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Discussion Notes 04

A Redneck Revolt? Radical Responses to Trumpism in the Rural US

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A Redneck Revolt? Radical Responses to Trumpism in the Rural US

Levi van Sant

Abstract

*The election of Donald Trump, exacerbated by Brexit and the apparent growth of right-wing populism around the globe, has spurred considerable reflection about the multiple divides that stratify the current US political spectrum, particularly the urban/rural and racial rifts. Rural and working-class whites have received special scrutiny for their higher-than-expected turnout, and are often casually portrayed as the root cause of Trumpism. While support for Trump, and the right-wing populism he tapped into, is definitely high among rural whites, it is by no means total. This presentation uses the work of one group organizing against right-wing populism, Redneck Revolt, as a way to think through the contradictions of Trumpism and working class whiteness in the rural US. Growing out of a rural Kansas mutual aid project called the John Brown Gun Club, one of Redneck Revolt's main goals is to recruit away from white supremacist organizations. Thus much of their strategy is built around working in the kinds of places that most leftists know very little about: rodeos, NASCAR rallies, and country music concerts. In the early 2000s, for instance, they set up booths at gun shows across Kansas, offering anti-capitalist, anti-racist pamphlets, and a stark alternative to white supremacist recruiters. As Redneck Revolt put it in their 2016 recruitment pamphlet addressed to right-wing populists, there is no necessary reason that "the white working-class ... [should] find solidarity with rich white ranchowners against the government, but not working-class people of color defending their own land and community." Community self-defense is a central part of Redneck Revolt's platform: in contrast to most other radical leftist groups in the US, they embrace firearms as necessary for the freedom of oppressed peoples (as a means of self-defense rather than militant aggression). Their ultimate goal is the dissolution of white supremacy, which they conceptualize as a system that oppresses both people of color **and** working-class whites. This presentation examines Redneck Revolt's critique of right-wing populism and their organizing strategies as a way to think through the openings for left politics in the rural US today.*

1) Introduction

a. Brief history of Redneck Revolt (RR)

- i. What is now Redneck Revolt began as the John Brown Gun Club in Lawrence, Kansas in 2004. The FBI was harassing and targeting the Kansas Mutual Aid Society in an effort to prevent them from protesting at national political conventions, so a group of anarchists in the region decided that they needed to arm themselves in self-defense.
- ii. They then worked to train themselves and others on the Left in firearms use and community self-defense. Because the mainstream liberal institutions in the US have created a culture of disarmament that is now widespread on the Left, the John Brown Gun Club worked to "demystify" guns and educate people about how they might exercise their Second Amendment Rights. They worked hard to differentiate themselves and their goal of community self-defense from clandestine groups proposing guerilla warfare against the state, but there was still significant hesitancy and backlash against the open promotion of firearm training among the political Left.
- iii. The John Brown Gun Club returned to building radical Left alliances, firearms education, and community self-defense work but lost coherence after core members left Kansas. It was reborn as Redneck Revolt in the summer of 2016 with the explicit aim of countering the growth of Right-wing Populism—particularly amongst rural, working class whites.

b. Measured Successes

- i. The John Brown Gun Club's first large mobilization was to counter-protest the 2005 national conference of the Minuteman Project, a far right armed anti-immigrant group that appointed themselves to extrajudicially monitor the US-Mexico border. They protested at the gathering and put significant pressure on the venue hosting the event, portraying the Minuteman Project (which was founded in Arizona) as outside troublemakers. The Minutemen have not held a national conference since that year.
- ii. From 2016 to the present the Redneck Revolt network has grown from a handful of branches to over 30 nationwide. Their main goal is to build alliances with other radical Left organizations and to confront and challenge the growth of militant white nationalism in the US.
- iii. Part of this involves opening dialogue with purportedly "libertarian" groups like the 3 Percenters and the Oath Keepers. Although these groups claim they are strictly concerned with protecting individual freedoms and the right to bear arms, they also exhibit explicit white nationalist tendencies. Through patient dialogue and popular education, several Redneck Revolt chapters have been able to challenge the white nationalist ideologies of these right-wing libertarian militias and flip them away from anti-immigrant and pro-capitalist positions.
- iv. Redneck Revolt provided community self-defense in support of Confederate Monument removal in Charlottesville. Cornel West credited RR with saving his life when white nationalists unleashed violence on protesters.

