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OPINION

Woke-Lash: Should the Cultural Left Check its Privilege? | Opinion

How Woke Culture Fuels Trump

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ON 12/15/20 AT 5:30 AM EST



An ironic upside of the Trump era was that some topsiders noticed the common experience of those suffering life's downsides. On the eve of the 2016 election, the *Saturday Night Live* skit "Black Jeopardy" famously highlighted the shared experience of the blue-collar "Trump voter" (played by Tom Hanks) and many Black voters, beginning with the contestants' common skepticism of the powerful. Later, T'Challa, the African king from *Black Panther* (Chadwick Boseman), performed poorly on "Black Jeopardy." Despite his race, Boseman's aristocratic character was more alienated from American Blacks than Hanks's bubba in a MAGA hat.

In the Trump era, *SNL* was exceptional for lampooning Donald Trump and his enablers but pulling punches with blue-collar voters. Comedy Central's offerings were more typical. In 2016, Fox News ran a bit from Manhattan's Chinatown that mocked residents along racial lines. It justly earned mass criticism, including a "masterful takedown" by a comedian on *The Daily Show*. But the same show regularly aired a series ridiculing Trump voters with interviews that punched

down and promoted stereotypes of them. As election day 2020 neared, the host was celebrated as the "king of humiliating Trump fans."

Punch-down liberalism reinforces political tribalism and sparks an under-discussed counterculture of "woke-lash." That "woke-lash" helps explain why Democrats failed to achieve a sweeping repudiation of Trump and floundered down-ballot in this year's election. Progressive ambitions were again stymied by whites less likely to live in cities, work in the information economy or identify with coastal culture. The white class gap—the difference between how college-educated whites and non-college whites vote—was greater in 2020 than even in 2016, which saw the largest class divide since 1964, when the coalitions were inverted and blue-collar whites were Democrats. (For perspective, this class voting divide was more than 200 percent greater than the gender gap among whites in 2020.) America's most affluent and most highly educated counties have shifted from voting mostly Republican to mostly Democratic.

The class that chronicles America's divisions continuously underestimates how much of what polarizes us is *also* about them. Last year, a study found that those who read more news and post more about it online were *more* likely to disparage the other side than less engaged Americans. Unlike Republicans, the more education Democrats attained the less likely they were to correctly gauge the views of the other side. Democrats with a postgraduate degree were three times less accurate in describing Republican stances than Democrats who did not graduate high school. Democrats were also more likely to have like-minded friends. Half of liberal Democrats, compared to a third of conservative

Republicans, also oppose a family member marrying someone of the other political tribe.

The academy, press and "professional Left" activists are disproportionately highly educated, news junkies, engaged online, liberal and live within a like-minded bubble. For generations, this class has largely blamed downscale whites for their own rejection of Democrats—it's their racism, their sexism, their ignorance...their fault!

