

Working-Class Culture as Political Participation: Reading Trump as Revolt Against a Middle-Class Public Sphere

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Abstract

The 2016 election cycle and ensuing presidency of Donald Trump has been attributed in large part to his support among working-class whites (Gest 2016, p. 193; Tyson and Maniam 2016). Their reasons for support, however, are open to interpretation. This article will suggest that elements of Donald Trump's public communication style and ethos align with elements of working-class culture, language use, and knowledge construction. Trump's anti-institutional, anti-government rhetoric reifies these components of working-class culture because of institutions' and government's deep foundations in middle-class culture, language use, and knowledge construction—and the working-class's, especially the white working-class's, alienation from these institutions, with the result being anger or apathy (Lareau 2003; Jensen 2012; Gest 2016). These values are often embedded in a master narrative that defines white working-class life as one of victimization (Hochschild 2016; Gest 2016; Cramer 2016). The article next suggests that Trump's oft-used rhetorical framework of not just immigrants as threat, but of immigrants as protected and valued by institutions that overlook white working-class concerns (Gest 2016), opens up one possible persuasive framework to legitimate Trump's xenophobia and racism through white working-class attitudes.

Keywords:

Trump, Public Sphere, Participation, Middle-Class

Differences in Class-Based Ethos and Political Participation

Persuasion is not a textbook exercise, and what counts as *ethos*, as making one valid or credible, to use the perfunctory textbook definition, is open-ended. Scholarly definitions that move beyond simple textbook definitions of *ethos* point to *ethos*'s embeddedness in culture and identity. Michael J. Hyde defines *ethos* as a rhetorical construct that creates 'places where people can dwell with and for others' (qtd in Werner 2017, p. xv). Jansen Werner claims that Hyde's 'notion of ethos poses significant implications for the sociocultural function of rhetoric; in particular, it proposes that rhetoric cultivates the conditions through which modes of 'knowing' and 'being' take shape' (2017, p. 110). Considering not only a definition of *ethos*, but specifically a working-class *ethos*, Pierre Bourdieu's work on social class and habitus is often used to construct elements of a working-class *ethos*. Jeremy F. Lane (2000) states:

According to Bourdieu, the working-class ethos was based on the collective experience of material necessity; making a virtue of that

necessity, their ethical code valued ‘honesty’ and ‘straightforwardness’ over the niceties and formalities of bourgeois social convention [...]. Neither of these antagonistic visions was neutral or absolute, the classification and forms of behavior valued by one class would be rejected by the other as either too ‘vulgar’ or too ‘formal,’ depending on which class perspective was adopted. (p. 144)

We see in this early definition of class-based *ethos* a distinction marking the ‘dwelling place’ of the classes as either too coarse or too uncoarse, with an entire system of ethics, knowledge, and trustworthiness attached to these two poles.

Rhetoric scholar Nathan Emmerich (2016) moves *ethos* beyond everyday experience to class-based expectations and possibilities, the differing limits and possibilities constructed through social class. Emmerich theorizes that ‘classed differences in ethos result in class differences when it comes to the articulations of one’s ambitions, expectations, and possibilities presented by the future’ (p. 280). This idea of *ethos* as limits as the possibilities and impossibilities one constructs due to social class experience, defines *ethos* as a teleological construct. Ethnographer of working-class argument Julie Lindquist (2002) has similarly claimed that any means of persuasion is a ‘teleological process’ (p. 4). Lindquist’s ethnographic research suggested that this teleological process is the primary informant of *ethos* because *ethos* defines one’s ability to ‘participate’ (2002, p. 9). Thus, working-class *ethos* becomes not only preferred forms of labor or recreation, or the differences in class-based perceptions of the possible. Lindquist overtly defines working-class *ethos* as public, directly connecting to *ethos* the possible and preferred forms of participation as well as the limits of one’s ability to participate.

I’d suggest that to participate in the political process, the working class shouldn’t be expected to mimic middle-class *ethos*; the working class has its own *ethos* (Lindquist 2002, p. 9) that sketches the parameters and domains of preferred, agentive participation. In the case of the 2016 election, this working-class *ethos* based in language, experience, possibility, and preferred forms of participation was congruent with much of Donald Trump’s rhetoric. Trump’s public presentations provided perspectives and rhetoric that millions of working class Americans could see as valid, as including them, the working class, in a political and media world often built and policed through middle-class knowledge construction and language preferences.

Working-Class and Middle-Class Participation in a Middle-Class Public and Political Sphere

Clearly cultural differences affect *ethos* and the teleology of participation, which changes expectations for public and political rhetoric. The possible and preferred are constructed to great degree by available resources—resources connected to traditional markers of social class. These, in turn, deeply affect forms of participation such as political behavior and self-advocacy. Justin Gest’s book-length study of working-class whites in Youngstown during the Trump campaign evidences that ‘[m]uch of our knowledge of political behavior links the intensity of citizens’ political participation with their resources, in the form of income, education, and skills’ (2016, p. 11).

