

Those Who Bring From the Earth: Anti-Environmentalism and the Trope of the White Male Worker

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ABSTRACT

The 2016 Republican Party platform is unabashed in its rejection of environmental principles and its embrace of extractive labor. Its 'Natural Resources' section reads: '[w]e are the party of America's growers, producers, farmers, ranchers, foresters, miners, commercial fishermen, and all those who bring from the earth the crops, minerals, energy, and the bounties of our seas.' What is interesting about this statement is its selective view of productive labor. Not all who bring from the earth are equally valued within the American conservative worldview. What accounts for the outsized role of white male workers in the discourses of American conservatives?

Introduction

The 2016 Republican Party platform is unabashed in its rejection of environmental principles and its embrace of extractive labor. The first sentence of its 'Natural Resources' section reads: '[w]e are the party of America's growers, producers, farmers, ranchers, foresters, miners, commercial fishermen, and all those who bring from the earth the crops, minerals, energy, and the bounties of our seas (Republican Party Platform Committee 2016)'. What is interesting about this statement – in addition to the fact that a section once titled 'environmental protection' has been rebranded 'natural resources' – is its selective view of productive labor. Not *all* who bring from the earth are equally valued within the American conservative worldview: white male coal miners are the oft-depicted banner-holders at Trump rallies; white male oil and gas workers are draped around him at executive order signings; and white male farmers and ranchers are the current symbols of both anti-federal resistance and 'proper' public lands management. What accounts for the outsized role of white male workers in the anti-environmental discourses deployed by contemporary American conservatives?

The Image of the Working Class in American Politics

Contemporary conservative attempts to capture the working class – as both a demographic bloc and a socially powerful symbol – have their roots in the Republican Party's efforts to

break up the New Deal coalition comprised of southern whites, northern labor, and urban racial and ethnic minorities (see, e.g. Kazin, 1998; Lowndes, 2008). These efforts intensified in the 1960s amid the rise of new social movements: civil rights, anti-war, feminism, and environmentalism. In the '60s and early '70s, a variety of concepts began to be deployed in efforts to rebrand conservatism as the *vox populi*: middle America, the heartland, the silent majority, the virtuous middle, and the forgotten Americans (Ehrenreich, 1989). While each of these concepts has been used at different points by different actors, their meanings and political impacts have been remarkably consistent. Each focused on a vision of normality; each was contrasted in opposition to a cultural 'Other' (the coastal elites, the loud minority, the unvirtuous extremists, etc.); and each was color-blind on the surface but was clearly invoked and intended to appeal to white America (Kazin, 1998; Olson, 2008).

These working class constructs have been both racialized and gendered. Attacks on the welfare state were waged in the name of the Main Street taxpayer, and in opposition to the figures of the welfare queen, gangster, and illegal immigrant (Chavez, 2008; Giroux, 2006). Moreover, for men who 'measure[d] masculinity by the size of a paycheck', conservative appeals to the Forgotten Americans functioned as an outlet through which to channel the blame for deindustrialization and the decline of unions onto women, people of color, immigrants, and political elites (Williams, 2016; see also Faludi, 1999). The concepts collectively provided a way for the white working and middle classes to re-think their location within the American social structure amid the turmoil of the time – an approach to positionality outside of the traditional class lenses of social liberals and leftists.

The cumulative result has been a gradual cultural redefinition of the working class. Thomas Frank (2004) argues that, by the 1990s, conservatives had successfully moved debates over class from the economic to the cultural register. Class politics had become less about wages and collective bargaining, and more about *authenticity*; the hard-working, straight-shooting residents of Main Street USA have it; the liberal bi-coastal elites don't. The political economic projects of the Right were, under the banner of cultural politics, transformed into issues of morality, decency, taste, and honesty; one's class became defined by 'what one drives, where one shops, how one prays' (2004, 113; see also Frank, 2016). Today, the conservative 'common man' inhabiting the 'Real America' exists in opposition to the twin figures of liberal elites – who mock the white trash, rednecks, and hillbillies experiencing real economic hardship and despair – and racial minorities – who purportedly lack the working class values that 'Make America Great' (Frank, 2004; Fraser, 2016; Hochschild, 2016).

