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## Social Class and Social Work in the Age of Trump

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## **Social Class and Social Work in the Age of Trump**

### **Introduction**

Social work, and social workers, must play a critical role in addressing dangerous rhetoric, policies, and practices in the United States associated with social class and its intersections. Social class has many meanings and components— economic, social, political, one’s sense of identity, and how class intersects with other social identities – so it is difficult to define it briefly and succinctly. These definitions are further complicated by a global lens, where family of origin, geography, and other factors can pre-determine social class. In this article we explore the complexities and contradictions of social class in the context of the United States as we believe that this is important for social work, particularly in the age of Donald Trump, where class, and its intersection with race and immigration status, is often used as a weapon to divide society and seek political advantages. While such use of class categories is not new in this country or in political rhetoric globally, the current climate in the United States warrants a review. Class, like so many areas of identity and oppression, can only be understood from vantage points that also account for what is meant by class, who gets to tell the story of what class means, and how the notion of class is manipulated and appropriated by a range of people.

In this article we will explore a range of ways of understanding the meaning of social class and ultimately how such understandings can inform

social work practice. We will begin by reviewing classical definitions of class, including a consideration of poverty, social inequality, power, privilege, resource hoarding, social and political capital and integrate subjective, individual and group aspects of class. We will then consider class through an intersectional lens: considering how the social construction of social class intersects with other aspects of social identity, notably race, gender, and immigration status. Our discussion includes contemporary narratives about social class and current trends in meaning making about social class. Finally, we will discuss the significance of social class, and its intersections, in social work practice. Discerning how the notion of social class is understood in a particularly socio-political moment sheds light on how policy interventions are leveraged, or not leveraged, to address inequality. These insights, may help to explain why so many white voters supported and continue to support Donald Trump and who, exactly, Trump's policy initiatives will serve. What does all of this imply for social work education, micro and macro practice and research?

### **A Review of the Definitions of Social Class**

Classical sociology, particularly stemming from the thinking of Marx and Weber, views social class as having three dimensions: economic, social and political (Encyclopedia of Sociology, 1974). Economically, it refers to how people are stratified by income, assets, and the resources that they can accrue and control. Socially, Weber talked about status groups, where there are different levels of prestige and there are shared life-styles, values, behaviors

and rituals. Politically, people view themselves as parts of groups, often forming organizations that advocate for and represent class interests – e.g. labor unions, Chambers of Commerce, political parties.

Virtually every society has groups that are separated and divided from one another by virtue of a hierarchal social matrix. People in higher social classes have greater access to resources, such as wealth, power, property social capital and prestige; the combination of such factors constituting “socio-economic status”. Part of this equation is the notion of “social mobility,” being able to move up in social class, with some societies having rigid class boundaries that are seldom breached, while others have ladders and socioeconomic enablers that make it possible for people to move up in class, which also means that there are socio-economic trap-doors, where people fall from a higher to a lower class. These can be due to recessions or depressions, but also because of war, genocide, ethnic conflict, and the collapse of institutions that maintain structural class hierarchies. For example, many Jews living in Europe during the 1930’s and 1940’s experienced downward mobility from a combination of the above factors. There are usually benefits for people who are members of higher socio-economic classes: better health, longer life expectancy, and a greater sense of life satisfaction. Perhaps most importantly, class mobility is less a function of individual effort or characteristics and very much a function of government policies that promote or undermine it.

Marx explicitly wrote about how power and exploitation are important aspects of social and economic class (Encyclopedia of Sociology, 1974). He also introduced the concept of “class conflict,” which helps to explain how power is exercised by different class groups, particularly how owners and economic elites exploit workers. The shrinking membership in trade unions, (which has been abetted by deindustrialization and by laws and social policies, as well as globalization) and consequent loss of political power, has weakened the ability of workers people to protect themselves from the economic fray of the marketplace.

