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# DONALD TRUMP AND THE RISE OF THE NATIONALIST RIGHT

Essays by Connor Kilpatrick, Lester K. Spence,  
Liza Featherstone, and Ethan Young

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# Donald Trump and the Rise of the Nationalist Right

## Examining How Trump Won the US Presidency

We are witnessing a tidal change, and it will not be for the better. Right-wing nationalist populism continues to rise throughout the Western world. With the victory of Donald Trump, its ascendancy has reached a new height.

Over the course of the last years, far-right movements have grown more powerful in small towns and capital cities across Europe. In the United Kingdom, right-wing nationalists were the driving force behind Brexit. In other countries, the far-right has joined in—or even taken over—national governments. Its ambassadors now include heads of state from Turkey to Hungary to Russia to Poland. With the election of Trump, even the “leader of the free world” will belong to the authoritarian right.

While the nationalist right used to be in disagreement and disconnected, today these forces are much better linked up than commonly known. Stephen Bannon’s *Breitbart News* is already reaching out to Marine Le Pen of France’s National Front and to the far-right Alternative for Germany. They share a broad set of values and goals: anti-immigrant, anti-black, anti-Muslim, anti-feminist, and other sentiments are woven into an ideological net of white nationalism, traditionally known as white supremacy.

In this context, it is a bitter irony that Donald Trump—who lost the popular vote (and it wasn’t even close)—could only win because of the Electoral College arithmetic, meaning that his victory is the result of an institution that is a direct vestige of slavery.

With Donald Trump in the White House, the seriousness of the far-right threat can hardly be overestimated. In the US, major accomplishments of labor and civil rights, women’s and LGBT, climate justice and other social movements are at stake. On the international and global level, the election of a president who ran an explicitly racist and anti-Muslim “tough guy” campaign will increase existing tensions and the likeliness of further hostilities.

This series takes a look at four major explanations for why Trump won this election. Of course these are not the only reasons—not explicitly analyzed, for instance, is how bad a candidate Hillary Clinton proved to be, and how badly her campaign was run—nor would we necessarily argue that any one is more important than the others. Together, they rather represent a sort of patchwork—sometimes overlapping, others intersecting—that provides an overview of how this national (and indeed worldwide) catastrophe could happen. Our issues of focus will be the Democratic Party’s neglect of the white working class; the persistence of racism; misogyny and corporate feminism; and the left’s shortcomings and failures.

Stefanie Ehmsen and Albert Scharenberg  
Co-directors of the New York Office, November 2016

# On the White Working Class

By Connor Kilpatrick

It may seem hard to believe in a country where Donald Trump has just become president, but people make rational political decisions. Most of the time, at least.

But something strange happened this election. For starters, Clinton nearly broke even with Trump when it came to voters making over \$200,000 a year—the party of the people winning a suspiciously high number of affluent professionals. And while Clinton still won a slight majority of voters making under \$50,000 a year, she did nowhere near as well as Obama, who won sixty percent of this income bracket in 2012.

Unfortunately for us all, the regions where this demographic cost her the most were in the absolute must-win Rust Belt states. It was there in the Upper Midwest that enough of Obama's white working class voters—who pundits had largely ignored as a crucial part of his coalition—finally had enough of the Democrats and defected to Trump.

While we hear constantly that they're demographically dying out, white workers without a college degree remain at least 63 percent of the working class and in twenty years will still be a "mere" 49.5 percent. That's a ton of potential voters—they were 34% of Obama's coalition—and yet few liberal pundits seemed to take notice.

On the contrary, after Clinton's loss the pundits rose up in fury when it was suggested that the Democratic Party needed to do more to appeal to this large slice of Americans. In one illuminating discussion, I saw a high-profile political commentator state that this was a ridiculous strategy because the only way these

poorer whites would come to the table is if the Democratic Party promised to explicitly or implicitly protect white supremacy as they did during the Dixiecrat era.

This couldn't be farther from the truth.

Let's look at McDowell County, West Virginia. The *Guardian* zeroed in on McDowell due to Trump winning 91.5 percent of the Republican primary vote. They of course left out the fact that more than three times as many Democratic Party ballots were cast and that nearly twice as many people voted for Sanders as for Trump—but we'll give them a pass because, at the time of the primary, the GOP race was effectively decided. Fair enough. McDowell County *did* go for Trump in November. Just as it did for Romney in 2012. But with only 38 percent of registered voters participating compared to 58 percent nationwide.