Gest’s book discovers a working-class disinterest in the common forms of agency defining the public and political sphere. Gest records working-class beliefs and actions based in political apathy or blaming immigrants and institutions who support immigrants and minorities over

hard-working white working-class folks. Thus, Gest's focus on white working-class beliefs and attitudes can be seen as harbingers of preferred political participation in the current political environment. Gest's finding of apathy and blame points toward cultural differences in how the working class wishes to participate publicly and politically. After all, most definitions of the public sphere based in empowerment and political agency maintain either the original assumptions of middle-class or professional class agency and empowerment, be it in Jurgen Habermas's original formulation of the public sphere based in the merchant class advocating for itself with regencies (Habermas 1989, p. 27), Warner's performance and identity theory that focuses on building a public inclusive to its own performed identity, communication standards, and style (2002), a theory that ignores power differences amongst stakeholders, or Hauser's theory suggesting that publics form around issues, not identities, but still require 'dialogue' (Hauser 1999, p. 67) that, I'd suggest, equates to middle class, debate-based, participation.

In these lines of public sphere scholarship, the public sphere and its concomitant political sphere is imagined as one in which all demographics and their communication is agentive; power is not accounted for. Concerning social class, Negt and Kluge argue that Habermas's merchants that created the public sphere ignored the proletariat in favor of a sphere where capitalists gathered to forward their interests (1993, p. 10), a critique still true today, albeit with major differences in twenty-first century working-class beliefs, attitudes, and forms of empowerment and participation.

A Tale of Two Public Voices

The working class is bereft of many resources, particularly middle-class education and achievement, which weakens the working-class's agency as dictated by the operations of the middle-class dominated public sphere. Barbara Jensen argues that 'A public voice, or elaborated [middle-class] code, requires a lot of education to learn well' (Jensen p. 81). Much as Gest points out that political participation, especially traditional political participation, is linked to availability of resources, Jensen suggests a resource such as advanced education is necessary to construct a valid 'public voice.' If lacking the resources to build this 'public voice,' the standard public and political spheres may be hard to enter, if one wishes to participate in such an alien environment at all.

Sarah Attfield (2016) has also commented on how working-class communication may be different from, and even unacceptable to, middle-class communication norms. Attfield argues that the working class seeks power in the tools that advance its cause, and the working class affords itself tools for participation that the middle-class may not. Importantly, middle-class respectability equates to being polite, calm, and avoiding coarse language, yet these forms of middle-class "respectability" when applied to working-class people [are] limiting and controlling' (p. 45). Attfield asks 'What happens when working-class people do not defer to their 'betters' and instead articulate their anger loudly and assertively?' (p. 46). Attfield's questioning of respectability acknowledges the relevance of impolite, uncalm, coarse language in public and political spheres and begs of a working-class means of participation that would factor for, and in fact, find empowerment and participation in, these 'non-respectable' features typically disdained in the middle-class oriented public and political spheres.

Media Bias and the Middle Class

The brash, uncalm, and coarse language that Attfield espies as potential working-class agency parallels the communication of Donald Trump, whose coarse speaking style was accepted, or at least forgiven, by many white working-class voters in 2017, but not by his many middle-class counterparts. Throughout the 2015 and 2016 campaign, the media predicted Trump's debate and speaking style would undermine his credibility, his *ethos*. In short, his coarse language was not proper participation.

This media and political sphere resistance to including or acknowledging 'coarse' public speaking was proven early in the primary season, when most Republican candidates believed that Trump's insult-based rhetoric and debate performance showing little knowledge of issues would not help him win the Republican nomination (Brown 2015). Later, Democrats repeated this mistake when they and the national media continued to believe that Trump's coarse communication style and hesitancy to attend some major debates, a decidedly middle-class structure, would disqualify him from winning the general election (Shepard 2016).

This inability of media to predict white working-class voters' preferences or acceptance of coarse language or debate standards points to, again, a public sphere of middle-class values that is, in this case, media disseminated and policed. Media language is essentially middle-class language—to use Attfield's description: polite, calm, and uncoarse.

Yet Trump used plenty of coarse language, from sexual insult to violence to cursing, as part of his public rhetoric. Trump's April 2016 tweet stated that if Hilary couldn't 'satisfy her husband, what makes her think she can satisfy America?' He also stated of an anti-Trump protestor, 'I'd like to punch him in the face' (Diamond 2016). Trump also cursed, saying, 'We are going to knock the shit out of ISIS,' (Trump as qtd in Schrock et al. 16) which added "'authenticity' to his tough guy performance' (Schrock et al., p. 16).

Why did so many pundits and politicians exclude Trump due to his coarse language? Media and entertainment operate on middle-class language, culture and knowledge norms: 'Even though the middle class is only about 35 percent of the workforce, almost every aspect of politics and popular culture, with help from the media, reinforces the idea that 'middle class' is the typical and usual status of Americans' (Zweig 2012, p. 41). The media are the major purveyors of 'proper' behavior, language codes, and related forms of expression. This middle-class bias can eliminate the ability for working-class members to see their culture acknowledged in popular culture or the public sphere: '[w]orkers are seen, when they are seen at all, as faces in a crowd or in sound bites, rarely as people with thoughtful things to say about their own condition in their country. In the media, the working class is truly the silent majority' (Zweig 2012, p. 58).

