

# The Strange Career of “the Working Class” in US Political Culture Since the 1950s

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Since the 2016 election season, mass media in the United States have been awash in references to the country’s “working class.” The misery of the group or the racism of its white members have explained Donald Trump’s election to the presidency.<sup>1</sup> Researchers have located an opioid epidemic in the working class; pundits have explored working-class fears of immigration; and reporters have exposed the increasingly prevalent working-class experience of precarious employment.<sup>2</sup> What has come to identify a member of the working class in these discussions is the lack of a college degree, and the press now assumes a “vast economic and cultural divide” between those who do not go to college and those who do.<sup>3</sup>

This widespread acknowledgement that the United States *has* a working class represents a 180-degree shift from the situation circa 1960. At that point, journalists claimed instead that the US working class was disappearing into the middle class. In 1959, for instance, the *New York Times* reported that the “buying power” of US workers had increased so much that “the separate identity of the ‘working class’ in this country is rapidly fading away.”<sup>4</sup> In 1960, *Times* reporters argued similarly that

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1. McElwee, “Truth about the White Working Class”; Packer, “How Donald Trump Is Winning”; Colvin, “Trump’s Base”; Molyneux, “Mapping the White Working Class”; Edsall, “The Democratic Party.”

2. Guo, “The Disease Killing White Americans”; Galston, “On Immigration”; Irwin, “To Understand Rising Inequality.”

3. Bahrapour and Clement, “Study: White Men Without a Degree”; Healy, “Out of High School” (quote).

4. “U.S. Study Shows Gains of Workers,” July 5, 1959, *New York Times*, ProQuest, *New York Times Historical* database. (Hereafter, when no newspaper is named, it means: *New York Times* as obtained from ProQuest’s *New York Times Historical* database).

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while the United States once had an identifiable “working class” with its own standard of living and culture this was no longer true. By 1960, the “working class” had risen into the “middle class,” they claimed, “both financially and culturally,” such that Americans were “beginning to approach the classless society we were always supposed to be.”<sup>5</sup>

While in the early 1960s, American reporters and their sources largely denied that the United States had an economically and culturally distinct working class, by 2017 those same players assumed a “vast economic and cultural divide” between the working class and other Americans. What happened? Why, between 1960 and 2017, did America’s mainstream press shift from burying the notion of a US working class to exhuming it?

It certainly was not that Americans were more likely to self-identify as working class in the later period. In the early 1960s, 48 percent of American adults self-identified as “working class” and 44 percent as “middle class.” In 2010, 47 percent of Americans self-identified as “working class” and 43 percent as “middle class.”<sup>6</sup> Changes in media representations did not simply mirror habits of self-representation among the subjects of media coverage. Other factors were at play.

To identify those factors, I have studied the use of the phrase *working class* in the *New York Times* from 1930 into the twenty-first century. To make my purpose clear, I should add that I have not investigated terms that some might believe synonymous with *working class*, such as *wage-earners*, *workers*, or *working people*. The reason is that the remarkable departure during the 2016 election season was not that the mass media discovered the United States had working people or wage-earners. What was remarkable was that some such people were construed as members of a distinct economic and cultural *class*.

The term *working class* has been fraught in the United States for at least two overarching reasons. First, leaders have since the founding of the republic insisted that the United States was—unlike Europe—a “classless” society, a land of individuals able to determine their own position in the world rather than accept the place into which they were born. Witness the earlier reference to “the classless society we were always supposed to be.”<sup>7</sup> Second, during the twentieth century the term came to be

5. Quotes are from Bruce Bliven, “The Revolution of the Joneses,” October 9, 1960. See also James Reston, “Religion and Politics—A Moderate View,” September 11, 1960.

6. National Opinion Research Center, Kennedy Assassination Survey, November 1963, USNORC.63KENN.R50, National Opinion Research Center, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, iPOLL (accessed September 18, 2017); National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, General Social Survey 2010, March 2010, USNORC.GSS10C.Q0189A, National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, iPOLL (accessed September 18, 2017). These surveys are comparable because they gave respondents the same options to choose from in answering. For a quick assessment of actual numbers of Americans who objectively qualified as working class circa 1960, see Patterson, *Great Expectations*, 323–25. For arguments that the majority of Americans remained in the working class at the end of the twentieth century, see, for example, Zweig, *Working Class Majority*, 34–37.

7. See also, for instance, Anderson, “The Language of Class.”

associated with communism and the first regime claiming to embody it, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Use of the term after 1917 risked suggesting adherence to a worldview in which class conflict generated historical change and threatened private property. For these reasons, references to wage-earners and working people have not been equivalent in the United States to acknowledging a working class, a term potentially suggesting a broad, horizontal divide among Americans whose interests conflicted. In my research, I am seeking to understand under what circumstances Americans have been willing to suggest that their country was divided by class. My interest is in figuring out why this particular term, rarely used in mid-twentieth-century US political culture, has become commonplace.

My study of the term *working class* in the *New York Times* suggests that the decades between 1960 and the mid-1980s were crucial to explaining the change. Several successive trends in those decades contributed to the increasing circulation of the idea that the United States did indeed have a distinguishable working class. The trends included (1) the easing over time of anticommunist fervor, which allowed the Left to reemerge into mainstream political life and reduced the political toxicity of leftist terminology; (2) the desire of journalists, politicians, and pundits, beginning in the 1960s, to identify racist white people as specifically as possible; and, (3) the devastating effects of deindustrialization and deunionization that left workers largely prostrate by the 1980s and thus no apparent threat to the existing social order. The convergence of these trends to a remarkable degree mainstreamed the term *working class* during the 1970s and 1980s.

By the mid-1980s, indeed, the representations of the working class that would be most common in 2016–17 were well established, and it is the emergence of those representations that I will explain in this essay. One point that seems especially striking is that mainstream print media were willing to acknowledge that the country suffered a class divide not when workers were organized, powerful, and demanding but when the working class seemed to be economically and politically powerless. While industrialization created a working class in the US economy, it may be that deindustrialization was more important to creating a working class in US political culture.

## Method

The method of this study is straightforward. First, I searched ProQuest's digitized *New York Times Historical* database to discover numerical trends in the use of the term *working class* between 1930 and 2009. This initial search revealed that the number of uses was pretty much the same in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, rose considerably in the 1960s, and shot up dramatically in the 1970s and again in the 1980s and yet again in each decade thereafter (Fig. 1). So far as the *New York Times* represented US political culture, the phrase *working class* became more integral with every decade after 1960.

