

# How Blue Was My Valley? Invited Paper for the AERA Special Interest Group on Rural Education

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Did rural America<sup>1</sup> bring Donald Trump to the presidency? The *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Atlantic Monthly* say so (see, e.g., Brownstein, 2016; Quirk, 2016). And it's an undeniable fact that 62% of small town and rural voters cast ballots for Trump (Morin, 2016).<sup>2</sup>

But what about the 38%? What do we know of *them*?

They are predictable enclaves, easily visible on a cross-walk of two data sources (see, e.g., Scala & Johnson, 2017; The Guardian, 2016; U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Some of these enclaves are in historically more liberal parts of the United States, such as California, Oregon, Washington, and Vermont. In some, a large percentage of residents are African American, Mexican-American, or American Indian. People of color see right through Trump: it's easy when he calls your ancestral home a "shithole."

Trump hasn't applied the epithet to rural places and isn't likely to do so, but those at Public Radio International<sup>3</sup> have (Massey, 2017), and rural people see right through *them*. PRI might well be seen as media home-base for a rural-contemptuous liberal elite—the same one that has undermined public schooling with punishment and privatization (Blacker, 2013; Cervone, 2017).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> We use "America" and "American" instead of the more conventional "United States" (either as noun or adjective) because the discussion elevates culture over State. We do not, of course, imply that the United States comprises all *the Americas*. Far from it: but the whole world knows what "America" signifies culturally, economically, and indeed politically.

<sup>2</sup>In some rural counties the support ran to 85%.

<sup>3</sup>*This American Life* aired the exploitative "Shit-Town" podcasts, politely referring to the program as *S\*town* in printed materials!

<sup>4</sup>The Clintons are indeed prominent among the liberal elite to

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Of course, there's a larger, more blameworthy group than rural: the 72% of the population who are White. And votes for Trump came disproportionately from that quarter (too). Most strangely, Trump held a 10% advantage among American White *women* in general.<sup>5</sup> And this was in spite of his bragging about molesting (White) women!

So, the widely repeated blame-the-hicks response is at least suspicious. Most of the population is (for the moment) White and the most White zone is rural: very conveniently rural gets the severest blame from the overwhelmingly White liberal elite ("Whew, it's not us!"). In other words, given the long mockery of rural people and places, there's a ready-made scapegoat to which Whites (particularly White liberal elites) can shift the blame. But, obviously, blaming White people also falls rather short of a good explanation—hiding more than it reveals.

Under 21<sup>st</sup>-century capitalism it seems wrong to blame any group of *people*, of actual, ordinary humans for the outcome of a very dicey election. The election was, once again, so close that the most logical blame might be placed on *stochastic processes* (i.e., chance), or perhaps more ontologically, on *fate*—a tragic flaw in the national character.<sup>6</sup>

Maybe both conditions converge in this case. Many people get to vote<sup>7</sup> in America: the destitute, those with darker complexions, and women—the undistinguished

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be *seen through*, advancing the punishment and privatization that have undone public schooling across America for a long time (see, e.g., Blacker, 2013). Bill Clinton helped lead the governors' charge towards punitive accountability and supported the expansion of school choice later on: "The President has challenged every state to let parents choose the right school for their children. Innovation, competition, and parental involvement will make our public schools better" (Clinton, 1998, p. 4).

<sup>5</sup>An advantage that rose to 28% in rural jurisdictions.

<sup>6</sup>As embodied, perhaps, in the Electoral College—an institution contemptuous of the votes of ordinary people.

<sup>7</sup>But not the 13% of the population in prison, 60% of whom are people of color—or the six million formerly imprisoned felons *who have completed* their sentences (Hagler, 2015).

mass, and not only property-owning White males (as at the outset of the republic). But, unlike the situation in many other developed western nations, voting operates in America with just two choices: the Republican or the Democrat.<sup>8</sup> It's the paradigm for American federal politics with very few local exceptions (e.g., the Vermont independent social democrat Bernie Sanders).

