

Tracking American Political Currents

Review of *White Identity Politics* by Ashley Jardina, Cambridge University Press, 2019, and *Fox Populism: Branding Conservatism as Working Class* by Reece Peck, Cambridge University Press, 2019

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It is both tired cliché and profound truth when we say that we are living through a tumultuous and complicated period of American political unrest. Antagonistic tribalism is at the heart of this, with the body politic seeming intent on splitting itself down the middle with a line of demarcation separating “us” from the evils of “them.” The struggle to make sense of this is vital, and Ashley Jardina’s *White Identity Politics* and Reece Peck’s *Fox Populism: Branding Conservatism as Working Class* are very real attempts to help us better comprehend some of the forces that have propelled us here.

Jardina is a political scientist intent on understanding the role of race in American political life, and through her research, she finds a unique and necessary perspective on the topic. She contends that our dominant lens on racism—one that has largely presupposed that the bias of whites against racial and ethnic minority groups, especially blacks, stems from outwardly directed animus—is insufficient for viewing the full extent of the racial dynamics most profoundly impacting our political discourse. *White Identity Politics* argues that by focusing on the disparagement and hatred toward others, we miss the critical element of white identity as a

galvanizing mechanism for in-group solidarity. While we have more readily recognized solidarity among disadvantaged sociodemographic groups in society, the role of in-group favoritism among whites has largely been ignored.

The book contends that a major part of this blind spot has been in how we discuss whiteness in general. Whiteness has been allowed to exist nearly invisibly, as a racial group beyond race, consistently positioned at the lead of the racial hierarchy while rarely acknowledging this in meaningful ways while more overt expressions of racial bias have become seemingly less tolerable. Jardina asserts that this situation has shifted in recent years due to two major events. One is that immigration and birthrates have increased racial and ethnic diversity in the United States, with demographers prognosticating that whites will cease to make up a numerical majority in the near future. The other is the election of Barack Obama in 2008, which signaled to many the unsure future of white leadership. These events have made white cultural dominance feel less certain, leaving many whites in a position to have their white identification “activated” in the face of what they perceive to be their group’s loss of status.

Jardina’s research relies heavily on data obtained through the American National Election Studies Time Series and a few other key initiatives meant to gather information about the demographic makeup of the American electorate, which she mines well to provide a unique and crucial perspective on what constitutes white identity and consciousness and how these interconnected concepts operate. Her project feels both obvious and surprising, starting with her overarching move to redirect the attention away from the outward animosity and/or systemic biases that exist against minority groups to the attitudes and dispositions that exist among whites that lead to the favoring of their own identity group above all others. It seems likely that many will bristle at this similarly to the way that some feminist critics and scholars have taken issue with strains of gender studies that redirect attention from the injustices of patriarchal culture toward the masculine identities that perpetuate and benefit from that culture. These sorts of reactions are necessary in that part of what gender studies and critical race studies

seek to repair is the deficit in serious attention given to subaltern groups and those with subaltern identities. However, the move toward focusing on the subaltern exclusively within scholarship looking to understand the workings of identity leaves us with another kind of knowledge gap. Although we may succeed in deterring the most obvious sorts of destructive behaviors when we call out overt bias, there are other, relatively more hidden (or ignorable/rationalizable) ways for bias to persist and have wide-ranging impacts. Jardina's project shines a light on why this situation will persist if we do not find ways to interrogate and better apprehend the role of white identification and solidarity within society.

Some of the most unexpected analysis comes in the demographic breakdown that she develops based upon her sifting of survey data. Jardina finds that white identity aligns less with party affiliation, economic status, or regionality than many would assume. The most significant correlations she finds based upon her evidence are that those who are most likely to have strong white identity and consciousness "are lower in education, higher in authoritarianism, and with greater levels of [social dominance orientation]," with those last two being "personality traits" that are in some sense harmonious.¹ The authoritarian leaning describes those who favor stricter, centralized leadership be maintained, which makes sense if one feels they are a member of a dominant group that benefits from the status quo. The social-dominance orientation is one in which those possessing it want their in-group to have privileges beyond those in any out-group. While other factors such as being older, living in rural areas, and having a traditionally blue-collar profession also correlate to some extent, these are much weaker than the relationships with education and the aforementioned personality traits or inclinations. This helps to adjust our view of how racial division operates and provides us a pathway to understanding how widespread white identification is.

