

The Mystery of White Rural Rage

Feb. 26, 2024



By [Paul Krugman](#)

Will technological progress lead to mass unemployment? People have been asking that question for [two centuries](#), and the actual answer has always ended up being no. Technology eliminates some jobs, but it has always generated enough new jobs to offset these losses, and there's every reason to believe that it will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

But progress isn't painless. Business types and some economists may talk glowingly about the virtues of [creative destruction](#), but the process can be devastating economically and socially for those who find themselves on the destruction side of the equation. This is especially true when technological change undermines not just individual workers but whole communities.

This isn't a hypothetical proposition. It's a big part of what has happened to rural America.

This process and its effects are laid out in devastating, terrifying and baffling detail in "[White Rural Rage: The Threat to American Democracy](#)," a new book by Tom Schaller and Paul Waldman. I say "devastating" because the hardship of rural Americans is real, "terrifying" because the political backlash to this hardship poses a clear and present danger to our democracy and "baffling" because at some level I still don't get the politics.

Technology is the main driver of rural decline, Schaller and Waldman argue. Indeed, American farms produce [more than five times](#) as much as they did 75 years ago, but the agricultural work force declined by about two-thirds over the same period, thanks to machinery, improved seeds, fertilizers and pesticides. Coal production has been [falling](#) recently, but thanks partly to technologies like mountaintop removal, coal mining as a way of life largely disappeared long ago, with the number of miners [falling](#) 80 percent even as production roughly doubled.

The decline of small-town manufacturing is a more complicated story, and [imports](#) play a role, but it's also mainly about technological change that favors metropolitan areas with large numbers of highly educated workers.

Technology, then, has made America as a whole richer, but it has reduced economic opportunities in rural areas. So why don't rural workers go where the jobs are? Some have. But some cities have become unaffordable, in part because of restrictive zoning — one thing blue states get wrong — and many workers are reluctant to leave their families and communities.

So shouldn't we aid these communities? We do. Federal programs — Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid and more — are available to all Americans but are disproportionately financed from taxes paid by affluent urban areas. As a result, there are huge de facto [transfers of money](#) from rich, urban states like New Jersey to poor, relatively rural states like West Virginia.

While these transfers somewhat mitigate the hardship facing rural America, they don't restore the sense of dignity that has been lost along with rural jobs. And maybe that loss of dignity explains both white rural rage and why that rage is so misdirected — why it's pretty clear that this November a majority of rural white Americans will again vote against Joe Biden, who as president has been trying to bring jobs to their communities, and for Donald Trump, a huckster from Queens who offers little other than validation for their resentment.

This feeling of a loss of dignity may be worsened because some rural Americans have long seen themselves as more industrious, more patriotic and maybe even morally superior to the denizens of big cities — an attitude still expressed in cultural artifacts like Jason Aldean's [hit song](#) "Try That in a Small Town."

In the crudest sense, rural and small-town America is supposed to be filled with hard-working people who adhere to traditional values, not like those degenerate urbanites on welfare, but the economic and social reality doesn't match this self-image.

Prime-working-age men outside metropolitan areas are [substantially less likely](#) than their metropolitan counterparts to be employed — not because they're lazy but because the jobs just aren't there. (The gap is much smaller for women, perhaps because the jobs supported by federal aid tend to be female-coded, such as those in health care.)

Quite a few rural states also have high rates of [homicide](#), [suicide](#) and births to [single mothers](#) — again, not because rural Americans are bad people but because social disorder is, as the sociologist William Julius Wilson argued long ago about urban problems, what happens [when work disappears](#).

Draw attention to some of these realities, and you'll be accused of being a snooty urban elitist. I'm sure responses to this column will be ... interesting.

The result — which at some level I still find hard to understand — is that many white rural voters support politicians who tell them lies they want to hear. It helps explain why the MAGA narrative casts relatively safe cities like New York as crime-ridden hellscape and rural America as the victim not of technology but of illegal immigrants, wokeness and the deep state.

At this point you're probably expecting a solution to this ugly political situation. Schaller and Waldman do offer some suggestions. But the truth is that while white rural rage is arguably the single greatest threat facing American democracy, I have no good ideas about how to fight it.