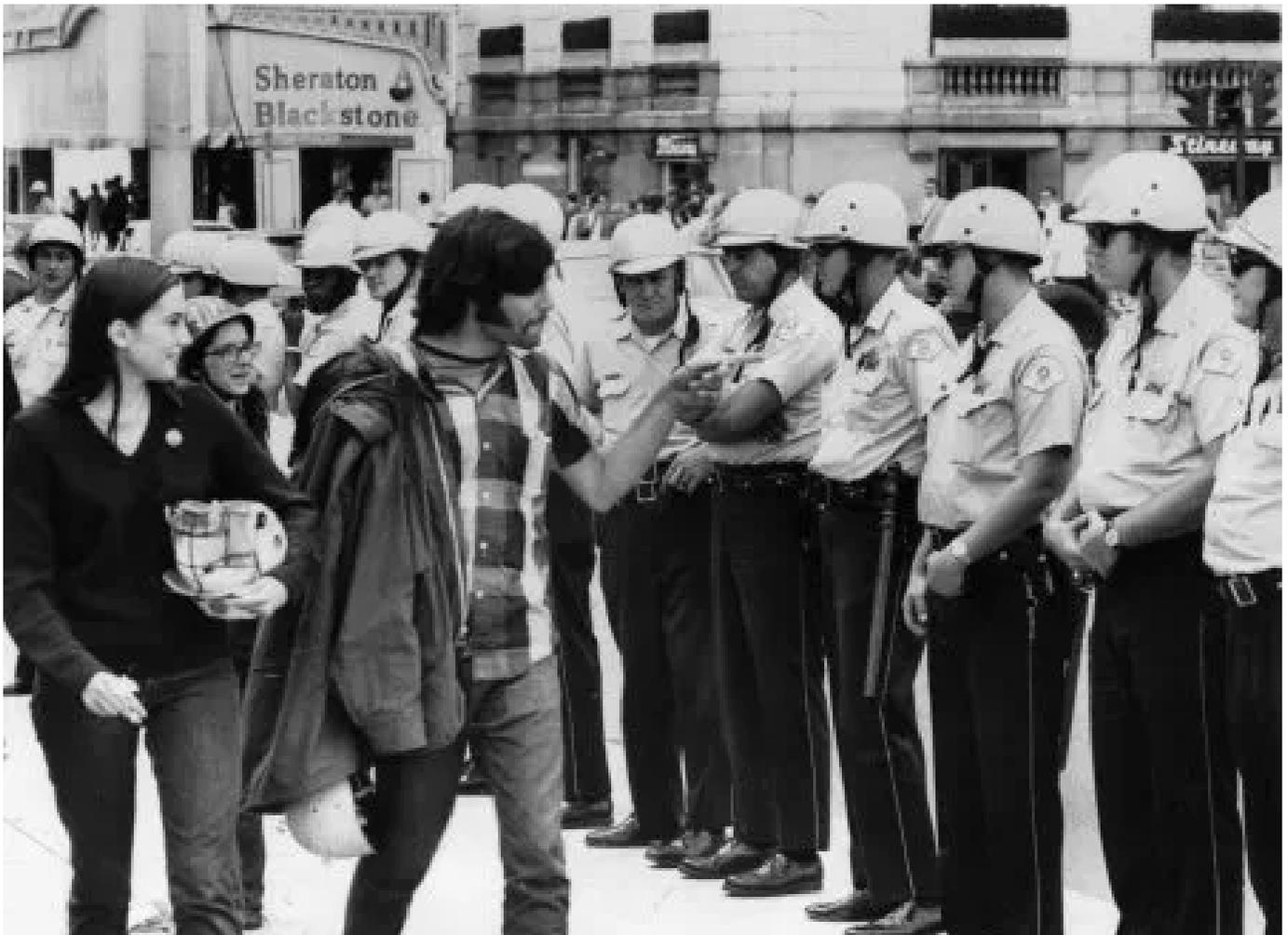
The censure regularly comes from a cultural class, brimming with professionals and technocrats, that chronicles an American experience foreign to it. The prestige press is populated by elite-school graduates at a higher rate than even the federal judiciary or Fortune 500 CEOs, but is tasked with understanding a nation where most people lack even a college degree.

One sees this upscale liberalism in the consumerism that particularly correlates with Democrats: shopping at Lululemon, Whole Foods and Apple and following *The New York Times*, MSNBC and NPR. It produces a mass culture powerful enough to inspire corporate "woke washing" and overwhelm Barack Obama's warning to "get over" woke "purity." It also motivates a third of Hispanics to regularly back Republicans, as they did with Trump in 2020.

Woke culture, and its resulting backlash, is why "defund the police" can be absent from Democratic platforms but still can be "killing our party" and undercutting reform, as House Majority Whip Jim Clyburn cautioned, "just as 'burn, baby, burn' destroyed our movement back in the '60s."

That fact—that militancy crippled '60s liberalism—is oft-forgotten today. A viewer of the recent film *The Trial of the Chicago 7* will walk away with no sense of why the 1968 Chicago protests backfired—why a majority of Democrats and Vietnam "doves" sided with the mayor and police over the activists and why, even after most Americans had turned against the war, the antiwar movement remained less popular than the Vietnam War.

That disconnect fueled resentment against "rich kid radicals" and "limousine liberals"—a backlash against a perception of smug cultural betters issuing liberal sanctimony without sacrifice.



1968: A group of hippies taunting policemen during the trial of the Chicago Seven, a group of radicals arrested during the protests against the Vietnam war at the Democratic National Convention.

