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Sacrifice Zones in Rural and Non-Metro USA: Fertile Soil for Authoritarian Populism

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Abstract

Sacrifice zones — abandoned and economically shattered places, with growing social and health problems — are spreading in historically white rural areas and small towns across the United States. Rural decline, rooted in economic restructuring and financialization, exacerbates racial resentment to create a breeding ground for regressive authoritarian politics. The paper argues for a multidimensional approach that examines and analytically connects long-term and recent trends affecting economy and livelihoods, institutions, health, and community life. It suggests that people and communities benefit when they can appropriate the wealth that they produce, but that since the 1980s capital has systematically undermined this capacity, especially but not only in rural areas and in intensified form after the 2008 financial crisis. While many Trump voters were affluent suburbanites, another important sector of supporters consists of downwardly mobile inhabitants of zones where the institutions that earlier allowed people to appropriate the wealth that they produced were destroyed and where the social safety net, always fragile, is increasingly in tatters. Scholars and the media have underestimated the human toll of the crisis. The paper concludes by posing several questions of political strategy for the struggle against authoritarian populism, both in the United States and elsewhere.

Keywords: Authoritarian populism, Trump, United States, rural zones, racism, farm crisis, economic crisis

> She remembered reading somewhere that even after people died, their hair and nails kept growing. Like starlight, travelling through the universe long after the stars themselves had died. Like cities. Fizzy, effervescent, simulating the illusion of life while the planet they had plundered died around them.
>
> —Arundhati Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017, 214)

Two countries and uneven development

'The United States is coming to resemble two separate countries, one rural and one urban,' political analyst David Graham proclaimed in a 2017 article in *The Atlantic* (Graham 2017). Viewing the map of 2016 presidential election results, it is hard to avoid a similar conclusion. Donald Trump carried over 2,600 largely rural counties and Hillary Clinton, who won the popular vote, less than 500 mostly urban ones (Associated Press 2016).

The 'two countries' thesis echoes scholars of uneven development going back decades, from Michael Lipton's (1977) study of 'urban bias' to Cynthia Duncan's *Worlds Apart* (1999) and —more recently— Katherine Cramer's *The Politics of Resentment* (2016). The rural-urban divide received more attention after November 2016.Too often now, though, 'rural' has become a synecdoche for 'Trump voters,' 'working-class' or 'white', misrepresentations that comedian Samantha Bee demolished in hilarious video interviews with small-town minority voters (Bee 2018). In fact, Trump voters had a higher median income than Clinton voters, reflecting backing among affluent whites without university degrees, many of them business owners in the suburban counties where Trump received nearly half his votes (Balz 2017; Carnes and Lupu 2017).

Multiple studies point to racial resentment as the strongest predictor of voting for Trump's peculiar brand of bigotry, faux populism and economic nationalism (Lopez 2017b). This racial anger intensified in the lead-up to 2016 not just because the U.S. had an African American president, but also from an accelerated decomposition of community life and livelihoods that many whites worried could reduce them to what they imagined as the level of Blacks and other minorities. It drew on a deep historical well of entrenched racism and anti-Native and anti-Black violence (McMurtry 2005; Greene 2017). In effect, these whites feared that the hopelessness and decay of the country's rural and urban 'sacrifice zones' was spreading to previously impervious geographical areas and social sectors that earlier benefited from white skin privilege.

While scholars usually employ the term 'sacrifice zones' for sites where capital has degraded physical environments (Holifield and Day 2017), journalist Chris Hedges described them more broadly as places where 'the marketplace rules without constraints, where human beings and the natural world are used and then discarded to maximize profit' (Hedges and Sacco 2014, xi). The main focus of this paper is on largely white areas susceptible to authoritarian populist appeals, but it is important to remember that there are major sacrifice zones — urban and rural — populated by Native American, African American, Latinx, and immigrant people. Indeed, some are situated within the most globally linked, economically dynamic metropolitan centres, such as New York and Los Angeles. Because racism, authoritarian populism and economic distress are often inextricably bound up with each other, these urban majority-minority sacrifice zones and the people in them figure in authoritarian populist rhetoric, along with the frequently derided 'coastal elites', as key elements in 'rural resentment' of cities and city people.

While this paper seeks to outline a framework for analysis of the long-term and recent devastation of much of the rural and small-town United States, it does not attempt to address the tremendous variability across states or regions, either in terms of economic and social conditions or political responses. Other researchers have provided useful ways of distinguishing between different kinds of rural zones. Jessica Ulrich-Schad and Cynthia Duncan, for example, in analysing results from a massive survey carried out between 2007 and 2011, distinguish between 'amenity rich' areas (with

tourism industries or potential), 'transitioning' areas and 'chronically poor' areas (Ulrich-Schad and Duncan 2018). 'Amenity rich' areas are generally doing somewhat better than elsewhere, although still suffering from highly seasonal employment patterns and upward pressure on housing prices, as affluent urbanites purchase or rent vacation homes.