Voting American-style is thus *very much like* the toss of a coin. Pure chance (1/2) does indeed rule: sometimes one way and sometimes the next. Voters confront an alarmingly narrow range of real choices. Remove one choice and the thinnest patina of claimed democracy vanishes from coast to coast.

It's a sharply controlled game, and the economic arrangements behind it have stripped forests, coal, oil, natural gas, and topsoil from the rural places of the entire continent. The onslaught for the remainder is well underway. Workers are imported for the extraction and then are pushed out (and populations decimated) when profitability demands. Even farming communities in America are not grounded by a plausible alternative: industrialization and consolidation are always at work on the land (Stoll, 2017). We have recently conducted case studies of school districts in Ohio, and every one of them exhibits strong features of this sort of local history.

Rural despoliation has been national policy since the beginning. The "empty" land of the continent and its resources are available to the highest bidder—always, and nearly everywhere. Capital resents having national parks and monuments and forests put out of reach; they reclaim them as the opportunity presents itself. It's what the private ownership of land *means* (Stoll, 2017). Democratic politicians are behind the despoliation at least as much as Republican ones, though they may *display* more sympathy for the "losers" and *some* concern for "the environment."

But rural people do grasp their low economic, political, and cultural status in the national imagination (and political economy). They can hardly avoid the prevalent imagery. With (literally) no resources (notwithstanding their inconvenient residence on the land overlying the resources) and with a small and dwindling share of the population, they can exercise little political clout (Cramer, 2016). All they can do is hope their vote will count *sometime*. It's a fool's errand—ordinarily—and most of us sense the fact. Democrats won't tell the people it's a "rigged system," but Trump alas did. They knew he was right.<sup>9</sup>

No wonder so many felt intrigued at Trump's goofy arrival on a national ticket. He was unlike any national presidential candidate in anyone's memory, with the possible exception of George Wallace (whom few will

<sup>8</sup>Greens and Libertarians are minor spoilers, and they did not get much blame for Trump (see, e.g., Chalabi, 2016).

<sup>9</sup>But he doesn't know the half of it.

remember—though we do). Wallace's timing was bad; that racist might actually have done better two generations later, in 2016 (he died in 1998).

How can we explain this fearful election? We offer four explanations; but let's be clear at the outset that racism played a key part (as everyone with eyes open knows), and it figures significantly among our explanations.

#### Four Explanations Explained

As a phenomenon related to the rise of Trump, we try, in this paper, to explain the conservatism that surrounds us personally, as rural residents and rural education scholars.<sup>10</sup> Our neighbors are (mostly) conservative; in part it defines them; it is part of their culture. They have suffered loss across generations, so they are interested to hold on to familiar ways of living. The schools play a contradictory role in this, as rural scholars (worldwide) know well.

We present four explanations of Trump-related conservatism, all of which, we believe, are apt to some degree. They may not add up convincingly, but they might be a start. First, we explain voting for Trump as a *weapon of the weak* (see, e.g., Scott, 1985). Second, we deal with the Republican allegiances of many rural voters as a variant of *false consciousness*.<sup>11</sup> Third, we examine the *rural resonance with fundamentalism*—a religious revival cultivated since about 1970 and marketed nationwide even earlier than that (see, e.g., Grem, 2016; Miller, 2014). Finally, we address *racism as endemic and ubiquitous* in White America, with more polite manifestations in polite society and more blatant ones down home (see, e.g., Inwood, 2015).

#### First Explanation: Trump as a Weapon of the Weak

The applicable construct here—*weapons of the weak*—is the title of a 1985 study by James Scott. The study investigated the resistance of Malay peasants to the disruption of village existence resulting from the introduction of industrial agriculture, especially in the

<sup>10</sup>We confess, though, that we are equally troubled by American liberalism. We understand "liberal"—in the European tradition—as just another sort of conservative. In such a view, conservatives prefer military options—for instance, wars with Iraq—to advance the interests of capital, whereas liberals prefer economic options to advance the same interests—for instance global free trade regimes (see, e.g., Sassen, 2006; Shea, 1989). The interests of capital are addressed by both positions and require both. The outcomes of national elections affect the underlying aims not at all. The American dichotomy ("liberal" and "conservative") is far more problematic than most media accounts suggest.

