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Hollowed out Heartland, USA: How capital sacrificed communities and paved the way for authoritarian populism

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ABSTRACT

Communities prosper when they are able to appropriate the wealth they produce and their institutions make peoples' lives meaningful. They wither when the institutions that permit this weaken or vanish. Sacrifice zones — abandoned, economically shattered places, with growing social and health problems — are spreading in historically white rural areas and small towns across the United States. Rural decline, rooted in economic restructuring and financialization, causes severe stress, exacerbates racial resentment, and creates a breeding ground for regressive authoritarian politics. A multidimensional approach must analytically connect long-term and recent trends affecting economy and livelihoods, institutions, health, and community life. The “racial resentment” and “economic distress” explanations for authoritarian populism are inextricably connected. Since the 1980s, and in intensified form after the 2008 financial crisis, capital has systematically undermined the institutions — mutually-owned banks, credit unions, mom-and-pop businesses, family farms — that fostered reinvestment of locally-produced wealth, especially but not only in rural areas. While many Trump voters were affluent suburbanites, another important sector of supporters consists of downwardly mobile inhabitants of zones where financialization and austerity destroyed the institutions that earlier allowed people to appropriate the wealth that they produced and where the social safety net, always fragile, is increasingly in tatters. The United States now has a poor and near-poor majority. Scholars and the media have underestimated the human toll of this crisis and the interconnectedness of the multiple processes of social decomposition affecting rural zones.

1. Introduction

“The United States is coming to resemble two separate countries, one rural and one urban,” political analyst David Graham proclaimed in a 2017 article in *The Atlantic* (Graham, 2017). Viewing the map of 2016 presidential election results, it is hard to avoid a similar conclusion. Donald Trump carried over 2600 largely rural counties and Hillary Clinton, who won the popular vote, less than 500 mostly urban ones (Associated Press, 2016).

The “two countries” thesis echoes scholars of uneven development going back decades, from Michael Lipton's (1977) study of “urban bias” to Cynthia Duncan's *Worlds Apart* (1999) and — more recently — Katherine Cramer's *The Politics of Resentment* (2016). The rural-urban divide received more attention after November 2016, but too often “rural” became a synecdoche for “Trump voters,” “working-class” or “white,” misrepresentations that comedian Samantha Bee demolished in hilarious video interviews with small-town minority voters (Bee, 2018). In fact, Trump voters had a higher median income than Clinton voters, reflecting backing among affluent whites without university

degrees, many of them business owners in the suburban counties where Trump received nearly half his votes (Balz, 2017; Carnes and Lupu, 2017; Edsall, 2019). These suburban voters, especially women, began to abandon Trump's base in the 2018 midterm elections (Greenberg, 2018; Kohler, 2019). But it nonetheless remains true, as Ta-Nehisi Coates (2017) wryly observed, that in 2016 “Trump assembled a broad white coalition that ran the gamut from Joe the Dishwasher to Joe the Plumber to Joe the Banker” and — it could be added, since he received a majority of white women's votes — from Susie the Waitress to Susie the CEO.

The argument of the paper is simple:

- (1) People and communities benefit when they can appropriate the wealth they produce and when their institutions provide frameworks for meaningful lives.
- (2) Since at least the 1980s, capital systematically undermined this capacity and these institutions in rural, non-metro and inner city zones in multiple, interlocking ways and shifted the wealth upward in class terms and outward in geographical terms, while

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- simultaneously undermining community social supports.¹ These zones “sacrificed” to capital are spreading from historically impoverished areas of Appalachia, the Deep South, and Native reservations to much of the rest of the rural and small town United States. Some lie within the most globally linked, economically dynamic metropolitan centers, such as New York and Los Angeles. Others are newly created banking and news “deserts” and places where the “retail apocalypse” and deindustrialization have hit hard.
- (3) Scholars, journalists and pundits have underestimated the severity, cruelty and interrelatedness of the factors contributing to these shifts and their impacts, especially but not only in rural areas, and the degree to which different negative forces mutually constitute each other.²
 - (4) Many Trump voters were affluent suburbanites motivated not directly by economic distress but by racism, loathing for government regulation, and hope for tax cuts. Another important sector, however, consisted of downwardly mobile inhabitants of zones where capital destroyed the institutions that earlier allowed people to appropriate the wealth they produced and where social provisioning and the social safety net — always tenuous and significantly dependent on better-off workers’ bargain with private employers — are increasingly in tatters.
 - (5) The “economic” and “racial resentment” explanations for the rise of Trump, and of authoritarian populism more broadly, cannot be neatly separated. Much of the U.S. population suffers severe economic stress, which in turn generates physical and emotional stress, and this is closely associated with fear and hatred of outgroups and susceptibility to authoritarian appeals.

The focus of this essay is on largely white areas receptive to authoritarian populist appeals, but it is important to remember that there are major sacrifice zones — urban and rural — populated by Native American, African American, Latinx, and immigrant people. Because racism, authoritarian populism and economic distress are often inextricably bound up with each other, urban majority-minority sacrifice zones and the people in them figure in authoritarian populist rhetoric, along with the frequently derided “coastal elites,” as key elements in “rural resentment” of cities and city people.

1.1. *The need for holistic analyses*

The discussion below relies heavily on news reports, case studies, data from government and other agencies, and investor websites and newsletters. It argues for a more holistic, multidimensional view that analytically connects the dots and identifies negative synergies not just between racism and economic distress, but between these and the systematic undermining of community institutions, such as schools, libraries, hospitals, nursing homes, local newspapers, post offices, cooperatively owned enterprises, and rural airports. When viewed together, the numerous interconnected forces contributing to the spread of sacrifice zones and the rise of authoritarian populism appear to be nothing less than a “perfect storm.”

¹ Federal agencies have varying criteria for defining ‘urban’, ‘rural’ and ‘non-metro’ (HRSA, 2017). This paper’s analysis views these categories in more expansive terms, since many small (and some large) cities outside of the most economically dynamic metropolitan areas maintain strong links with nearby rural zones and contain significant “sacrifice zones.” For the purposes of this discussion it is less important to precisely operationalize “rural” and “urban” than to recognize that “rurality” is in part a cultural and identity category shaped by life circumstances and that influences political subjectivity.

² The Report of the U.N. Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights on his mission to the United States of America (Alston, 2018) constitutes an exception. Nonetheless, while it links the diverse mutually reinforcing factors that contribute to poverty, it devotes relatively little attention to processes of community decomposition, such as those discussed in this paper.

