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Recommended Citation

Fuist, Todd Nicholas and Williams, Rhys. 'Let’s Call Ourselves the Super Elite': Using the Collective Behavior Tradition to Analyze Trump’s America. Sociological Forum, 34, S1: 1132-1152, 2019. Retrieved from Loyola eCommons, Sociology: Faculty Publications and Other Works, http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/socf.12537

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“Let’s Call Ourselves the Super Elite”: Using the Collective Behavior Tradition to Analyze Trump’s America

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Abstract

The mid-20th century “collective behavior” school asserted: (1) collective behavior—the actions of crowds, movements, and other gatherings—had distinct dynamics; (2) such action was often “non-rational,” or not governed by cost-benefit calculation; (3) collective behavior could pose a threat to liberal democracy because of these features. While this tradition fell out of favor, the 2016 election has given us empirical reasons to revisit some elements of collective behavior approaches. We argue for three key orienting concerns, drawn from this tradition, to understand the current political era. First is a focus on authoritarianism and populism, particularly among those who feel disaffected and isolated from political institutions, pared of psychologistic determinism and geared more sensitively to their manifestations as a political style. Second is a focus on racialized resentment, strain, and perceptions of status decline, especially in how such feelings are activated when people are confronted with disruptions to their lives. Third is an analysis of “emergent norms” and the extent to which political actors produce normative understandings of contextually appropriate action that are distinct from traditional political behavior. We elaborate on these themes, apply them to examples from current politics, and suggest ways to incorporate them into contemporary sociological research.

Keywords: Social movements, politics, collective behavior
In light of current events, fears of creeping authoritarianism have come to dominate academic concerns about American politics. The proliferation of new communications technologies have left many sociologists wondering if individuals are becoming too isolated - spending all their time glued to screens, alone in their homes, separated from the moderating bonds of community that have traditionally insulated people from political extremism. Prominent figures promote “strong man” politics, and rail against political and national enemies, both at home and abroad. These trends have led scholars to question whether the country is coming apart at the seams, even stirring fears of the potential for fascism in the U.S. to go beyond a minority wing of one political party and establish itself in state institutions and political culture.

We are referring, of course, to academic concerns articulated in the 1950s. Sociologists in a variety of subfields, and coming from divergent theoretical and political perspectives, dedicated grave attention to authoritarian tendencies, the atomization of social life, and the psychology of “the crowd” as they conducted study after study attempting to show that the fraying bonds of community could lead in dangerous directions. For example, the work of the Frankfurt School, including Theodor Adorno et al.’s (1950) *The Authoritarian Personality*, focused on the ability of demagogues to manipulate people into either complacency or fascism. This dovetailed with the political philosophy of Hannah Arendt (1951) who, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, saw mass populaces as acutely susceptible to propaganda and fear. Scholars of social movements, led by thinkers such as Robert Park and Herbert Blumer of the Chicago School, saw crowd psychology as the key to understanding how individuals could be mobilized into antidemocratic movements. These concerns were deeply colored by the recent memory of
Nazism in World War II, as well as ongoing anti-communist fears and racism in the U.S. Both the political left and right were worried about the future of liberal representative democracy. Despite our colloquial recollections of the 1950s as idyllic, many sociologists of the time thought of the decade less in terms of *Ozzie and Harriet* and more in terms of Stalin and McCarthy.

While these lines of thinking were diverse, in analyses of social movement theories they are often grouped in various ways into the “collective behavior” (CB) tradition (see Buechler 2000, 2004, 2011; McAdam 1982; Snow and Davis 1995). The CB tradition finds roots in several European theorists. For example, Emile Durkheim’s concern for social cohesion permeates mid-century CB theorizing. Alternatively, French social psychologist Gustave Le Bon (1895/1997) suggested that an individual in a crowd “descends several rungs in the ladder of civilisation,” becoming irrational, easily suggestible, and potentially prone to destructive behavior. This understanding was influential on those scholars of the Chicago School who understood collective behavior, including social movements, as emerging out of an initial inciting incident which created a shared object of focus that caused people to act aggressively as crowd behavior spread like a contagion (Blumer 1939).