<sup>11</sup>It's worth noting that Engels—originator of the construct in a letter of 1893—is reported to have applied it *only* to the thinking of the bourgeoisie: as the ideology (e.g., neoliberalism today) that they construct about the way the world works (Ritzer, 2007).

guise of the rice combine. Industrialization, in brief, made villagers and all they valued redundant. They resisted any way they could, using what Scott called *weapons of the weak*: gossip, sabotage, thieving, boycotting.

With the reluctant acceptance of the boorish and unpredictable Trump by the Republican elite, voters were handed a *strong* weapon of the weak. It seemed a mistake: *whoops!* Anyone could see the discomfort Trump generated within the political establishment. It was palpable, or at least widely reported, even among Republicans. The Democrats might have offered the disaffected electorate a comparable weapon (Sanders<sup>12</sup>): they demurred. That's how choice fares in America: it was a setup, with chance working a bit differently from usual.

The moment was amazing. To exercise this strong weapon, the weak merely needed to do their civic duty and *choose*. It was a measure of revenge, across the political spectrum. If you were White and disaffected (rural, less-intensely-schooled, in the Rust Belt of small cities once led by labor) the choice was Trump. The political elite of Republicans and Democrats collaborated on the offering. The elite stymied itself through a blunder.

But can one really call such "voting" resistance? Isn't real resistance supposed to be organized, selfless, and class conscious? Scott's definition<sup>13</sup> suggests that what transpired in the America in November 2016 does qualify as resistance:

Class resistance includes *any* act(s) by member(s) of a subordinate class that is or are *intended* either to mitigate or deny claims (for example, rents, taxes, prestige) made on that class by superordinate classes (for example, landlords, larger farmers, the state) or to advance its own claims (for example, work, land, charity, respect) *vis-à-vis* those superordinate classes [original emphasis]. (Scott, 1985, p. 290)

This passage was worked out to apply to Malay peasants circa 1980, but the author thought then to include terms that rather evidently do apply to rural voters circa 2016: *prestige ... the state ... respect*. Because the weapon was offered—so unwisely—by the elite, its actual use struck one as surreal. Welcome to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Of course, rural voters do not constitute a class, and the Trump vote is not the action of a social class per se. Scott (1985), however, reminds us that *class* is a dramatically misleading reification, the very last stage of *class struggle*. The process of class struggle forms what later, almost in

<sup>12</sup>Polls at the time of the nominations showed Sanders with a stronger advantage over Trump than Clinton (see, e.g., RealClearPolitics, 2016).

<sup>13</sup>For similar conceptions see also Barthes (1957), Foucault (1975), and Willis (1977).

hindsight, comes to be called a "class." Class struggle is going on everywhere, and so it did in the voting booths of the 2016 presidential election. Scott quotes from 19<sup>th</sup>-century novelist George Eliot on this point:

As to the causes of social change, I look at it in this way—ideas are a sort of parliament, but there's a commonwealth outside, and a good deal of commonwealth is working at change without knowing what the parliament is doing. (*Daniel Deronda*, p. 528)

In 2016 America, the observation made by Eliot's character isn't exactly *metaphorical*. But a "social class" per se is not necessary to this explanation.<sup>14</sup> Any "weak" individual or group inevitably uses weapons of the weak (see, e.g., Barthes, 1957; Foucault, 1975; Willis, 1977). A bit of adventitious organization, though (e.g., voting), can multiply the impact.

### Second Explanation: Rural Idiocy and False Consciousness

One might claim (as above) that, under normal circumstances (that is, those that didn't pertain in 2016), American voting is a game where voters lose, whatever the toss. It's a debatable claim (as all claims are), but it has a lot going for it.