While the essay outlines a framework for analysis of the long-term and recent devastation of much of the rural and small-town United States, it does not attempt to address variability across states or regions. The “cases” it examines are not specific locations or groups of people, but rather widespread and sometimes imperceptible forms of wealth extraction — from destroying mutual banks and credit unions to investing in trailer parks — that simultaneously enrich a few and impoverish many. Jessica Ulrich-Schad and Cynthia Duncan are among the researchers who have provided useful ways of distinguishing different kinds of rural zones. Analyzing results from a massive survey carried out between 2007 and 2011, for example, they distinguish “amenity rich” areas (with tourism industries or potential), “transitioning” areas and “chronically poor” areas (Ulrich-Schad and Duncan, 2018). “Amenity rich” areas are generally doing somewhat better than elsewhere, although still suffering from highly seasonal employment patterns and upward pressure on housing prices, as affluent urbanites purchase or rent vacation homes.

2. U.S. social crises and the rise of authoritarian populism

The rise of Trump is part of a longer and wider global embrace of authoritarian populism. Defining characteristics of populism are its multi-class base and its discursive construction of a “people” juxtaposed to “Others” that include minorities and immigrants, foreign “threats” such as China, and condescending, “globalist” urban elites. While some historical and contemporary populist projects — particularly in the Americas — have broadened social inclusion and enacted or proposed progressive agendas, most today are profoundly exclusionary and revolve around the figure of a demagogic leader and the identification of that leader with a movement. These authoritarian populisms typically purport to pit “the people” against elites, foreign “threats,” and stigmatized subordinate groups (Judis, 2016; Scoones et al., 2018). Often they combine “an authoritarian version of electoral democracy” that “represents itself as being outside ordinary politics” (Finchelstein, 2017, 163) and increasingly punitive and voracious types of neoliberal and “illiberal” practices, particularly efforts to quash dissent, politicize state institutions, and slash social protections and rights (Hendrikse, 2018). The “populist repertoire” also includes

The antagonistic re-politicization of depoliticized domains of life ...; the valorization of immediacy and directness against mediating institutions; ... and the ‘low’ style and deliberate violations of rules of polite speech and demeanor (Brubaker, 2017, 367)

Today’s “populist moment,” as Chantal Mouffe indicates, is a direct outgrowth of crises in the neoliberal model implemented in most countries during the past three decades (2018, 11). In the United States these crises include escalating wealth and income inequality, wage stagnation, diminished social mobility and declining average life expectancy (Stiglitz, 2019).

2.1. *The “racism” and “economic distress” explanations*

The question of whether “racism” or “economic distress” was most important in explaining the rise of Trump is misplaced. As Richard Fording and Sanford Schram point out, and as other evidence detailed below indicates, “objective economic conditions and subjective anxieties about one’s economic prospects can be an important cauldron heightening anxieties about cultural and demographic changes that lead to opposition to various ‘out groups’” (2017, 673). Claudine Pied, similarly, argues that today’s conservative populism involves a “coming together of and manipulation of ‘identity politics’ and economic decline” (Pied, 2019, 770). Multiple studies point to racial resentment as the strongest predictor of voting for Trump’s peculiar brand of bigotry, faux populism and economic nationalism (Lopez, 2017). In 2010–2016 the increased geographical dispersion of immigrants (Frey, 2017), some of whom managed to prosper in

environments unfavorable to small businesses, likely heightened white hostility in previously monochromatic communities.³ However, to point to racism or “racial resentment” as the key motivation fueling support for Trump is not to negate explanations rooted in the devastation of white working-class and rural communities, since this can exacerbate racism and anti-immigrant sentiment. Indeed, Mike Davis shows the decisive role in the election of the few dozen Rust Belt counties that flipped from Democratic to Republican between 2012 and 2016 and which had both growing immigrant populations and industries that closed *during the campaign* (2017). In the 2016 primaries and general election Trump performed best in distressed counties with the highest drug, alcohol and suicide mortality rates (Guo, 2016; Monnat, 2016).

Trump's coalition included and includes a significant working-class component, with diverse, often overlapping motivations that range from flat-out racism and anti-immigrant hatred to hopes for economic revitalization to “cultural issues,” such as gun rights and abortion. At the same time, more affluent whites like Trump's support for traditional right-wing positions, such as conservative Supreme Court appointments, tax cuts, increased defense spending, and elimination of “burdensome” regulations on business. As one rigorous study that argues for the continuing relevance of the “working-class narrative” concluded, there is

no evidence that motivations for voting can be cleanly apportioned into parts that are grounded only in material interests, racial resentment, cultural anxiety, or any number of the other single-stranded motives that have been attributed to Trump's voters. (Morgan and Lee, 2018, 241)

Moreover, the distinction between bread-and-butter and “cultural” issues founders under closer scrutiny. Guns, for example, are often cited as a quintessentially “cultural” concern, yet it is “white men who have experienced economic setbacks or worry about their economic futures [who] are the group of owners most attached to their guns” (Smith, 2018). Firearms signify masculinity in a context of growing economic impotence where gun owners increasingly view the home as a bunker requiring defense against threatening outsiders (Maskovsky, 2019, 390; Smith, 2018).⁴

2.2. Economic stress, psychological stress and authoritarianism

The specifically authoritarian dimension of Trump's populism also needs to be part of the “working-class narrative.” One recent study of 7500 non-elderly adults found that 41.7 percent of those with family incomes below 150 percent of the Federal Poverty Line experienced moderate or serious psychological distress, twice the rate of those with family incomes above 150 percent of FPL (Karpman, Zuckerman, and Gonzalez, 2018b). Another survey of over 6000 Americans experiencing financial stress “consistently saw a profile similar to that of PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder]: nightmares, an inability to feel

³ An offhand remark in Bageant's *Deer Hunting with Jesus* (2007, 31), a biting memoir about returning to his rural Virginia hometown, captures the invidious comparisons and envy circulating among some working-class whites: “Hell, Pootie, if immigrants can put together successful businesses of their own, why can't you keep up with your truck payments?”

⁴ Maskovsky drolly observes that the liberal-left version of this bunker mentality “has less to do with guns than ... with nanny cams, home security systems, gating, and other new technologies designed to prevent predators from entering the home via virtual means” (2019, 390). Brubaker sees links between three kinds of “protectionism” as central to authoritarian populism: economic protectionism in the conventional sense, intended to protect national industries and jobs; securitarian protectionism, which highlights threats from crime and violence; and cultural protectionism, which exalts “traditional” or “mainstream” culture and seeks to preserve it against looming perils (Brubaker, 2017).

emotionally close, and cognitive blunting.”⁵ It also “found an association between high levels of external locus of control (ELOC) — the idea that success or failure is a result of external factors — and the intensity of financial stress.” These factors correlated closely with receptivity to authoritarian appeals, intolerance and conspiracy theories (Buckwalter, 2018). Other studies corroborate these findings and point to stress as a significant factor fostering hatred for and fear of an outgroup (Chang et al., 2016; Cikara et al., 2011).

