

JOANN WYPIJEWSKI

THE POLITICS OF INSECURITY

IT WOULD BE a mistake to interpret the 2016 election solely as Clinton's loss. Trump brought assets to the Republican ticket that Mitt Romney did not have in 2012, and ratified a party-building strategy which, while vital to the GOP for decades, had not been fully realized at the presidential level until now. The problem for Romney as a vote-rustler, aside from being an über-representative of the moneyed class, was that his politics of nostalgia was not rooted in anything real—the precarity of people's lives, their felt experience of economic decline and social quicksand. Nor would he go the extra step to tap the dangerous gas of emotion that historically has fuelled the energies of anxious white people. Romney had no believable way of reaching masses of people at the point of their insecurity.

What Trump has that Romney didn't is proximity to life beyond the metropolitan suites, or at least the memory of it. His father had taught him the importance of getting close to the grit of building, and from his earliest days in the business Trump spent time talking to contractors, labourers, petty managers, electricians. He learned to accommodate the volatility of a bigoted managing agent in Ohio as easily as the condescension of a banker in New York. He paid attention to their language, and knew how to get what he wanted despite or because of it. Much of the GOP's 2012 convention was an exercise in fear-mongering, but no one would say outright just whom everyone should be scared of. It was clear then to anyone paying attention that if your subject is decline, but you can't identify any economic source of it because you're committed to redistribution upward; if one of your sturdiest weapons is fear, but you're too polite to unleash the racist, nativist ammunition; if your party

is divided, but you have no strategy for unifying it or forging a different coalition that can outstrip it—then you're going to lose. For Romney, winning was impossible. Trump was different. He knew that white nostalgia was not simply for the small town, lined with small businesses that might become big businesses. He knew that white insecurity has never been just about economics. He tapped the gas, and won 2 million more votes than Romney had.

Trump tapped the gas from his first trial balloon as a standard bearer of birtherism, to delegitimize Obama, and from the first moment of his presidential announcement, talking about Mexicans as rapists and criminals. Then he tarred Muslims. Trump caricatured the source of decline with the tools that left-liberal and trade-union politics had already forged: trade deals. He appealed to people where deindustrialization had seriously accelerated under his 'Make America Great' inspiration, Ronald Reagan, and he blasted Clinton and NAFTA for it. It was untrue, or only partly or superficially true, but it was something. He watched Sanders and he echoed him. And to Sanders' bleached economic argument, Trump added the foreign menace. He went to enclaves that presidential candidates never visit and his utterances about 'devastation' resonated, especially with white people in counties that are racially isolated, where mortality rates among whites aged 45 to 54 have spiked, and social mobility among youth has flat-lined. (Those socio-geographic features, according to a pre-election Gallup analysis of 125,000 adults, were the greatest predictors of a Trump supporter, after being white, male, heterosexual, conservative and Christian.¹) Then Trump fed red meat to audiences nourished for decades on rage, racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia and *faux* populism by a right-wing sound machine of millionaire shock jocks and their less well-heeled pretenders, who dominate the radio waves. And he did it with no apology, no evasion.

Trump's *echt* supporter was not the poorest or most precarious straight white man. He was not the most likely to be unemployed, underemployed, competing with immigrants, living amidst the ruins of factories, or the most susceptible to the whiplash of global trade. Microdata from that Gallup survey put his mean household income at \$81,898. Far from the proletariat of media typecasting, this 'white working class' is as likely to

¹ Pablo Diego-Rosell and Jonathan Rothwell, 'Explaining National Political Views: The Case of Donald Trump', Gallup Draft Working Paper, 2 November 2016.

include business owners or managers as it is foremen or skilled workers in construction, production, installation, transportation, machine maintenance and repair. More likely to be over forty, more likely to receive disability or other Social Security payments, unlikely to have accumulated wealth that is not leveraged or to have got much if any post-secondary education, his is a profile in disappointment: the low-boil blues of one who almost made it, but not quite.

Perhaps sick of ‘playing by the rules’, as his betters have always exhorted, and having so little to show for it, this voter was drawn to the man who could say anything, do anything, and get away with it. America has always loved its outlaws. The Gallup survey says next to nothing about motivation, and even if asked, people might not have told the truth. Exit polls show that nationally, Clinton won voters who said the economy was their top issue by 10 points. They suggest that what Trump voters wanted most was some generalized shake-up, ‘change’, a word with as many meanings as the people who invoke it. Change could be the reason for the touted paradox of the Obama voter now supporting Trump. On election night outside Trump’s victory party in Manhattan, though, change meant the defeat of Obama, as enthusiasts chanted the final date of his second term as if he’d been on the ballot, and one man marched around shouting, ‘White power!’

