Class & Politics at the Dawn of the Trump Era

Posted on March 27, 2017 by Daniel Graff

In trying to make sense of the surprising 2016 election — Who were Trump's supporters? Were they motivated by the politics of pocketbooks, race, or fear? And what lessons should Republicans, Democrats, and political activists draw as they move forward? — many mainstream news analysts and pundits have produced disappointing but frankly unsurprising answers that fall back on unreliable conventional wisdom rather than clear common sense. By reproducing rather than interrogating clichés about class, identity, and politics, they inadvertently hinder the critical thinking necessary to reboot projects for economic justice at a pivotal moment in the nation's history.

There are many culprits here, but the most recent is New York Times columnist Timothy Egan, whose "Democratic Party Sugar High" chastises the Party of Roosevelt for losing the 2016 election and then mocks the "soul-searching and strategizing" of its leaders for the past several weeks. Egan is genuinely — and justly — alarmed at the exclusionary, xenophobic, and far-right policies pushed by the new president and the GOP leaders in Congress, but his prescription for the Democrats' path to power rests on three common, yet faulty, claims about class and politics in the USA.

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This is the inaugural post of our partnership with The Labor Question Today, a blog run by Daniel Graff of the Higgins Labor Program at the Center for Social Concerns at Notre Dame.

First, for Egan the US working class is white. He blames the Democrats for ignoring "the genuine pain of the white working class," whom he also calls "the forgotten American[s]." This ignores the fact that the US working class — whether defined by education, occupation, or income — is multiracial, and much more diverse than other socio-economic groups. Surely Egan knows that millions of brown and black folks toil in food service, housekeeping, transportation, manufacturing, and other working-class sectors; indeed, African Americans and Latin@s are much more likely to be working class than white Americans. Yet, by equating working class with white, Egan implies that non-white Americans don't have class grievances; the unspoken assumption is that they have racial identities that shape their politics.

Furthermore, this thinking adds fuel to the false fire that white workers have suffered at the expense of non-white workers, while the truth of the matter is that black and brown Americans have been slipping further behind their white counterparts in income and wealth for the past decade or more. I agree with Egan that the Democrats haven't paid enough attention to working-class concerns, but they didn't abandon white workers while taking care of non-white workers. Any pro-worker political project must take into account the diversity of the US working class; otherwise, it will end up promoting an identity politics rooted in race but masquerading as class.

Second, Egan sees the 2016 election as a revenge tale of the (white) working class punishing the Democratic Party. Because Democrats abandoned them, he argues, workers turned to Trump and embraced his vow to "make America great again." As Egan warns, "If Democrats continue to hemorrhage voters among the working class, they will never see the presidency, or even expect to govern in one house, for a long time." Such a simplistic rendering ignores the complexity of the American electoral political system, which — because it is structured to favor two broad coalitions — is always messy, often confusing, and usually contingent upon many factors. While it's true that enough white working-class voters switched parties between 2008 and 2016 to help turn critical rust-belt states from blue to red (and with profound consequences), it's important to point out how narrow Trump's victory was in states like Wisconsin and Michigan (and once again remember that he lost the overall popular vote). This was no landslide, and the results represented no referendum on class or anything else.

Trump's win was fueled as much by race (he won the white vote by 20 points) and religion

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(he won white evangelicals by over 60 points) as class. Egan reduces a complicated election outcome to a single factor — (white) working-class resentment, which he blames on the Democrats' turn toward "identity politics and media-cushioned affirmation." Others follow the same crude class logic but blame white workers' racism for their "wrong" votes. While there's no doubt that white racism is a major problem in American culture and politics, it's important to realize it is a cross-class phenomenon. Moreover, working-class people, like other people, have complex and often contradictory political identities, and it's not so easy disentangling class from race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and region. Because we cannot simply reduce the 2016 election to a straightforward story with white workers as the resentful change agents, the goal for anyone promoting pro-worker politics cannot be just to figure out a way to win them back. Such an approach represents the short-term, band-aid approach to winning elections that landed workers and their advocates here in the first place.

This leads directly to Egan's third claim, that the way forward for Democrats is simple and straightforward. "The way out is not that difficult," he concludes, and Democrats should "promot[e] things that help average Americans." Great idea, but the problem is that "average Americans" are quite divided on the help that they want and need, which makes the way out very, very difficult. Moreover, if we assume as Egan does that "average Americans" are white, we'll end up reproducing the very divisions that led us here.

Don't get me wrong — Timothy Egan and I both desire a political program prioritizing the economic interests of working people, but our paths are distinctly different. He sees the future through the past via the mobilization of white workers, which I see as a political dead end. Instead, I argue that any successful program for economic justice must go through, not around, racial division; it must be sensitive to and inclusive of working-class diversity; and it must recognize, not ignore, the exclusions of the past that continue to structure the present.

That's a big charge, to be sure, but the sudden solidarity shown by millions of Americans in the streets, at airports, and as "petitions with boots on" at congressional offices over the past several weeks gives me cautious hope of better times ahead.

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