



TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

**THE SOCIOLOGICAL REASONS WHY WOKE/SOCIAL JUSTICE
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BY

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There is a widespread frustration among many Democratic political strategists today about the attitude of “woke/social justice” activists who flatly reject the value of seeking to win any greater white working class/rural support and dismiss the possibility that such efforts might ever be successful. In response, since 2016 there have been a wide range of articles and commentaries that have tried to sympathetically explain the attitudes of white working class and rural voters and to argue for why activists from the progressive wing of the party should try to better understand and sympathize with their outlook and concerns.

To put it simply, these efforts have been a failure. On the contrary they have for the most part simply provided many leftist activists with the opportunity to write flamboyant denunciations of the basic foulness and perfidy of white working class and rural voters.

Writing in the Nation, for example, Elie Mistel says:

[in 2020]...a majority of whites (and a not insignificant number of Latinos) remembered that keeping a violent police force with its foot on the neck of Black folks was what they really wanted. [Moderates] suggest doing what Democrats have traditionally done: figure out what the racists want and give it to them...the move of crapping all over the Black people you need to win elections so that white racists feel more comfortable with you was tried and perfected by Bill Clinton. He called it “triangulation.”

...What does [this] strategy look like? I'd argue we've already seen it. When we saw images of Border Patrol agents whipping Black Haitian refugees at the border, we were seeing what it looks like.... Beating Haitians while beaming about mass deportation is probably **the exact kind of policy that makes Biden tolerable to non-college-educated [i.e., working class] voters in swing states.**¹

In contrast there are few—if any—examples of left activists who changed their minds as a result of reading the commentaries that argued the case for a more nuanced view of white working class and rural Americans.

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¹<https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/democrats-election-shor/>

Faced with this stalemate it is worth stepping back and reviewing the way in which educated progressives' views of "the common man" have evolved since the New Deal era and to seek to understand the sociological roots of the modern attitude and why it is now so fiercely resistant to change.

This has important political implications. If the attitudes of many left activists in the progressive wing of the democratic party are indeed profoundly resistant to change and lead them to categorically reject the goal of creating a "big tent" Democratic coalition that includes the non-MAGA sector of working class and rural voters (unless such voters accept the woke/social justice philosophy) it means that Democrats who believe in the necessity of winning such working class support must instead consider ways to encourage the creation of new political organizations and coalitions that can independently represent and champion these voters' distinct outlook and agenda.

The 1930's – The Worker as Noble Hero

The basic social ethos and personal philosophy of many working class and rural Americans is properly described as cultural traditionalism. It is an outlook that is shaped by the major social institutions in working class and rural life – the church, the armed forces, the local business community and the vision of the American system of government taught in traditional high school civics classes. The values it upholds and teaches are religious piety, patriotism, small business/free enterprise and the superiority of the American system of government.

Within this common framework there have always been relatively tolerant and intolerant variations, particularly with regard to attitudes toward members of non-white ethnic groups and support for religious theocracy. On the other hand, in America there was no indigenous tradition of fierce class-based radicalism as there was in France where it was rooted in the bitter popular resentment of a hereditary class of aristocrats. Only in the 20th century did nationwide working class discontent appear most dramatically in the 1930's with the rise of the trade union movement.

The popular image of the working man in the 1930's reflected the influence of the huge trade union uprising. In the movies of the 1930's the "common man" was often portrayed as a noble hero. The rich, in contrast, were often portrayed in the films of the 1930's as greedy, pompous, stupid and self-indulgent – as blustering bankers and cynical playboys in tuxedos.

During World War II this characterization of working class people flowed into portraits of deeply noble and heroic soldiers and sailors. A standard storyline that was repeated over and over again in films was the exploits of a close knit squad of distinctly working class G.I.s with *"a kid from Brooklyn"*, *"an earthy Italian or a guy named Kowalski"* and a rural *"country boy from Tennessee"* all united in their fight against fascism.

This noble view of the white working class was, in retrospect, actually rather ironic because at that time typical white workers both in the north and south were casually racist in a way that was far worse than the attitudes of even the most racially prejudiced workers that one encounters today. In that pre- Martin Luther King era there were no pro-forma, lip service

rejections of racism (e.g., “now look, I’m not a racist but you do have to admit...”) or unctuous declarations that “I judge people as individuals not by the color of their skin.” Instead there was a vast, widely shared acceptance of the most deeply pernicious racist stereotypes and prejudices.