Class realities

Anecdote is not explanation, but neither is analgesic talk of trade or the economy. If the working class was the determinant on November 8—the whites who backed Trump, the blacks and Latinos who did not surge for Clinton, the union households who gave the Democrat candidate the smallest advantage (8 per cent) since 1984—then its alienation from itself and the ways both parties relate to that are arguably the momentous issues of the election. This working class without ‘the class’, with little ideological consciousness of itself, no coherent politics and diminishing organization, is hardly new; but against the spectre of Muslim bans and intensified state machinery to round up undocumented workers, its divisions are newly dangerous, especially for designated scapegoats—but also for itself.

To take the Trump voters first, it is dishonest to pussyfoot around bigotry as vital to their man’s appeal. It is also no use assuming that all 62.9

million of them—the highest number in Republican history—are virulent haters. More likely, and more difficult politically, most are probably typical white Americans who historically haven't let discrimination get in the way. Their forebears, metaphorically speaking, lived with legalized racism, segregation, unequal wages, chauvinism and violence of one sort or another; they followed leaders who validated that reality; and, taken up with their own problems, they didn't give much thought to the notion that accommodating themselves to the myriad oppressions of others also disciplined them, limited them, depleted them.

In this, they are not unlike the Democratic Party, which for decades accommodated its segregationist rump; or organized labour, which even in the best cases has a fairly disembodied focus on wages and conditions, while providing limited room for political discussion or education. Covering the Democratic primary in Ohio in 2008, I had a series of talks around the state with rank-and-file members of the Communications Workers of America. My interlocutors (not all white men) passionately expressed views that straddled matters of work, personal life, war—that is, their embodied class reality. They could be sharply contentious; invariably, at the end, someone said, 'I wish we could do this in our local.' Equally invariably, when I put it to the local leader, he responded with some version of 'Are you kidding?' The gun people would be at the throats of the anti-gun people; the abortion people would be tearing at each other. No, it would be a mess.' This is less a reflection on CWA, a progressive union, than it is a window onto the generally pinched construction of class issues and the scant opportunities for people to analyse power and the benefits that capital accrues from division. In unions with less member involvement than CWA, limiting politics to endorsements typically issued from the top only serves to telegraph that there is no faith in the workers—no faith in them as people, who are complicated like most people and looking for a matrix to make sense of their lives. It says they don't count, their views don't count. In 2016, Clinton lost union households in Ohio by 9 per cent.

Outside the unions, someone else has been providing a matrix. Most people do not have a clear-cut ideological worldview. Most times, their political perspective is a jumble of left and right, aspiration and defeat, cynicism and romanticism. They take what seems to make sense at the moment, what fits with their experience and history. It's often contradictory. These are people like my father, a tool-and-die maker in Buffalo

until the late 1980s, when the work moved to Texas and Mexico. He and my mother lived in a black neighbourhood that had once been mainly Polish, staying put when most of the whites fled. Sometime around 2003 he took to listening to Rush Limbaugh and kindred radio blowhards. My mother loathed them. He called them comedians. After sending a few dollars to wounded-warrior outfits and filling out surveys sent from Republican congressional offices, he began receiving sheaves of GOP, religious and truly demented literature in the mail. He voted for Obama against Hillary in 2008 but voted for McCain–Palin in the general election because he was a veteran and she was ‘a nice, feisty girl’ who was strong against abortion. By then my mother had died. The fright mail intensified after Obama’s election, as did phone calls on behalf of Newt Gingrich and other party luminaries. The Democrats, meanwhile, sent a birthday card. In 2012 he was alone and almost 90, and his house had been broken into twice. Democrat-led redevelopment that was transforming Buffalo’s waterfront and West Side had not flowed to the black East Side. The avenues that he remembered abuzz with commerce remained desolate after thirty years. When the factories that had supported the black and white working class left, so did half the people. Workers were told that it was their fault, the fault of their unions, which had driven up the price of business in the 1970s, and of the black unemployed, who scared away investment when they lit up the city in the 1960s. I’m not sure how my father voted in 2012. Probably for Romney, on ‘right to life’, the only thing left to believe in.

The tangle of delusion, belief, hope, disappointment and realism should not be underestimated. The dissonance between people’s personal behaviour and their political choices ought not to be underestimated either. The only person on our block whom my father couldn’t stand was the other white man, who let his property rot and sat around all day living on disability. The older black people on all sides he talked to over the fence or on the porch, only rarely in the kitchen; and the idle young men he hired for little jobs around the place and instructed in the use of tools. The little kids he watched over as they waited for the school bus, mostly because he didn’t want them on his lawn but also because he thought that children ought to be minded. The people of the hood called him ‘the old man’, and one prayed over him when he was sick. I felt sure this year, had he been alive, he’d have voted for Trump. He never liked the Clintons, never went third party and never sat out an election. He would have voted and then, I’ve no doubt, he would have

talked to the people next door about common things, cheered that the house across the street was sold to a home owner and not a management company; but worried, too, because the Bangladeshi who bought it, and who are buying up houses in the area that cost anywhere from \$6,000 to \$35,000, might be terrorists. As one of his neighbours, a former press-woman now retrained as a medical tech, said last month when I was at the house, ‘They’re Arabs, and you never know.’ So now white and black are scared of the South Asians—‘oK, they’re not Arabs, but they are Muslim’—moving in.

