
What Is White America?

The Identity Politics of the Majority

Nell Irvin Painter

White Shift: Populism, Immigration, and the Future of White Majorities

BY ERIC KAUFMANN. Abrams Press, 2019, 624 pp.

White Identity Politics

BY ASHLEY JARDINA. Cambridge University Press, 2019, 384 pp.

Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment Is Killing America's Heartland

BY JONATHAN M. METZL. Basic Books, 2019, 352 pp.

The U.S. presidential election of 2016 altered the prevailing American ideology of race. Donald Trump's coy, borderline white nationalism helped turn people who previously happened to be white into "white people"—coded as white in an essential way, just as, for instance, black people are coded as black in an essential way. Many observers were slow to grasp the political ramifications of

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citizens who happen to be white voting first and foremost as white people. In the immediate aftermath of the election, commentators rushed to ascribe Trump's victory to economic disarray in the heartland and to a subset of voters lamenting their loss of jobs and stability. It took a couple of years for journalists, pollsters, and scholars to find a sounder explanation: by and large, most white Trump supporters were not voting out of economic self-interest; rather, they were resentful of social changes that threatened their taken-for-granted position atop a social hierarchy—despite the fact that the vast majority of those who held political power were white (and male), white families' wealth was still six and a half times as great as black families' wealth, and black families headed by college graduates had about 33 percent less wealth than white families headed by high school dropouts.

Three new books seek to validate this explanation and to answer a few crucial questions. What do these white people want? According to these authors, they want Trump, Brexit, guns, tax cuts, Republicans, Social Security, and Medicare. More than anything else, they want to protect their place atop society.

And what don't these white people want? Immigrants, Obamacare, and money for public schools. And above all, they don't want to be called bigots by multiculturalists; that kind of talk threatens them and encourages them to embrace white nationalism. They cannot imagine a multiracial society in which white people—however defined—peaceably take their place among others who are not white.

And who are these white people? That's what these books are about, and

that's what makes them both interesting and, ultimately, vexing. All three authors seem to believe that it is possible to understand whiteness ontologically, as a thing. But race is better understood as an ongoing discourse, not as a physical reality. Although racism and the discrimination that accompanies it clearly have measurable social and economic effects, race is a concept that should be described with verbs such as "to seem," as opposed to "to be." The belief in the reality of race as a biologically or otherwise fixed characteristic, however, is like the belief in witchcraft, as the sociologist Karen Fields said years ago: there's nothing one can say to disprove it. And, I would add, that belief produces clear political outcomes.

If there is no such thing as a stable, freestanding category of whites, how can one make convincing claims about whiteness and white identity politics? The solution to this problem, for these authors and many others, is to turn to data, measurements, charts, and graphs. Eric Kaufmann and Ashley Jardina analyze data from opinion surveys to make arguments about the roots of white resentment. Jonathan Metzl examines medical statistics and conducts interviews with individuals to understand why white-identifying people support a conservative political agenda that has had a deleterious effect on their own health and well-being. Kaufmann and Jardina focus on white identifiers' conservative politics but minimize the Republican Party's strategy of exploiting the enormous emotional power of whiteness to advance regressive taxation, limit the social safety net, and disempower workers. All three authors recognize that so long as white identity is

disconnected from economic (and, in the case of Metzl, biological) self-interest, politicians will remain free to pursue policies that benefit corporations and the wealthy but that do ordinary white people little good. But political issues that matter beyond white identity—for instance, voting rights and equal treatment under the law—hardly appear in these books. And none of the three books offers a convincing path out of the dangerous territory into which the United States has been thrust by white identity politics.