Next, I began actually reading the articles, editorials, and op-eds that used the term *working class* in reference to the United States in most of the presidential elec-

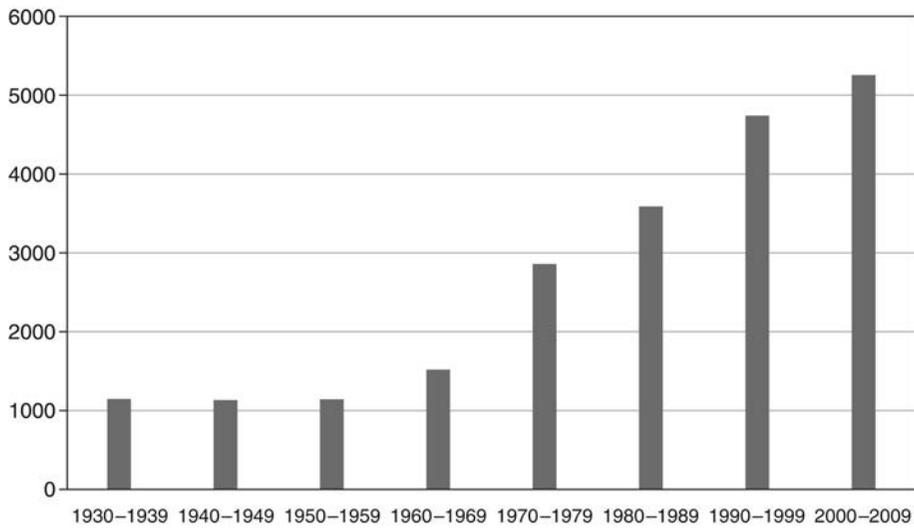


Figure 1. Number of articles and editorials in the *New York Times* using the term *working class* by decade

tion years between 1932 and 1984 and in years of important or widespread strikes.<sup>8</sup> I have noted to whom the term was attributed; when and under what circumstances the term was reported; and, when possible, what commentators meant by *working class* when they used it. This process revealed that the use of the term in reference to the United States declined to only a smattering of references in the 1950s. When the *Times* used the phrase in that immediate postwar decade, it was almost always referring to another country. Otherwise, though, the initial trends held, and in fact, the increased use of the term in the 1970s and again in the 1980s was even more dramatic. If we count the number of articles that used the term *working class* only in reference to the United States, the number more than doubled between 1960 and 1968; more than doubled again between 1968 and 1972; and between 1974 and 1984, rose 60 percent.<sup>9</sup>

To make sure that the increased number of articles and editorials featuring the term *working class* did not simply represent an increase in the number of articles and editorials in the newspaper, I turned to [chronicle.nytlabs.com](http://chronicle.nytlabs.com), which figured the percentage of articles that used any term in selected years. [Chronicle.nytlabs.com](http://chronicle.nytlabs.com) showed that the percentage of articles in the *New York Times* that included the term *working class* increased steadily in the late 1960s and 1970s, hit an all-time high in 1980, dipped a bit in the mid-1980s, and then hit another all-time high in the

8. I read all editorials and articles that associated the phrase *working class* with the United States in 1932, 1934, 1936, 1946, 1948, 1952, 1956, 1959, 1960, 1964, 1968, 1972, 1974, 1980, and 1984. I have read less systematically in many other years as well.

9. The number of references to a “working class” in the United States for select years: 1960 (19); 1968 (49); 1972 (104); 1974 (99); 1984 (164).

late 1980s. From there, the general trend continued upward.<sup>10</sup> We cannot, then, simply attribute the increasing number of references to the "working class" to a larger newspaper.

Moreover, to confirm that these trends were not peculiar to the *New York Times*, I charted the number of articles and editorials that featured the term *working class* in several other newspapers and found the same trend. In the *Wall Street Journal*, for instance, the number of articles and editorials using the term increased dramatically in the 1960s, nearly doubled in the 1970s, and more than doubled in the 1980s.<sup>11</sup> For a newspaper different from the *Times* in both politics and circulation, I charted the numbers for the *Chicago Tribune*. Again, the pattern held.<sup>12</sup> I found the same for periodicals ranging from *U.S. News and World Report* to *Black Enterprise*.<sup>13</sup>

The data seem to indicate that, within mass-circulated US print media, the term *working class* became more prevalent after 1970 than at any time since at least 1930 and that its increased use was stark. While I have only selectively read articles in publications other than the *New York Times*, that sampling, together with the consistency in the numerical patterns across print media, makes me fairly confident that the evidence within the *Times* represents US print culture more generally. Moreover, because the *New York Times* was considered a newspaper of record in the United States and was the metropolitan newspaper with the largest circulation of any in the country, the trends there would be significant even if they were not identical to those elsewhere. At the very least, what we are seeing in the *Times* demonstrates that its hundreds of thousands of readers were increasingly exposed in the late twentieth century to the assumption that the United States had a working class, that Americans were not united in an undifferentiated middle class.<sup>14</sup> That evidence alone explodes common understandings of the late twentieth-century United States, which have argued that the term *working class* disappeared from the "political vernacular" after the 1970s, if not before.<sup>15</sup>

10. Chronicle.nytlabs.com, search term = "working class" (accessed June 20, 2016).

11. ProQuest, *Wall Street Journal Historical* database (accessed June 1, 2016).

12. ProQuest, *Chicago Tribune Historical* database (accessed June 1, 2016).

13. EBSCOhost, *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* database and EBSCOhost, *Reader's Guide Retrospective* database (accessed July 10, 2016).

14. So far as I can discern, no central policy at the *Times* controlled the use of the term *working class*. Diamond, *Behind The Times*; Steven Greenhouse, e-mail messages to author, August 27 and 29, 2017; Steven Roberts, e-mail messages to author, August 30, 2017. But I do not think it matters who made the decision, because the effect was the same either way.

15. Metzgar, "Politics and the American Class Vernacular"; Zweig, *Working Class Majority*; Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*; Cowie, "Red, White, and Blue Collar"; Lichtenstein, "Class Consciousness." Some researchers have noticed that the white working class was central to political strategizing from the 1930s through the 1980s, but they have not been concerned with the language used to refer to this political constituency. See, for example, Teixeira and Rogers, *America's Forgotten Majority*.

### Sketching the Baseline

A quick overview of the use of the term *working class* in the 1950s will establish a baseline for the period of change that began in the mid-1960s. As mentioned, in the 1950s the use of the phrase in reference to the United States declined from its use in the 1930s and 1940s. Indeed, the term was culturally criminalized. In 1952, for instance, only nine articles or editorials used the phrase in reference to the United States, and only one of those references did not appear in an article about a trial of Communist Party members for conspiracy to overthrow the US government. *Working class* was in the early 1950s vividly associated with criminal leftists.<sup>16</sup>

By the end of the 1950s, after some of the worst excesses of the anticommunist crusade had abated, use of the term *working class* was a bit freer, but only free enough to confirm the continuing reluctance of reporters and their sources to employ the term and to explain why. In July 1959, the longest steel strike to that point in US history erupted, and one analyst dubbed it the most significant labor action “since the unionization of the mass production industries twenty years ago.”<sup>17</sup> Many commentators saw the strike as a threat to the prosperous US economy, and they often construed it as a conflict between “labor and management.”<sup>18</sup> By that point, as historian Margo Anderson has revealed, “labor” was understood as an interest group rather than a social class, and included only unionized blue-collar workers, a decreasing minority of postwar wage-earners.<sup>19</sup> President Dwight D. Eisenhower agreed as to the threat posed by the strike, and, after seventeen weeks, invoked the Taft-Hartley Act to force the steelworkers back into the mills.<sup>20</sup>

In the nearly unbearable tension of the 1959 steel strike, only eleven articles employed the term *working class* in reference to the United States at all, and nearly half of those were in reports on the visit of Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev to the United States. The communist leader—rather than any upstanding American—was often the character mouthing the phrase in these pieces, bolstering the association between communism and “working class.”<sup>21</sup> Even as a nationwide strike of steelworkers was roiling reporters and political leaders to such an extent that over fifteen hundred articles published in the *Times* that year contained the words *steel* and *strike*, not one of those articles used the term *working class*.<sup>22</sup>

16. The one outlier is Stanley Levey, “Puerto Rico ‘Astir’ Warring on Want,” April 29, 1952.

17. A. H. Raskin, “Steel Strike Fought over Basic Concepts,” August 16, 1959.

18. For instance, “Time on Steel,” June 28, 1959; and Anthony Lewis, “Labor: The Government’s Role: Steel Strike Shows Limits of Power,” October 11, 1959.