Economic and political transformations

White privilege had many dimensions — decent wages in largely industrial employment, defined-benefits pensions, seemingly permanent employment — but these began to unravel in the neoliberal 1980s and imploded during the Great Recession of 2008 (Katznelson 2005, 2017). Their erosion and loss fuelled not only a 'politics of resentment' grounded in a specifically 'rural [white] consciousness' (Cramer 2016), but also an 'aggrieved masculinity' and a sense of 'aggrieved entitlement' (Kimmel 2017). Michael Kimmel describes this as both a sense of victimisation from being unable to access the benefits to which white working- and middle-class men believed themselves entitled — and which were snatched away by unseen forces — and a sense of humiliation at being incapable of fulfilling the patriarchal aspiration of being the sole breadwinner for their families. Many white women bought into the dream of a patriarchal bargain in which husbands would work and provide and they would raise families, and the disintegration of this hope powered further resentment (Kimmel 2017).

The punditry and media failed to grasp the enormity of these economic and cultural transformations because so many analyses were piecemeal, examining home foreclosures but not the opioid epidemic, or deindustrialization and unemployment but not the disappearance of locally owned financial institutions. They also failed to place U.S. decline in global and historical perspective, rarely asking why in one of the richest nations people did not enjoy the right to health or a dignified retirement (Haque 2018).

A more holistic, multidimensional view would analytically connect the dots and identify negative synergies not only between these forces, but others as well, such as the closing of schools, hospitals, local newspapers, cooperatively-owned enterprises, and rural airports. The objective of this paper, which relies heavily on news reports, case studies and data from government and other agencies, is to sketch the outlines of such an approach. When viewed together, the multiple factors contributing to the spread of sacrifice zones and the rise of authoritarian populism appear to be nothing less than a 'perfect storm'.

The argument of the paper is simple:

> (1) People and communities benefit when they can appropriate the wealth that they produce.
> (2) Since at least the 1980s, capital has systematically undermined this capacity in multiple, interlocking ways and shifted the wealth upward in class terms and outward in geographical terms.
> (3) Scholars, journalists and pundits have underestimated the severity, cruelty and interrelatedness of the factors contributing to this shift and its impacts, especially but not only in rural areas.
> (4) Many Trump voters were affluent suburbanites motivated significantly by racism but not directly by economic distress. Another important sector consisted of downwardly mobile inhabitants of zones where the institutions that earlier allowed people to appropriate the wealth that they produced were destroyed and where the social safety net — always tenuous and significantly dependent on better-off workers' bargain with private employers — is increasingly in tatters.

The Long Decline

After the mid-1970s wages became de-coupled from productivity gains and stagnated (Sorscher 2015). At the international level, the key factor was the mid-1970s collapse of the Bretton Woods framework, which since 1944 had fostered protected national economies, and the subsequent 'opening up' of

international finance and trade (Helleiner 1994). Domestically, concerted attacks on organized labour, particularly once Ronald Reagan became president in 1981, further eroded workers' bargaining power.

Income and wealth inequality soared. By 2016, 63 percent of Americans didn't have enough savings to cover a $500 emergency (McGrath 2016). Today, nine million have zero cash income (Pilkington 2017). The divide had a pronounced racial dimension. In 2014, the median earnings gap between black and white men, which had narrowed sharply in 1940-1970, was larger than in 1950 (Bayer and Charles 2016).

One striking findings of Cramer's *Politics of Resentment* was that rural Wisconsinites viewed the 2008 Great Recession as 'unremarkable' (Cramer 2016, 169). They had been living in a recession for decades. Many spend a huge portion of their income on gasoline and the cars that are essential for commuting to work almost everywhere in the country, especially in rural areas, where distances are long and evangelical Christian and right-wing talk shows dominate the air waves. The economic precarity of low-income Americans is such that the cost of a car repair may initiate a downward spiral that culminates in job loss and even homelessness (C. Lutz 2014). U.S. households are deeply indebted from mortgages, autos, credit cards, and student loans (Federal Reserve Bank of New York 2018). Business indebtedness, long an important factor in the demise of farms and other small enterprises (Dudley 2002), is for many Americans an additional source of insecurity and anxiety.

