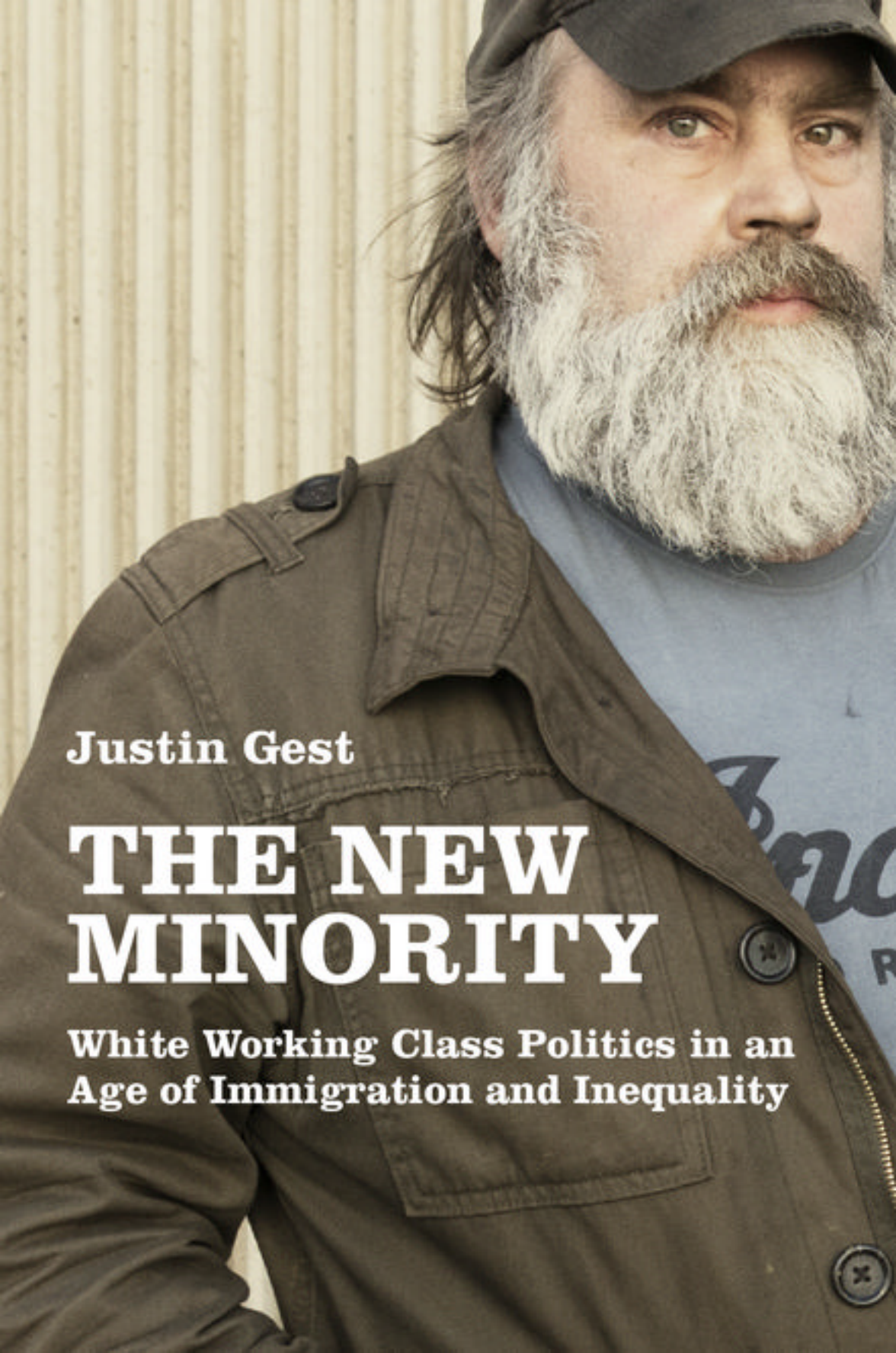

Justin Gest

# THE NEW MINORITY

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# 1

# Introduction

## POLITICAL MARGINALITY IN THE POST-TRAUMATIC CITY

*The snake which cannot cast its skin has to die. As well the minds which are prevented from changing their opinions; they cease to be mind.*
—Friedrich Nietzsche

White working class people are perplexing.

They are subject to the pressures of intensifying inequality across much of the developed world, and yet inherit the advantages of language and integration. They live in societies that are subject to significant demographic change, but not in such a way that the predominance of white people is in question. They are so frustrated politically that they would rather start their own movements than submit to the compromises required by mainstream coalitions. Some have become quite rebellious. Has ever a group so purportedly marginalized possessed such power?

In this book, I contend that this tension—between the vestiges of white working class power and its perceived loss—produces the phenomenon of their radicalization. I use multiple research methods to examine white working class people's attitudes and clarify these paradoxes, in order to improve our understanding of white working class people's political behavior—which can be extreme and, thanks to their numbers, remains meaningful in North American and European societies.

## Multiple Narratives of Decline

A key reason that white working class people perplex observers is that multiple narratives depict their plight and attempt to explain their political behavior in the United States and the United Kingdom.

