

Standing Together If Apart

Responding To Globalization

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January 15, 2017 Picture: Shannon Stapleton/Reuters.

"This article is part of The Critique's January/February 2017 Issue "Stick It To The Man: A Year Of Anglo-American Populist Revolt Against A Changing Culture And An Obtuse Political Establishment."

The 2016 election focused on important issues: inequality, globalization, immigration, race and the problems with the US political system, but Trump's victory was not due to a cultural revolt of poor white men. Rather, it was white people, in general, who voted for Trump and rich white people, in particular. White people in this country may feel like they are not getting what they deserve but, especially from the desert-based moral perspective many Trump supporters endorse, the problem lies primarily in these expectations. White people in the US are amongst the global, as well as local, elite; they are amongst the best off in this country and the world. Manufacturing declined in the 1970's and the fact that a college education is important for economic success is well-publicized. It is only if we care about people, irrespective of desert, that we should care about poor white men (along with poor people of other races and sexes). If we do care about everyone, however, we should not support Trump's proposals. Constraining globalization across the board, or even pursuing it only insofar as it promotes US interests, will likely harm many people (including poor white men in the US). Of course, we have been pursuing globalization without concern for wider distributional consequences for a long time. The results have been devastating. Many Trump supporters recognize this. Moreover, Trump's supporters have many other legitimate concerns. Our political system has serious issues that are difficult to fix. We should not gloss over, or try to suppress, the deep moral and political disagreements that do divide our country. But we should care about all people irrespective of their views and work to make globalization fair for all. In what follows, I will defend this contention in more detail.

1. Just Expectations and Just Desert: Poor White Men?

Unlike many previous elections, the 2016 election focused on issues that really matter to a lot of people's basic life prospects. Globalization and immigration have, for instance, been reshaping the face of the planet; increasing the movement of people, money, and goods around the world at an unprecedented rate and, while some have benefited, many have not. Inequality in many nations, including the US, has been rising. Although the World Bank reports that the proportion of those in extreme poverty has been falling for decades, the number may be stagnant or may have even increased. [1] Although the World Bank continually changes poverty lines and measurement methods, at least 10% of the world's population lives below their lowest poverty line – on less than what \$1.90 buys in the US per day. [1], [2], [3] A much greater proportion of the world's population lives under the higher poverty line of \$3.10/day, and 71% live on less than \$10 per day. [3]

But it is a myth that the election results are solely a consequence of a cultural revolt of poor white males due to globalization's impact in the United States. It is certainly true that, as manufacturing has shifted to developing countries and the US has

become more of a service, and information, based economy, many have lost their jobs. Moreover, NAFTA may well have hastened the process. [4], [5] Yet, it is not clear that free trade has had a large impact overall on the decline in manufacturing. [4], [5], [6], [7], [8], [9]. In any case, the average Trump supporter earns more than the average Hillary supporter. [10] And it was white people in general, not just poor white men, who voted for Trump. [11] At least, poor white males are no more responsible for the fact that Trump won than any other segment of the population that voted for him (or failed to vote against him). Many poor people and minorities who preferred Hilary in the polls did not vote at all.[1]

There is some evidence that Trump supporters feel like they are not getting what they deserve (respect, power, jobs, stuff). [13] Many seem to believe that their problems are due to affirmative action and what they think are unjustified entitlements that others receive. [14] They also seem to care a great deal about personal responsibility and just deserts. [15] [16]

[1] It is not even clear that there are good strategic reasons for the left to focus on helping poor white males post-election. The fact that poor white males were swing voters in the election does not even make it very likely that they will be the swing voters in the next election. In previous elections issues such as abortion, gay rights, and gun control have had more salience than globalization or immigration. [12] Different constituencies will likely influence future elections even if the underlying concerns of poor white males remain unresolved [See Figure 1. Graph in Jonathan Haidt and Emily Ekins, "Donald Trump supporters think about morality differently than other voters. Here's how", Vox].

If white people in the US do not think they are getting what they deserve, the problem may lie, in part, with their expectations. [17] Although their relative position may have declined in recent years, white people born in the US are, on average, some of the luckiest people in the world. [18] And, in the US, whites have more money, education, are healthier, and live longer than the general population. [19], [20] Even though a greater proportion of the poor are white, the chances of being poor if you are white are much lower than the chances of being a poor black or Hispanic person [21].

