federal money for education. The extent to which white worker-actors benefited from government intervention was not only invisible to worker-actors—it was mostly invisible within elite public discourse as well. Elite-level

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arguments figuring white workers as victims of welfare and affirmative action relied on that invisibility.

**Affirmative action and the white working class**

When contemporaries argued that race-based affirmative action programs were particularly unfair to working class whites, they made two primary claims, focused on affirmative action in stable working class trades (construction, police and fire departments) and college admissions, respectively. In the former case, arguments followed on the “burden of integration” pattern detailed above—those whites who had the least were asked to sacrifice the most. White professionals were insulated from job competition, in this view, and as a result did not “have much to lose from black demands for equity in hiring. Most blacks had no hope of finding a place in the executive suites or faculty lounges; they were aspiring to blue-collar jobs, such as in the building trades, where color-blind hiring would have meant, among other things, that a white worker could no longer expect to pass his job along to his son.”655 As one white worker-actor wrote to the *New York Times* in defense of nepotism within unions, “Some men leave

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their sons money, some large investments, some business connections and some a profession. I have none of these to bequeath to my sons. I have only one worthwhile thing to give: my trade…For this simple father’s wish it is said that I discriminate against Negroes.”

Historically, family and community connections have been a significant source of cultural capital for white worker-actor men in particular, allowing them to access better-paying and more stable work. Personalizing this system through the example of a (white) father wishing to pass his trade on to his son framed it in the most sympathetic and innocuous terms possible.

The new liberalism’s critics also contended that race-based preferences for college admission placed white working class students at an unfair disadvantage. They too faced obstacles that professional-class whites did not face, in this view, but did not receive recognition or dispensation for them. The 1980s and 1990s in particular saw a number of calls from both progressives and conservatives to increase class-based affirmative action measures. Significantly, these arguments often came in the context of staunch opposition to race-based affirmative action. Toward the end of a polemical 1979 article identifying race-based affirmative action as unlawful racial discrimination, then-University of Chicago professor Antonin Scalia emphasized his support for preferential measures for the “poor and disadvantaged”: “I am not willing to prefer the son of a prosperous and well-educated black doctor or lawyer—solely because of his race—to the son of a recent refugee from Eastern Europe who is working as a manual laborer to get

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his family ahead.” This frequent device also appears, for instance, in Dinesh D’Souza’s 1991 book *Illiberal Education*, which compares “a black or Hispanic doctor’s son, who has enjoyed the advantages of comfort and affluence” to “the daughter of an Appalachian coal miner.” These arguments reflect an either-or, zero-sum frame consistently present on issues of race and class in this period. The objective for a Scalia or D’Souza was not so much to call for more preferences for all disadvantaged applicants—affirmative action on the basis of class and race—as to undermine the claim that affirmative action programs should benefit prospective students of color, regardless of class.

Criticism of affirmative action also provides further evidence of the consistent slippage between “white working class” and white working class men. In order for the claim that affirmative action was harmful to the white working class to make sense, the benefits white worker-actor women drew from it had to go unmentioned. Frederick Lynch, a conservative intellectual who helped to popularize the concept of “reverse discrimination,” derided new liberal understandings of power and disadvantage as a “a colorized version of Marx’s class struggle,” in which “white men (regardless of individual backgrounds) are regarded as a privileged modern-day ‘bourgeoisie,’ while women and people of color…are the oppressed ‘proletariat.’ Any mention of a white working class—once prominently represented in labor histories—is simply met with

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more rationalizations or with awkward silence.” In this formulation, “white working class” and “white men” seem to be synonymous; “women” are a distinct group. (Lynch’s reference to a white working class “once prominently represented in labor histories” is also suggestive—the fact that liberals had once been greatly invested in the welfare of a group they now derided, critics often noted, was further evidence that the new liberalism had lost its way.)

**Welfare and the white working class**

In the Trump era, there has been considerable attention paid to white working class people who depend on welfare and disability to support themselves. Those working class white people who are in the labor force, some have suggested, are not angered only by distant others of color; their anti-government sentiment stems from direct experiences with whites in their community whom they perceive as undeserving and irresponsible. That hypothesis is mostly absent in late twentieth century discourse on welfare, which hewed almost universally to a black welfare recipient/white taxpayer binary. Since the mid-1960s, the dominant understanding in elite discourse had framed poverty and

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government poverty programming as concentrated among African Americans in Northern cities. 661 (“Welfare” in this context means Aid to Families with Dependent Children, or AFDC, the much-stigmatized program that provided cash assistance to low-income parents and was ended after Congress passed welfare reform in 1996.) The chief objection to status quo welfare policy held that it incentivized immoral and irresponsible behavior (children born out of wedlock, single-parent families, drug use, criminal activity, able-bodied adults dropping out of the labor force) and allowed that behavior to continue indefinitely. Longstanding anti-black racist tropes were the central component of anti-welfare discourse. The white working class, though, often played a supporting symbolic role.

For contemporary elites, working class whites were deeply angered by welfare because they themselves worked hard for modest rewards, paid taxes, and did not take welfare. What they had, they had earned themselves, in this framework. For journalist Pete Hamill, “the working class earns its living with its hands or its backs; its members do not exist on welfare payments…Taxes and the rising cost of living keep [the working class white man] broke, and he sees nothing in return for the taxes he pays.” 662 “Working class” people, sociologist Lillian Rubin wrote, were mainly “steady workers living in stable families; most of them asking nothing and getting nothing from the government programs that give welfare to the rich and the poor.” 663 For critics of the new liberalism,

663 Lillian Rubin, Worlds of Pain: Life in the Working Class Family (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 4. The claim often went farther. It was not simply that working class whites received little assistance in the
“work” above all defined the political identity of middle-income white workers. Pollsters called them “working Americans,” the “working middle class,” or “the people who work.” The concept of “work” was so heavily racialized that any individual associated with “work,” “working,” or “hard work” was assumed to be nonblack.

The central villain in anti-welfare discourse was the black welfare recipient who took advantage of government largesse to live a luxurious lifestyle. This figure was often opposed to a white worker. One strident 1991 book included a sympathetic portrayal of a white public school teacher infuriated by her experience teaching in a predominantly African American school: “I would see the kids, whose families were on AFDC, walking around in designer jeans, silk shirts, alligator shoes. And I’m breaking my buns.”

In national politics, Ronald Reagan provided the two most famous examples of the exploitative welfare recipient trope. During his 1976 presidential campaign, he featured in his stump speech the story of a Chicago “welfare queen” with “eighty names, thirty

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addresses, twelve Social Security cards…She’s on Medicaid, getting food stamps, and…collecting welfare under each of her names. Her tax-free cash income is over $150,000.” In another recurring story, he framed the food stamp program as enabling “some young fellow ahead of you to buy T-bone steak” while “you were standing in a checkout line with your package of hamburger.”

All of these anecdotes work by opposing mythic welfare privilege to real class disadvantage. In this framework, the injustice done to the white worker is twofold—moral and economic. Most simply, the white worker faces financial hardship as a direct result of shouldering the tax burden for welfare programming. New Right activist Bob Whitaker riffed on the Marxian concept of “exploitation” in framing “today’s worker” as “exploited more by the welfare class than by the upper class.” More broadly, though, the framework turns on an understanding of morally right and morally wrong responses to economic hardship. The proper response is to work hard (“breaking my buns”) and be disciplined in one’s spending (buying hamburger rather than T-bone steak). The improper response is to exploit the system and spend extravagantly (“designer jeans, silk shirts, alligator shoes”). For government to encourage immoral behavior is hurtful to those who follow the proper behavior, in this view. A journalistic profile of one voter framed the welfare system as “an insult to her parents’ work ethic.” For the “middle class,” Stan Greenberg argued, “the government’s sending its money to the undeserving was just a slap in the face.” This language of physical harm (“slap in the face”) is suggestive; the “middle class,” in this framework, experiences a visceral wounding

because it perceives that its virtue and hard work go unrecognized and unrewarded by the wider society. Work, in this context, is not just any remunerative employment. It is hard, physical, boring, dangerous, low-paid. The fact that a person continues to work despite limited material rewards is proof of virtue and perseverance. Critics of the new liberalism placed the focus not on the causes of precarity but on the distinction between “deserving” and “undeserving” workers.

