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## PARTY AND CLASS IN AMERICAN POLITICS

*Reply to Riley and Brenner's 'Seven Theses'*

**T**O SITUATE THE 2022 midterm election in the context of the last hundred years of American politics, consider two communities in Minnesota. To the north, the city of Hibbing sits non-coincidentally at the edge of what was, for much of the twentieth century, the largest iron mine on the planet. Indispensable to Allied victory in the Second World War, the exploitation of Minnesota's Iron Range also gave rise to a series of local political-economic arrangements at once distinctive and paradigmatic.<sup>1</sup> Thanks to some combination of pure mineral largesse and fear of labour militancy—strikes in 1907 and 1916 almost brought the iron industry to its knees—a progressive city government successfully taxed mining profits to fund a spectacular array of public works.<sup>2</sup> At the time of its construction in 1922, Hibbing High School, a Tudor Revival masterpiece known as 'the Castle in the Woods', was perhaps the most expensive public school in the United States. It was here in the 1,800-seat auditorium—underneath ornate moulded ceilings and Belgian crystal chandeliers—that school officials famously cut the young Robert Zimmerman's microphone midway through a 1959 performance of 'Rock and Roll Is Here to Stay'.

The outrageous wealth of the Iron Range was never expropriated from the expropriators, but over the course of a century, after further concessions won by mineworker unions, a fair portion was extracted from the extractors. Yet Hibbing today is a world removed from its iron age zenith. The mines are as productive as ever, but now employ fewer than 6 per cent of the city's workforce. As health care, retail and other

service sectors outstrip the industries of the ‘historical working class’, Hibbing’s economy has come to resemble that of many other struggling blue-collar towns across the Midwest.<sup>3</sup> Its median household income is under \$50,000 a year, well below the state norm; its average home price is just \$111,300; and less than a quarter of its adult population holds a bachelor’s degree.

Two hundred miles south, the St. Paul’s ex-urb of North Oaks, MN, passed its quiet twentieth century at the opposite end of American capitalism’s value pipeline—not where the money comes from, but where it takes refuge. The area was first developed as a manor home and recreational cattle farm by the railroad tycoon James J. Hill, the ‘Empire Builder’, and the man Jay Gatsby’s father hoped his son would become.<sup>4</sup> In the 1950s Hill’s heirs converted the family estate into a kind of libertarian residential experiment. To this day, the city of North Oaks maintains no public property: all land, including the streets and sidewalks, belongs either to individual residents or a private homeowner’s association.

Though its literal gates came down in the 1980s, the town continues to enforce its no-trespassing rules. (In 2008 North Oaks successfully petitioned to remove images of its streets from Google Maps; it remains invisible on Street View.) Billed as ‘an exclusive, private community’, naturally complete with its own golf club, lakeside beaches and conservation area, North Oaks strives to appear less an outgrowth of Minneapolis–St. Paul than a secluded realm apart from it. Nevertheless, the suburb has prospered handsomely within the booming ‘Headquarters Economy’ of the region, home to more Fortune 500 companies than any other metro area of its size. Since the 1970s this preeminence has helped the Twin Cities attract and retain a disproportionate share of high-earning managerial professionals and their families.<sup>5</sup> Some five thousand of them

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<sup>1</sup> In 1945 the Hull-Rust mine alone produced more tons of iron ore (19 million) than the entire Soviet Union (15 million) or UK (14 million). At the war’s peak in 1943, Minnesota’s iron output roughly equalled Western Europe’s.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Lubotina, ‘Reform: The Struggle for Control of Hibbing’, *Upper Country: A Journal of the Lake Superior Region*, vol. 2, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Aaron Brown, ‘Iron Range Labour’s Maturity, and Decline’, *Minnesota Reformer*, 31 August 2021.

<sup>4</sup> As Henry Gatz says to Nick Carraway of his Minnesota-born son: ‘If he’d of lived, he’d of been a great man. A man like James J. Hill. He’d of helped build up the country.’

<sup>5</sup> Derek Thompson, ‘The Miracle of Minneapolis’, *The Atlantic*, March 2015; J. Myles Shaver, *Headquarters Economy: Managers, Mobility, and Migration*, Oxford 2018.

now live in North Oaks: the town's median household income is over \$220,000 a year; its average home price, over \$696,000; and nearly three-quarters of its adult residents have earned a bachelor's degree.

