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### November 13, 2016: It Was Jobs, Heroin and Disconnection—Not Racism

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Title: It Was Jobs, Heroin and Disconnection—Not Racism

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11/13/2016—If you want to feel better about the election result—well, relatively better—listen to ProPublica reporter Alec MacGillis on NPR weekend edition about white working class voters who voted for Trump overwhelmingly and flipped the Rust Belt, narrowly, to him. ([story here](#))

These voters have real grievances. But many of them voted twice for President Obama and race did not arise once in MacGillis's report. Nor did immigration, really. When immigration came up, the conversation shifted to Mexican heroin, not Mexicans. Undocumented people are not an issue for most of these voters. Nor do they oppose progress for women—in fact mostly they were women. Nor was it any real animus toward Hillary Clinton. Clinton just was part of a faraway establishment that runs things and leaves them out. If you will, President Obama and Donald Trump were obviously not part of that establishment, while Romney and Clinton were. Women candidates might have a harder time reaching them, but a different woman might well have done so.

These voters talked about jobs and the opioid epidemic and, overall, that they have been left behind and don't count.

The question for me is, what accounts for the extraordinary social dislocation and emptiness that MacGillis found? Is it just stagnating wages and lost manufacturing jobs? Or, is it absolutely that, but also something deeper?

Take Erie, for example, which, on election night, former Governor Tom Corbett presciently noted was not voting Democratic enough for Hillary to win Pennsylvania. Erie symbolizes the vote for Trump.

Erie was devastated by the 2008 recession. Its recent peak unemployment rate 11.7% in February, 2010. As late as January, 2013, the unemployment rate was still 10.1%, at a time when the State unemployment rate was only 7.6%. So, Erie was left behind.

Yet, since January 2013, the unemployment rate has been steadily dropping. In April, 2015, the unemployment rate had dropped to 5.5% and the State rate to 5.3%. Erie had mostly recovered.

But, something unexpected then happened. Unemployment went up in the last year in Erie, when it did not nationally—from 4.6% in September, 2015 to 6.4% in September 2016. That increase is not quite what it seems. It is probably in equal parts stagnation in hiring plus an increase in the labor participation rate—people not bothering to look for work are not counted as unemployed, so when they start looking for work, the unemployment rate goes up. But there certainly is no sign of brisk hiring.

So, what is it? Are working people in Erie devastated by economic conditions? It's not great in Erie, but it is not the Great Depression either. Certainly, by itself, economic conditions don't warrant blowing up the whole system, which is partly what a vote for Trump was understood to be.

What does the Democratic Party offer to people in Erie? Jack Kelly, the conservative columnist for the Post-Gazette, wrote today that all the Dems offered was bathrooms for transgendered people. He was making the point that the Democratic Party had lost touch with ordinary working people. By implication, it was only Trump's racist and misogynist personality that kept the race as close as it was. White working class voters did not share these views, but these views did not repulse them enough not to vote for Trump—Trump even got a fair share of votes from people who said he was unqualified to be President.

From this perspective, Hillary's error was running against Trump rather than against his policies—his opposition to an increase in the minimum wage, his corporate tax cuts and so forth. Trump's personal failings misled Hillary into thinking Trump could be defeated personally rather than as a Republican, with typical Republican positions on many issues.

Part of the reason for the misdirection was that Hillary did not want to talk about two issues in particular: trade and global warming. This reflects both the schizophrenia in the Democratic Party and Hillary's lack of candor. On trade, Hillary clearly was not telling the truth about her genuine leanings. She is a free trade advocate and would have been better off defending trade. She lost the anti-trade vote anyway. On global warming, her refusal to engage the job losses that climate change requires led many workers to conclude she did not care. Hillary had to acknowledge the pain and loss and ask for sacrifice for the sake of our grandchildren—plus offering something to climate change and trade displaced workers—something Republicans also reject.

Two more points. First, it was not Comey and Clinton looks small invoking him as the reason she lost. I'm sure his letter to Congress hurt her. But she should be asking why the election was so close that the letter mattered so much. Hillary had not closed the deal one week before the election and that is why late deciding voters broke against her. On the other hand, Hillary did not run a bad campaign. She won the popular vote after all. The Democratic coalition is still the dominant coalition. Translating that national strength into electoral success should not be an impossible task.

Where does all this leave my concern about nihilism—the decline of all traditional values and institutions that has resulted globally from the death of God and the inability of secularists and non-affiliated people to fill the God-shaped void? I believe this nihilism is why the rust belt is in such despair. Community was broken—not just the job market.