And yet in 2008, Barack Obama won McDowell handily with 53 percent of the vote. Recent studies have shown that Obama won across the country in 2008 with far more white working-class voters than commonly thought. As one older, ex-mine worker in McDowell told the *Guardian*, "I voted for that black guy two times." He's now with Trump.

How does a liberal pundit explain this? If these voters are such obstinate racists who'll always choose upholding "white supremacy" over their pocketbooks, why did they give Obama a shot in the first place? Did they think he wasn't *really* black those first two times?

Or, perhaps, in the wake of the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression, Obama and his party simply failed to make the lives of vot-



ers in McDowell County substantially better. Maybe these McDowell voters question how it was that the wealthiest Americans recovered so quickly from the crash while they and their families and neighbors are worse off than ever.

While Obama at least delivered Medicaid expansion to West Virginians, Clinton campaigned on the promise that, “We’re going to put a lot of coal miners and coal companies out of business.” And while she did say that she would enact programs to ease the loss of those livelihoods, Bill Clinton had made similar promises about easing the job losses created by NAFTA. To no one’s surprise, they didn’t materialize. I’d say that’s some well-earned skepticism.

Where Hillary ran as the “most qualified” candidate, Trump barnstormed the Rust Belt offering not only racist appeals but a reactionary, right-wing New Deal promising a massive infrastructure program to rebuild the country and “Make America Great Again.” While Hillary’s legislative program was significantly more progressive than Trump’s (and even Obama’s), she barely campaigned on it. Her response to Trump was that “America is *already* great,” even as most of Obama’s downscale voters found their lives had improved very little under his tenure. She focused instead of Trump’s offensive and outrageous statements and the fact that the *real* billionaires were “with her.” But the effect of all this seemed only to reinforce that Trump was in fact the outsider. The game-changer.

Whereas Obama explicitly played this role in 2008, Clinton ceded that mantle to Trump. Much like FDR was seen to be a “traitor to his class,” Trump embraced the role himself. Liberals were so focused on his grotesque and offensive racism that they completely missed this twin side to his politics. Whereas workers of color couldn’t afford to ignore or de-prioritize his racism and instead focus on his anti-“free trade” pitch, white workers could.

And unfortunately for us all, it worked. Trump will go into 2017 as the leader of a Republican Party with more power at all levels of the state apparatus than at any time in at least a century. And it’s thanks largely not only to the reactionary, relatively affluent white voters who’ve been with the Republican Party all along, but to the downscale, working-class ones in the Rust Belt who left Obama’s coalition and put Trump over the top either by voting for him or staying home.

But this doesn’t mean they’re damned. When it comes to the nature of the white working class, I agree with civil rights leader Bayard Rustin: they are neither inherently conservative nor liberal. Which way they break is determined by politics and organization—not destiny or their whiteness.

Racism can be fought, defeated, or overruled by working-class politics. Or it can be brought front and center. West Virginia in the 1920s was a bastion of reaction—the KKK and coal operators ran the state. Starting in the 1930s and up through the 1970s, it became a hotbed of labor unions, class struggle, and a hell of a lot of Democratic Party votes. In 1968, Democratic candidate Hubert Humphrey, who rose to prominence for his commitment to both civil rights and the welfare state, crushed Republican Richard Nixon and Independent George Wallace in West Virginia with 49.6 percent of the vote.

Today’s Democratic Party can still count on the votes of millions of working-class Americans, largely people of color. And yet it’s an open secret that the party’s program is led by the affluent professional class at best and enlightened Silicon Valley billionaires at worst. Obama himself has hinted that he’s interested in going into venture capital after his presidency. Thanks to WikiLeaks, we now know that Apple CEO Tim Cook and Bill Gates—the billionaire who has been leading the movement to

destroy public education—both made it onto Clinton’s shortlist for running mate. This is the party rejected by white workers supposedly out of “racism” and nothing more—not the party of civil rights, labor unions, and Medicare.