While the various lines of thinking which were connected to these concerns at midcentury are diverse, with some drawing on Frankfurt School Marxism, others more on Durkheimian functionalism, there is no doubt that worries about “mass society,” collective behavior, and authoritarianism were widespread in the 1950s and early 1960s. Then, as the social movements of the late 60s and ’70s pushed for greater inclusion and liberation of marginalized people, sociologists began to change their perspective on collective action. The paradigmatic case shifted from European fascism to the U.S. civil rights movement. Mainstream theorizing about social movements began to cast them as rational actors who were mobilizing resources to
take advantage of political opportunities (McAdam 1982; McCarthy and Zald 1977). Social movement action became just another form of planned political involvement, rather than the extraordinary ‘moments of madness’ (Zolberg 1972) that many CB theorists examined. Part of the problem with the CB tradition was its legacy. Le Bon’s odious racism and sexism, or Lewis Feuer’s (1968) argument that student protest amounted to lawless Oedipal outrage, along with later CB theorists’ prevailing assumption that mass movements were typically antidemocratic, gave even the most sophisticated work in the tradition a stigma to later scholars. Studies of the potential authoritarian tendencies of Americans, or of the ways that collective behavior may be contagious, lost favor to studies that treated social movements both as rational and benevolent, essentially “politics by other means” by the wrongfully disenfranchised.

Yet the 2016 election, along with a number of recent socio-political developments, gives us reason to revisit the concerns of CB theorists. We don’t suggest a return to an inherently negative take on social movements, nor a focus on how psychological maladjustment may be responsible for collective action, but we do think there are insights in the CB tradition that were minimized in later scholarship but that may be useful for helping us to understand the events of 2016 and beyond. In this paper, we will highlight several key themes in the CB literature that we suggest may help us understand the contemporary political landscape in the U.S., then apply the ideas in question to current events and recent research. In particular, we suggest that analyzing (1) the overlapping dimensions of authoritarianism and populism, (2) the intersection of resentment, status decline, and the “disruption of the quotidian” (Snow et al. 1998), and (3) emergent norms, provides a useful theoretical lens through which to examine the current political moment. We conclude with suggestions for future research approaches that could draw on CB insights, incorporating them back into our sociological understandings of political action.
The CB tradition was varied, and had several theoretical progenitors from Durkheimian functionalism to Marxist theory. The early CB work in America, though, mostly emerged out of Chicago School theorists who were predominantly influenced by Simmel’s understanding of group interactions and Le Bon’s work on crowds. Scholars such as Park and Burgess (1921) and Blumer (1939) formulated early CB theorizing that ultimately fit into Blumer’s symbolic interactionist framework, using Le Bon’s understanding of the contagiousness of the crowd as a template for viewing most kinds of collective behavior, from mobs to social movements.

Collective behavior was seen as arising out of the interplay between individual psychology and shared agitation. Put simply, interacting with people who shared your mood and focus of attention, caused by some event, generated collective action. Psychological distress coming from social “strain,” in this viewpoint was the mechanism that connected societal events and contexts to group behaviors (Buechler 2000:20).

Meanwhile, in the 1940s and ‘50s, scholars such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and Hannah Arendt wrestled with the aftermath of Nazism. Horkheimer and Adorno’s (1944/2002) “The Culture Industry” presented a critical Marxist vision of the U.S. in the thrall of popular culture, which provided endless amusement at the cost of keeping citizens complacent and focused on consumer consumption. This dovetailed with a scholarly concern focused on media and “propaganda,” resulting from assessments of the successful ideological practices of the Nazis and Imperial Japan (e.g., Hoffer 1942). Adorno and Horkheimer saw the culture industry as potentially stirring antidemocratic impulses in people, impulses Adorno et al. (1950)
sought to measure in *The Authoritarian Personality*. That work took a psychological approach to understanding potentially antidemocratic sentiment, polling individuals on a variety of indicators to assess the degree to which they had fascist tendencies. While less influenced by Marx or Freud, Arendt (1951) suggested that societies where social classes, which had an organic base in their relationship to labor, had been converted to “masses,” amorphous groups that lacked such a connection, were ripe for mobilization into totalitarianism. Like Adorno, she saw mass propaganda as particularly effective in stimulating such efforts. Importantly, these versions of CB, concerned as they were with the “mass society” that emerged in modern capitalism, had an historicized assumption about collective behavior. They suggested that particular contemporary conditions had affected the socio-cultural contexts in which collective behavior occurred.

