Comment Suppers

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The Possibilities and Perils of Populism

BY SKYLER ADLETA

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A WORKING-CLASS PERSPECTIVE ON THE FRAGILE AMERICAN DREAM

There is something distinctly American about a populist mentality guiding political considerations. A political philosophy that champions ordinary folks should be easy enough for any American to support. It is a necessary mandate for a government that claims to be "of the people, by the people, for the people." As a rather ordinary working-class guy who has lived in the Midwest his whole life, I am familiar with the frustrations born out of feeling limited in modern America. It's why I find populist sentiments surrounding industrial and family policy so agreeable. I have seen what happens to families and communities when prosperity-granting working-class jobs are offshored in the pursuit of lower overhead and higher profit margins. As opportunities are lost, desperation abounds. People begin making poor choices, become jaded, and are converted to bitterness and anger. Then community breaks down. Policy that aims to bring opportunity back to these communities, paired with policy that would encourage and support family growth and prosperity, would be proper nourishment to a working class dealing with ever-increasing socio-economic hunger.

But there is also something distinctly un-American in how populism is manifesting itself in working-class society today. The fear and anger driving the whole movement concerns me. There is never a clearer sign that a population should tread carefully than when they are willing to relinquish their convictions into the hands of a political leader. Obviously, the convictions of the people inform the direction in which the Republican and Democratic Parties aim the ship of policy. This is fine. What is not fine, though, is leader worship. Both sides can be guilty of this. It's the inheritance of zero-sum thinking. The Left is convinced that if Donald Trump

wins the upcoming election, it will be the end of American democracy. The Right is convinced that if Joe Biden is re-elected, America itself will deteriorate and unravel. These diametrically opposed perspectives lead to a fatalism that guarantees perpetual civic disharmony. Not to mention, if the other side's losing becomes the paramount goal, even over your own side's achievement of anything lasting, what exactly are you fighting for? As a conservative, does this mean that I need to let "my man" escape the constraints of standard conservative convictions in exchange for seeing my political opponents lose?

This recently became an issue when Donald Trump announced his position on abortion. Many conservatives are uncompromisingly pro-life. No doubt perceiving that serving the convictions of that segment of the population may not guarantee him political success, Trump came out with a new look that is more appealing to the pro-choice crowd. This didn't surprise me. Donald Trump's positions are largely guided by his desire to win. What did surprise me, though, was how quickly some conservative figures who support Trump changed their tune on abortion as a result. Even people I know who have always been staunchly pro-life have done this. When this happened, I realized the amount of power that Trump has amassed. Their desire to see their leader win, paired with their desire to be in lockstep with him ideologically, was apparently worth sacrificing previously held convictions on the altar. It is one thing to support a political candidate despite their unwillingness to champion every conviction you hold dear. Indeed, there is a healthy self-awareness in understanding that a politician might not appeal to, or fight for, your every conviction. But loosening or abandoning convictions in order to mold yourself to your candidate is different—and dangerous. It devours individuality and agency. It is leader worship.

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I had my own brief flirtation with leader worship. Instead of abandoning a specific conviction, however, I abandoned gratitude and satisfaction. When Trump entered the political scene, I was working in manufacturing at a colour pigment factory. Working there was comically dreary. My shifts went from 6:00 p.m. to 6:30 a.m. on a rotating schedule. This meant I had no weekly routine. Sometimes I was off on Friday and Saturday. Sometimes I was off on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. Sometimes I worked three days in a row and had a day off. Other times I worked six days in a row before getting three days off.

Everything in the factory was coated in a black, chalky film of grime and dust. High bay lights crackled overhead, emitting enough light to see but never enough that it was anything other than dim. Dead mice were common discoveries. I frequently saw co-workers kicking mouse corpses toward the trash compactor, their little bodies tumbling along the floor like a dropped hacky sack.

Initially, I worked in an area called the kiln room. The place was fiendishly hot, with temperatures hovering close to 120 degrees Fahrenheit, the result of gas-fired kilns the size of tractor-trailers used in the pigment production process. The heat was made worse by the thick, long-sleeved work shirts and work pants all employees were required to wear—a necessity to avoid any pigment, which was toxic, touching our skin. Then there was the respirator and hard hat, trapping heat and sweat against my face and skull.

