

United States - Misrepresenting the White Working Class: What the Narrating Class Gets Wrong

Tuesday 18 October 2016, by [METZGAR Jack](#), [SCHULTZ Connie](#) (Date first published: 14 March 2016).

Most of the time the white working class is invisible in the U.S. But during elections there is a flurry of attention to this “demographic” among political reporters and operatives, and as a result, also among the millions of us who read, listen, and watch their reporting, analyses, and endless speculation about who is ahead and behind and why.

I’ve been watching this phenomenon since 2000 when Ruy Teixeira and Joel Rogers first revealed that a large chunk of the American electorate is white and working class [1]. As it has migrated from social scientists, with their “operational definitions” and facility with math, to pundit world, however, loose stereotypes and class-prejudiced assumptions have been growing exponentially. It’s becoming a low-level one-sided cultural class war where what Nadine Hubbs calls “the narrating class” blithely assumes that working-class whites are “America’s perpetual bigot class.” [2]

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Connie Schultz noted how many reporters and columnists associate Donald Trump and his pal Sarah Palin with white working-class ignorance and bigotry [see below]. A Cleveland Plain Dealer writer, for example, complained: “Thanks to Trump, the entire Palin clan is now back in the spotlight they so crave. Come July, Republican National Convention organizers should house the whole dysfunctional family in a trailer park in Ashtabula [Ohio].” As it happens, both of Schultz’s grandmothers lived portions of their lives in trailer homes in Ashtabula, and she commented that “since Donald Trump’s charade of a candidacy caught fire, I have heard many fellow liberals freely toss around the terms ‘white trash’ and ‘trailer trash.’ These are people who would never dream of telling a racist joke, but they think nothing of ridiculing those of lesser economic means. Every group has its ‘other.’ For too many white intellectuals, it’s the working class.”

Unlike Schultz, most of the narrating class are from solidly middle-class backgrounds with little or no experience of working-class people of any color, but in my reading it is relatively rare to see outright classist remarks like the one Schultz quotes. Rather, for the most part class-prejudiced assumptions are based on professional middle-class ignorance and misunderstanding.

Take the assumed popularity of Trump among the white working class, for example. There appears to be supporting evidence for that. According to Brookings, for example [3], in a national survey 55% of “Republicans and Republican-leaning independents who support Trump are white working-class Americans.” But this does not mean what Brookings thinks it means. Among all adult whites, nearly 70% do not have bachelor’s degrees [4] (the definition of “working class” used here). This means that at 55%, the white working-class is *under-represented* among Trump supporters. Conversely, unless Trump is getting much more minority support than reported, his supporters are disproportionally college-educated whites. They make up 30% of the white population, but they are at least 40% of Trump voters in the Brookings survey.

There are two reasons for this kind of error, this one by a highly respected D.C. think tank. One is

simple ignorance of class demographics. The bachelor's/no bachelor's binary is widely used to separate whites into two broad classes, but many analysts and reporters have no idea of the relative sizes of these two groups in the overall population. They routinely assume that most white people must be college-educated professionals like themselves and the people among whom they live and work.

The other reason for this kind of error is based solely on the assumption that white people who have graduated from college are less racist, less anti-immigrant, less anti-feminist, less homophobic, and generally more tolerant of diversity than people who have not. As a college professor, I very much hope this assumption is valid, but I could find no solid evidence that it is. At least in political commentary, the question is never asked, and you have to wonder why not.

Here's where Nadine Hubbs's *Rednecks, Queers, & Country Music* is so helpful. She shows how an educated white "narrating class" tends to see working-class whites as "ground zero for America's most virulent social ills: racism, sexism, and homophobia." Hubbs traces this to a Southern tradition of "white elites placing the blame for racial violence on poor whites as early as the turn of the twentieth century." Hubbs quotes Patricia Turner, who has dubbed it "the fallacy of *To Kill a Mockingbird*", which is the "notion that well-educated Christian whites were somehow victimized by white trash and forced to live within a social system that exploited and denigrated its black citizens."

This class-based blame-shifting ("It's not us, it's them!") actually supports racist and other systems of oppression. As Hubbs points out, the well-documented institutional racism that involves banks denying mortgages, employers not hiring blacks, and landlords refusing and/or exploiting black renters is not generally carried out by poor and working-class whites, but by white middle-class professionals. By casting intolerance and bigotry as the unfortunate/misguided attitudes of "poorly educated," "low-information" white voters, we white middle-class professionals deflect attention from those well-entrenched institutions within which we work, institutions that systematically deny opportunities to a wide range of people based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, immigrant status, and class.

This usually plays out in political reporting and analysis more subtly than in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but it is no less class-prejudiced. Articles like "The truth about the white working class: Why it's really allergic to voting for Democrats" [5] use extensive polling data to explain why working-class whites are so strongly Republican, but they fail to mention that "the" white middle class is also "allergic to voting for Democrats," if a little less so. Even when writers explain how working-class whites' "racial fears and anxieties" [6] are based in their deteriorating living standards and working conditions, they inadvertently deploy the bigot-class framework. By not asking whether and to what extent there might be some "racial fears and anxieties" among the white middle-class as well, these analysts assume, and expect their readers to assume, that there's not any!