During Trump's campaign, however, this silent majority was vocal about Trump's rhetoric and delivery. There were early signs of differing expectations of language and knowledge construction in the public sphere. The daily newspapers during Trump's campaign were littered with quotes from his many working-class admirers. 'He speaks before he thinks,' (Frum 2016) they reported. 'He tells it like it is,' (BBC 2016) they suggested. These compliments certified his authenticity and truth-telling, despite Trump's overriding habit of making claims with no support, for failing the media's fact checks, and for his earning of Four Pinnochios, the equivalent of an unequivocal mistruth, on a near daily basis during his campaign (Senell 2017, p. 1).

Class distrust can outweigh party distrust, as we see from a white-working citizen of Youngstown's sentiment: 'The thing I like about Trump is that both sides hate him' (Gest 2016, p. 193). Both sides here can be interpreted as Republican and Democrat—both parties offer only middle-class representatives in the public and political spheres. Regardless of ruling party, institutions are dominated by middle-class values, language, and knowledge construction, and, despite ideological differences, institutional discourse can feel alien to white working-class voters. Gest's interviewee also captures how the working class is willing to forgive coarse language in the public sphere. The interviewee goes on to state that 'And in his odd, crude way, he makes sense. I know he's not a woman-hater and he's not going to reverse what liberalism has done for us the last 40 years. He just wants to get our country stabilized and back on track' (2016, Gest p. 194). This working-class analysis of Trump's public language does not critique through middle-class language codes. The interviewee is aware that Trump's speech is 'odd' and 'crude,' comparatively, but this speech does not disqualify Trump from the public and political sphere, as many middle-class media pundits predicted.

'I'd Rather Be a Peon Than a Boss': Differences in Working-Class and Middle-Class Culture

Barbara Jensen's *Reading Classes* captures basic cultural differences that cross behaviors, cognition, social-emotional relationships, and language use. She titles these, working class *Belonging*, and middle class *Becoming*. She states 'middle-class language and culture tend to promote individual achievements and competition between outstanding individuals, or people who 'stand out.' Working-class language and communities tend to recreate values of social connection, solidarity, and mutual aid' (2012, p. 55). Here, Jensen outlines the basic cultural values and systems of working-class life similar to Annette Lareau, whose long-term study of parenting strategies in homes suggested key differences in several elements that comprise culture and that point clearly toward Jensen's *Belonging* or *Becoming*. Lareau states that '[c]lass position influences critical aspects of family life: time use, language use, and kinship ties' (2003, p. 236). How one spends one's time, uses one's language, and develops relationships with family determines one's status as an individual seeking to individuate oneself (*Becoming*) or unify with the community (*Belonging*).

Belonging and *Becoming* contribute to differences in language use and knowledge construction. Jensen states that 'Different social classes influence their members with different *ways of knowing*. Middle-class culture, and the worldview it promotes, is driven by formal language and its lengthy, step-wise learning. It both reflects and recreates a culture that prizes individual achievement of excellence and the competition that will (supposedly) force the 'best and brightest' to the top' (2012, p. 73). However, for working-class culture 'the details of language are in the backseat rather than at the wheel. In fact, the vehicle of consciousness is not so much driven like a car down predictable avenues, as it is like steering a canoe over a body of water. [...] *Belonging* necessarily involves paying attention to and being part of the world around one' (2012, p. 76).

Jensen suggests an 'us versus them' sentiment amongst working-class communities. Jensen reminds that the working class is comprised of a number of cultures, but '[i]n working-class communities, 'them' describes not only the professional middle class (and enduring and cross-ethnic Other) but a variety of other 'thems' as well, and only one, very specific 'us'' (2012, p. 62). Katherine J Cramer's interviews with the rural, white working class in Wisconsin also uncovered an 'us and them' attitude. Cramer's interviews focused on a natural distrust of university educated, city-dwelling Wisconsin citizens, particularly public employees. Cramer

states that ‘Many rural individuals saw professors as urban and ‘them’ and believed they looked down on local, rural folks’ (2016, p. 131). Cramer also establishes the *us versus them* cultural identity framework by pointing out that ‘people talked about the public school teachers in their towns as outsiders, even if they grew up just a few towns away’ (2016, p. 131). Gest frames working-class Chicago similarly: ‘In their pubs and neighborhoods, our credentials are not achievements or affiliations, but rather the people we know who vouch for our credibility and character’ (2016, p. xi). Thus, greatly important to working-class culture, identity, and forms public participation is a framework of ‘us versus them’, which is not simply a rhetorical trope, but a facet of working-class culture that shores up working class *community*, distinguishing it from middle-class values.