Running through discourse on welfare, affirmative action, and the white working class are large and contentious questions about privilege, suffering, and restitution. For critics of the new liberalism, liberals understood privilege and disadvantage in a way that elided the experience of white workers. The white coal miner’s daughter D’Souza opposed to the black doctor’s son; the worker with nothing but his trade to pass on to his sons; the worker standing in line to buy hamburger instead of T-bone steak—for the new liberalism’s critics, these figures suggested that efforts to redress historic inequalities based on race and gender directly victimized struggling whites who had not derived much privilege from the existing system.

Conclusion

One of the highest-profile speeches of the 2008 election cycle was Barack Obama’s “A More Perfect Union,” delivered in Philadelphia in March 2008. “A More Perfect Union” was a major address on race in America, written as controversy around incendiary sermons given by Obama’s former pastor Jeremiah Wright threatened to derail his candidacy. In one of the central devices in the speech, Obama describes in parallel
terms the anger and resentment held by both blacks and whites and typically only expressed in private; in each case, he suggests, the resentments are legitimate but ultimately limiting and counterproductive. The primary argument in Obama’s discussion of white resentment reads as follows:

Most working- and middle-class white Americans don’t feel that they’ve been particularly privileged by their race. Their experience is the immigrant experience—as far as they’re concerned, no one handed them anything; they’ve built it from scratch. They’ve worked hard all their lives—many times only to see their jobs shipped overseas or their pensions dumped after a lifetime of labor. They’re anxious about their futures, and they feel their dreams slipping away, and in an era of stagnant wages and global competition, opportunity comes to be seen as a zero-sum game, in which your dreams come at my expense. So when they are told to bus their children to a school across town; when they hear an African American is getting an advantage in landing a good job or a spot in a good college because of an injustice that they themselves never committed; when they’re told that their fears about crime in urban neighborhoods are somehow prejudice, resentment builds over time.668

Most immediately, the speech suggests Obama’s familiarity with the discourse outlined in this chapter. More broadly, it suggests the major imprint that the critique of the new liberalism’s treatment of the white working class continued to exert decades later. Busing had not been a major national political issue since the 1980s. The 2000s saw considerably less emphasis than earlier decades on ethnic whites’ immigrant history. However, when the politician who would become the first African American president sought to frame “the resentments of white Americans” as “grounded in legitimate concerns,” he turned to these former mainstays.

In this speech, as he has elsewhere, Obama made the standard progressive argument that white working class anger is mistakenly focused towards people of color.

rather than corporate elites (“justified, but just misdirected,” as phrased in a more recent interview). Exploited by conservative politicians, he argued in the Philadelphia speech, “these white resentments distracted attention from the real culprits of the middle-class squeeze,” including “a Washington dominated by lobbyists and special interests” and “economic policies that favor the few over the many.” The history detailed in this chapter suggests that the problem of misdirection (“distract[ing] attention from the real culprits”) is not only a product of white worker-actor racism and nativism and the conservative elites who exploited it. It is deeply embedded in a longstanding elite-level critique of the new liberalism’s relationship to the white working class.

First, perhaps the most significant recurring pattern in this discourse centers on political actors deploying white disadvantage to undercut claims made by or on behalf of marginalized groups. Arguments against race-based affirmative action programs identified them as unfair to working class white students. Because professional-class women benefited more than working class women from efforts to bring about workplace equality, in this framework, those efforts were actively harmful to non-elite women. Cash welfare for low-income parents was unjust because those with slightly higher incomes struggled to make a good living working full time.

Second, while (white) working class disadvantage was very prominent in this discourse, there was considerably less focus on its causes. Employers and workplace issues rarely appeared. In anti-welfare discourse, taxes were more prominent than wages as a source of financial hardship. In some cases, the de-emphasis of workplace issues reflects the belief that unionized (white) workers no longer faced significant injustice at
work—it was at home and in the neighborhood where they had no agency. In other cases (as with socially conservative critics of the feminist movement), critics implied that blue-collar workers could not expect to find agency or fulfillment at work, so home life was most important to them.

Ultimately, though, it is essential to stress that all the common arguments positioning working class whites as victims of liberalism play on real disadvantage. Not all whites were (or are) uniformly powerful. European immigrants faced discrimination and greater class disadvantage than native-born whites. Lower-income white students faced disadvantages in accessing elite colleges. Working class Americans of all backgrounds worked long hours at multiple jobs and wound up with incomes marginally higher than the poverty level. The challenge for progressives is to mainstream a framework for talking about these issues that does not invoke resentment of “identity politics,” welfare, or the attention paid to other people’s pain.
Concluding Chapter

In a 2015 piece framing “America’s white working class” as “a dying breed,” *Washington Post* columnist Harold Meyerson recalled “a time when the white working class was the subject of happier tales.” The “white worker of the mid-20th century was the protagonist of the American saga,” he reminded readers. White working class people “were the linchpin of the New Deal coalition” and made up “the world’s most affluent and economically secure working class from the 1950s through the 1970s.” It was in more recent decades that the story of the white working class had “grown relentlessly grimmer,” with Donald Trump’s candidacy the ultimate manifestation of its sense of “abandonment, betrayal, and misdirected rage.”

During and after the 2016 election, the white working class has once again moved to the center of the elite political imagination. The reason is straightforward: for most professional political observers, especially those who lean liberal, Donald Trump’s success was a shock. Because it ran counter to nearly all the conventional wisdom guiding political analysis, Trump’s rise prompted urgent elite efforts to understand and portray the motivations of his voters. Those efforts have focused heavily on the white working class—a group once numerous, valued, and strong, for Meyerson and many others, but now bitter and marginal. As this dissertation has stressed, elite engagement with the white working class as a social and cultural category has a history that is important to understand for its own sake. White working class representation in the post-Trump era provides further evidence for that claim.

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This concluding chapter is divided into two parts. The first follows the approach of a conventional conclusion, summarizing the major findings of the study and the major threads running through the narrative. Placing issues of mediation and representation at the center of analysis opens up new ground for the study of white working class politics, this project has argued, and calls attention to the importance of understanding the white working class as a political symbol in the context of elite-level politics. Part Two integrates points of emphasis from the study with new material in order to more directly address white working class representation in the era of Trump. Both Trump supporters and Trump opponents are recognizably part of a pattern that has recurred consistently since the 1960s, in which the white working class represents rightful (for some) or illegitimate (for others) opposition to liberal values. Important distinctions are apparent, however: trade, immigration, and globalization have changed elite perceptions of white working class grievances in important ways; the economic nationalism Trump has mainstreamed leverages the white working class against establishment Republicans as well as liberals; demographic change and the experience of the Obama presidency have altered how Democrats view the political importance of the white working class.

I. Summary of Analysis

The dominant approach in existing literature on white working class politics focuses on understanding the culture, identity, or political views of the white working class, too often understood as a homogenous group. This project has sought to intervene in existing literature by stressing themes of representation and mediation: how elites have
studied and talked about the white working class, especially through the news media, and why that work has mattered. It retells a familiar historical narrative, the rise and fall of New Deal liberalism, putting the representation of the white working class at the center of the analysis.

**The white working class as a foil**

This dissertation has stressed the importance of analyzing claims made about white workers in relation to the intellectual influences and strategic objectives that bear on elite political contestation. Perhaps the clearest takeaway from the project is that, crudely put, the white working class as a political symbol is or can be what elites want or need it to be in a given period. The white working class has served as a ready foil or symbol for a wide range of political claims on the right, the left, and the center; it has been positioned as a champion of progressive and reactionary views, a foil to corporate elites and liberal elites. Because the white working class is such a ready foil, the texts produced by journalists, pollsters, and others characterizing the politics of white workers often say as much, if not more, about the political aims and cultural contexts of their authors as they do about the people being studied.