The 'Real Work' of Anti-Environmentalism

The conservative conception of the working class has both impacted and been impacted by environmental political struggles. As many analysts have pointed out, a Manichean binary between jobs and environmental protection has become central to American conservatism: environmentalists, the narrative goes, care more about insignificant animal species than the livelihood of fellow human-beings (Brick, 1995; Hochschild, 2016; Layzer, 2012); they purport to love the unspoiled nature of rural America, but only venture out into it in small, sanitized doses (Layzer, 2012, 2014); they are out of touch, effeminate, and ideologically extreme elitists who shop at Whole Foods, buy over-priced hybrid cars, and drink eight-dollar lattes (Frank, 2004, p. 217). The flip side to this image of environmentalist as 'limousine liberal'

(Fraser, 2016) is the blue-collar worker as ardent anti-environmentalist. As Judith Layzer has argued, neoliberal visions of property rights, emphasizing regulatory takings, gained popular traction through their fusion with the Wise Use movement in the early 1980s (2014, pp. 172–174). Regardless of whether the anti-environmental activists of the rural West were actually of the working class, the images of the yeoman farmer and the ruggedly individualistic cowboy struck a chord with a sizeable segment of the American public.

The history and politics of Wise Use are well known to most environmentalists, but there is a broader argument to be made about the relationship between this dominant image of the working class and environmentally intensive labor – e.g. extractivism and heavy industry. For example, in summarizing rural consciousness in Wisconsin, Katherine Cramer reflects on her interviewees' definition of hard work:

People are like: Are you sitting behind a desk all day? Well that's not hard work. Hard work is someone like me — I'm a logger, I get up at 4:30 and break my back. For my entire life that's what I'm doing. (Guo, 2016)

Arlie Hochschild's (2016) celebrated ethnography of Louisiana Tea Party politics, provides further evidence for how environmentally-intensive labor is legitimized and environmentally nurturing or beneficent work is devalued. She writes:

[T]he nearly all male areas of life – the police, the fire department, parts of the US military and oil rigs – needed defending against this cultural erosion of manhood. The federal government, the EPA, stoop up for the biological environment, but it was allowing – and it seemed at times it was causing – a cultural erosion. (p. 203)

Nowhere is this linkage between (1) cultural ideals of nationalism, race, and gender, and (2) particular forms of work more apparent than in President Trump's obsession with coal. In her analysis of mountain-top removal in Appalachia, Rebecca Scott (2010) observes:

masculine identified jobs in heavy industry or natural resource extraction have long been considered real work ... In the United States, these jobs have been historically considered the territory of white men. (p. 9)

Trump's raging popularity in 'coal country' was one of the central storylines of the presidential campaign. And from the perspective of short-term economic interest, it makes sense that many residents of historical zones of extraction would vote for a pro-extractive politician. What is puzzling is the broader national resonance of the coal miner image. Although 'the entire coal industry employs fewer people than Arby's' (Ingraham, 2017), coal workers have climbed to the pinnacle of the political agenda. In an era in which historically dominant forms of environmentally intensive, white male labor are declining, the symbolic potency of mining, oil and gas extraction, and heavy industry has increased.

This apparent paradox has less to do with the politics of the white working class itself, and more to do with the extent to which the white middle and upper-classes have internalized the conservative politics of class. As anthropologist Jessica Smith (2017) argues, Trump's emphasis on coal 'appealed to the middle classes, who copiously consume the cultural mythology surrounding miners as emblematic of their own cultural and economic anxiety'. The supposed culture of the working class is one that many whites who are themselves outside of the working class nonetheless identify with. For example, when Cliven Bundy – a rancher who, objectively, isn't working class but fits the dominant image – is fighting against grazing fees, they can root for him to stick it to the state, and thereby justify their anti-environmental politics in populist terms. It is this cultural construction of the working

class that results in Sarah Palin leading Republican National Convention attendees in a rousing rendition of ‘drill, baby, drill’; Fox News commentators referring to the EPA as ‘job terrorists’; and, of course, Trump wearing a hard hat while promising to ‘bring back coal’.

If Trump’s first year in office has shown anything, it’s that anti-environmentalism lies at the foundation of the conservative political agenda. Further, conservative anti-environmental politics extend far beyond a narrowly defined environmental terrain. The now-dominant conception of the working class – tethered to the trope of the white male worker – oversimplifies the actual politics of the white working class, renders invisible the labor of working class women and people of color who bring from the earth (in addition all those who *care for the earth*), and further perpetuates a host of socio-ecological crises. How to combat it is another discussion.

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