After all, it wasn’t just the *white* workers who snubbed Clinton—black working-class voters turnout also plummeted in these Midwestern states despite Trump’s open race baiting. And Trump did better with Latinos than Romney ever had, even as he called them “rapists” and campaigned on building a wall along the country’s southern border. Black turnout did remain high, however, in the wealthiest majority African-American county in the country: Prince George in Maryland.

So while this form of liberal politics can probably still scare up enough votes to win a few elections, it’s fundamentally incapable of not only governing but of changing American society for the better. After all, the two most significant and expansive federal civil rights initiatives of the twentieth century were enacted by two presidents who won the votes of the white working class—Harry Truman and Lyndon B. Johnson. And it was Walter Reuther’s United Auto Workers—not “woke” corporate executives—that provided financial support to Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement.

The Democratic Party’s nationwide marginalization means, in much of the country, that it’s been decades since it was this difficult to start or join a labor union or enjoy access to abortion services. Despite having largely shed the “racist” white working class from the Democrat’s electoral coalition, the black-white wage gaps are larger today than they were in 1979.

It’s here where the politics advocated by Sanders shows the way forward. Sanders’ fiery, populist class politics resonated with the exact kinds of downscale people who Demo-

crats have such a hard time turning out, or who end up in Republican hands as far too many did in this election. Nearly every single matchup poll all year showed Sanders beating Trump by far wider margins than Clinton, largely thanks to so-called “independent” voters—people alienated from both parties. Even now, Sanders is the most popular politician in the United States. Yet Democratic Party elites see nothing more than vulgar “class-only” politics.

But his supposed “class-only” politics are exactly what gave him the legitimacy to address these other issues while still holding that coalition together. Sanders campaigned on combatting climate change far more vigorously than Clinton and yet he won West Virginia—in the heart of coal country—handily. Because by definition his ardent, class-warrior politics made it clear that he did not believe social progress required or should even allow working people to make yet another sacrifice—even when tackling climate change. And therein lays the central irony of the Democrats’ tighter rhetorical embrace of social liberalism alongside a staunch rejection of populist class politics: they actually made far more progress on the former when they were still a party capable of the latter.

The belief that bringing in the nonvoting white working class *requires* surrendering on commitments to gender equality and antiracism is simply that—a belief. Sanders simultaneously attracted the support of white working-class voters in states like Indiana, Wisconsin, West Virginia, and Michigan (all states Clinton lost to Trump), even as he repeatedly championed Black Lives Matter and the fight against racial discrimination. And while Sanders lost the black vote in the primary, he won the millennial share of that electorate—the portion most attuned to the priorities of Black Lives Matters. With Bernie, there was never any race-baiting “Sister Souljah” moment.

So while we're told about just how insane white workers are for voting the way they do, I frankly don't find it surprising. Many still vote for today's affluent, professional-class Democratic Party with low expectations. Some, with no labor union or political organization to corral them, fall back onto reactionary prejudices and throw in with people like Trump for the worst reasons.

And most of them, understandably, just stay home on Election Day. Until we change that fact, social justice in the United States will continue to remain out of reach for *everyone* who has to work for a living.

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## The Race Factor

By Lester K. Spence

Donald Trump, who first catapulted to national political prominence by suggesting Barack Obama was not an American citizen, was just elected President of the United States.

The Southern Poverty Law Center received reports of approximately 260 hate crimes in the days after Trump's election, and within two weeks they'd logged over 700 such incidents. Anti-immigrant incidents lead the list, with anti-black incidents coming second.

Within a few days of his election, Trump proposed several individuals with deep connections to the Jim Crow racist South and the related white nationalist movement for his cabinet. I'm not being hyperbolic when I suggest that Trump represents a figure the likes of which we haven't seen since George Wallace. Trump's election, combined with Republican control of the legislative and judiciary branches of the federal government and of a large majority of state legislatures, suggest the possibility of hard-right white nationalist domination even as whites become a minority of American citizens.

What role did racial politics play? I'd like to focus on three factors: racial resentment; the

evisceration of the Voting Rights Act; and the failure of the Democratic Party to mobilize black voters.

Let me begin with the issue of growing racial resentment. While a number of people believe we need to spend time thinking about and working with the white working class, the white working class was not the only white voting segment to turn for Trump. I think that rather than locating Trump's support in a specific class segment of whites, it's more accurate to suggest that a more specific *racial* resentment, separate and distinct from class, drove his support through a series of decisions made by both the Republican and Democratic Party.