19. Anderson, “Language of Class,” 364. See also Lichtenstein, *State of the Union*, 141–77.

20. Stein, *Running Steel*, chapter 1, 7–36.

21. “Text of the Statement by Union Leaders on Questions They Put to Premier Krushchev,” September 21, 1959; “Summary of the Dinner Debate between U.S. Union Leaders and Krushchev,” September 22, 1959.

22. A. H. Raskin’s article “Deep Shadow over Our Factories” (November 29, 1959) did, however, reference class conflict, without using “working class.” It is the only article that I can find that referenced class at all in the context of a strike from the 1940s through the 1970s.

Hesitation to make reference to a working class in the midst of a strike was not peculiar to the 1950s. In 1946, when four-and-a-half million workers walked off the job, creating the greatest strike wave in all of US history, the only article in the *New York Times* to use the phrase *working class* in association with a strike was one that detailed the Soviet press's analysis of the US strikes.<sup>23</sup> Otherwise, in the hundreds of articles reporting on or at least mentioning strikes in 1946, none used the phrase. Similarly, during the earlier strike wave of 1934, *working class* was rarely used to describe or explain a strike in the United States. In fact, one of the few articles to use the phrase in the context of a strike in all of the 1930s did so in order to argue that the 1934 general strike in San Francisco was not an expression of class conflict.<sup>24</sup> Even in the period of the Popular Front, then, *Times* reporters generally avoided the term *working class* when members of that class were well organized, powerful, and threatening. The early Cold War only strengthened that well-established impulse.

Moreover, in the 1950s when labor leaders referred to the US "working class," they carefully distinguished their definition from that associated with communism. During Khrushchev's visit in 1959, a group of US labor leaders met with him. In the course of the conversation, the president of the United Auto Workers (UAW), Walter Reuther, used the term *working class* but immediately distinguished his meaning of the term from Khrushchev's. "We [in the United States] have people as dedicated to advancing the working class as there could be anywhere else," Reuther insisted, quickly adding that the capitalism of the 1950s was not the capitalism that Karl Marx had written about. "American workers" were not, he went on, "victims of capitalist production," nor were they "wage slaves." They did not believe they had "nothing to lose but their chains." Workers in the United States had, according to Reuther, a chance to work toward solutions of their problems "as economic citizens through collective bargaining and as political citizens through legislation and government action." The result was a very high standard of living for American workers, which invested them in the capitalist system. The "working class" in the United States, he insisted, was not in conflict with capitalism.<sup>25</sup>

That a powerful labor leader in 1959 would rush to demonstrate that his understanding of *working class* was not that of Marx or Khrushchev confirms why the term was not much in evidence during the height of the anticommunist crusade. It was politically toxic. It risked associating its users with the ideology of their country's global rival.

What, then, prompted the uptick in uses of the term *working class* in the mid-1960s?

23. Brooks Atkinson, "Moscow Accuses Capital in Strikes," February 4, 1946.

24. "Pioneers not Proletarians," July 23, 1934.

25. "Summary of the Dinner Debate."

### Easing of Anticommunism and Reemergence of the Left

In 1964, the *Times* published the term *working class* twice as many times in reference to the United States as it had in 1956. One reason was the easing of the anticommunist crusade, which allowed the Left to reemerge into mainstream political conversations as it had in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>26</sup> The term appeared, for instance, in coverage of the reinvigoration of the Communist Party-USA (CP). The *Times* reported that the CP was feeling on safer ground in 1964 because no new cases had been tried under the Smith Act since 1957. The newspaper assured readers that the CP was no longer under Soviet supervision and that it wanted a “peaceful transition to socialism.” In the meantime, the party supported Democratic candidates because it was “necessary for the working class to take advantage when the interests of itself and the capitalist class coincide.”<sup>27</sup> In this telling, the CP sounded anything but threatening, a far cry from its treasonous status in the 1950s.

In 1968 and 1972, the reemergence of the Left was even more marked. In 1968, the Communist party ran a candidate for president for the first time since 1940.<sup>28</sup> Party leader Gus Hall criticized the New Left for abandoning the “working class.”<sup>29</sup> Radicals like Harvey Swados and Andrew Kopkind published in the *Times* and did not hesitate to use the language of class in their social analyses.<sup>30</sup> In 1972, the newspaper published essays by Herbert Marcuse and Raymond Aaron. Marcuse argued that the “working class” was not currently revolutionary but remained “potentially revolutionary” and now included not only blue-collar workers but also salaried employees and the intelligentsia.<sup>31</sup> Frank Reisman, the editor of *Social Policy*, echoed Marcuse, claiming that the “working class” was becoming younger, blacker, and more female and that automation and bureaucratization were moving white-collar workers and professionals into it.<sup>32</sup> Angela Davis, after being acquitted on murder charges in California, traveled to Moscow and delivered greetings from “American blacks and other oppressed people of color and of the working class.”<sup>33</sup> Unsurprisingly, the reentry of the Left into mainstream political conversations increased the references to a “working class,” and the prominence of the Left, though varying through the

26. The term’s prominence in the *Times* in those earlier decades was especially due to the prominence of the Left in mainstream news and its use by academics.

27. Arthur Herzog, “A Specter Haunts the American Communist Party,” October 25, 1964.

28. Peter Kihss, “Communists Name Negro Woman for President,” July 8, 1968; William Honan, “If You Don’t Like Hubert, Dick, or George, How about Lar, Yetta, or Eldridge?” October 27, 1968.

29. Will Lissner, “U.S. Reds Score New Left’s Ideas,” July 5, 1968.

30. Harvey Swados, “The U.S. Is at Once Grim and Exhilarating,” November 17, 1968; Gladwin Hill, “Marcuse Returns as Storm Center on Campus,” September 29, 1968; Andrew Kopkind, “Are We in the Middle of a Revolution?” November 10, 1968; John Kifner, “Radical Movement at Columbia Begins to Revive,” September 20, 1968.

31. Herbert Marcuse, “Blue Collar Revolution,” August 7, 1972. See also “Marx and Para-Marx on Capitalist Contradictions,” August 15, 1972.

32. Frank Reisman, “Catching Up with the Vanguard,” August 14, 1972.

33. “Angela Davis Warmly Welcomed in Moscow,” August 29, 1972.

years, remained an element in the increasing use of the term in the *Times* through the 1980s.<sup>34</sup>

### Racial Politics

In addition to the reemergence of the Left, racial politics motivated increased use of *working class*.<sup>35</sup> Although in 1964 several articles used the phrase to refer to both black and white workers, especially in analyses of how workers were affected by industrial automation, other essays used the term to identify white Americans opposed to racial integration.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, nine of the twenty-eight usages of *working class* that year appeared in reports on white people who opposed African American civil rights or were worried about competition from black people for jobs and housing.<sup>37</sup> In all of these stories, white people who opposed black advancement were identified as "working class." In one, the opponents of integration were identified as both "working class" and "lower middle class," and the kinds of occupations represented in the "lower middle class" would in later years often be identified as "working class" in articles identifying the group as racist.<sup>38</sup> The phrase *white working class*, which did not appear at all in 1960, appeared at least three times.<sup>39</sup>

Given the general reluctance of those writing in the *Times* to use the phrase *working class* at all and the insistence by some writers in the 1960s that the "working class" had been absorbed into the "middle class," those who, in 1964, identified white people opposed to black civil rights as "working class" were making a choice.<sup>40</sup> They might just as readily have referred to these voters as "middle class" or "lower middle class." They could also have avoided the language of class altogether, which was the most powerful inclination in other situations within US politics; they could have referred to these voters simply as white workers, white wage-earners, or white

34. "Nationalize U.S. Steel, Socialist Candidate Says," February 8, 1984; Walter Goodman, "A Small Workers Party Aims Fire at Capitalism," October 10, 1984. Also noting the increased attention to the working class in the 1970s is Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 177, 180–81. Brick and Phelps do not systematically study mass-circulated political conversations but rather focus on conversations within the Left.