The kilns lined the centre of the production floor in my area. My job consisted of using a large, metal hand scoop to transfer "raw" pigment from large bulk bags into hundreds of ceramic containers about the size of a big shoebox, stacking each pigment-filled container on a kiln car, and pushing it into the kiln to be fired. Then I would move on to a different kiln to unload another car that had properly cooled.

To open the doors of a kiln, I was required to wear heavy-duty, insulated PVC gloves. I was told that if I wasn't wearing these gloves when I touched the kiln door, the skin from my hand would melt to the surface. A co-worker told me he saw it happen once: a worker mindlessly caught himself from falling by pressing his hand against the kiln door. When he pulled his hand off the surface of the door, it left behind a thin cobweb of skin, which shrunk and fell from the door like burnt bacon retreating from the surface of a pan.

The misery was broken up by two fifteen-minute breaks and one half-hour lunch. Toward the end of my time working in the kiln room, Donald Trump was frequently on the breakroom TVs. He spent a lot of time assuring me that he was going to be my messiah, rattling on about how the politicians and elites who had forgotten me were going to have their day of reckoning. I would chug some water, wonder what it was like to live in Mar-a-Lago, then get back to work.

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Up until this point, I viewed my time in the factory as one of the best things that ever happened to me. I was homeless or couch surfing from August 2011 until late 2013. I graduated high school right in the middle of this period of destitution. I didn't go to college. My lack of resources seemed more urgent than a college education.

Despite having grown up amid divorce, addiction, and perpetual moving and instability, I was now glimpsing the far, sunlit countryside of the American dream.

There was one thing I was absolutely certain of toward the end of high school: that I was a loser. I thought I would never make enough money to support a family. The future, to me, was a monster under the bed—too frightening to look at, which left it shrouded in uncertainty. But then I applied for this factory job, which boasted a very good wage, and was hired as a labourer. I began my stint in the kiln room. Eventually I was promoted to an operator position, where I was responsible for the fulfillment of one of the manufacturing processes for the pigment.

I basically lived in that factory, working a schedule with built-in overtime and working extra overtime whenever I could. Soon I had a nice one-bedroom apartment in a decent part of town. Not too long after moving in, I got married and shared my apartment with my wife. I bought my first car that wasn't a mechanical travesty. All the while, I was building up savings. Eventually I bought my first home, a small three-bedroom ranch. It was wonderful. I joked with my wife that we were on our way to glory. I was somehow sneaking through the narrow door of the American promise. Despite having grown up amid divorce, addiction, and perpetual moving and instability, I was now glimpsing the far, sunlit countryside of the American dream.

Alas, I started hearing Donald Trump talk about how things *really* were and how I was *really* viewed by the intellectual and political elite of our society. Apparently these people hated me and thought working-class people like me were little more than dogs. If certain legislation or market prosperity produced a succulent bounty, it was the elites who benefited and we got only what fell on the floor. Nothing was done directly for us. To the elites America was nothing more than their plaything—the place where they

could romp about and build up their wealth, influence, and power and hide away in their coastal enclaves. The political elite on the left didn't even care about American security. Both villains and desperate people were pouring across our border illegally: the villains would ravage our communities and fill them with drugs, violence, and death; the desperate would flood the US with cheap labour. This would mean the guillotine for whatever decent-paying working-class jobs hadn't yet been offshored. Cheap labour would drive down wages, and my job and wage security would diminish.

I took Donald Trump's dire warnings as little more than those of a carnival ringmaster and certainly didn't view him as a prophet or a saviour. Early on I found it funny that he belonged to the very class of people he claimed were pressing their bootheel on the necks of the working class and America itself. I suppose his willingness to attack his own ilk afforded him some credibility.

After some time, however, I began to consider what he was selling. The angry populist mandate he was pushing began converting something in me. I started to question my own satisfaction. Was I merely lapping up a glob of casserole that happened to slap on the floor near me? Then Trump's political opponents started talking about his supporters as if they were filth. The media and Hollywood mocked them and laughed at them. I didn't even know if I was a Trump supporter yet, but as I watched things unfold, I started to think, "The host of *The Apprentice* might be right. These people don't understand or sympathize with the challenges of ordinary American life at all. And worse, they do seem to think we're stupid pests." I started to believe that these elites viewed people like me as belonging to a foolish and dispensable caste of people. Politics, culture, and prosperity belonged to *them*, not us. I began referring to Trump supporters as "us" instead of "them." The way the elites spoke about us, it seemed like they couldn't care less about whether we shared in the prosperity and satisfaction of the American dream. As Trump rose in popularity, we revelled in the idea that these people would have to swallow their pride and take us seriously. Especially after Trump stunned the country and became the forty-fifth president.