Like financial distress and ELOC, racial anger is an important element in sympathy for authoritarianism. This intensified in the lead-up to 2016 not just because the U.S. had an African American president, but also from an accelerated decomposition of community life and livelihoods that many whites worried could reduce them to what they imagined as the level of Blacks and other minorities. It drew on a deep historical well of entrenched racism and anti-Native and anti-Black violence (Bentley-Edwards et al. 2018; Greene, 2017; McMurtry, 2005; McWhirter, 2012). In effect, these whites feared that the hopelessness and decay of the country's rural and urban “sacrifice zones” was spreading to previously impervious geographical areas and social sectors that earlier benefited from white skin privilege (Wuthnow, 2018, 67–68).

White privilege had many dimensions — decent wages in largely industrial employment, defined-benefits pensions, seemingly permanent employment — but these began to unravel in the neoliberal 1980s and imploded during the Great Recession of 2008 (Katznelson, 2005, 2017). Their erosion and loss fueled not only a “politics of resentment” grounded in a specifically “rural [white] consciousness” (Cramer, 2016), but also an “aggrieved” or “fragile masculinity” and a sense of “aggrieved entitlement” (Kimmel, 2017; Knowles and Tropp, 2018). Michael Kimmel describes this as both a sense of victimization from being unable to access benefits to which white working- and middle-class men believed themselves entitled — and which their fathers enjoyed before seemingly unseen forces snatched the benefits away — and a sense of humiliation at being incapable of fulfilling the patriarchal aspiration of being the sole breadwinner for their families. Many white women bought into the dream of a patriarchal bargain in which husbands would work and provide and they would raise families, and the disintegration of this hope powered further resentment (Frasure-Yokley and Lorrie, 2018; Kimmel, 2017). Downwardly mobile whites sometimes had few tools for explaining how urban liberal elites and politicians ignored them but emphasized Black oppression, while at least some Blacks and other minorities had clearly risen to positions of power.

2.3. Spreading “sacrifice zones” and “the invasion of the wealth snatchers”

While scholars usually employ the term “sacrifice zones” for sites where capital has degraded physical environments (Holifield and Day, 2017), journalist Chris Hedges described them more broadly as places where “the marketplace rules without constraints, where human beings and the natural world are used and then discarded to maximize profit” (Hedges and Sacco 2014; xi). Sacrifice zones are, in effect, internal colonies, as agricultural economist John Ikerd observes:

Rather than being colonized by national governments, most economic colonization today is carried out by multinational corporations, which is the case in rural America. ... Irreplaceable precious rural resources, including rural people and cultures, are being exploited — not to benefit rural people but to increase the wealth of corporate investors. These corporations are purely economic entities with no capacity for commitment to the future of rural communities. Their only interest is in extracting the remaining economic wealth from rural areas. (Ikerd, 2018)

⁵ Notably, however, the “post” part of the PTSD is often irrelevant, since the trauma of financial stress is ongoing.

Economist Joseph Stiglitz notes further that “wealth creation is often confused with wealth extraction.” He attributes the devastation of so much of the United States after three decades of neoliberal free-market policies to “the invasion of the wealth snatchers” (Stiglitz, 2019).

The punditry, scholars and media failed to grasp the enormity of this “invasion,” or the economic and cultural transformations that accompanied it, because so many analyses were piecemeal, examining home foreclosures but not evictions (Ellen and Dastrup, 2012), the opioid epidemic but not worsening economic precarity, or deindustrialization and unemployment but not the disappearance of locally-owned financial institutions. Some astute observers developed compelling multidimensional descriptions of the destruction of small communities, but largely missed the less immediately perceptible ways that financial capital plundered and sacrificed rural regions (Porter, 2018; Wuthnow, 2018). Financialization — the growing involvement of financial actors in business and markets and the ownership of assets not for what they might produce but for how they might be stripped, flipped or otherwise generate shareholder value — originates far away and tends to be opaque.⁶ As Jennifer Clapp points out, “This lack of transparency about which actors are involved in driving these trends creates space for competing narratives — often advanced by the financial actors themselves — that point to other explanations for negative social and environmental outcomes” (Clapp, 2014, 798). As indicated below, the failure of neoliberal policies to produce the promised prosperity meant that these explanations increasingly involved post-factual claims from politicians and media talking heads. These and other commentators also failed to place U.S. decline in global and historical perspective, rarely asking why in one of the richest nations people did not enjoy the right to health or a dignified retirement (Haque, 2018).

2.4. USA has a poor and near-poor majority

In July 2018, the White House Council of Economic Advisers declared that the “War on Poverty,” initiated during Lyndon Johnson’s administration in the 1960s, “is largely over and a success” (CEA, 2018, 29). This rosy assessment — buried in a report intended to justify imposing work requirements on beneficiaries of non-cash welfare programs (e.g., Medicaid, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance or “food stamps”, and rental housing assistance) — ignored a host of evidence that pointed in the other direction. Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to affirm that the United States now has a poor and near-poor majority.

The United States saw a sea change around 1980. Wages became decoupled from productivity gains and stagnated (Misel et al., 2015; Sorscher, 2015). Between 1940 and 1980, the wage gap between poorer cities and richer ones narrowed at an annual rate of 1.4 percent, but after 1980 this convergence disappeared (Giannone, 2017). At the international level, key factors were the mid-1970s collapse of the Bretton Woods framework, which since 1944 had fostered protected national economies, and the subsequent “opening up” of international finance and trade (Helleiner, 1994). Domestically, concerted attacks on organized labor, particularly once Ronald Reagan became president in 1981, further eroded workers’ bargaining power.

Income and wealth inequality soared, and the impoverishment of the population proceeded apace. In 2011, 1.5 million households — half of them white — with about three million children, were surviving on cash incomes of less than \$2.00 per person per day (Edin and Shaefer 2015; xvii–xviii). Nine million Americans have zero cash income (Pilkington, 2017). By 2016, 63 percent of Americans didn’t have enough savings to cover a \$500 emergency (McGrath, 2016); 34 percent had no savings at all (Bloom, 2017). In that same year the official poverty rate was 12.7 percent, with the “supplemental poverty

measure” reaching 14 percent (Fox, 2017).⁷ A 2017 study in 15 states (accounting for 39 percent of all U.S. households) found that “asset-limited, income-constrained, employed” or “ALICE” households — those above the federal poverty line but earning less than the “bare-minimum survival budget” in their area — accounted for a shocking 40 percent of all households (United Way, 2017). Between 2007 and 2016, median household wealth fell by 31 percent (Federal Reserve, 2018).