According to an *economic narrative*, Western countries' reorientation toward more service-oriented, high technology, globalized economies since the Second World War required the outsourcing of light manufacturing and basic services to developing nations with minimal labor standards. This economic transformation undermined the social and political strength of white working class communities by diminishing their ranks, loosening associational life, and jettisoning state-sponsored welfare support systems which had been in place in the postwar era. The white working class individuals who adapted to these changes have since joined a reconsolidated social majority of white people and ethnically diverse immigrants who constitute globalization's winners (and losers who are at least acquiescent).

Those slower to adapt are commonly understood as the dispersed, unorganized holdouts of an earlier era without access to the benefits of a globalized economy. Over the course of the twentieth century in the United Kingdom, the proportion of the working population employed as "manual workers" fell from 75% to 38%, while the proportion of professionals and managers rose from 8% to 34% (Sveinsson 2009). In 1940 in the United States, 74% of employed workers were white and did not hold professional or managerial jobs. By 2006, that percentage plummeted to 43% (Abramowitz and Teixeira 2009: 394–395). In 1940, 86% of adults 25 years old and over were white and without a four-year college degree. By 2007, that percentage declined to 48% (ibid.). In 1947, 86% of American families were white families with less than $60,000 in income (in 2005 dollars). In contrast, that percentage declined to 33% by 2005 (ibid.).

The postindustrial middle classes have therefore swelled with various European-origin, white communities and upwardly mobile immigrant-origin people who are increasingly integrating into a largely inclusive capitalist meritocracy that has elevated standards of living and altered social solidarities. This transformation not only shrunk the community of those understanding themselves as white working class; it also splintered the broader working class into an aspirational immigrant stratum, and the enduring remainder of poor white natives. For the poor, chances of upward mobility remain low. The United States and the United Kingdom feature the least economic mobility among OECD countries (OECD 2010; Corak 2013); parental income remains highly determinant of lifelong economic status. This conclusion has been elaborated in great detail in research on the United States, where mobility has stalled for over a generation (Chetty et al. 2014).

Advocates of this resource-oriented perspective argue that while ethnic, gender, and cultural backgrounds are factors in explaining a person's life prospects and behavior, it is the social class into which one is born that is still most determinant (National Equality Panel 2010). In this depiction, the outmoded white working class is juxtaposed with a white middle class and upper class that

both expanded with economic development in the twentieth century and have since created economic—along with cultural—space between themselves and those who failed to make this socioeconomic leap. Such resource disadvantages have been shown to consistently lead to disengaged political behavior (see Verba and Nie 1972; Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2013).[1] The widening gap is indeed frequently justified on meritocratic grounds that subtly insinuate cultural differences. Nevertheless, resource-oriented explanations of white working class marginalization argue that the social stigma ascribed to that demographic is merely the residue of severe inequality.

A *moral narrative* characterizes poor white people as antagonists clinging to the unfair advantages of an earlier time. Resistant to progressive change in order to maintain power over ethnocultural minorities, poor white people are conventionally portrayed as the last vestige of the most forgettable era in twentieth-century social history—what Usherwood (2007) described as the "amoral and apolitical section in society who are neither deserving nor poor. It is a group that is against learning, anti-intellectual, and comprised of individuals who—in the words of one commentator—'despise browns and blacks' (especially if they are making something of their lives) and also education, enlightenment and internationalism" (Alibhai-Brown 2007). Accordingly, poor white people represent an antagonist to other, often equally poor, ethnocultural minority groups—groups that have worked to gain equal footing through efforts like the continuing civil rights movement.

More subtly, white elites, whose antecedents may have once supported policies of exclusion and rose to elite status through prejudiced systems of education and promotion, vilify poor whites (see Jones 2011; Wray 2006). In the drive to counterbalance historical discrimination, both white elites and minority groups often distance themselves from poor white people to account for their success in these systems—systems that working class white people had a lesser hand in building.

Specifically, white members of the "underclass" have been singled out as behaviorally or morally inferior. In the United Kingdom, they are associated with "backwardness" and stereotypes condemning "unclean" and "lazy benefit-hunting mother[s] of several children" (Jones 2011; Wray 2006), even while white people are also able to claim a rhetorical high ground as their country's "heart and soul"—the people that historically spilled blood and perspired for a continuing national existence.

Charles Murray (2012) describes the white underclass, and its deviant norms in the United States, thusly: "In the years after 1960, America developed something new: a white lower class that did not consist of a fringe, but of a substantial part of what was formerly the working class population." Murray goes on to

describe the deviant characteristics of this new white underclass at length. First, he contends that the members of this white underclass violate the traditional American norm of industriousness. More and more of these white individuals are claiming disability benefits or are employed in "less-than-full-time work"; Murray (2012: 171, 176) notes that this is especially true among less-educated white males.