This cultural facet of *us versus them*, of recognizing distinct differences in working and middle-class culture, aligns with the *us versus them* rhetorical tactics of Donald Trump (Schrock et al. 2017; Sennell 2017), but *us versus them* also offers the working class a familiar way to participate in the public and political sphere—a way that aligns with working-class culture and anti-institutional sentiment. Trump’s campaign rhetoric framed Trump’s opponents, especially Washington Elites, through an Us v. Them melodrama (Schrock et al., 2017, p. 10). For billionaire Trump, this may be a rhetorical tool, but this may not be merely a rhetorical trope to the working-class listener. Jensen notes of working-class participation that ‘what becomes central in communities of mutual aid is a shared consciousness, a *participation of identity*, a living in and through one another. *Me* and *mine* are replaced with *us*. Language is used to shore up a communal way of being, in intimacy beyond words’ (2012, p. 76). Importantly, Jensen connects the working class *us* directly to participation and identity—a form of participation and identity not highly valued in the middle-class public sphere where individuation from others is most important.

Excerpts from rallies demonstrate how Trump uses an ‘us versus them’ framework, wherein he is not a politician or privileged billionaire, but rather victimized by ‘them,’ the Elite, just as his audience has been. This framework typically contains a general summary of a situation, then a statement suggesting his outrage (designated with *italics*), which is often accompanied by changes in point of view (designated in **bold**) to intimate a shared victim status between himself and audience. Here is an excerpt of a Grand Rapids rally:

The political class in Washington has betrayed you. They have uprooted your jobs, your communities, and [t]hey put up new skyscrapers in Beijing while your factories in Michigan were crumbling. *These are **our** politicians.* (Trump qtd in Schrock et al., 2017, p. 11)

Trump uses the tactic and sequence again in the following from a rally in Buffalo: ‘Do not get scared and do not feel guilty. It is not your fault. *It is politicians representing all of **us** who have no clue.* Totally incompetent. *These are people that represent **us** [...]*’ (Trump qtd in Schrock et al., 2017, p. 11).

In the following Trump is speaking on the disastrous effect of NAFTA at rally, which again applies the us v. them framework: ‘We are living through the greatest jobs theft in the history of the world. . . *What **our** politicians have allowed to happen* to this area [...]. A disaster’ (Trump qtd in Schrock et al. 11). By not identifying other politicians as competitors, as equals, and with Trump not seeking to individuate himself from his equals (middle-class Becoming), Trump’s rally rhetoric piggybacks on working-class culture and uses of language based in shared identity, not verbal individuation.

Trump is not alone in using *us versus them* frameworks. Rather, he is a practitioner who often avoids positioning himself as equal, but individuated, from his competitors. An important element of participation and power is creating group identity: ‘one essential element for working-class power is a clear idea of who the enemy is, whose power working class power is arrayed against’ (Zweig 2012, p. 117). With continual resentment toward institutions, and despite changes in the political parties running the institutions that still leave the institution middle class, one can see that middle-class culture is clearly a large component of *them*. What Zweig’s quote on working-class power may leave undefined, however, is that the working class, despite knowing who *them* is, may not wish to participate in ways identical to their middle class counterparts.

To evidence this claim of working-class participation differently, I’d like to move into the working-class workplace, where ‘working-class life invites cooperation between ‘people like us’ versus the competitive ‘them,’ the middle-class and bosses (Jensen, 2012, p. 64). Jensen outlines the story of her ‘bright and hard-working Aunt Luella,’ who quit a supervisor position after just several days of being promoted after numerous years on the production line of a bakery. Aunt Luella stated of her reasons for quitting this supervisory position and returning to the production line: ‘I’d rather be a peon than a boss’ (2012, p. 64). Luella’s supervisory position quickly ostracized her from her long-time friends, who were also her co-workers. Luella’s move to a position of authority quickly moved her out of working class *us* and into *them*, ‘institutional power’ (Jensen 2012, p. 64). Aunt Luella quitting was a clear choice of Belonging over Becoming, and her choice is based not in language, but in working-class culture—the social ostracism that followed her a promotion that differentiated her from the group. Aunt Luella’s final preference to be a ‘peon’ demonstrates that Luella is aware that she violated a cultural norm by moving to a position of authority. Her authority changed her way of participating amongst her peers.

Middle Class ‘Hot Air’: Social Class and the Value of Debate

Working-class participation develops from an assumption that an opinion is shared by all: ‘assertion, if it is to be successful, must be a collective, rather than an individual act’ and will ‘emphasize the communal’ (Bernstein 1971, p. 143). This collective agreement is what makes one’s position valid. In opposition, middle-class speaking codes are far more elaborate because of the many considerations of middle-class language use. Middle-class codes are less linguistically predictable because they capture an individual’s nuanced argument, what Bernstein terms ‘the ‘I’ over the ‘we’’ (1971, p. 147)—that is, one’s own unique viewpoint in a debate, the middle-class individual shaping society and advocating for oneself. Jensen similarly reports that ‘middle-class groups used language and discussion to think and argue, to display individual ability, and to uncover the differences of opinion and debate within the group. The working-class groups used language and discussion to find agreement within the group to connect emotionally with one another. [...] Class differences in speech were consistent and profound enough to point to different cultures’ (2012, p. 54).

This collective aspect of working-class culture can explain why working-class culture sees much debate as ‘hot air,’ as elites talking instead of doing hard work. Different concepts of labor dominate class scholarship (Bernstein 1971, p. 143; Cramer 2016, p. 135-36; Hochschild 2016, p. 61). Debate and difference are highly prized and expected in middle-class settings, but they are not expected or valued at the same premium in working-class culture, where everyone is viewed as agreeing upon how things are, the working-class collective view.