Behind the math of 50/50, looms neoliberalism: *the ideology of global capitalism*. The underlying phenomenon (the economic base) is the freedom of capital to move anywhere and do everything, and the ideology (neoliberalism) provides the justification largely via the media (liberal and conservative). So, this explanation accepts the claim: voting is part of the media charade.<sup>15</sup>

Voting doesn't touch the actual phenomenon of interest. The choices are dressed in hyperbole, and the parties attempt to generate buzz for the candidates. It's not just that some voters (e.g., rural ones) are manipulated—all voters

<sup>14</sup>For a long time, there were just two classes: owners and workers, the bourgeoisie vs. the industrial proletariat in the Marxian formulation (see "rural idiocy" below). But with the coming of a managerial elite, the digital revolution, the service economy (and the fall in America of the industrial proletariat and its unions), the identity of classes is more in doubt than ever (see, e.g., Wright, 1997). At the same time, of course, increased and rising economic inequity is widely known.

<sup>15</sup>As McQuarrie (2017) observes: "The opposition between the credentialled and the uncredentialled had its purest partisan expression in 2016. This should give us pause considering that almost all of the commentators, journalists, scholars and pundits who interpret the election are professionals. The absence of reflexivity about this is both self-serving on the part of those who are inattentive to it and striking in its extent" (p. S143).

are manipulated almost all the time. They are suffered to vote, while the corporate “persons” exercise power directly (corporate noblesse), indirectly (via congressional acquisitions), and ideologically (with fabulously well-funded “free speech”). Their agendas come with multiple guarantees of success. Ordinary citizens are, in this ideology, kept safely out of actual political practice.<sup>16</sup>

And this is where idiocy comes in. In this explanation, voting is for people made *idiots* by ideology (i.e., the false consciousness of neoliberalism). What?

*Idiocy* is not only a deprecation. Athenian *idiōtēs* circa 400 BCE were those who were considered incompetent to take part in public affairs: they were enslaved or impoverished or uneducated (see, e.g., Idiot, 2018; Parker, 2003). In short (in this comparison), those Americans without *interests*—without enough money to make money, for instance—were cultivated across the 20<sup>th</sup> century as incompetent to play politics: *idiōtēs*.

This circumstance *ordinarily* gives national voters little choice but to vote “against their own interests.” In fact, ordinary voters in national elections have no interests (so far as the election is concerned) because national interests are, in fact, constituted by the managers and owners of the productive capital in circulation worldwide.<sup>17</sup> Idiocy is a profitable institution of global capital. To the extent that neoliberalism underwrites “liberal democracy” worldwide, it must cultivate voters as idiots.

The removal of voter competence in this way helps explain the discontent of politically dispossessed voters in liberal democracies, which so upsets the liberal wing of neoliberalism. The upset provokes an epithet: *populism*, with rural the poster child worldwide. Note the difference with the conception of idiocy: populism suggests a self-evident stupidity<sup>18</sup> of choices (e.g., Republican over Democrat) made by the masses, whereas *idiocy* (i.e., political dispossession) recognizes the absence (in ordinary circumstances) of a legitimate voice. And *idiocy* construes the unsavory “legitimate choice” of 2016 as (weak) revenge (first explanation).

<sup>16</sup>Those who insist on political involvement have scant chance of success, or survival—without sufficient capital, that is.

<sup>17</sup>Neoliberalism is proactive in forestalling its subjugation in the public interest; privatization is a case in point (see, e.g., Harvey, 2005; Sassen, 2006).

<sup>18</sup>The term seems to express the discomfort over restless natives from the perspective of all who are not of the people (anyone might be or might not be). But the deployment (this time from liberals) reassuringly reminds the liberal faithful that the people are idiots. Nonetheless “populism” at root suggests the masses (“the people”) are always right (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). The problem is that no one can tell what the masses actually think. Investigative journalism? Surveys? Semi-structured interviews? The party line? Better thinking is the only antidote and, in the long term, is far more dangerous to inequality.

