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MEN IN CRISIS: CLASS, DESPAIR, AND POLITICS

Everyday People Aren't Stupid: Working-Class Men & the Left's Condescension

By Jeff Bloodworth
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Editor's note: Following is the third part of a series focusing on modern men and the social crisis that has resulted in many men succumbing to despair. Gannon University Professor Jeff Bloodworth is coordinating the monthly series, which includes several writers.

Everyday people aren't stupid. Cassandra Sever knows this from personal experience. The daughter of a rural South Carolina hairdresser, she was reared in working-class America. Today, Dr. Sever is a sociology professor at the nation's oldest and arguably most prestigious women's institution of higher learning: Mount Holyoke College. A foot in the ruby reddest and sky bluest of worlds gives her unique insight. From this, she posits that working-class Americans believe "My identity is not worthy and how I live is not good."^[1]

From suicide rates and life expectancy to family dissolution and Trumpist nihilism, evidence of, what Sever terms, a "culture of despair" abounds. Economics, to be sure, is part of this. Deindustrialization, globalization, and union busting have hit the working class hard. A nebulous term, in 2025 America, class comes down to the "diploma divide."^[2]

Between 1979 and 2005, the wages of those with a bachelor's or post-graduate degree jumped by nearly 25%.^[3] During the same era, wages for high school dropouts and those with a high school degree fell.^[4] By 2023, the median weekly wage for a working-class man, \$852, was only a smidgen higher than in 1979

(adjusted for inflation). To be sure, working-class women still lag behind their male counterparts in pay. But this gender gap pales in comparison to the overall diploma divide. Richard Reeves, who wrote the widely lauded “Of Boys & Men,” observes, “the long-term story here is of growing wage gaps by social class for both men and women, but with working-class men faring worse of all in terms of trend.”[5]

In 2025, the diploma divide is America’s class divide. And the diploma divide is increasingly a problem for men. In the 1980s, men were more likely than women to hold college degrees. Today, that reality has flipped. Sixty-four percent of men have no college degree, compared with 57% of women.[6] Today, women make up nearly 60% of all college students — and the male-female enrollment gap climbs every year.[7]

In the age of Donald Trump, it is the diploma divide and class that shapes American politics. In 2024, a majority of low-income Americans voted Republican for the first time in a generation.[8] Trump took 56% of voters without a college degree and 55% of all men.[9] Kamala Harris, meanwhile, won the college-educated vote by 14 points in addition to those earning \$100,000 or more. And Trump’s win was not just with the white working class. Compared to 2020, Trump increased his share of the non-white, non-college vote by 8 points.[10]

Trump and Trumpism are existential threats to American democracy. Without working-class male votes, Trump is not president. If this demographic shifted a few points leftward, Trumpism would collapse at the ballot box. To do so, we must understand Trump’s multiracial, working-class (male) coalition and the forces radicalizing them. Twenty-first-century America features an economy that no longer rewards working-class labor and an elite culture that they believe mocks and derides them. These are the twin forces fueling the working-class revolt that is the essence of Trumpism.

To worry about men, especially for those on the political left, is foreign.[11] For a generation, America’s left intelligentsia rightly turned its egalitarian focus to sexism, racism, and homophobia. Strides were made; much work is left to be done. Sexism, racism, and homophobia remain real obstacles to Americans seeking their equal part of our nation’s bounty. But social justice need not be a zero-sum game. In 2025 America, “inclusion” means adding class and working-class men to the mix of those left behind by an economy and culture in transition.