The 2008 bursting of the mortgage bubble was biggest driver of homelessness, ravaging entire communities as homeowners defaulted on what had often been predatory loans. Nationally, residential foreclosures —383,037 in 2006 — climbed rapidly, with around one million each year in 2009-2012, and only returning to pre-crisis levels in 2016 (CoreLogic 2017). The cumulative impact, especially in the hardest-hit states — California, Florida, Michigan — was devastating, as families doubled up with relatives, went on the road, or moved to shelters.

Rural and non-metro sacrifice zones

Some features of U.S. sacrifice zones are specifically rural. The 1980s saw the worst farm crisis since the 1930s depression (Edelman 2003, 188–90). Prices for petroleum and fossil-fuel-based fertilizers skyrocketed, interest rates soared as monetary policies sought to dampen inflation, loans were called in, and grain prices plummeted with the cessation of sales to the Soviet Union following its invasion of Afghanistan. The rapid consolidation of input and machinery suppliers, and in the processing, storage, brokering and exporting of key commodities, allowed a handful of giant corporations to garner a rising share of the total value-added between the farm gate and the consumer (Kneen 2002).

Many farmers lost lands to larger operations. Survivors of the 1980s suffered a second crisis in the past five years, following the end of the commodities boom of the 2000s (Harvie 2017). In 2013-2017 U.S. farmers and ranchers experienced a 48 percent drop in real net farm income, the largest four-year decline since the 1930s depression (USDA 2018a). Over half of farm households now lose money on farming (USDA 2018b). Median net farm income, which was slightly negative at $-118 in 2014 dropped to $-1,165 in 2017 and is expected to fall to $-1,316 in 2018 (USDA 2018c). As farmers again go bankrupt, the multiplier effects further destabilize local economies.

In *The Glass House: The 1% Economy and the Shattering of the All-American Town* (2017), Brian Alexander describes an Ohio community whose story parallels that of thousands of others throughout the United States. Home to a large glass plant, it was a place where 'a factory worker might live three blocks from a factory owner' and where owners backed local bond issues to fund the good schools and hospitals that attracted skilled employees. In the 1980s leveraged buyout specialists raided, loaded the company up with debt, dismembered it, crushed the union, and cashed out. A series of new owners — hedge funds and private equity shops — slashed wages and pensions and ordered the executives to live elsewhere, 'so they wouldn't be troubled by requests for civic involvement or charitable contributions' (2017, 56).

The priority now was shareholder value, not making products or, much less, squandering profits on community institutions. The deindustrialization of the rural and urban United States proceeded apace, crescendoing with the 2008 crash, after which non-metro areas outpaced the rest of the country in industrial job loss, suffering a 35 percent drop in manufacturing employment (Orejel 2017). Populist demagogues like Trump blame job loss exclusively on free trade and factory flight, and their liberal critics also cite automation (Miller 2016), but neoliberal financialization has clearly been a central factor.

Financialization also decimated mutually-owned banks, which long powered small-town economies. Directors often contributed to local institutions, knew clients, and sometimes made business and personal loans based on trust rather than credit scores. Beginning in the 1980s, private equity investors seeded mutual and savings banks across the country with small deposits in anticipation of their eventual conversions into stock institutions (FDIC 2017). Depositors had rights to buy stock at low insider prices before initial public offerings (IPOs). Typically shares appreciated 15 percent on the day of the IPO and 20 or even 50 percent more in the following months. Directors and investors then encouraged giant regional banks to gobble up and shutter local ones and cashed in as shares soared 200 to 400 percent above the IPO level, suctioning wealth out of communities, instituting stricter lending criteria, undermining small businesses, creating 'banking deserts', and forcing the newly un-banked to depend on high-cost check cashing outlets and payday lenders, often themselves financed by the larger banks (Mizan n.d.; Economist 2017; Connor and Skomarovsky 2011). During 2008-2016, rural areas, which have less access to broadband and Internet banking, saw 86 new banking deserts (Richardson et al. 2017).

Like mutual banks, cooperatives and credit unions that reinvested locally the wealth communities produced had long acted as a bulwark against rapacious corporations and banks (Schneiberg 2011). Of the 3,346 agricultural cooperatives — grain elevators and packing houses, among others — that existed in 2000, one thousand closed by 2009 and another 350 by 2015, in part because of mergers analogous to those occurring in farmland (USDA 2011, 2017, 6). Of the more than 8,000 credit unions in 2007, over two thousand closed by 2017 (NCUA 2017, 177).

