

BY NAOMI BRAINE

## Trumpism and the Unstable Ground of Whiteness

Trumpism is built on a split-screen image of life for the White middle and working classes: a contemporary view of economic suffering and “loss” to encroaching “others,” while in the background hovers a shimmering past of cultural and economic glory. In reality, of course, the lost economic prosperity has largely flowed upwards to the wealthiest segment of the U.S. population, and the situation of White Trump voters continues to be significantly better than that of African Americans and Latinxs of similar educational levels.

A dangerous aspect of this dual image is that Trumpism describes a real element of White American experience while linking it to racist and xenophobic “alternative facts.” The parts of the country that can variously be described as Trump country, “Red States,” or the older phrase “the heartland,” may be concentrated in the Rust Belt, the South, and the Plains, but can also be found scattered through “Blue” states like New York and California. I find “heartland” useful because it captures the self-understanding of the small cities, towns, rural, sub- and ex-urban areas that have long been the core of a White, largely Protestant, multi-generation U.S. experience and identity that was central to the Trump constituency. These heartland communities are currently experiencing a decline in economic opportunities, a marked increase in opiate addiction, and reduced life expectancy,<sup>1</sup> as well as a rise in racist xenophobia most visible as Trumpism. The convergence of economic and demographic change is not unique to our current era, and has previously led to a surge in the power and respectability of the Far Right among Whites living outside of major cities.



A member of Identity Evropa (a White supremacist college organization) sports a “Make America Great Again” hat at an event last year. (Photo courtesy of thetab.com.)

Times of demographic and cultural threat to a core White American identity and experience have historically empowered the Far Right. Post-Civil War reconstruction was obviously one such time, and led to the birth of the Ku Klux Klan in the South. The Civil Rights movement was another such time, and also saw a resurgence of the KKK in the South. In addition, the surge in neo-Nazi and other Far Right organizing in the 1980s could be seen as another such period, following the movements of the 1960s and ‘70s that challenged traditional White male power structures. These three examples, however, were periods in which the Far Right was mobilized in particular areas, not times when its ideology was normalized or widely dispersed throughout the wider U.S. The 1920s and early ‘30s, however, after

the last major wave of immigration and economic transformation, were a time of significant right-wing mobilization that spread throughout the U.S. and was largely normalized in White, non-urban areas.<sup>2</sup> Significantly, the major threat to White identity in the ‘20s and ‘30s came from Southern and Eastern European immigrants, who were considered neither White nor Black according to the racial classifications of the time. Over time, these European immigrant groups came to be understood as White,<sup>3</sup> illustrating both the possibility of shifts in racial categories and the power they hold at any given moment in time.

Demographers have been anticipating for many years the moment the U.S. population ceases to be a majority of European descent, or “White” in the current U.S. understanding of race. The

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dramatic expansion of inequality in the U.S. taking place at the same time as the economic decline of the “heartland” means that this shift in numerical majority status is occurring in the context of status loss across multiple dimensions for Whites most accustomed to living in homogenous, White-majority contexts. The Obama administration added a symbolic threat of increasing Black power and visibility while continuing the neoliberal policies that have eroded the employment, education, and housing advantages given to Whites, especially men—sometimes called the “wages of Whiteness”—for non-elite Whites relative to both those above and those below.

The historical expansion of the category of “White” to include the descendants of devalued European groups updated and maintained the White-Black bifurcation at the core of U.S. racial hierarchies. There is some evidence that a similar process may be underway today with some Asian and Latinx groups, although in ways that currently point to an “off-White” status in which some Latinx and Asian populations look increasingly similar to Whites in income and education.<sup>7</sup> An analysis of the expansion of Whiteness addresses the societal level, not the experiences, negotiations, and conflicts that occur as the process unfolds. It also does not consider how the process may affect non-elite Whites who