Politics Are Downstream from Culture

Paychecks matter. Higher wages fuel optimism and better life prospects. But for Sever, material forces only explain so much. She sees an American working class in the grips of a “culture of despair.” For her, the sources of despair emanate from

a culture of social justice-minded intellectuals. To Sever, “elites drive what is meaningful to a culture and what we [society] recognize [as valuable]. [Intellectuals] drive what society values and what we are about.” And intellectuals find little value and worth in working-class America. Culture, just as much as the paycheck, is driving this working-class “culture of despair.”^[12]

You doubt Sever? In the early postwar era, Leftwing intellectuals viewed the working class as the primary vehicle for progressive political change. Authors and artists ranging from the author of “The Feminine Mystique,” Betty Friedan, to the classical baritone (and Communist Party member) Paul Robeson valorized the working class. Television shows like “The Honeymooners,” “Good Times,” and “All in the Family” celebrated working people. Times changed. By the late 1970s, the left-leaning intellectual class blamed the white working class for the nation’s racism, chauvinism, and “imperial” tendencies. Elite opinion has gravitated into pop culture. Today, the American working class, and white working-class men, in particular, tend to be either a punchline or punching bag for the social justice left. This cultural context gives Trumpism its very oxygen.

David French, a New York Times columnist, observes “Mocking poor whites is among the last acceptable forms of bigotry.”^[13] And French’s charge is proven by studies of popular culture. Richard Butsch, a sociologist who analyzes media, examined more than 400 situation comedies. He found a television mainstay is the working-class male “buffoon.”^[14] Butsch writes of these characters, “They were dumb, immature, irresponsible, and lacking in common sense. ... The man was typically well intentioned, even lovable, but no one to respect or emulate.”^[15]

This is not merely an American phenomenon. Lord Melvyn Bragg, a BBC broadcaster and author, observed about British television, “I’m not a fan of the working class being mocked ...we’ve got to the stage where the working class has been turned into a cliché.”^[16]

In Britain, the “*chav*” has become an archetypal working-class television character. An acronym borne from a bureaucratic term, “Council House and Violent,” a *chav* wears a track suit and sports cheap hairdos. The character also provides low-rent humor on British television shows. Owen Jones, who wrote “Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class,” discovered his idea at a tony, upper-crust dinner party. In the middle of the Great Recession, the dinner host cracked: “It’s sad that Woolworths is closing. Where will all the chavs buy their Christmas presents?”^[17]

Even social democratic Sweden is not immune. Göran Eriksson, a professor of media studies, finds that television mocks the working-class, “representing them as slow, inflexible, undynamic and unstylish.”^[18]

In three straight presidential races, Donald Trump took at least 60 percent of the rural vote. These electoral returns exacerbated elite condescension of rural, largely working-class Americans. Lynlee Thorne, the political director for the Virginia-based Rural Ground Game, has spent years organizing Democrats in rural Virginia. She complains that the national party's rural strategy amounts to, "We have the best policies, you dumb hicks."

Jess Piper is a liberal who resides in a tiny northwest Missouri community. She is also executive director of the rural-focused Blue Missouri. Piper told me bluntly, "Liberals hate rural people." She is constantly told by urban, educated counterparts, "You got what they voted for," referring to the actions of rural Republican voters^[19] In their 2024 bestselling "White Rural Rage," authors Tom Schaller and Paul Waldman exemplify this stance. The duo sold scads of books and garnered loads of media attention for a thinly researched work of "rural bashing."^[20]

Lisa Pruitt, a University of California-Davis law professor, studies rural bias in the law. She is a liberal who grew up in rural Arkansas. Like Sever, she leads a blue life but was reared in a red world. She writes of the rural, white working-class bashing she sees:

Indeed, among denizens of the largest cities and 'coastal elites,' rural Americans have become a proxy for the working class — the uncouth, the uncultured, and — yes — the illiberal. I contend that social progressives reserve their greatest contempt — and increasingly also their ire — for whites in rural America, the vast majority of whom are working class.^[21]

This condescension does not go unnoticed. Anthony Flaccovento, a liberal who ran twice for Congress in rural Virginia, works with the Rural-Urban Bridge Initiative, dedicated to healing polarization. He told me that rural, working-class whites "believe Democrats just don't like them." To punctuate this, he said that his neighbors are "damn proud, and they feel preached to and demeaned. Liberals, in their experience, don't respect working people or believe the educated think they might have something to learn from you. They are utterly and wholly aware of this."^[22]