The significant changes in the symbolic role played by the white working class reflect broader shifts in elite public discourse and political contestation. In the 1930s, when the (white) worker appeared as a central symbol of the need for economic reform, the Depression exerted a major imprint on elite public discourse, with business leadership discredited and Marxian ideas respectable. In the 1950s, when Cold War-era political imperatives encouraged an emphasis on mass prosperity and the superiority of the
American economic system, the (white, male) worker predominately appeared in elite public discourse as proof of that system’s success. The still-powerful image of the secure, affluent mid-century (white) worker cannot be understood outside that Cold War context, which rendered class politics deeply dangerous and pushed contemporaries towards glowing assessments of the economic status quo. The transition of the (white) worker from a predominantly liberal to a predominantly conservative symbol is rooted in changing understandings of what these terms meant, as defending a set of moral and racial norms once taken for granted by many “liberals” became marked as “conservative.”

The importance of elite public discourse

This project has sought to stress the importance, for analysis of white working class politics, of looking at contestation within media and public discourse. In particular, I have emphasized the dynamics through which competing elites’ claims coexist, intersect, and reinforce one another, how the same basic frame can support competing claims. That dynamic is particularly evident in the decades after the 1960s, when both liberals and conservatives consistently drew on the conservative (white) majority/liberal (white) elite frame in their analysis. It is also evident in the 1950s, when both organized labor and organized business emphasized the secure middle-income lifestyles of (white, male) workers and their families. Elites have often held to shared views of the political world that cut across conventional ideological distinctions, the chapters suggest. When competing elites’ claims have overlapped, alternative understandings of white working class politics have gained less visibility.
Similarly, in understanding elite-level political discourse about the white working class, it matters very much which elites have become broadly recognized as representatives of white workers. Bourdieu’s concept of the spokesperson suggests that a non-elite group can only speak in a dominant political space through agents who can believably claim to represent it. Looking at the changing characteristics of elite voices understood to be speaking for white workers in national politics provides a useful twist on the familiar story of white workers’ turn from liberalism toward conservatism. The history of the American white working class and the history of organized labor in America are intertwined in many ways; one noted relatively infrequently is the importance of organized labor in speaking for (white) workers in elite public discourse. From the mid-1930s to at least the mid-1960s, most elites regarded labor officials as the preeminent voices for the group contemporaries called “workers” or “the workingman.” Since the 1960s, conservative politicians—especially Richard Nixon, George Wallace, Ronald Reagan, and Donald Trump—have taken that role. In recent decades, unions’ influence in elite public discourse has declined substantially, and no left-of-center force has replaced them, leaving conservatives relatively uncontested in their claims to speak for white workers.

Speaking about and for unitary groups is a key part of democratic politics; as Bourdieu notes, it invests political claims with the power that comes from clarity and simplicity. Claims to speak for white workers have been consistently bolstered by the specter of essentialism haunting the discourse on white working class politics. Over many years, in liberal, left, and conservative writing, journalistic writing and academic writing,
there has been a consistent tendency to identify the white working class as a more or less homogenous group with uniform political views. During the New Deal era, the tendency to view (white) workers as a unitary group helped to obscure their nonliberal views; since the 1960s, it has worked to obscure liberal views. Pointing out the essentialism characteristic of elite discourse about white working class people does not mean denying the prominence of conservative, anti-liberal, nativist, racist, sexist views within the group, and it cannot be an excuse to soft-pedal the consequences of those views. What is needed is a language that recognizes their prominence and power but does not rely on rigid understandings of an exceptional white working class to explain them.

**The tensions embedded in a (white, male) working class**

One of the basic tensions in a history of white working class representation centers on the conflicting work done by a class category marked as white, and often as male. Dominant views of white working class masculinity and white working class femininity have overlapped substantially; both have centered on the home, the close-knit family, and distrust of the outside world. However, white working class women have been significantly less central to the discourse than men, and they have often been defined within it through their relationship with men—not as workers so much as workers’ spouses or daughters. In the midcentury period in which the (white) worker stood closest to the symbolic center of society, the triumphalist tenor that marked much discussion of labor relations was based on an image of the “worker” as a white male breadwinner whose wages allowed his wife to stay at home, while one of the period’s prominent studies of (white) working class women was titled *Workingman’s Wife.*
Because white working class-ness has been strongly associated with traditional masculinity and femininity, racial grievance, and economic liberalism, the (white) worker cannot be read as an unproblematic symbol for either liberals or conservatives. The (white) worker was most prominent as a liberal symbol in a period where the problem of industrial modernity—how economic security could be maintained in an industrial society—was the central theme in elite public discourse. For left-of-center contemporaries, this problem was by no means unique to or limited to white workers; it touched the lives of all Americans, especially the vast majority who lacked power or wealth. However, the dominant liberal understanding of the history of US capitalism focused on the predominantly male and European-descended urban industrial workforce, without integrating slavery, settler colonialism, or segregation. Liberals placed the (white, male) industrial worker at the center of their vision of society in part because urban wage workers exemplified the conditions of instability endemic to the modern age, in part because their political economic position accorded them potentially vast economic power, and in part because they could be positioned as deserving, ordinary Americans who sought the economic gains necessary to achieve normative family life. The (white) worker conveyed the need for change, but also respect for and continuity with past American ways.

In and after the 1960s, increasing numbers of professionals framed what had been viewed as normative, middle class American ways of life as narrow and harmful, especially for women and children. That white workers continued to prize those ways of life could now be read as a sign of inferiority. In the same period, white workers were
explicitly defined against African Americans, understood as threatened by additional change and most concerned with defending the tidy houses and secure middle-income lifestyles they had gained since the Depression. However, even as the white working class became a predominant symbol of cultural traditionalism and anti-black backlash, the dominant understanding of white working class identity remained grounded in economic liberalism. The period in the late 1960s in which the alienation of the white working class became a central theme in elite discourse (Chapter 3) saw explicit criticism of the economic order rarely seen since the 1940s. For decades, conventional wisdom among conservative political operatives prescribed emphasizing cultural issues and minimizing the natural liberal advantage on economics. As conservatives have gained the benefits (electoral and symbolic) of white worker-actors’ votes, they have increasingly had to answer for their economic wellbeing—a reckoning made clear in the Donald Trump candidacy.

**The thin line between normativity and inferiority**

Perhaps most of all, the white working class’s utility and flexibility as a political symbol can be attributed to the intersection of white and working class, subordinate class status and membership in the dominant racial group. Whiteness conveys a sense of power, privilege, normativity, and averageness; working class can convey an underdog positioning and a salt-of-the-earth authenticity as well as cultural or intellectual inferiority. Over the period between the 1930s and 1990s, elite representations of the white working class have been marked by both normativity and inferiority, with the boundaries between the two porous and neither far from view at any given time. Even as
1930s and 1940s leftists placed a great deal of hope in (white) workers as a force for a more progressive future, they retained serious concerns about these workers’ susceptibility to misinformation and demagoguery. The striking workers praised by leftists were not unique or intellectually gifted; they were numerous, brave, and dedicated to their cause. In the post-civil rights era, as Chapters 3 and 4 argued, the same basic understanding of the politics and culture of Middle America can support inflections appealing to multiple political perspectives—an anxious, narrow-minded majority holding back needed change; a majority committed to rightful traditions abandoned by a misguided elite. Ordinariness and majority status invite everything from praise to condemnation to indifference, depending on the context.

This thin line between normativity and inferiority continues to be apparent in post-Trump white working class representation. Trump’s praise for white working class people as America’s best citizens is profoundly patronizing (“I love the poorly educated”…“the smart, smart, smart people that don’t have the big education”). Meanwhile, condescension is often embedded in calls for liberals to stop condescending to the white working class. For Joan Williams, a law professor whose 2017 book *White Working Class* is dedicated to combatting “class cluelessness in America,” “many habits of the professional elite—from artisanal religion to a life of self-actualization—require a college education. America doesn’t provide that, so we need to take the working class as we find them…Many of our truths just don’t make sense in the context of their lives.”