lar relevance, this iteration of the Klan explicitly targeted Catholics and Jews as threatening racial “others,”<sup>9</sup> drawing clear and uncompromising boundaries around who counted as a White American. It included a wide range of members who would not have endorsed the violence perpetrated by some within the national network, but who nonetheless embraced a platform of nativism, White Protestant supremacy, and both moral and economic conservatism.<sup>10</sup> The KKK functioned in many ways as an ordinary fraternal order, with special social events and women’s and children’s auxiliaries. This effectively normalized the expression of White supremacy combined with conservative moralism as no different than any other social organization.<sup>11</sup> There are strong analogies here to the ways conservative movements today, including the Tea Party and conservative Christianity, have normalized and spread a potent combination of racism, sexism, xenophobia, and homophobia with *Breitbart News Network* and other media outlets serving as bridges to the Alt Right and the Trump campaign.

Unlike the KKK, Prohibition is not usually considered in connection with racial boundary enforcement or Far Right movements. Popular history and imagery largely associate Prohibition with flappers, jazz, gangsters, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, and the desire to “clean up” urban life in the early 20th Century. While those were all elements, the historical reality of Prohibition embodied the era’s deep conflicts over national identity, power, and social dominance.<sup>12</sup> The movement for Prohibition was an assertion of traditional White, Protestant dominance over the “degenerate” ways—and growing prominence—of Catholic and Jewish immigrants, and to a lesser extent African Americans. Enforcement of the law reflected this not only in the differential targeting of working class immigrants and African Americans, but in the active role played by organized community vigilante groups, including the KKK. The repeal of Prohibition under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was part of the realignment of national political processes associated with the New Deal,<sup>13</sup> bringing the largely immigrant, urban, industrial working class

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By contrast, Whites in the large urban areas that consistently voted for Clinton in November have largely become accustomed to contexts that combine White supremacy with numerical minority status. For example, Whites are only 48.7 percent of the population in the Chicago metropolitan area but have a median household income of \$71,927, which is more than double the median Black household income.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in the Philadelphia metro area, Whites account for 41.7 percent of the population, and their median household income is 78 percent higher than the median Black household.<sup>5</sup> In these and other large cities, Whites experience racial and cultural diversity without significant loss of economic and political power, reducing or eliminating the identity and status threat of racial diversity. The lived experience of diversity without relative status loss may provide a form of perverse protection against Trumpist xenophobia and racism, particularly in contrast to the experience of economic anxiety without comparative context; the “deaths of despair”<sup>6</sup> among White working and middle classes in heartland communities result from existential loss, not direct and objective comparison.

consider themselves the White American norm even as their social ground is shifting culturally and economically. The wave of reformist and right-wing movements of 1920s and ‘30s, particularly Prohibition and the second wave of the KKK, were a White, middle class, Protestant backlash against the growing power and assimilation of Southern and Eastern European immigrants, raising questions about what might be learned from this period in relation to today’s dynamics.

The second wave of the KKK differed from the first, Reconstruction-era Klan, as well as the later Civil Rights-era Klan, in significant ways that are relevant to thinking about the contemporary Far Right. The Klan of the 1920s was a mainstream, national fraternal organization which openly espoused White supremacy and engaged in racist terrorism but whose primary activities involved a range of community projects of interest to its middle class membership, from social events (e.g. pageants and baseball teams) to support for Prohibition.<sup>8</sup> They combined racism and xenophobia with a generalized conservative Protestant moralism concerned with opposition to birth control, the teaching of evolution, and drinking alcohol. Of particu-

into a political coalition that implemented progressive social welfare policies in part through the deliberate exclusion of African Americans.<sup>14</sup> It took the uprisings of the Civil Rights movement before African Americans were incorporated into the New Deal.

The contemporary concentration of opiate use among native-born, non-urban Whites has discouraged punitive substance control policy, but in other ways the current moment has some sociopolitical analogies to 100 years ago. This is also a time of extreme inequality, a second Gilded Age, and a period of consolidation of changes in the structure of capitalism. The early 20th Century solidified an industrial economy while the current period has seen a shift to financialization; each of these transitions came with significant technological development and change. The early 20th Century was also the last time the U.S. had a high proportion of immigrants concentrated in major cities, with associated demographic and cultural shifts. Importantly, these economic and social changes led to both subjective and objective loss of status among middle class and small-landholder Whites outside of large cities,<sup>15</sup> although there does not appear to have been the same depth of social and economic threat experienced in those communities today.

