

Decline Porn

A value or a fetish?

NOAH ROTHMAN / APR. 17, 2017

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In the nation's elite political media, an initially well-meaning effort to understand the voters who handed the president the keys to the White House has morphed into something closely resembling exploitation.

The quest in America's newsrooms to identify and understand the Trump voter in traditionally bluer areas of the country began just hours after the polls closed. On November 9, fewer than 24 hours after Trump's victory, **New York Times** reporter Trip Gabriel took the local temperature in Ambridge, Pennsylvania. There, locals were elated by the idea of the incoming administration. But the piece took an anthropological turn when it not only asked why that would be but implied an answer.

These people were examples of a society in crisis, driven not by aspiration but desperation. After all, look at their surroundings? A restaurant, "one of the few thriving businesses on Merchant Street, which old-timers—and there are now mostly old-timers—remember as once so crowded you bumped into people. Now it's largely deserted."

As the piece went on, the report's Western Pennsylvanian setting became another character in the story. Its demography ("largely white, less educated"), its declining population, its post-industrial blight, and its shockingly high unemployment rates provided not just color but a theory of everything.

This story arguably begat a genre of Trump-era reporting that, at times, illuminated interesting trends worthy of exploration.

The **Wall Street Journal** explored how rates of employment in retail resulted in the virtual demise of the American mall in places like suburban and exurban Ohio. "Once the booming heart of America's manufacturing industry, the Rust Belt is now dotted with derelict factory buildings, empty warehouses, and struggling downtowns filled with pawnshops and boarded-up stores," wrote **The Week**'s editors, examining the value of Trump's antipathy toward trade and the pressures associated with automation. The Washington Post's series, "**Unnatural Causes: Sick and dying in small-town America**," examined how the rates of "deaths of despair"—drug overdose, alcohol-related afflictions, and suicide—are rising at accelerated rates in the American heartland.

"What's clear is that places like southern Ohio were fertile ground for an inflammatory candidate vowing, however vaguely or implausibly, to turn back the clock and restore life to the way it used to be," wrote the Post's Joel Achenbach. Worse still, he averred, these voters' choices now leave them faced with the prospect of

undoing the health-care reform plan that allowed them to access insurance. And thus, we come to a morose crossroad in which trend pieces designed to illuminate dimmer corners of society become exercises in bias confirmation.

“In Kiron, Iowa, pop. 229, the meaning of a life, a death and another cup of coffee,” read the headline in Monday’s **Washington Post**. What followed was a rote sketch of a dreary moment in the bleak lives of some small-town Americans, punctuated with remarkably detailed bits of dialogue that could have been torn from the pages of a Samuel Beckett play. For the better part of 3,000 words, the beleaguered residents of a dying town in Rep. Steve King’s district are examined as though they were exhibits in a menagerie. Amid the articulation of political viewpoints alien to coastal liberals are occasional descriptions of their increasingly decrepit surroundings; roads that lead nowhere, farms that dried up, ways of life that went extinct.

Did this examination of the dwindling population of Kiron impart any wisdom to its readers? Individually, not really. As part of a series of explorations of the world outside the Acela Corridor, however, it is a brushstroke in an increasingly detailed portrait. Perhaps the objective of reporters and editors who seek to examine the lifestyles of the nation’s dying towns is noble. Maybe they are seeking to educate and enlighten their audiences as to how the other half lives. Or perhaps eulogies for Kiron and towns like it are examples of a style of journalism that fetishizes decline. Maybe their purpose is to trigger in their coastal readers a gratifying sense of empathy, while at the same time ratifying their own life choices. Maybe it’s just another opportunity to **ponder scornfully** why so many Americans “**vote against their own interests.**”

National Review’s Kevin Williamson might not have known the backlash he would spark last year when, in examining the plight of the working-class voter (who isn’t **necessarily white**) residing in the suddenly dystopic surroundings of a defunct manufacturing town, articulated an unpopular solution to their problem: Move. Suggesting that Williamson’s recommendation amounted to intellectual laziness and evasion, *The Week*’s Michael Brendan Dougherty **accused** Williamson and the conservative elites who think like him of “condescension.” Dougherty **was not alone**. The Trump era has already demonstrated the political potency of the president’s “forgotten man,” but not the existence of ways to mitigate his pain. These debates are valuable and won’t end any time soon. Can the same value be found in the exhibition of Trump voters (or non-voters) and their surroundings absent any statistical or empirical context?

Valley View, Texas. Maiden, North Carolina. Lancaster, Ohio. Cairo, Illinois. Et cetera, et cetera. In print, on radio and television, and on the internet, political media is flooded with tales of the abundance of fear and privation on the formerly vibrant Main Streets of Middle America. Occasionally, they are scolding of the various villains responsible for the situation; **Pharmaceutical companies, cheap foreign labor, competition from China, mortgage lenders**, or even just **the voters themselves**. Not infrequently, the story doesn’t have a bad guy. Only a tormented, relatable protagonist. Is any of this “awareness” helping its subjects? Maybe not. Maybe that’s not the point.