Trump's preference of campaign rallies, as well as atypical debate performances in which he didn't participate properly, can be linked to working-class language preferences. Rally rhetoric in particular allows Trump to make easy assumptions without elaboration, easily identify himself with the working-class collective, then avoid debate, argument, or nuanced policy statements typically expected of politicians practicing their middle-class uses of language for political participation. Trump has stated his own distaste for traditional political rhetoric, suggesting that most politicians speak 'as is they are speaking from a script titled 'How Boring Can I Possibly Be?' (Trump qtd in Robin 2018, p. 271). I would suggest, rather, that the middle class values debate as a form of participation far more than the working class, who often see debate as 'hot air.' This element of Trump's speaking style, too, aligns with working-class culture.

Differences in Ways of Knowing Between Social Classes

Knowledge construction depends greatly upon social class and one's exposure to education institutions. College education itself is a middle-class enterprise, with students indoctrinated into middle-class standards through such routine college practices as Freshman English (Bloom 1996, p. 654) and the freshman essay (Adler-Kassner 1999, p. 92), where language is evaluated according to middle-class values such as respectability, decorum, propriety, moderation, and temperance (Bloom 1996, p. 659-61)—qualities highly reminiscent of Attfield's middle-class polite, calm, uncoarse language. As Jensen argues, 'cultural capital is the invisible curriculum in colleges, much more than in high school; but there are no classes in it' (2012, p. 156).

Educational research has, for decades, clearly outlined what middle-class university expectations are: modern university education involves deliberately moving students through predictable stages of cognitive development (King and Kitchener 1994, p. 66; Moore 1994, p. 47). Educational research suggests that universities move students through clear stages of cognitive development: early in their development, college students exhibit early-stage dualistic thinking—everything is expected to be 'right' or 'wrong.' Students are expected to move beyond this and next acknowledge that a multiplicity of ideas and answers exist. However, in this second stage, students may not always apply the values necessary to distinguish quality arguments from poorly constructed arguments and opinions—any argument or opinion is equally good in this second stage. The individual is in a stage of 'quasi-reflective' learning in which they can identify and relate two abstractions, but they cannot make the two abstractions cohere into a quality argument (King and Kitchener 1994, p. 64).

In the third stage students should recognize stronger argument from weaker argument and navigate contextual relativism. Eventually, in the final stage, this results in mastery of discipline-specific critical analysis and the ability to take on a specific value set as an interpretive lens (Moore 1994, p. 47-49), all the while recognizing that the lens is one choice among many with strengths and weaknesses. This cognitive spectrum is inseparable from the rhetorical and ethical considerations that accompany the handling of increasingly complex information and ideas with real-world implications (Moore 1994, p. 46). Highly relevant to college-level critical thinking and communication is the foundational ethic of fact checking, deep analysis, and emotionless objectivity that dominate the preparation and speaking of the middle class in the professional, public, and political spheres. These lead to polite, calm, uncoarse language.

Yet Donald Trump continually flaunted these basic principles, even the lower level principles, of university education throughout his campaign without damaging his *ethos*. Eric Sennell's summary of Trump's rhetoric demonstrates Trump's ignoring of context, of fact-based evidence, and of careful consideration of claims. Sennell (2017) summarizes Trump's approach, saying

Trump's rhetoric of polarization delegitimizes opposing views and sources of information while simultaneously strengthening his ethos. His redirection shifts attention from his flaws and controversies to other narratives, preserving his ethos. His rapid delivery of information piques his supporters' partisanship and prevents careful consideration of any particular claim. Even if a claim is fact-checked and debunked, Trump often repeats the claim in an attempt to imbue it with familiarity and thus a sense of truth. Lastly, he decontextualizes his assertions so that they will be received differently than they otherwise might be. Combined, these strategies build and maintain an ethos of astonishing power. (p. 4)

Similarly, Minnix argues that populist rhetoric can be, and indeed Trump's is 'a discursive process of reducing complexity [...] (2017, p. 67). Political scientist Corey Robin argues Trump's intellectual penchant for contradiction may not trouble the conservative mind due to conservatism's tradition of contradiction, which is a 'counter to the simple-minded rationalism that was supposed to animate the left' (Robin 2018, p. 239). However, Robin states that Trump 'neither knows nor nods to this tradition' (2018, p. 240). Thus, Trump does not seem to have mastered the conservative system for critique; general mastery of such a system would be required to reach the third or fourth level of cognitive development outlined above. Robin states that Trump's 'whims are as unlettered as his mind is untaught' (2018, p. 245).

For one example of a lack of disciplinary thought according to evidence, Trump often promised to bring back the coal industry, particularly by rolling back EPA regulations. However, economists, experts, and even coal CEOs armed with statistics argued this plan would not help, as market forces, not regulation, has led to the coal industry's decline (Henry 2017). Trump's ignoring of expertise, especially in his own domain of business and economics, suggests Trump is not changing his claims or policy according to the forms of evidence one might encounter in universities, institutions, and similar research-based organizations, while others, even coal CEOs, are constructing knowledge through the university paradigm.