While I think the story of the neoliberal turn hasn't been fully told, what we know is that the turn—which significantly increases income inequality and reduces worker protections and the size and scope of the welfare state—comes as a partial result of racial politics. Support for welfare decreases as welfare recipients are increasingly represented as black and underserving. Support for punitive approaches to crime increases as criminals are increasingly represented as black super-predators.

Ground zero of the modern tax revolt is California's infamous Prop 13, which in 1978 placed a hard cap on property taxes and created a harsh supermajority burden on all future tax increases. The best predictor of support for Prop 13 (which passed decisively) was neither partisanship identification, support for conservative ideology, or class. It was racial resentment.

Resentment stoked by both political parties.

We're all by now familiar with Richard Nixon's "southern strategy," used to win the South (and hence the presidency) by subtly appealing to the racial sentiments of white southern voters. We can also point to Ronald Reagan, who announced his intent to run for President in 1980 right outside of Philadelphia, Mississippi (home of one of the most brutal murders of the civil rights era) on a platform of states' rights. In 1984, the Democratic Party ran Walter Mondale against Reagan, believing that Reagan was vulnerable given how disastrous his policies were for working-class whites. Reagan beat Mondale soundly.

Rather than go to Philadelphia, Mississippi, to assess the causes, the DNC conducted a series of focus groups with white voters in Macomb County, Michigan. The results of the focus group were clear. The whites blamed almost all of the problems they faced on black citizens, who were simultaneously stealing jobs from them because of affirmative action and lazily living off of the government. The data collected from the focus groups was so virulently racist that the DNC destroyed the records—the only reason we know they exist is because of the work of Mary D. Edsall and Thomas E. Edsall in *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race Rights and Taxes on American Politics*.

We now know the population interviewed in these focus groups as "Reagan Democrats."

The population that attended Trump rallies by the thousands and put him in office are the

symbolic sons and daughters of Reagan Democrats. Like their "parents" they are incredibly resentful of blacks and Latinos who they believe have taken everything whites rightfully deserve. However, unlike their parents they are also increasingly resentful of the white political and economic establishment, whom they feel promised them that their hard work would be rewarded.

The Republican Party bears a great deal of blame for what they've caused. But the Democratic Party is not blameless. As a result of their focus groups, a group of conservative Democrats created the Democratic Leadership Council. Among the policies they promoted were: privatizing Social Security, reducing the ability of workers to organize, ending welfare, increasing capital's ability to move across borders. Instead of trying to make a case to Reagan Democrats that their life circumstances were deeply connected to those of their black and brown brothers and sisters, the Democratic Party instead moved to the political right to try to catch them. One can argue that Obama moved *slightly* leftward over the course of his eight years, and that Hillary Clinton moved even further to the left, but these moves were partially forced by political activism in the form of Occupy Wall Street on the one hand and Black Lives Matter on the other.

The rhetoric Trump deployed at his campaign rallies and the white nationalist and racist organizations affiliated with his campaign consistently weaponized this resentment.

Trump explicitly uses white nationalist rhetoric to stoke racial resentment and nationalist fear. The Democratic Party is unable to stop it in part because it bears some responsibility. But what we're looking at in the Trump victory is not simply an attitudinal matter. It isn't even simply a matter of attitudes stoked by institutions. While demography isn't destiny, there are now enough black, Latino, Asian-Ameri-



can, and young white voters to outvote racially resentful whites.

We also have to look at institutional modifications. The second important factor is the evisceration of the Voting Rights Act.

While many look to the 1964 Civil Rights Act as the most important bill of the era, I'd argue that the 1965 Voting Rights Act was even more important, because it enhanced and protected black political power. Over the past few decades the Republican Party engaged in two types of tactics designed to curtail that power. They've passed laws throughout the country designed to increase the burden on individual voters to vote, by increasing the types of identification required, and by significantly decreasing the number of early voting days and the number of voting booths individuals have access to, among other things. Furthermore, they've brought a number of legal cases before federal courts and the Supreme Court in order to reduce the legislation's scope. In 2013 *Shelby County v. Holder*, the Roberts Court struck down Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act, designed to prevent states with long histories of racial suppression from passing voting laws without clearing them with the federal government.