35. I hope to develop this point more fully in a future essay.

36. Black and white working class: Fred Powledge, "Negroes Ponder Malcolm's Move," March 15, 1964; Fred Powledge, "Rights Activists Expanding Goals," March 28, 1964; Sam Blum, "To Get the Bars Back on Their Feet," September 27, 1964.

37. See, for example, Austin Wehrwein, "Democratic Race Rouses Wisconsin," March 29, 1964; Seymour Martin Lipset, "A Private Opinion on the Polls," August 30, 1964; and "The Nation," September 27, 1964.

38. Douglas Robinson, "Kennedy in Trouble with Italian-Americans in City About Two Issues," October 13, 1964.

39. "CORE is Picketed by U.S. Nationalists," June 21, 1964; James Reston, "The Turbulent Democratic Strongholds," July 29, 1964; James Reston, "How to Unify the Unions," September 2, 1964.

40. For absorption of the working class into the middle class, see, for example, Bruce Bliven, "The Revolution of the Joneses," October 9, 1960; and James Reston, "Religion and Politics—A Moderate View," September 11, 1960. This trend is confirmed by Margo Anderson's study of magazine literature at the time as well. Anderson, "Language of Class," 364–67.

working people. The decision to refer to white opponents of racial justice as “working class” seems like an attempt not only to identify a political constituency as specifically as possible but also to “other” these racist white people, an effort to distance the political views of this group from the presumably better white people who supported civil rights. In these cases, it was not the user of the term *working class* who was vilified, as in the early 1950s, but rather the subjects who were identified as “working class.”<sup>41</sup>

In 1968, the trend intensified. Reporters consistently referred to racist white people as “working class” even when they included white-collar workers like clerical workers and sales clerks. They did so overwhelmingly in their reporting on the presidential campaign of segregationist George Wallace. One reporter admitted that in Connecticut “working class” voters came out openly for Wallace, while the “middle class” supported him secretly.<sup>42</sup> But most made no admission that racism found fertile ground among a broader swath of Americans. Articles identified the locus of Wallace’s support in Missouri, Minnesota, Connecticut, and Cleveland as “the working class.”<sup>43</sup>

Developing the association between racism and the working class in another context, a journalist reported that school children in Florida were either indifferent to or delighted by the murder of Martin Luther King Jr. and that anti-King sentiment was twice as high among “working-class homes” as “middle-class families.” “Working-class homes” were defined as those in which fathers were “laborers or in clerical or sales positions.” The latter two groups were often construed in other contexts as lower middle class. Again, a long tradition of avoiding the language of class altogether might have encouraged this reporter to do the same, but instead he chose to invoke class—and to construe “working class” broadly—with the result that racism was attributed overwhelmingly to the working rather than the middle class.<sup>44</sup>

Associating only the working class with racism suggested that racism was not endemic to American life as it would surely have seemed had racists been located in the more encompassing and amorphous middle class. When racism was imputed specifically to the working class, it seemed contained by class boundaries; it was not represented as part and parcel of US culture and institutions.

The containment of racism within the working class was expressed in an article on the presidential preferences of voters in Queens just days before the 1968 general election. Ballots in that election gave voters the choice of Hubert Humphrey (Democrat), George Wallace (Independent), or Richard Nixon (Republican). The

41. For the vilification of the working class in other contexts, see Cobble, “Don’t Blame the Workers.”

42. William Borders, “Wallace Forces in Connecticut Hold Candidate Can Win State,” September 22, 1968.

43. Walter Rugaber, “Survey Finds Political Chiefs Fear Wallace Gains,” July 21, 1968; William Borders, “Wallace Turns to Connecticut,” August 4, 1968; John Leo, “Radical Tabloid Begins Weekly,” October 13, 1968; Nan Robertson, “Housewives in Ethnic Enclaves In Cleveland Leaning to Wallace,” October 22, 1968.

44. John Leo, “Students Polled on King Slaying: 59% of Whites in South Elated or Indifferent,” October 6, 1968.

reporter opened his piece with the identification of Queens as "practically synonymous with 'middle class.'" In fact, he insisted, "Queens' varied mixture of small homes and apartments, of races and incomes and ethnic groups, mirrors the make-up of the 'middle America' that determines most elections." Then, the reporter interviewed likely voters in Queens. In that survey, the only time that he shifted his description of the borough from "middle class" to "working class" was when he identified the neighborhood of Camillo Del Greco, an Italian American who ran a gas station—putting him in the category of either a business owner or manager—who was apparently going to vote for Wallace, a candidate that the reporter had just claimed was often seen by his supporters as "racist." Del Greco bore out that association: "I work like a horse," he reportedly said, "and I gotta pay taxes so those people can get welfare?" A man nearby was quoted as saying, "The young people around here are for Wallace. . . . We're not prejudiced around here—we just don't like niggers."<sup>45</sup> The reporter invoked the label *working class* only in connection with these overtly racist white people, whose economic position would actually seem to have fit his initial characterization of the area as quintessentially "middle class." Whether or not the move was deliberate, it had the effect of associating the working class, and not the middle class, with racism.

During the 1972 election, when Wallace ran in the Democratic primaries rather than as an independent, the trend continued. When writers referred to Wallace as well as the other Democratic presidential candidates in the same article, they usually described only Wallace's supporters as "working class."<sup>46</sup> In several articles noting that some workers were voting for the racist Wallace and others for Humphrey or McGovern, the term *blue collar* was used to identify those committed to Humphrey or McGovern, while *working class* applied only to those supporting Wallace.<sup>47</sup> Economically, the two groups were indistinguishable; only their racial politics differed.

Associating the working class with racism in these contexts also linked it with whiteness, an association that, while enduring, was surprisingly unstable until the mid-1980s.<sup>48</sup> In fact, the strength of the connection discernibly diminished around 1980, when just about as many references explicitly named the black working class as the white, and some writers overtly brought to light a multiracial, multiethnic working class.<sup>49</sup> Additionally, the *Times* in 1980 repeatedly analyzed class divisions within

45. Steven V. Roberts, "Humphrey is Gaining in Queens," October 31, 1968.

46. Douglas Kneelands, "Wallace Populism Scored by His Wisconsin Rivals," March 17, 1972; John Herbers, "Minority Planks Urged in Boston," May 31, 1972.

47. Walter Rugaber, "Labor Studies Results of Effort for Humphrey," April 27, 1972; Jack Rosenthal, "Alienated Voter Theory Doubted," April 28, 1972; Walter Rugaber, "Survey Ties Issues, Not Shooting, to Wallace Victory," May 17, 1972.

48. This is a widely recognized association; see Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 236; and Windham, "Women Hold the Keys."

