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The New Minority

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The New Minority

White Working Class Politics in an Age of Immigration and Inequality

JUSTIN GEST

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PREFACE

The Radicalized Middle

Cockneys are pretty much extinct. I'm an Englishman without England. What does it mean to be English anymore? We've been invaded without any blood being spilled. All I hear are foreign languages and it makes me feel like I'm in a foreign country. I feel like other people should have the same opportunities as us, but that we should come first. We should be in the center, but I feel like I'm on the outside, as far from the center as possible.
—Ollie Marks, age 30
Dagenham, East London

The middle has fallen out of American and European politics.

Across the Atlantic, political movements increasingly appeal to the extreme left and right, reflecting the polarization of political constituencies. Rebel representatives and violent activists employ tactics to stall government, hinder coalition building, and communicate their agendas through antidemocratic means. Opinion polls suggest that the public, despite expressing a preference for compromise, is increasingly uncompromising in its preferences.

This polarization and brinkmanship can be explained in multiple, overlapping ways. Some observers note that campaign financing and publicity incentivize confrontation and disagreement among elected officials. Other observers blame the news media's voracious appetite for drama and its focus on ratings at the expense of accuracy and equilibrium. Still others blame electoral and governing institutions that provide fringe groups with an outsized ability to obstruct the predominant prerogatives of those at the middle of the political spectrum.

In this book, I suggest that these trends intensify an underlying demographic phenomenon: the communities of white working class people[1] who once occupied the political middle have decreased in size and moved to the fringes, and

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American and European societies are scrambling to recalibrate how they might rebuild the centrist coalitions that engender progress.

It was not so long ago that the white working class occupied the middle of British and American societies. During the mid-twentieth century, the vast majority of white people lacked university credentials and worked in manual or non-managerial labor, often in the manufacturing industry (US Census Bureau 2015a; Skidelsky 2013; Pierce and Schott 2012; Sveinsson 2009; Abramowitz and Teixeira 2009: 395). The middle class was made up of people without university degrees, and the wage gap between those with and without university educations was relatively small (US Census Bureau 2015b; Abramowitz and Teixeira 2009: 392). Many industrial sectors were unionized (UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2015; Bureau of Labor Statistics 2015). The diffuse confederation of white working class voters was the bellwether that backed presidents Franklin Roosevelt and then Dwight Eisenhower; and prime ministers Winston Churchill and then Clement Attlee. Later, many supported Lyndon Johnson and then Richard Nixon; and in the United Kingdom, Harold Macmillan and then Harold Wilson.

Today, members of the same demographic sometimes resort to violence and intimidation to achieve a fraction of the political influence they once wielded as a powerful voting bloc (Dancygier 2010). Estranged from the middle, they feel silenced and ignored by mainstream political parties and therefore, in the United States and the United Kingdom, have created their own.

In the United States' constrained two-party system, the Tea Party emerged as a rebellious faction within the Republican Party after the election of President Barack Obama in 2008. In each subsequent congressional election, this movement expanded their share of the Republican caucus and deposed a number of establishment candidates, including House Majority Leader Eric Cantor in November 2014 and eventually Speaker John Boehner, who was pressured to resign in October 2015. Tea Party members along with many white working class people elevated the unexpected presidential candidacy of real-estate mogul Donald Trump to international prominence and the Republican nomination in 2016. Simultaneously on the left, a separate faction has sought the reorientation of American capitalism. Embodied by the Occupy Wall Street movement during the financial crisis, this group has pulled Democrats to more populist and protectionist economic stances. Among white working class Americans, many denounce global trade deals and censure the collusion between Washington lawmakers and K Street's business lobbyists, and then, in the same sentence, go on to revile undocumented immigrants, demand cuts to welfare programs, and scoff at ongoing movements for racial justice.

In Europe since 2010, far-right parties have scored victories across national and European Parliamentary elections. The Swiss People's Party, the

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Danis People's Party, and the National Front took more than a quarter of their most recent national votes in Switzerland, Denmark, and France respectively (European Parliament 2015). In Britain, the United Kingdom Independent Party (UKIP) collected 27% of the British vote in the 2014 European elections, 12% in the 2015 Parliamentary election (BBC News 2015), and soon displaced Prime Minister David Cameron when the 'Leave' campaign they backed won the referendum on Britain's EU membership in June 2016. Amid multiple losses, the British Labour Party panicked, appointed far-left socialist Jeremy Corbyn, and then endured a leadership vacuum of their own, without any clear policy platform or electoral strategy in sight. Among white working class Britons, many seek greater unionization and the expansion of social services while simultaneously supporting the dissolution of the European Union, backing the mass deportation of immigrants, and condemning Islam.

At this juncture, most mainstream political parties have eschewed the full endorsement of the most extreme viewpoints, despite their obvious traction among many white working class people. The way a ringmaster gingerly approaches a tiger, parties cautiously navigate around these viewpoints—often acknowledging their legitimacy without engaging their policy implications for fear of alienating more moderate supporters. Both left and right moderates are reluctant to embrace white working class xenophobia and the economic protectionism that will turn off growing ethnic minority voting blocs and the neoliberal business lobby, respectively. Barack Obama won both the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections despite double-digit defeats among white voters without university degrees (Levison 2013). David Cameron was also re-elected in 2015 without the white working class vote (Ford 2015). White working class people have become at best a destabilizing force on attempts to assemble broad, centrist coalitions and at worst, a diminishing, enigmatic afterthought.

How did we get here? How does a group of people synonymous with Middle Britain and Middle America—the heart, soul, and backbone of their respective countries—drift to marginality? What drives their emerging radicalism? What transformations lead a group with such enduring numerical power to, in many instances, consider themselves a "minority" in the countries they once defined?

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