Galaxies apart in history, economy and social geography, Hibbing and North Oaks have recently crossed paths in politics. For decades the heavily unionized Iron Range was among the most dependable Democratic regions in the country, offering loyal if lonely support to landslide victims like George McGovern and Walter Mondale. The city of Hibbing delivered two-to-one majorities for generations of Democrats as distinct as Lyndon Johnson, Paul Wellstone and Amy Klobuchar. In national politics, the deluge came in 2016, when Hibbing narrowly voted for Trump over Clinton; Biden failed to win it back in 2020. Yet until last year the Minnesota Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party (DFL) still held ten of the Range's eleven state House seats.<sup>6</sup> It was only in 2022 that Hibbing, which elected two new Republican legislators, left behind its transitional status as an ambivalent 'Obama-Trump' district and was absorbed into the vast and darkening red plain that now runs unbroken from Lake Superior to the Cascades.

North Oaks, too, has been 'on a journey'. When founded at midcentury, the former Hill family estate became a citadel of country-club Republicanism. The otherwise hapless Barry Goldwater carried North Oaks by a three-to-one margin in 1964; for the next half-century, national and Minnesota Republicans could count on winning around 60 per cent of the vote there. Again 2016 marked a partial watershed: North Oaks voters recoiled from Trump, while remaining solidly Republican at the state level. Only in 2022 did North Oaks become truly *Democratic*, voting to oust its Republican legislators and helping propel a blue wave across the greater Twin Cities. Though the DFL lost five state House seats in the Iron Range, it held the Minnesota House and retook the Minnesota Senate, largely on the back of these sweeping suburban victories.

These examples are admittedly extreme. But the opposing journeys of Hibbing and North Oaks illustrate the dominant trend in twenty-first-century American politics: the movement of poorer and lower-educated voters toward the Republican Party, and the parallel

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<sup>6</sup> The DFL's distinctive name is a dull echo of Minnesota's populist history: it was formed after the merger of the Democratic and Farmer-Labor parties in 1944. Functionally, the party is little different from any state Democratic organization.

migration of wealthier and higher-educated voters toward the Democrats. Political scientists call this phenomenon ‘class dealignment’; left-wing writers, with a reliable ear for the ungainly phrase, have adopted the term as a shorthand for the two-way traffic of downscale voters traveling right and upscale voters moving left. Dealignment’s roots sink far back beyond this century, and its emergence, varying in speed and intensity, has been tracked across much of the advanced capitalist world.<sup>7</sup> Yet it is in the United States—in places like Hibbing and North Oaks—that the process has been most vivid, particularly in the last decade. Why is this happening? How has it reshaped the two dominant coalitions in American politics, in both ideological and institutional terms? And what are its implications for the future of left political struggle in the United States?

### *In the trenches*

In their ‘Seven Theses on American Politics’ in the last number of NLR, Dylan Riley and Robert Brenner examine the 2022 midterms in light of these questions—speculatively, and yet with more conceptual ambition and formal rigour than is customary for such an election analysis.<sup>8</sup> Dealignment, as they properly note, is an ‘inadequate framework’ for understanding the conjuncture: it offers at best a bland, schematic retracing of an important trend, not a positive interpretation. Instead, following Riley’s earlier map of American ‘Faultlines’ in NLR 126, they undertake a geological survey of the political-economic forces that might explain this double movement of voters—the materialist underpinnings of our age of electoral resorting.<sup>9</sup> This is a necessary task, and their account draws on a powerful meta-framing, an original characterization of Biden’s policy agenda, and many shrewd, discouraging judgments about the viability of social-democratic politics in a period of weak growth. Nevertheless, its assessment of the new coalitions themselves—their character and motivating logic—remains unpersuasive.

Riley and Brenner’s master concept is ‘political capitalism’, a term with many ancestors and referents on the left, but in their hands primarily

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<sup>7</sup> The most comprehensive international exploration of dealignment has been presented by Thomas Piketty and his school of researchers, reviewed by Göran Therborn, ‘Inequality and World Political Landscapes’, NLR 129, May–June 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Dylan Riley and Robert Brenner, ‘Seven Theses on American Politics’, NLR 138, Nov–Dec 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Dylan Riley, ‘Faultlines’, NLR 126, Nov–Dec 2020.

a way of understanding the massive public spending of the Covid era. Historical quibbles aside—of course, as Braudel would insist, capitalism has worked through the state since at least the fifteenth century—Riley and Brenner identified something obviously real and distinct about our moment. On top of the \$3.4 trillion Trump spent to fight the pandemic, Biden’s major initiatives, including the American Rescue Plan, the bipartisan infrastructure bill, the Inflation Reduction Act, and student debt relief, have totalled about \$5 trillion, depending on your calculator. All this has come alongside significant increases in the military budget across both administrations.