49. Black working class: Alan Oser, "Improvements for Apartments in Flatbush," January 11, 1980; Helen Epstein, "Abortion: An Issue That Won't Go Away," March 30, 1980; Eleanor Blau, "There's Folklore in Them Thar Streets," April 18, 1980; Alan Oser, "Owner, 86, Finds 1740 House Trying," August 3, 1980; "New Haven Pledges 'Not to Rest' Until Black Girl's Killer is Caught," August 7, 1980; David Whitman,

the black community.<sup>50</sup> One journalist actually claimed that while black America had been largely classless before (!), the victory of civil rights had created class divisions among African Americans.<sup>51</sup> The work of William Julius Wilson was partly responsible for this “discovery” of class in the black community, and, of course, the Left had continuously represented the working class as multiracial, while progressive politicians in the 1970s argued the same (see below). Whatever the explanation, the working class circulating in the *New York Times* around 1980 was far from exclusively white.<sup>52</sup>

Four years later, however, the association between whiteness and the working class was powerfully established. While in 1980, eighteen articles referred explicitly to a black or multiracial “working class” and twenty-two referred either to a “white working class” or a “working class” of ethnics understood to be white, that near-equality disappeared in 1984, when only eight articles referred explicitly to a black or multiracial “working class” and twenty-nine articles to an explicitly “white working class” or “working-class” white ethnics.<sup>53</sup> These patterns of association—between the working class and racism, between the working class and whiteness—drawn between the mid-1960s and mid-1980s—significantly shaped public discourse in 2016–17.

### The Beleaguered Working Class and Its Oppressors

Also shaping public discourse in 2016–17 was the representation of the working class as beleaguered, downtrodden, and done in (but not done in by employers), a pattern also firmly established in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1972, a variation on the theme of scapegoating the working class for racism made its debut in the *Times* and carried with it this important new dimension. Some writers, while continuing to locate resistance to racial integration in the working class, began to argue that this resistance emerged not simply from the racial prejudice of individual workers but from their legitimate economic fears.<sup>54</sup> Anthony Lewis, for example, in an op-ed on the violent opposition to busing in South Boston, quoted a colleague’s claim that in South Boston

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“Behind the Miami Riot,” June 8, 1980; John Herbers, “Progress for Blacks Is Still Shadow and Substance,” September 7, 1980; Carl Gershman, “A Matter of Class,” October 5, 1980; Molly Ivins, “The Senate Candidates’ Neighbors Speak Out,” October 29, 1980; Edward Schumacher and Jill Snolowe, “A Couple of Success Stories in Minority Sections,” January 6, 1980. Multiracial working class: William Serrin, “A Transit Worker and ‘Tough Times,’” April 9, 1980; Barbara Grizzuti Harrison, “Hers,” May 22, 1980.

50. David Whitman, “Behind the Miami Riot,” June 8, 1980.

51. Sheila Rule, “Black Middle Class Called Vulnerable,” March 30, 1980.

52. John Herbers, “Cause of Middle Class Exodus From Cities Is Debated as Racial,” August 3, 1980; Carl Gershman, “A Matter of Class,” October 5, 1980.

53. See, for example, Glenn Collins, “Status Doesn’t Determine Family Strength,” January 16, 1984; Steven Weisman, “The White House Ponders New Hampshire’s Message,” March 4, 1984; Kevin Phillips, “A G.O.P. Majority?” April 19, 1984; William Schmidt, “Prosecutors Set Sights on the Klan,” June 3, 1984; Richard McGahey, “Industrial Policy’s Problem,” July 6, 1984.

54. Robert Reinhold, “2 Boston Races Point Up School Dilemma,” July 8, 1974.

as elsewhere the "ultimate reality is the reality of class . . . . Social and economic vulnerability versus social and economic power, that's where the real issue is." Although Lewis insisted that racism was also rampant in South Boston, he pictured the Boston metropolitan area as an arena where poor and less powerful working people, black and white, were confined and pitted against each other in the battle for meager resources, while affluent suburbanites looked on from beyond, protected by a city boundary that set them outside such gritty competitions. Those most condemned by this vision were affluent spectators to working-class suffering.<sup>55</sup>

Suffering and vulnerability in such analyses seem to have been key to the willingness of writers to imagine their subjects as "working class." Indeed, beyond racial politics and the emergence of the Left, another crucial context for the increasing use of the term *working class* was the perceived misery and weakness of its members. In the early 1970s, stagflation—an unexpected combination of inflation and unemployment—was baffling American economists and eroding the security of a wide range of workers. Many writers invoked the term *working class* to identify those most beleaguered by this unexpected combination of economic forces.<sup>56</sup> In 1974, these commentators explained that white workers were increasingly returning to the Democratic party (after voting for Nixon in 1972) because of inflation and unemployment, which were wrecking their economic prospects. One argued, for instance, that the "Republican attraction for white, ethnic, working-class voters . . . is waning" due to the "very fragile unpredictability of the economy and its negative effects on those whose bread is won each day by the labor of their hands."<sup>57</sup>

This trend continued into the 1980s, when what one writer called the "two headed monster of energy scarcity and economic stagflation" was, according to one article after another, devastating the "working class."<sup>58</sup> Reporter Howell Raines claimed in 1980 that "working class voters" were "being eaten alive" by inflation and unemployment.<sup>59</sup> Likewise, Steven Roberts reported that Republican presidential nominee Ronald Reagan had on his side "working class economic distress."<sup>60</sup>

In analyses of the misery caused by a deteriorating economy, the vulnerability of the working class was often underscored by pairing it with "the poor." These twinings began in the 1970s and suggested that the interests of the working class and the poor were more nearly identical than those of the working and middle classes, a repre-

55. Anthony Lewis, "Moral Bankruptcy," December 16, 1974.

56. Nancy Seifer, "Big Losers in the Hot-Stove League," April 10, 1974.

57. James Wooten, "G.O.P. Seen Losing Ethnic Voters," October 21, 1974. See also Richard Reeves, "Carey vs. Wilson," October 27, 1974.

58. Steven Weisman, "What Is a Conservative?" August 31, 1980 (quote). See also Steven Roberts, "Blue-Collar Democrats Slipping to Reagan," April 20, 1980; William Severini Kowinski, "The Squeeze on the Middle Class," July 13, 1980; Bernard Weintraub, "Politics Unpalatable in Workers' Diner," September 11, 1980; Hedrick Smith, "Democrats in Jersey Fear Loss of Blue-Collar Vote," September 26, 1980; E. J. Dionne, Jr., "Economy Is Big Issue," October 22, 1980.

59. Howell Raines, "Reagan Appeal Seen as Mixed in 3 Key States," May 18, 1980.

60. Steven Roberts, "The Nation," May 18, 1980.

sentation straining the connection drawn in the 1950s and 1960s between the working and middle classes.<sup>61</sup> In the 1970s, one writer insisted, for example, that the affluent did not understand “the thin line that divides much of the working and lower-middle class from the poor.”<sup>62</sup> In 1980, Iver Peterson reported that the Republicans were trying to broaden their appeal “to include more members of the working class and the poor in northern industrial cities.”<sup>63</sup> A Democratic precinct worker in Hell’s Kitchen said on the opening day of the Democratic National Convention, “We’ve still got working class and poor in this neighborhood, but they don’t share in the party and patronage” the way they did under Tammany Hall.<sup>64</sup> By 1984, the working class was as often explicitly paired with the poor as with the middle class.<sup>65</sup>

At the same time, the oppressors of the working class—those doing them in, breaking them down—were rarely identified as automating employers, union-busting corporate interests, or capitalists fleeing regulation, unions, and taxes by leaving the United States.<sup>66</sup> In articles using the phrase *working class*, the *Times* instead chalked

61. For evidence that “the poor” were sometimes understood to be black or Latino, see “Maurice Carroll, ‘City Hall Listens to Whites but the Results Seem Mixed,’” October 7, 1974.

62. Fred Hechinger, “Class War over Tuition,” February 5, 1974.

63. Iver Peterson, “Glimpse of ‘Real Detroit’ Given to 13 Republicans,” July 13, 1980. See also Jill Smolowe, “Macchiavola’s Budgets Get Support,” January 25, 1980; Helen Epstein, “Abortion: An Issue That Won’t Go Away,” March 30, 1980; and William Severini Kowinski, “The Squeeze on the Middle Class,” July 13, 1980.