Family-owned stores and diners on small town Main Streets were sites of congenial human contact, invested profits locally, and provided additional income and employment for farm and other rural households. As malls and chain stores proliferated, 'mom-and-pop' businesses withered from relentless competition. Fewer small businesses means less ad revenue for local newspapers, thousands of which closed in recent decades, some succumbing to the Internet and others to the same financialization that was strangling industries and banks (Abernathy 2016). This meant not just a dearth of local news and ads, but also of recognition of births, deaths, weddings, graduations, and sporting achievements, that is, of a town's inhabitants and their identity with and pride in place. More recently, low-wage retail and service jobs the chains and malls provided began to disappear with the expansion of e-commerce (Thomas 2017; A. Lutz 2016). Empty storefronts and malls and vanished newspapers are not just signs of job loss and economic precarity. Inhabitants of sacrifice zones read them as stark, painful reminders of abandonment and a shredded social fabric.

It was not just retail businesses, savings banks and co-ops that closed. In recent decades, federal and state governments have also removed funding from social services of all kinds. Rural hospital closures doubled between 2011-12 and 2013-14, disproportionately impacting the South (UNC Sheps Center 2017). Post offices are closing too. They have long been have long been lifelines for rural people, serving as meeting places, delivering essential medicines, information, and human contact. In 2012, some 3,000 rural post offices narrowly avoided closing, but a slow attrition is nonetheless shutting many of them (Gewirtz 2011; Swinnerton 2017). Most recently, the Trump administration let funding lapse for community health centers used by 26 million Americans and proposed ending a forty year-old Federal rural airport program, which serves 111 communities at least 210 miles from an urban airport (Kliff 2018; Lowy 2017).

The federal and many state governments have systematically starved schools of funds. Because property taxes are, apart from state budgets, a key source of education funding, when tax bases and populations decline, schools — often centers of small-town sociality and key loci of local identity — close, shift to four-day-per-week schedules or consolidate with adjacent districts (Cramer 2016, 50; Economist 2018). Thirty percent of all school closures nationwide in 2011-12 were in rural areas, stranding students in isolated areas, forcing them to take long bus rides that negatively affect academic performance, and disproportionately impacting minority communities.

Education austerity and school closings fragment society in other ways. Public schools as incubators of citizens and democratic values may be overhyped at times, but there is little doubt that in many places, despite widespread de facto racial segregation, they 'have encouraged a unique mixing of diverse people' (Christakis 2017). When underfunded schools descend into mediocrity, critical thinking and civic engagement suffer and sectors of the populace become ever more susceptible to demagogic manipulation. Recent research indicates that extreme right-wing conservatives shared and consumed more 'fake news' stories on Facebook and Twitter than all other political groups combined (Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017; Narayanan et al. 2018). At least one rigorous study suggests that 'fake news' likely influenced the outcome of the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Gunther, Beck, and Nisbet 2018). Yevgeny Prigozhin — nicknamed 'Putin's cook' — the alleged head of Russia's social media disinformation operation around the 2016 U.S. presidential election, reportedly commented that 'the Americans are very impressionable people; they see what they want to see' (MacFarquhar 2018).

As once vital communities and neighbourhoods hollowed out, losing their institutions and the capacity to appropriate the wealth that they produce, despair and anxiety triggered violence and addiction. Economist Umair Haque, in a trenchant essay on the 'social pathologies of collapse' — school shootings, the opioid epidemic, 'nomadic retirees' who live in their cars and work low-wage jobs, and the normalization of indifference — concludes that 'we are grossly underestimating what pundits call the "human toll"' (Haque 2018; Gun Violence Archive 2018; Bruder 2017; Whoriskey 2018).

To take but one obvious example, the scale of the opioid problem — and of the physical and emotional pain behind it — is staggering. In 2015, some 92 million or 38 percent of U.S. adults used prescription opioids, with 11.5 million (4.7 percent) reporting misuse (Han et al. 2017). Big pharmaceutical corporations aggressively marketed painkillers like OxyContin and fentanyl, and in some states doctors wrote more prescriptions than there were people (Lopez and Frostenson 2017). In 2008-2017 drug companies shipped 20.8 million opioid pills to just two pharmacies in one town — population 2,900 — in largely rural West Virginia (Eyre 2018). This was not atypical in West Virginia, where pharmacies in even smaller towns received massive shipments of pills and where overdose deaths are higher than in any other state (Halloran 2018).

Drug overdoses are rising rapidly and now kill more people than gun violence and auto accidents combined. More Americans now die each year from drug overdoses than died in the entire Vietnam war (Lopez 2017a). To make matters worse, the methamphetamine scourge, which was centred in rural and non-metro zones and which had subsided in the early 2000s, 'has returned with a vengeance', in part because meth users can now easily find cheap opioids to dampen meth's intense rush. In some states deaths from meth now vastly outnumber those from opioids (Robles 2018).