These various lines of thinking, the interactionism of the Chicago School, Marxist-influenced concerns about the potential for totalitarianism, and a more functionalist understanding of norms and institutions that was dominant at mid-century, came together in the heyday of CB theory 1950s and ‘60s. For the purposes of mining the CB tradition for useful theorizing to help us understand current U.S. politics, we turn to prominent work from this time period by William Kornhauser (1959), Neil Smelser (1962), and Ralph Turner and Lewis Killian (1957/1987), each of whom gave the CB tradition some of its most enduring, theoretically rich statements. Kornhauser explicitly brings together what he calls the “aristocratic critique” of mass society, associated with Le Bon, and the “democratic critique” of mass society, with Arendt as his exemplar, into a larger theory of collective behavior. The “aristocratic critique” sees the problem of mass society as elites who are too susceptible to the fickle masses via the engines of modern democracy. The “democratic critique,” on the other hand, worries that masses uprooted from traditional bonds of class and community are susceptible to mobilization by nefarious
elites. Kornhauser suggests that mass society is characterized by both of these things: an elite who are beholden to the masses and a populace who have lost the insulating bonds of community, rendering them easy prey for extremism.

For Kornhauser, people have traditionally acted to deal with problems in their community through the institutions in which they were embedded, such as unions or churches. Because people were dealing with local problems and acting through collective institutions, they could take rational, moderate action based on shared knowledge of the situation. Developments such as the rise of the mass media and the weakening of community institutions created a potential threat to democracy by focusing people’s attention on distant problems that they lack the experience and expertise to deal with, while they lose the moderating bonds of social groups. This produces a situation where elites can use the mass media to speak directly to the populace, whipping them into an undemocratic frenzy or focusing their attention on scapegoats for their problems. Conversely, it also creates a situation where elites are beholden to the masses who vote not only at the ballot box, but through the selection of “cultural leaders” in the media via the market. Essentially, Kornhauser suggests that mass society could create a democracy-threatening feedback loop wherein elites in politics and the media sell the masses extreme solutions to their problems and alienated masses hold elites accountable to their extreme rhetoric by voting with ballots, attention, and dollars.

As Buechler (2011) notes, Kornhauser was certainly incorrect in one empirical prediction about social movement mobilization. Kornhauser felt that isolated individuals, bereft of guidance by local institutions or social networks, were more likely to be swept up into collective action. Research in the last three decades has shown the opposite—people get mobilized through social networks, not as lone individuals. In that way, Kornhauser shared a concern with Eric Hoffer’s
(1951) The True Believer regarding the emotional vulnerability of those experiencing social isolation. Nonetheless, Kornhauser and Hoffer brought attention to the emotional and cathartic dimensions of collective action, something often overlooked in later analysis.

Influenced less by structural-functionalism and more by Blumer’s symbolic interactionism, Turner and Killian focus less on how the structure of society may contribute to anti-democratic possibilities and more on the crowd and its dynamics. They continue the interactionist emphasis on fluidity, spontaneity, and processual development in group interaction. They reject the Le Bonian idea that crowds are irrational as well as the notion that there is a “group mind,” but note that, nonetheless, there is something different about crowd behavior they seek to identify. They define crowd behavior broadly, seeing it as everything from people milling in an area, to a riot, to a social movement, to a “diffuse crowd,” dispersed over a large area, connected only via shared interests and focus.

Crowds of all kinds, Turner and Killian suggest, can result from a breakdown of social control that leads individuals to seek new guidelines for behavior or understanding. For them, ‘breakdown’ doesn’t necessarily lead to anomie or atomized individuals, susceptible to libidinal passions. Instead, “emergent norms” develop as people in crowds cue each other and begin to understand, often implicitly, the ways of being that allow them to negotiate their settings. Thus, Turner and Killian see crowds as a key mechanism for social and behavioral change – they may be a place where unpopular or denigrated ideas and behaviors are supported, including new or challenging political ideas and political styles.

Smelser’s “value-added theory” was a formal model, highly influenced by Parsonian structural-functionalism, that was part of a larger body of work focusing on “strain” as the cause of non-institutionalized collective behavior (see Gurr 1970; Gusfield 1963). For Smelser, a
number of conditions engender such behavior, including structural conduciveness, a shared belief, some kind of triggering event, and a failure of social control. When a group is facing social strain, such as an economic downturn, they may be mobilized into action around that strain and its suggested grievances or perceived solutions, given the other conditions being met. The target of such collective behavior may or may not be “rational,” in that it may or may not be genuinely related to the problem the group faces. Smelser notes that some collective behavior has an element of “wish fulfillment” in that participants direct their anger at something that will not actually alleviate the strain (“if we kick the immigrants out of our country, we’ll get our jobs back”), but regardless of its rationality, collective behavior, to Smelser, draws on beliefs and values that have permeated through a group of people, articulates their strains, and thus shapes the way they choose to undertake action to alleviate them.