In both eras, the response among native born “heartland” Whites has been a mainstreaming and normalization of explicitly racist, xenophobic, and violent right-wing perspectives. The Far Right has gained more power today than in the past, with Trump’s ascendancy to the White House and the installation of Hard Right movement figures such as Steve Bannon and Mike Pence in the executive branch. The conflation of Muslims and “terrorism” fuses religion, ethnicity and politics at an even deeper level than earlier accusations of Jewish communism, with similar connotations of international “infiltration” and threat. The right-wing resurgence did not begin with the populist nationalism that elected Trump, and is unlikely to end in four years regardless of who wins the 2018 and 2020 elections. The second wave of the KKK went from 1915 until the late ‘20s, and Prohibition lasted from 1920 to ‘33.

One of the important lessons to be learned from the 1920s and ‘30s is to be wary of alternative social contracts that have genuinely progressive elements while maintaining authoritarian structures and White supremacy. The enforcement of Prohibition led to a significant expansion of policing and penal systems in the U.S., creating the core structures of the current federal law enforcement and prison systems.<sup>16</sup> The first federal drug-control laws were passed in 1909 (the Opium Exclusion Act) and 1914 (the Harrison Act), but national enforcement accelerated significantly after the repeal of Prohibition when the fundamentally racist institutional enforcement infrastructure reoriented towards drug control.<sup>17</sup> The New Deal instituted a set of economically progressive policies but did so through the consolidation of an alliance that brought together the European immigrant, industrial working class with non-urban, native-born Whites, including the southern power structure, while explicitly excluding African Americans.<sup>18</sup> The coalitions that in 1933 simultaneously ended Prohibition and brought in the New Deal enacted some progressive change, but only at the expense of African Americans and other non-Whites, who remained marginal-

servative Democrat positioned as “anyone but Trump” in 2020. For example, Andrew Cuomo, the governor of New York, is a conservative Democrat with a strong neoliberal track record and marked hostility towards both unions and low-income communities in New York City who shows signs of national ambitions. His highly touted new Excelsior scholarship program offers free tuition at NY public colleges for middle class families, but the actual design of the program does not cover the majority of students’ expenses yet requires a schedule that will make work and family responsibilities difficult to maintain.

If history is a guide, the hallmarks of a re-inscription of Whiteness would benefit the middle class in a significant way while leaving out the urban poor, particularly the non-White poor. Possibilities include a Medicare buy-in or other form of health insurance support that helps the middle class while being too expensive for the working poor; the expansion of a DACA-like program but with elements that enhance criminalization of the undocumented as a whole; or perhaps restrictions on immigration overall that don’t focus on terrorism but enhance the polarization between “valuable” and “criminal” immigrants.

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ized while Catholics and even Jews were increasingly incorporated into Whiteness.

These historical examples suggest the potential for a political response, perhaps by the Democratic Party or a populist movement less racist than Trumpism, which offers some economic relief but re-inscribes White supremacy by bringing together U.S. born Whites and selected immigrant groups. The 2016 exit polls<sup>19</sup> show the seeds of this in a right-wing direction, with 29 percent of both Latinxs and Asians voting for Trump. These data fit with the economic and social stratification among immigrants that would enable a re-inscription of the boundaries of both Whiteness and Blackness,<sup>20</sup> and could be harnessed even more effectively perhaps by a con-

It is vital to remember that the expansion of Whiteness intrinsically involves the simultaneous re-inscription, and perhaps expansion, of Blackness. It will be necessary to break the historical racist alliance between elite and non-elite Whites that lies at the core of the current situation, and to do it before new groups are inducted into the edges of the privileged circle. ☪

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