One formulation (idiocy) is at least understandable as vengeful, the other (populism) is just obfuscation: neoliberalism calling the mass of ordinary people names. It’s a mark of fear. Mobs are indeed unruly, and they do turn ugly fast. As educators, though, we believe very simply in better thinking as the way past both revenge and false consciousness (of whatever sort and origin).

“Rural idiocy,” as some will know, appears in the Marx and Engels *Manifesto* of 1848. Their usage was *ironic*: the image of a bourgeoisie “rescuing” rural migrants from “the idiocy of rural life” was laugh-out-loud ridiculous and the authors knew it.<sup>19</sup> After all, Marx’s dissertation (Marx, 1841) was in classics. Well, much has changed since 1848, but the prospect of private enterprise performing such a rescue in 2018 is far more ridiculous even than it was in 1848.

### Third Explanation: The Political Mission of the Evangelical Church

More than 60% of Christian evangelicals voted for Trump, and many of them live in rural places, especially in the Southern United States (Cervone, 2017; Scala & Johnson, 2017).<sup>20</sup> So, blaming Protestantism for the outcome of the 2016 presidential election seems at least as apt as blaming locale. As the interpreters of the Baylor Religion Survey note,

Evangelical Protestants voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump. This was somewhat surprising given that evangelical voters tend to value expressions of religious piety from their chosen candidates; arguably, Donald Trump did not fit the normal Evangelical profile. (Froese, Uecker, & Vaughan, 2017, p. 7)

In fact, Trump hardly exhibits the demeanor or espouses the pious values of an evangelical Christian. He is rich, amoral, cosmopolitan, and a bully. There must be an explanation (that is, apart from deep and prevalent hypocrisy).

<sup>19</sup>In the *Manifesto*, the only Marx that *hardly anyone* is ever (un)likely to read: “The bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns. It has created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life. Just as it has made the country dependent on the towns, so it has made barbarian and semi-barbarian countries dependent on the civilised ones, nations of peasants on nations of bourgeois, the East on the West” (Marx & Engels, 1848, p. 17).

<sup>20</sup>The statistics on this issue vary rather widely. Representing the top of the range, Pollitt (2017) reported, “for instance in the last election, 81 percent of white evangelical Christians put aside their so-called biblical and family values and voted for Donald Trump, a libertine and crook” (p. 6).

In fact, since the 1980s Christian evangelicalism has become Republicanized as a marker of its increasing focus on social issues, especially those relating to abortion, gay rights, “family values,” and gun control (Bean, 2014; Scala & Johnson, 2017; Schwabel, 2017). In recent years anti-immigration sentiment seems also to have been added to the list of concerns of this putatively “Christian” Right (Froese et al., 2017). Of course, as Grem (2016) argued, Christian evangelicalism has been sold to the public (especially the rural and suburban public) for half a century or longer.<sup>21</sup>

Many rural residents, possibly more than those in other locales, listen to what their churches tell them (see, e.g., Penning & Storteboom, 2003). Perhaps their religious sentiment is stronger than that of people living in suburban and urban places; perhaps their churches more than other institutions have spoken up for them across the decades (Lowe, 2016; Neitz, 2005, 2009). Rural communities also may, as Neitz (2009) has argued, preserve identity in part by upholding the distinction between the “churched” and the “unchurched”—a construct that, even though it may play out somewhat differently in different communities, helps distinguish “insiders” from “outsiders.” Rural churches also evoke particular places and, in this way, give meaning to the lives of rural people (Neitz, 2005). With all that rural churches give to their members, we can readily imagine how open parishioners might be to the political rhetoric delivered from the pulpit (Penning & Storteboom, 2003).