**Applying the Themes of Collective Behavior to Contemporary Politics**

The CB tradition is broad and differentiated but, drawing on some of the exemplar work discussed above, we have identified three themes that have potential analytic purchase in helping us to understand contemporary U.S. politics. These are: (1) authoritarianism, with a shift in its focus from a personality type to a social support for right-populist politics; (2) status decline, and the extent to which this is perceived as a product of disruption and breakdown of the normal; and (3) emergent norms as oppositional reconfiguring of collective behavior. In this section, we will review current work from sociology, psychology, and political science, along with journalistic reporting on the 2016 election and its aftermath, to demonstrate the potential currency of these factors in contemporary politics, and the need for addressing revisions of these concepts to make
them more useful to on-going research. We then conclude with suggestions for using these concerns with two other orienting concepts in future sociological research, namely discourses and identities.

Authoritarianism, Populism, and Disaffection

Authoritarianism is a tricky knot to untangle, and sociology has largely ceded concern for authoritarianism, at least in the U.S., to psychologists and political scientists. Taub (2016), in fact, defines it as a “psychological profile” of those who value “social order and hierarchies, which bring a sense of control to a chaotic world,” placing authoritarianism directly in the purview of psychology. Adorno et al. (1959) famously saw people with the “authoritarian personality” as remarkably common. Contemporarily, these fears are reflected in such recent books as Levitsky and Ziblatt’s (2018) How Democracies Die, Stenner’s (2005) The Authoritarian Dynamic, and Hetherington and Weiler’s (2009) Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics. These authors suggest, similar to Adorno et al. over half a century ago, that authoritarian tendencies are both widespread and dangerous.

There are reasons to add nuance to these conversations, as several scholars have suggested the data show that fears of rampant authoritarianism in the U.S. are overblown. Research consistently finds overwhelming support for democracy among the U.S. public, as well as negative views on rule by a “strong leader” or “army rule” (Drutman et al. 2018, see also Lührmann et al. 2017). Drutman et al. (2018) find that, even among those who suggest they are dissatisfied with democracy, a majority still reject authoritarian alternatives. It is true that political views as expressed in survey data are often malleable, and many people feel little
pressure to be logically consistent in formal terms. In fact, political views tend to fluctuate dependent on whether the respondent likes the particular leader in question, for both Democrats and Republicans (Achen and Bartels 2016; Drutman et al. 2018). Because identity is a strong predictor of politics, the content of people’s opinions often vacillates more than what groups they align themselves with or distance themselves from. As with sports fans who can cheer a once-hated player who joins “their” team, many will view a “strong leader” favorably if they are “ours.”

And yet, despite this nuance in recent research findings, there is something going on in contemporary politics that calls for explanation. Hetherington and Weiler (2009) find that holding authoritarian beliefs, such as (1) dividing the world into “us vs. them,” (2) a desire to project strength, and (3) a fear of the breakdown of law and order, has increasingly become a key driver of the partisan divide in the U.S. We might question whether dividing the world into “us vs. them” is inherently authoritarian, but it certainly structures strongly held identities, particularly when the distinction among “us” and “them” has moral meaning. Hetherington and Weiler show that voters with such tendencies used to be roughly split between the two parties, but that partisan identity has increasingly correlated with authoritarianism. Since the Republicans branded themselves the law-and-order party behind the racialized politics of the Richard Nixon and then Ronald Reagan eras, authoritarian voters have sorted into the Republican Party, while non-authoritarian voters have become solidly Democratic.

Rahn and Oliver (2016) support this finding, noting that supporters of Donald Trump, Senator Ted Cruz, and Senator Marco Rubio all displayed similarly strong authoritarian views when compared to supporters of Hillary Clinton and Senator Bernie Sanders. Among Republican voters specifically, MacWilliams (2016) demonstrates that authoritarian tendencies strongly
predicted a vote for Trump over competing Republican candidates during the primaries. All of this suggests that, while a return to those CB approaches that saw authoritarians lurking all around us may be unfounded, it will be profitable to examine ‘authoritarian politics’ in the contemporary U.S. as a way of understanding both political styles and partisan identities.