As Brenner has noted before, this has been a mind-bending windfall, occupying a larger share of US GDP than any other budget spike since World War II.<sup>10</sup> Whether its interventionist logic or awesome scale really ‘burst the dykes of the neoliberal order’, as an enthusiastic Adam Tooze has it, may be debated. But certainly, it marks a departure from the era of austerity—‘the practical death of the state as a parsimonious house-keeper’—and a formation worthy of analysis on its own terms.<sup>11</sup> Riley and Brenner suggest that the Covid-era cash gush is an artifact of the broader crisis of capitalism itself, with growth stagnant and increased profitability nowhere on the horizon. If surplus can no longer be had by diverting the too-sluggish currents of production, it must be smashed right out of the rock by the hard hand of the state. Under political capitalism, therefore, US electoral coalitions wage a zero-sum competition for resources, in which ‘raw political power, rather than productive investment, is the key determinant of the rate of return.’

This theorization raises many economic questions, principally about the nature, scope and duration of capitalism’s growth emergency.<sup>12</sup> Socialists have been betting on crisis for nearly two hundred years now; one or two memorable hits notwithstanding, the house has never failed to accept our tickets. There is reason to doubt whether the current ‘polycrisis’, no matter how often it is cited at Davos, represents anything substantially different.<sup>13</sup> Regardless, as a metalogic of contemporary American politics, Riley and Brenner’s concept offers considerable explanatory power.

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Brenner, ‘Escalating Plunder’, *NLR* 123, May–June 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Adam Tooze, ‘Has Covid Ended the Neoliberal Era?’, *Guardian*, 2 September 2021; John Terese, ‘Is This the Green New Deal?’, *Damage*, 14 September 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Tim Barker, ‘Seven Theses on Brenner and Riley’s “Political Capitalism”’, *Origins of Our Time*, 24 December 2022.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Davos Worries about a “Polycrisis”’, *New York Times*, 17 January 2023.

The twentieth century's electoral war of manoeuvre, full of dramatic waves and swings, has in our time ground down into an entrenched war of position.<sup>14</sup> The possibility of a revived class politics, by now vitiated and confused by the electoral shifts since 2016, was dealt a body blow in the second Bernie Sanders campaign. Amid this scarred landscape, it is indeed difficult to imagine the forces that might produce a 'class compromise'. With Republicans and Democrats settled into their regional bunkers, loud in mutual denunciation but always-already stymied in action, there appears no legislative road to major reform of any kind. What remains, then, is either the 'neo-progressivism' of Biden or the neo-nationalism of Trump—two flavours of 'Keynesianism without growth', capable of producing fat budgets and base-rousing executive orders, but little that resembles structural change.

It is easy enough for the liberal press to describe this perfervid and yet strangely motionless combat as a culture war, driven not by economics but abstract and expressive 'values'. But as Riley and Brenner insist, the partisan fault lines have a material basis that goes beyond a disagreement over the correct setting of marginal income tax brackets. 'Red' and 'Blue' America, the colourful offspring of dealignment, increasingly occupy alternative worlds—not simply in their 'cultural' opinions about sex, race or guns, but in the media they consume, the places they live in, the families they make, the jobs they do, and the institutions they depend on. Riley and Brenner are right to call for more attention to the substance of these rifts, which cannot be dismissed or understood by the simple category of 'identity'. And yet their own analysis of this divergence loses its way, skidding instead toward a shallow conception that begins to resemble Blue America's flattering image of itself.

### *Alignments undone*

Why then have working-class Americans swung to the right while managers and professionals move toward the centre-left? Formally Riley and Brenner reject this characterization, preferring a more rigorous definition of class—not as a general index of social status or power, but strictly a relationship to the means of production. Under their schema some 70 to 80 per cent of Americans today are 'working-class', including any

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<sup>14</sup> Also evoked by Mike Davis after the 2020 election: 'Trench Warfare', NLR 126, Nov–Dec 2020.

salariated heart surgeon, tax attorney or corporate vice president who happens not to report income from assets or self-employment.