Furthermore, the labor force participation rate has decreased considerably in the white underclass, again with less-educated white males leaving the labor force in much greater numbers (Murray 2012: 172–173). According to Murray, these trends cannot simply be explained away by citing macroeconomic conditions because the overall economy grew well enough from 1960 to the present day. Instead, Murray argues that these trends are a sign that the American norm of industriousness "has softened" in the white underclass: "White males of the 2000s were less industrious than they had been twenty, thirty, or fifty years ago," he wrote, "and . . . the decay in the industriousness occurred overwhelmingly [among the least educated]" (181).

Beyond work habits, Murray cites the deterioration of American norms with regard to religiosity and marriage. He writes that, "White America as a whole became more secular between 1960 and 2010, especially from the beginning of the 1990s. Despite the common belief that the working class is the most religious group in white American society, the drift from religiosity was far greater in [working class America]" (200; see Wilcox 2010: 48–49 for further supporting evidence). Since church-going is a major source of social capital, Murray argues that the decline in religiosity directly impacts the environmental tools available to members of the white underclass, and therefore has serious implications for individual prospects in social mobility. Similarly, Murray and others have pointed to a deterioration of the institution of marriage within the white underclass. Lower status whites are much more likely to get divorced within 10 years of marriage, have children out of wedlock, and report unhappiness with their current marriage (see Douthat and Salam 2008; Wilcox 2010). To put the scale of these trends into perspective, the extramarital birth rate among white American women with a college degree has remained nearly constant at 5% since the 1960s. Meanwhile, the rate of extramarital births among white American women without a high school diploma is now 60% (Murray 2012: 161–162; see also Douthat and Salam 2008: 134).

In a recent column lamenting white working class support for Donald Trump's presidential candidacy, the *National Review*'s Kevin Williamson (2016) wrote:

> "[If] you take an honest look at the welfare dependency, the drug and alcohol addiction, the family anarchy—which is to say, the whelping of human children with all the respect and wisdom of a stray dog—you will

> come to an awful realization. It wasn't Beijing. It wasn't Washington, as bad as Washington can be. It wasn't immigrants from Mexico, excessive and problematic as our current immigration levels are. It wasn't any of that.
>
> Nothing happened to them. There wasn't some awful disaster. There wasn't a war or famine or a plague or a foreign occupation. Even the economic changes of the past few decades do very little too explain the dysfunction and negligence—and the incomprehensible malice—of poor white America. So the gypsum business in Garbutt ain't what it used to be. There is more to life in the 21st century than wallboard and cheap sentimentality about how the Man closed factories down.
>
> The truth about these dysfunctional, downscale communities is that they deserve to die. Economically, they are negative assets. Morally, they are indefensible. Forget all your cheap theatrical Bruce Springsteen crap. Forget your sanctimony about struggling Rust Belt factory towns and your conspiracy theories about the wily Orientals stealing our jobs. Forget your goddamned gypsum. . .. The white American underclass is in thrall to a vicious, selfish culture whose main products are misery and used heroin needles."

Williamson, Murray, and other commentators who have highlighted the deviant norms of lower-status whites may do so primarily as a way to draw boundaries that are meant to justify working class whites' lower social position. And yet, at the same time, other accounts focus on deteriorating mores in an attempt to signal a brewing crisis within the white working class itself. It is often difficult to distinguish between these two agendas. Independent of the underlying objective, however, it is consequential that more attention is being paid to the cultural norms of a white underclass (Murray 2012; Jones 2011), in a manner similar to treatment of poor racial and ethnoreligious minority groups.

This moral account contends that white working class political behavior is a product of cultural habits that diverge from other groups of white people and an essentialized understanding of "white culture" (see Demie and Lewis 2010 for examples; and see reviews in Jones 2011). It juxtaposes the ostensible complacency, ignorance, and backwardness of white working class people with the industry, naïveté, and resourcefulness of immigrants and minority groups who push forward despite adversity and structural disadvantage, but also with the way the primarily East and West Coast bourgeoisie have adapted to the economic transformations that they had a hand in driving. However, the ubiquity of this culturalist account appears to be institutionalizing itself. It acts as a sort of structural hindrance to the advancement of white working class individuals, who have trouble shaking off this stigma, and therefore improving their economic well-being and making political claims effectively. As this book shows,

white working class people conventionally value hard work and use it—for better or worse—as a mark of moral distinction and as a means of identification to separate themselves from non-white working class countrymen.

This dichotomous moral narrative obscures an important *demographic narrative*. Before the Second World War, many industrialized societies were largely racially homogenous, and mainstream social divisions were grounded in differences of religious sect or white ethnicity (native nationals, along with people of Jewish, Irish, Mediterranean, Levantine, and Eastern European origin). Indeed, from the founding of the nation through 2004, a majority of Americans were white and had concluded their education before obtaining a four-year college degree (Brownstein 2011). Even as late as the 1990 census, whites without a college degree represented more than three-fifths of American adults. However, with the steady influx of immigrants, attenuating native fertility rates, and an increasingly global economy, the fault lines of sociopolitical relations shifted (see Kaufmann 2004c; Abrajano and Hajnal 2014).