In the 2016 election the evangelical pulpit was noisy about its support for Trump (e.g., Boston, 2017; Pollitt, 2017; Wadsworth, 2017). According to Pollitt (2017), evangelical churches overlooked Trump’s personal moral failings with the expectation that supporting him would advance their agenda on social issues like abortion, gay rights, and immigration. The ends justified the means.

Arguably, the evangelical vote was in part a rural vote for Trump. But the dynamics were not principally based in locale. As we consider next, the racist undercurrent of the vote may also not have been specific to rural places.

#### **Fourth Explanation: Racism Comes from Above**

Just as rural is not synonymous with fundamentalist, neither is White rural synonymous with racist. But there’s overlap. It is documented to a limited degree in the scholarly literature (Kimmel & Ferber, 2000; Lensmire, 2014; Stein, 2001) and hyped in the popular press (Massey, 2017).

But common sense suggests that racism, like other major institutional formations, is managed by the elites

<sup>21</sup>According to Grem (2016), evangelicalism was too radical for the elite leaders of business in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. But concerted efforts to blend fundamentalist religion with mainstream business practices succeeded in making it more palatable by the middle of the past century.

that necessarily direct the major institutions. (It is how they work.) This idea isn’t new. Harley (1988) characterized it in relationship to the power dynamics of maps and mapmaking: “the ideological arrows have tended to fly largely in one direction, from the powerful to the weaker in society” (p. 300). Others have articulated it in work theorizing racial dynamics as systemic rather than discursive. The system in America is infamous worldwide because it rivals the South African experience. The American legacy is perhaps worse, systemically speaking (see, e.g., Berry, 1970).

As early (or late) as 1992, van Dijk pronounced, “The structural nature of racism presupposes its reproduction among the white dominant group at large” (p. 201). According to Feagin and Elias (2013) racism clearly has socio-historical roots but it is *actively* maintained in the contemporary United States by a “new white political power elite-controlled governmental policy-making structure” (pp. 940-941). It’s what Bonilla-Silva (2003) referred to as “color-blind” racism and what others have also challenged in the discourse about a purportedly (and patently improbable) “post-racial” America (Esposito, 2011).

Such arguments position latter-day racism as one more (fearfully strong) weapon in the neoliberal arsenal. In this view, capital has a stake in mitigating overt racism while simultaneously sustaining and *exploiting* covert (systemic) racism. In large part its mechanism is to have neoliberal ideology justify inequity by invoking individual opportunity in a free market—the level playing field of schooling and job-holding (e.g., De Lissovoy, 2013; Kaplan, 2011): losers don’t deserve what they don’t get. It’s predictable that Trump loves the word “loser.” At root is an ethos of competitive individualism—a tightly calibrated zero-sum game in which one family succeeds at the expense of another family, one community at the expense of another, one gender, one race, and so on.

The point is to obscure awareness of a solidarity that might exist between the large majority of ordinary people in opposition to an elite class of corporate kin-keepers (see, e.g., Berry, 1970; Marable, 1983). Pitting poor Whites against poor African Americans is just part of the strategy—part of the battle plan on their side of the class struggle. Divide and conquer is a well-tested and effective strategy of domination.

Furthermore, if Inwood (2015) is right, the strategy was intentional. His analysis shows how a political move known as the “Southern Strategy” used racial dynamics that were prevalent in the South to stir up widespread White backlash to civil rights victories of the 1960s. In his assessment, this political strategy played on the economic and social fears of working- and middle-class Whites across the nation—not just in the South—making them receptive to the rhetoric of Republican neoliberals like Ronald Reagan (see also Bowser, 2017). A similar argument positions the election

of Trump as an almost natural consequence of the Southern Strategy:

The Southern Strategy was the original sin that made Donald Trump possible.... Conservative elites can denounce Trump all they want as a “cancer” or an impostor. In truth, he is their true heir, the beneficiary of the policies the party has pursued for more than half a century. (Heer, 2016)

No wonder, then, that the party welcomed Trump to the ticket. And no wonder, either, that Democrats demurred on Sanders (i.e., he was *not* pursuing what they themselves had pursued since Reagan’s conservative restoration).