Thus, whether it is Trump's untutored form of argument and public rhetoric, the simplification of ideas through populism, or an extreme form of a whimsical, unpracticed, reactionary mindset, Trump does not play by middle-class's rules of knowledge construction. I am not claiming that the middle class always applies these rules, nor that the working class ignores context, facts, or investigation of claims. Lindquist has proven that argument and debate certainly happen in working-class environments (p.3). Rather, as the next section will evidence, the working class understands that the typical ways of knowing and speaking used by institutions are only one approach, and a middle-class one at that.

Gest captures the class differences in knowledge construction and participation in his Youngstown interview with a local working-class activist, Charlie Johnson. Johnson states, 'Many are happy to go to a meeting where [Councilman] Mike Ray hands out charts, gives a presentation, but doesn't actually do anything. Their eyes just glaze over.' (Gest 2016, p. 127).

The forms of participation—charts and presentations—are based in the knowledge construction of the middle class. The reaction to these methods of participation are two: glazed over eyes or not showing up to participate at all (Gest 2016, p. 127). Cramer's rural working class also suggests a difference in knowledge construction. Cramer states that 'many [working class] people perceived that their own wisdom was not book learning, but it was far more valuable and realistic' (Cramer 2016, p. 129). Cramer's interviews, however, push beyond this basic insight to reveal some other features that link rural, working-class attitudes to ways of knowing and anti-institutional sentiment. Cramer's Wisconsinites complain about their local knowledge not being requested or valued by the UW-Madison research teams, particularly their knowledge of the lakes and fish breeding season (2016, p. 126-27), road improvements that increased local safety but were denied because of environmental regulations (2016, p. 129), and a general feeling that legislators and the Department of Natural Resources 'had little actual understanding of the practicalities of everyday life in the Northwoods' (2016, p. 129). These claims relate directly to differences in knowledge construction, with Cramer's rural interviewees, all laborers in the working class, arguing that their knowledge is not validated or used by institutions. These examples also suggest that working class members are aware of the differences in knowledge construction.

Donald Trump's Knowledge Construction

While Trump is not the only public figure to use these rhetorical tactics that ignore context, use 'us versus them' frameworks, and delivery emotion over logic, I would suggest Trump is unique. The university's and the middle-class's rules of school were not necessary for, and therefore do not apply to and are unrehearsed by, a billionaire trust fund recipient who never needed books, education, or middle-class methods to make his riches. With Trump being only a Twitterer, not a writer, or even a book reader (Sheehan Perkins 2017), he hasn't spent the thousands of hours necessary to absorb the university and professional's way of thinking or expressing critical thought, or even correct grammar and punctuation, as witnessed, for example, in his many Twitter statements or letters to citizens that capitalize 'Nation' even when used as a common noun (Caron 2018). Trump never needed these middle-class tools, language, or ways of knowing. Thus, in his language and knowledge construction, and because of this unique background, I might term Trump a 'working-class billionaire' who is able to transform his wealth and status into a position that aligns uniquely with some facets of working-class culture, as distinct from middle-class culture, therein allowing the working class to recognize elements of working-class culture, finally, in the public and political spheres.

Institutional Alienation and Disempowerment

Many of these cultural features, whether based in language, thought, or behavior, connect to working-class feelings of institutional disempowerment and anti-institutional biases. These feelings of disempowerment begin in childhood and continue through adulthood. Importantly, they also suggest two different forms of participation, especially concerning advocacy with institutions.

Research (Lareau 2003) shows large differences in language use in the American home, including working-class parents talking to their kids less, as well as parents' verbalization being based to greater degree in commands, not negotiation. Working-class parents advocate less on their children's behalf, particularly with school. Working-class parents submitted to the power of the school, the institution, then complained privately, sometimes angrily, at the dinner table, feeling abused by the middle-class institution.

Lareau's research also captures how working-class parents didn't stand for children 'whining,' while middle-class parents saw 'whining' as practice debating, negotiating, and advocating for oneself. However, middle-class kids' lives were a whirlwind of practice talking with adults as equals through a never-ending series of teachers, coaches, and private lesson mentors. Middle-class kids negotiated with adults. Middle-class parents, with the fearlessness of entitlement, negotiated with institutional authority whenever their child received less than necessary to fully bloom into a future middle-class adult.

These differing relationships with institutions also distinguishes class-based participation—a middle-class participation that produces individuals that are comfortable with and who can easily advocate for themselves inside of institutions, and a working-class participation that feels observed by and disempowered by, rather than participating through, institutions.