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The claim that “a life of self-actualization” is only possible with a college education is a particularly egregious manifestation of “class cluelessness.”

Recent elite analysis of the white working class—like Williams’, for instance—is generally marked by a sense of immediacy, of scoping out an uncharted political world. However, many of the patterns evident in the post-Trump period (the period beginning in late 2015 when it became clear that Trump had a real chance to win the Republican nomination) are evident in the history of white working class representation from the 1930s to the 1990s. It is important to understand the rise of Trump and the conversations around it in that context.

II. Situating the Trump Voter

Throughout Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign and presidency, the dominant elite-level view has understood support for Trump as concentrated within the white working class. The least nuanced versions of the argument have implicated a homogenous white working class viscerally drawn to Trump’s rhetoric and willing to follow him anywhere. More nuanced versions (relatively speaking) have understood alienated white working class people as his core supporters, those most moved by his campaign. “At the core of Donald Trump’s political success this year are the grievances of a sizable and now vocal block of disaffected voters, many of them white and working-class,” Dan Balz of the Washington Post wrote in March of 2016. For Balz, Trump “and so-called Trumpism represent an amalgam of long-festering economic, cultural and racial dissatisfaction among a swath of left-out Americans who do not fit easily into the ideological
pigeonholes of red and blue, right and left.” For a *Columbia Journalism Review* contributor writing shortly after the 2016 election, “the revolt of the white working class that ushered in the Age of Trump” was “the biggest political story of our lifetimes.”

Elite public discourse of the period has evinced an intense interest in intellectual work portraying the pain of the white working class. Perhaps the highest-profile account of white rural poverty in the post-Trump period, J.D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy*, has been optioned for a Hollywood movie, with Ron Howard attached to direct. Journalistic portrayals of Trump voters, especially white working class people living in depressed small cities and towns, appeared consistently throughout Trump’s candidacy. The pervasiveness of the genre is aptly captured in a *Washington Post* contributor’s parody of “the flood of journalists who went to Real America to see how the Trump supporters are getting along”: “In the shadow of the old flag factory, Craig Slabornik sits whittling away on a rusty nail, his only hobby since the plant shut down…Lydia Borkle lives in an old shoe in the tiny town of Tempe Work Only, Ariz., where the factory has just rusted away into a pile of gears and dust.”

Journalistic explorations of white working class Trump supporters do conflicting work—they suggest that journalists and elites are bound by their professional and democratic duty to sympathetically portray Trump voters’ concerns

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Attributing Trump’s rise to a “revolt of the white working class” has been the clear dominant interpretation throughout the period. However, several studies and multiple articles in political media have pushed back on this argument. A fivethirtyeight analysis of exit polling in Republican primaries found that Trump supporters had a median income of $72,000, above the national median income of $56,000 and the figure for Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders voters (around $61,000).

Two Gallup researchers (drawing on data from roughly 125,000 Gallup interviews) found a mean household income of $81,898 for voters viewing Trump favorably and $77,046 for those who did not. In this study, higher incomes predicted support for Trump even among non-Hispanic whites; education and occupation-based variables were more supportive of the conventional wisdom, with workers in skilled blue-collar occupations more likely to favor Trump and college-educated voters and professionals less likely.

According to Edison Research general election exit polling, Trump won nearly every subcategory of white voters: 62% of white men (+31% over Clinton), 52% of white women (+9), 48% of...
whites with a college degree (+3; Trump was +14 among men in this category and -7 among women), and 66% of whites without a college degree (+37).\textsuperscript{676} These results are consistent with the existing quantitative literature on white working class politics, in which income consistently shows the most liberal “white working class” and education the most conservative.

The clearest takeaway from this data is that attributing Trump’s rise to the white working class is at best an incomplete interpretation. Certainly some evidence supports the conventional wisdom. Democrats did somewhat better among whites with a college degree than they generally have, while Trump outperformed his recent predecessors among whites without a college degree.\textsuperscript{677} Though nonvoters and the minority of voters who opposed him should not be overlooked, by any reasonable measure, the majority of white working class voter-actors who voted in the 2016 election voted for Trump. However, in the case of Trump (as it does more generally), the frame of white working class exceptionalism works to obscure the continuity and consistency of whites’ attitudes across the sociocultural distinctions so often emphasized in elite public discourse. Trump enjoyed broad-based support among white voters across income groups, regions, and educational categories. Any argument that Trump was the choice of “working class,”

\textsuperscript{676} Edison Research 2016 exit polling, last updated November 23, 2016, available at http://www.cnn.com/election/results/exit-polls. It is not possible to find exit polling data broken down by income and race; Clinton did best with voters making under $50,000 (+12), and Trump won 49% of the $50,000-$100,000 category (+3), with voters above $100,000 evenly split at 47%. For a useful discussion, see John Hudak, “A Reality Check on 2016’s Economically Marginalized,” Brookings, November 16, 2016, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2016/11/16/economic-marginalization-reality-check/. Typically, the claims analysts make about demographic groups’ preferences also leave aside the roughly 45% of eligible voters who did not vote.

“lower-income” or “struggling” Americans requires excluding all nonwhite voters from those categories; even when analysis is confined to whites, it is not clear that his voters struggled more economically or suffered more from deindustrialization.

The key question, then, is why the “white working class revolt” frame remains dominant even though easily available data undermines or nuances it. Many of the reasons are deeply rooted in a longer history of white working class representation: sixty years of similar constructions of the white working class have left a heavy imprint on elite-level political analysis; many of the people attending Trump rallies manifested in their speech, dress, and self-presentation what professionals easily identify as low cultural taste; racialized and gendered understandings of class identify as typical “workers” those working class people most likely to support Trump, white men. From a more present-oriented perspective, the dominant elite-level view of the Trump voter can be usefully understood (drawing on the elite consensus frame developed in Chapters 3 and 4) by looking at the intersection of conservative claims on behalf of white workers and liberal efforts to understand and respond to Trumpism. Trump has placed the white working class at the symbolic center of his appeal to a degree not seen in decades, adopting an oppositional, underdog positioning that differs significantly from conventional conservatism. Liberals differ most substantially on whether or not they can or should work to win the white working class back to their side; much as they did in the 1960s and after, liberals have found populist conservatives’ claims to speak for white workers persuasive.
Conservatives and the white working class in the Trump era

The ideology that has come to be called “Trumpism” differs from recent conventional Republican and conservative politics in its pessimistic tenor, the oppositional posture it takes towards establishment Republicans as well as liberals, and its emphasis on nationalist over libertarian principles. Crucial in all of these respects is the central symbolic position it accords to the “American worker,” the “working class,” and the “middle class”—all ostensibly race-neutral terms consistently used (as this study and others stress) to describe blue-collar whites.