This is an arresting if questionable intervention into the murky waters of American class analysis, where cheap but available demographic short-hands like education and income stand in for a more complex reality. Yet here it appears largely as a semantic detour, since Riley and Brenner readily concede, first, that postsecondary education (closely linked to wages) starkly divides this larger class; and second, that the defining political shift of our era is the movement of ‘the less educated fraction of the working class’ toward the Republicans, while the ‘credentialled fraction’ is ‘remobilized in the Democratic coalition’. This may not be ‘class’ dealignment, by their terminology, but it is essentially congruent with the picture drawn by others who use the phrase: the have-nots of Hibbing trending right; the haves of North Oaks trending left. Or, to borrow the folk formulation of a character in Richard Nelson’s celebrated 2017 play cycle about a family in New York’s Hudson Valley: ‘When did all the rich people become Democrats?’<sup>15</sup>

Riley and Brenner’s answer to this is simple—indeed, too simple. The Republican conquest of the Iron Range, along with other less-educated regions, is ‘the consequence of the GOP’s successful bid to appeal to the interests of a particular fraction of the working class in nativist and racist terms.’ Meanwhile Democrats have won North Oaks and other affluent suburbs by rallying around ‘the twin terms of expertise and diversity’. This comes rather close to the sort of talking-point you might hear on MSNBC—America torn between roughneck bigots and responsible humanitarians—though in Riley and Brenner’s formula, the dividing line is not mere attitude but ‘rational’ economic calculation.<sup>16</sup> MAGA Republicans have convinced less-educated workers that they stand to gain, materially, by supporting a party that will keep immigrants out and non-whites down; Democrats have convinced ‘highly-educated workers’ that they can increase the value of credentialled labour. In the zero-sum world of political capitalism, a vote in either direction is not just an expression of feeling but a statement of interest.

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Nelson, *The Gabriels: Election Year in the Life of One Family*, The Public Theater, 2017. For recent data affirming this precise point, see Sam Zacher, ‘Polarization of the Rich: The New Democratic Allegiance of Affluent Americans and the Politics of Redistribution’, *Perspectives on Politics*, February 2023, pp. 1–19.

<sup>16</sup> A point noted and developed in Dominic King, ‘A Death Sentence for the American Left’, *Damage*, 25 January 2023.

The problems with this interpretation, however, are the same that bedevil the liberal argument that explains post-2016 dealignment by way of working-class ‘whitelash’. Chiefly: why now? Consider this (typical) analysis of the 2008 Republican presidential campaign led by John McCain and Sarah Palin against Obama and Biden:

As the race progressed, the McCain/Palin campaign increasingly relied on polarizing cultural cues distinguishing ‘our side’ from ‘theirs’. Whereas Obama was at first largely criticized as inexperienced and naive, by the closing months of the election he had become an enemy of the nation and a foreign other. At a series of highly publicized rallies in the closing months of the race, the McCain–Palin camp attempted to tap into the existing well of white national and racial anxiety and channel it into activism.<sup>17</sup>

Amid a campaign that featured intense speculation about Obama’s overseas background, pictures of the Democrat dressed in ‘Muslim garb’ and attacks on his association with the black pastor Jeremiah Wright, McCain’s closing speech—at the GOP convention in St. Paul, Minnesota—boasted of ‘the most ambitious national project in decades’. He promised to keep jobs from going overseas, double the child tax exemption, cut \$700 billion of foreign aid, and exploit natural resources to win independence from foreign oil (‘Drill, baby, drill’). ‘We need American energy’, said Palin, ‘brought to you by American ingenuity and produced by American workers.’ Yet despite such appeals to the white, native, and nationalist fractions of the working class, in both emotional and material terms, ‘Barack *Hussein* Obama’ won Hibbing—over ninety per cent white and native-born—by thirty points. He lost, however, in North Oaks, whose residents were not yet sufficiently invested in expertise and diversity to support the first black editor of the *Harvard Law Review*.