This impression reflected the class shift that came with the campus New Left. In 1968, as Bobby Kennedy sought to unite Blacks and blue-collar whites, Gene McCarthy (the liberal collegian favorite) warned matriculants to keep in mind that RFK appealed to "the less intelligent and less educated people." Said Arthur Schlesinger, McCarthy was declaring "a revolution against the proletariat."

At the time, left-leaning columnist Joseph Kraft conceded that the media is "dominated by the outlook of upper-income whites" and not "ordinary Americans." Much like reporters suddenly noticing working-class whites with Trump, blue-collar whites were "rediscovered" in '69—to quote a *Washington Post* story that year on elites' remembering the "plain people," only to forget them again.

By 1971, bigoted and buffoonish Archie Bunker premiered on *All in the Family*. That same year, Senator Henry Jackson spoke of "some" Democrats who were "indifferent" or even "hostile" to working people, with their "snide jokes about 'hardhats' and [white] 'ethnics'" and "fashionable clichés about how workers have grown fat" and "racist." Socialist Michael Harrington later echoed the anti-communist Democrat. The new commentariat, Harrington noted, was removed from the "marginality and even joblessness" of earlier social critics and that class shift "may have made them less sensitive to the daily struggles of less favored people."

Meanwhile, in the year Archie Bunker debuted, America ran a trade deficit for the first time since 1893. Blue-collar whites' social standing began eroding along with their prospects.

The cultural class has since tended to overlook its role in polarization. It impairs its own authority by engaging as a combatant in our culture wars. It contributes to many progressives' seeming inability to learn from past mistakes. It shapes

Americans' conception of what the "woke" deem tolerable. In August, NPR spotlighted a book aggrandizing looting. It generated blowback. It was also no outlier. NPR separately suggested the impropriety of the word "riot" because the "definition could be rooted in racism"—though many of the rioters were white.

Such "woke" moralism spurs more resentment when the moralists ignore their own elevated station. A *Times* reporter earns a middle-class lifestyle. But her societal sway eclipses that of an electrician. Many Democratic candidates who seek to address blue-collar prospects rue their side's cultural baggage but shy from incurring the wrath of "cancel culture."

That progressive puritanism hunts heretics instead of seeking converts, to borrow a phrase from Mark Shields. This year, leading progressives lashed out at Bernie Sanders for accepting the endorsement of podcaster Joe Rogan. That fixation on transgressions estranges the millions who lack Rogan's power but, like him, still hold progressive views despite having erred or breached liberal orthodoxy. Lesser transgressions ("microaggressions"), such as forgetting one's "attention to the inequity" by referring to a classical composer by his surname, continually induce Democratic headwinds.

That culture of rebuke often simplifies complex phenomena. The worst, though very real, reasons for people's charged politics (racism or chauvinism) often become the *only* reasons. The charge of racism historically had a way of dismissing all else that concerned bygone blue-collar Democrats, from sinking cities to rising disorder. This reductionist mentality has threaded through euphemisms for bigotry, from '60s "white flight" to '90s "angry white men" to

to "white privilege" today.

Recent Democratic leaders have also explained the other political tribe by its worst tendencies—from Hillary Clinton's views on "deplorables" to Barack Obama explaining that some people "cling to guns or religion or antipathy." To quote Ta-Nehisi Coates after Mitt Romney's "47 percent" remark, "Any politician who starts from the assumption that half the country is out of reach is an embarrassment." Clinton and Obama were contrite (Romney too). But as liberals argued with Romney, the "Kinsley gaffe" betrayed more.

Blame-down elitism especially harms liberals because they claim concern for workers and the superior open mind. The insult can burn more when prominent voices tell those barely making ends meet or doing unsung work that their life struggle is actually a "privilege" because they are white, mocking even their alienation and adversity.

As the adage goes, people remember the way you made them feel. Liberal censoriousness and scorn frequently seems like a mute button to those who already feel unheard. It helps clarify Trump's populist appeal not as a conservative but as an anti-liberal. The culture of rebuke also provides the psychological benefit of offloading the responsibility for political division from those who have societal status to those who do not. Or put another way: do some progressives also need to "check their privilege?"

David Paul Kuhn is author of The Hardhat Riot: Nixon, New York City, and the Dawn of the White Working-Class Revolution, one of The New York Times' "100 Notable Books of 2020."