Many of the industrial union organizers were committed radicals who had an utterly sincere belief in racial equality but racism was so widespread and ingrained that, for the most part, they did not try to challenge it directly aside from arguing that, to succeed, organizing campaigns needed to organize everyone in the factory (which just by itself required overcoming substantial white prejudice). The general trade union view at the time was that racial prejudice could not be overcome with finger-wagging lectures and social pressure. On the contrary the union perspective was that common action and experience had to precede attitude change. It would be in the course of the shared struggle for common objectives that white workers would come to learn the truth of equality, not from sanctimonious scolding and verbal harangues.

After World War II – “Average Joes and “Egghead Professors”

In the post-World War II era the noble worker of the 30’s and 40’s evolved in Democratic thought into the image of the “average joe” as a basically decent guy who supported trade unions, the New Deal and The Democratic Party. College professors, on the other hand, were often viewed by most Americans at that time as a group that was eccentric but basically benign. In politics they were accepted as a secondary but valued part of the Democratic coalition.

This relatively positive view of the college-educated by ordinary people was not surprising because colleges in this era did not teach ideas that in any significant way challenged the basic culturally traditional outlook of working class Americans. Colleges did teach enlightenment values like respect for science, rationalism and free debate but in general academia basically reinforced the status quo.

But by the 1960’s a major social change was occurring in the universities. There was a massive growth in college education as millions of young people from the baby boom generation came of age and enrolled for first time. Many of these new students sought degrees in the liberal arts and social sciences rather than remaining in the traditional applied fields like business, engineering, architecture, law and medicine.

At the same time many of these new college students were radicalized by the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement which led to a general disenchantment with “the system” and a view of ordinary rural and working class Americans as deeply hostile to the new perspective as overt working class anger and hostility toward “long-haired hippies” and “draft dodgers” grew. By late 1960’s the “heroic workers” of the 1930’s had become the redneck thugs in the movie, *Easy Rider* who casually shoot the two counterculture heroes and the “hard hats” in New York who attacked a peace demonstration and then formed the base of Richard Nixon’s “silent majority.”

By the mid-1980s a deep sociological transformation was well underway. A second generation of new college students had grown up in families with parents who were themselves college educated and had gone to school in middle class neighborhoods where many of their classmates were the children of college educated parents as well. They consequently had relatively few friends or personal contact with working class kids of their own age.

At same time in the liberal arts and social science departments of many universities professors from 1960's generation were increasingly replacing older academics and changing the character of the instruction. As the social observer Tod Gitlin sarcastically noted about the Reagan era, "While the Right has been busy taking the White House the Left has been marching on the English department." Increasingly, students could take courses and even obtain degrees in new academic disciplines like "critical sociology" and "cultural studies" as well as in new departments of Black, Women, Third World and other studies.

Trading Workers for "The McGovern Coalition"

This had a profound effect on the academic study and understanding of the white working class. The traditional method for studying working class Americans had been serious ethnographic field work in working class workplaces or communities. In the 1960's there were dozens of books and articles reporting such research published every year by sociologists and cultural anthropologists. By the late 1980's, however, this had declined to a literal handful. In their place, in the new departments of cultural and critical studies, the culture of the working class was studied instead through the analytical "deconstruction" of popular culture materials like music videos, films, documents, novels, street art, poetry, dance, nightclub acts and similar "social texts."

By the mid-2,000's, this transformation had reached quite extreme levels. On one occasion after I delivered a presentation about the white working class to a session of a conference organized by one of the several academic associations that are devoted to "working class studies" for example, I asked the audience of 50 or 60 how many of them were engaged in actual field studies of working class people in their jobsites or communities and not a single hand was raised. I then asked how many were in the traditional empirical disciplines of sociology or cultural anthropology and again not a single hand was raised. I later found that the most common discipline of the members of the association was History followed by English and Literature and then the new departments of critical or cultural studies. At the end of the conference I remarked, perhaps impolitely, to the conference organizer that I found it rather ironic that in a conference dedicated to "working class studies" there seemed to be no one who was actually out in the field studying working class Americans.

This inevitably had a profound effect on the Democratic Party. A shift away from the white working class had actually been evident even in the early 1970's when the 1974 Democratic bi-convention deprived the AFL-CIO of its customary position in the party hierarchy in favor of a new system of proportional representation for groups like African-Americans and Women. By the early 2,000's, when the "storming the gates" rebellion of young college-educated Democrats emerged to challenge the Clintonian "third way/Republican light" strategy, the participants quickly focused on the idea that a new Democratic majority coalition could be created based on minorities, women, youth and the college educated. The book that was most often cited as support for this possibility—Ruy Teixeira and John Judis's, *The Emerging Democratic Majority*—quickly became understood as endorsing the idea that this new coalition did not require the support of the white working class.