With the end of the Second World War, an amalgam of ethnic white groups emerged as an expanding middle class. They occupied the industrial working classes of the United States and parts of Western Europe and were boosted by dual-income families, elevated life expectancies, and steady economic growth. Over time, immigrants from disparate countries of origin, spanning Latin America and East Asia in the United States, South Asia in the United Kingdom, North Africa in Western Europe, and Turkey in Central Europe, replaced these ethnic whites. Since 2004 in the United Kingdom, the minority population has almost doubled, and minority groups account for 80% of the country's population growth (Sunak and Rajeswaran 2014: 6). The nonwhite population represented 37% of the United States population in 2015, and it is expected to grow as the American population under age 5 is over 50% nonwhite (US Census Bureau 2015c). The United States' foreign-born population grew from 9.6 million (4.7%) in 1970 to 40 million (12.9%) in 2010—the highest share since 1920 (Singer 2013).

Ever since the earliest waves of immigration to Western industrialized democracies, these societies have grappled with the challenge of socially, politically, and economically integrating diverse peoples into economies and societies organized around equal rights. Accordingly, social hierarchies metamorphosed. Whether white people's working class status is defined according to education-, occupation-, or income-based standards, a 30% to 50% decline in the relative size of this group from the World War II era to today in the United States has transpired (Abramowitz and Teixeira 2009: 395). Recent research (Case and Deaton 2015) suggests that these trends may be intensified by an extraordinary 22% rise in the mortality rate of white working class people since 1999—which has taken place in an era during which the death rates among all other groups decline.

Even with the decline of the British and American manufacturing industries and the countries' ongoing demographic changes, white working class people still compose a significant sector of the voting public. They represent at least one-third of the American population as of 2005, depending on how working class status is understood:

- 36% of Americans are white people without college degrees holding non-salaried jobs (Jones and Cox 2012);
- 33% of American families are white households earning less than $60,000 per year (Abramowitz and Teixeira 2009);
- 43% of Americans are white people without professional or managerial jobs (ibid.);
- 48% of Americans are white people without a four-year college degree (ibid.).

As a result, this subset of the American electorate can still affect electoral outcomes, but nevertheless remains misunderstood and under-mobilized. Even though nearly 50% of the US population is white and without a college degree, this group made up only 39% of voters in 2008 and 35% of voters in the 2010 election (CNN 2008; 2010). This is true despite the fact that white Americans are disproportionately of voting age vis-à-vis non-white Americans. The British white working class is even larger. According to the 2011 census, white British people make up 80.5% of all Britons, and unlike Americans, the British working class has shown a propensity to identify as "working class" even when employed in middle-class occupations, some of which require some higher education.

## Post-Traumatic Cities

The setting for these countervailing narratives is not uniform, but they are prominent in what I call "post-traumatic" cities. Post-traumatic cities are exurbs and urban communities that lost signature industries in the mid- to late-twentieth century and never really recovered. Examples include Blackburn, Bolton, Hartlepool, Hull, Wolverhampton, and East London in the United Kingdom, and Erie, Flint, Gary, Kenosha, Michigan City, Toledo, and Youngstown in the Rust Belt of the United States. At the peak of Western states' manufacturing economies, particular companies or industries employed enough people for a long enough duration that they could single-handedly support these cities' economies and dominate their politics. Today, such cities endure as shells of their former splendor.


*Map 1* Map of the United Kingdom.

East London was planned as a "Garden City," to be anchored by major manufacturers that would lure white working class East Enders away from London's congested inner city after it became crowded with Eastern European Jewish (and later, South Asian) immigrants. In 1922, May & Baker's chemical plant relocated to Dagenham from Wandsworth. In 1925, the Barking Power House

electric station was established in Creekmouth. And in 1931, the Ford Motor Company built what would become an enormous factory on several square miles of Dagenham's riverfront (Hudson 2009). These employers provided dependable jobs for the residents of the new estate. The population of Dagenham soared from 9,000 to 90,000 between 1921 and 1931, and the combined populations of Barking and Dagenham increased another 50% before 1951.

However, after the mid-1970s, East London's economy went the way of the Ford factory, which endured massive downsizings. As that market declined, unions weakened, labor laws liberalized, and industrial jobs followed a more global move offshore. Britain's postindustrial economy had little use for Barking and Dagenham's white working class tradesmen, as it shifted to high technology and a broader service sector.

Alongside the economic changes, the borough's demographics also altered. A new generation of residents moved in to take advantage of mortgages and rentals that were a fraction of those in inner London. While some purchased homes, many new immigrants were assigned to public housing in council-owned rowhouses and tower blocks. There were sub-Saharan Africans, Lithuanians, Bosnians, Poles, and South Asian Muslims in each of the borough's wards. By


*Map 2* Map of the Northeastern United States.

the 2000s, these immigrant groups composed about half the population of East London, as an extension of London's globalizing metropolis.

Youngstown, Ohio was once known as "Steeltown USA." For years, the foundries and furnaces of about a half-dozen companies provided not only jobs, but also housing, loans, supporting industries, philanthropy, and sites for political organization and social life. Throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s, a 30-mile-long stretch of mills developed along the Mahoning River. Rapid population growth fueled the city's meteoric industrialization, thanks to the arrival of working class immigrants from every corner of Europe. By 1930, nearly half the city's population owned their homes, and by the 1940s, Youngstown's population reached 170,000—about 90% of which was white (Linkon and Russo 2002: 38; Buss and Redburn 1983: 2).