Many of the poor and near-poor are employed, often in multiple low-wage jobs, and depend on food stamps to eat — in effect a public subsidy for their employers, which include some of the largest corporations in the world. In 2017, 78 percent of U.S. workers and 81 percent of women workers in a Harris poll reported living paycheck-to-paycheck (CareerBuilder, 2017). Nearly 40 percent of nonelderly adults indicated that they or their families had trouble meeting at least one basic need — food, healthcare, housing, or utilities — in 2017 (Karpman, Zuckerman, and Gonzalez, 2018a). A rapidly growing number of the very poor sell their blood plasma to large corporations twice-weekly in order to survive (Shaefer and Ochoa 2018); indeed, blood plasma collections doubled between 2008 and 2016, and the number of collection centers rose from 300 to 700 between 2005 and 2017 (Economist, 2018b).

One striking finding of Cramer’s *Politics of Resentment* was that rural Wisconsinites viewed the 2008 Great Recession as “unremarkable” (Cramer, 2016, 169). They had been living in a recession for decades (a reality that Bageant’s *Deer Hunting with Jesus* [2007], published just before the crash, amply documents for small-town Virginia). Many spend a huge portion of their income on gasoline and the cars that are essential for commuting to work almost everywhere in the country, especially in rural areas that lack public transport, where distances are long and evangelical Christian and right-wing talk shows dominate the airwaves. Low-income Americans’ economic precarity and lack of labor and housing rights are such that the cost of a hospital visit or car repair may initiate a downward spiral that culminates in job loss and even homelessness (C. Lutz, 2014). U.S. households are deeply indebted from mortgages, autos, credit cards, medical bills, and student loans (Federal Reserve Bank of New York, 2018). Business indebtedness, long an important factor in the demise of farms and other small enterprises, is for many Americans an additional source of insecurity, anxiety, and stress (Dudley, 2002; Newman and Bunge 2019).

2.5. Unhousing the poor

The 2008 bursting of the mortgage bubble was a major driver of homelessness, ravaging entire communities as homeowners defaulted on what had often been predatory loans. Nationally, residential foreclosures — 383,037 in 2006 — climbed rapidly, with around one million each year in 2009–2012, and only returned to pre-crisis levels in 2016 (CoreLogic, 2017). By 2012, 22 percent of U.S. homeowners with mortgages were “underwater,” with debt obligations that exceeded the value of their homes. Fully \$7 trillion in home equity evaporated in the same period (Ellen and Dastrup, 2012). Evictions from rental housing constituted an even larger driver of homelessness, with an estimated 83 million cases registered nationwide in courts between 2000 and 2016, an average of 4.9 million per year (Badger and Bui, 2018). Many more “informal evictions” occur as renters succumb to landlord pressures and move before having to face legal action (Desmond, 2016). At least one in four poor renting families spend 70 percent or more of their income

⁶ For a detailed discussion of financialization, see Clapp and Isakson (2018, 4–10).

⁷ The 2018 poverty line, set by the Department of Health and Human Services, was an annual income of \$12,140 for an individual, \$25,100 for a family or household of four, and \$42,380 for a family or household of eight (ASPE, 2018). Mostly rural and completely rural counties have higher poverty rates, 16.3 and 17.2 percent, respectively, in 2017 (Guzman et al., 2018). The supplemental poverty measure includes both cash resources and non-cash benefits and subtracts necessary expenses, such as taxes and medical costs.

on rent and utilities (Desmond, 2016, 4). Only one in four households that qualify for affordable housing programs receives any kind of assistance (Eviction Lab, 2018).

The cumulative impact of the housing and homelessness crisis, especially in the hardest-hit regions, has been devastating, as families doubled up with relatives, went on the road, or moved to shelters. A foreclosure can ruin an individual's credit rating, and a legal eviction from rental housing comes with a court record. Either constitutes a major obstacle in securing future housing and jobs, since landlords and employers routinely perform credit checks on potential tenants or hires, and property owners similarly screen for a rental applicant's previous eviction record (Ellen and Dastrup, 2012). According to the Princeton University Eviction Lab, eviction also causes job loss,

as the stressful and drawn-out process of being forcibly expelled from a home causes people to make mistakes at work and lose their job. Eviction also has been shown to affect people's mental health: one study found that mothers who experienced eviction reported higher rates of depression two years after their move. (Eviction Lab, 2018).

Individuals with no permanent address are further disadvantaged when filling out job applications. Frequently they lose food stamps, Medicaid and other government benefits when renewal notices arrive at addresses where they no longer live. Children have to switch schools in mid-year, often to ones in less desirable neighborhoods, which negatively affects their educations and those of their permanently housed classmates (Ellen and Dastrup, 2012, 4).

The amounts of delinquent payments that triggered eviction proceedings are suggestive of the precarity low-income households experience. In Richmond, Virginia, one of the hardest hit small cities, the median amount tenants owed was \$686 (Badger and Bui, 2018). Not surprisingly, the Princeton Lab concludes that “The evidence strongly indicates that eviction” — and we might add, foreclosure — “is not just a condition of poverty, it is a cause of it” (Eviction Lab, 2018).

Large investor groups and real estate investment trusts (REITs) heighten housing insecurity by targeting “mom-and-pop” trailer parks, hiking rents and siphoning off money that would otherwise be spent locally.⁸ Frank Rolfe and Dave Reynolds, who boast a \$500 million portfolio of mobile home parks, run a “Mobile Home University” that teaches investors how to get in on a business that promises annual returns of up to 20 percent (MHU, 2019b; Wotapka, 2013; Lilly n. d.). Mobile home park investors skim profits from and dispossess the most disadvantaged sectors — what Rolfe contemptuously terms “the dregs of society” (MHU, 2019a). Trailer park residents — 6 percent of the U.S. population — are essentially captives of this form of monetizing the poor; residents are “more likely to endure the [rent] increase than pay a trucking company the \$3000 it can easily cost to move even a single-wide trailer to another park” (Rivlin, 2018).

3. Financialization and deindustrialization in rural and non-metro sacrifice zones

Some features of U.S. sacrifice zones are specifically rural. The 1980s saw the worst farm crisis since the 1930s depression (Edelman, 2003, 188–90). Prices for petroleum and fossil-fuel-based fertilizers skyrocketed, interest rates soared as monetary policies sought to dampen inflation, loans were called in, and grain prices plummeted with the cessation of sales to the Soviet Union following its invasion of Afghanistan. The rapid consolidation of input and machinery suppliers, and in the processing, storage, brokering and exporting of key commodities, allowed a handful of giant corporations to garner a rising

⁸ Investors include Warren Buffett, the Carlyle Group (the world's largest private equity firm), and a Goldman Sachs alumnus who left the bank to go into trailer parks (Effinger and Burton, 2014; Neate, 2015; Wotapka, 2013).

share of the total value-added between the farm gate and the consumer (Kneen, 2002; Howard, 2009).