The end results of these tactics have been disastrous. A wave of states immediately passed legislation designed to curtail voting. This, in addition to laws preventing felons from voting (a decision that reduces black voting strength in states like Florida by several percentage points), created conditions where the population that could have potentially turned out for Clinton was artificially suppressed. In noting why he decided to strike down part of the Voting Rights Act, Judge Roberts argued that the type of racism that the Voting Rights Act was designed to curtail in effect no longer existed. Given the rapidity with which Republicans throughout the country not only passed legislation designed to curtail voting but brashly

articulated their desire to do so for the purpose of suppressing the black vote, this statement was either made in ignorance or in willful knowledge of the consequences.

Stoking racial resentment on the one hand and eviscerating the Voting Rights Act on the other were both arguably necessary for Trump's Electoral College victory. However, given that Trump's victory is only part of a much larger picture—again the Republican Party now controls the presidency, the legislative branch, the judiciary, and perhaps most importantly a large majority of state legislatures—I'd argue that these two phenomena are necessary but still insufficient.

The third and final (simplified) dynamic is the unwillingness of the Democratic Party to develop what could be called "maximum feasible participation" strategies, particularly in black populations. As a result of historical and contemporary racism, black people remain hyper-segregated in major cities on the one hand and in rural areas on the other. A strategy of aggressively registering, mobilizing, and activating black voters could potentially generate electoral victories at the local, state, and federal level. However, more importantly such a move could also shift the Democratic Party further to the left. Such a move would put the Senate and a number of governorships into play, and would also at the very least call a number of state legislatures into question.

Why hasn't this happened? While the white working-class vote has over the course of decades consistently voted regressively, Black working-class voters have persistently voted progressively.

The Democratic Party now realizes that they need black voters in order to take the presidency. As a result they've done a lot of work required to register and mobilize black voters every four years for presidential elections.

However, most cities with high black population percentages are reluctant to engage in persistent registration, education, and mobilization, in part because the neoliberal turn has significantly truncated the willingness and the ability of city mayors to provide services to this population. Put plainly, the Democratic Party is only interested in turning out black voters when the presidency is at stake, and not under any other conditions because the black population itself may end up wanting government for services city mayors are unwilling to provide.

There are more factors at play in talking about Trump's election and his presidency. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the FBI and the Russian

government were at work in generating the conditions that made Trump's Electoral College victory possible. Furthermore, the Brexit results as well as the growing strength of hard-right white nationalist parties in places like France suggest that this is not solely an American phenomenon. However, going forward and thinking more specifically about racial politics in the American context, I believe that we must first start by understanding white racial resentment and the institutions that stoke it: the evisceration of the voting rights act, and the demobilization of black voters.

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## On Misogyny and Elite Feminism

By Liza Featherstone

"Donald Trump is coming here to kill all of you," an angry, gloating man threatened a friend of mine last week in the Gowanus (Brooklyn) Whole Foods parking lot, getting out of his truck and putting his face right next to hers. Many women report being the sudden target of similar sexist, politically motivated attacks. Some women have even been physically assaulted by men for expressing dismay about the election results.

It feels like open season on women. A man boasted about assaulting women and was rewarded with the highest office in the land, thus emboldening woman-haters everywhere. How did this happen?

There's no doubt that some of Trump's most strident supporters were motivated by hostility to the idea of a woman president. At his ral-

lies, there were buttons and t-shirts referring to Clinton as a "bitch." Even more disgusting were slogans wishing sexist violence upon her, like one man's t-shirt, photographed by *New York* magazine, which read, "I wish Hillary had married O.J."

The Hillary-loving feminist commentariat was inclined to see misogyny as a driving force in the election results. Feminist writer Amanda Marcotte tweeted on Election Night, responding to Trump's impending surprise victory, "Men hate you." The next day she clarified, "41% of men do not hate you," referring to the percentage of male voters who had gone for Clinton. "The rest do."

Of course, some men hated the idea of a woman president, and Trump was the ideal sexist beneficiary of such feelings. And it's grotesque

that Trump's misogyny wasn't a deal-breaker for voters. But the election is hardly a mandate for misogyny: after all, a woman won the popular vote. As well, if male solidarity with a misogynist—or, for that matter, any special feelings about Trump—were a huge factor, Trump should have invigorated the base. Yet there was no surge in Republican voters—Trump got fewer votes this year than the deeply forgettable Mitt Romney won in 2012.