So, over time class was understood as pertaining to economic, social and political resources and power. Given this, the impact of social class on the life course and quality of life is profound. It influences how and what people eat, where they live, educational attainment, economic opportunities, access to clean water, and health and safety (Ryan, Singh, Hentschke, & Bullock, 2018). But as Ryan et al. point out, economic uncertainty and scarcity (whether real or perceived) also affects how people think and feel about themselves, their relationships, and the context in which they live.

In 1972, Sennett and Cobb published a seminal book, *The hidden injuries of class*, which complicated the classical meaning of social class (Sennett & Cobb, 1973). Based on qualitative interviews with working class, white, Italian American men in Boston, they argued that class is also an internal part of a person’s identity; how we see ourselves and others. They

coined terms such as “badges of ability,” “sacrifice and betrayal,” and “injured dignity” to capture the themes articulated by their research participants, which centered on how their values, emotions, and internalized conflicts were associated with class. When some men became educated and moved into professional and middle-class contexts, they often felt as if they did not belong, that they were “passing.” But even though many experienced a sense of class loyalty and a wish to maintain fidelity to their families and neighborhoods, they also felt uprooted, dislocated, and alienated from their own class backgrounds, expressing a sense of liminality and ambivalence. Despite increases in material well-being, there was a diminishing sense of self-respect; feelings of embarrassment and shame about not really being middle class alongside disdain for that class (Benn, 2001). As Benn points out, when one’s social class was inherited and there was little social mobility, there was therefore little that one could do about one’s position in life. But with the demise of hereditary social distinctions, one’s social station is often taken personally, viewed as a matter of personal failing or weak character.

There are important critiques of this study – it did not question or interrogate that its data and conclusions came from a limited sample of white, heterosexual men. But it added an important subjective dimension to our understanding of social class; that it is part of a person’s identity. We will consider the significance of this, along with racial and gender identity, in the age of Trump.

Thus, social class has external, hard components (e.g. income, assets, wealth, economic mobility), group-lifestyle aspects (e.g. behaviors, affiliations, values) and an internalized sense of self (e.g. identity, emotions, aspirations). And all aspects of social class involve status – it is always in relation to and in comparison, with others; the notion of social class loses its meaning without economic and perceived social differences between groups. This means that it is both how one sees oneself and how one sees and is seen by others. And social class involves power: the power to meet basic needs, to spend and acquire, to live in certain neighborhoods, to attend specific schools, to have high credit ratings, to leave assets for descendants, to produce and disseminate dominant public narratives, to engage in and influence the political process, as well as an internalized sense of power, efficacy and entitlement. Social class may also have an impact on the embodied experience of individuals, including their exposure to work related health and mental health hazards that negatively impact a person's life.

Singha (2017) argues that to view class solely as an objective, quantitative category, while making it easier for researchers and other external observers, misses the subjective meanings of class. But he also argues that to only focus on the subjectivity of class is a limited view and leads to categorical fuzziness. He notes that the cut-off points that demarcate class can seem arbitrary. His point raises the question of who has the power and authority to determine such boundaries? Singha also notes that social class involves social networks and is part of a specific sociocultural context featuring public

discourses that define, describe and shape social class. An example of sociocultural differences constructing class is how in England, social class is not only tied to money and economic resources but to breeding, land, and titles, which is not true in the US, where it is tethered more to one's economic wealth and resources. Thus, social class is not solely about economics.

Given the complexity of the meaning of social class, it can be helpful to make a distinction between *class positions*, which are based on statistics, economic location, wages, resources and assets *and* class identities, subjective identifications of one's place within an economic and social system (Speer, 2015). Speer argues that class identities are strongly shaped by one's family of origin, which fits with Sennett and Cobb's (1973) findings. In our clinical experience, we have found that class identities can even be intergenerational. For example, someone whose parents have achieved a middle-class social positionality, but who came from a poor or working-class background, can pass down class values and a sense of identity to their children who are born into and grow up in a middle-class family and neighborhood. How strong, fixed or fungible this identity is depends on the interaction of many factors in addition to the intergenerational legacies, such as location of residence, the kind of schools that one attends, and socioeconomic shifts in neighborhoods and societies, as well as the interaction of social class with other aspects of a person's identity, such as race/ethnicity.



