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OPINION - 04 NOV 2016

Election Special: False Economy

Part seven of our US election series: Ben Davis on why the topic of class has returned to the national conversation

BY BEN DAVIS

Tomorrow morning, the United States will go to the polls to vote for their 44th president, choosing between the Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton, and the Republican candidate Donald Trump. This election cycle has been more divisive and toxic than any other in living memory in the US; it has widened old conservative and liberal fault lines, and created new, even more dangerous ones with the potential to effect not just the US, but the whole world.

*This entry, from writer and academic Ben Davis, is one of a seven-part frieze.com series that has been published throughout October in anticipation of tomorrow's vote. The remaining entries, considering key issues such as education, environment, Brexit, race, paranoia and class, **are available here** <<https://frieze.com/tags/us-election-special>> .*

My country, the United States of America, does not have much of a deep tradition of talking about the working class during elections. Everyone is supposed to identify as middle class. Politicians of both parties have historically targeted their pitches accordingly.

And so, the tiny, tiny silver lining of the serial horror show that is the Donald J. Trump campaign might be that the situation of the 'white working class' has surged, suddenly, into the national conversation. Middle class identification has been sharply eroding in the recent decades, with a corresponding rise in US citizens identifying as lower or working class – but only now, suddenly, when it turns out that this fact has consequences for who runs the country, is it a hot topic **among pundits** <<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/01/27/despite-recovery-fewer-americans-identify-as-middle-class/>> .

The quality of the resulting discussion, however, has not always been all that you might have hoped. 'The white American underclass is in thrall to a vicious, selfish culture whose main products are misery and used heroin needles,' **Kevin Williamson declared** <<http://www.nationalreview.com/article/432876/donald-trump-white-working-class-dysfunction-real-opportunity-needed-not-trump>> in the pages of the old-guard conservative National Review, as the Republican establishment lost control to the insurgent billionaire during the primaries.

As primary season has yielded to the Trump vs. Hillary Clinton battle royal, a panicky liberal media has too-often matched Williamson's caricatured view, in its own idiom. Chest-thumping bigots in 'Make American Great' hats make for good B-roll, and there always seem to be some on hand at Trump rallies.

At the same time, the earnest journalistic pilgrimage into Trump Country has become its own sort of cliché over recent months. So much so, in fact, that The Awl **recently penned a paint-by-numbers parody of the genre** <<https://theawl.com/i-talked-to-some-trump-voters-too-24d8399a6147#.gyr1tkkrp>> : 'Bleaksville, Kentucky (or maybe it's in Ohio or West Virginia, I can't remember) has seen better days...'

The trouble is, **Trump doesn't actually have his base in Bleaksville** <https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2822059> , or at least not from its worst precincts. As a September report from Gallup put it, succinctly, '[Trump's] supporters are less educated and more likely to work in blue collar occupations, but they earn relatively high household incomes, and living in areas more exposed to trade or immigration does not increase Trump support.'

I'm not sure this country has a media-ready image for such a person. In a political campaign of so many twists, this is a real one: Just at the moment when the media suddenly wants to speak about the working class, it may actually be some section of the middle class that is in play.

Trump – crass, bombastic, materialistic, racist, full of swaggering machismo, a TV star viewed somehow as the paragon of authenticity – is a very US character. I get people's fixation on his personality. But I also despair at the personality-obsessed nature of the discussion. His popularity is a product of a state of affairs much larger than him – indeed, one that is larger than just the US situation. Xenophobic right-wing populism is growing ever closer to power across the capitalist heartlands of Europe as well.

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Derek Zoolander goes back to his roots. Courtesy: Paramount Pictures

Economic inequality has reached unheard of, cartoonish extremes

<<http://www.economist.com/blogs/dailychart/2011/10/income-inequality-america>> (a process that has accumulated, in the US, under both political parties, for decades). It is quite logical that, in the face of an extreme status quo, even people who have benefited under the status quo – maybe especially people who benefit from the status quo – are liable to be drawn an extreme ideology in search of an explanation.

Even in the likely event of his defeat, Trumpism will outlive Trump, abetted by the compromises of Clinton, fantasized and real. It will likely repackage itself in less crazy-eyed form, as Marine Le Pen has done in France, mainstreaming the politics of her more openly toxic father. (Ivanka 2020, anyone?)

So it's tremendously important that we not walk away from this election with the idea that Trump is the true voice of the 'white working class.' He is not. He is what happens when class has been so invisible from the discussion that a competent showman with a pack of isolationist zingers feels as credible as the respectable mainstream, with its non-answers to economic questions that only grow more and more urgent.

11/28/2016

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Main image: Donald Trump wearing a hard hat during his rally at the Charleston Civic Center on May 5, 2016 in Charleston, West Virginia. Photograph:

Mark Lyons/Getty Images

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