Authoritarianism, though, can be conceptually complicated. Drutman et al. (2018) identify several traits of those who support authoritarian leadership, stating the “highest levels of support for authoritarian leadership come from those who are disaffected, disengaged from politics, deeply distrustful of experts, culturally conservative, and have negative attitudes toward racial minorities” (2018:5). These traits, in our estimation, do not necessarily point to authoritarianism in terms of an abstract preference for hierarchy and stifling dissent, even as they echo key CB concerns regarding the susceptibility to propaganda, distrust, and bigotry. Rather, they point to a particular, historically grounded political style that is currently referred to, often too casually, as “populist.” In trying to drill into the role of authoritarianism in the 2016 election, and to salvage authoritarianism from being overly psychologized and individualized, it is useful to think about the connections between authoritarianism and populism. They are not, in our view, conceptually or historically necessary to each other. That is, populist politics are not intrinsically authoritarian. Rather, they currently align as a result of distinct socio-political contexts.

Mudde (2004:543) defines populism as “an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, arguing that politics should be an expression of the [will] of the people.” Additionally, Mudde suggests that populism is a thin ideology, lacking deep rigor or specific policy proposals, allowing it to be combined easily with more robust ideologies of both the left and right. Similarly, Anselmi (2018:8) identifies three basic analytic traits of the populist
“configuration”: a homogenous community—people who perceives itself as the absolute holder of popular sovereignty and that asserts itself as an alternative to elite establishments; a leader who is directly connected to this community—people; and a communicative style that focuses on an ‘us-them’ distinction (see Aslandis 2018, who examines this cross-nationally). For both Mudde and Anselmi, the key distinction between the people and the elite is moral, with the “general will” of the people based on “common sense” that is directly available and potentially unmediated, fitting easily into the idea that populist politics can be expressed by strong, often personalist and potentially authoritarian, leadership.

Kazin (1998) calls populism “a persuasion” that is more “impulse than an ideology,” a language employed to persuade (3). Its flexibility has helped make it relevant and useful across time and issue areas, and with different social groups identified as “the people” or “the elite.” The populist persuasion posits a conflict over inequality, with the people protesting their powerlessness versus a controlling elite. What is more, for Kazin (2) the populist persuasion in the U.S. is a claim that “the powers that be are transgressing the nation’s founding creed.” Populists are affirming, not denying, the nation’s basic cultural and political worthiness; they are protesting inequalities without calling the entire system into question; they are making the debate one about who truly represents the essential “American” vision of what a good society looks like. Thus, populism aligns moral and political identities, potentially legitimating authoritarian leadership.

Rahn and Oliver (2016) compellingly argue that authoritarianism and populism overlap significantly, but are distinguished by the question of elite mistrust that is highlighted by Kazin, Mudde, and Anselmi. Authoritarians typically wish to submit to the will of strong leaders, while populists tend to distrust authorities whom they see as usurping the will of the people,
highlighting the us vs. them element of populism. As such, Rahn and Oliver argue, we can compare voters in the primaries among both Democrats and Republicans along these two dimensions to paint an interesting picture. Republicans who supported Trump, Cruz, and Rubio all displayed highly authoritarian tendencies. What separated Trump voters from supporters of the other Republican candidates was a populist mistrust of elites. Bernie Sanders voters scored high on anti-elitism as well, yet Sanders supporters trusted experts, though not authorities, while Trump supporters mistrusted both. Rahn and Oliver caution that the picture isn’t as simple as “authoritarianism drove support for Trump.” Rather, there are a series of variables, including authoritarian tendencies, mistrust of elites, and mistrust of experts, which may have shaped voters’ choices.