There are other factors that further confound an understanding of social class. Social class used to be understood within a societal or national context but in today's world it occurs in a global matrix. There is greater access to information about life styles (including measures of happiness, well-being, longevity, etc.) as well as media depicting how people representing certain classes live from other countries. There are greater transnational flows of people (e.g. immigration, seasonal workers), culture and of production (goods and products made in a range of countries). Do workers from multiple countries who collaborate to produce products such as cars and clothing share a class allegiance or is this subsumed by national identifications? And of course, there is now a proliferation of social media which creates communities across space rather than in localities; how does this influence one's inner sense of class? None of this is neutral as leaders, demagogues, and political parties pit one class against another, exploiting cheap labor, undermining labor unions, and morally denigrating some while elevating others.

Morgan (2017) has developed a coding system for class that has seven levels based on the US Census and the **Erikson, Goldthorpe, Portocarero [EGP] ("Goldthorpe Class Scheme," 2019)** class schema, developed in the 1980's and widely used by sociologists. Although this model acknowledges class hierarchy, it is not "unidimensional" and allows for groupings that are not necessarily hierarchical in relation to one another – they are different without assigning absolute rankings. He proposes three levels of social class in a white-collar group beginning with Class **I**- managers, administrators, officials

and high-level professionals such as doctors, engineers, lawyers and professors. Interestingly, this does not make subtle distinctions between the salaries of corporate CEOs and college professors as it combines economic status with social and political aspects of social class. Class **II** lists “lower-grade” professionals – e.g. clergy, human resource managers, nurses, and teachers. Social workers are listed in Class **II**. Members of both of these classes enjoy regular salaries, benefits, and greater freedom and flexibility at work. Class **IIIA** – higher grade service and non-manual workers – e.g. bookkeepers, customer service representatives, real estate agents. Class **IIIB** includes “lower grade” non-manual workers – cashiers, child-care workers, hairdressers, home health aides.

Moving away from white color jobs, class IVA is “non-professional self-employed workers with employees and IVB is for people self-employed without other employees” (Morgan, 2017). Class V is composed of “higher-grade technicians and repairers, public safety workers, performers, and supervisors of manual workers,” which includes chefs, lab technicians, firefighters, police officers, construction and sales supervisors. Class VI includes skilled manual laborers, such as automobile mechanics, plumbers, electricians, painters and repairers. Class VIIA consists of non-agricultural unskilled manual workers, such as cooks, dishwashers, maintenance workers, packagers and construction workers. Class VIIB encompasses all agricultural workers and Morgan also has an unranked class for all members of the armed forces. Some key factors within his class schema are years of completed education and

income from wages and salaries. Clearly, there are many differences within his class groupings but he argues that research indicates that many people within a class have similar political behaviors and attitudes (Morgan & Li, 2017). We are sharing this model because of the greater range of class distinctions from previous configurations of class, but some important factors that this schema leaves out are those who are unemployed, underemployed, disabled, retired, or frozen in unyielding lives and neighborhoods of poverty.

Despite the complexity of this model, there are still many other factors at work which influence social class, such as levels of social mobility and resources that come from contacts and social networks. More contemporary scholars have raised the issue of social access as a key marker and predictor of social class. For example, Szreter and Schuller (2000, page 1) identify social capital as “social networks, the reciprocities that arise from them, and the value of these for achieving mutual goals”. Lack of social capital can limit one’s access to the tangible resources that result from such connections, for instance, private investment in a business idea or model or social networks that provide access to high income jobs.