As with every presidential election cycle, the visceral excitement and obsession with politics slowly dialed down. The constant arguments that had become the background noise to my personal and work life dissipated. The one thing that didn't dissipate, however, was my dissatisfaction. I was no longer chipper about my tough but well-paying factory job. I felt like a fool for having so happily wagged my tail in excitement as I ate the scraps that fell from an uninterested master's plate.

Something verging on the sacred occurs when hope is allowed to leaven a people's cultural identity in sobriety and solidarity.

This is hard for me to admit because it marked the start of the most arrogant and entitled period of my life. It is a funny thing. I recognize—in hindsight—a kind of innocent humility in myself during my first couple years in the factory, despite being filled with an intense pride. But it was a pride wrapped up in gratitude and determination. The abandonment of this gracious pride and the adoption of a mantle of aggrieved victim produced the kind of ugly pride that we all detest. This kind of pride is gluttonous, satisfied only by the recognition that my low station is unfortunate and unfair. It also relishes the ridicule, humiliation, and defeat of those who I was now convinced thought themselves so much better than me. I don't recall this sense of grievance manifesting itself in any kind of outward way. It was mostly interior. The only person who endured my whining pessimism was my wife, who, being the best person in the world, encouraged me to be thankful for what we had and how far we had come, and assured me of how proud she was of me.

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This is not to say that Donald Trump was the cause of my resentment. That was probably always there to some degree, albeit under the surface. He merely spoke to the self-doubt that lived within me and in millions of other people. In accepting his narrative of American life, I invited in bitterness and dissatisfaction and bade farewell to the healthy patriotism and determination found in the classical American mythology of promise. Any brief spurt of political conviction this promise was capable of producing was gone. Only a personal malaise remained. It wasn't until I encountered another political figure about a year later that everything changed. Donald Trump may be an example of how a quest for power can be disguised as advocacy. But Alexander Hamilton was an example of how a quest for fulfillment can be the strongest advocacy one could ask for.

I still remember the moment Alexander Hamilton woke me up. By this time I had left the kiln room behind and was running a blender operation. These blenders were close to twenty feet tall and about fifteen feet in diameter. To load them, I had to

climb to a mezzanine built over the top of them. On the floor in the centre of the mezzanine, a large trap door opened to the blender's mouth. On this particular day I was listening to music as I loaded several hundred bags of red iron into the blender. (Using headphones on the production floor was forbidden. I didn't care and did it anyway. I am jaded now, remember?) I decided it was time to change up my musical scenery. I pulled out my phone and opened Spotify. One of the trending albums was *Hamilton: An American Musical*. I had heard plenty of talk about *Hamilton* but didn't know much about it. Indulging a whim of curiosity, I pressed play and resumed my work. Over the next few hours my ambition was baptized. Here was this orphan: isolated in the Caribbean with no resources, most of his family gone, and prospects as bleak as one could imagine. And yet through an insatiable desire to overcome his circumstances, he leaves his home for mainland America; fights in the Revolutionary War, earning the respect of powerful people through his work ethic, bravery, and intellect; and ultimately becomes a founding father and the first secretary of the treasury. I listened to the musical three times in a row during that twelve-hour shift.

For several months my workdays were filled with this album. Curious about the historical background, I read Ron Chernow's *Alexander Hamilton*, on which the musical is based. The biography solidified my trust in Hamilton's credibility. It was then that I realized what I had lost. The drive Hamilton possessed was what I found admirable about him, because it is the drive I associate with working-class men and women. For most working-class folk, dreams and aspirations fall into place not with the help of powerful resources but through a pragmatic and noble self-denial and a relentless work ethic. By our willingness to work strenuous, monotonous, or disenchanting jobs, we can make our way toward the American dream—and earn a sense of pride and gratitude. Hamilton's story reminded me not only of how far I had come but also of how un-American my attitude had become. While I appreciated, and still appreciate, the attention Donald Trump has given to certain policy initiatives, the perspective he called the working class to was not bound up in hope and solidarity. It was bound by fear. When fear is used to stoke a spirit of anger and suspicion, it gives rise to a kind of emotional inversion. Instead of fear giving rise to courage and in time maturing into hope, we view hope as adolescent, courage as futile, and fear as mature. This is wrong. Fear is not the proper end. Fear is useful only if it orients our agency toward a truly proper end: hope. As long as we refuse to nurse and condition our participation with fear to grow into something more, we will remain small