Closer to home is Kat DiVittorio. The assistant director for the Corry Higher Education Council is a Democrat. She has no love for Trump, but living in Corry, she feels the elite condescension for rural, working-class Americans. She recently told me, "The Democrats quit being the party of normal. They are the party of 'we are smarter than you. We are better than you.' What kind of party runs on a 'we are better than you' platform?"^[23]

Culture of Despair

Due to her working-class roots, Sever is sensitive to depictions of the working class. Professor Sever thinks it is the responsibility of intellectuals to be sophisticated in their depictions of working-class life. She also understands some of the challenges. She told me, “They [the working class] can’t package their ideas in the same way. Our job is to take everyone seriously and translate them. [Instead], we vilify and shame them.”

An ethnographer, Sever has surveyed elite students to understand the social justice left. According to a Pew survey, the social justice left makes up 7% of all American voters.^[24] Majority white, they are one of the two typology groups with the highest share of college graduates: 48%. No group turns out to vote or donates more money to candidates than the social justice left.^[25] Their numbers may be small, but they occupy the heights in the nation’s culture, media, and academic institutions.

David Brooks, author and political and cultural commentator, finds that the central idea animating the social justice left is an opposition to “privilege.” And this, to Brooks, is the contradiction at the heart of the movement. Disproportionately born to wealth or upper-middle-class comfort and schooled at elite institutions, Brooks writes, “You have to prove to yourself and others that you are on the side of the oppressed.” Because they possess the very class advantages they also disavow, the cognitive dissonance has a “radicalizing effect.”^[26] Dr. Musa al-Gharbi, a sociologist at SUNY-Stony Brook, has examined these “radicalizing effects.” In his book, “We Have Never Been Woke,” al-Gharbi found the majority white social justice left holds “woker” positions on racial issues than the average Black or Hispanic person.^[27]

A social justice leftist does not merely believe that race matters or that racial advantages persist. Those are so obvious as to almost be banal conclusions. What makes the social justice left distinct is that it sees social justice as a zero-sum game of the oppressor versus the oppressed. Aiding the oppressed and standing on the “right side of history” doesn’t require gender or race-blind neutrality. Rather, social justice calls for tilting the scales toward equity.

Sever studies the consequences of Brooks’ “radicalizing effect” and al-Gharbi’s oppressor-oppressed dichotomy. In her study of elite college student culture, the oppressor, in the minds of the students, is invariably a straight, white working-class man. She told me “If you ask them, [the students], they’ll say ‘I like men.’” But when she probes, “How do you feel about men?” Then they open up.”

Sever is told “If I was born as a bio[logical] man, I wouldn’t be a toxic man.” She has discovered a knee-jerk belief that “men are toxic” inherently, even if they “do the work.” She finds this to be a pervasive belief with elite college students. She concludes that these social justice leftists believe, “There is something authentic

that marginalized men possess. Bio men can never have this.” Sever confided to me, “This is how they see reality. Bio, white men are inherently repressive.”[28]

She concluded that in the group she studied, “Men are not valued. They are loathed.” Sever believes this study is a representative example of the social justice worldview emanating from elite universities. Twenty years ago, Ivy League schools were heterodox places that merely tilted left. Today, elite universities do not merely tilt left — the social justice left predominates. And because graduates of elite universities occupy the heights in culture, media, and academia, these ideas bleed into mainstream ideology via the New York Times, NPR, and prestige television shows and movies.

Working-class Americans live downstream from elite culture. The oppressor-oppressed dichotomy has, like a virus, escaped the laboratory of the university. And Sever believes the class most often depicted as the “oppressors,” unsurprisingly “don’t feel valued.” Sever told me “When we value certain identities — we are not valuing everyone. The white guy. When we lean-in to value some — others are left out.” She finds that young social justice elites believe that “not being educated, being working class — [those] jobs are profane. Working class: what’s to like about them?”

The message, according to Sever, that is sent to white, working-class Americans is nothing short of, “You horrible people are all racists.” She told me “a culture needs to value all our people. You can’t differentially value people that is the code of a liberal society. We no longer even make this claim.”

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