Another factor is generational cohort. Generational cohorts may have different expectations about what constitutes social classes, where they fit in and what they aspire to. A person in their 70’s who is lumped into the same class category as someone in their 20’s may have internalized what class meant 50 years ago, or perhaps their notions of the significance of class has evolved –

but it is likely to differ somewhat from a younger person's views about class. Also, if there is a cataclysmic event, such as the Great Recession of 2008, a person in their 70's has little time to recoup their losses while a person in their 20's may have time to gain further education and has more years of employment ahead of them. Conversely, older people may have accrued more resources that enable them to weather the storm, while an event like the Great Recession can set wages back (and the ability to gain credit, buy homes, pay off loans) so far that a younger person may never recover. Schwartz (2018) has termed those born in the 1980s as the "lost generation for wealth accumulation" because of the Great Recession. What is often problematic is that even contemporary considerations of social class often omitted the intersection of race, gender and other aspects of social identity, which we try to respond to below, a discussion which intersectionality theory contributes to in a substantial way.

### **Understanding Social Class from an Intersectional Lens**

#### **Contemporary narratives about social class.**

Class has been racialized in the United States from the time of first contact between Europeans and indigenous Americans and has continued throughout the history of the U.S.: it is not possible to consider class separately from the history and dynamics of racism in this country (Fenton, 1999). Class influenced which Europeans migrated to the U.S. and European schemas of class were imposed in the Western hemispheres on indigenous

societies, which included the racialized practices of genocide, enslavement and ethnic cleansing (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2015; Miller & Garran, 2017). The enslavement of African Americans and the subsequent privileges of whiteness given to poor, white European-Americans became a central dynamic in America's class dynamics (Allen, 1994). This continued with the selective immigration policies of the U.S. – admitting poor Europeans such as Italians, Irish, Poles and Jews – while excluding Asian immigrants (e.g. Chinese and Japanese), appropriating parts of Mexico and dispossessing the Mexicans who lived in those lands, and the ongoing project of white supremacy and racism that continues to be an enduring factor in the US class calculus (Miller & Garran, 2017).

The term intersectionality refers to two major points of interaction: how different forms of oppression interrelate and interconnect and how different aspects of a person's social identity are intermingled (Miller & Garran, 2017). While intersectionality theory has and continues to develop, Crenshaw (2018) recently explained it as "Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It's not simply that there's a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LGBTQ problem there. Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things." The sociologist Charles Tilly (1998) discussed how all forms of social oppression, or what he termed "durable inequalities," have certain things in common: exploitation by one group of another group; hoarding of resources and opportunities by one group at the exclusion of another; the adaptation and emulation of all of these

structural inequities and intergroup dynamics in a range of societal representations – organizations, institutions, political dynamics, cultural preferences, etc. As Bell (1997) has stated, social oppression is characterized by how it is pervasive, restricting, hierarchical, and is internalized as well as being an external reality. And power is an essential ingredient in social imbalances (Yuval-Davis, 2006). This certainly is true of social class – wealthier people have more assets and resources, social mobility, social protections, social status, social and political power and more. But it is also true of other aspects of social oppression and privilege – racism, sexism, transphobia, heterosexism, ableism, etc. And it is not as if these are separate and distinct forces; they interact and intersect in many ways.

The same is true of identity. None of us are strictly defined by one aspect of our identities – we have class affiliations but also a sense of ourselves racially, ethnically, our gender, sexual orientation, regional and national attachments, degree of being able bodied, and much more. Social identity refers to how we see ourselves in relation to other people as well as how others, and society, read and construct who we are (Miller & Garran, 2017). There are social aspects to identity – who we identify with and hang out with; affective – how we feel about ourselves in relation to others; cognitive – how we think and understand the world; ego-self – how we perceive, describe and think about *ourselves* and others. Social class, race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and other aspects of social identity impact individuals uniquely because of the social contexts in which **individuals find themselves** – certain

situations may evoke a greater awareness of gender, others of social class, while yet others one's racial/ethnic identity.

While the awareness of some social identities may be stable (e.g. as a social worker), others may be fluid and contextual. For example, a woman may be very conscious of gender in a predominantly male workplace or a person who is gender non-conforming may be very aware of this when surrounded by cisgender colleagues. Identities also shift over time and are affected by larger political and social factors, including the social construction of these identities and how they shift over time. Social identities also respond to threats and are often more visible to a person who is targeted, than identities that are mirrored and are considered “normal” or “mainstream.” For example, immigrants of color have been under fire from the Trump regime and are very aware of their immigration status and race.