Clinton simply didn't inspire enough people—especially women—to come out and vote for her. Compared to Obama in 2008, Clinton won fewer votes from women, whether they were black, Latina or white.

Part of the problem was the campaign's attempt to speak to women as if we were a unified group—which we have never been. One of her campaign's slogans, #ImWithHer, was painfully uninspiring, appropriately highlighting that the entire campaign's message centered on the individual candidate and her gender, rather than on a vision for society, or even women, as a whole. Clinton frequently mentioned that her presidency would show little girls that they could do anything when they grew up.

This push for female unity, at times simply clueless about the many differences among women, turned nasty at certain moments. During the primary, her surrogates recklessly impugned the feminism of women who didn't support her. Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said on the campaign trail that there was a "special place in hell" for women who didn't support other women. (The Secretary, when asked in 1996 about the half million Iraqi children who died as a result of US sanctions on Iraq, told Leslie Stahl of *60 Minutes*, "We think the price is worth it." So it's understandable that Albright might anxiously keep that special place front of mind.) Even more ludicrously, Gloria Steinem, the best-known feminist of the Second Wave, mused during the

primary that young women weren't supporting Clinton because they wanted to be "where the boys were."

Clinton's campaign reveled in attacking the misogyny of opponents, both imagined and real. First they amplified and made much of the "Bernie Bros," a species of sexist Internet-dwelling men who supported Bernie Sanders' primary campaign and were the subject of many a think piece by Clinton-supporting journalists. Then of course there was Trump himself, with his sexist comments about Megyn Kelly ("bleeding from her wherever") and his "pussy-grabbing" boasts. This sort of thing was red meat to professional managerial-class Clinton supporters who would have voted Democrat anyway, but the campaign counted on GOP women finding him so offensive that they'd break her way. It never happened. Instead, she lost Democrats and independents by failing to speak clearly to working-class voters.

This failure came authentically to Clinton, because hers was an entirely elite vision of feminism. Working-class women knew perfectly well that for all of Clinton's "listening tours," the only listening that mattered took place in conversations with her high-end funders, in the living rooms of the Hamptons and Beverly Hills—or in the Q&A sessions after her \$250,000 speeches to Goldman Sachs. In the fall of 2016, she was spending most of her time with the super-rich.

It would be a mistake to attribute "wokeness" to Trump voters, many of whom were people who always vote Republican. Nor should we attribute "working-classness" to them, either, since they were higher-income than Clinton voters. I doubt many of them knew that Clinton had served on the board of Walmart, a company famous for building its vast profits on the labor of poorly-paid women, and the target of the largest sex discrimination suit in history. But many Americans—whether they voted

for Trump, or more likely, stayed home—knew Clinton had long been an integral part of the system that had failed them.

Her tone-deaf campaign didn't even pretend to transcend such class divisions. Clinton offered relatively few ideas about how to make ordinary women's lives better. She eschewed social democracy, despite its clear appeal, during the primary, to rural voters in key states. She had made clear that she was opposed to such ideas during the primary, responding to her opponent's talk of universal benefits with the class rage of a committed one-percenter. She passionately declaimed that we would "never ever" have single payer health care, a system that benefits everyone, but especially women, since our health care costs are higher and we are more likely to declare bankruptcy because of medical debt. Though she had her own (always means-tested) plans—free college for some, more tax credits for child care—her views on expanding the social offerings of the state were always painfully clear. At a private fundraiser in February, Clinton derided as a "false promise" Sanders' advocacy of "free healthcare, free college," patronizingly noting that his supporters don't "know what that means, but it's something they deeply feel."

Clinton continued being her unfiltered elitist self in the general election. She wrote off huge swaths of the population as "deplorables" and didn't even bother to campaign in Wisconsin. Among union members, her support was weak compared to other recent Democratic candidates, and, according to most exit polls, significantly lower than Obama's was in 2008. The campaign endlessly touted endorsements from the ranks of the celebrity one-percenters, especially women. In the end, Clinton enjoyed a gender advantage only among the college-educated. Among white women without college degrees, Clinton lost to Trump by 28 points. It was almost as if waitresses in Ohio didn't care that Anna Wintour was #WithHer.