I believe we should care about the genuine needs of all poor people but, insofar as Trump supporters stress personal responsibility, I cannot see why they would focus

on poor, uneducated, white males upset about the lack of opportunity in the manufacturing sector, in particular. Manufacturing declined significantly in the US before those of working age were even in high school. It is not news that a decent education is necessary to flourish in the modern economy. It is better to care about poor people in general, irrespective of race, even if they bear some responsibility for their plights.

That is why I think the problem with Trump's proposals is that they are likely to harm many people (irrespective of race, sex, or ideology), but even poor white people will probably not do better if Trump follows through with his promises. On average, white people might benefit by removing some entitlements but, even if this is the case, it is not true across the board. Likely, poor whites will suffer even more as we scale back the services that do benefit them along with other poorer segments of society. Also at great risk are the middle class, disabled, and elderly who secure the largest portion of entitlements. [24] This illustrates a second sense in which many poor white people who voted for Trump may have unreasonable expectations (many of these people think that his policies will benefit them, they will not).

2. Radical Break? The History of Globalization and our Political System

In any case, I believe Trump's proposals to tax companies investing abroad or offshoring production, label China a currency manipulator, renegotiate or exit trade agreements, expel migrants, and build a wall to keep them out will be devastating for many in the U.S and abroad. [25] Taxing companies investing abroad or offshoring production would likely save some jobs but at the cost of decreasing growth. Overseas services can bring significant cost savings to those in many other industries. [26] Labelling a country a currency manipulator would, normally, just lead to negotiations over how it sets its exchange rate. But, we are already negotiating exchange rates with China and they no longer peg their currency to the U.S dollar. [27] If the U.S exits trade agreements, like NAFTA, that will likely harm many of our companies and consumers without creating significant growth in U.S manufacturing. [28] If manufacturing returns to the U.S, it will likely do so due to mechanization, not protectionism. [29] It is hard to imagine Trump embracing thoroughly protectionist policies, but the consequences could be devastating. [30], [31], [32] Even where a

wall exists, and the border has been militarized, illegal immigration continues unabated. [33] [34]

Even if Trump's policies do not mark a radical break from previous administrations' policies, many people (of all races) in this country and abroad are likely to suffer. I believe Trump's main motivation is to pursue trade and economic policies in general whenever they benefit us (where he does not take "us" to include everyone). This is pretty much a continuation of the status quo. The U.S and other rich countries have often embraced globalization where it benefits them, but not otherwise. There are, for instance, still large tariffs against agriculture in developing countries where most of the global poor work. [35] We already have a wall to keep Central and South American immigrants out and a cumbersome legal immigration process to keep other migrants out. [36]

"Trump's main motivation is to pursue trade and economic policies in general whenever they benefit us. This is pretty much a continuation of the status quo."

It is precisely because developed countries have pursued globalization without concern for many of its distributional impacts that they have such mixed effects not only in the U.S but around the globe. Free trade has likely decreased access to essential medicines, while privatization and deregulation have posed problems for many countries' capacity to ensure that all of those within their borders can secure basic health, education, and other services. [37], [38] The evidence that free trade has reduced poverty and inequality on average is weak. [1], [39] And it is to their credit that many Trump supporters were genuinely concerned about the distributional effects of globalization quite broadly.

More generally, it is important to recognize that many of the complaints driving the move to elect Trump are entirely justified. Many people in the US are hurting and our political system is flawed. We live in a country where corporations and the wealthy have the lion's share of political power. Politicians cater to special interests large enough to make major campaign contributions to get elected. [41], [42] And, given that there are only two political parties that appeal to the median voter, few believe they have a voice and even fewer have a reason to use theirs.

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Most voters are disaffected and for good reason: What happens in the election may not change too much for them. The middle class benefits most from tax and entitlement spending. [43], [44] Although Hillary's rhetoric was more egalitarian than Trump's, few outside of the middle and upper classes really thought that she would do anything for them. Only 3% of the country has Obama care (marketplace) and many of the poor receive very few other benefits. [10], [45] Similarly, Sanders' focus on higher education seems motivated to address middle-class voters. Only 30-some percent of the US population has a college degree and it is not clear how much loan forgiveness would expand the proportion receiving an education. [46] His campaign also failed to address sources of increasing racial tension.