What changed between 2008 and 2016? Unquestionably Trump’s bombastic pledge to ‘build the wall’ gave his campaign more bite than many previous Republicans. But the appeal to exclusionary nationalism was hardly new to the American right, which had vowed to halt ‘illegal immigration’ for decades—Bob Dole made ‘criminal’ migrants his closing pitch in 1996—without achieving a realignment of less-educated workers. Nor is it clear, frenzied commentary aside, that Republican political racism since 2016 has actually exceeded the benchmark of 2008, never

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<sup>17</sup> Enid Logan, *At This Defining Moment: Barack Obama’s Presidential Candidacy and the New Politics of Race*, New York 2011, pp. 107–20.



mind the older era of Willie Horton and ‘welfare queens’. The weakness of the argument from ‘race’ is underlined by the substantial Republican trend among non-white, less-educated voters across the MAGA era: are increasing numbers of Latinos, Asians and black men really striving to increase their labour power by ‘keeping down’ other non-white workers?<sup>18</sup> The argument from nativity, though more plausible, runs into the same objections. Are the Vietnamese immigrant workers in California, Honduran immigrant workers in Florida and Mexican immigrant workers on the Texas border—who all broke hard for Trump in 2020 and did not swing back in 2022—really being ‘organized as native’?<sup>19</sup>

A fuller explanation for these shifts requires an alternative chronology of class and voting in America. Effective ‘class politics’, as Riley and Brenner note, has been exceptionally rare. But the labour struggles of the 1930s, translated into the regulatory and welfarist reforms of the New Deal, achieved a historic alignment between the Democratic Party and working-class voters, no matter how the latter are defined. This was unprecedented in US political history—across the long nineteenth century, the major parties had pressed ruthlessly on regional, religious and ethnic divisions within the working class. Nor did the transition from the genuine ‘class politics’ in the 1930s to the interest-group liberalism of the postwar era upend the New Deal alignment. That does not mean that the achievements of the postwar welfare state—including, frankly, the achievements in civil rights law—can be chalked up to ‘class politics’ as Riley and Brenner define it.<sup>20</sup> Yet in the United States, as virtually every other postwar capitalist society, it may have been a necessary condition for lasting reform. (Under conditions of ‘class alignment’, the shock of World War II produced the GI Bill and veterans’ hospital system; without those conditions in place, the shock of Covid produced cash giveaways that vanished like sand in a sieve, erecting no structures and creating no constituencies.)

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<sup>18</sup> Ruy Teixeira, ‘The Democrats’ Nonwhite Working Class Problem’, *The Liberal Patriot*, 22 December 2022.

<sup>19</sup> Weiyi Cai and Ford Fessenden, ‘Immigrant Neighborhoods Shifted Red as the Country Chose Blue’, *NYT*, 20 December 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Riley and Brenner refer to the civil rights laws of the 1960s as an achievement of ‘working-class politics’, but for liberals in the postwar North, as Jennifer Delton has argued, they helped provide an alternative moral basis for politics precisely not grounded in class struggle: *Making Minnesota Liberal: Civil Rights and the Transformation of the Democratic Party*, Minneapolis 2002.

In any case, the socioeconomic basis of two-party voting, whether measured by income, education or occupation, remained largely intact: Hibbing miners were Democrats; North Oaks executives were Republicans.<sup>21</sup> This electoral order first began to wobble in the 1970s, in response to the familiar array of transformations that undermined centre-left, broadly working-class parties throughout the capitalist world. Stagnation, deindustrialization and the consequent retreat of organized labour began to cost Democrats votes from downscale workers laid off and re-atomized into ‘sacks of potatoes’ by the global economy. Across the last quarter of the century, this was greeted by Democratic leaders with general complacency, leavened occasionally by enthusiasm at the prospect of trading votes from the erratic and declining ‘historic working class’ in return for ardent professionals (and easy targets for fundraising). Under the leadership of Carter and Clinton, the party was in any case transitioning from a flaccid defence of the postwar consensus to an aggressive regime of deregulation, financialization and deficit budgeting—‘asset-price Keynesianism’ for Wall Street and welfare reform for Skid Row.<sup>22</sup>

And yet—and here is a key point—in ideological terms the Democratic Party’s leadership shifted far earlier, and more decisively, than its voters did. The presidential landslides of the 1980s make it easy to forget that ‘Reagan Democrats’ were still Democrats. Until the last years of the century, at least, Democrats remained the down-ballot party of government in the cities, the South, and the Midwest—nearly the whole country outside of ancestral Republican holdfasts in the rural Northeast and mountain West. Even after the Red wave of 1994, Newt Gingrich and his cronies claimed a greater share of the delegation from Connecticut than the delegation from Texas. The former Confederacy slipped away rapidly thereafter, but Democrats remained competitive with lower-income, less-educated white voters everywhere else. Union households