Incarceration rates for whites — and especially for white women — have risen since 2000, very likely because of increased law enforcement activity in rural drug-consuming areas (Humphreys 2016). Absent family members, and particularly women, who still account for the lion's share of work related to social reproduction, constitute an additional burden and stressor for households and communities. Addicts — whether of meth or opioids — make unreliable family members, neighbours and employees, which further undermines households, society and economies in the sacrifice zones.

Angry politics in shattered communities and white suburbs

In the 2016 election Trump performed best in counties with the highest drug, alcohol and suicide mortality rates (Monnat 2016). In 2017, for the second year in a row, life expectancy in the U.S. fell, in significant part because of drug overdoses and other 'deaths of despair' (Case and Deaton 2017; Fox 2017). Farmers, in particular, are killing themselves in record numbers (Weingarten 2017).

Trump discerned the anger, fear and alienation in the sacrifice zones, but directed his racist, anti-immigrant harangues only at their white inhabitants. His country-club racism, off-hand authoritarianism, simple-minded nationalism, overblown promises, and claims to be a 'strong leader' resonated in shattered communities (Goldfarb 2018). Trump's tirades also appealed to nouveau-riche entrepreneurs and well-to-do white suburbanites, many of whom bought Republican claims about 'burdensome' regulation of business, 'big government', and 'undeserving' minorities, immigrants and public employees, and were uneasy that their heretofore monochromatic communities were being 'invaded' by affluent immigrants and people of colour.

Trump repeatedly pathologised non-white inhabitants of the sacrifice zones, deploying age-old right-wing rhetoric about 'unproductive' minorities that in turn served to justify the traditional conservative agenda of eviscerating the public sector and protecting the interests of the super-rich. Governments appeared unable or unwilling to address the convergence of multiple crises — of employment, housing, education, health care, decaying communities — and this in turn revived memories of past broken promises, including those of neoliberal Democratic administrations. This feeling of abandonment, along with downward mobility, made white rural Americans receptive to a candidate who cast himself as an 'outsider' (Orejel 2017).

Challenging questions

In the epigraph to this paper, Arundhati Roy evokes the image of 'fizzy, effervescent' cities, 'simulating the illusion of life while the planet they had plundered died around them' (2017, 214). Her empirical referent is, of course, India, another setting where authoritarian populism is ascendant and where transnational alliances between demagogic leaders, including the Trumps, are in the works (Abi-Habib and Lipton 2018). It is not only the troubling story of U.S. societal collapse and its 'human toll' that needs to be viewed in global and historical perspective, but also the story of authoritarian populism itself.

The overview of crisis sketched in this paper suggests several pressing questions. In the United States, should the resistance try to win over Trump supporters, or is it more effective to work on combatting voter suppression, particularly of minorities, fighting for campaign finance reform, and mobilizing the vast numbers that abstain from electoral participation (Wallace 2016)? In the #MeToo-Stormy Daniels moment, will white evangelical and white women voters drop their support for the crude, misogynist, philandering president (Johnson and Hawbaker 2018; Borchers 2018; Illing 2018; Kohler 2018)? Or does having a pliable, if mercurial, conservative, racist ally in the White House trump all other considerations? How durable are the resentments and identities that we now — with the benefit of hindsight — recognize as the products of decades-long processes and that have been central to the rise of authoritarian populism?

To what degree is global and U.S. authoritarian populism a façade for a state-led project that invokes 'family values', retrograde forms of masculinity and heteronormativity, and an exclusionary vision of the nation in order to exacerbate social divisions, roll back social conquests, and intensify exploitation of human beings and the environment (Hervik 2018)? Is it possible to re-legitimize the public sphere and public investment, funded by progressive taxation, to create a stable and more just society that provides opportunities for all?

To what extent are the world's autocrats — Trump, Duterte, Erdoğan, Modi, Orbán, Putin, among others — simply a mutually self-supporting collection of erratic rulers or are they taking shape as a

more coherent, if sometimes fractious, global authoritarian populist axis (Walsh 2018; Bhagavan 2016)? And finally, can movements in different countries learn from and coordinate with each other to resist the authoritarian wave?

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The Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI) is a new initiative focused on understanding the contemporary moment and building alternatives. New exclusionary politics are generating deepening inequalities, jobless 'growth', climate chaos, and social division. The ERPI is focused on the social and political processes in rural spaces that are generating alternatives to regressive, authoritarian politics. We aim to provoke debate and action among scholars, activists, practitioners and policymakers from across the world that are concerned about the current situation, and hopeful about alternatives.

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