3. Moving on from Here: Honest Politics and Fair Globalization

So, what should we do now? There are many proposals on the table, from campaign finance reform to mandatory voting, allowing third parties to participate in democratic debates, and even giving up on elections altogether and choosing members of congress by lottery. [47], [48], [49], [50], [51], [52], [53], [54]

Although we should not discount the importance of coming up with creative new ways of addressing the problems with our political system, few of these proposals are likely to be effective. Campaign finance reform is difficult to implement and may do little given that there is a large incentive for political parties to overcome any barriers to campaign advertisements we put into place. Mandatory voting is likely to face strong resistance from those who would not benefit from the outcome of a more representative electoral system. [55] If we want to create more than a two party system, letting smaller parties participate in debates will probably not suffice – we need to eliminate plurality rule. But, to do so, we may need to do what only a civil war has allowed us to do in the past: change the constitution. Even if we could implement a multi-party system, the European experience clearly shows that that is not enough to prevent the election of racist, populist leaders.

In the absence of better ideas some suggest we need to reduce political division, but I think what we really need is a cultural revolution, not political correctness. Those on both ends of the political spectrum share one thing in common: They do not like the elites. [56] Calls to work together, for sanity, for getting along, appear to many of these people as pleasantries at best. Often they view them as attempts to silence

genuine dissent by those in power. [57] To some extent they are probably right about this. It is not by suppressing disagreement that we best work together but by acknowledging differences in view point and finding points of agreement. This is why protest is acceptable: it gives voice to genuine concern and can help build alliances, as well as threaten solidarity.

If one recognizes the genuine differences in opinion that divide the country, it makes sense that many people in this country find it hard to work together because they find each other's views and actions on the opposite side to be, at least in some respects, deplorable. We should not shrink from this fact but we do need to work together and, to do so, I think we need to recognize that people are not identical with their views. Many of us love those with very different perspectives and we must approach others with that genuine concern and care.

Personally, I believe we need to change our moral perspective as a country to care consistently about others irrespective of race, sex, or ideology and make globalization fair for all: We should try to capture the benefits of free trade for all, while avoiding the costs. [1] There are many ways we can do this. If we could reduce protectionism in agriculture, where most people in developing countries work, that would likely help reduce rural poverty (70% of the world's poor live in rural areas). [35], [40] Still, reducing barriers to trade in this sector would harm some, even if it would benefit others immensely. [35] So, besides modifying trade agreements on the basis of their likely distributional impacts (e.g. refusing to endorse provisions that will reduce access to essential health care or other services), we might implement policies to redistribute the gains from trade (and compensate those who will suffer). It is also possible to link trade agreements to agreements to improve labor or environmental conditions (e.g.) and support trade related-adjustment assistance programs etc. [39]

More generally, we should care about the impact of our policies on all people's basic life prospects; we should work to ensure that everyone can live a minimally good life in this country and elsewhere. We must recognize, for instance, that even those who have gained from immigration and globalization may not gain enough — securing jobs in sweatshops and as undocumented workers subject to abuse and harassment. Many sweatshop workers are children working for long hours for low wages while others do dangerous work made possible by the expansion of global markets (e.g. recycling electronic components, breaking bricks, making charcoal). [58], [59] Many

undocumented workers also work for wages so low that they struggle to care for their families, and often lack things like health insurance and the protection of law that most U.S workers take for granted. [60], [61], [62]

I believe no one should gain by creating rules that mean millions will be unable to access essential medicines or deprive billions of the opportunity to lift themselves from poverty in developing countries. There is a strong moral argument that place of birth should not determine basic life prospects; we should do what we can to enable everyone to live minimally good lives. At least, we should offer refuge to those who need it and act with some minimal regard for the consequences of our actions for other people.

4. Conclusion

We need creative new ways of changing political rules or at least working around the problems our political system poses for promoting fair trade and equality within our borders. I believe that we all need to have reasonable expectations and decent life prospects. But constructive, honest, dialogue is important for working together with those who have very different perspectives. Unless and until we can secure deeper agreement, let us hope we can keep and foster our alliances and the values many of us still hold dear to our hearts. Let us stand together, if apart.

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