Many farmers lost lands to larger operations. The availability of bigger, more powerful and expensive machinery permitted fewer farmers to farm larger areas, a process that accelerated both indebtedness and the decline of the agricultural population. Survivors of the 1980s suffered a second crisis in the past several years, following the end of the commodities boom of the 2000s (Harvie, 2017). In 2013–2017 U.S. farmers and ranchers experienced a 48 percent drop in real net farm income, the largest four-year decline since the 1930s depression (USDA, 2018a). Over half of farm households now lose money on farming (USDA, 2018b). Median net farm income, which was slightly negative at \$-118 in 2014 dropped to \$-1165 in 2017 and to \$-1840 in 2018 (USDA, 2018c; 2019). As farmers again go bankrupt, the multiplier effects further destabilize local economies and communities. Farmland ownership concentration, for example, particularly when corporate enterprises replace family-owned units, is associated with declines in the number of children in rural school districts and with the shuttering of schools that had long been centers of community life (about which more below) (Bosman, 2018).

In *The Glass House: The 1% Economy and the Shattering of the All-American Town* (2017), Brian Alexander describes an Ohio community whose story parallels that of thousands of others throughout the United States.⁹ Home to a large glass plant, it was a place where “a factory worker might live three blocks from a factory owner” and where owners backed local bond issues to fund the good schools and hospitals that attracted skilled employees. In the 1980s leveraged buyout specialists raided, loaded the company up with debt, dismembered it, crushed the union, and cashed out. A series of new owners — hedge funds and private equity shops — slashed wages and pensions and ordered executives to live elsewhere “so they wouldn't be troubled by requests for civic involvement or charitable contributions” (2017, 56).

The priority now was shareholder value, not making products or, much less, squandering profits on community institutions. The deindustrialization of the rural and urban United States proceeded at a rapid clip, crescendoing with the 2008 crash, after which non-metro areas outpaced the rest of the country in industrial job loss, suffering a 35 percent drop in manufacturing employment (Orejel, 2017). Populist demagogues like Trump blame job loss exclusively on free trade and factory flight, and their liberal critics also cite automation and failure to innovate (C. C. Miller, 2016; Mihm, 2018), but neoliberal financialization has clearly been a central factor.

3.1. Creating “banking deserts”

Financialization also decimated mutually-owned banks, which long powered small-town economies. Directors often contributed to local institutions, knew clients, and sometimes made business and personal loans based on trust rather than credit scores. Beginning in the 1980s, private equity investors seeded mutual and savings banks across the country with small deposits in anticipation of their eventual conversions into stock institutions (FDIC, 2017). Depositors had rights to buy stock at low insider prices before initial public offerings. Typically shares appreciated 15 percent on the day of the IPO and 20 or even 50 percent more in the following months. Directors and investors then encouraged giant regional banks to gobble up and shutter local ones

⁹ Earlier studies of deindustrializing communities rarely captured sufficiently contemporaneous processes of financialization. Doukas (2003), for example, analyzed local-level impacts of nineteenth-century corporate “trusts,” but largely neglected financial capital's more recent efforts to reorganize and eviscerate industry. Nash (1989), similarly, pointed to problems of “footloose capital,” “disinvestment” and “runaway shops,” but explained deindustrialization mainly as part of a “race to the bottom” as corporations sought lower wage workers abroad, rather than as a strategy of an increasingly financialized investor class.

and cashed in as shares soared 200 to 400 percent above the IPO level, suctioning wealth out of communities, instituting stricter lending criteria, undermining small businesses, creating “banking deserts,” and forcing the newly un-banked to depend on high-cost check cashing outlets and payday lenders, often themselves financed by the larger banks (Mizan n. d.; Economist, 2017; Connor and Skomarovsky, 2011). During 2008–2016, rural areas, which have less access to broadband and Internet banking, saw 86 new banking deserts (Richardson et al., 2017).

Like mutual banks, cooperatives and credit unions that reinvested locally the wealth communities produced had long acted as a bulwark against rapacious corporations and banks (Schneiberg, 2011). Of the more than 8000 credit unions in 2007, over two thousand closed by 2017 (NCUA, 2017, 177). Of the 3346 agricultural cooperatives — grain elevators and packing houses, among others — that existed in 2000, one thousand closed by 2009 and another 350 by 2015, in part because of mergers (USDA, 2011; 2017, 6). Rural cooperatives may, however, receive an additional lease on life as a result of an initially little-noticed “grain glitch” retained in the hastily-drafted 2017 Republican tax bill. This clause allows farmers to deduct from their taxes 20 percent of their sales to cooperatives (Tankersley and Rapoport, 2018). Agribusiness interests would like to overturn the measure, since they claim it undermines private investment, but they are unlikely to do so given the lack of Democratic support for repeal.

3.2. Financialization, the “retail apocalypse” and “news deserts”

Family-owned stores and diners on small town Main Streets were sites of congenial human contact, invested profits locally, and provided additional income and employment for farm and other rural households. As malls and chain stores proliferated, “mom-and-pop” businesses withered from relentless competition. Approximately 600,000 family-owned businesses disappeared just between 2007 and 2012 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007, 2012). Moreover, when the national economy rebounded, where businesses returned bore little relation to where they had disappeared; by 2016, fewer than one-quarter of U.S. counties had managed to replace the businesses they lost in the recession (Fikri and Lettieri, 2018, 14–17).

Fewer small businesses means less ad revenue for local newspapers, thousands of which closed in recent decades, some succumbing to the migration of readers and ad dollars to the Internet and others to the same financialization that was strangling industries and banks (Abernathy, 2016). This meant not just a dearth of local news and ads, but also of recognition of births, deaths, weddings, graduations, and sporting achievements, that is, of a town's inhabitants and their identity with and pride in place. Newspaper closures are associated with diminished voter turnout, less competition in local elections, and increased government corruption, as officials no longer face scrutiny by journalist “watchdogs” (Rubado and Jennings, 2019).

A recent report by the University of North Carolina's Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media paints a devastating picture (Abernathy, 2016). The “new media barons” — private equity outfits, hedge funds and other investment partnerships — have bought up at bargain rates small, local papers all over the country. They cut costs by merging production, sales and editorial functions of several newspapers, while also amassing audiences large enough to remain attractive to advertisers, which increasingly were large chains rather than local businesses. Often this consolidation meant closing “distressed” or “underperforming” papers, firing staff members and creating “news deserts” that left many smaller communities with no source of local news, whether the actions of the city council or the safety of the water supply. Investment performance, not journalism, became the overarching criterion. A manager's handbook authored by the CEO of one of the new chains put it bluntly:

Our customer is the advertiser. Readers are our customers'

customers. [Therefore] we operate with a lean newsroom staff... Sales are the lifeblood of the company ... so it is clear that the top priority of all our newspapers is the sales department. Staffing should be as high as possible in sales and as low as possible in all other areas. (quoted in Abernathy, 2016, 47)

After the first waves of retail closures on small town Main Streets, low-wage retail and service jobs in nearby chains and malls also began to disappear with the expansion of e-commerce (Thomas, 2017; A. Lutz, 2016). According to Bloomberg, it wasn't a simple matter of competition from online merchants; “The root cause is that many of these long-standing chains are overloaded with debt — often from leveraged buyouts led by private equity firms” (Townsend et al., 2017). This “retail apocalypse” was part of a vicious circle, since with the demise of brick-and-mortar businesses — whether on Main Street or at the mall — e-commerce behemoth Amazon became ever more essential for rural residents, many of whom work long hours and can ill afford the gasoline and time needed to drive long distances to shop (Bittle, 2018; Townsend et al., 2017). To make matters worse, since the mid-2000s surviving big-box businesses frequently mount “dark-store lawsuits,” alleging that they should be assessed based on sales of vacated comparable properties, which requires small towns to spend resources on legal costs and further decimates local tax bases (Cohen, 2019).