Paul Krugman has been an Opinion columnist since 2000 and is also a distinguished professor at the City University of New York Graduate Center. He won the 2008 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences for his work on international trade and economic geography. [@PaulKrugman](#)

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/26/opinion/white-rural-voters.html>

OPINION LETTERS

The Roots of Rural Rage

Readers discuss a column by Paul Krugman about the hardships faced by white rural Americans.

March 23, 2024, 7:00 a.m. ET

To the Editor:

Re "[The Mystery of White Rural Rage](#)," by Paul Krugman (column, Feb. 27):

In 2006 I rode my bicycle across the country. From San Diego to Georgia I traveled over long stretches of empty road that connected small rural communities.

What I sensed in each of these small communities was the comfort of familiarity. The people know one another. Because of this intimacy, this community family if you will, they're inclined to forgive within the family but, I think, are inclined to blame others on the "outside" for the ills that befall them.

Christian values, love of God and country, are supposed to be an inoculation against bad things. Yet almost every per capita statistic — teen pregnancy, gun deaths, infant mortality, spousal abuse, drug use, alcoholism, poverty — shows an inherent, not extrinsic, problem in rural America.

Rural residents, as Mr. Krugman points out, live on the "destruction side of the equation," but technology alone is not to blame. A distorted fear of outside forces perpetuated by a conservative political agenda and the dream of returning to the halcyon days that are never coming back is holding them captive.

Reed Caster
Warren, R.I.

To the Editor:

Here in flyover country the resentment is palpable, symbolized by billboards along I-70 that announce, “One Kansas Farmer Feeds More than 155 People + You!” Translation: If we don’t do what we do (grow your food), it doesn’t matter what you do (type on your keyboards).

Small-town and rural people are simply tired of being unseen and therefore disrespected. I doubt there’s a single salve for that resentment, but here’s one suggestion for city-dwellers: Get humble and curious; get in your car and spend a day in a rural culture. And listen.

Roger Gustafson
Stilwell, Kan.

To the Editor:

Paul Krugman has got it wrong. He says the rural pain caused by the “creative destruction” of technology is alleviated by a huge transfer of urban tax dollars to poor rural states, dollars that are “available to all Americans.” Excuse me? Medicare and Social Security won’t be available to 20-somethings for 40 years. If you have marketable skills, you make too much money to be on Medicaid.

Rural folks experience very little transfer of tax dollars. In my small town, we have no local police, and our health system is woefully underfunded. Internet is expensive or nonexistent. Our main streets are a shadow of their former selves. And worst of all, Covid drove city folks to move here and turn affordable rental properties into expensive homes and Airbnbs. Now housing is unaffordable.

Why don’t folks move to the city? We have a quality of life you can only dream of — but we cannot pay the bills.

Rage? Not a mystery! We’ve been abandoned!

Terry Lochhead
Brownfield, Maine

To the Editor:

I come from a place (though I left it long ago and am now what you’d call an “elite,” I guess) that voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump twice and almost certainly will again. The conundrum that Paul Krugman describes is at first vexing but in the end is simple.

How can people who have lost so much vote for someone who cares for their plight only to the extent that he will get their vote? The issue is rooted in emotion, not data. It's hard to generalize, but generalize we sometimes must. Many Trump voters feel ostracized by a media and political culture that at best has abandoned them and at worst mocks them. So, in the words of Mr. Trump himself, what have they got to lose?

They don't all uniformly worship him, either. What they see is someone who will do *something*, even if it's to make that other political and cultural class squirm and fret.

Mr. Krugman gets to the bottom of the issue when he mentions the loss of dignity in these places. Denied that, people will search for it elsewhere.

Paul Bone
Denton, Texas

To the Editor:

For political advantage, one of our major political parties has maintained for more than 40 years that "government is the problem." How could this campaign not generate rage on the part of those Americans increasingly in need of help?

The fear and resentment resulting from this myth provided a handy distraction from the migration of wealth from our lower and middle classes to the top, and made government action to correct the problem more difficult.