Economist Zweig can be seen as commenting on the lack of agency of working class culture in a decidedly middle class public and political sphere. Zweig (2012) states,

When society fails to acknowledge the existence and experience of working people it robs them of an articulate sense of themselves and their place in society. We know from the vibrancy of other identity movements that to silence and leave nameless a central aspect of people's identity is to strip them of a measure of power over their lives. (p. 61)

Concerning working-class feelings of disempowerment, academia may be partly responsible for seeing working-class empowerment where little exists. Preeminent labor historian Jefferson Cowie's 'How Labor Scholars Missed the Trump Revolt' (2017) suggests a certain blindness to working-class realities that may be largely due to academia's chosen narratives that reify working-class agency. Feelings of agency toward institutions, however, are decidedly middle class, and perhaps middle-class academics' narratives have selectively grafted this middle-class agency too easily or too routinely into working-class studies. Historian Cowie states of his field and the Trump victory that,

We may have been blinded by the bedrock assumptions of our own field. Most labor historians, one way or another, and whether or not they concede it, remain children of the 'new labor history.' The field emerged in the 1960s and '70s from several sources: the political vision of the New Left, civil rights, and women's movements. [...] In place of institutions and economics, the new breed of scholars put culture, consciousness, community, agency, and resistance at the center of their analyses. [...] No longer intellectual pawns, the working class could have its own voice and reveal its own rich complexity. Liberated history, so the assumption went, would lead to liberated workers. [...] But this paradigm never quite escaped its origins in the political romanticism of the New Left that gave birth to it. (para. 5)

Cowie later reflects on how these values dominant in working-class scholarship were much different than his own working-class childhood:

Having grown up in a white, blue-collar, Midwestern household, I was long bothered by the fact that my experiences at home never jibed with the literature I read in graduate school. [...]The working-class universe I knew most intimately was one without romance or agency and with precious little discussion of movements or protest or anything of the sort. (para 8)

Cowie analyzes how academia, itself steeped in middle-class values, misrepresents the degree of working-class agency, or perhaps looks for it only in certain locations. This becomes detrimental when, for instance, the middle-class historian or politician grafts the quality and quantity of middle class agency and participation onto the mass of working-class members.

Racism and Xenophobia or Institutional Disempowerment?

Thus far, I've outlined how culture, knowledge construction, and agency with institutions are different between classes, and how this provided Trump an *ethos* often congruent to working class culture's preferences. Yet this does not wholly address the issue of race in Trump's working-class white demographic. Clearly the millions of members of the white working class who voted for Trump are not, as a demographic, xenophobic and racist, leaving one to wonder why Trump's xenophobic claims were greatly ignored or found acceptable enough to not disqualify him from office. Although many reasons are possible, and no scholar can untangle all various threads that threaten to treat the working class as a white homogenous entity, I'll suggest that Trump's use of an anti-institutional framework in which institutions support minorities, but not working-class whites, aligns with working-class beliefs and therein provides a powerful ethos, and perhaps logic, likely making Trump's xenophobic claims more palatable to a significant population of working-class whites.

Working-class whites feel marginalized by institutions and believe that institutions favor immigrants and minorities:

The individuals I surveyed and interviewed [...] believe ethnic minorities have been given social advantages at the expense of white working class people. [...] 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. (Gest 2016, p. 16)

One may interpret this catch-22 as a conflict where working-class whites, despite a lack of agency with middle-class institutions, are not recognized as marginalized, or as culturally different from the middle class, which has better resources to be upwardly mobile.

Without the availability of resources, strong feelings of reverse discrimination do factor into the working-class participation, especially in the Trump era (Gest 2016, Khazan 2016). Prior to Trump, the Obama administration built no strong narrative to counter the conservative narratives of victimization by big government and the victimization of the white majority (Lopez 2017, p. 191-94). Thus, the white working class isn't merely racist. Rather, its racism and xenophobia is often tied to its distant, cantankerous connection to institutions, institutions run by the middle class that, in the working-class view, redistribute hard-earned money to

undeserving, lazy recipients, be they government employees (Cramer 2016, p. 18, 136; Zweig 2012, p. 170) or welfare recipients (Hochschild 2016, p. 61). For the white working class ‘government support symbolizes a certain badge of respect’ for minorities (Gest 2016, p. 168) that the white working class does not receive from the very same institutions.

Blaming Institutions as a Rhetorical Gateway to Acceptance of Xenophobia

Language differences, knowledge construction, and ‘us’ versus ‘them’ beliefs can create an anti-institutionalism to imply a ‘white’ working class under attack from American institutions and validate, to a degree, racism and xenophobia. Trump’s rhetoric can be overtly racist or xenophobic based solely in fear of the other, such as his comment equating Mexicans with criminality: ‘When Mexico sends its people, [...] They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.’ (Trump qtd in Wolf 2018).

However, numerous examples of his rhetoric suggest *institutions* protect the illegal and undeserving at the expense of working-class whites. According to Trump, immigrants and minorities overwhelm our resources, and, despite this, *government institutions* protect immigrants, or *government institutions* do nothing while immigrants plunder jobs and resources, despite studies showing immigration leads to economic growth (Hoban 2017). Thus, Trump’s racist and xenophobic statements are often framed through an already existing anti-institutional attitude.