Dollar stores, which lead full-service groceries to close, are among the few retail outlets proliferating in this bleak environment, with the number climbing from 20,000 to 30,000 nationwide since 2011. Chains such as Dollar General — whose owners include BlackRock, Vanguard and Singapore's sovereign wealth fund and which cater to customers that one market analyst describes as “a permanent underclass” — spend as little as \$250,000 on a new store, while a Walmart might cost more than \$15 million (Donahue and Mitchell, 2018; Frazier, 2017). David Proctor, Director of Kansas State University's Rural Grocery Initiative summed up the problem:

The jobs, tax dollars, and even any profits generated from a local grocery store go back to [the] community or at least to the owner who lives in or near that community. Significant profits from Dollar General are going back to their corporate office, not to the community. (Donahue and Mitchell, 2018)

Empty storefronts and malls, vanished newspapers, and ubiquitous dollar outlets are not just signs of job loss and economic precarity. Inhabitants of sacrifice zones read them as stark, painful reminders of abandonment and a shredded social fabric.

3.3. Eviscerating healthcare, education and public services

It was not only retail businesses, savings banks and co-ops that closed. In recent decades, federal and state governments have removed funding from social services of all kinds, shrinking the public-sector workforce and eroding its working conditions (Cohen and Gebeloff, 2018). Rural hospital closures doubled between 2011–12 and 2013–14, disproportionately impacting the South (UNC Sheps Center, 2017). Many struggled from a shortage of patients with employer-sponsored insurance, which generally provides higher reimbursements than Medicaid and Medicare (Adamy and Overberg 2017). As rural populations age and birthrates dwindle, rural hospitals, typically owned by for-profit companies, ceased offering obstetric services, which are now unavailable in more than half of rural counties. Faced with long, costly drives to the nearest provider, many women receive inadequate prenatal care, resulting in higher frequencies of maternal and infant mortality and other negative outcomes (Healy, 2018). During 1990–2015 in the United States the number of maternal deaths per 100,000 soared to 26.4; in Louisiana, it reached a shocking 58.1, the same rate as Jordan and slightly worse than El Salvador and Iraq. Meanwhile, in the same period in Germany, France, Japan, England, and Canada, the number fell to less than 10 (Young et al., 2018; WHO

et al., 2015, 52–53). In an increasing number of isolated communities the only hospital is Catholic, which makes certain kinds of care off-limits — abortion, certainly, but also birth control, vasectomies, tubal ligations, some types of end-of-life care, and emergency contraception (Barry-Jester and Thomson-DeVeaux 2018). In five states, more than 40 percent of beds are in Catholic hospitals and in another five states the figure is 30–39 percent (Uttley and Khaikin, 2016). More than 440 rural nursing homes have closed or merged in the last decade, often because Medicaid payments are insufficient to cover costs; when residents are relocated in distant facilities, they may be cut off from lifelong friends and from elderly spouses who are unable to make the drive (Healy, 2019). Recently the Trump administration let funding lapse for community health centers used by 26 million Americans and proposed ending a forty year-old Federal rural airport program, which serves 111 communities at least 210 miles from an urban airport (Kliff, 2018; Lowy, 2017). Health and access disparities deepen even more when strapped local governments sell public parks to raise revenue and nearby residents lose opportunities for exercise and recreation (Belluz and Zarracina, 2019; McClure, 2012).

Post offices are closing too. They have long been lifelines for rural people, serving as meeting places, delivering essential medicines, information, and human contact. In 2012, some 3000 rural post offices narrowly avoided closing, but a slow attrition is nonetheless shutting many of them (Gewirtz, 2011; Swinnerton, 2017). The growing importance of Amazon in rural areas has stretched the underfunded U.S. Postal Service to the breaking point, since private couriers, such as FedEx and UPS, often are unable to make a profit in and do not serve many rural zones, especially for “last-mile delivery.” USPS carriers in these areas are working longer shifts, often for no extra pay, and offices are understaffed (Bittle, 2018). Together with the highly unusual 2006 Congressional mandate that required the USPS to pre-fund 75 years of future retiree healthcare benefits, which caused its deficit to soar, these operating conditions are becoming pretexts for privatization (Smith, 2018). Trump recently announced a task force to “reform” the USPS (Task Force, 2018). This was motivated in part by hard-right ideological hostility to the public sector and lusting after potential profits for private delivery services; but more importantly, the Post Office's largest customer is Amazon, whose CEO, Jeff Bezos, is publisher of *The Washington Post*, which has been highly critical of Trump's administration (Dayen, 2018).

The federal and many state governments have systematically starved schools of funds. Because property taxes are, apart from state budgets, a key source of education funding, when tax bases and populations decline, schools — often centers of small-town sociality and key loci of local identity — close, shift to four-day-per-week schedules or consolidate with adjacent districts (Cramer, 2016, 50; Economist, 2018a). Thirty percent of all school closures nationwide in 2011–12 were in rural areas, stranding students in isolated areas and forcing them to take long bus rides that negatively affect academic performance. This disproportionately impacted minority communities, but also caused significant suffering for rural whites.

Rural public libraries are often “de facto community centers” and sometimes provide the only public meeting spaces in their communities (Vinjamuri, 2013). For those unable to afford Internet access or computers, public libraries are essential for seeking educational resources and medical information and applying for jobs, government services, and college. While library closings in devastated cities, such as Detroit, received considerable attention in the years following the 2008 crisis, the picture in most of the country — and in rural zones, in particular — indicates a gradual erosion marked by shortened hours, difficulties in attracting and retaining qualified staff, inadequate and deteriorating facilities, and cutbacks in funding, as local tax bases erode and states take an increasingly draconian view of public expenditures (COSLA, 2012; Real and Rose 2017; Swan et al., 2013; IMLS, 2016, 8). Adding to the problem, powerful right-wing lobbies, such as the Koch Brothers' Americans for Prosperity, have targeted ballot initiatives in several states

that seek to fund public libraries (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 2016). Public libraries have become increasingly reliant on local taxes, even as voter support for them has softened, which under today's austerity conditions likely portends future funding reductions (OCLC and ALA, 2018).

