Steven Sampson: Angry white males as suffering subjects

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*"They get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations."* (Barack Obama, in a speech to donors during his 2008 campaign)

The above remarks, made while Obama was running for president, are eight years old. But they echo Hillary Clinton’s critique of Donald Trump’s supporters as “deplorables.” Both Obama and Clinton were criticized as elitist for their remarks, and both quickly apologized ([Pilkington 2008](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/apr/14/barackobama.uselections2008); Seelye and Zelenyi 2008).. Perhaps they are a key to the left’s shock over Trump’s victory. Trump’s supporters—“the forgotten people,” as he calls them—were not shocked. They were confident he would win, as was Trump himself. A few weeks ago at the annual American Anthropological Association (AAA) meeting in Minneapolis, I sat in an auditorium full of dejected anthropologists, listening to our colleagues assess the US elections, Trump, and Trumpism.

Why did Trump win? Or more precisely, how did Hillary lose? Why were so many experts so wrong about Trump’s support? How will Trump’s victory affect the lives of ordinary Americans? Perhaps we need a major research grant on the Anthropology of Angry White Men. Perhaps we should drop all this Whiteness Studies; we need Angry White Studies*.* Perhaps the nature of white rage is the core issue here, for rage can denote both a desire for justice against repression or discrimination, but also an anxiety about dispossession, lost entitlements, and downward mobility. It was this second kind of rage that Trump mobilized. (Regrettably, an AAA panel on rage, which I also attended with *Focaal* founder Don Kalb, had only eight people in attendance.)

Although Hillary Clinton received two million more votes than Trump, it is Trump’s support that still requires some explanation: What about the 49 percent of college-educated white women who voted for a man who repeatedly insults women? What about the 29 percent of Hispanics, immigrants, or children of immigrants who voted for Trump and his “Build That Wall” policy? What about the 217 counties, many in the Rust Belt, that had voted for Obama four years earlier but who now voted for the Republican Trump? Had they suddenly become racist? Meanwhile, the US press was forced to publish firsthand “confessions” of unlikely Trump supporters, with titles such as “I am a Muslim woman and an immigrant and I voted for Trump” ([Nomani 2016](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2016/11/10/im-a-muslim-a-woman-and-an-immigrant-i-voted-for-trump/?utm_term=.1e561095ac92)). Apparently, all these people were so desperate for a change that they were willing to risk a Donald Trump to get it ([Cilizza 2016](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/11/14/one-of-hillary-clintons-top-aides-nailed-exactly-why-she-lost)).

How should anthropologists understand the Trump phenomenon? Do we just say that he “manipulated” people’s weaknesses? That he “let their racism come to the surface”? Is that it? Were all his 60 million supporters suffering from some kind of social anxiety? Were they sick? Clearly, Trump skillfully captured the fears and aspirations of 60 million US voters, especially those affected by neoliberal restructuring, the exit of industrial jobs, and immigration. His support came from people with the most faith in the American dream: white workers and lower middle classes (the latter whom Hugh Gusterson, in his presentation at the AAA roundtable, called the pharmacists, building contractors, and car dealers). These people had either lost their jobs and even homes or had seen their wages and household incomes decline. They had watched as local businesses closed, services declined, and their cities and institutions “hollowed out” (Murray 2012; Putnam 2015; Vance 2016). Trump’s supporters were not just the downwardly mobile or down-and-out. They were also thosein fear of this downward mobility, those with what Barbara Ehrenreich called “fear of falling.” Hillary Clinton’s voters were quite different, dwelling on the coasts or in urban areas; they were cosmopolitan, progressive elites. Or they were various minorities who sought the kind of “recognition” that would help them step into the American dream of upward mobility; their fear was not so much that of losing a piece of the dream but trying to obtain it in the first place.

