Trump’s angry white men

Michael Kimmell looks at the plight of those who have lost out in America’s gender war

‘Is this a white country, or what?’ asks Andy, one of the middle-aged white men I am interviewing immediately after August’s demonstration of White Supremacists in Charlottesville, Virginia. He seems as bewildered as he is enraged, his voice snarling, and yet with a plaintive upward lilt at the end.

It is this enraged bewilderment that propelled Donald Trump into the Oval Office, a sense that something had changed, something fundamental, something foundational, in American society. Andy might just as well have asked: ‘Is this a man’s country?’

When I interviewed the ‘angry white men’ whose stories form the basis of my recent book, I picked up a sentiment among them. They told me how they felt pushed aside by Washington insiders, ignored by callous bureaucrats, and undone by a parade of others who challenge their previously unfettered access to the American Dream. Theirs were stories of marginalization, of being ‘kicked to the curb by a Washington elite’, as one of them put it.

Like many Americans, I didn’t see Trump’s victory coming. I underestimated both the depth and the width of this rage, and how others, including plenty of angry white women, might find resonance with it. I missed how the steady parade of events and statements that might easily have disqualified anyone else — anti-immigrant statements, admissions of sexual assault, racist statements about Latinos, coded racist statements about African Americans — barely made a dent in Trump’s appeal. Indeed, it only solidified the conviction among the angry white men that this was someone who felt their pain.

The groundswell had been building for some time. I first encountered what I came to call angry white men in the late 1990s, when I was asked to appear on a television talk show opposite three guys who felt they had been the victims of workplace discrimination. Each told his story, about how he was qualified for a promotion, or a job, that he did not get. And each was really angry. The title of this particular show was a quote from one of these men: A Black Woman Stole My Job. After each man had told his story, the attention turned towards me. ‘Well, professor,’ the host asked. ‘What do you have to say to these men?’

I said I had just one question for them, and it was about the quote that served as the show’s title. Actually it was a question about one word in the title. The word ‘my’. What made this guy think it was his job? Why wasn’t the episode called ‘A Black Woman Got the Job’ or ‘A Black Woman Got a Job’? Because these guys felt that those jobs were ‘theirs’, that they were entitled to them, and that when some ‘other’ person — black, female — got the job, that person was really taking ‘their’ job.

Sound familiar? Isn’t that exactly the sort of line echoing through America’s red states today? ‘We have to take our country back!’ shouts the Tea Party. Who is the ‘we’ in that sentence? What do they mean by ‘our’? Of course, the only people who could legitimately say that they have to take their country back are Native Americans. Everyone else came here on a boat, whether they wanted to or not.

White men’s anger comes from the potent fusion of two sentiments: entitlement and a sense of victimization. The righteous indignation, the anti-Washington populism is fuelled by what I came to call ‘aggrieved entitlement’ — the sense that those benefits to which you believed yourself entitled have been snatched away by
unseen forces larger and more powerful. You feel yourself to be the heir to a great promise, the American Dream, which has turned into an impossible fantasy for the very people who were supposed to inherit it. As I listened to these men, their anguish and despair turning to righteous rage at their downward trajectory in a country they found increasingly unrecognizable, I felt myself empathic. They were right; they had lost something. As they saw it, they had lost some words that had real meaning to them: honour, integrity and dignity. They had lost their autonomy, their sense of themselves as ‘somebody’. And, as I heard them say it, they had lost their sense of themselves as men – real men, men who built this country and who, in their eyes, are this country.

In Strangers in their Own Land, sociologist Arlie Hochschild describes the emotions with a stark image, most applicable to policies about immigration: Imagine you are standing in line. You’ve been waiting hours, patiently. Then, suddenly all these people you don’t recognize cut in front of you in line. ‘Hey,’ you say, ‘I’ve been waiting in line like everyone else! Wait your turn!’ Then a bunch of politicians show up and tell you to shut up, that these people have been historically shut out of even getting to stand in line and now they get to cut in front of you. That is how these men feel.

These are real feelings, but also fake news. After all, the states in which Trump scored his most lopsided victories are precisely those states that have the lowest rates of immigration in the nation. Those places that actually have experience with large numbers of immigrants were decidedly more welcoming to them.

That world in which white men grew up believing that they would inevitably take their places somewhere on the economic ladder, simply by being themselves, is now passing into history. Yes, it is true they stood in line, played by the rules and paid their taxes. It is the American Dream, the ideal of meritocracy. But that ideal misses how the deck was stacked in their favour for generations. They feel that anything even remotely approaching equality is a catastrophic loss.

The downwardly mobile, lower-middle class bought into the American Dream. They are true believers. To hear them tell it, if they worked hard, played by the rules and paid their taxes, they, like their fathers and grandfathers before them, could buy a home and provide for a family. (Actually, they just needed to show up. They worked, but on an uneven playing field.) But as I learnt interviewing these men, that Dream became a nightmare of downsizing, job loss, outsourcing, plant closures, shutting down the Ma and Pa store when Wal-Mart moved in, losing the family farm. These men feel like they are seen as failures; they are humiliated – and that humiliation is the source of their rage.