Since at least the Reagan presidency, white working class voters have made up an increasing share of the Republican base, but Republicans and conservatives have seldom placed (white) workers at the center of their economic vision of America. To be sure, some conservatives have pushed back on messaging that comes across to non-elite Americans as exclusive; some have also contended that the party elite’s favored economic policies skew to the wealthy. Since 2000, Tim Pawlenty has championed “Sam’s Club” (as opposed to “country club”) Republicans; Rick Santorum, Mike Huckabee, and columnists Ross Douthat & Reihan Salam have called for conservative policy geared more explicitly around the needs of the white working class.\(^6\) The 1990s saw considerable opposition in elite-level politics to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and trade liberalization generally. Opponents—ranging from the AFL-CIO and labor-liberal legislators to dissident conservatives like Ross Perot and Pat

Buchanan—argued that free trade advantaged corporations and highly educated workers but harmed less skilled workers, further incentivizing corporations to disinvest in domestic production and move domestic manufacturing jobs to low-wage countries. The most obvious forerunner to Trump at the presidential level is Buchanan, a longtime political commentator and former Nixon and Reagan aide who ran for president in 1992, 1996, and 2000. Buchanan’s runs paired hardline cultural conservatism with an emphasis on “looking out for America first”; like Trump, he emphasized the suffering of displaced (white) workers, the “forgotten men and women who work in the forges and factories and plants and businesses” of the nation.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, however, the dominant view in both major parties—advocated by Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, both Bushes, Alan Greenspan, and nearly every White House economic advisor—held that trade liberalization was good for the country. More measured arguments generally stressed that globalization was an inexorable force and that the United States would fare worse by disengaging with the world; the new economy would disrupt industries and disadvantage some workers, but the majority would benefit from cheaper goods made possible by imports and job

opportunities made possible by exports. Less measured arguments recalled the
triumphalism of the post-World War II period in suggesting that the new economy
promised near-universal gains. Generally, when white workers have appeared as a
central political symbol for conservatives since the Reagan era, they have been positioned
within a broadly drawn cultural mainstream—“Middle America,” “real America,” or
Sarah Palin’s “small town America”—identified as the moral core of the nation. These
tropes imply authenticity and superiority over coastal liberals, but not a sense of
economic dislocation. The dismal view of modern America central to the 2016 Trump
campaign presented a deep disjuncture from conventional politics in both major parties.

The nationalist/populist conservatism advocated by the strategists and
intellectuals gathered around Trump is distinctive in part because it centers an
unambiguously white working class more explicitly than any dominant ideology in recent
American politics. In the narrative of recent history that undergirded Trump’s 2016
campaign, particularly as put forward by former Trump administration chief strategist
Steve Bannon, the position of the (white) working class exemplifies what has gone wrong
in America in recent decades. Power has been held by an economic elite—represented in
the establishments of both major parties—unconcerned with the wellbeing of fellow
citizens and entirely disconnected from life as lived by the majority. Deindustrialization,
in Trumpism’s narrative of recent American history, is most emblematic of the deep
injustice that resulted. “One by one, the factories shuttered and left our shores, with not
even a thought about the millions upon millions of American workers left behind,”
Trump stated in his inaugural address. “The wealth of our middle class has been ripped
from their homes and then redistributed across the entire world.” For Bannon, the way “the industrial base in this country has been eviscerated” amounts to “an economic hate crime on the working class people in this country,” perpetrated by and for the benefit of “the elites in the ascendant economy in Silicon Valley, Wall Street, Hollywood, and Washington, DC.”

The economic nationalism Trump has mainstreamed champions white workers in a way that blurs the economics/culture binary central to elite analysis of white working class politics since the 1960s. In a longstanding analysis shared by figures from Richard Nixon to Thomas Frank, conservatives win when they convince white working class voters to put their cultural grievances above their economic interests, and liberals win when they bring economic issues to the forefront. This conventional model does not apply when, as advocates of Trumpism argue, the dominant liberal and conservative politics are intertwined and have both consigned America’s most deserving citizens to economic and cultural marginalization. Put differently, anti-libertarian and nativist elements are both central to Trumpism, and they are inseparable.

First, central to economic nationalism’s critique of libertarianism is the stress it places on the importance of national identity and borders. In Buchanan’s framework, “the country comes before the economy, and the economy exists for the people…In the proper hierarchy of things, it is the market that must be harnessed to work for man and

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not the other way around.” The argument here is not simply that an economy exists to serve human needs, but that libertarianism subordinates cultural cohesion and identity to the dictates of the market. Globalization and immigration harm the economic prospects of native-born workers, in this view; they also introduce difference and hybridity into the nation, which only functions as it should in a climate of cultural homogeneity. For Buchanan, “A nation is more than a consumer cooperative; it is a people, separate and apart, with its own destiny and history, language and faith, institutions and culture.”

Similarly, for Steve Bannon, “A country is more than an economy. We’re a civic society”…“We are a nation with a culture…and a reason for being.”

Economic nationalism appeals to white supremacists because it valorizes homogenous constructions of identity and culture defined against a corrupt internationalism. Many of its advocates have expressed explicit concern about threats posed to American identity and sovereignty by the shrinking of the white majority and Latin American immigration; discussions of shadowy networks of “globalist” international elites evoke longstanding anti-Semitic tropes. Crucially, though, economic nationalism also draws respectability from the basic democratic or populist

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682 Patrick J. Buchanan, address to the Chicago Council of Foreign Relations, November 18, 1998.
684 “A country is more…” in David Fahrenthold and Frances Stead Sellers, “How Bannon Flattered and Coaxed Trump on Policies Key to the Alt-Right,” Washington Post, November 15, 2016; “We are a nation…” is Bannon on a panel discussion at the Conservative Political Action Conference, February 23, 2016, text available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/02/23/stephen-bannons-nationalist-call-to-arms-annotated/?utm_term=.c1901b9c3256. Bannon’s influence as an individual political figure dropped significantly following controversy over critical comments he made about Trump which became public in January 2018, but the influence of populist/nationalist rhetoric on conservatives’ and Republicans’ public claims-making has been undiminished.
frame stressing that the needs of the “people” come before the needs of elites. The claim that “the economy exists for the people” has been the basis of liberal argumentation for decades (the tension, obviously, lies in how “the people” are understood), and some liberals have interpreted Trump’s victory as a repudiation of neoliberalism and a vindication of their own views. Part of the danger and power of populism lies in that tension—because the underdog-populist frame is so flexible and familiar, it offers white nationalists and their apologists an opportunity to mainstream their claims. In a striking and now-infamous article dedicated to introducing “establishment conservative[s]” to the alt-right, Milo Yiannopoulos and his co-author frame alt-right thought (in which “culture, not economic efficiency, is the paramount value”), as a useful and legitimate corrective to conservatism chiefly focused on open markets and economic growth. Nativist or anti-immigrant claims are typically framed in a way that emphasizes the victimization of vulnerable native-born Americans. In a prominent narrative on the right, capitalists seeking cheap labor and liberal politicians seeking easy votes pursue a loose immigration policy at the expense of lower-skilled native-born workers, who face fewer job opportunities and depressed wages as a result.

Second, in economic nationalist discourse, the same complex of elites is held responsible for both the economic and the cultural dislocation suffered by (white) workers. The economics/culture binary depends on an opposition between liberal/cultural (journalists, professors) and conservative/economic elites (Wall Street and


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employers). That opposition has blurred, however, as constructions of the economic elite shift toward a more urban, cosmopolitan, global-oriented image. In a 1996 article, conservative columnist Samuel Francis argued that globalization would render conventional distinctions between “right” and “left” irrelevant. “The fundamental polarity in American politics and culture today,” Francis claimed, pitted “a deracinated and self-serving Ruling Class” against “Middle American groups…constituting both the economic core of the nation through their labor and productive skills as well as the culturally defining core that sustains the identity of the nation itself.” As corporations disinvested in rural America, moved manufacturing overseas, and did business across borders, rootedness in the local community and the nation became a threat, in this view; the “economic interests as well as the cultural habits and ideologies of the Ruling Class drive it toward globalization—the managed destruction of the nation, its sovereignty, its culture, and its people.”688 These elites—for Bannon, “people in New York that feel closer to people in London and in Berlin than they do to people in Kansas and in Colorado”—have no sense of social responsibility or affinity with the nation and its non-elite citizens.689

The blurring of the economic and cultural elite also manifests in the argument that conventional distinctions between Republican and Democratic politicians are unimportant when all have interests tied up in the same insiders’ game. The mainstreaming of this view poses a serious challenge for Republicans identified with the “establishment.” In an emerging frame, populist conservative outsiders seek real reform

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on behalf of the struggling (white) working class, while the party establishment is beholden to the Republican donor class and the interests of the Washington, D.C. “swamp.” Steve Bannon, campaigning for the populist primary challenger of a sitting Alabama Republican senator, framed the race as a test of “who is sovereign—the people or the money.” “They think you’re a pack of morons,” he told an Alabama audience. “They think you’re nothing but rubes. They have no interest at all in what you have to say, what you have to think or what you want to do.”690 Alabama, of course, is the home state of Bannon’s forerunner George Wallace, whose stump speeches consistently stressed the disdain elites held for his supporters: “They have looked down their noses at the average man on the street too long”…“They look down their noses and call us pea pickers and peckerwoods and lint heads and rednecks”…“Your thoughts are just as good as theirs.”691 By “they,” Wallace meant liberals, intellectuals, “pointy-headed professors”; Bannon meant Republicans as well.