The South, of course, is not coextensive with rural. But arguably its reliance on rurally situated slavery played a critical role in shaping a national economy and ethos—within a larger global one (Farrow, Lang, & Frank, 2006). As Beckert (2014) argued, global production and distribution of cotton and cotton products—perhaps the earliest form of global industrial capitalism<sup>22</sup>—not only made land acquisition and slavery profitable, it also set in motion dynamics that pitted poor Whites against poor people of color over the very long term and worldwide.

This interpretation suggests that White elites have reaped benefits for a long time by exploiting the racism of poor Whites, while simultaneously making their own racism invisible. Scratch the surface, and the racism of the elite comes into view. For instance, elite Whites allow few people of color into the institutions that groom their children to remain in power, such as prestigious law schools, elite boarding schools, and even public-school gifted programs. And the few people of color who gain entry are often treated badly (see e.g., Cookson & Persell, 1991; Evans & Moore, 2015). Of course, elites aren’t hospitable to other outsiders either (e.g., rural people, working-class Whites).

None of this is to deny that racism operates through people, most particularly including White people, and rural White people at that. The racism of some rural Whites has of course buttressed neoliberalism: it is supposed to work that way. But our point is to situate the racism of rural Whites within a larger and more complex dynamic of racialized politics in the United States—politics that head almost exclusively in one direction—toward “a war of each against all, [where] the devil takes the hindmost” (Sinclair, 1906/2003). It’s a familiar and very American story. Some people know it and also love it—so it works for Trump.

<sup>22</sup>Sugar (another trade historically dependent on enslavement) required only simple industry: the original industrial machines exploited cotton—compounding the misery of enslaved Americans working the cotton fields to supply the machines (see, e.g., Baptist, 2014).

### Scapegoats in the Wild Blue Yonder

Why would the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Atlantic Monthly* want to blame rural people for Trump when there are so many other options? We have presented four, and there are probably at least four more.

One plausible answer is that the progressive and conservative sides of the neoliberal elite actually have good reasons *of their own* to vie for dominance.<sup>23</sup> They have somewhat different economic alliances, after all, and they use different political strategies and profit differently, and different factions of the elite benefit from regime changes. Whereas both sides support the globalization of capital (and forms of education that valorize it and its ideology—neoliberalism), the liberal version is more “enlightened” in its reliance on state regulation to moderate the extreme costs of late-stage capitalism (e.g., environmental despoliation, poverty, economic inequality, poor schooling, poor health care, and the privatization of everything possible).

According to Noam Chomsky (2017), however, both sides of the neoliberal spectrum have an interest in curbing widespread engagement in political debate and action:

Go back to the 1970s. Across the spectrum, elite spectrum, there was deep concern about the activism of the ‘60s. It’s called the “time of troubles.” It civilized the country, which is dangerous. What happened is that large parts of the population—which had been passive, apathetic, obedient—tried to enter the political arena in one or another way to press their interests and concerns. They’re called “special interests.” That means minorities, young people, old people, farmers, workers, women. In other words, the population.

Particularly threatening to elite interests, in Chomsky’s view, is the possibility that ordinary people might inadvertently find common ground in opposing late-stage capitalism. “Progressive neoliberals” and “conservative neoliberals” both stand to benefit handsomely from the divide-and-conquer strategy. And so they do. That they target different groups (i.e., immigrants, people of color, the LGBTQ community, and academics, on the one hand; and rural people and blue-collar workers, on the other) hardly matters. It all keeps the “playing field” muddy.

Deployment of the strategy by progressive neoliberals, according to one source (Brenner & Fraser, 2017), combined vitiated concepts of emancipation and new business models (e-commerce of various sorts): a “mix that was rejected in toto by Trump’s voters” (p. 132). That mix did real damage to everyone involved in rural areas, the Rust Belt, and the

<sup>23</sup>Of course, scapegoating makes for an easier story and a more distracting one.