On the other hand, people with privileges – be it class, race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. – are often less aware of their unearned privileges (McIntosh, 1992; Miller & Garran, 2017). Class privileges include access to employers, seeking health care without concern about cost, not worrying about having enough to eat, being able to take regular vacations, and much more (Ryan et al., 2018). Ironically, people with class privileges are often the least supportive of social safety nets and attribute the struggles of people in lower classes as being due to character and motivation, while viewing themselves as having succeeded due to grit and perseverance. The lack of awareness of class

privilege illustrates how “members of powerful groups do not realize that they are privileged because they don’t have the social comparison information to recognize the discrimination they do not experience, the poverty they don’t experience, and the prejudice they do not experience” (Pratto & Stewart, 2012, p. 31). Thus, people with higher socioeconomic status (SES) express less sensitivity to others’ suffering, higher levels of entitlement and narcissism, greater selfishness, and heightened propensity toward self-serving, unethical behavior than lower SES groups (Ryan et al., 2018). Conversely, middle class African Americans are much more likely to know someone who is poor than middle class whites (Speer, 2015), creating greater familiarity and empathy for those who are socioeconomically vulnerable.

There are at least five major areas, which interact with one another, where social class intersects with other aspects of racism and white supremacy (Miller & Garran, 2017):

1. Residential segregation and apartheid
2. Access to jobs and segmented labor markets
3. Racialized financial services
4. Lack of assets (particularly investment assets)
5. Being blamed for one’s lack of social mobility.

Many African Americans and increasing numbers of Hispanic Americans live in highly-segregated neighborhoods, where there are fewer economic resources,



less access to public transportation, higher concentrations of poverty, higher rates of crime and lack of safety, and less money spent on schools and educational and recreational resources (Miller & Garran, 2017; Speer, 2015). Some of this is due to explicit social policies – like “red lining” neighborhoods, or allowing banks to discriminate against groups of applicants based on their race, but there are also institutional impediments such as fewer educational and employment opportunities and lack of transportation in segregated neighborhoods. The combination of these factors creates a matrix of barriers, which impede upward economic and class mobility (Miller & Garran, 2017).

African Americans have a great deal more difficulty receiving mortgages and loans and when they do buy houses, because of segregation, the value of homes does not rise as much as a home in a white neighborhood and often property values go down (Miller & Garran, 2017; Shapiro, 2004). Thus, two of the most important assets when it comes to upward mobility – home ownership and education – are significantly less available to African Americans and many Latinos/Latinas, which constrains upward class mobility. Because of the interaction of racism and classism, a child born to African American parents in the top economic quintile **is** just as likely to fall to the bottom quintile as staying in place, while a white child is five times as likely to remain in the upper class that they are born to (Edsall, 2018). There are fewer hedges and circuit breakers against economic downturns and fewer resources and safety in communities (Speer, 2015). Adding insult to injury, rather than considering the structural impediments to economic parity because of institutional racism

and classism, people of color are often blamed for their lack of upward mobility and become the target of scapegoating by many media outlets and politicians, not only including but led by President Trump and the Republican party that he now leads. By focusing on behavior, values and morals, there is little impetus to change the structural factors that foster poverty, social exclusion and inequality.

While there are intersections between race and class, there are also divergences. Everything will not improve for people of color through class-based remedies. Ijeoma Oluo (2018), who identifies as an African American woman, suggests that black people are poor for different reasons than white people: not being offered job interviews because of their race and having black-sounding names, having their property values fall rather than rise when they purchase homes, paying higher mortgage rate for those homes, having incarcerated partners, parents and children who are unable to contribute to a family income, not getting promoted as easily at work or doing the same work for lower salaries than white people. These and many other issues are a function of racism, so even when there are class-based strategies to achieve greater equality, the social and economic consequences of racism remain unaddressed.