Trump, by contrast, spoke to many white rural working people's realities—their sense that trade deals had wrecked their local economies, the painkiller addictions ravaging their communities, their resentment of corporate elites like Hillary Clinton. He promised to create jobs and rebuild our crumbling infrastructure, and to end the overseas wars that have inflicted so much hardship on rural middle and working-class families. He also, by railing against Muslim and Mexican immigrants, pandered to the ugly, crude racism that is amplified by such economic resentments and is always a part of American life. Many of his supporters didn't share all of his racist and sexist attitudes—consider, for example, the majority of Trump voters who said they favored citizenship for currently undocumented immigrants—but his vulgar language about women and minorities struck some as a sign that he was speaking his mind, in defiance of professional-class norms and a political media culture of endless spin and bullshit. As well, he promised the usual package of tax cuts and anti-abortion politics that usually draw Republicans to the polls. White women, a majority of whom have voted Republican in the last four elections anyway, were willing to overlook his misogyny for some of these reasons.

Feminism now has an opportunity to move beyond the "lean in" go-girlism of the Sheryl Sandberg set. Left feminists must organize to protect women's rights under Trump/Pence. We should work together to protect immigrants' rights and religious freedoms, and prevent a likely assault on abortion rights. We also need to fight environmental battles at the state and local level, recognizing that nothing good can be achieved at the federal level under a regime of climate denialism. We need to strengthen institutions of the left: organize unions in our workplaces, join independent left parties, run progressive candidates for local and state offices, make and disseminate left media. We should work especially to support existing feminist efforts that

are squarely focused on women's material realities, whether that means joining local and state campaigns demanding paid sick days and family leave, single payer health care or—especially right now—the Fight for \$15.

Feminists have to fight Trump, and his violent sexism, racism and, perhaps most urgently, xenophobia and religious intolerance. But we can't do it with leaders who would rather hobnob

with billionaires than fight for ordinary women. A feminism that revels in its identification with people like Clinton—even now organizing in groups with names like Pantsuit Nation—is not a feminism that will be able to fight for the interests of the majority of women. And it is not a feminism that can win.

*Liza Featherstone is the editor of False Choices: The Faux Feminism of Hillary Rodham Clinton (Verso).*

## The Left's Secret Identity

By Ethan Young

All political tendencies are caught in a whirlpool since the election, but none more so than the left. It lacks any recognizable center, despite the meteoric rise of Bernie Sanders. It appears in and around the Democratic Party in unconnected, isolated circumstances, fragments of the population. Not only are the fragments disconnected from one another, they also suffer from isolation from the previous generation, which in turn had lost touch with its own predecessor.

History has been unkind to the American left. A hundred years ago, the movement was plagued with “infantile sickness,” an inability to recognize setbacks that could basically be equated with diseases in babies, like colic. By comparison, today's left grapples with dissociative identity disorder, multiple warring personalities, just when it needs more than ever to focus on politics.

For those motivated by self-preservation, everyone else is suspect. Then, those radicalized upon discovering the harsh limits to advancement for their particular demographic expect everyone else to join their fight. Justified grievances become moral tests. Groups form protec-

tive subcultures that grow ever more enclosed and self-referential, and self-righteous in their approach to the rest of society. Club rules take precedence over politics. Language and etiquette become more important than working out effective strategies and organizing skills. Wagons are circled against transgressions that are seen as outright attacks—or more precisely, sins. The culture of “calling out” and fetishizing marginalization creates the left's “secret identity” as a suicide squad that reproduces its own powerlessness.

The safety pin controversy has become “a thing” since the 2016 election. It captures what I'm trying to describe. After Trump's victory, amidst a sharp increase in hate crimes and racial and sexual harassment, social media began promoting wearing a safety pin as a symbol of empathy and willingness to help when things get dangerous in everyday situations. As mostly white, mostly younger liberals and radicals started pinning up, a counter-push appeared online. What the hell is a safety pin good for? How does that deal with a racist demagogue running the country, with followers seething with bitterness, getting carte blanche (*very blanche*) to inflict pain? Does



a safety pin help, or is it just a way to feel better about losing the election?

