

The New York Times' Amanda Taub and "the crisis of whiteness"

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"The Interpreter" is a *New York Times* column by Max Fisher and Amanda Taub that pledges to explore "the ideas and context behind major world events." An interpretation no doubt, but on what basis and from what social vantage point?

Taub's November 1 article, "Behind 2016's Turmoil, a Crisis of White Identity," is one of many pieces in the American media that pin the blame for the unprecedented character of the 2016 presidential election on "white" defensiveness and resistance to change.

According to this line of reasoning, support for Republican Donald Trump has emerged from formerly "privileged" layers of the white working and lower-middle class, who feel threatened by the growing power of women, African Americans and other previously "marginalized" social groupings.

Several things are striking about Taub's article—first of all, its unseriousness and lack of substance. The comment does not reveal a trace of scholarship or depth. It is little more than a series of impressions and assertions, driven by reactionary, although unstated, political assumptions.

Who are the "experts," backing up her claims? They include Eric Kaufmann of Birkbeck College, University of London, whose sensationalized research about the influx of fanatically religious Muslims into the West (in *Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth?* and other works) has fueled anti-immigrant sentiment; Michael Ignatieff, former leader of Canada's Liberal Party, who defended the Bush administration's policies, including torture, in his *The Lesser Evil*; and Robin DiAngelo, whose "area of research," according to her website, "is in Whiteness Studies and Critical Discourse Analysis, explicating how Whiteness is reproduced in everyday narratives."

Another conspicuous feature of the November 1

column is the degree to which Taub and others like her are consumed with racist ideology. Her article cavalierly and recklessly makes assertions about "whiteness" and "white people's" beliefs and fears in a manner that bears a far greater resemblance to the outpourings of an Alfred Rosenberg, Nazi ideologist, than to any democratic tradition in the US. Such language and jargon have always been the preserve of the extreme right.

"Whiteness," Taub asserts, is more than simply skin color. It is the privilege of "not being defined as 'other.' [i.e., black, female, etc.]" This identity now "seems under threat." She continues: "For generations, working-class whites were doubly blessed: They enjoyed privileged status based on race, as well as the fruits of broad economic growth." Their "feeling of success may have provided a sort of identity in itself. But as Western manufacturing and industry have declined, taking many working-class towns with them, parents and grandparents have found that the opportunities they once had are unavailable to the next generation. That creates an identity vacuum to be filled."

"Doubly blessed"! What imaginary universe is Taub describing? The American working class, white and black, made progress in the postwar period on the basis of enormous struggles and sacrifices. The US capitalists have never given anything for free. Taub makes much of the fact that for a historically brief moment, as it turns out, many workers were able to lift their heads up and not lead lives dominated each day by privation and poverty. She clearly begrudges them that. In any case, as Taub herself admits, those "doubly blessed" conditions have been destroyed or significantly undermined.

Taub simply makes things up as she goes along.

She informs us patronizingly at one point that the loss of economic and social reassurance has accelerated a phenomenon known as “white fragility”—“the stress white people feel when they confront the knowledge that they are neither special nor the default; that whiteness is just a race like any other. Fragility leads to feelings of insecurity, defensiveness, even threat. And it can trigger a backlash against those who are perceived as outsiders.” This is simply foul rubbish. In fact, many white, black and immigrant workers identify correctly the forces that are destroying their lives—the banks, the conglomerates, the government. They are far less clear what to do about it.

Part of the anger felt by Taub and the *New York Times* editorial superstructure stems from the fact that the population is refusing the advice and admonitions of its “betters” by not obediently lining up to vote for Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party, the party of the status quo.

It is genuinely incomprehensible to the *Times* brain trust, very comfortably off and satisfied with the world as it is, why wide layers of the American people should be seething with anger. Taub and her colleagues earn hundreds of thousands of dollars a year, live in pleasant and commodious homes and apartments, have generous health care and retirement plans, vacation each year in warm climates, and so forth. What does an Amanda Taub, lawyer, academic and well-paid columnist, know about social misery in America?

More than 40 million Americans in 2015, at some point in the year, did not know where their next meal was coming from. Tens of millions live in or on the edge of poverty, with benefits and pensions eviscerated, real incomes falling, decent jobs disappearing. Life is an economic nightmare for a growing section of the population. Meanwhile, a handful of hated predators enjoy unimaginable wealth and privilege. Taub and her colleagues at the *Times* are far closer to the latter circles and circumstances than they are to the reality afflicting working class America.

The educated dunces who write about “the crisis of whiteness” always omit one fact, that America’s “white” population helped elect Barack Obama, twice. Obama has proved to be the direct instrument of Wall Street finance and the military-intelligence apparatus. Social inequality has grown to unprecedented heights under his administration; killings by drone and

undeclared, unauthorized war have been the centerpieces of his foreign policy. The past seven years have been a chastening experience. Many working class voters expect, or fear, the same from a Hillary Clinton presidency.

Donald Trump, a billionaire demagogue, has drawn strength largely from the popular disgust with Obama, Clinton and the Democrats, and their apologists like Taub and the *Times*. This reactionary bigot is able to make an approach to some sections of workers only because of the right-wing, pro-big business policies of the Democrats. “Trumpism,” with its fascistic overtones, would not exist save for the political vacuum created by the “left” obsession with race, sex and gender, which propels the suffering and desperate into the arms of the right wing.

If a white supremacist movement were to emerge, the arguments of Taub and others would not have to be altered much to serve as its ideological foundation. Turn Taub’s phrases around, and they can be used by any manner of ultra-right element. And make no mistake about it, if the political winds were to shift, and such a movement gained steam, some of today’s “identity politicians” would join up. There is nothing intellectually or morally to prevent them.



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