Detail from *Man and Machinery*, mural at Detroit Institute of Arts by Diego Rivera, 1932–1932.
Image by Ashley Street

and worried for all our lives. I decided to abandon my fearful spirit of pessimism and bitterness and follow Alexander Hamilton's lead.

I worked with an intensity that reminded me of my early days in the factory. Some shifts I went through two or three uniforms because I was so drenched in sweat. By this time I had worked at the factory for close to five years, and after weeks of deliberation I applied for a management position that had opened up in my department. I was asked to come in for an interview. It was with an executive whom I knew fairly well and had a decent relationship with. My interview, however, wasn't an interview. He thanked me for my interest in the position but told me that all management positions required a college degree. It was a matter not of ability, he assured me, but merely of company policy. Whether or not this was true, I told myself not to be discouraged. Perhaps I needed to leave the working-class Caribbean for the working-class mainland. After discussing the matter with friends and family, I determined that construction was where I needed to go. Many people had told me that the construction industry hadn't given in to college credentialism, and that ability and performance still determined a person's trajectory. Soon I applied and tested for entry into an electrical apprenticeship and got it.

I began night trade school and work as an apprentice electrician in October 2017. By March 2020 I was a construction project manager working in the office. In 2021 my wife and I built our family home. In January 2023 she left her job to begin the noble and difficult work of being a stay-at-home mom with the three children we now have. My time with Hamilton helped me rediscover a truth about the working class in America. We have front-row seats to the power of American society. The power doesn't lie in a naive bootstrapism. My path has always been filled with powerful advocates willing to guide and condition me. The power of American society lies in the promise and the reward of prosperity, comfort, and security. The American dream. There is no doubt that credentialism, malaise, and other economic and political factors are squeezing the working class's ease in achieving the dream. But by no means has it robbed us of being able to achieve it. I look back on my story and see a spirit of determination and hope weaving in and out of my life that I believe is emblematic of the American people. An antiquated, but still timeless, spirit of patriotism and resilience. I am not a Christian nationalist, and I have no wish to deify the American people or America itself. But I do think something verging on the sacred occurs

when hope is allowed to leaven a people's cultural identity in sobriety and solidarity. The leader who understands and encourages this spirit will not wield their power in a manner that merely bolsters their own position. They will use their power and credibility to inspire a proper disposition toward the power of liberty similar to how my dear friend Alexander Hamilton saw it: "There is a certain enthusiasm in liberty, that makes human nature rise above itself, in acts of bravery and heroism."

There is a kind of populism that can be healthy—more than that, might be necessary—for our country to heal. But it must be a populism dedicated to mutual respect, not one guided by vengeance and stagnant grievance. Having the ability to advocate for and see one another clearly is the only thing that will begin to heal not just the class divide but America itself. Liberty and civic harmony have been hijacked by partisanship. Our friendly disposition toward demagoguery and authoritarianism is allowing it to happen. Zero-sum thinking is indicative of a nation of cowards. It inspires a civic and spiritual laziness where we exchange persuasion for coercion, courage for fear, hope for anger, and freedom for oppression. The birth of good governments and powerfully pragmatic and compassionate leaders within a country is dependent on the disposition of that country's citizens. A hopeful future for America—for any country—must be one defined by the bravery and heroism of ordinary people loving the right things, rejecting lies, and respecting one another enough so that all people have the opportunity to walk in hope toward prosperity, comfort, and security.

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SUPPER QUESTIONS

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Questions

1. Have you ever found your convictions shifting based on the changing convictions of a political leader you follow?
2. What is the most difficult job you've ever had to work? What did it teach you?
3. When have you experienced a virtuous pride in your accomplishments, and when have you experienced the "gluttonous" pride of the victim?
4. Has any particular work of art inspired you to love your country? Which one(s)? Why?
5. Do you agree with Adleta that there can be a healthy kind of populism? Would your versoin look different from what he describes?