64. Francis Clines, “Party Is Returning to a Town Alive with Democratic Memories,” August 11, 1980.

65. Poor and working classes: Philip Taft, Jr., “New Look for Camden,” January 1, 1984; Fred Hechinger, “Teachers Tell of Powerlessness and Frustration,” February 14, 1984; Bertell Oلمان, “Small Business Myths,” February 19, 1984; William Schmidt, “Prosecutors Set Sight on the Klan,” June 3, 1984; George Sternlieb, “Surprising Costs of the Co-op Boom, and Who Might Pay,” June 3, 1984; Sara Rimer, “The Closing of Power Memorial is Mourned,” June 8, 1984; Leonard Silk, “Economic Scene: Class-Oriented Tax Programs,” August 15, 1984; Anthony DePalma, “Can City’s Plan Rebuild the Lower East Side?” October 14, 1984; Fox Butterfield, “Experts Disagree on Children’s Worries about Nuclear War,” October 16, 1984. Middle and working classes: Bruce Bartlett, “But Business Pays More Than Its Share,” January 29, 1984; Edward Gargan, “Will a Subway Dig Buffalo Out?” June 10, 1984; “Bush Puts Foes in Left and Liberal Spectrum,” July 24, 1984; Sydney Schanberg, “Let Them Eat Boutiques,” August 7, 1984; Edward Gargan, “Buffalo Trolley Line Clangs to a Start,” October 10, 1984; “Arms Freeze Advocates Count on 1986 Races,” November 18, 1984. Poor, working class, and middle class together: John Kenneth Galbraith, “The Heartless Society: As America Becomes More Affluent, We Increasingly Ignore or Rationalize the Plight of the Poor,” September 2, 1984; Joseph Murphy, “Saving Pell Grants for Students,” October 6, 1984.

66. For economic context, see Stein, *Pivotal Decade*; Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive*; and Windham, *Knocking on Labor’s Door*.

67. James Wooten, “G.O.P. Seen Losing Ethnic Votes,” October 21, 1974. Leonard Silk, “Few Mourn Controls,” May 1, 1974; Orde Coombs, “Three Faces of Harlem,” November 3, 1974. Robert Reinhold, “2 Boston Areas Point Up School Dilemma,” July 8, 1974; Seifer, “Big Losers.” One exception is Rima Apple, “As Goes Skokie,” November 3, 1974: One politician blames high oil prices on oil companies. Steve Roberts, “The Nation,” May 18, 1980; William Severini Kowinski, July 13, 1980; Robert Hanley, “A New Way of Life for Ford Workers,” April 20, 1980; Hedrick Smith, “Democrats in Jersey Fear Loss of Blue-Collar Vote,” September 26, 1980; Douglas Kneeland, “Reagan Promises Auto Workers To Seek Cut in Japan’s Exports,” September 3, 1980.

up inflation and unemployment to uncaused, abstract economic trends or, in the 1980s, blamed the Japanese or an overweening federal government.<sup>67</sup>

In fact, whenever property was explicitly identified as a contentious issue for the "working class," the property at issue was not the means of production; it was real estate. The site of conflict was not the workplace but the neighborhood. When Anthony Lewis had in 1974 described the economic position of the biracial "working class" in South Boston, the cause of their shared suffering was not an employer, corporate America, or a class of capitalists. The enemy of the working class was a group of suburbanites, whose power was rooted not in their ownership of the means of production but in their relation to real estate, specifically in the means to purchase homes outside the city limits. Another analyst referred in 1974 to the "the strident class conflict that seems increasingly to inhere in the landlord-tenant relationship," again invoking real estate as the property that defined economic classes.<sup>68</sup> When any sort of capitalist was identified as an enemy of the working class in the 1970s and 1980s, that capitalist was much more likely to be a real estate developer than an employer.<sup>69</sup>

If anything, this trend intensified in the 1980s, when gentrifiers were often pictured as the oppressors of those identified as "working class." In fact, gentrification was one of the most important contexts for use of the term *working class* in the 1980s. "Working-class" people were in that decade reported to be driven out of their neighborhoods by "upper-middle class newcomers" often called yuppies (young urban professionals).<sup>70</sup> Such articles focused on the displacement of working-class Americans in Camden, Weehawkin, and Hoboken, New Jersey; Stamford, Connecticut; and Park Slope and Greenpoint in Brooklyn.<sup>71</sup> In South Boston, lobstermen were reported to be vexed by an influx of yuppies, who complained that their beautiful waterfront views were sullied by working boats out on the waves.<sup>72</sup> Similarly, the gen-

68. "Misplaced Criticism Threatens Condominiums," July 21, 1974.

69. See, for example, Jon Nordheimer, "A Tiny Florida County Undertakes the Struggle against Too Much Growth," February 17, 1974.

70. Richard Shepard, "The City's Ethnic Enclaves," August 8, 1980; Robert Tomasson, "Growth of Stamford Slows School Integration," December 14, 1980; "Change Comes as a Loss to Yorkville Old Timers," December 21, 1980. Philip Taft Jr., "New Look for Camden: Homesteading in Camden," January 1, 1984; Thomas Lueck, "Proposed 40-Story Office Towers Would Give Weehawken Its Own Skyline," April 17, 1984; Maureen Dowd, "Park Slope: New Faces, New Shops," May 7, 1984; John J. O'Connor, "TV Weekend," June 22, 1984; Anthony DePalma, "Promise and Fear of Hoboken's Future," December 16, 1984; Clifford Pearson, "If You're Thinking of Living In: Stamford," July 1, 1984; Kirk Johnson, "Greenpoint, At Last, Gets New Development," July 13, 1984.

71. Philip Taft, Jr., "New Look for Camden: Homesteading in Camden," January 1, 1984. Thomas Lueck, "Proposed 40-Story Office Towers Would Give Weehawken Its Own Skyline," April 17, 1984. Maureen Dowd, "Park Slope: New Faces, New Shops," May 7, 1984. John J. O'Connor, "TV Weekend," June 22, 1984. Anthony DePalma, "Promise and Fear of Hoboken's Future," December 16, 1984. Clifford Pearson, "If You're Thinking of Living In: Stamford," July 1, 1984. Kirk Johnson, "Greenpoint, At Last, Gets New Development," July 13, 1984.

72. Fox Butterfield, "About Boston," June 4, 1984.

73. Martin Gottlieb, "Garment Center Future at Stake in the Debate on Times Square Plan," June 28, 1984.

trification of Manhattan, according to one reporter, threatened “the jobs of the city’s own third world—its mostly minority, working-class community.”<sup>73</sup> In a discussion of widespread conversions of rental properties in Manhattan to condominiums or co-ops, those most hurt were identified as “the poor, working class, and the young.”<sup>74</sup> In a report on the West Village, the *Times* claimed, “Working-class people are being driven out of their apartments by the new rents and co-op prices.”<sup>75</sup> Even the Bowery, which according to one article, had “always been a working-class community,” was now threatened by gentrification.<sup>76</sup>

Underscoring the absence of employers, capitalists, or corporate interests in stories that analyzed conflict in connection with a “working class,” the *Times* continued largely to avoid the term in the context of strikes. Wildcat strikes erupted throughout 1972, but the phrase *working class* was not invoked in reports on those conflicts. The pattern continued in 1974, a year featuring hundreds of strikes. Although the press avidly reported these walkouts, none of their reports used the term *working class*.<sup>77</sup> In 1980, in evidence of how much more readily the press recognized a “working class” in the United States, four articles did use the phrase in the context of strikes. Three of the four articles focused on a transit strike in New York City; the other, on a strike of musicians against New York’s Metropolitan Opera. One of the articles used “working class” to refer to riders rather than striking workers on the transit system.<sup>78</sup> And it is telling that these conflicts were strictly local and that one of the two employers involved was not a private corporation but a local government. The capitalist class remained off the hook.