IF YOU'RE WHITE, YOU'RE ALRIGHT

Kaufmann is a professor of politics at Birkbeck, University of London. He is an expert on the politics of Northern Ireland and thus brings a sense of history to the subject of white identity, which he terms "white ethno-traditionalism." His book deals mostly with the United States, but Canada and Europe also come into view. By his reckoning, race is a genetic fact, and in a manner reminiscent of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century scientists' belief in temperamental differences based on race, he perceives a "white arch-type" that has certain recognizable cultural manifestations. He calls multicultural and multi-racial populations in Western countries "mixed-race" and uses the term "unmixed" with scare quotes but without irony.

Kaufmann explores the attitudes of white people who oppose immigrants and refugees and voted for Brexit or Trump and argues that most of them are not power hungry or antiblack. They're just normal human beings who, feeling threatened, are engaging in cultural self-defense. To prove that his claims rest on sound science, Kaufmann displays



Majority rule: supporters at a Trump rally in New Hampshire, August 2019

data in dozens of charts and graphs. But too often, they reduce or distort the reality they are supposed to represent. One chart, for example, shows two lines relating to the probability of someone voting for right-wing populists in a given country, correlated with whether the voter says safety is very important. The caption asserts that other variables were controlled for, but the reader is left wondering how that control has affected the stated probabilities. The graph offers no evidence for the direction of causation among the highlighted variables: the percentage of Muslims in the population, a person's level of concern for safety, and that person's propensity to vote for right-wing populist parties or candidates. But Kaufmann nonetheless suggests a particular causal direction, implying that the presence of Muslims stokes concerns about safety, which then encourage support for right-wing populists.

Kaufmann's main argument is that the kind of white identity politics that has taken the form of right-wing populism results from two threats: diversification through immigration, which reduces the size of the white majority, and an "anti-majority adversary culture" of "left-modernism," whose "most zealous exponents" inhabit college campuses, where they pursue their "mission of replacing 'whiteness' with diversity." Kaufmann claims that the "anti-white narrative" of "radical left-modernists" has pushed some white people beyond mere opposition to immigration into extremist theories of "white genocide." To help white-identified people pull back from such extremes, Kaufmann proposes remedies for the short and the long term. In essence, Kaufmann wants to save white people from themselves.

But some of his proposals seem less like antidotes to extremism and more

like accommodations to it. Take, for example, his suggestion for how to deal with the problems posed by refugees: keep them away from the majority white population and house them “on a long-term basis” in “camps” offering refuge but no prospect of permanent settlement. Such camps could be set up in “a less prosperous non-EU country like Albania.” Western countries that oppose refugees would be willing to fund such camps, he writes, because “they care more about the cultural impact of refugee settlement than the economic costs.”

Kaufmann’s long-term solution to prevent the spread of extremist white identity politics is to speed what he sees as an inevitable “white shift”: the emergence of a new definition of “white” that would include light-skinned people with heterogeneous ancestry and, at the same time, would conserve the “core myths and boundary symbols” of whiteness. Of course, this is a phenomenon that has appeared in U.S. history many times and in many guises. Over the centuries, as Kaufmann notes, definitions of whiteness have come to incorporate formerly denigrated groups, such as Irish Americans, Italian Americans, and Jewish Americans. Consider, too, the centuries-old practice of members of the many-hued African American population passing for white in a deeply racist society—a topic Kaufmann ignores. Kaufmann is surely correct that ideas about who counts as white are bound to change. In Kaufmann’s view, this shift will help maintain white supremacy. However, as I’ve written elsewhere, such an enlargement is in fact already weakening white supremacy by benefiting wealthy and educated people who do not identify as white.

To Kaufmann, the worries of “ethno-traditional nationalists” about “losing the country they know” are legitimate and not automatically worthy of condemnation. Those who condemn such thinking, he suggests, are peddling the “anti-white narrative” of the white-hating “modernist-left” and driving new followers into the arms of right-wing white nationalists. If these critics would just shut up, white people would settle down and admit other people into their world—provided they are light-skinned enough and willing to identify as white. But Kaufmann doesn’t explain how nonwhite people would fit into this new polity, with its newly entrenched and enlarged white majority. Nor, crucially, does he reflect on how such a polity would fare when it comes to protecting the fundamental values of liberal democracy.

