

Gest, Justin (2016) *The New Minority: White Working Class Politics in an Age of Immigration and Inequality*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK.

Review by Tim Francisco

The night before the presidential election, Justin Gest discussed *The New Minority: White Working Class Politics in an Age of Immigration and Inequality* at The Steel Museum in Youngstown, Ohio, where I have lived and taught for 13 years now. Youngstown is one of two ‘post-traumatic cities’ (the other is Barking and Dagenham, East London, U.K.) that are the case studies for his premise that the white working classes that built these once-thriving hubs have drifted toward marginality and ‘emerging radicalism’. The talk, and the book, now seems prescient given the victory that unfolded for President Donald Trump, thanks in large part to Rust Belt states like Ohio. Neither Youngstown, nor Mahoning County, went all in for Trump, but they did not turn out for Clinton in large numbers, while neighboring Trumbull County did swing Republican for the first time in decades.

Gest spent three months in Youngstown, and three months in East London, immersed in local culture, politics, and social life, and his research is the compilation of in-person interviews and survey data. The book explains the sense of disenfranchisement, loss, and frustration, linked to economic stagnation, globalization, and (more so in Barking and Dagenham than Youngstown) immigration, that has left the white working class feeling like a minority in the very communities it once dominated. By studying the two cities, the similarities between their socio-economic circumstances, and the responses to these challenges, Gest aims to show why white working class groups respond to these crises differently in terms of their political behavior—why some withdraw to the fringes of inactivity, as others embrace far-right politics.

In taking up this question, this book provides important contributions to the conversation about the ‘forgotten’ class, occurring just about everywhere in the post-Trump/Brexit era. One of the ways in which this study enriches the field is in Gest’s delineation of the relationship between citizens’ experiences of social deprivation, and the extent to which this influences political behavior. He accomplishes this by recording the symbolic repertoires his white working class subjects’ use to understand their subjective status deprivation. His findings suggest that while his British subjects see social positioning as linked to origin, Americans view social positioning as dependent upon income. For the British group then, deprivation and marginalization occurs as the result of ‘arbitrary favoring’ by a distant State of one group over another. For Americans, social position, as largely based upon wealth, is ostensibly surmountable in an economy that encourages individual agency. Gest’s argument for a correlation between degrees of perceived deprivation and tendencies to engage in anti-system behaviors makes excellent sense,

although his delineation of anti-system behaviors is, in places, speculative. The metric that provides one of the most glaring examples of a US white working class shift toward far-right radicalism is the large numbers of respondents (65 percent) who voiced support for a hypothetical third party centered on ‘stopping mass immigration, providing American jobs for American workers, preserving America’s Christian heritage and stopping the threat of Islam’, a platform that, as Gest notes, mirrors that of the British National Party (208). But, as Gest understands, politics are as much about candidates, histories, and more than ever, personalities. Because of this, support of a hypothetical party platform isn’t conclusive evidence that America’s white working class is embracing the far-right. It is, rather, one piece of a composite that seeks to explain political attitudes and behaviors as relational, according to subjects’ perceived positioning in social hierarchies.

It’s difficult to discuss white working class politics without attending to racism and xenophobia, particularly in the current political moment. Gest understands this, and he explores the implications of shifting formations of class-consciousness and mechanisms of social mobility with attention to the pejorative beliefs his subjects sometimes reveal. He does not level a blanket dismissal of white working class disaffection, or support for far-right politics, as solely a byproduct of racism or xenophobia, even as several of his subjects deploy coded (and not so coded) language and imagery of both, in their discussions of social programs, such as welfare in Youngstown and immigrant influx in East London. Instead, while acknowledging both racism and xenophobia, Gest broadens the discussion to articulate some of the causal factors for white working class perceptions of their own adversarial minority status. He explains that the decline of unions and the disinvestment in local politics that once provided some means of organizing around class-based interests, has, in part, fomented mobilization around a default identity of disenfranchised whiteness. Compounding this stymieing of a broad, inclusive, working class is the dominance of corrupt, single-party politics that has entrenched political apathy and withdrawal.

Gest also finds that the built environments of post-industrial cityscapes nurture a crippling nostalgia, acting as physical reminders of both loss and possibility, and that, in Youngstown, residents are ‘reluctant to alter the structure of their city, desperately preserving what’s left of a bygone era in anticipation of its resurrection’. To be sure, the nostalgic impulses here are strong, and can be debilitating, but I also wonder if this is becoming a rehearsed narrative, or perhaps a generational one. Recently, the city has accepted the help of the National Guard for a pilot demolition program, City Council is moving forward with a planned amphitheater and green space, and, despite what Trump promised, few are actually waiting for the mills to come back – in fact, the amphitheater will be built on the site of a demolished mill. Youngstown is trying to do what Gest urges in his conclusion: to ‘challenge nostalgia with hope’, but, as he makes plain, this requires opportunity for social and real capital, that, thus far, neither political party has delivered, for as he notes, working class voters ‘are rational’, and they want candidates to take their grievance seriously (200). What makes Gest’s book important, then, and a really good read, is his fundamental argument that the white working class has been adversely affected by myriad forces and systemic breaches—and that understanding these factors, along with their social, economic, and psychic effects is critical for any rebuilding of progressive working class politics.

Reviewer Bio

Timothy Francisco, PhD is Director of The Center for Working Class Studies at Youngstown State University, and professor in the Department of English.