3.4. Neoliberalism and post-factual politics

Education austerity, school closings, and library cutbacks fragment society in multiple ways. Public schools as incubators of citizens and democratic values may be overhyped at times, but there is little doubt that in many places, despite widespread de facto racial segregation, they “have encouraged a unique mixing of diverse people” (Christakis, 2017). When underfunded schools descend into mediocrity, critical thinking suffers and sectors of the populace become ever more susceptible to demagogic manipulation and social media trolls and bots (McClenen, 2018). The same is true of public library cutbacks; as the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* editorialized in 2016, “Defund libraries. Create a nation of fools” (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 2016).

These attacks on education infrastructure facilitated the rise of “post-factual” politics. Equally important, however, the reality that three decades of neoliberalism had failed to deliver the prosperity it had promised required the expansion of consumer indebtedness to “paper over” worsening signs of social crisis (Eichengreen, 2018, 134), as well as the “propagation of illusions” and “expert lies” (Streeck, 2017). This in turn reinforced a style of rule reliant on gaslighting and spurious accusations directed at public figures, politicians, and the media.

Recent research indicates that extreme right-wing conservatives shared and consumed more “fake news” stories on Facebook and Twitter than all other political groups combined (Guess et al., 2017; Narayanan et al., 2018; Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). On Twitter, “falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information,” even though those spreading it had fewer followers, were significantly less active and had been on the platform for significantly less time (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Various studies suggest that “fake news” likely influenced the outcome of the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Gunther et al., 2018; Shane and Mazzetti, 2018). Yevgeny Prigozhin — nicknamed “Putin's cook” — the alleged mastermind of Russia's social media disinformation operation around the 2016 U.S. presidential election, reportedly commented that “Americans are very impressionable people; they see what they want to see” (MacFarquhar, 2018).

3.5. Killing the pain

As once vital communities and neighborhoods hollowed out, losing their institutions and the capacity to appropriate the wealth they produce, despair and anxiety triggered violence and addiction. Economist Umair Haque, in a trenchant essay on the “social pathologies of collapse” — school shootings, the opioid epidemic, “nomadic retirees” who live in their cars and work low-wage jobs, and the normalization of indifference — concludes that “we are grossly underestimating what pundits call the “human toll” (Haque, 2018; Gun Violence Archive, 2018; Bruder, 2017; Whoriskey, 2018).

To take but one obvious example, the scale of the opioid problem — and of the physical and emotional pain behind it — is staggering. In 2015, some 92 million or 38 percent of U.S. adults used prescription opioids, with 11.5 million (4.7 percent) reporting misuse (Han et al., 2017). Big pharmaceutical distributors and manufacturers aggressively marketed painkillers like OxyContin and fentanyl, and in some states doctors wrote more prescriptions than there were people (Lopez and Frostenson, 2017). In 2008–2017 drug companies shipped 20.8 million opioid pills to just two pharmacies in one town — population 2900 — in largely rural West Virginia (Eyre, 2018). This was not atypical in West Virginia, where pharmacies in even smaller towns received massive shipments of pills and where overdose deaths are higher than in any other state (Halloran, 2018). In Missouri between 2012 and 2017,

the three largest distributors shipped 1.6 billion dosage units of opioids, a volume equivalent to more than 260 doses for every state resident (HSGAC, 2018).

Pervasive corruption and greed fueled the opioid epidemic. Under the Controlled Substances Act, pharmaceutical distributors are required to monitor and report suspicious orders to the Drug Enforcement Administration. However, the “big three” distributors — McKesson, AmerisourceBergen, and Cardinal Health — have “consistently failed to meet their reporting obligations over the past ten years — in some cases surrendering licenses for distribution facilities and paying escalating fines after DEA and Department of Justice investigations” (HSGAC, 2018, 1). Above the distributors, the large pharmaceutical companies aggressively targeted regions, doctors, and even particular patients to hike opioid sales; they systematically understated risks of addiction and also acquired patents for addiction treatment, so that they could continue to profit from the disaster they helped create (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2019; Coombs, 2018; Crow, 2018; Hadland et al., 2019). At the ground level, doctors who run “pill mills” and pain clinics have engaged in billing schemes to bilk Medicaid and private insurers and have frequently accepted drug manufacturer kickbacks and lucrative speaking engagements where they tout the virtues and underplay the dangers of particular opioid products (Hughes, 2018). And in Washington, “big pharma” spends more than any other lobby on influencing elected representatives and other policymakers (Fang, 2018; Herman, 2018; McGreal, 2017).

Drug overdoses are rising rapidly and now kill more people than gun violence and auto accidents combined. More Americans now die each year from drug overdoses than perished in the Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq wars combined (Kristof, 2019). To make matters worse, the methamphetamine scourge, which was centered in rural zones and which had subsided in the early 2000s, “has returned with a vengeance,” in part because meth users can now easily find cheap opioids to dampen meth’s intense rush. In some states deaths from meth now vastly outnumber those from opioids (Daley, 2018; Garriot, 2013; Robles, 2018).

Incarceration rates for whites — and especially for white women — have risen since 2000, very likely because of increased law enforcement in rural drug-consuming areas (Humphreys, 2016). Absent family members, and particularly women, who still account for most work related to social reproduction, constitute an additional burden and stressor for households and communities. Addicts — whether of meth or opioids — make unreliable family members, neighbors and employees, which further undermines households, society and economies in the sacrifice zones.

4. Angry politics in shattered communities and white suburbs

The financial stress many working-class Trump supporters experience is compounded by high levels of diabetes, lack of exercise, heavy drinking, and high body weight; stress is a precursor and a consequence for each of these conditions and thus must also be considered an element in the development of fear of and hatred for an outgroup and sympathy for authoritarianism (Buckwalter, 2018; Chang et al., 2016; Cikara et al., 2011). In 2017, for the third year in a row, life expectancy in the United States fell, in significant part because of drug overdoses and other “deaths of despair” (Case and Deaton, 2017; CDC, 2018; Fox, 2017; Meit et al., 2017). During 1999–2016, suicide rates increased in 49 out of 50 states, with rises of over 30 percent in 25 mostly rural states (Stone et al., 2018). Farmers, in particular, are killing themselves in record numbers (Weingarten, 2017).