FEAR FACTOR

Less polemic and more modest than Kaufmann’s book, Jardina’s study applies multiple regression, the most widely used of all statistical methods, to opinion polling data. Jardina, an assistant professor of political science at Duke University, controls for variables representing resentment of blacks, partisanship, gender, region, and political ideology and proposes to measure the influence of the degree to which white Americans identify as white, stripped of all other characteristics. Her measure of white identity has five categories, ranging from “being white is not at all important to my identity” to “being white is extremely important to my identity.” Then she checks whether this measure of white identity allows her to predict political attitudes. It does.

She writes that perceived threats to white supremacy—a nonwhite U.S. president, a Latina justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, affirmative action, college courses on race—have made white people feel “outnumbered, disadvantaged, and even oppressed.” Political responses have followed, as white voters have supported strict immigration controls and voter identification laws that reduce minority turnout. According to Jardina’s analysis, a strong sense of white identification predicts negative attitudes toward immigration and positive attitudes toward Social Security, Medicare, and the policies of the Trump administration. But, Jardina contends, white identification alone does not predict opposition to policies and programs often viewed through a racial lens, such as affirmative action, welfare, and Medicaid. Rather, opposition to those things correlates with a strong sense of racial resentment that is distinct from merely identifying as white.

Jardina’s methodology of applying multiple regression to opinion polling data is widely used in political psychology and other social sciences. But its pitfalls are well known, the most obvious being the problem of determining causality when the effects of certain variables are very small and predictions are therefore hard to make with confidence. A second pitfall lies in this methodology’s inability to characterize change over time—to capture changing behaviors as populations adjust to one another. There is, further, the temptation to search among possible control variables or among variables to predict in order to find positive results. These pitfalls suggest that one should be skeptical of,

for example, Jardina’s assertion that “desires to preserve Social Security and Medicare are rooted in white racial solidarity”—a claim that seems to ignore the role of class and age in support for such programs.

Perhaps Jardina’s most important argument is that “white identity is not defined by racial animus, and whites who identify with their racial group are not simply reducible to bigots.” Without passing judgment, Jardina writes that many white identifiers resent the notion that “expressing their identity would be seen, unfairly, as problematic or even racist.” She cites as an example of this dynamic an episode in 2015 when a deli owner in New Jersey posted a sign at his business reading, “Celebrate your White Heritage in March. White History Month.” The deli owner was baffled when some of his neighbors excoriated his sign as racist. But it’s difficult to accept that support for a hypothetical White History Month would indicate nothing more than a blameless expression of white racial solidarity, portending no ill will toward other groups. After all, what might be celebrated during White History Month? Would it highlight heroic white people such as the Founding Fathers, even though they are already broadly celebrated? Would it commemorate events in U.S. history such as the American Revolution, which very much included people of color? Would it herald the ethnic cleansing of Native Americans justified by Manifest Destiny? Answering the question of what White History Month might look like in practice would reveal the antidemocratic dimension of white identity and demonstrate why it cannot be celebrated as though it were historically neutral.

WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH WHITE PEOPLE?

It's not hard to see how ethnic and racial minorities—and the polity at large—might be harmed when white-identifying citizens decide to vote and organize specifically as white people. But to what extent does such political behavior actually benefit white people on an individual level? Metzl explores that question and finds that, at least in Kansas, Missouri, and Tennessee, white identity politics has resulted in physical and intellectual harm to some white people. Metzl, a medical doctor and a professor of sociology and psychiatry at Vanderbilt University, has produced a data-driven book that alternates between narrative and analysis. Metzl also relies on personal interviews to shed light on how public policy affects particular people and how they process the conflicts between their physical well-being and their political convictions. He wants to know why “lower- and middle-class white Americans vote against their own biological self-interest as well as their own economic priorities.”