This humiliation is deeply gendered, because when I say they wanted to support their family, they wanted to do it by themselves. The downwardly mobile, lower-middle and working classes are the last men in our history to believe that they alone should support a family and that their wives ‘should not have to work’. The core feature of American manhood has always been as ‘breadwinner’. And they can’t do it anymore. A generation ago, in 1974, the median income (in 2014 dollars) for a family of four in the United States was $48,497. Forty years later, in 2014, it was $53,057, less than $5,000 more. And what is the difference between that family of four in 1974 and 2014? Mother is working.

Of course, women have always worked but we are talking ideology here, not history. And that helps explain how so many women ended up voting for Trump. Many of them voted not as ‘women’, but as ‘moms’ – working mothers who didn’t want to be working. They were true believers also, and they believed that their role was to raise the children and keep the home. When I interviewed Tea Party women a few years ago, many spoke of wanting their men to be the traditional heads of households, able to support their families. They wanted to live in a 1950s sitcom. And that 1950s sitcom proffered a very gendered world, a world of domestic patriarchy where ‘Father Knows Best’. Like in a fairy tale: ‘once upon a time’ the whole world outside the home was a locker room – a place where guys could be with other guys, relaxed in a casual camaraderie. The office was a locker room. The law firm, the hospital operating theatre, the academy – all locker rooms. The military, the government, even the locker room itself.

But now there are women everywhere, not just ‘entering’ the public arena but ‘invading’ what had been a formerly all-male space. ‘Where can a guy go these days,’ so many men ask ever so plaintively, ‘where he can just relax, say stupid stuff, be a jerk, and not worry about being so
Masculinity in crisis: relentlessly policed by women? And you wondered about the popularity of sports bars and man caves? Or the popularity of the ‘mansphere’, that area of cyberspace where women are routinely bashed rhetorically, and harassed and threatened if they dare to enter the space and question it.

Once, the world felt like a pristine homosocial Eden; today multiculturalism and feminism have transformed it into a terrifying arena; once men were kings even outside their castles, and now they feel they are walking on eggshells lest they be blamed for all the world’s problems. Their revolt is, therefore, nostalgic, pessimistic, reactionary. They yearn to return to that world of the 1960s ad man Don Draper, the world of their grandfathers.

Just listen to their language. ‘Make America great again’. ‘Take our country back’. And when they speak about manhood – or of identity more generally – they speak about what they must ‘retrieve’, ‘reclaim’, or ‘restore’.

Of course, it’s a fool’s errand. Women will not return to the home; a nation of immigrants will continue to welcome some newcomers. And even more than that, the demographic trends that have already been set in motion will not end. The year 2042 remains on the horizon as the year the US becomes a majority-minority nation. The generation that will be majority non-white in America has already been born.

Angry white men are hurt and angry and bewildered. They are right to be angry. They have been screwed. Heck, I’m angry too. But in the countless interviews I have conducted since the election, I always ask the same questions: was it immigrants who issued those predatory loans that lost them their homes? Was it feminist women who outsourced their jobs and created deals that let billionaires pay no taxes? Did LGBT people embark on ruinous trade deals? Of course it wasn’t. America’s angry white men are right to be angry, but they are delivering their mail to the wrong address. That mail is now a letter bomb, and it will take a nation to defuse it.

Populism is not a theory or an ideology, it is an emotion. And the emotion is righteous indignation that the government is screwing ‘us’. In 2016, there were two populist movements: the left populism of Bernie Sanders and the right-wing populism of Donald Trump. It is likely that the standard-bearer of left populism – a 76-year-old Jewish socialist – was not going to get anywhere near the White House in that election. But populism rode a tsunami of righteous entitled rage. The populism of the alt-right is the distorted mirror image of the populism of Bruce Springsteen, the poet laureate of the white working class.

At the end of my book, I recalled another president who faced a populist surge by disenfranchised and unemployed angry white men.Announcing the New Deal in 1932, President Franklin Roosevelt spoke of ‘the forgotten man’, suffering in the Depression, losing his farm, his livelihood and losing his way. Trump uses the same phrase and evokes the same forgotten man. FDR promised ‘to build from the bottom up and not from the top down’ as he implemented a huge government spending effort to put people back to work. Trump, by contrast, offers only the same failed trickle-down policies that enriched the few and impoverished the many.

Long after the smoke and mirrors of Trump’s promised economic policies, and after this mass hallucination that has many believing that rolling back environmental regulations and imposing draconian immigration policies will somehow restore America to its former glory, there will still be a future to build, and, I believe, a large number of white men will roll up their sleeves, alongside their neighbours, and put their shoulders to the wheel.

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