Trump’s appeals to economic insecurity allowed those who might ordinarily be turned off by the open racism and nativism and sexism to say, ‘Well, there is something more here. He’s talking about our experience. He’s talking in a language we understand. He’s talking about the prosperity we lost and how we’ll get it back.’ About the rest, the ugliness Trump tapped, they said, ‘He doesn’t mean it’, or ‘He won’t be able to do it’ (round up 11 million undocumented immigrants), or ‘That’s just electioneering’, or ‘That’s just locker-room talk’, or ‘He’s an entertainer, he doesn’t mean anything he says.’ I heard all those justifications, or versions of them, from Trump supporters last year.

Bigotry didn’t get in the way for them. It didn’t get in the way, either, for third-party backers. This is not to exaggerate the power of those protest votes. It was a revolting election (it usually is). Clinton lost it by arrogance and inattention, by ignoring voters in her ‘blue wall’ of Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania, and offering the Obama coalition of non-white and young voters more symbol than substance. Mostly she lost it by making the election about Trump, captured in insipid slogans, ‘Love Trumps Hate’ and ‘I’m With Her’. People need to have something to vote *for*; many also expect to be asked for their vote. In Wisconsin, Hillary didn’t even ask. Not the whites. Not the blacks, whose vote the state made every effort to suppress. Politically indisposed to formulating a class argument that addressed the multiple, interconnected strands of people’s insecurity, she took all their votes for granted. It was her own form of triangulation: pitch for the Obama urbanites and the Republican suburbanites—on the superficial grounds of legacy in the first instance, and salvation from embarrassment in the second—and figure the blue wall had nowhere else to go. It turns out everyone had somewhere else to go in the places that counted.

Nevertheless, the third-party vote raises a serious question for the left: what would it take for social solidarity to outstrip an airy sense of political purity with respect to the electoral arena? Trump promised to round up undocumented immigrants, exclude Muslims and reinstitute torture, but that brash commitment to human suffering was not severe enough to mobilize a united left opposition to thwart him. By his own vow or in the choice of his running mate, he favoured constraints on bodily freedom for young black men, women and homosexuals, but that was not enough; nor was musing on the use of nuclear weapons. It's an academic question now, given the weakness of the left. There is no mass-based organized force that might have backed Clinton as an instrumental means of averting attacks on the most vulnerable populations, then mobilized in the streets and every other area of struggle to disrupt her own plans of attack and to press for radical reform. There is no broadly articulated class politics in which race, sex, origin, are not add-ons, not simply matters of 'inclusion', but deeply entwined, as they are in life (and Sanders didn't have this). No electoral strategy to develop power bases in conjunction with grassroots groups. The protests now—and the scramble in cities and states, campuses and churches, to declare sanctuaries—are measures of our hope but also our impotence, as the pro-Clinton media makes Putin Public Enemy Number One, as some protesters blithely follow, and Democrats, distraught since the election, find their calling in manly embrace of the national security state. A thousand gnats nip at Trump, but power is on the right.

Creating enemies

The GOP, now in control of the Presidency, Congress, the prospective Supreme Court, most of the state legislatures, most of the governorships, is more than renewed. It can push almost anything it wants, assuming party discipline. The lobbyists—the swamp that Trump promised to drain—are writing the legislation. The illusion in 2015 that Trump represented the dissolution of the Republican Party depended on faith that there was no possible way he could win. Those who conjured that illusion misapprehended the potency of actually existing white nostalgia. They also forgot the bones upon which the modern Republican Party built itself. That is worth remembering now, in the midst of confused and hoary talk among liberals about 'class' versus 'identity politics', and the Republicans' supposed hearty grasp of the former. For it is exactly

identity politics, right-wing-style, that shaped the GOP's duplicitous class politics. Growing out of the wreckage of the Goldwater campaign in 1964 and elaborated ever since, it shaped the language, the grassroots passion, the politico-religious relationship, the local-national networks, the hysteria-to-policy pipeline and the general politics of rage that had its most ecstatic expression in Trump's victory. It is the source of the Christian Right, which since the 1970s has been for the Republicans what the unions were for the Democrats: the people who organize their base, get out the vote, stand in the rain. They were demoralized by Romney the Mormon, but they embraced Trump, despite his lifetime flouting of their stated bedrock values. Trump took 81 per cent of the evangelical vote. His warnings about Endangered America echoed cries of the Endangered Family and Child around which Republican strategists first erected the scaffolding of New Right politics, as a backlash to the libertine Sixties and as an instrument of power.