1. Ashley Jardina, *White Identity Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 115.

The fifth chapter of *White Identity Politics*, “The Contents and Contours of Whiteness,” is perhaps the most illuminating of the entire book, as it clearly articulates what constitutes whiteness as those most connected with the identity experience it. This is at the core of the intervention that this project makes. Jardina finds that white identification aligns strongly with a vision of Americanness that emphasizes being a natural-born citizen, a speaker of English, a believer in Christianity, and, of course, a person with white skin. More importantly, she finds that those with strong white racial identity can both recognize their own privileged status while they simultaneously report feeling aggrieved about what they perceive to be a narrowing of opportunities for themselves and fellow whites in addition to other disadvantages for their race, much of them centering around concern over “reverse racism.” Even among whites who do not embrace white identity, such rejection is often couched in a rejection of race considerations altogether (aka “color blindness”), which also leads to a perpetuation of racial inequality through the maintenance of the status quo of white dominance.

Jardina goes on to trace how white racial identity aligns with political stances, including immigration policy, federal aid programs, and preferred presidential candidates. Her analysis reveals that while some of the positions of those with strong white identity—anti-immigration, anti-globalization, proisolationism—fall along lines that could readily be seen as having racial animus undergirding them, there are many positions regarding social welfare, affirmative action, and other policies benefiting racial minorities that do not align so well. Jardina explains this as indication of in-group favoritism being a much stronger force than out-group animosity, even if many of its practical effects have the same results. This is readily apparent in her breakdown of white identity’s role in the 2012 and 2016 United States presidential elections.

While whiteness is not overtly the core concern of Reece Peck’s *Fox Populism: Branding Conservatism as Working Class*, it is very much imbricated in what he ultimately uncovers and argues. As the title of the book suggests, its focus is the rise and impact of Fox News as a twenty-four-hour

news channel, particularly in its stylistic approach to television journalism and the conservative political identity that the style manifests. Rather than looking directly at how white identification informs American politics of the early twenty-first century as Jardina does, Peck provides in-depth critical explication of how Fox News has played a major role in cementing a marriage of tabloid tactics and populist rhetoric and performance as key modes of address for contemporary American conservatism.

Fox Populism builds its argument on rich textual and contextual analysis of Fox News programming and marketing, as well as its foundations, especially in the pre-Fox News careers of Rupert Murdoch, Roger Ailes, and Bill O'Reilly. In mining that, the book establishes the Fox style as one rooted in a strong blend of tabloid sensationalism and populist politics that can be traced back to the earliest days of those key players. Peck also situates this within the broader post-network television moment in which cable channels were looking for ways to better court niche audiences. In this assessment, Fox News is not so much an unforeseeable game changer as it is a logical development of various forces that were already in motion within the changing US political landscape and media ecology.

Much of the analysis of actual Fox News programming content is anchored in their coverage of the financial crisis of 2007–2008 and its aftermath, which is a particularly opportune window onto its style. For one thing, Fox had, by then, been firmly established as the ratings leader among twenty-four-hour news competitors. For another, the crisis overlapped the campaign, election, and early presidency of Barack Obama. Perhaps most importantly, it was a moment in which socioeconomic status seemed poised momentarily to be a prime pivot point within political discourse. This was a crisis rooted in the actions of financial institutions and the various regulatory (and deregulatory) moves made by elected officials and governmental entities, and that is largely where the initial blame and concern was directed. However, as Peck's research bears out, Fox played a critical role in shifting this narrative from one of "Wall Street greed and corporate malfeasance to one centered around fiscal policy and the national debt, taxpayer victimization,

and the ‘sweetheart’ benefits of public-sector workers.”² The details of how that occurred reveal a lot about how Fox discursively constructs their visions of conservatism and conservatives themselves.

