



The Working Class Forgot To Show Up

America's Forgotten Majority: Why The White Working Class Still Matters

by Ruy Teixeira and Joel Rogers

New York: Basic Books, 2000

Hardcover; 215 pp.; \$27.00

Economic Apartheid in America: A Primer on Economic Inequality and Insecurity

by Chuck Collins and Felice Yeskel

New York: The New Press, 2000

Paper; 229 pp.; \$16.95

[Steve Brouwer](#)

Can the notion of social class return to political discourse? Al Gore, in a flirtation with populist rhetoric, nearly uttered the words "working class" this past fall when he lauded "America's Working Families." Now that the home-field advantages have allowed the Bush family to stop the clock, freeze the count, and declare young Dubya (W.) the winner, we can turn our attention to more meaningful scores. For pure decisiveness, you can't beat the returns just in from The Twenty Year War (otherwise known as The Great Class War of 1980 — 2000), a one-sided slaughter if there ever was one:

<u>Capital</u> , 1980-2000:	Stock Market — up 1017%	<u>Top CEO pay</u> — up 1030%
<u>Labor</u> , 1980-1999:	Productivity — up 35%	<u>Average worker's wage</u> — up <u>1%</u>

The Forgotten Majority and *Economic Apartheid* each chronicle the unhappy results of the class war, beginning with similar assessments of the damage inflicted on working Americans over the past two decades. They describe a "Great Divide," the constantly widening gulf of inequality separating the privileged from the majority of citizens. On one end sit the richest one percent of the population, those who control the capital and rake in the lion's share of the profits. Alongside them, enjoying much more modest compensation, are the middling class of managers, supervisors, and professionals (maybe ten to twenty percent of the population.) On the other end are the eighty to ninety per cent of the population who have gained little or nothing over the past twenty years. The average American wage slid downhill for seventeen years then sneaked back up to \$11.88 per hour in 1999 — fourteen cents higher than it was in 1980. Why was the score 1030 to 1 in favor of the chief executives and the major stockholders? *Because the working class never showed up to fight.*

Forgotten Majority concentrates on strayed white working class voters because blacks and Hispanics of all classes already vote Democratic by huge majorities. Teixeira and Rogers, who realize that the working class loses because its white majority does not vote in its own self-interest, choose to concentrate on a detailed analysis of voting patterns. They want the Democratic Party to redirect itself toward the white working class, about 55 percent of the U.S. population, instead of vying with the Republicans for white middle- and upper-middle-class votes (about twenty percent of the population.) The Democratic Party has never received a majority of the votes of middle-to-upper-class citizens but has been able to win elections when it identified with the bread-and-butter issues of the working class.



Collins and Yeskel, who work for United for a Fair Economy, focus on popular education, not electioneering, in their book. They hold that the working class didn't show up for the latest Class War because the media monopolies kept them from knowing how sharply power has shifted in favor of the corporate elite. Over the past five or six years, United for a Fair Economy has presented one of its workshops, "The Great Divide," to thousands of labor-union members, churchgoers, and community activists across the country. With *Economic Apartheid in America*, they have produced a handbook for effective grassroots empowerment, replete with easily understood charts and statistics, that volunteers can use to educate their fellow citizens. As a bonus, the authors show how to stage political protests, get media attention, and hook up with a wide array of progressive grassroots organizing groups.

These two books are not perfect. While *Economic Apartheid* provides useful historical examples of grassroots dissent — for instance, the nineteenth-century prairie populists and their effective circuit-riding organizers — it neglects the more valuable and sustained traditions of left-wing labor

unionism and socialist organizing that paved the way for the New Deal. Apparently the "S" word is still verboten, even among leftists.

Teixeira and Rogers, whose past work has been marked by astute electoral analysis, take a more serious stumble. In identifying a huge voting block as "working class," they suggest that the Democratic Party could have benefited greatly if it had adopted (or re-adopted) a platform of economic populism over the past twenty-five years. True enough. But Teixeira and Rogers would have done better to dispense with whiteness and instead to emphasize the need for unifying a racially diverse working class. They also should have defined the working class in terms of income rather than education — that is, defined it as comprising the eighty percent of households that earn less than \$75,000 to \$80,000 a year. Voting data demonstrate that income divisions are more decisive in predicting voting behavior than the cultural class bias and professional status that are presumed to go along with educational attainment. A focus on income offers the key for changing the electoral outcome: lower-income people, especially the third of the electorate with household incomes of under \$30,000 a year, vote overwhelmingly Democratic, while the upper thirty percent of households, who make over \$60,000 a year, have always favored the Republicans. Voter turnout is about 35 percent of the former, versus 70 percent of the latter. If Democrats can get the lower half of the working class to register and vote, they'll win handily.

Because Teixeira and Rogers avoid the issue of increasing voter turnout (a paltry fifty percent of the whole adult population votes for president), they try too hard to convince us that whites will give up their racist prejudices in favor of new-found class loyalty.

If only most white people knew (or cared) that they were working class! There was one big sub-group of Americans who voted overwhelmingly for George W. Bush *despite* their income levels: white Protestants. These neo-Puritans have dreamt of the City on the Hill — a white, gated community of the elect — for over three hundred years. It's disturbing how many of them, though solidly stuck in the working class (by any objective measure), are content to sit at the base of the Hill, forming an angry wall of armed gatekeepers for the Episco-palefaces who sit above them. As Marx once said, a class is only real if it is a class-for-itself, that is, conscious of its own power and potential to change history. For now, only the rich are a conscious class. That's why they've won The Great Class War so far — one thousand and thirty to one.

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