Trump discerned the anger, fear and alienation in the sacrifice zones, but directed his racist, anti-immigrant harangues only at their white inhabitants. His country-club racism, off-hand authoritarianism, simple-minded nationalism, overblown promises, and claims to be a “strong leader” resonated in shattered communities (Goldfarb, 2018). In effect, Trump’s framing of the economic crisis appealed to the predispositions of an audience that had long harbored, even if latently,

existential fears and deep resentments of cosmopolitan elites, racial and other minorities, immigrants, and unscrupulous trading partners (Bonikowski, 2017; Mutz, 2018). Trump’s tirades also appealed to nouveau-riche entrepreneurs and well-to-do white suburbanites, many of whom bought Republican claims about “burdensome” regulation of business, “big government,” and “undeserving” minorities, immigrants and public employees, and were uneasy that their heretofore-monochromatic communities were being “invaded” by affluent immigrants and people of color. Importantly, whites who are intolerant of “out-groups” — ethnic, racial, religious, linguistic, and sexual minorities, in particular — manifest decreased support for democracy and backing for “a strong leader” and authoritarianism, including military rule (Drutman et al., 2018; S. V. Miller and Davis, 2018).

Candidate Trump repeatedly pathologized non-white inhabitants of the sacrifice zones, deploying age-old right-wing rhetoric about “dangerous” and “unproductive” minorities and immigrants that in turn served to justify the traditional conservative agenda of shrinking government and protecting the interests of the super-rich. Governments appeared unable or unwilling to address the convergence of multiple crises — of employment, housing, education, health care, decaying communities — and this in turn revived memories of past broken promises, including those of neoliberal Democratic administrations. The Democratic Party’s nomination of a candidate widely and accurately viewed as a member of the country’s traditional political class and the Party leadership’s failure to even perceive the crisis, much less advance transformative policy alternatives and a genuinely inclusive vision, lent credence to Trump’s bombast about “American carnage.” As occurred elsewhere when demagogic authoritarian populists have won power, sectors of the electorate experiencing worsening economic marginalization punished establishment “moderates” and “centrists” (Hendrikse, 2018; Streeck, 2017). In the U.S. case, the feeling of abandonment, along with downward mobility and heightened suffering, made white rural Americans receptive to a candidate who spoke about their distress in familiar terms and cast himself as an “outsider” (Cherlin, 2018; Orejel, 2017).

5. Conclusion

The devastation of rural communities sketched in this paper points to the need for an understanding that emphasizes holism and interconnectedness and that acknowledges the burdens of history, whether the longstanding, deeply-rooted racism pervasive in the United States or the more recent destruction wrought by neoliberal financialized capitalism in rural and urban sacrifice zones. It is important to underscore as well that the recent rise of authoritarian populism is a symptom of this devastation rather than a proximate cause. Indeed, the “populist moment,” in the United States and elsewhere, signals a profound crisis in a neoliberal model dominant during the last three decades that both conservative Republican and liberal Democratic administrations enthusiastically implemented. That its earliest targets were often minorities does not negate the pain of its more recent, white victims.

Rural decline is not simply the result of deindustrialization spurred by free trade, the farm crisis, or automation and robotization. Since the 1980s, financial capital has developed imaginative new ways to strip and seize the assets present in rural zones, whether these be mutually-owned banks, industries, cooperatively-owned grain elevators, local newspapers, hospitals, people’s homes, or stores located in towns and malls. Its fiscal austerity agenda — centered on tax cuts for the rich above all else — has undermined the capacity of small communities to adequately fund institutions, such as schools, day care centers, nursing homes and libraries, which had made these attractive places for working-class and professional people to raise families.¹⁰ Capital’s

¹⁰ In some communities, conservative fundamentalist churches are the one remaining robust social structure (Bageant, 2007, 172).

deregulatory agenda decimated unions, eroded occupational safety and health enforcement, ravaged the environment, and facilitated the institutionalization of precarious employment conditions under which workers depend on multiple low-wage jobs, frequently never knowing their assigned shifts until the last minute, and are often considered “independent contractors” with no labor rights.¹¹ The lion's share of the vast wealth that rural zones produced and continue to produce has accrued to shareholders in corporations and financial institutions headquartered in a handful of distant, economically dynamic urban centers.

To insist on the decimation of rural and non-metro sacrifice zones in tracing the rise of Trump is not to downplay explanations based on the racism of many of his supporters, who included a majority of both working-class and affluent white voters, women and men. The resentments and white identity politics that allowed Trump to win the presidency and consolidate his base are products of decades-long processes that intentionally siphoned wealth out of some areas and concentrated it in others. More than two years into the Trump presidency, resentments and white identity politics also appear to be rather durable (Cohn and Parlapiano, 2018), despite a growing genre of upbeat liberal media commentaries that predict diminished support for Trump among elements of his base, such as white evangelical and white women (Johnson and Hawbaker, 2018; Borchers, 2018; Illing, 2018; Kohler, 2018) or working-class men (Gray, 2017; Reilly, 2018). The daily outrages of the Trump administration — whether personal insults, incessant lying, revelations of assaults on women, racist commentaries, attacks on immigrant families, impugning the professionalism of underlings or entire government agencies, or amateurish and belligerent foreign policy fiascos — rarely produce more than a small, momentary decline in the base's enthusiastic support for the President, which numerous polls locate in a range of 35–45 percent.¹² Whether “Trumpism is a religion founded on patriarchy and white supremacy” (Blow, 2018) or a millenarian “cargo cult” of “desperate” people “praying for factories” (Davis, 2017), its attraction, like that of authoritarian populist regimes elsewhere, rests significantly on emotional appeals and triggers. As with other non-evidence-based worldviews, this involves

a persistent disavowal of a consensus definition of truth in favor of ... one man's opinion. Historically, the widespread acceptance of obvious untruths is part and parcel of an acceptance of authoritarianism consistent with a primary component of authoritarianism — submission. (Buckwalter, 2018)

The racial and anti-immigrant hatred central to U.S. authoritarian populism may be part of a deeply felt white identity politics exacerbated by a long-term devastation of communities that accelerated since the 2008 crisis. But it is also a façade for a hard-right, state-led project that invokes “family values,” retrograde forms of masculinity and heteronormativity, and an exclusionary vision of the nation in order to exacerbate social divisions, roll back social conquests, and intensify exploitation of human beings and the environment (Hervik, 2018). The strategies that might begin to reverse this doleful state of affairs are beyond the scope of this analysis, but turning back the authoritarian populist onslaught and refashioning the prevailing commonsense could not be more urgent. At the very least, this must involve re-legitimizing the public sphere and massive public investment — funded by progressive taxation — in order to create a stable, inclusive and more just society that provides opportunities for all, especially in

¹¹ Uncertainty about work schedules greatly complicates planning for other jobs, daycare, and education, as well as contributing to income volatility. All of this exacerbates the prevailing stress and insecurity.

¹² One indication of the solidity of this base comes from a July 2018 CBS poll which indicates that 91 percent of strong Trump supporters believe that he is an “accurate” source of information. Only 11 percent said the same of the “mainstream news media” (CBS News, 2018).

the zones that have been sacrificed to capital over the past thirty or more years.

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None.

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