Metzl begins in Tennessee with a white man he refers to as Trevor (Metzl uses pseudonyms throughout), who is poor, lacks health insurance, and suffers from an inflamed liver, hepatitis C, and jaundice. Trevor staunchly supports his state's refusal to embrace Obamacare by expanding Medicaid coverage, even though that refusal deprives him of the care he needs to save his life. “Of what was Trevor dying?” Metzl asks. The answer, he says, is the “toxic effects of dogma” and “American notions of whiteness.” That dogma, according to Metzl, equates Obamacare with intrusive government and intrusive government with

threats posed by Mexicans and “welfare queens.” Metzl calculates that “Tennessee's refusal to expand Medicaid cost every single white resident of the state 14.1 days of life,” presumably on average.

Metzl also examines the health consequences of Missouri's 2016 “constitutional carry” bill, a piece of legislation that dramatically widened an individual's right to bear arms in that state. He reports on conversations he had with members of a support group for people who have lost a loved one to suicide. Kim's father committed suicide with a gun after “he got worried about protection, security, you know, and terrorism and intruders.” For Metzl, “terrorism and intruders” translates into fears associated with immigrants and the country's first African American president. His nonwhite interviewees, less fearful of the unknown, are less attached to their rights to own and carry firearms. Kim joins all the others in her suicide support group in rejecting proposals to strengthen gun control, even given the near certainty that someone attempting suicide with a gun—statistically most likely to be a white man—will succeed. “It's not the gun's fault,” says one of the group's members. “Guns are important to us and to our liberties.”

But Metzl cannot come up with concrete means of saving white people's lives within the logic of whiteness. His main advice is that white people should be less fearful of social change; they should understand that it is not a zero-sum game.

NO WAY OUT?

Racial identity, these three authors realize, is a gut-level belief that's very hard to shake. U.S. history has shown the difficulty of getting masses of white

people to further their economic self-interest by banding together with nonwhites—which might explain why all three balk at advocating fundamental political change, at least in the short run.

All three of these books portray white identity politics as conservative and Republican, as if being white-identified leads in only one direction politically. Although they evince varying degrees of sympathy for such politics, all three concur that they are harming American society. Even though Kaufmann and Jardina see white identity politics as a normal response to perceived threats, they also see a need to pull back from a reactionary trend. Kaufmann says white people need “reassurance,” which will open the way “for a return to more relaxed, harmonious and trusting societies,” as when white people sat securely on top. Jardina is more fearful, seeing aggrieved whites as an “untapped well . . . ready to be stoked by politicians willing to go down a potentially very dark path.” Although she believes that an enlargement of whiteness (along the lines of Kaufmann’s white shift) will most likely occur, she sees it as insufficient. Like Metzl, she wishes white identifiers would become less fearful of social change. But she doesn’t suggest any particular means of encouraging that outcome. For his part, Metzl concludes with a plea for what he terms “white humility” and asks, “What might American politics look like if white humility was seen not as a sellout or a capitulation but as an honest effort to address seemingly intractable social issues?” If only white Americans would attempt cooperation rather than domination, American society might move away from “a biology of demise.”

It is true that vast numbers of white-identified people are unhappy with their loss of privileges. But those privileges depended on distortions of Western democratic values that produced a kind of hereditary aristocracy of whiteness. The question before Americans at this time concerns the value they place on their democracy when one of the country’s two main political parties has embraced antidemocratic leadership and policies. Democracy will suffer as long as the Republican Party continues to function as a white people’s party, as it increasingly does. The presidential election of 2016 offered some hope for the future, as some three million more voters opposed Trump than supported him. Now, three years later, the choice between Trump’s white nationalism and the multiculturalism of the Democrats appears even starker. One can only hope that increasing numbers of Americans will conclude that standing at the top of a racial hierarchy is not worth the loss of American democracy. 🌐