Whether Trump was conscious of this rhetorical convergence is beside the point; he merely had to be its exponent. The activist base, the receptive reflexes, the supportive infrastructure, were ready. Back in the days of their formation in the late 1960s, the enemy sapping American greatness was sex education, which merged into the Equal Rights Amendment, homosexuals, FemiNazis, abortion, teen pregnancy, condoms, diversity curricula, strangers. The list was long; the objective, organizing people at the point of their insecurity, real or imagined, to achieve broader political aims. This isn't the place to go into detail, but the history of right-wing base-building against sex education alone is eerily evocative in today's context of 'alternative facts', especially as told by Janice Irvine in *Talk About Sex* (2002). 'Words are bullets', James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, said in the midst of that early organizing.² The crux of his argument: the only measure of political language was its ability to wound the enemy and rally your side. Facts were irrelevant. Emotion was all. Hence the spectacle in school meetings across the country of child-protectors reading out the most filthy porno, pretending it had come straight from textbooks, and rousing parents who never could be mustered politically around any other question so effectively. Hence the exhortations to uniform action: 'Stand if you love your children!', the auditorium thundering to its feet, the few souls alarmed by such small-town Nurembergs skulking away, hoping they wouldn't be noticed.

² Cited in Janice Irvine, *Talk about Sex: The Battles over Sex Education in the United States*, Oakland 2002, p. 73.

‘Creating enemies through provocative sexual speech promised political rewards’, Irvine writes.³ Indeed, the language of fear was intended to incite an audience that was working class, or barely middle class, economically anxious, religious or religious enough, overwhelmingly white and heterosexual. Buffeted by the cultural and economic dislocations of the 1970s, this audience saw the family as its last link to ‘normalcy’. And the family *was* weakened. Those who built a politics around it at least understood that class insecurity was not just about jobs, but they did not intend to address the real sources. They were rebuilding a party, and the fearful parents who signed on to the culture wars also perforce signed on to militarism, right-to-work ordinances, Wall Street values, Reaganism, death squads, prisons, gang registries, welfare-bashing and silence as tens of thousands of gay men died of AIDS.

The original architects didn’t have to believe any of what they said about godliness, just as Trump and his guru, Steve Bannon, don’t today. They were playing for power. So are the Christians, who have done pretty well so far with Trump, better than with the born-again George W. Bush. As of the first few weeks, they had the Vice Presidency, the Health and Human Service Secretary, Education Secretary, Housing Secretary nominee, Supreme Court nominee, a ban on foreign aid to any organization that gives out information about abortion, priority for Christians in immigration (now in the courts), legal redefinition (now on hold) of religious freedom as the freedom to discriminate. That none of those political favours addresses the actual insecurity of those Trump voters contemplating premature death for themselves and dead ends for their children is, again, beside the point—for now.

A relevant future?

This thumbnail history is useful to keep in mind, though, as protest flourishes—in New York these days, any internet search for ‘protests today’ results in directions for imminent action—and talk persists of the future of the Democratic Party. Right now, the talk feels antique. The players feel antique. The stereotype of the working class feels really antique. As a mode of political action, demonstrations feel antique, too, but these are so spontaneous (the airport rallies), so various (the women’s march, the high-school walk-out, the immigrant marches, the

³ Irvine, *Talk about Sex*, p. 77.

one-day strike of Yemeni bodega owners) and so fluid in terms of participation that they represent what hope there is for something more. At least people are fighting; soon they will have to face the problem of organizing strategically, and talking with people beyond the big cities and the familiar circles, those who don't vote or whose vote is mainly a measure of their frustration.

During the remake of the party that Trump now leads, the Democrats didn't fight. Organized labour barely fought for itself. There were homosexuals who fought, women who fought, blacks who fought. Too often their struggles were taken for special pleading, instead of what they were. The respectable NGOs that grew out of those fights folded into the Democratic Party out of sentiment or for lack of any other option. It wasn't until Jesse Jackson's Rainbow campaigns of the 1980s articulated a strategy linking all those fights that the party tops could see what might come from a race-conscious, class-conscious, urban-rural, anti-imperialist analysis—and, especially in 1988, got scared. Bill Clinton's response was the Rainbow's antithesis, the Democratic Leadership Council, laced with a little old country schmaltz. Obama picked up the form but without the content, as did Hillary, with less conviction. Sanders acted like the last white guy standing on the stage in the Sixties after the women and blacks and queers and Puerto Rican nationalists had broken off into their caucuses. Separate from anything Clinton did, Sanders was not going to win the Democratic nomination that way. He found that out too late. If there is a relevant future for the party now, or a vital alternative vehicle, it will have to come from other precincts, with more imagination and more experience of thick life.