The third and fourth chapters provide the most thorough case for how the Fox News brand functions in terms of projecting a working-class identity for itself and its audience. One major component here is the movement from constructing social class as a primarily cultural phenomenon rather than an economic one. Peck challenges the work of others, such as Thomas Frank, who have advanced the notion that conservative populism sows a false consciousness that has the working class misrecognize the interests of the wealthy elite as their own by obscuring economic concerns with cultural ones. Wanting to undo that binary, Peck demonstrates how the cultural dimensions of working classness are just as salient as economic ones and how Fox has so opportunely tapped into this misreading of the impact of cultural class distinction on the part of the political Left. This shift of emphasis from wealth status to the taste culture of class allows for the displacement of populist anti-elitism against the rich onto an anti-elitism that rejects education, expertise, and nonworking-class taste as the real signifiers of the elite. It also laid the foundation for the rise of what Peck describes as the rhetoric of “entrepreneurial producerism” that is best encapsulated in the framing of the wealthy as “job creators.” When tied together with cultural populism, this paints a picture of social hierarchy as a story of moral imperative, with those on top always deserving their position due to their superior work ethic while those on the bottom (at least as they are seen by others) suffering their fates as the result of their individual failings of ingenuity.

By providing shifts in critical perspective, both these books complicate the ways in which we view the contemporary political terrain of the United States. While the Trump presidency is not central to building the arguments in either of these projects, it looms large as the situation which

2. Reece Peck, *Fox Populism: Branding Conservatism as Working Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1.

these arguments attempt to illuminate and is what both these books have to inevitably address toward their closings. *Fox Populism* titles its conclusion as “Trump Populism,” which makes great sense given how its preceding argument almost makes Trump’s success with the Republican base seem inevitable, with his own style so readily fitting, and amplifying, the style of Bill O’Reilly, Sean Hannity, and Fox News more generally. Trump’s performances at his rallies and events exhibit the same blend of tabloid hyperbole and conservative populist “common sense” tactics that long defined Fox News’ style, and Trump’s career in real estate, at least in how he presents it, positions him very well within a social hierarchy calibrated by the logic of entrepreneurial producerism.

Perversely enough, as Peck charts, Trump’s rise and success came amid a moment in which Fox was incrementally pulling back from its tabloid populist brand and attempting to present a more respectable and less exclusively working-class image. This was also a time in which rival news outlets, on television, radio, and online, had risen to rival some of the stranglehold that Fox seemed to have had on conservative politics. A short postscript offers an attempt at mapping the resulting shift toward a different sort of conservatism, labeled as “alt-right,” and championed by some of those rival outlets, particularly the website Breitbart News. This strain of conservatism has more “unapologetically built on white identity politics and anti-feminism and that emphasized economic nationalist positions over conservatism’s traditional free-trade internationalism.”³ To anyone familiar with the events surrounding the 2016 US presidential election, the results of this swing are apparent in the tight connection forged between Trump and Breitbart, and especially its former executive chairman Steve Bannon.

While there are strains of the same tabloid populism at play, Peck questions whether the shift away from working-class alignment and the more transparent appeal to white identity evident in the alt-right style will resonate as strongly as the Fox style had. Even though Jardina’s *White Identity*

3. Peck, *Fox Populism*, 239.

Politics offers the vantage of a different angle more founded in racial identity politics, it arrives at a similarly uncertain assessment of the longer-term viability of Trumpism and the alt-right. The more overt appeal to white identity and consciousness apparent in Trump and his relationship with alt-right voices and news outlets was couched enough in, or given cover by, his anti-immigration, anti-globalization, and pro-isolationism messaging that it worked effectively for the 2016 election, but, over time, this approach could ultimately become too blatant to maintain its dominance among those who are less comfortable with naked racial animus. This speaks to the general uncertainty surrounding the 2020 US presidential election and its aftermath. From what we can see now, there is still clearly some utility to the rhetorical appeals of working-class populism, tabloid sensationalism, and a preservation of the status quo that benefits those with strong white identity, but it may be getting stretched to a point where the group that it serves is no longer big enough to sustain its momentum. However these dynamics ultimately play out, it behooves us all as scholars and citizens to expand our understanding of these factors, which have brought us to this period of turmoil, and it seems essential that political strategists and activists include consideration of them as they look toward the future of democratic discourse in the United States.