This was profoundly ironic because the book itself clearly and emphatically stated exactly the opposite – that a solid Democratic majority could not be created without retaining the support of at least 40% of the white working class that at that time still represented a majority of the

electorate. Without the white working class, Teixeira and Judis argued that what remained should properly be described as “The McGovern Coalition” referring to the coalition McGovern assembled in the 1974 presidential election.

This should have been an absolutely terrifying statement since George McGovern received **only 37% of the popular vote in that year and lost a stunning 48 states**. But few of the advocates of the new coalition strategy had bothered to carefully read the book and simply assumed that heroic efforts to increase the registration and participation of groups like youth, people of color and single women could overcome all obstacles to success.

The elections of 2008 and 2012 seemed to validate the emerging democratic majority idea – although, in fact, Obama actually did win about 40% of the white working class vote in 2008 and then in 2012 ran against a wealthy, decidedly uncharismatic plutocrat whose wife owned and trained thoroughbred horses as a hobby and who actually had elevators in his garage for his upscale cars.

It was thus a tremendous shock to many Democrats when Donald Trump successfully harnessed the profound discontent that had been building in working class America and created a new majority coalition. The “blue wall” of working class Democrats in the rust belt states that Hillary Clinton’s campaign was relying on simply collapsed.

Why Workers Stereotype Democrats and Why Educated Progressives Stereotype Workers in Return

Democratic commentators responded to this defection in two distinct ways. Some went into working class towns and rural areas and brought back sympathetic journalistic reports from roadside diners and VFW meeting halls about the legitimate discontents among these voters and their sense of abandonment by the Democratic Party. For vast numbers of the woke/social justice left, on the other hand, the election results were argued to clearly prove that anyone who voted for Trump was a bitter racist who would never join a Democratic majority.

To understand why this latter view is now held by many on the Democratic left with such absolute certainty and bitter intensity it is necessary to recognize several basic sociological facts about how social and political ideologies operate.

First, when a certain set of views is held by virtually everyone in a particular community those views cease to seem like opinions and come to be perceived as “*obvious common sense*” or “*what everybody just knows.*” People with different views are viewed as not just wrong, but as basically “crazy.”

In working class and rural communities the basic interlocking set of values that underlie cultural traditionalism have this character. Respect for religious values, patriotism and support for the institutions of local business and government are so near-universally accepted that they seem self-evidently “right” and “good.” In these communities a 16 year old high school student who suddenly declares himself or herself to be an atheist or a Marxist is therefore not viewed as simply expressing an unpopular point of view but as being “*just plain crazy.*” After all, people will say, “*No sensible person can really believe crazy stuff like that.*”

It is this social mechanism that makes all liberals or democrats appear completely unacceptable and easy for working class people to accept the stereotypes offered by the Republican propagandists. Without any personal contact with college educated Democrats working class people can easily accept the idea that someone who supports a democratic socialist like Bernie Sanders has the same ideology as Hugo Chavez in Venezuela or that because Minnesota representative Ilhan Omar is a Muslim she must share many views with Osama Bin Laden. These stereotypes can seem entirely plausible when a working class person has absolutely no personal experience with a particular group of people. Without any personal experience to rely on, the mind resorts to creating what are essentially stereotypes of the democratic coalition – *“the bitter black militant,” “the radical student,” “the condescending liberal.”*

It is easy to perceive this process working in the culture of working class and rural communities but it becomes more difficult to recognize it in a person’s own culture. The psychological process is, however, exactly the same.

We are now in the second and third generations of college students who grew up in homes with college educated parents, went to school with classmates similar to themselves, attended university classes taught by teachers who shared their outlook and then went on to get jobs in the network of think tanks, progressive social organizations and liberal media companies that dominate the intellectual infrastructure of the Democratic Party without ever having had any meaningful, intimate contact with working class people or the need to work and socialize with people who hold culturally traditional values and attitudes.

In this social world a wide range of woke/social justice views do not seem like opinions that can be reasonably doubted or debated but as hard social realities that *“any decent person simply just understands.”* From this perspective the working class person who asserts that they are not racist because they judge people as individuals is not expressing a social perspective that is rooted in their culture but is rather directly exposing their inherent racism.

