

Reviews

Justin Gest. *The New Minority: White Working Class Politics in an Age of Immigration and Inequality*.
(New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.
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Justin Gest, an assistant professor of public policy at George Mason University's Schar School of Policy and Government, has written an insightful and engaging study of why many white working-class people in the U.S. and U.K. are deeply unhappy with the social and political status quo. Gest did field research, including extensive interviews in two representative communities: Youngstown, Ohio and Barking and Dagenham in East London. These are both excellent choices for Gest's intended purposes because they are the kinds of places that flourished in the 1940s, 50's and 60's, and then fell victim to globalization and deindustrialization thereafter.

The New Minority does a fine job of explaining why white working-class people in such places today feel ignored and even abandoned by both of their respective countries' two major parties. The most interesting chapters of this book tell the stories of Youngstown's and East London's decline, and how the older residents in particular view that process. For Youngstowners, the crucial, devastating change has been a shift from economic security built on male bread-winner jobs in the steel industry during its heyday to pervasive economic insecurity in an economy with few good jobs for those with no more than a grade-school education or special skills. For East Londoners, the focus of discontent is at least as much on the issue of displacement by new immigrants from

the U.K.'s former colonies, whose presence has transformed the look and feel of the old neighborhood. Many of Gest's quotations from the interviews are wonderfully evocative, and he skillfully weaves them into his account.

Having painted vivid portraits of both places, Gest zeroes in on why working-class whites have reacted so negatively to those changes, and the particular ways that they explain them. In Youngstown, the decline of the steel industry is understood mostly as the result of management's quest to seek higher profits in places where wages are a lot lower. Combined with that is a sense of grievance that the welfare state programs established to deal with the damage done by that shift are abused, not by the white working-class usually, but by African Americans there. At the heart of the matter is a pervasive belief among dispossessed whites that blacks are quick to accept cash assistance, which whites tend to view in moralistic terms as reflecting an unwillingness to work. Gest's research reveals that whites rely on welfare-state programs a great deal as well, but persist in thinking that they only accept in-kind assistance such as food stamps, and even then, only to supplement inadequate incomes from low-paying jobs. The extent to which this perception reflects reality is a bit unclear; what is unambiguous is that the whites Gest surveyed in Youngstown firmly believe it. The net result is a working-class community divided against itself, and a culture of corruption as the most networked people fight for scarce jobs and resources.

East London, as Gest makes clear, is not entirely different, but lacks the stark black-white binary of Youngstown. Instead, older working-class whites in East London complain about newer immigrants as overly prone to rely on welfare-state programs while declining to assimilate into traditional English folkways. The key

distinction in the minds of working-class whites there is between immigrants who came earlier and seemed eager to assimilate themselves into British society, and a more recent wave that seems determined to turn a neighborhood working class whites view as theirs into a very different kind of place. The net result in terms of political power is much the same, however: a divided community that has little clout with establishment figures of various kinds.

Having laid out that narrative, Gest goes on to try to map just how alienated various kinds of working-class whites are in both places, and the extent to which the degree of alienation affects the nature of their protest against the status quo. Gest is on familiar turf here; his previous book was a study of the extent to which Muslims living in the West are alienated from it. One very clear feature of this new study are diagrams of alienation in which Gest asked his interviewees to use a set of concentric circles to show how they see the distribution of power in their homelands. The most interesting finding is that white working-class people in both Youngstown and East London see racial and ethnic minority groups as having more power than they do, thanks to changes in law and life since the 1960s. In essence, working-class whites believe they have changed places with the minorities that they used to out-rank, socially, culturally, and politically. In their view, the people at the top of their respective societies have come to care more about minority groups than working-class whites. Gest makes clear that view has generated much of the populist energy that carried Donald Trump's presidential campaign and the Brexit referendum to unexpected victories.

This book is very helpful in many ways, especially to people who are perplexed by the intensity of white working-class alienation. *The New Minority* is not, however, without flaws. What

would have made this very good study even better, in the American context particularly, is more attention to religion. Youngstown is a place heavily populated by white Catholics, the older of whom are often strongly morally traditional. Much of their sense of blacks as profoundly different (rather than natural allies) flows from that situation, which Gest does not fully explain. Another issue that could have used more context is Gest's discussion of nationalism, which to older working-class whites in the U.S. and U.K. is seen as something very positive. It provided the glue that held those countries together, during World War II specifically, fostering a way of seeing that greatly affects perceptions, especially of recent immigrants. Gest also needed to say more about the ingrained commitment to patriarchal family structures among working-class whites, older ones in particular. Their world had been built on male breadwinning, and much of their sense of grievance stems from the decline in jobs that pay enough to make that model workable. Finally, Gest has a tendency to think that working-class whites who backed Trump and Brexit are hopelessly retrograde in their thinking, rather than consider seriously the possibility that the pressure they are putting on the U.S. and U.K. systems may well move them toward a future that looks somewhat more like the past. One need not agree with that agenda in order to take it seriously, and *The New Minority* could have done that to a greater degree. That said, Gest's study is an excellent one of an issue of great contemporary importance, and possesses a rare comparative dimension. For those reasons, *The New Minority* is highly recommended for academics and their students in history, political science, sociology, and other, related fields.

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