These circumstances ended with the swift collapse of Youngstown's steel industry in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In a matter of six years, Ohio State Employment Services estimates that 50,000 jobs were lost in basic steel and related industries, costing Youngstown's working class $1.3 billion in annual manufacturing wages (ibid.). Unemployment climbed to a staggering 24.9% in 1983 and a wave of personal bankruptcies and foreclosures resulted (ibid.). The city spiraled into a tailspin characterized by domestic abuse, substance abuse, divorce, suicide, murder, and ultimately, the mass departure of its population. Today, Youngstown has barely a third of its 1970 population, and about half of its citizens are now black or Latino—groups who simply did not flee as quickly as their white neighbors.

East London and Youngstown are but two examples of a class of cities that have experienced this trauma of a simultaneous economic, social, and political collapse. They are also characteristic of the more industrialized neighborhoods of larger cities. There and elsewhere, the white working class populations I consider are consumed by a nostalgia that expresses bitter resentment toward the big companies that abandoned their city, a government that did little to stop them from leaving, and a growing share of visible minorities who are altering their neighborhoods' complexion.

Other cities and regions have undergone economic and social decline. However, few have experienced such a decline so universally and so immediately after enjoying the zenith of prosperity and influence that once characterized industrial towns in the mid-twentieth century. Post-traumatic cities were often so wholly dependent on a single company or sector that their sudden closure or downsizing undercut an entire social, political, and economic infrastructure—depriving their vast communities of the sense of stability, power, and centrality to which they had become accustomed.

The sprawling factories, towering smokestacks, and vast warehouses that once pumped and percolated with the booming business of an era now sit still

in the center of cities that remain physically oriented around their lost productivity. Residents maneuver around the crumbling, rusty relics of industrialism much like the way today's Greeks and Italians maneuver around the roped-off ruins of Ancient Athens and Rome. They simultaneously taunt inhabitants with memories of better days, and render false hope that they are one big break from returning to glory.

This determinism of the built environment and pervasive nostalgia corrodes innovation and paralyzes the evolution of these communities. And as a result, the characteristic politics of these cities is often backward facing. Rather than adapt to the post-traumatic future, people seek to reinstate the pre-traumatic past—which is an impossibility. Small programs have begun to shrink some cities, returning outlying land to nature and clearing the amassed tangle of deserted railroad tracks, electrical lines, and auxiliary piping. But as with urban planning, the politics of modernization are laced with resentment.

Most of us witness the politics of resentment at the national level, where it is detached from its origins in post-traumatic environments. Headlines depict the xenophobic platforms of nativist political movements rising to power. Election results show exit polls touting white working class support for candidates vowing to limit social programs. Satellite news channels beam images of unions and working class white people protesting global trade deals or demanding the maintenance of outdated subsidies. Police mobilize against hate crimes and forms of political violence.

However, such events are exceptional, and they distract from the diversity of white working class political behavior. Many white working class people engage in peaceful democratic processes. A large group is simply too busy to advocate, given the demands and pressures of daily life. Still others quietly withdraw to the fringes. How can we understand these political choices and the attitudes that underpin them? How can we understand white working class marginality?

## A Theory of Marginality

Much of our knowledge of political behavior links the intensity of citizens' political participation with their resources, in the form of income, education, and skills. Yet among similarly under-resourced communities of white working class people, what leads some individuals to engage in the democratic political system to create reform, and others to circumvent the political system by rebelling or withdrawing from it? This is not a question of intensity, but rather one that inquires about the nature—the orientation—of individuals' political activism.

In earlier research, I addressed this question as it relates to communities of Muslims in Western Europe—highly politicized people who have largely

demonstrated their inclination to robust democratic engagement, but also their vulnerability to insularity and violent extremism (Gest 2010). In many ways, and especially in Europe, white working class people represent Western Muslims' primary antagonist. In Britain, nativists have frequently clashed in the streets with Muslims protesting for the establishment of shariah (Islamic law). In the United States, white working class vigilantes have sought to harm random Muslim citizens in retaliation for equally random attacks pursued by extremists in the name of Islam. Indeed, many of the claims that each community makes of the political system is in reaction to the other. Working class white people often seek to restrict immigrants' access to welfare, abolish affirmative action policies, and receive priority in public housing. Muslims often want more muscular anti-discrimination provisions, reduced pressure to assimilate, and increased accommodation of cultural and religious difference.

By examining white working class politics in parallel with the (far more expansive) scrutiny of Muslim politics, I hope to develop a broader understanding of political marginality—in terms of both rebellion and withdrawal—in the context of democratic engagement. My earlier research on Western Muslims found that senses of deprivation—the discrepancy between individuals' expectations and their perceptions of reality—drive political choices. More specifically, I found that Muslim respondents whose expectations of political power and social rights were greatly disappointed were more likely to join radical, antidemocratic organizations. Correspondingly, I found that Muslim respondents whose expectations were more fulfilled were more likely to engage in democratic political participation or be complacent.