When other identity categories get added to the mix we can see the amplification of existing inequality. For instance, the work of Williams Institute (2018) explores how gender, sexual orientation and race come together in the

economic prospects of families. Households headed by two gay men (as defined by the Census) have the highest mean income of any family group, including that of heterosexual families. This is likely a result of the gender-income gap, where men out earn women. As such, lesbian headed households fall at the bottom of mean income of any two-parent family structure. Yet when race is added to the picture the numbers change dramatically and households headed by two black gay men fall to the bottom of mean incomes, likely a result of institutional racism, combined with sexual orientation, which mitigates the impact of gender.

On a broader level, class is closely related to colonialism. The wealth of colonial powers (e.g. England, Holland, Germany, Italy and the U.S.) is greater than that of colonial subjects (e.g. most countries in Africa and Latin America). There are exceptions –such as the U.S., Canada and Australia (all countries where white supremacy took hold)– where former colonies became wealthy and even had colonies of their own – but the trend is fairly constant. This also means that colonial powers had classes within their national group that benefitted from the extraction of resources and exploitation of indigenous people living in colonies, such as merchants, industrialists and politicians. And when there were indigenous people living in countries like the U.S., Canada and Australia, they were killed, ethnically cleansed, enslaved and displaced by colonial settlers, who became the dominant social class when these colonies became independent countries (Dunbar Ortiz, 2015; Fanon, 2008; Finkelman, 2005, and Miller & Garran, 2017)). Not only do these

inequities shape the internal class systems within countries and the hierarchies of nationalized social classes between countries, they are also very strong push forces for immigration and migration, and the racist, right-wing populist movements to prevent these forces, such as Brexit in the UK and the rise of Trumpism in the U. S.

As we write this article, not only has there been a rise in hate crimes against people of color and Jews, but a singular focus by President Trump on building a “wall” intended to keep immigrants and refugees from Latin American from entering the US, even when they are trying to escape political violence and domestic violence. In 2017, according to the FBI, hate crimes rose by 17%, particularly targeting African Americans, Jews, LatinX, and Native Americans. Large swathes of people (e.g. Haitians, El Salvadorians) have lost their protected status and face deportation. President Trump’s travel ban, upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court, suspends immigrant and non-immigrant visas from five Muslim countries and North Korea and Venezuela (Gladstone & Sugiyama, 2018). The combination of his anti-immigrant policies has had significant implications for economic well-being for many immigrant families in the US and abroad. Families, or individuals in those families, face deportation or an inability to work in the U.S., which lowers their earning capacity along with exposing women to a much higher risk of domestic violence (Kopan, 2018). It has also led to a climate of fear among immigrant communities in the US, leading people to not claim or collect benefits for fear of deportation. Food banks have reported lower numbers of women seeking help, leading to fears

not only about the economic consequences but also health and medical well-being of children and families (Ebbs, 2018).

As we have argued, trends in economic inequality in the United States can be attributed to and explained by a variety of complicated social, political and structural factors. The history of slavery, segregation, Jim Crow and mass incarceration and institutionalized racism contribute greatly to both the trends in economic inequality and to understanding the between and within group differences of those who are at the top and bottom deciles of income in the United States. For instance, Black families consistently have lower median household incomes than any other race or ethnic group (as defined by the U.S. Census, 2018), which is a clear result of the particularly virulent forms of anti-Black racism at the center of these histories. Industrialization and technological trends, combined with the erosion of trade unions, has contributed to stagnant incomes and limited occupational and social mobility, which is further fueled by unequal access to educational and training opportunities. These forces have limited the incomes and income mobility across racial groups but are often most highlighted as an injury to the white working class, particularly in rural communities. Finally, political forces increasingly dominated by the economic elite, and the erosion of campaign finance regulation further escalated inequality and are eroding the remaining mechanisms to control. While income inequality continues to rise, **it** has done so in concert with the elimination of the social safety net, intensifying the dangers of living in poverty in the United States.