The best response is affordable higher education, child care, health insurance and job retraining for the rural work force, financed by a rollback of irresponsible tax giveaways to the rich. That can be made possible only by electoral rejection of the political force that created the problem in the first place.

Eric R. Carey
Arlington, Va.

To the Editor:

Paul Krugman wonders why rural whites "support politicians who tell them lies they want to hear."

The answer is obvious: Truth is no match for lies when one's tribal identity as a white person is felt to be under attack.

Lyndon Johnson knew this sad fact back in 1960, [telling his aide](#) Bill Moyers: “If you can convince the lowest white man he’s better than the best colored man, he won’t notice you’re picking his pocket. Hell, give him somebody to look down on, and he’ll empty his pockets for you.”

Rural whites started doing that in earnest after the ink dried on L.B.J.’s signing of the Voting Rights Act in 1965. They joined other whites in abandoning their decades-long status as linchpins of the Democrats’ New Deal coalition, flocking instead to the party that has tried to undermine Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid from their inception.

The rise of Donald Trump has borne out L.B.J.’s blunt assessment, as rural whites have been only too willing to swallow Republican lies that make them feel better as they blame convenient scapegoats for their economic woes.

Bryan L. Tucker
Boston

To the Editor:

The rage that Paul Krugman describes is not exclusively limited to whites. Many in the mainstream media tend to view every contentious issue through the lens of race.

In the rural community in which I reside, the rage is felt and expressed by our African American and Latino residents as well. They also feel that local, state and federal governments as well as the economic system have become stacked against them by the enactment and punitive enforcement of woke progressive policies.

People in our rural community are sick of political correctness, cancel culture and performative virtue signaling as they have only engendered increased divisiveness. People are legitimately angry and are yearning for a return to a more rational and moderate approach to addressing the issues that are vital to their well-being.

For the most part, folks don’t give a damn about your pronouns. What they do care about and need are improved access to quality health care, more equitable allocation of federal funds for infrastructure improvements, depoliticized educational programs, more robust support of rural economic development zones and technical work force training opportunities.

The advent of artificial intelligence and robotic manufacturing processes has added to an increased sense of insecurity, fear and anger in our rural communities.

David Wrenn
Mill Spring, N.C.

To the Editor:

Paul Krugman writes that white rural rage — stemming from job losses — is “arguably the single greatest threat facing American democracy.”

But how much of a threat, I wonder, does Mr. Krugman think the country’s metropolitan citizens will pose when they lose their cushy white-collar jobs to A.I.?

Do we imagine that the current middle and upper classes will be less angry than rural people are now? Or do we think that these classes will usher in an era of resentment and anger unlike anything we’ve ever seen?

Perhaps the elite media class will develop more empathy for unemployed, angry, white rural people in the coming years and spend less time blaming them for being a threat to democracy.

Matthew Pierce
Ruther Glen, Va.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/23/opinion/rural-rage.html>

Give Paul Krugman credit for admitting he doesn’t understand rural rage. A Nobel laureate in Economics, Mr. Krugman is a “rational” man. Trump, though clever, is not about “reason.” He targets all the ugliness out there and exploits it, acting out everyone’s sh_t for them. MAGA’s love him for giving them the chance to ride along with him. Everyone now has a newsfeed that suits them, everyone feels informed; there are no more “uneducated” and “ignorant” rubes and working stiffs out there anymore. All have an articulate source practiced in backing up their convictions. In the past many such would acquiesce to the university professional types, but now, if the “extra-educated” are given any place by them, it is only to subserviently provide the competencies and complete the tasks those with limited formal education cannot manage. In my experience, it can be as simple as, after farmer locals had blundered in tactics trying to recover suppressed mineral rights, being conscripted into writing a letter to a sly class action lawyer telling him nicely to take a hike. (When meeting in “the big city” with them, he took umbrage at rural hicks playing legalese, and bullied them back into submission.) But when it came to actually admitting their mistake and allowing a change in tactics, that was going too far in the surrender of their power. The advantage they had gained (as “self-made real men of the world”), after either being judged inadequate by an education system or in finding it incompatible or unaffordable, was nonnegotiable. TJB