

Can We Please Stop Calling These People Populists?

By David Brooks

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Over the past 20 years or so many of us social observer types have been writing about the horrific chasms separating the educated class (people with college degrees) from the working class (people without).

Some of these chasms involve basic health outcomes. People without college degrees die about eight years sooner than people with four-year degrees.

Some of the chasms involve family structure. Women with only a high school diploma or less are about five times as likely to have children out of wedlock as women with a college degree. Some of the chasms are sociological. People with only high school diplomas or less are much more likely to say they have no close friends. They are more likely to live in towns where social capital is collapsing and the young are fleeing.

Some of these chasms involve educational outcomes. By sixth grade, the children of poor families are performing four grade levels lower than the children of affluent families. As Daniel Markovits of Yale has pointed out, the education gap between affluent and non-affluent students today is greater than the gap between white and Black people in the era of Jim Crow. If America elected a populist as president, you would expect him to devote his administration to addressing these inequities, to boosting the destinies of working-class Americans. But that's not what President Trump is doing. He seems to have no plans to narrow the education chasms, no plans to narrow the health outcome chasms or the family structure chasms. He has basically no plans to revive the communities that have been decimated by postindustrialization. Sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter Get expert analysis of the news and a guide to the big ideas shaping the world every weekday morning. Get it sent to your inbox. Why is that? The simplest answer is that Trump really seems not to give a crap about the working class. Trump is not a populist. He campaigns as a populist, but once he has power, he is the betrayer of populism.

What's going on here is not a working-class revolt against the elites. All I see is one section of the educated elite going after another section of the educated elite. This is like a civil war in a fancy prep school in which the sleazy kids are going after the pretentious kids. Look at who is running this administration. The president is an Ivy League-educated real estate developer. The vice president is an Ivy League-educated former venture capitalist. Elon Musk, the emperor of DOGE, is an Ivy League-educated

billionaire.

Look at the people working with Musk. Luke Farritor is a 23-year-old who used artificial intelligence to decipher an ancient Greek scroll. Ethan Shaotran is a 22-year-old Harvard student. Gavin Kliger wrote a Substack post called “Why I Gave Up a Seven Figure Salary to Save America.” These people are not exactly Joe the Plumber.

And look at the programs they are going after. They’re not going after the programs where big budget savings can be realized — like the entitlement programs. They’re going after the programs where they think highly educated progressives work. They’re going after the foreign aid community, the scientific community, the NGO community, the universities, the Department of Education and the Kennedy Center.

They are seeking to destroy the wokesters (the word they use for highly educated progressives) and D.E.I. (the term they use for what highly educated progressives do).

In 2018 the organization More in Common released the “Hidden Tribes” survey. It found that two groups were driving American politics, which it called progressive activists and devoted conservatives. These groups are at opposite ends of the political spectrum, but they have a lot in common. They are the richest of all the groups in the More in Common typology. They are the whitest of all the groups. They are among the best educated of all the groups. When I wrote a column about the bitter feud between these two elite groups, I headlined it “The Rich White Civil War.” That headline still accurately describes what we’re seeing.

How did we get in this mess? Well, starting about 60 years ago, a group variously labeled the Bobos or the creative class began establishing hegemony over commanding institutions of American life — the universities, the media, the foundations, publishing and entertainment. There are two things you should know about this class. First, like most groups, its members dislike intellectual diversity and tend to impose a stifling progressive orthodoxy in the places they dominate. Second, more than most groups, they see themselves as the moral uplifters of society, on everything from environmental attitudes to sexual ethics, and enjoy preaching in order to enlighten their morally backward countrymen.

Progressives exercise hegemony over these institutions but not total control. Every year, for example, elite colleges admit a few conservative students. They often have one or two token conservatives on the faculty, whom they can roll out for panel discussions. These rare conservatives tend to form

dissident communities with one another. In the 1980s there was The Dartmouth Review, which gave us Laura Ingraham and Dinesh D'Souza. Later, The Princeton Tory gave us Pete Hegseth. Today there is The Claremont Review of Books, one of the intellectual mouthpieces of Trumpism.

There is something about being a rare conservative in a sea of progressive insularity that tends to drive people crazy. I get it. When I worked at National Review and on the Wall Street Journal editorial page, some of my New York neighbors would give me the Hitler salute when I got on the elevator. It used to make me want to join the John Birch Society just to spite them. The right-wing elite college dissidents often feel besieged, embattled. They are often both merry pranksters and also cranky, bitter and oppositional. They catastrophize. They look out on those hellscapes of Hanover, N.H.; Princeton, N.J.; and Claremont, Calif., and they decide Western civilization is in ruins. Above all else, they seek social revenge on those who condescend to them.

And here's the crucial fact about many of them. Many of them are not pro-conservative; they are anti-left. There's a big difference. They do not focus on building and reforming the civic institutions that conservatives believe are crucial to any healthy society. They focus on tearing down whatever institutions the left occupies.

Conservatives believe in constant and incremental change. Nihilists believe in sudden and chaotic disruption. Conservatism came into being opposing the arrogant radicalism of the French Revolution. The Trump people are basically the French revolutionaries in red hats — there are the same crude distinctions between good and evil, the same contempt for existing arrangements, the same descent into fanaticism, the same tendency to let the revolution devour its own.

You might say that progressives have it coming. The moment they began shutting conservative and working-class voices out of their institutions, they were inviting a backlash, and now here it is.

But here's the problem: As F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote in "The Great Gatsby," rich people are careless. They break things. The members of the Trumpist elite think they're going after the educated elites at U.S.A.I.D. and the N.I.H., but you know who's really going to pay the price? It's the woman in Namibia who is going to die of AIDS because PEPFAR has been eviscerated. It's the child in Ohio who's going to die of cancer because medical research was slowed. It's the future citizens of America whose lives will be worse because their state institutions no longer function. It's the working-

class communities that will continue to languish because Trump ignores their main challenges and focuses instead on culture war distractions.

Here's the essence of Trumpism: It's to be blithely unconcerned that people without a college degree die about eight years sooner or that hundreds of thousands of Africans might now die of AIDS but to go into paroxysms of moral panic because of who competes in a high school girls' swim meet.

Sure, the upper reaches of the federal work force are generally left or center left, as you'd expect from a group that possesses a plenitude of advanced degrees. But they are also mostly nonpolitical patriots who often work 60-hour weeks to keep us safe, to save lives, to make America work. This is a complexity the Trumpists seem incapable of contemplating. They are people who would destroy your home because they don't like your lawn sign.

I'm not a fan of populism, but real populism would be better than the right-wing elite nihilists who are running the country now.