Can we speak of a broader theory of political marginality? These earlier conclusions would be strengthened if they were supported by evidence from multiple communities subject to disadvantage. White working class communities provide a powerful test because they represent a most different case study—a most unlikely counterpoint to the plight of Muslims and other visible minorities in Western democracies. While it is unreasonable to expect Muslims and white working class people to report the same sources of dissatisfaction, I ask whether their dissatisfaction is structured in a similar manner and similarly driving their political choices. Can we speak of a broader theory of alienated and engaged political behavior?

## How Do You Measure Marginality?

The great challenge in studying marginality is its typical form as a nonevent. Social scientists conventionally measure the observable (political participation, political organizations, government decisions, etc.), so marginality is often only

evident in the absence of observable action (withdrawal or proscribed rebellion). And naturally, those who are withdrawn or rebellious are less likely to be visible to researchers' eyes. The withdrawn are less likely to be a part of a survey sample, because they are less likely to be accessed in the first place. The rebellious are less likely to acknowledge their violent or radical behavior for fear of incrimination or concerns about palatability. I therefore pursue my investigation in ways that allow for greater sensitivity to withdrawal and rebellion, in a manner that makes subjects feel comfortable sharing their views and activities.

I begin with ethnographies of East London and Youngstown to develop the vernacular of people's marginality and map the full diversity of their political behavior. East London and Youngstown do not represent cases that enable the examination of a peculiar trend. Rather, they exemplify the British and American postindustrial story that takes place in the manufacturing sectors of many cities and towns. They are two prominent cases among many in their respective countries.[2] Their trajectories take place in historically stable democracies with postindustrial economies that were severely affected by global financial crises. Each group is conventionally thought to be the core ethnoreligious constituency of their respective countries, despite an era of increasing demographic diversification and low native birth rates. Each group occupies a similar social position within their social milieu, which is characterized by marginality and, simultaneously, cultural authenticity. However, the United Kingdom and the United States have different approaches to social programs, local governance, and immigration (see Appendix A). This cross-national lens permits a broader discussion of white working class political behavior, and correspondingly, an opportunity to build broader hypotheses about it.

I spent three months in each community and carried out in-depth, unstructured interviews with 120 people to understand daily life and political culture—the interaction between respondents' "personal narratives" and surrounding social developments (Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett 2008). I supplemented this with archival research about the communities in an effort to further trace the formation of political beliefs expressed by interviewees.

I also analyzed survey data about white working class people's attitudes and behavior to test these ideas. To render respondents a greater sense of privacy and to access people less available by phone or in person, I relied upon Internet-based, nationally representative polling—a YouGov survey administered to nearly 5,000 British respondents, and an SSI poll of just over 1,000 American respondents. The survey questions were based on the ideas derived from my ethnographies and allowed me to consider the conclusions drawn from them with a much larger sample. (A fuller discussion of my research methods may be found in this book's appendix.)

In both my fieldwork and quantitative analysis, I emphasize three lines of inquiry. First, I pursue a more reflexive understanding of white, working class

American and British identity. In order to do so I sought to assess how participants understand their personal and social position vis-à-vis other reference groups in society, such as blacks, immigrants, or educated bourgeois whites. This reflects an enduring scholarship about structures of identity as a matter of group position, and more specifically, how white Americans react to perceived threats to the organization of social hierarchies (see Blumer 1958; Hofstadter 1967; Roediger 1991; Olson 2008; Parker and Barreto 2013; Masaoka and Junn 2013). As Cheryl Harris (1993: 1713) writes about the course of American history, "the set of assumptions, privileges, and benefits that accompany the status of being white have become a valuable asset that whites sought to protect." As these settled expectations have become so embedded, white people understand them to be "a natural order of things that cannot legitimately be disturbed" (Harris 1993: 1778). How are these relationships reconciled and reflected in political choices? How are these relationships reconciled and reflected in political choices? In this way, I engage individuals' senses of social, economic, and political positionality.

Second, I encouraged participants to think visually and elaborate about their ideals of American and British democracy, their visions of the future, and their characterization of present sociopolitical circumstances. I expect this will most clearly illuminate individuals' sense of place, their nostalgia, and the lost landscapes of their past. Do these utopian imaginaries exist? What are individuals' perceptions of change, their personal and collective future, and the trajectory of their society? In this way, my investigation reveals the discrepancies between their ideals and their perceived realities.

Third, I attempted to understand how similar people under similar circumstances hold divergent attitudes about their positions and divergent ideas about how (and whether) to make claims of the political system. I solicited the personal histories and ideational background of the people I interviewed to trace the process of their attitude formation. What are the attitudes behind a sense of estrangement and a sense of engagement? How are these attitudes connected to and informed by perceptions of socioeconomic position and trajectory? How do these individuals propose to best reconcile social, economic, and political inequities? What courses of action are available to those who feel marginalized, and how are such courses understood and pursued?

## Pressing Questions and Findings

This book's investigation of the motivations behind white working class political choices plugs into a series of pressing, public questions discussed by researchers and other observers.