The working class of the *New York Times* in the 1970s and 1980s was in one sense Walter Reuther’s working class: it was a group invested in capitalism rather than at odds with it. What was different was that it was pitiful rather than powerful. This combination—procapitalist and weak—made for a working class admissible to US political culture.

### The Mainstreaming of *Working Class*

The convergence of these trends—the weakening of anticommunism with its concomitant opening to the Left; the desire to minimize the scope of American racism; and the economic devastation of workers—allowed for a remarkable degree

74. George Sternalleb, “Surprising Costs of the Co-op Boom, and Who Might Pay,” June 3, 1984.

75. Sydney Schanberg, “Let Them Eat Boutiques,” August 7, 1984. See also Anthony DePalma, “Can City’s Plan Rebuild the Lower East Side?” October 14, 1984.

76. Esther Fein, “A Symbol of Despair, and Signs of Changes,” October 18, 1984.

77. Edward Cowan, “Inflation-Weary Unions Pursue Cost-of-Living Clauses,” July 18, 1974; Marjorie Hunter, “As Strikes End: Calm and Garbage,” July 17, 1974; Richard Witkin, “5,500 Furloughed in Airline Strike,” July 17, 1974.

78. William Serrin, “A Transit Worker and ‘Tough Times,’” April 9, 1980; Cornelius Hendricks, “Labor Should Reassess Its Right to Strike,” April 14, 1980. In “The Strike’s Final Round Begins,” May 7, 1980, riders were referred to as “poor and working class” who were more hurt by the transit strike than the “more affluent.” “News Summary,” October 15, 1980.

of mainstreaming of *working class* in the 1970s and 1980s. In those decades, as the use of *working class* skyrocketed, a much broader range of political operatives were reported to use the term than in earlier periods, and journalists themselves employed the phrase more freely.

Perhaps most surprising, a range of politicians beyond the avowed Left began to use the term publicly, which, however limited this usage, represented a clear break with the past. From 1932 through 1964, the *New York Times* never attributed the phrase *working class* to presidential candidates in the Democratic or Republican parties. Even as President Franklin Roosevelt condemned "economic royalists" and drew a massive working-class constituency into the Democratic party, he was not reported in the *Times* ever to use the term *working class*. This evidence reveals more than reluctance of the *Times* to report use of the phrase by mainstream politicians: FDR actually did avoid the term. Once elected, in none of his public messages, statements, speeches, press conferences, or fireside chats did FDR utter the phrase *working class*.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, a digitized archive of presidential public papers shows that the term was not used in the public pronouncements of any sitting US president from FDR through Nixon. Hoover used the term in 1932, and it did not appear again in a public presidential statement until 1975, after which time, it was used, however sparingly, by every US president except George H. W. Bush (1989–93) and his son, George W. Bush (2001–9).<sup>80</sup>

Data from print media thus seem to represent trends in actual usage of the term *working class* by America's political actors rather than a practice of the newspapers alone. What we are seeing in the *New York Times* would seem to be trends in US political culture more broadly, and they included the increasing acknowledgment of a working class by politicians outside the Left. This recognition was mostly limited to the Democratic party and remained fairly rare, but it represented a noticeable change.

According to the *Times*, while no presidential candidate from either of the two major political parties uttered the phrase *working class* from 1932 through 1964, one finally did use it in 1968. Robert Kennedy, as he ran in the 1968 Democratic primaries, employed the phrase to refer to many of his own constituents.<sup>81</sup> After that, in the 1972 election, the floodgates opened, at least among Democratic candidates. The Democratic party's nominee for president, Senator George McGovern, was reported

79. Peters and Woolley, *American Presidency Project*.

80. Gerald R. Ford, "Remarks at a Republican Party Fundraising Reception in Boston," November 7, 1975; in Peters and Woolley, *American Presidency Project*, [www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=5366](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=5366). The list of statements in which the term *working class* appears includes a speech by Nixon, but Nixon did not use the term; a Chinese official at the same function did. In addition, a reporter used the term in questioning Ford in September 1975, but Ford himself did not use the term. Likewise, two public appearances by George H. W. Bush included the term, but it was not uttered by the president himself.

81. "Kennedy's Camp Voices Optimism," May 7, 1968; John Herbers, "Vote for Change Seen by Kennedy," May 8, 1968.

82. "Excerpts from Senator McGovern's Address Explaining His Economic Program," August 30, 1972.

to rely on the term in explaining his economic policy.<sup>82</sup> New York's Mayor John Lindsay, who made a brief run at the Democratic presidential nomination in 1972, was quoted as saying that the majority of students at New York's City University were "sons and daughters of white working-class families," and he intended to keep the university free.<sup>83</sup> Fred Harris, a populist senator from Oklahoma who also ran for president in 1972, argued that the reason that McGovern and Wallace were doing well in the Democratic primaries was because "the real conflict in our society is not between welfare mothers and auto workers; it is between poor working people and rich people." The "working class," Harris claimed, which constituted 20 percent of the population, earned only 13 percent of the national income. The concentration of wealth and power was the number-one problem in the United States, according to Harris, who held out hope that in 1972 voters would choose to redistribute both.<sup>84</sup>

Beyond quoting their sources, journalists also employed *working class* in their own voices more often. Especially in articles on the Democratic primaries that did not also refer to Wallace, reporters often used the term to refer to workers won to candidates McGovern, Edmund Muskie, or Humphrey.<sup>85</sup> Editorialists Jack Newfield and Jeff Greenfield made a pitch for a populist coalition that would include "black and brown Americans, working-class whites and the best of reformers."<sup>86</sup>

The mainstreaming of *working class* continued into the 1980s, when many journalists used the phrase more than once in their articles and no one argued that the United States had no economic classes.<sup>87</sup> In both 1980 and 1984, the working class was represented as key to presidential elections. While in 1980 the phrase was not attributed to presidential nominees from the major parties, it was attributed to their aides.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, one journalist claimed that rarely in US politics had "so much atten-

83. Emmanuel Perlmutter, "Mayor Is Seeking Catholic Backing," January 27, 1972.

84. Fred Harris, "The Real Populism Fights Unequal Wealth," May 25, 1972.

85. Rima Apple, "Polish-Americans Still Favor Muskie," January 23, 1972; "After New Hampshire," March 9, 1972; Douglas Kneeland, "Hartke Withdraws from Race and Backs Humphrey," March 2, 1972; R. W. Apple Jr., "A Three-Man Race," April 6, 1972; Tom Wicker, "The Two Georges," April 6, 1972; "McGovern Moves Up," April 27, 1972; R. W. Apple Jr., "Apparent Surge by McGovern May Bring Upset Ohio Victory," May 2, 1972; R. W. Apple Jr., "Gain for McGovern and Wallace," May 5, 1972; Steven Roberts, "Humphrey Strength With Vote Blocs Fades," June 4, 1972; Frank Lynn, "President's Margin Seen as a Million in the State," November 8, 1972.