We see this framework in Trump’s April 2016 suggestion that institutions are protecting illegal immigrants and allowing them to use up resources at greater rates than citizens. Trump claimed that ‘illegal immigrant households receive far more in welfare benefits’ (as qtd in Kohn), despite the fact that ‘That assertion has been disputed by the conservative Cato Institute, which actually found that they are less likely to use welfare benefits than citizens—both in terms of frequency and dollar amount’ (Kohn 2016). Trump frames his immigrant bashing through institution bashing—immigrants use up American resources, and government agencies do not stop them. We see a similar use of anti-establishment rhetoric to set up xenophobia in a Des Moines speech in April 2017:

They’re not going to come in and immediately go and collect welfare. [...] I believe the time has come for new immigration rules which say those seeking admission into our country must be able to support themselves financially and should not use welfare for a period of at least five years. (Trump qtd in Register’s Editorial, 2017)

The *Des Moines Register* reported ‘raucous applause from supporters.’ The *Register* itself critiqued Trump, reporting that ‘with few exceptions, new immigrants cannot access welfare programs during their first five years in the U. S.’ (Register’s Editorial 2017) due to a law signed by Bill Clinton. Thus, even when law does not permit institutions to allocate resources to immigrants, Trump’s framework suggests institutions do so anyway, and xenophobia becomes framed through a rhetoric where institutions, particularly government, provide immigrants institutional badges while offering the white working class little help.

This rhetorical frame can be seen repeatedly in Trump’s speeches and comments, but also in his professional documents such as his immigration reform plan released during

his early candidacy in August 2015. His report again uses a framework of institutions allowing too many foreigners, who take up resources—in this case, good jobs that American institutions should be protecting.

We graduate two times more Americans with STEM degrees each year than find STEM jobs, yet as much as two-thirds of entry-level hiring for IT jobs is accomplished through the H-1B program. More than half of H-1B visas are issued for the program's lowest allowable wage level, and more than eighty percent for its bottom two. Raising the prevailing wage paid to H-1Bs will force companies to give these coveted entry level jobs to the existing domestic pool of unemployed native and immigrant workers in the U.S., instead of flying in cheaper workers from overseas. ('Immigration Reform That Will Make America Great Again')

Much like Trump's speeches, this policy statement suggests institutions are not helping Americans and instead have law and policy favoring immigrants. Many of Trump's short list of policy suggestions that follow in the 'Immigration Reform' document also use this framework of institutions favoring immigrants and minorities, not Americans. Trump's policies include increasing the prevailing wage for H-1B visas, a requirement to hire American workers first, and ending welfare abuse. Each implies institutions are favoring immigrants, minorities, and the undeserving, while American workers and citizens are the victims of such policies.

Trump's rhetorical framework can be glimpsed elsewhere. For instance, Trump's unevicenced claim that California allowed millions of illegal immigrants to vote in the 2017 election (Jacobs and Levine 2017). Here again, the institutions of the state of California are protecting immigrants, this time to despoil democracy and his victory of the popular vote.

Working-Class Participation in Context

My explanation of white working-class acceptance of xenophobia through an anti-institutional framework, a framework whose ethos is based in cultural differences from the middle class that include language preferences, knowledge construction, and feelings of agency, is neither stronger nor weaker than competing claims as to how race and social class function. The relationship of class to race is currently a major question in working-class studies (Linkon and Russo, p. 6), and many answers are possible beyond my own. Joan C. Williams' *White Working Class* (2017) outlines a number of possibilities, such as privileged whites not acknowledging their privilege (p. 63), the left dismissing white working-class 'demands on the grounds of white privilege' (p. 70), a feeling that no politician is fighting for the white working class (p. 64), an American welfare system that, unlike many European systems, aids those in poverty, but not those attaining a working-class or middle-class income (p. 13), a fear of economically falling in a global economy (p. 65), a fear enhanced by increased immigration to rural areas (p. 66) that working-class whites feel may affect their own future, and also their communities' futures (Zito and Todd 2018, p. 20). Returning to Attridge's idea of coarse language as empowerment, Williams suggests that for some, racist public rhetoric like Trump's is a 'poke in the eye to elites' (2017, p. 64).

I add to this list of explanations the following: the working class feels alienated from middle-class language, knowledge construction, and culture and has its own forms of these categories

of public participation. The working class saw elements of itself in Trump's political participation, if only through the recognition of the lack of middle-class standards typical of media and political discourse. Many of these middle-class standards also guide institutions, which the working class feels distant from and often victimized by. Trump's rhetoric often used a framework of institution as victimizer of the working class; this sometimes allowed Trump to use anti-institutional rhetoric as a gateway to argue for white working-class victimization through an existing general working-class distrust of institutions.

Concerning how to best answer the question of race and social class, David R. Roediger suggests that there is a 'tired assumption that white males are the working class' (1999, p. 189). He suggests that the 'key question, on such a view, is invariably how white, usually male, workers [...] will react and move' (p. 189). I would suggest that potentially different expectations of public participation for the working-class, constructed greatly by anti-institutional attitudes that align with Trump's rhetorical frame for xenophobia, comprises one way that many working-class whites decided to 'react and move' in the last election cycle, bringing new insights into a working-class public sphere with it.

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He also serves as Writing Center Director, founded Winona State's Writing Across the Curriculum program, and chaired the university's faculty development program. He is currently completing a book project entitled *Mapping Publics* that focuses on sustainability and market rhetorics in the public sphere. Liberty is also a first-generation, working class student from Southern Wisconsin.

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