

What if We're the Bad Guys Here?

Aug. 2, 2023



Evan Vucci/Associated Press

 Give this article    247



By David Brooks
Opinion Columnist

Donald Trump seems to get indicted on a weekly basis. Yet he is [utterly dominating](#) his Republican rivals in the polls, and he is [tied](#) with Joe Biden in the general election surveys. Trump's poll numbers are stronger against Biden now than at any time in 2020.

What's going on here? Why is this guy still politically viable, after all he's done?

We anti-Trumpers often tell a story to explain that. It was encapsulated in a [quote](#) the University of North Carolina political scientist Marc Hetherington

gave to my colleague Thomas B. Edsall recently: “Republicans see a world changing around them uncomfortably fast, and they want it to slow down, maybe even take a step backward. But if you are a person of color, a woman who values gender equality or an L.G.B.T. person, would you want to go back to 1963? I doubt it.”

In this story we anti-Trumpers are the good guys, the forces of progress and enlightenment. The Trumpers are reactionary bigots and authoritarians. Many Republicans support Trump no matter what, according to this story, because at the end of the day he’s still the bigot in chief, the embodiment of their resentments, and that’s what matters to them most.

I partly agree with this story; but it’s also a monument to elite self-satisfaction.

So let me try another story on you. I ask you to try on a vantage point in which we anti-Trumpers are not the eternal good guys. In fact, we’re the bad guys.

This story begins in the 1960s, when high school grads had to go off to fight in Vietnam, but the children of the educated class got college deferments. It continues in the 1970s, when the authorities imposed busing on working-class areas in Boston, but not on the upscale communities [like Wellesley](#) where they themselves lived.

The ideal that “we’re all in this together” was replaced with the reality that the educated class lives in a world up here, and everybody else is forced into a world down there. Members of our class are always publicly speaking out for the marginalized, but somehow we always end up building systems that serve ourselves.

The most important of those systems is the modern meritocracy. We built an entire social order that sorts and excludes people on the basis of the quality that we possess most: academic achievement. Highly educated parents go to elite schools, marry each other, work at high-paying professional jobs and pour enormous resources into our children, who get into the same elite schools, marry each other and pass their exclusive class privileges down from generation to generation.

Daniel Markovits summarized years of research in his book “The Meritocracy Trap”: “Today, middle-class children lose out to the rich children at school, and middle-class adults lose out to elite graduates at work. Meritocracy blocks the middle class from opportunity. Then it blames those who lose a competition for

income and status that, even when everyone plays by the rules, only the rich can win.”

The meritocracy isn’t only a system of exclusion; it’s an ethos. During his presidency Barack Obama used the word “smart” in the context of his policies over 900 times. The implication was that anybody who disagreed with his policies (and perhaps didn’t go to Harvard Law) must be stupid.

Over the last decades we’ve taken over whole professions and locked everybody else out. When I began my journalism career in Chicago in the 1980s, there were still some old crusty working-class guys around the newsroom. Now we’re not only a college-dominated profession, we’re an elite-college-dominated profession. Only 0.8 percent of all college students graduate from the super elite 12 schools (the Ivy League colleges, plus Stanford, M.I.T., Duke and the University of Chicago). A 2018 [study](#) found that more than 50 percent of the staff writers at the beloved New York Times and The Wall Street Journal attended one of the 29 most elite universities in the nation.

Writing in [Compact magazine](#), Michael Lind observes that the upper-middle-class job market looks like a candelabrum: “Those who manage to squeeze through the stem of a few prestigious colleges and universities in their youth can then branch out to fill leadership positions in almost every vocation.”

Or, as Markovits puts it, “Elite graduates monopolize the best jobs and at the same time invent new technologies that privilege superskilled workers, making the best jobs better and all other jobs worse.”

Members of our class also segregate ourselves into a few booming metro areas: San Francisco, D.C., Austin and so on. In 2020, Biden won only 500 or so counties, but together they are responsible for [71 percent of the American economy](#). Trump won over 2,500 counties, responsible for only 29 percent. Once we find our cliques, we don’t get out much. In the book “Social Class in the 21st Century,” sociologist Mike Savage and his co-researchers found that the members of the highly educated class tend to be the most insular, measured by how often we have contact with those who have jobs unlike our own.



Credit...Mark Peterson/Redux, for The New York Times

Armed with all kinds of economic, cultural and political power, we support policies that help ourselves. Free trade makes the products we buy cheaper, and our jobs are unlikely to be moved to China. Open immigration makes our service staff cheaper, but new, less-educated immigrants aren't likely to put downward pressure on our wages.

Like all elites, we use language and mores as tools to recognize one another and exclude others. Using words like problematic, cisgender, Latinx and intersectional is a sure sign that you've got cultural capital coming out of your ears. Meanwhile, members of the less-educated classes have to walk on eggshells, because they never know when we've changed the usage rules, so that something that was sayable five years ago now gets you fired.

We also change the moral norms in ways that suit ourselves, never mind the cost to others. For example, there used to be a norm that discouraged people from having children outside of marriage, but that got washed away during our period of cultural dominance, as we eroded norms that seemed judgmental or that might inhibit individual freedom.

After this social norm was eroded, a funny thing happened. Members of our class still overwhelmingly married and then had children within wedlock. People without our resources, unsupported by social norms, were less able to do that. As Adrian Wooldridge points out in his magisterial 2021 book, "The

Aristocracy of Talent,” “Sixty percent of births to women with only a high school certificate occur out of wedlock, compared with only 10 percent to women with a university degree.” That matters, Wooldridge continues, because “The rate of single parenting is the most significant predictor of social immobility in the country.”

Does this mean that I think the people in my class are vicious and evil? No, most of us are earnest, kind and public spirited. But we take for granted and benefit from systems that have become oppressive. Elite institutions have become so politically progressive in part because the people in them want to feel good about themselves as they take part in systems that exclude and reject.

It’s easy to understand why people in less-educated classes would conclude that they are under economic, political, cultural and moral assault — and why they’ve rallied around Trump as their best warrior against the educated class. Trump understood that it’s not the entrepreneurs who seem most threatening to workers; it’s the professional class. Trump understood that there was great demand for a leader who would stick his thumb in our eyes on a daily basis and reject the whole epistemic regime that we rode in on.

If distrustful populism is your basic worldview, the Trump indictments seem as just another skirmish on the class war between the professionals and the workers, another assault by a bunch of coastal lawyers who want to take down the man who most aggressively stands up to them. Of course, the indictments don’t cause Trump supporters to abandon him. They cause them to become more fiercely loyal. That’s the polling story of the last six months.

Are Trump supporters right that the indictments are just a political witch hunt? Of course not. As a card-carrying member of my class, I still basically trust the legal system and the neutral arbiters of justice. Trump is a monster in the way we’ve all been saying for years and deserves to go to prison.

But there’s a larger context here. As the sociologist E. Digby Baltzell wrote decades ago, “History is a graveyard of classes which have preferred caste privileges to leadership.” That is the destiny our class is now flirting with. We can condemn the Trumpian populists all day until the cows come home, but the real question is when will we stop behaving in ways that make Trumpism inevitable.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/02/opinion/trump-meritocracy-educated.html>