A lot of irony here. Both sides have a case. The debate won't be reconciled, and will disappear like New Coke, pet rocks and other fads of by-gone days. But even as it plays out, neither side seems to grasp that it has no effect or sheds any light on the power relations that give rise to the problem of violent backlash in the first place.

This is nothing new—it's been characteristic of the left for decades. It's not really sectarianism, the scourge that periodically (1919, the 1930s, 1968) plagues emerging groups trying to reinvent revolution. Rather, this is a cultural phenomenon that is part of the quest for safe spaces by newly radicalized individuals with no political home to call their own. On a personal or social level, who doesn't wish for a safe space? Who doesn't want to deal only with open-minded, sympathetic people? We all want to be understood, and live in safety and security. This is an entirely understandable initial response to oppression, alienation, and other intolerable conditions of life as we have known it. That's why there's religion.

The problem is when this search for an island of solidarity and safety actually defines the left. The left lacks a "vision"—though most identify with socialism, there is little understanding of socialist history or theory. It lacks coordinated organization—there is no national group with a mass base, although some left-leaning groups and unions have numbers and influence in particular constituencies. There is no media center that either speaks to or transmits the views of the scattered pockets of organizing and unrest. Meanwhile, secondary education discourages viewing society as a collective effort, and prepares young people to grow into a fixed hierarchy of ownership and servitude.

In response, radicals more often seek solace than power. In their own grooves, they comfort

each other and lash out at critics. They pride themselves for moral superiority over the rulers, and will even stand in judgment over those who are ruled. They create a setting where affinity of a few is substituted for mass political action (taken not by thousands, but millions) as the engine of social change.

Now, after the wave of new protests in the late Obama era, the Sanders campaign, and the post-primary mess that resulted in the election of Trump, there are signs of a new direction. As the shock of November 8 drives a turn toward left politics, many new converts are looking for orientation and training. But patterns of moral grandstanding, romanticizing "the struggle," and sectarian posturing have staying power. The left has plenty of passion, but lacks a coherent organizing strategy or analysis of how power is defined by social relations from top to bottom. The prevailing understanding of class puts the concept as one among many forms of injustice, rather than the basic structure of capitalist society.

Some aspects of this problem can be traced to the turn away from history, towards various eureka moments from cultural studies: hierarchies of oppression; fetishizing class status, race, gender, and ideological "identities" as political in themselves; and fixation on academic sandbox fights divorced from non-campus life and standing above politics in general.

The rise of the far right through populist appeals to xenophobia, economic insecurity, and entrenched race and gender power relations is mirrored by the inability to build the left as a political force.

The solutions are not simple or easy. There are demands that need to be made of every part of the broader left, while also insisting that each part be heard and understood by the others. There is no possible way to isolate the right without directly addressing the reassertion of white

supremacy in the society on every level. There is no way, in turn, to make any sense to any section of the general public without acknowledging the failure of past administrations to put the needs of working people ahead of corporate profits.

Rote formulas for party building, whether cadre-model or de-centered, multi-tendency campaigns, end up mired in sectarianism or frustration. A party that can effectively vie for power will not come from a small group planting an acorn, or from a slapped-together laundry list of demands and signatures.

The actual form a national opposition will take is more likely to be determined by the ways social movement activists move towards serious politics working through existing institutions, while developing new projects with their own character, testing the boundaries of the acceptable and respectable.

This is asking a lot. But it is achievable. The left's orientation is dominated by speaking truth to power and mobilizing, in our separate, isolated corners. In that context, the secret identity left flourishes. The focus needs to shift to speaking truth to the powerless, organizing, and making strategizing and analysis into democratic prac-

tices. This means that organizers, tacticians, and leaders have to find a common orientation of convergence and coordination.

Instead of scattered crusades and martyrdom, we need to rediscover, with twenty-first-century eyes, the most powerful weapon against capitalism produced in the last century—the united front. Working together to de-fragment and re-focus the political left in and around the social movements, with mutual respect and shared awareness of how much is at stake. The strategic goal is to stabilize and build the political left, hold back the rightward drift, and isolate and crush the far right—in that order. In broad unity but not monolithic or mechanical in our thinking or approach.

In the land of opportunity there is plenty of room for opportunism, but the road to disempowering plutocracy is made by walking, through democratic practice and democratic empowerment. Not backward to a golden age but the negation of a failed system.

E pluribus unum.

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