The Great Recession of 2008 was a major jolt of insecurity for all but those in the wealthiest income brackets. The recession was caused by a combination of predatory lending practices that led to soaring house prices buoyed by unattainable mortgage structures and questionable practices across the financial services industry. The response to the recession is tightly linked to the increasing importance of campaign contributions, which has resulted in lower tax rates for high income earners and less regulation for companies who employ and are led by such earners (Frank, 2018), largely those companies in the financial sector. Such corporations were bailed out by the federal government, without a parallel bailout for the individuals who were the victims of these predatory lending practices and lost their homes in the process.

The response by government to the recession contributed to a suspicious, if not cynical view of government (Kuttner, 2016) that was exploited by the very social class that benefitted from the bailouts. As inequality has increased before and after the recession, the safety net diminished, growing concern about fairness, there has been a greater tendency to scapegoat groups such as immigrants (Edsall, 2018). This was fertile ground for a demagogic, nationalist, authoritarian, populist candidate, Donald Trump, to win a closely fought presidential election with the minority of the popular vote.

### **Social class, meaning making, and politics.**

There are many competing narratives about the role of social class in the 2016 election. Most of these narratives fail to employ an intersectional lens, and

thus problematically simplify the role of social class in both the election, and the larger current political dynamics in the United States. To truly unpack the factors that led to the rise of Trumpism, the ideology of Trumpism and its frame of social class must be examined *with* other constructed social identities such as race and gender. This analysis reveals how successfully fear of losing privileged status can drive voter behavior. It is this fear that Trumpism successfully harnesses to incite and excite its base.

The dominant post-election narrative was that white, working class people were revolting against global and national elites. Often this narrative includes references to geography, for instance that **the plight of** rural poor whites **was** ignored by the Democratic party. J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016), underscores this narrative and introduces the idea that a new culture of poverty has developed in rural white communities where people rely on government assistance while at the same time harboring resentment about its receipt. This narrative views rural white voters as victims of economic neglect and industrialization by a government that favors urban cities and their constituents. It argues that a culture of white elitism has emerged in the highly educated class who attend out of touch, inaccessible, and social insular institutions of higher education and then benefit from the social networks of those institutions. Social inequality combined with resentment towards "elites," resulted in many more white people feeling angry and resentful.

There are many problems with this dominant narrative. It centers a white perspective, while at the same time obscuring the role of white voters across the economic spectrum who supported Donald Trump. Doing so erases people of color from the discussion entirely and highlights economic inequality *within* white communities as the primary social issue warranting government intervention. Poverty in communities of color is rendered invisible or irrelevant to this political dynamic. Finally, this view fails to consider the role of gender, and the ways in which it intersects with economic inequality, race, and voting behavior. Poverty becomes a problem of white men in rural settings who require more support from a government who has left them behind; while such poor communities are suffering, so are many others.

This cannot be separated from anti-immigrant fears and fervor for immigration restrictions, as well as bullhorns trumpeting and amplifying racism (Morgan & Li, 2017). If class anxiety was the dominant driver fueling support for Trump, why did so many working-class African Americans and Latinos vote against him? In the age of Trump, class is now being used as a meme to mostly mean white men and women who are against immigration and are reluctant to see government benefits go to people of color. Is this populism or a form of nativism and a reassertion of racialized power and privilege? As Kuttner (2016) has argued, the contemporary dynamics of social class in the U.S. reflect “the clash of deeply felt injuries,” where there are “dueling cultural and economic wounds.”



## **Implications for Social Work Practice**

Given the current socio-political context, and its impact on oppressed populations, we must consider how we are responding as clinical social work educators, practitioners, and researchers. Social work education must grapple with training clinical social workers who can struggle with the variety of ways to understand social class but who also have a keen awareness of intersectionality theory, particularly with regard to race, ethnicity and immigration status. Practitioners need to understand how dominant macro schemas and narratives about social class may be internalized by those without access to social capital, while at the same time challenging such narratives as half-truths and refocusing the analysis to externalizing the causes of social class immobility. Finally, social work researchers and policy makers must continue to examine the true causes of poverty and economic inequality and offer concrete and practical policy solutions that will appeal to a wide variety of voters.