Based on my own observation and experience of both working-class and middle-class whites, my guess is that there is more bigotry and intolerance in the working class, and as I have said, I have an occupational bias in hoping that's true. But it's not a slam dunk. When I actually try to count heads from my direct experience, the only thing I'm sure of is that bigotry and intolerance are present and absent in both classes. And as part of the narrating middle class, I recognize how comforting a blame-shifting bigot-class narrative can be as we witness the Republican front-runners advocate torture and carpet bombing while fulminating against Mexicans, Muslims, and New York values. But we should be aware that this one-sided narrative protects our class from scrutiny and thereby supports institutional forms of exclusion that bite harder and more systematically than inappropriate sentiments and bad attitudes.

Jack Metzgar

* Working-Class Perspective. Posted on March 14, 2016:

<https://workingclassstudies.wordpress.com/2016/03/14/misrepresenting-the-white-working-class-wh-at-the-narrating-class-gets-wrong/>

Here We Go Again, Trash-Talking The Working Class

Bear with me, please, as I start this column with a brief story about my two grandmothers who lived in trailer homes.

They lived in Ashtabula County, which is tucked into the northeast corner of Ohio, an hour east of Cleveland. If ever you've travelled a good distance along U.S. 90, you likely passed our county's handful of exits on your way to somewhere else.

For all of my childhood, this was home, and I was seldom happier than when I had time alone with my maternal great-grandmother, Ada, who raised my mother from the age of 8. In the late '60s, after her husband died, Ada sold her house and 20 acres to move into a trailer home a couple of miles down the road. It was closer to her church, her second home.

I spent weeks at a time in the summers with her, freed from the responsibilities of the oldest child always on duty. She taught me how to cook, garden and quilt. Every Sunday after church, rain or shine, we walked to the cemetery to tend my great-grandfather's grave and say a prayer of gratitude for the time we'd had with him. We had our evening rituals, too. She believed a steaming cup of tea at sunset was a great way to settle the mind for the big thoughts that show up only under the night sky.

My maternal grandmother, Vivian, lost custody of my mother when she was 8 and spent the rest of her life trying to make it up to her and taking care of my uncle, who had a mental disability. His name was Francis, and she never spent a day away from him until he died from complications of diabetes in his late 50s.

Grandma Vivian was the first person I knew to buy an aluminum Christmas tree. What a sight for my siblings and me. My mother stood behind us and whispered orders to close our mouths and stop acting like we'd just seen a ghost.

This was the grandma with the trunk full of antique dresses and hats for us to play with whenever we visited. When my mother wasn't around, Grandma often served me a cup of coffee loaded with milk and sugar — a grown-up reward for "being so responsible." When her house in Ashtabula County became too run down to be safe, my grandmother closed it up and lived in a trailer on the back lot until Alzheimer's robbed her of the ability to take care of herself.

I wanted you to know a little bit about my grandmothers so that you might better understand my outrage over a Cleveland Plain Dealer writer's reaction to Sarah Palin's endorsement of Donald Trump for president:

"Thanks to Trump, the entire Palin clan is now back in the spotlight they so crave. Come July,

Republican National Convention organizers should house the whole dysfunctional family at a trailer park in Ashtabula.”

This is surely not the first time a pundit has cast the Palins as “trailer park folks” — which is code, of course, for “white trash.” We are hearing these phrases more frequently as pundits try to make sense of Donald Trump’s soaring poll numbers.

In her book “Framing Class: Media Representations of Wealth and Poverty in America,” sociologist Diana Kendall describes how in 2008 then-“Late Show” host David Letterman “maintained a night-after-night monologue about Sarah Palin and why she is white trash.” He was joined, she writes, by “print media, television and Web blogs ... full of descriptions of Sarah Palin’s trailer park lifestyle.”

Much closer to home, since Donald Trump’s charade of a candidacy caught fire, I have heard many fellow liberals freely toss around the terms “white trash” and “trailer trash.” These are people who would never dream of telling a racist joke, but they think nothing of ridiculing those of lesser economic means.

Every group has its “other.” For too many white intellectuals, it’s the working class.

Neither of my grandmothers had much money, ever, but they contributed so much to the lives of the people they loved. They were both storytellers who helped me understand the long-ago sacrifices of people I would never know but who live on in the blue of my eyes and the ambitions of my heart. They are why I’ve devoted a number of columns and stories over the years to people who live in trailer parks.

Just this week, I was remembering Marjie Scuvotti, a 24-year-old mother of four. I interviewed her in 2002, on the first anniversary of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. She talked to me in her home in a trailer park as she painted her 6-year-old son Issac’s face red, white and blue for a parade celebrating first responders.

“You’re my American-flag boy,” Marjie whispered in his ear. She couldn’t have been a prouder mother.

This campaign year has barely begun, and it promises to be a long one. Regardless of which partisan lens we look through, we will see some voters who confound us.

Mocking them will never bring us closer to understanding them, but it will surely reveal us, and we will not benefit from the exposure.

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* THE NATIONAL MEMO. January 28, 2016 12:09 pm:

<http://www.nationalmemo.com/here-we-go-again-trash-talking-the-working-class/>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.thenation.com/authors/jack-metzgar/>

[2] http://www.amazon.com/Rednecks-Queers-Country-Music-Nadine/dp/0520280660/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1456262702&sr=1-1&keywords=nadine+hubbs

[3] <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2016/01/01/is-trump-taking-advantage-of-american-anxieties/>

[4] <http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/education/data/cps/2014/tables.html>

[5] http://www.salon.com/2015/11/29/the_truth_about_the_white_working_class_why_its_really_all_ergic_to_voting_for_democrats/

[6] https://ourfuture.org/20160216/how-democrats-should-have-answered-gwen-ifills-question-on-race?utm_source=progressive_breakfast&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=pbreak