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<sup>21</sup> For academic literature on ‘class voting’ see Robert R. Alford, ‘The Role of Social Class in American Voting Behavior’, *Western Political Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 1, March 1963, pp. 180–94, which helped introduce the concept. Further elaborations include Michael Hout, Clem Brooks, and Jeff Manza, ‘The Democratic Class Struggle in the United States, 1948–1992’, *American Sociological Review*, vol. 60, no. 6, December 1995, pp. 805–28; Geoffrey Evans, ‘The Continued Significance of Class Voting’, *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 3, 2000, pp. 401–17.

<sup>22</sup> Perry Anderson, ‘Homeland’, *NLR* 81, May–June 2013, p. 13; Robert Brenner, ‘Structure vs. Conjuncture’, *NLR* 43, Jan–Feb 2007.

gave Democrats a 20-to-30 point premium in every House election from 1982 to 2010. Against McCain and Palin, Obama did not just cruise to victory in Hibbing; he won white workers without a college degree across Minnesota, Iowa, Michigan, Wisconsin and Illinois.

### *The new map*

Why does this chronology matter? The sharp and truly fateful shift in voting patterns, within the downscale American working class, has only occurred in the last decade. And it has occurred in parallel with the movement of well-educated, well-paid workers in the opposite direction. Spliced by occupational class, the timeline is the same: ‘skilled manual workers’ and ‘higher-grade professionals, administrators, managers and officials’ only exchanged political loyalties after 2012.<sup>23</sup> Riley and Brenner argue that both swings are explained by material interest, and yet in their analysis they remain oddly detached from each other, with Democrats focused on education, while Republicans (separately) mobilized around race and nation. But is it not more plausible that this dramatic double movement, concentrated in such a narrow time frame, represents divergent responses to the same conjuncture?

In retrospect, the 2016 presidential election did not just present voters with a striking contrast in style or ideology, but a visceral demonstration of the way that forty years of neoliberalism had changed the party system. The Democrat defended ‘free trade’ and US military interventions abroad; the Republican attacked them both. Rhetorically Trump’s most distinctive contrast with previous Republicans was not anti-immigrant agitation but his refusal to attack welfare ‘entitlements’ like Social Security.<sup>24</sup> Above all Trump presented himself as a political outsider who would ‘drain the swamp’ in Washington: a premise that depended, ultimately, on the notion that Democrats had become the party of the ruling elite.

This proved plausible to voters—and has remained a central theme in MAGA politics beyond Trump—because it contains a large measure of truth. At the level of presidential theatre, the formal repositioning of the

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<sup>23</sup> Ted Fertik, ‘(Occupational) Class and Party Identification’, *Medium*, 30 Oct 2018.

<sup>24</sup> There was good reason why voters identified Trump as less ‘conservative’ than Romney, McCain or Bush: ‘Trump Seen as Less Conservative than Prior GOP Candidates’, *Gallup*, 4 October 2016

parties was long disguised by the persistence of the Bush aristocracy on the right, and Obama's campaign-season gestures toward populism on the left. Yet 2016 and everything after has revealed the Democrats not only as a fundamentally technocratic party—'conspicuous in the embrace of science as an ideological value'—but a party which can claim a new kind of predominance atop America's social, cultural and economic hierarchies. This extends well beyond traditional power bases in government, law, philanthropy, media, entertainment and the universities, though in the last quarter-century these areas have all grown significantly in social weight and liberal partisanship alike. Campaign contributions by sector offer a crude but suggestive glimpse of the new map: Democrats now hold the upper hand in communications (including a near-monopoly in Silicon Valley), finance (including lopsided support from hedge funds, private equity and venture capital), and health care (including an acute Red-to-Blue swing within the pharmaceutical industry).<sup>25</sup>

Galvanized by fear, outrage and a perpetual sense of beleaguerment, American liberals in the age of Trump have barely noticed these epochal accessions of power. But in addition to their accustomed dominance within the culture industry, Democrats now prevail in the three most conspicuously dynamic sectors of the twenty-first century US economy.<sup>26</sup> And far more than the economic zones where Republicans still maintain preponderance—energy, real estate, retail, agribusiness—these Democratic sectors require and are rightly associated with advanced education, elite credentials and professional-managerial leadership.<sup>27</sup> To explain the shift of the less-educated working class away from the Democrats, this emergent power structure—dramatized in 2016 and impossible to miss thereafter—must occupy centre stage.