South in general, and it included people and communities decimated with the opioid epidemic. According to this analysis, these “stakeholders” were offended by the “progressive moralism” (p. 132) of this faction of the elite. Trump is no progressive moralist!

The conservative faction, of course, undermined solidarity more directly, capitalizing on ordinary White people’s fears (e.g., of immigrants, people of color, the LGBTQ community, and academics). The two factions found common ground—so to speak—in their different ways of working the crowd on behalf of capital.<sup>24</sup>

### Solidarity and the Collectivist Alternative

Public schools are the institutions that made liberal nation states, or at least were intended to make them by making the citizens that formally justified their existence (see, e.g., Counts, 1932; Hobsbawm, 1992; Weber, 1976). It was a fine ideal until the advent of corporate persons made citizenship less about thinking and more about showing up for work (wages) and shopping (debt). And now the formation of citizens is collapsing under the neoliberal assault: especially via the assault on public schools (subterfuge), but also (more formatively) via the heavy-duty “schooling” (false consciousness) provided to everyone, especially adults, via “the media.”

Note, however, that the retirement of the citizenry is deeply embedded at the very inception of a “liberal democracy,” with elites taking immediate charge of its foundational concept of free enterprise. Alan Greenspan<sup>25</sup> has recently characterized democracy as “the safety-valve of capitalism” (Davidson, 2016)—the velvet glove of the invisible hand.<sup>26</sup>

The founders of the American republic (except perhaps Hamilton, *in his dreams*) could hardly imagine the gargantuan corporate actors now striding the world, nor the implications for the construct of *citizen*. Poof! Citizens are gone along with the nation state (see, e.g., Sassen, 2006). It’s not surprising that the public good has less and less place in state schooling. The state’s a surrogate and the citizen a shopper.

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<sup>24</sup>One of the most peculiar emerging media trends is the defense of global free trade as a liberal value. Well, and of course it *is*. But it takes on greater fervor in light of Trump’s opposition to free-trade compacts in general. Apparently, the progressive arm of the ruling class now should start cheering for transnational capital. Get the crowd energized! The best defense is an offense: it’s a companion strategy to divide-and-conquer.

<sup>25</sup>In Greenspan’s autobiography (on p. 332), according to Davidson (2016, p. 621), Greenspan, of course, is an Ayn Randian, among whom the very word *collectivist* just means “craven.”

<sup>26</sup>See this usage in the title of Frankel’s (1980) lecture.

Consumers will now be formed—and farmed—by and for corporate profitability (the chant of careers and college).<sup>27</sup> We don’t know yet what will happen as digital intelligence displaces all sorts of work. Where will the funds that support profitability in a consumer economy come from? Will humans simply and happily appropriate the “surplus value” of machines?<sup>28</sup> In all likelihood, it will be a struggle, even a class struggle, as it always has been so far. At stake, after all, is power: making people do the bidding of an elite group (on the one hand) or joining people together to enact a world worth living in (on the other).

In the meantime, the ideal of the common good—one and many—will persist *because it must*: the terms of a precarious human existence demand it. Obviously, many places will not be hospitable for an education, even a schooling, toward this good (a world worth living in). We’d guess, however, that more rural places than suburban and urban places will prove hospitable (see, e.g., Corbett, 2014). The reason is their economic, political, and cultural marginality. When even the liberal mainstream—politicians like Clinton and Obama—abet the destruction of public schools, a residual public practice will stand a better chance in overlooked corners.

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<sup>27</sup>Of course, as Sassen (2006) reiterates, nation states are not gone, it’s just that what they once were is withering away, leaving a convenient husk to be managed by the real political actors, who nonetheless confront significant challenges (Davidson, 2016), not the least of which is the continued usefulness of the nation state for finance.

<sup>28</sup>For Marx surplus value proceeded only from human workers.

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