## **Intersectionality and Social Work Education**

While intersectionality is a buzzword in many academic settings, teaching both the origin of and the theory itself is vitally important to social work. Intersectionality must be understood not just as an intersection of identities, but as a lens through which to view history, experiences, meanings, and practice. Using this lens takes practice and coaching that can be provided during a student's education. For instance, if a class is considering a case

about an adoptee of color it is important not only to name the identities of each family member but to use an intersectional lens to consider how these identities impact each family and their current circumstances. For instance, one could open a discussion of cross-cultural adoption practices and the history of forced acculturation to white, middle and upper class ways of being and how these histories may or may not be understood or enacted in this family system. Too often we stop at naming multiple identities rather than fully understanding what an intersectional lens can reveal.

### **Social Work Practice**

The current political climate, and the economic realities in the United States mean that social workers are seeing clients with increasingly acute needs in decreasingly resourced settings. The depth and breadth of rampant rhetoric aimed at vilifying people of color, immigrants, individuals who identify as transgender and women makes day to day functioning dangerous for the clients with whom we interact. Clinicians have developed a variety of interventions, such as the Liberation Health Triangle (Martinez & Fleck-Henderson, 2014) that can help clients analyze the impact of oppression on their lives or narrative approaches that help externalize social class myths. These types of interventions should be learned, taught, and practiced, helping clients and practitioners recognize and respond to structural inequality. This recognition of structural inequality creates an opportunity for productive social policy change geared towards eliminating such inequalities while also affording

the opportunity for the redirection of anger and fear towards the other from nationalist and co-opted populist messaging.

### **Research and Macro Practice**

Researchers and macro practitioners must continue to document and expose the real causes of social inequality and offer practical solutions grounded in research and social justice, while centralizing the experiences of oppressed populations and the role that systematic oppression has in creating such equalities. This task has, and will continue to be, increasingly difficult as the federal government is the primary funding entity for much of our work. Often, these funding mechanisms guide our work towards the questions that suit the investments of those in power. We must resist these efforts. Institutions outside of the government (like educational and philanthropic organizations) that have the possibility to fund social work research should consider doing so and re-imagine and re-vitalize grants to social work researchers as a way to provide an alternative to reliance on government funding.

Macro practitioners must use this political moment to find **and** assert a place at the table. The electorate is often thought of through an identity politics lens that centralizes a single aspect of a **voter's** experience. By bringing an intersectional lens to such analysis, we may offer insights and approaches not seen by other political operatives. We must resist narratives that reduce complexity. For instance, poverty cannot and should not be

divorced from racism in the public discourse. Considering poverty with such a lens dramatically changes the policy initiatives poverty reduction requires. This is the kind of re-imagining that social work can and should tackle.

Perhaps most importantly, across education, practice and research, we must contest the division of social class conversations from those about race, ethnicity and immigration as they obscure the realities of structural racism in the United States, and its overwhelming contribution to current social inequalities.

## **Conclusion**

**We have described how class is not only about economic and social status but also about identity. The current political regime understands this and class has become a racialized weapon of right-wing nativism, pitting people who identify as white working class not only against so-called “elites” but people of color, immigrants, women and queer populations.**

**Social workers can respond to this in a number of ways. One is to ensure an intersectional analysis when discussing and teaching about social class. The current public narratives about class harken back to a mythic, white US, when social scientists and scholars also discussed class in a one-dimensional fashion. We hope that social workers will complicate and contribute to public discourses by using an intersectional class analysis.**

**Social workers can also help our clients to explore how oppression in their lives is internalized and how they can respond to these 'hidden injuries' in ways that are liberating rather than supporting demagogues who act against their class interests. The profession can also contribute to research about the structural factors that foster greater economic and social inequality, which is necessary to refute the appropriation of class grievances and resentment into an anti-immigration sense of white identity and white supremacy. The stakes are very high for the profession as they are for our nation.**

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