86. Jack Newfield and Jeff Greenfield, "Moving toward a New Populism," April 12, 1972.

87. Multiple references in one article/editorial: E. J. Dionne Jr., "Previewing a Carter-Reagan Faceoff," March 23, 1980; William Serrin, "A Transit Worker and 'Tough Times,'" April 9, 1980; Steven Roberts, "Blue-Collar Democrats Slipping to Reagan," April 20, 1980; Howell Raines, "Reagan Appeal Seen as Mixed in 3 Key States," May 18, 1980; Barbara Grizzuti Harrison, "Hers," May 22, 1980; David Whitman, "Behind the Miami Riot," June 8, 1980; Cokie and Steven Roberts, "What's Got Into the Voters This Year?" June 15, 1980; Joseph Sullivan, "Reagan Gains in a Key Democratic County in Jersey," October 6, 1980; Steven Weisman, "Carter Presses Issue of 'War and Peace,'" October 7, 1980; Molly Ivins, "Life in Denver: The Houstonization of a Cowtown in the Rockies," October 8, 1980.

88. Bernard Weintraub, "Mrs. Reagan, in Campaign Ad, Assails Statements by Carter on Her Husband," October 26, 1980.

89. Joseph Sullivan, "The Man of the Hour Wears a Blue Collar," October 12, 1980.

tion been paid by the campaign strategists to what they believe are the likes and dislikes, the fears and hopes of the working class."<sup>89</sup> Candidate Ronald Reagan, moreover, promised—in the words of a journalist—to “working-class communities in New Jersey” that he would not “tamper with existing labor laws, or seek right-to-work legislation.”<sup>90</sup> In 1984, one of Reagan’s aides in New York State, who identified himself as from a “working-class” family, claimed that voters from that class would be crucial to Reagan’s reelection.<sup>91</sup> While Reagan’s Secretary of Labor in 1984 was confident that “many working-class people would vote” for the incumbent president irrespective of the Democratic nominee, the president’s staff expressed anxieties about Walter Mondale’s possible nomination because of his appeal to “working-class ethnic groups.”<sup>92</sup> To increase his chances of reelection, Reagan campaigned hard in what reporters identified as “working-class neighborhoods.”<sup>93</sup> Once Mondale received the Democratic presidential nomination, he and his running mate, Congresswoman Geraldine Ferraro, were often represented as going after “working-class” voters.<sup>94</sup> And, in one attempt to woo workers to his candidacy, Mondale concluded, “Working-class Americans are worse off [than before Reagan was president] and the middle class is standing on a trap door.”<sup>95</sup>

Many candidates in the 1984 elections emphasized their own working-class roots. Gary Hart, a Democratic contender for the presidency, after losses in the New York primary and Wisconsin caucuses, began to emphasize his working-class background.<sup>96</sup> In the primary election for a Congressional seat in central New Jersey, both candidates vied to be seen as working class.<sup>97</sup> “Democrats were cheered” in their convention, according to one reporter, “by Mrs. Ferraro’s skillful references to her roots in the working class as the daughter of an immigrant who sacrificed to win her a place on the ladder of opportunity.”<sup>98</sup>

90. “Major News,” October 12, 1980.

91. Jane Perlez, “Reagan’s Man on Blue-Collar Voters,” January 20, 1984. See also Steven Weisman, “Light Work-Outs for the Reagan Campaign,” June 24, 1984.

92. William Serrin, “Donovan Appears at Labor Parley in Florida to Defend President,” February 23, 1984. See also Jeffrey Schmaltz, “5th District Race Tests Strength of Democrats,” October 21, 1984; Steven Weisman, “The White House Ponders New Hampshire’s Message,” March 4, 1984; Kevin Phillips, “A G.O.P. Majority?” April 19, 1984; and Steven Weisman, “Presidential Aide Scoffs at Mondale Tax Pledge,” July 21, 1984.

93. Steven Weisman, “Deficit Politics: Mondale Bets on Tax Plan, But Odds Still Favor Reagan,” September 16, 1984.

94. Dudley Clendinene, “New Mondale Ads Impress a Skeptic,” September 12, 1984; Jane Perlez, “For Ferraro, Tough Week Isn’t All Bad,” September 16, 1984; Fay S. Joyce, “Mondale’s Attacks Take on a Personal Tone,” September 19, 1984; Maureen Dowd, “Ferraro Sharpens Criticism of Reagan’s Foreign Policy,” September 30, 1984.

95. Hedrick Smith, “Reagan-Mondale Clashes May Foreshadow the First Debate,” October 7, 1984.

96. Gerald Boyd, “Hart Staying Calm amid Turbulence as Pennsylvania Test Approaches,” April 9, 1984; Frank Lynn, “Gary Hart Offers Labor Assurances,” April 10, 1984.

97. James Feron, “2 Democrats With Much in Common Vie in Jersey,” May 31, 1984.

98. Howell Raines, “Ferraro Factors: Mondale’s Big Gamble Involves More than Gender,” July 15, 1984.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the term *working class* was to a remarkable degree mainstreamed. Journalists used the term freely to identify segments of the US electorate as did political operatives from the two mainstream political parties. Candidates for local and national offices, especially from the Democratic party, also used the term. By the 1980s, *working class* had achieved a considerable foothold in US political culture.

## Conclusion

This history explains the ubiquity of the term *working class* in US print media during and since the 2016 election. First, the weakening of anticommunism in the United States—no doubt further diminished since 1991 by the disintegration of the Soviet Union—freed the term from association with a global enemy of the United States. The political detoxification of the term allowed journalists and pundits to use it with less fear, and, in fact, the erosion of anticommunism was so advanced by 2016 that a self-described democratic socialist ran for president in the Democratic primaries. Bernie Sanders's presidential campaign injected *working class* into mainstream political conversations just as leftists had since the 1960s. The difference in 2016 was, of course, that Sanders was not operating at the margins of mainstream politics but directly in the center, giving the term greater prominence than ever.<sup>99</sup>

Second, the association of *working class* with racism, first established in the 1960s, provided an easy way to explain the ascendance of Donald Trump. Observers were quick to ascribe to the working class the white nationalist sentiments that animated rallies for Trump because that association had been cemented in the 1960s and widely circulating since. After the election, more careful analyses demonstrated that white Americans of every class voted for Trump and that the incomes of his supporters were overwhelmingly in the middle- to upper-income range.<sup>100</sup> But the association was so firmly established that it remained a powerful current in the news.<sup>101</sup>

Finally, the well-established pattern of using the term *working class* when the group was perceived as prostrate rather than powerful threw off any constraint that reporters might have had in 2016 about acknowledging that the United States was deeply divided by class. The unrelenting deterioration of workers' economic position by deunionization, capital flight, and automation made it easy in the 2016 election season to represent workers as pitiful and unthreatening. In that situation, US print media has, since the 1970s, been more than willing to acknowledge the country's working class.

The current recognition of an American working class thus rests on some trends potentially valuable to workers' well-being and some that are deeply detri-

99. "Full Transcript: Democratic Presidential Debate," *New York Times*, October 14, 2015, [www.nytimes.com/2015/10/14/us/politics/democratic-debate-transcript.html?ref=liveblog&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/14/us/politics/democratic-debate-transcript.html?ref=liveblog&_r=0).

100. Carnes and Lupu, "It's Time to Bust the Myth."

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mental. Most damaging is the scapegoating of the working class for racism. This vilification, suggesting that the working class is uniquely responsible for racial hierarchies or racial violence, is detrimental not only to the well-being of workers but also to the fight against racism. It suggests that the working class is itself exclusively white and stigmatizes white workers as vicious bigots; it tends to alienate wage-earners from those who might otherwise serve as political allies; and it guarantees that white supremacy will not be brought down because it distracts attention from institutional racism and obscures the ways that expectations of racial privilege permeate not just the white working class but all classes of white people in United States.

Seeing clearly the historical trends that shaped the language of the 2016 election cycle may allow those interested in justice for working people and the eradication of racism to reject the damaging trends and build on the promising ones. ■

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