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Republicans and conservatives who support Trump gain from the perception that they represent the (white) working class, the “American worker,” the “forgotten people.” Like generations of conservatives before them, they can claim to represent an underdog group against an elite. That benefit comes at the cost of being repeatedly forced to defend

themselves against charges of racism (at least for those who do not welcome those charges) and of enabling an unqualified misogynist and bigot. For many of the elites who oppose Trump, framing his rise as a “revolt of the white working class” makes strategic sense as well. Populist liberals who hope to see fundamental economic reform point to Trump’s victory as evidence that the electorate has rejected the power structure, that white working class voters will choose liberal populism if Democrats offer it. Other liberals see Trump as evidence that Democrats should devote their resources to more progressive constituencies, voters of color and college-educated whites; in this view, efforts to regain white workers will push the party to the right, not the left. In the present day, as has generally been the case for many years, prevailing symbolic constructions of the white working class are problematic and disadvantageous for liberals.

**Liberals and the white working class in the Trump era**

Among liberals, two predominant lines of argumentation emerged to explain Trump’s victory. Distilled into a few words, they centered on neoliberalism and white supremacy, respectively. Many observers integrated the two into one narrative, in which economic deprivation and racial/cultural grievance were interlocking forces driving white workers (especially in depressed rural areas) to Trump. Consistently, though, racism/sexism and “economic anxiety” (a phrase so common one columnist described Trump voters as “Economically Anxious™”692) were framed as competing explanations. From one perspective, Trump’s white working class supporters were primarily motivated

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by legitimate anger at Wall Street, the political establishment, and the trade deals that had
gutted their communities. “Millions of Americans registered a protest vote…expressing
their fierce opposition to an economic and political system that puts wealthy and
corporate interests over their own,” Vermont senator Bernie Sanders contended. Trump
“won the White House because his campaign rhetoric successfully tapped into a very real
and justified anger.”693 Other liberals criticized this perspective for overlooking or
excusing the rank bigotry that had undergirded Trump’s rise. Trump supporters were
certainly angry, in this second view, but their anger was not legitimate and should not be
legitimated. For Salon’s Amanda Marcotte: “The Trump revolution was driven by white
men who are watching women and people of color making gains that put them closer to
equality. They are rebelling at the erosion of the sense that white men are better and more
important than everyone else, simply because they exist.”694

Conflicting views of Trump voters’ motivations have shaped liberals’ arguments
about how best to move forward in the aftermath of Trump’s victory. Some have
advocated bringing the white working class closer to the liberal vision of America; others

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similar readings, see e.g. Cornel West, “Goodbye, American Liberalism. A New Era Is Here,” The
Guardian, November 17, 2016; Robert Reich, “What Donald Trump’s Election Really Means,” AlterNet,
November 10, 2016; Ronald Aronson, “The 2016 Election Proves That Neoliberalism Is Backfiring,” The
Nation, September 21, 2016; Nicholas Kristof, “Trump Voters Are Not the Enemy,” New York Times,
February 23, 2017; Thomas Frank, “Donald Trump Is Moving to the White House, and Liberals Put Him
There,” The Guardian, November 8, 2016; Connor Kilpatrick, “Burying the White Working Class,”
Jacobin, May 13, 2016. For Democratic strategists arguing for the importance of winning white working
class voters, see the June 2017 American Prospect roundtable on the white working class at
http://prospect.org/white-working-class.

694 Amanda Marcotte, “Yes, the White Male Anger That Fueled Trump’s Victory Was Real—But It Isn’t
Valid,” Salon, November 11, 2016. For similar readings, see e.g. Derek Thompson, “The Dangerous Myth
That Hillary Clinton Ignored the Working Class,” The Atlantic, December 5, 2016; Damon Young, “I Will
Never Underestimate White People’s Need to Preserve Whiteness Again,” Very Smart Brothas, November
Holland, “Stop Obsessing Over White Working-Class Voters,” Rolling Stone, November 16, 2016; Jamelle
have advocated the opposite. The debate liberals have had in the wake of the 2016 election can be understood as the latest manifestation of a recurring debate they have been having since the late 1960s: how to address what Chapter 3 called the “problem of the white working class,” the political challenges posed by white working class voters’ support for race-baiting conservative candidates. Since the late 1960s, liberals have put forward three basic prescriptions: 1) move to the left on economic issues, 2) move to the center/right on cultural issues, or 3) build the coalition around groups other than the white working class. The developments of the last ten years have seen an increase in the influence of arguments #1 and #3 and a decrease in the influence of #2.

The primary path advocated by Bill Clinton and the New Democratic movement (#2) centered on tempering the party’s association with cultural liberalism, “big government,” and “special interests”—feminists, African Americans, LGBTQ people—in order to regain the alienated white voters key to any conceivable electoral majority. Through the 1990s, this approach was dominant in the party, credited by its advocates for Clinton’s 1992 and 1996 victories. In recent years, however, Black Lives Matter, Occupy Wall Street, and other liberals and leftists have been heavily critical of many of the signature achievements once touted by the Clinton administration, particularly NAFTA, Wall Street deregulation, welfare reform, and punitive criminal justice policy. New Democrats’ influence within the party has dwindled significantly. Notably,

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695 Democrats were out of power. Clinton argued in a 1991 speech, because “too many of the people that used to vote for us—the very burdened middle class we’re talking about—have not trusted us in national elections...to put their values into our social policy at home, or to take their tax money and spend it with discipline.” Bill Clinton, keynote address at 1991 Democratic Leadership Council conference, Cleveland, OH, May 6, 1991, https://www.c-span.org/video/?17869-1/democratic-leadership-council-keynote-address.
advocates of both of the predominant post-Trump responses to the problem of the white working class define themselves against the Clinton years.\textsuperscript{696}

\textbf{#1: Move left on economic issues}

In one perspective prominent in post-Trump analysis, Democrats can succeed with white working class voters (and other non-elite voters as well) by developing a stronger economic program. Some who make this argument assume that what is needed is simply a shift in messaging or emphasis, while others have called for a substantial departure from existing economic policy. Particularly in the aftermath of the netroots movement, the Great Recession, and Occupy Wall Street, the Democratic Party has seen the rise of an increasingly vocal populist left-liberal wing critical of the party’s turn towards neoliberalism since the 1970s and calling for serious reform on financial regulation, consumer protection, and trade policy. For these Democrats (most notably represented in national politics by Bernie Sanders and Massachusetts senator Elizabeth Warren), the Democratic Party’s failure to strongly champion the interests of workers against the economic elite is partly to blame for Trump’s rise, and the party must respond by changing how it operates. For Elizabeth Warren, “We should hear the message loud

and clear that the American people want Washington to change...The entire electorate embraced deep, fundamental reform of our economic system and our political system."\footnote{697}

For liberals in this camp, Trump’s victory can be very easily read as vindication. This is partly because an outsider candidate promising to upend the system foregrounded issues—particularly trade and campaign finance—that these liberals have urged the Democratic Party to address for years. It is important to note, though, that there is a degree of overlap in how liberals and populist conservatives have understood the story of the white working class in postindustrial America. Many liberals share with populist conservatives a basic frame of decline from a mid-twentieth-century apex, and that overlap should encourage some pause and reflection.