## IS WHITE WORKING CLASS MARGINALITY AND POLARIZATION A TRANSATLANTIC PHENOMENON?

It is tempting to perceive a convergence of Western European and North American politics toward a shared narrative. Both continents are undergoing fundamental shifts in the structure of their societies. Their economies have largely completed the sweeping deindustrialization and denationalization that began in the early 1980s. As part of this shift and the realities of demographic aging, their societies have admitted millions of ethnically diverse immigrants to address skill shortages, reunify with family, and rescue refugees. And their political spectra have been altered by the weakening position of labor movements and the integration of expanding urban bourgeoisies and these immigrant-origin groups into the left. In this spirit, white working class politics possess a transatlantic dimension.

However, the two continents diverge in the way these trends are understood and approached. The United States and Canada are settler states where nearly all citizens have traceable origins as immigrants themselves, while Europeans can still speak of (constructed) national identities forged in blood and historical sacrifice. In particular, the American economy features fewer safety nets and a more open marketplace that its citizens (often blindly) understand to be ultimately more meritocratic. And the American political spectrum is constrained by the expediencies of a two-party system that suppresses the potential emergence of breakaway movements responding to fleeting senses of urgency or perceived rigidity in the mainstream parties. These convergences and divergences inform and contextualize the politics of white working class people I observed in each venue. They make the dynamics of white working class political behavior quite different across the two contexts.

Still, from my research, there emerges a transatlantic politics of white working class people defined by their senses of economic obsolescence and social relegation. This is not to say that white working class people have all gotten poorer, although many have. My respondents exhibit a resilience to financial difficulty, to which many have become accustomed. Rather, this is to say that—across the postindustrial regions of Western Europe and North America—white working class people sense that they have been demoted from the center of their country's consciousness to its fringe. And many feel powerless in their attempts to do something about it.

## IS WHITE WORKING CLASS ANGST MERELY RACISM?

Prejudice and discrimination span generations and certainly play a role in white working class politics. However, the resentment that white working class communities express through their rhetoric and political choices is not as simple as

their discomfort with the proximity of ethnic minorities in their neighborhoods (e.g., Newman 2012a; Abrajano and Hajnal 2014). Rather, the individuals I surveyed and interviewed as part of my ethnographic fieldwork believe ethnic minorities have been given social advantages at the expense of white working class people. My respondents perceive a society that (they acknowledge) once rendered white people an inherent advantage, but now overcompensates for these missteps. In short, many white working class people feel like the victims of discrimination.

Politically, white working class people face a catch-22: should they complain about the promotion of ethnic minorities at their expense, they are labeled racists. Should they blame an economic model featuring expanding inequality and increasingly unstable employment, they are deemed to be lazy. Consequently, the politics of race and demographic change is fought indirectly, and often in coded terms. In Britain, debates linger over public housing priorities, and whether and when immigrants deserve access to welfare. In the United States, white working class people—often dependent on social programs themselves—perceive ethnic minorities as exploitative of welfare and vote to reduce its scope. In Britain, the right is tugging the political center to cut ties with the European Union and curtail the admission of immigrants, including those who possess the highest skills. In the United States, the criminalization of approximately 12 million undocumented immigrants has overshadowed the politics of a system that has settled nearly 60 million newcomers over the last two generations. These issues related to the status of ethnic minorities are actually proxies for issues related to the changing status of native-born white people in the societies they once defined.

## WHAT DRIVES SOME WHITE WORKING CLASS PEOPLE TO RADICAL POLITICAL BEHAVIOR?

People seem to be more frustrated by that which they have lost, than that which they never possessed. In this book, I find that white working class people's rebellion is driven by a sense of deprivation—the discrepancy between individuals' expectations of power and social centrality, and their perceptions of fulfillment. More specifically, white working class people are consumed by their loss of social and political status in social hierarchies, particularly in relation to immigrant and minority reference groups. Their politics are motivated and pervaded by a nostalgia that reveres, and seeks to reinstate, a bygone era.

While this finding emerges from my ethnographic fieldwork, it is corroborated by the data from my nationally representative survey data. I find that political deprivation—as measured by perceived loss of power—creates a form of political capital that is channeled into not only protest activism, but also support for the

violence and xenophobia of radical right groups. The data suggest that while the wealthier, the educated, and the older opt for peaceful means of protest, younger white working class men are more likely to pursue acts of rebellion. Driving this radicalism is not merely a measurable sense of political deprivation and economic obsolescence, but according to the data and controlling for other factors, a profound sense of social deprivation—a shift to the periphery of their society.

## Outline of the Book

The challenge of this book is to explain the divergent individual political behavior of white working class people in response to their marginality. This marginality is contested, for good reason, by observers who point to the residual advantages that even poor white people continue to enjoy in the United Kingdom and the United States. However, there is reason to—at a minimum—consider their self-assertion that they represent a new minority. The next chapter explores this contention.

By putting into conversation diverse literatures addressing socioeconomic inequality, minority politics, and political behavior, Chapter 2 exhibits how systemic, psychological, and rhetorical forces interact to institutionalize the marginalized social position of white working class people in the United States and United Kingdom. I consider the challenges such circumstances and self-assertions pose for the external observer. I then consider the ways individuals have been observed to respond to these circumstances in their political behavior. In the end, we are confronted with a puzzle: why do white working class political actors in similar positions of systemic, psychological, and economic entrenchment respond with variable forms of political behavior?