2) Organizing Strategies

- a. Broadly, Redneck Revolt's political ideology is a form of libertarian socialism.
- b. Their purpose is to, "incite a movement amongst working people that works toward the total liberation of all working people, regardless of skin color, religious background, sexual orientation, gender, country of birth, or any other division that bosses and politicians have used to fragment movements for social, political, and economic freedom."¹
- c. One of their most consistent and forceful positions is a critique of *white supremacy*, which they conceptualize as:

"a system of violence and power that ensures that political, economic, and social power is withheld from people who aren't white. White working class people have all benefited to a certain extent from the system of white supremacy that exists within the United States. However, this same system and our participation within it have also ensured that white working class people will stay poor and relatively powerless in this society."²
- d. They position themselves as part of rural and working class white communities and work to recruit *away* from white nationalist and right-wing populist groups. They believe that the white working class allegiance to right populism is contradictory and not inherent, thus they establish a presence at places most Left organizers avoid—gun shows, rodeos, and NASCAR races. Here they promote their message that:

"White supremacy is a system that white working people have helped protect, but it is also used as a tool against all working people, with people of color impacted the most severely. Allegiance to a politics of white racism has only allowed the rich to continue to hold onto power, with no lifting effect to working class folks of any race."³

¹ www.redneckrevolt.org/principles

² www.redneckrevolt.org/about

³ www.redneckrevolt.org/about

- e. Even though working-class solidarity is their central organizing strategy they also work to build alliance with radical Left groups across multiple axes of social difference (including Black Lives Matter, the Huey Newton Gun Club, and the Surviving Sisters Gun Club [which trains women in self-defense and provides move-out services to those trapped in abusive relationships]), recognizing that there is no monolithic “working-class experience” and that the class struggle must be fought in conjunction with other liberatory struggles.
 - f. They state their core principles as follows⁴:
 - i. We stand against white supremacy
 - ii. We believe in true liberty for all people
 - iii. We stand for organized defense of our communities
 - iv. We are working class and poor people
 - v. We are an aboveground militant formation
 - vi. We stand against the nation-state and its forces which protect the bosses and the rich (police and military)
 - vii. We stand against capitalism
 - viii. We stand against the wars of the rich
 - ix. We stand against patriarchy
 - x. We believe in the right of militant resistance
 - xi. We believe in the need for revolution
- 3) Lessons for US Left – and beyond
- a. I believe we must work on multiple fronts with a diverse range of Left politics, including making demands on the state. But the Redneck Revolt model of Libertarian Socialism reveals important things, and should be an important part of the US Left. Of particular importance is their Gramscian effort to read for the “good sense in the common sense” of right-wing populism through radical and grassroots engagement.
 - b. They reveal the possibility (and difficulty) of recruiting rural, white working-class
 - i. Rural, white working class is not inherently conservative and racist
 - ii. In fact, white suburbs are probably Trumpism’s strongest base⁵
 - iii. The Left has increasingly avoided/stigmatized the rural white working class, and is thus partly to blame for that bloc’s Right-ward drift⁶
 - c. White Supremacy v. White Privilege
 - i. Redneck Revolt suggests that it is difficult to organize poor white folks by telling them of their racial privilege, because it doesn’t resonate with their experiences of poverty
 - ii. White supremacy, on the other hand, can highlight the articulation of race and class, identifying their oppressors as elite whites (not racial others)
 - d. Rethinking firearms
 - i. Part of Redneck Revolt’s ability to reach rural, white working class folks hinges on the fact that they clearly support gun rights
 - ii. This suggests an opportunity/need for the Left to reframe the gun debate, perhaps through a shift away from “gun control” to “gun violence”?
 - iii. This is not merely a rhetorical shift, but one that brings state-sanctioned gun violence into the conversation. Thus, it proposes moving away from government regulation of individuals (which ultimately increases state power), and towards a critique of all forms of “gun violence” – especially that of the police and military.

⁴ www.redneckrevolt.org/principles

⁵ See for instance, www.opendemocracy.net/marc-edelman/sacrifice-zones-in-rural-and-non-metro-usa-fertile-soil-for-authoritarian-populism

⁶ antipodefoundation.org/2017/09/14/race-rurality-and-radical-geography/

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About the Author(s)

Levi Van Sant received his PhD in Geography from the University of Georgia in 2016 and is currently a lecturer of geography at Georgia Southern University. His dissertation analyzed the racial politics of land and agriculture in the Charleston, South Carolina area; articles from this research have been published in *Geoforum*, *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, and *Gastronomica*. He has also published an Antipode intervention on "Race, Rurality, and Radical Geography in the US," and is currently guest-editing a special issue of that journal on "Placing Race in Political Ecology." His current research examines the ways that conservation easements reproduce racial and class hierarchies through the maintenance of private land holdings.

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.

For more information see: <http://www.iss.nl/erpi>
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