One of the predominant narratives in contemporary liberal politics centers on what might be called “the decline of the middle class.” “From the end of the Great Depression to about 1980,” in a typical account, “America built a middle class unlike anything known on earth,” with organized labor strong and business guided by a sense of social responsibility. Beginning in the late 1970s, however, economic elites went back on the basic bargain they had made with workers. “Productivity kept going up,” but as “corporate executives and stockholders began taking greater shares of the gains,” “workers...[were] left behind as wages stagnated.”\footnote{698}

This narrative situates the insecurity and inequality of the present day against the backdrop of a more egalitarian past—most often the world of the midcentury blue-collar

\footnote{698} Elizabeth Warren and Elijah Cummings, “Free the Middle Class,” \textit{USA Today}, February 23, 2015.
middle class. A recent account of deindustrialization’s impact on Lancaster, a small Ohio city heavily dependent on the glass industry, includes this representative treatment:

People worked hard, but most believed they’d made a fair deal. You could walk off the high school graduation stage on Saturday and walk into a plant on Monday, where you could stay for the next forty years. The company would make you a mechanic, a millwright, an electrician, a machine operator, a mold maker, a salesman. You’d do bone-wearying work, but there were the perks, too, like the company softball, baseball, golf, and bowling teams; the company choir and drama clubs; the insurance and pension. You’d never get rich, and you’d bitch about management and fat cats, but you could buy a little house on the west side, then maybe over on the east side or out in the country, and maybe a boat to fish from on Buckeye Lake. You could get married. You could pay for your kids to attend decent state universities. Best of all, you could stay in the town where your kid’s fourth-grade teacher had taught you, too. If you bought in, obeyed the rules—spoken and unspoken—paid your taxes, loved your town and your country, that was the bargain on offer.\textsuperscript{699}

When elites in the late 1940s and 1950s put forward a similar vision of the good life for workers, they saw that lifestyle as evidence that Americans had found an equitable resolution to the pressing problems of industrial society. For present-day liberals, the same imagery now serves as a testament to the greed of those who left that equitable resolution behind in pursuit of selfish gains.

It is not difficult to understand the appeal of the “decline of the middle class” narrative: it suggests a better America, within living memory, undone by a clearly identifiable set of antagonists. In twenty-first century politics, however, an unmarked “middle class” in decline cannot be an unproblematic symbol for liberals. The midcentury period’s growing middle class was built on the back of the New Deal’s

stratified welfare state\textsuperscript{700}, with the “bargain” promised to workers only available to whites (to some degree, only white men, and in their case the benefits were often overstated, as Chapter 2 argued). The “decline of the middle class” narrative struggles to integrate Americans whose families were held out of the middle class, and any declension narrative where relative equality erodes after the 1970s inevitably runs up against other narratives of twentieth-century America that center women and people of color more explicitly. Nostalgic evocations of the 1950s in particular can suggest many things, often simultaneously: common purpose; union strength and respect for workers; relative equality; cultural traditionalism, homogeneity, or cohesion; segregation; single-income households with breadwinning fathers and stay-at-home mothers; Judeo-Christian values; close-knit neighborhoods, well-behaved children, and tidy streets; discreet public discourse free of sustained conflict and controversy. Certainly this history is not lost on liberals who invoke the cultural memory of the midcentury period. It is important, though, to grapple with the question of how and to what extent the period can serve as a model (and, perhaps simultaneously, a cautionary tale) for twenty-first century politics.

\textbf{#3: Leave the white working class in the past}

At the other end of the spectrum is the view that white working class voters are unwinnable for Democrats and liberals. In this view, white workers’ drift to the right has been congealing for decades, and they are opposed to or lukewarm toward crucial liberal

values; efforts to pursue them will harm Democrats’ core constituencies, with issues like
criminal justice reform, abortion rights, and immigration reform tossed aside in the
pursuit of the Democrats’ white whale, the elusive white swing voter. Instead, for many
liberals, Democrats should build their coalition around the “people of color and
progressive Whites” who “comprised the Obama coalition”701, especially the
communities of color who make up the staunchest Democratic voters.

It is important to stress that decentering white workers in the progressive coalition
has only appeared politically feasible for a short time. The argument appeared in the late
1960s and early 1970s among Democrats tied to the New Politics movement but did not
survive George McGovern’s drubbing at the hands of Nixon in 1972. Through the mid-
2000s, the dominant view held that Democrats could not win at the national level without
support from moderate and blue-collar whites. In the final months of the 2008
Democratic presidential primaries, Hillary Clinton argued explicitly that she would be a
stronger nominee than Barack Obama because Obama did not have the necessary support
among “working, hard-working Americans, white Americans,” by which she meant
whites without a four-year college degree, the group pollsters call the “white working
class.” When the remark proved controversial, Clinton defended herself by referencing
the conventional wisdom that “these are the people you have to win if you’re a Democrat
in sufficient numbers to actually win the election. Everybody knows that.”702

For many liberal observers, the Obama presidency dethroned this truism.

Although the “Democratic decline among older and blue-collar whites has continued,”

701 Steve Phillips, Brown is the New White: How the Demographic Revolution Has Created a New
journalist Ronald Brownstein argued in 2015, Obama “triumphed twice anyway by assembling a more consistently left-leaning coalition centered on millennials, minorities, and socially liberal whites, especially college-educated and single women.” This “Obama coalition,” understood as an outgrowth of fundamental demographic change, has also been called the “coalition of the ascendant” or the “rising American electorate”—meaning its constituencies, unlike the white working class, are growing as a share of the broader electorate. In more measured versions of the argument, the growing percentage of voters of color augurs well for Democrats and poorly for Republicans, but Democrats’ weaknesses among working class whites will leave them vulnerable in the near future, especially at the state and local level. In the least measured versions, Democrats’ advantage with “rising” constituencies will simply make them the dominant party.

In this framework, the white working class often serves as a receding reactionary backdrop to emerging, forward-looking groups: “a more highly educated and diverse constituency,” “a coalition of transformation…comfortable with demographic and cultural change,” valuing “multiculturalism,” “inclusion,” and “openness.” Though Trump’s victory put a crimp in the triumphalist tenor of the “coalition of the ascendant” narrative (pushing Democrats to recognize that long-term demographic change does not prevent short-term catastrophe), it also reinforced an understanding of the white working


class as hostile to change, “dreaming of a past that no longer exists.”705 For nearly all observers, Trump has only sharpened the cultural divide wracking the country. As *New York Times* columnist Michelle Goldberg argues: “America is now two countries, eyeing each other across a chasm of distrust and contempt. One is urban, diverse and outward-looking. This is the America that’s growing. The other is white, provincial and culturally revanchist. This is the America that’s in charge.”706

Concerns about Democrats centering white working class voters are well founded, especially given the connection between the pursuit of “Reagan Democrats” and the party’s move to the right in the 1980s and 1990s. The prospect of writing off the white working class should also raise concern. Neoliberal policy can be advocated through the language of social conservatism, as in welfare reform; it can also be legitimated through the language of multiculturalism, diversity, and change. Certainly many liberals skeptical of the white working class are well aware of this and have opposed the neoliberal turn within the party; what follows should be read as a general argument about the pitfalls of a common way of seeing white workers. First, some formulations of the “rising” America (like Goldberg’s above) flatten the power differentials within the urban liberal coalition. The “provincial” common adversary works to blur together the interests of working class people of color and the interests of urban professionals, without bringing up jobs, wages, affordable housing, or any of the fundamental sticking points in urban politics. This works in part because the interests of voters of color can be much more easily read as noneconomic than the interests of the white working class. Working class whites are

likely lost to Democrats, one 2017 New Republic contributor contends, and the party should respond not by “emphasizing class over culture” but by “playing on the turf of culture and identity” to appeal to “low-income minorities”—whose concerns in this account center on “culture and identity,” not “class.”707