Chapters 3 and 4 investigate the roots of this variation by undertaking ethnographies of two communities of working class white people situated at the fault lines of the last half-century's social transformation: East London, England (Chapter 3) and Youngstown, Ohio (Chapter 4). Based on interviews with 120 people—35 of whom are elites—and observations during six months of immersion across the two venues, my interview and ethnographic data exhibit two communities characterized by drastic economic transformation and demographic change, which has left many people consumed by their collective and individual falls from grace. Unable to cope with the trauma resulting from the twin collapses of commercial and social life, the populations examined are also subject to governments disconnected from their preferences, and their incapacity to do much about it. I closely examine the social, political, and economic circumstances that contextualize important trends: the observed disconnection between citizens and their government, individuals' poignant nostalgia and sometimes aggressive

nativism, the rise of anti-system political organizations like the British National Party in London, and the extent of political corruption in Youngstown. I seek a more rigorous understanding of white working class culture, social boundaries, and their experiences with various forms of deprivation—all in order to better explain the political choices they subsequently make.

In Chapter 5, I explore the aforementioned economic narrative as it relates to inequalities in the political institutions that structure white working class civic engagement. After laying out the observable variation in respondents' political behavior, I describe three key institutional factors that enable the problematic trends in democratic politics across the cases: (1) the single-party landscape of both political constituencies; (2) the different institutional rules governing local government; and (3) the weak infrastructure of social capital left by Youngstown's and East London's union histories. Institutional explanations set the context for white working class people's political marginality in postindustrial environments, but they struggle to explain individual-level differences among the populations this book considers.

Chapter 6 considers the aforementioned moral or cultural narrative, which implies that white working class people establish political identities in opposition to ethnic and racial minorities who might otherwise unite with white people as part of an impactful proletariat constituency. I begin this chapter by discussing the reinvigoration of class as a defining social division in Youngstown and East London. I contend that the white working class people I study draw more conventionally understood ethno-racial boundaries on top of contemporaneous class boundaries, which are frequently muted by socioeconomic circumstances. I then observe that class divisions are more salient than ethno-racial divisions for white working class respondents who live in neighborhoods that are predominantly composed of ethnic minority residents. Ultimately, I argue that it is more accurate to think of white working class political divisions as a matter of social status, which integrates the overlapping divisions of race and class and converts them into narratives that structure people's experiences in the market, society, and the political sphere.

Chapter 7 seeks to build more sophisticated understandings by linking individuals' political behavior to their understanding of local social hierarchies. I find that while respondents in East London interpret their predicament through the prism of nativity and its entitlements, those from Youngstown view their economic decline through the prism of a dubious American meritocracy. I argue that subjects use these constructed repertoires to rationalize their plight and inform their political behavior. In the remainder of the chapter, I argue that the choice to withdraw or rebel is based on individuals' expectations about their system's responsiveness, their expectations of their own power, and their perceptions of whether or not these expectations are fulfilled in practice. More

simply, I hypothesize that radical political behavior is underpinned by a discrepancy between subjects' expectations of how government and society ought to be, and how they perceive it to be. Conventionally known as "subjective status deprivation," the discrepancy of expectations and perceived fulfillment pertains to economic status, and more relevantly here, respondents' different symbolic repertoires of their local social hierarchies.

Chapter 8 applies the arguments developed in my fieldwork to a much broader sample than qualitative research permits. Since the early twenty-first century, the United Kingdom and United States have each featured a well-known, far right flank. The British National Party, English Defence League, and English National Alliance are anti-system groups that pursue xenophobic agendas with often violent tactics. While notorious, their prominence and palatability in British public discussion permits survey research about people's inclination toward anti-system forms of behavior without much concern that respondents may be reluctant to reveal their affiliation or favor. In the United States, I exploit the rise of the Tea Party and the presidential campaign of Donald Trump. I find that while political deprivation is correlated with protest activism among wealthier, older, and more educated white people, it is correlated with radicalism among younger, working class white people. Less ambiguously, the data show that radicalism is also driven by individuals' sense of social deprivation—that is, their sense of their own movement to their society's periphery.

Chapter 9 applies the findings of earlier chapters to white working class electoral politics and their implications for campaigns and mobilization efforts. While white working class voters make up a major portion of the electorate, especially in Rust Belt regions, mainstream parties on the right and left alike are baffled about how to reach them—or at least how to do so in a modern economy without alienating other crucial segments of their respective electoral coalitions. This chapter traces how history has shaped this voting bloc's viewpoints of the parties and of politics, explores how its priorities and allegiances have evolved in the early twenty-first century, and provides insights for any political organization that might want to make an affirmative attempt to bring the white working class back into the political fold. It identifies and explains prominent public opinion paradoxes and party failures. In the end, this chapter provides insights and strategies for how to promote the greater political engagement of the white working class and appeal to one of Europe and North America's most mystifying electoral communities.