Trump’s core issues were loss of American jobs, elite arrogance in Washington, US decline, the costs of Obamacare, immigration, and security against terrorism. Hillary focused on Trump’s character, as a man not fit to be president. But she also played identity politics. If you are a member of disenfranchised social group X, she declared, then you have to vote for me, the first female president. Trump turned identity on its head, focusing on a range of threatening Others—in the cities, in Washington, coming from abroad. Seeing the immigrant as a threat is not simple racism. As Larissa MacFarquhar (2016) wrote in a *New Yorker* [profile of Trump supporters in West Virginia](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/10/10/in-the-heart-of-trump-country)—one of whom was a third-generation Muslim auto dealer, another a university history professor—immigration *does* change things for the natives, both economically and culturally. Immigrants *will* work harder and for lower wages; they have to. And immigrants bring with them cultural practices that require natives’ adjustment, especially those natives not fortunate enough to be living in elite enclaves, having elite jobs, or wealthy enough to send their kids to private schools or have Latina nannies. It is these kinds of anxieties and adjustments of the native working classes that Hillary ignored or denigrated as racism and that Trump tapped into during his enthusiastic campaign events.

How did we miss the profound discontent that both Trump and Bernie Sanders so skillfully mobilized? Perhaps there lies an ethnographic bias here in the way the media, and we anthropologists, highlight the more exotic and visible identity projects of certain victimized groups while overlooking the “unmarked” white working and petty bourgeois group: those who have been told they “just have to adjust to the new reality.” Perhaps we were too preoccupied with the importance of different cultural identities, searching out “[the first X to do Y](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/opinion/sunday/the-end-of-identity-liberalism.html),” to use Mark Lilla’s (2016) phrase. Working-class whites or small-town shopkeepers suffered from a special kind of cultural anxiety: the anxiety of decline, the fear of falling. It turned out that those who feared falling down the ladder outnumbered those who sought upward mobility through Hillary’s “recognition” project. Trump won. Hillary lost.

We anthropologists have been so preoccupied with “recognition” that we have overlooked the fear of falling. Hence, an ethnography of Trump supporters, those “forgotten people,” should not be based on exposing some kind of social pathology among them. In 2008, Obama saw the white working classes as “bitter,” irrational, or childlike, “clinging” to their guns and religion. But if anthropology teaches us anything, it is that all of us cling to something. Discovering what people “cling” to and how they “cling” is what ethnography is all about. What, indeed, have we anthropologists been clinging to? According to [Terje Tvedt](https://morgenbladet.no/aktuelt/2016/11/trump-journalistikken-og-historiens-slutt) (2016), a Norwegian historian of ideas, we have clung to our universal, liberal, end-of-history narrative. Tvedt documented that the press did not ignore or overlook Trump and his supporters; they were covered extensively. But it was our interpretations of them that were distorted, if not condescending. His supporters were viewed as ignorant or racist or misogynist. “Curing” them of their illness required enlightenment, “awareness raising,” or a job-retraining project that would give them hope (few such interpretations were made of Bernie Sanders supporters, who at best were called “naïve”). In these interpretations, we were clinging to our own grand narrative of modernist rationality, cosmopolitanism, tolerance of diversity, and social uplift. Our explanations of Trump’s support became a medical diagnosis of their “illness.” If his supporters were ill, they could be blamed for being “manipulated” by Trump, and their legitimate concerns and ontological insecurity dismissed out of hand. Funny how everyone with whom we do not agree must somehow be manipulated, misinformed, or blinded.

Studies of the forgotten white underclass by Arlie Hochschild (2016), Nancy Isenberg (2016), J. D. Vance (2016), Larissa MacFarquar, Charles Murray (2012), and Robert Putnam (2015) are a start in understanding how disaffected this group really is. These studies all seem to indicate that these people know what is being done to them by those in government, financial institutions, and the “progressive” media and its commentators. Trump had the ability to tap into the ontology of his supporters. It is reminiscent of Bruce Kapferer’s (1988) analysis of Sri Lankan nationalism: Trump’s “Make America Great Again” platform (now called “MAGA”) becomes an amalgamation of the myth, history, and golden age, expunging the ontological threats that Kapferer describes for Sri Lanka.

Where Hillary’s supporters, many of them in the same precarious class position as Trump’s, saw her as a champion of their of equal opportunity and recognition of their identity, Trump’s voters experienced an ontological threat posed by forces “in Washington,” Wall Street bankers, the mainstream media who highlighted the victimhood of others but ignored theirs, and a cultural elite who have been telling the native working classes they must “adapt” to the new reality and become “tolerant” of immigrants, along with telling us what to eat, where to smoke, and how to raise our kids.