This perspective is then reinforced by another aspect of the way that people perceive social class. When a person is asked to visualize a social group that they are personally acquainted with, they will mentally generate a composite image of several specific individuals. When they are asked to visualize a group they do not know personally, on the other hand, they will instead create an image based on what they have seen in the media. If most college educated people are asked to visualize *“a Japanese businessman,”* for example, they will create a rough mental image (most likely set in modern Tokyo) that is based on photos they have seen in the business press, and on TV shows and movies rather than on any personal experience with such people. And finally, if they are asked to visualize a completely unfamiliar kind of person such as *“a Samoan businessman”* they will not be able to generate any mental image at all. They will logically recognize that people of this type must indeed exist but they will not be able to generate any visual image of them.

The same process occurs with groups of voters. When many college educated people are asked to visualize *“white working class Trump supporters”* they quickly create a mental image based on the many photographs and videos they have seen of the people at Trump’s rallies – a mental image that is typically of middle-aged, heavy-set men and square-jawed women with MAGA hats and angry looks on their face. On the other hand If they are asked to visualize *“white*

working class Biden supporters” or “white, blue collar Democrats,” no vivid mental image at all will come to mind. Like Samoan businessmen, they will logically recognize that such people do exist but they will seem less vividly real or substantial than the Trump supporters.

No matter how many sympathetic articles or profiles about particular individuals that these people read they are rejected as irrelevant. Without any personal experience with non-MAGA working class people college educated individuals form a general mental model of the group and how it thinks which they then treat as true – the image of white working class people as all being “really” like the ones they see in the Trump rallies.

It is this series of social and psychological processes that leads many “woke” progressives to feel comfortable in dismissing **all** white working class voters as racists and rejecting the value of seeking to persuade some who voted for Trump to vote Democratic instead. As Steve Phillips, a leading exponent of this view very vividly put it, seeking white working class votes is *“a complete waste of time, effort, money and breath.”*

After all, as Mystal argued, *“Beating Haitians while beaming about mass deportation is probably the exact kind of policy that makes Biden tolerable to non-college-educated [i.e. working class] voters in swing states.”*

If Left Democrats Won’t Change Their Minds About Workers, What Alternative Strategy is Available?

The political consequences of this are profound. The political strategy that activists who dismiss the need to win greater working class support propose are variations on the idea that a “new majority” of people of color, youth, single women and college educated voters exists and can successfully be mobilized.

Elie Mystal clearly expresses the view :

Democrats have to turn out every Black or brown voter they can find; they have to turn out every white college educated voter who rejects bigotry; and they have to ensure that those voters will have frictionless access to the ballot and that their votes will actually be counted. Some of those voters of color will vote Republican, of course, but healthy majorities will vote for Democrats if Democrats give them something to vote for. **Overpowering Republicans with enthusiasm and turnout is the only way to beat them,** because trying to appease them is both morally intolerable and strategically foolish.

This view is held as a matter of faith by many activists and cannot be categorically refuted because it is always possible to assume that progressives can somehow mobilize historically unprecedented turnout and generate unprecedented progressive sentiment among “new majority” voters who currently do not vote or evince left-progressive sentiments on opinion surveys.

In reality, on the other hand, current demographic data shows that the critical Senate races in 2024 are in states with major white working class majorities. As the data from the major “States of Change” project reveals:

The top 8 competitive Senate seats for 2024 are all Democratic-held: West Virginia, Montana, Ohio, Arizona, Nevada, Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania.

The white working class share of eligible voters in these states is as follows:

West Virginia – 74 percent.

Montana – 60 percent.

Ohio and Wisconsin – 58 percent.

Michigan – 55 percent.

Pennsylvania – 53 percent

The other two states, Arizona and Nevada are “only” around 40 percent white working class but the overall working class share of eligibles in these states is astronomical: 71 and 75 percent, respectively.²

The idea that the next elections for these senate seats (which hold the balance of power in the senate) can be won without Democrats retaining a substantial minority of white working class support is difficult to sustain – it is a triumph of faith over evidence.

The struggle to prevent a Republican senatorial majority in 2024 therefore requires Democrats who recognize this reality to accept two basic facts.

1. A substantial majority of the Democratic left will not accept the strategy of seeking to create a broad Democratic coalition that includes non-MAGA rural and working class voters.
2. Democrats who do accept this strategy must seek instead to encourage the creation political formations and alliances that represent the distinct “culturally traditional but non-extremist” sector of the working class and that will support Democratic candidates who incorporate those values into a coalition platform.

Major elements of the Democratic left are locked in a left/progressive information bubble and will never change their dismissal of culturally traditional but non-extremist rural/working class voters. Democratic candidates who disagree must seek alternative ways to win these workers’ support.

How this can be done is further discussed in a forthcoming Strategy Memo:

The Non-Extremist Wing of the Working Class Needs a National Political Alliance That Champions its Distinct Values.

¹<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/states-of-change-3/>