It’s also important to stress that the left-behind white worker makes for an ideal failed neoliberal subject—too stupid, racist, and shortsighted to adapt and succeed in the modern economy. The firm association between white workers and backlash politics makes their discontent with the status quo easiest to dismiss as a bigoted aversion to “change.”708 Rather than “accepting some ‘personal responsibility’…for their low standard of living and destructive lifestyle,” one liberal contends, “the wrongly romanticized white working class is flocking to a candidate who allows them to blame other people for their problems.” The fact that “high school dropouts who have stopped filling out job applications” faced poor economic prospects should not, in this view, obscure the reality that “the American economy is doing rather well.”709 The liberal gibe that prosperous blue states’ taxes subsidize social services for poorer red states is intended as a rebuke to conservatives who define “makers” against “takers,” “taxpayers”

708 A particularly clear manifestation of this can be found in the work of urbanist Richard Florida, best known for his theory of the “creative class.” Florida mirrors nationalist conservatives in stressing the emergence of a new elite understood as urban, cosmopolitan, and global-oriented; in sharp contrast to the populist right, he idealizes this “creative class” as a force for progress distinguished by its innovativeness and social tolerance. For Florida, the sharpest fault lines in American politics pit the “creative and diverse” coastal metropolises against “a more close-knit, church-based, older civic society of working people and rural dwellers.” In this framework, conservatism is “the ideology of the economically left behind”; an “anti-urban, anti-progress” agenda like Trump’s is motivated by “growing resentment against the more open and ‘permissive’ liberal values toward women, minorities, immigrants, and the gay and lesbian community that are characteristic of the country’s most prosperous urban regions.” Richard Florida, The Rise of the Creative Class (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 281; Florida, “The Conservative States of America,” The Atlantic, March 29, 2011; Florida, “A Declaration of Urban Independence,” Politico, July/August 2017.
against “tax eaters”; instead, it replicates exactly the same logic. In the discourse detailed in this project, white workers’ happiness and wellbeing has frequently been employed as a primary yardstick for the health of the society as a whole. That practice is symptomatic of the imbrication of whiteness and understandings of the democratic public. Without losing sight of that history, it is essential to recognize the clear danger in suggesting that white workers’ disadvantage does not primarily reflect societal injustice, that it is primarily an indictment of white workers themselves.

**Elite talk about the white working class: Moving the conversation forward**

The issues most often raised in elite discourse about the white working class—in recent months and for decades prior—go to the heart of American political economy and Americans’ political consciousness. They far exceed the agency of any single actor, no matter how powerful. A better public discourse is only a very small corner of the vast structural and ideological problems elites grapple with through talk about the white working class; it is naïve to suggest otherwise. With that said, it is possible to identify a few consistent sticking points that consistently militate against a more nuanced discussion of the role of the white working class in American politics.

First, the narrow understanding of class that has long informed US politics makes it more difficult for elites to see women and people of color as class subjects and to understand their political claims as “economic”; it also makes it difficult for elites to see white working class people as having “cultural” concerns. When pundits describe the

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political views of white working class voters, “cultural” or “social” issues often serve as euphemisms for racism, sexism, or nativism; in a common left-of-center line of reasoning, “culture” is the sphere owned by the right, and a “cultural” appeal to white working class people is synonymous with the racialized populism of Donald Trump and his forebears. This understanding of “culture” is unnecessarily limiting. If class is understood as about cultural identity as well as economic position, recognition as well as redistribution—and it should be—the discussion can be broadened considerably. As Lisa Henderson argues, “the practice of class recognition…matters in the formation of selves and solidarity in ways that an analytic emphasis on redistribution alone cannot capture.”

The argument that liberals have historically succeeded by “encouraging white workers to vote their wallets” is a limiting reading; it misses the importance of a sense of solidarity, of being treated like a human being, of a sense of being understood and valued. Rather than looking to economics to trump culture, it is important to consider the many ways culture does, can, and/or should shape politics.

Also limiting is the enduring critique of “identity politics” that has often accompanied criticism of liberals’ neglect of the white working class. In a controversial 2016 *New York Times* piece and an ensuing book, Columbia University professor Mark Lilla called for “The End of Identity Liberalism,” which he deemed a divisive politics rejected by the “demos,” particularly those voters “living between the coasts.” For Lilla, “liberals…threw themselves into the movement politics of identity,” in the process “losing a sense of what we share as citizens and what binds us as a nation”—in other

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words, a shared identity. For the argument that liberals need to “go beyond identity politics” to make any sense at all, the term “identity” must be restricted to those forms of affiliation the critic finds problematic. Often, the fundamental argument is that liberals turned off white workers by appealing too narrowly to minority constituencies.

“Republicans have been trying to divide us, and we as Democrats came along and affirmed their divisions,” Ohio congressman Tim Ryan alleged in a 2017 speech. “We said, ‘If you’re African American, I’m going to talk to you about voting rights. If you’re a Latino, I’m going to talk to you about immigration. If you’re a woman, I talk to you about choice. If you’re gay, I talk to you about LGBT rights.’” In the same speech, Ryan called on Democrats to “focus like a laser beam on the waitress with two kids. On the factory worker. We lost them to Trump”—in other words, make specific appeals to working people (whom Ryan implicitly renders as white Trump supporters) as a group.

The question is not whether identity should figure in politics—it will no matter what—but which identities should be put forward. The challenge for (white) workers’ liberal advocates is to articulate their claims in a way that supports other coalition members’ claims instead of undermining them. Criticism of “identity politics” does the opposite, relegating issues of race, gender, and sexuality to the ostensibly superficial realm of “identity.” Calls for Democrats to respond to an explicitly white working class tend to steer all involved toward emphasizing white over working class. However, it is possible to bring workers, including white workers, closer to the symbolic center of elite

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discourse without stepping into the well-trodden territory of white (working class) victimization. Calls for elites to respond to an explicitly multiracial, multiethnic working class—in other words, the actually existing working class—are comparatively rare in elite discourse. While the racialization of terms like “worker,” “work” and even “hard work” (see Hillary Clinton’s “working, hardworking Americans, white Americans”) certainly presents a steep challenge, more clearly articulating a progressive working class identity inclusive of white workers and working class people of color is an essential step in bringing about a better elite public discourse.

Since the 1960s, liberal discourse on white working class politics has frequently been characterized by “either-or” frames and false binaries that imply liberals must choose class or race, class or gender, white workers or the “Obama coalition,” the white working class or Black Lives Matter. These zero-sum frames reflect the history of white working class representation more than the needs and views of worker-actors. To be clear, it is naïve to suggest that real tension and friction do not exist; nor am I making the argument that all workers have identical interests. As Stuart Hall concisely put it, “social collectivities have more than one set of interests; and interests can be and frequently are contradictory, even mutually exclusive. Workers in a social system have both the interest of advancing and improving their position and advantages within it and of not losing their place.”

The “either-or” frames that recur in analysis of white working class politics rely instead on a view of groups as separate entities with opposing interests and views. Conventional analysis does not provide a discursive place for the Democrats and liberal-

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leaning people who make up a sizable percentage of the white working class, the LGBTQ white working class people who make up a sizable part of the LGBTQ population, even the women who make up the majority of white workers. A better elite public discourse on white working class politics must recognize actually existing heterogeneity and include seemingly “out-of-place” people in the picture along with conservative men.

Finally, present-day elite discourse evinces a clear and profound difficulty seeing or positioning white working class people as part of the American future. In both liberal and conservative discourse, the white working class is almost always positioned as symbolic of a past that contemporaries hope to recapture or move beyond. Promises to “Make America Great Again” are only the most obvious example. A consistent narrative, especially among liberals, holds that the white working class is effectively “dying out.” “The only way of addressing their plight is a form of political hospice care,” one scholar argues. “These are communities that are on the paths to death. And the question is: How can we make that as comfortable as possible?”

Whatever happens in the coming decades, the United States will still have a working class majority, and white workers will comprise a sizable segment of that working class. Generations of elites have employed the white working class as political symbol, and that history has privileged the political use of the subject over the subject itself. It is time for elites to take stock of the history of white working class representation and move beyond it, to engage with working class people of all backgrounds as people with opinions and experiences rather than as political backdrops or foils.

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