People cling to different things. Some cling to religion, guns, and hatred of elites; we anthropologists cling to modernism, rationality, the importance of “identity,” human rights, and a globalization celebrated as “diversity.” We look for our “suffering subjects” (Robbins 2013), and we hope that by stimulating their “recognition,” by giving them a “voice,” things will get better for them (and that we will feel better). There are all kinds of suffering subjects out there, all of them competing on the “I’m-suffering-more-than-you” market. Trump’s suffering subjects helped him win the election.

The condition of precarity, insecurity, uncertainty, and “fear of falling” is certainly not a US phenomenon, as speakers at the AAA meeting emphasized and as anyone living in Europe can see. Trump and Trumpism are but the latest in a long line of electoral “Fuck You!”’s rendered by the Forgotten Class, of which Brexit is the most recent. Common to these movements is the risk of uncertainty to achieve some kind of change. Uncertainty, insecurity, lost community, fear of others—this is more than just class struggle. It is the stuff of anthropology.

Let me give five suggestions for how anthropology might research the Forgotten People: the code words here are suffering, ontology, morality, “outsiderism,” and vicarious personal experience. First, we need to extend our notion of the “suffering subject” (Robbins 2013). Robbins’s and Don Kulick’s (2006) essays on anthropologists’ obsession with “powerless people” are starting points for rethinking the way we should deal with cultures we want to understand but whose politics we might oppose. Second, let’s do some applied ontology: what kind of ontological world is inhabited by those who want to Make America Great Again, including those American Muslims, Hispanics, or “college-educated white women” who, despite Trump’s rhetoric and supporters, saw him as a solution to their problems? Third, we need a moral anthropology of the election, something that goes beyond seeing Hillary as the candidate of the tolerant and progressive and Trump that of the “deplorables” and racists. What is the moral vision of Trump voters and Tea Party supporters? Can the moral outrage of angry, white, working-class men, those whom Hochschild says have “stood in line” waiting for the American dream, be a legitimate object of inquiry without seeing them as pathological? Surely we anthropologists must address this question without being accused of partisanship. Fourth, we need an anthropology of what Janine Wedel (in her AAA roundtable remarks) has called “outsiderism.” Anthropology has a long tradition of studying anomalous cultural figures. Trump himself was a stranger king, the joker, the trickster, a taboo breaker (Luhrmann 2016), the rebel, and the comedic satirist (Hall et al. 2016 on Trump’s gestures is another example). Both Sanders and Trump reflected these outsider characteristics, while Hillary’s “experience” in Washington was seen as a handicap (we need a conference on “experience as handicap”). Anthropology is well positioned to focus on the outsider, that someone who combines contradictory, taboo-breaking tendencies while mobilizing a broad constituency for change. A focus on “outsiderism” might bring together the anthropological study of emotion, mobilization, and “faith” that both Trump and Sanders so clearly mobilized among their enthusiastic supporters. Finally, let us forget for a moment all the tweets and social media and focus on the real magic of Trump: *his live performances*. Trump was performing “live,” several times a day, and as Kira Hall and colleagues (2016) pointed out, he used not just words but dramatic bodily gestures to get his message across. We need to study that “something” that energized people at his live events; let’s call it charisma.

For the hundreds of anthropologists in Minneapolis, our ostensibly post-racial, progressive agenda had collapsed. But for millions of Trump supporters, the election was a rebirth, a great victory for “the forgotten people.” It was a chance to “save America.” There is nothing pathological about such visions. We need to elaborate how the Forgotten People, the suffering subjects of Trump’s campaign, succeeded in reconfiguring their life experience into a political strategy. Trump did not manipulate his supporters so much as they manipulated him. Trump was their vehicle for their “practical ontology,” their politics of ontological restructuring. But as an entertainer, Trump understood ontological insecurity. He understood what people cling to and why they cling. It’s time to get out there and find out what Trump knew that we didn’t. We all cling to something.

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