The more liberal commentary obsesses over ugly but scattershot and long-familiar Republican attacks on immigrants or non-white workers, the more they render invisible this deeper tectonic shift. Voters them-

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<sup>25</sup> Sectoral contributions data are available on the Open Secrets website.

<sup>26</sup> Riley, 'Faultlines', pp. 35–8. Perry Anderson traced much of this ground in 'Homeland', pp. 27–32—unsparingly, and yet with what now appears an underestimate of Democrats' potential to control the American power grid.

<sup>27</sup> One reason Republicans have become so fanatical about election results is that electoral politics—unlike culture, ideology or the commanding heights of the economy—is one of the few realms where they retain a potential advantage over Democrats.

selves are not so blind. As local commentators have noted, the rightward turn of the Iron Range has been expressed through anger at the Twin Cities—that is, the prosperous, credentialled and ever-growing metropolitan core that manages Minnesota’s economy. In Riley and Brenner’s analysis, the workers of Hibbing were driven by ‘rational’ resistance to the (largely theoretical) prospect of economic competition with a Salvadoran or Somali immigrant. But it seems far more plausible that they have been mobilized in ‘rational’ resistance to the educated elites of North Oaks, whose power over the industries and institutions that shape their lives—from Facebook pages to hospital centres—is anything but abstract.<sup>28</sup>

From a Republican strategic perspective, of course, these mobilizations go hand-in-hand, since Blue-state elites have emerged as programmatic champions of racial diversity and vocal (if substantively ambivalent) defenders of migrant rights. Nevertheless, the political priorities are clear. Trump’s heir apparent on the right, the mannered and manipulative Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, has not thrived by scapegoating non-white workers, much less targeting them for exclusion: in 2022 he likely won more non-Cuban Hispanic votes than any Republican in Florida history. Instead he has sought, with evident calculation, to put real Democratic power bases (universities, bureaucracies, ‘Silicon Valley elites’, the Walt Disney Company) in his crosshairs. Even DeSantis’s splashiest foray into xenophobia—his transportation of migrant workers to Martha’s Vineyard—drew attention for its forking sneer at liberal elites, not raw hostility to the migrants themselves.

Ultimately, perhaps, this point is less a challenge to the Riley–Brenner thesis than a refinement of it. Since 2016, both parties have adjusted to America’s emergent political-economic faultlines with ever-greater candour and enthusiasm, accelerating what may be an overdue realignment of voting coalitions. In an era of stagnation and gridlock, each party is now content to fortify itself around its fraction of the broad wage-earning class, largely on the basis of emotional and material appeals aimed against the partisans on the other side—for Democrats, the racist, unhinged MAGA rabble; for Republicans, the smug credentialled elite and

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<sup>28</sup> Aaron Brown, ‘Iron Range, Seething at Twin Cities, Continues Right Turn’, 11 November 2022. A conversation with Alexander Brentler helped further develop this point.

its adopted clients. The opportunities for constructive political engagement, much less a re-polarization around class politics, remain few.

Yet if the ‘class struggle social democracy’<sup>29</sup> of Bernie Sanders is now in ruins, virtually every other alternative on offer seems worse—not only unable to break the new partisan order, but actually working to deepen its hold. Left-wing attacks on supposed nostalgia for the ‘historical working class’, or celebrations of some ‘new’ or ‘actual’ working class—i.e., that portion which already votes against Republicans—offer little more than a chic articulation of the actually-existing politics of the Democratic National Committee. The parallel tracks of liberal and left-wing thought on this subject are not accidental, since the organized electoral left today draws breath exclusively in districts dominated by Democrats. Any way forward for the American left will require a cold reckoning with the forces that have landed so many of its politicians, activists and intellectuals in opposition to the miners and retail workers of Hibbing, Minnesota—and in a de facto alliance with the current occupants of James J. Hill’s manor estate.

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<sup>29</sup> Bhaskar Sunkara, ‘The Exercise of Power’, *Jacobin*, 25 February 2019.