Rahn and Oliver’s findings reveal that another CB concern may be important to examine: disaffection. The effects of alienation and isolation have been a concern in sociology from the early days of the discipline, and such disaffection seems to be driving support for Trump among segments of the electorate. Recall Drutman et al.’s (2018:5) finding that respondents in their study who were “disaffected, disengaged from politics, [and] deeply distrustful of experts” were the most likely to hold pro-authoritarian viewpoints. Recent ethnographic work on rural conservatives reveals a wellspring of disillusionment. The rural Wisconsinites interviewed by Cramer (2016) indicated that they felt “systematically ignored” and deeply estranged from various institutions in society, from the government to the economy to higher education. This led to resentful, anti-government/elite feelings. Hochschild (2016), Burke (2015), and Gest (2016) highlight similar themes of resentment and alienation among conservatives. Gest (2016:21), for example, finds that the white, working-class conservatives he studied felt a deep sense of “externality,” in that they perceived themselves to be excluded from “representative
government… popular entertainment, public institutions, and employment” (see also: Williams 2009). In each of these works, people who feel ignored yet also see themselves as “real,” hardworking, moral Americans (see Cramer 2016:66-67), sought to express a politics that places the will of the people above the authority of elites.

Kornhauser (1959) would see this as a clear expression of populism in mass society. He suggests that mass society pushes towards populism in politics via mass culture because the dominance of the mass media means that an appeal to the widest possible audience swamps the particularistic, local, or subcultural. People, in mass society, are a market, and are treated as such by a variety of authorities and institutions. This creates “mass standards” that negatively affect local cultures and, in words that Cramer (2016) and Miller et al. (2016) would later echo, can be “readily used by mass-oriented elites as bases for manipulating and mobilizing large numbers of people” (Kornhauser 1959:103). Ultimately, Kornhauser (103) suggests, the fickle and easily manipulated sentiment of the crowd is a threat to “the defense of basic institutions, especially liberal democracy” because disaffected masses elevating the will of the people can be convinced that anything which appears widely supported is justified.

Donald Trump’s personal style, campaign, and current presidency seems to validate Kornhauser’s observation. Certainly, Trump is acutely obsessed with the “will of the people,” as long as that can be expressed quantitatively as “more” or “less.” From his preoccupation with the size of his inaugural crowd, his own popularity as revealed in poll numbers, his wealth, and his TV ratings, Trump emphasizes the validation of the people who support him using criteria that equate quantity with quality. “More” is better; moreover, “more” is true. The focus on and valorizing of the “popular” ignores standards of approval generated by cultural or political elites.
Indeed, Trump’s policy preferences are notoriously fickle, sometimes shifting with whatever gets him the best response from an audience.

Additionally, recall that Kornhauser suggested that a key element of mass society is elites’ abilities to communicate directly to masses, as well as elites who are beholden to the fickle will of the people. On the one hand, Trump was a candidate with an exceptional ability to speak directly to what Kornhauser might see as “leveled” masses through the mass media.

Mussgrave and Nussbaum (2018) find that Trump did significantly better than Clinton in areas that are “news deserts,” with a lack of robust, local news (see Miller et al. 2016). They conclude that “there’s no doubt that a lack of trusted local media created a void that was filled by social media and partisan national outlets,” Trump’s preferred communication tools. His message to his base was one of elevating “the people” above “the elite” who ignore their sovereignty. At a June, 2018 rally in Fargo, North Dakota, Trump told the audience:

> They call them the elite. These people. I look at them, I say, that’s elite? We’ve got more money and more brains and better houses and apartments and nicer boats. We are smarter than they are. They say the elite. We are the elite. You are the elite…. Let’s call ourselves the super elite. (Graham 2018)

While bragging about having better boats is a strange kind of elitism, we nonetheless see that Trump, here, rejects a hierarchy that would disadvantage his base, casting himself as the embodied representative of popular will against the failure of the elites.

We see here all of the concerns Kornhauser suggests about populism in mass society: (1) masses who feel disconnected from institutions, (2) who are treated like a “market,” merely picking between packaged products to signal their consumer choices by
(3) elites who can communicate directly to those masses through their command of media, and (4) elites beholden to the will of the people (rather than, say, rational-legal institutional codes). In fact, Carmines et al. (2016) suggest that Trump’s win happened because he held on to the bulk of Republican partisans while also appealing to populists, who have traditionally been more split between the parties. Elite discourse, they argue, tends to package specific policy and ideology bundles together into neat “Democratic” and “Republican” positions, but many average Americans have beliefs and values that don’t conform fully to either party (see Baldassarri and Goldberg 2014). White populists, many of whom hold economically liberal positions coupled with culturally conservative views, have traditionally been divided between the two parties, but Trump’s direct appeal to such voters helped him win both the primary and the general election by shifting the coalitions in play:

White populists are the most likely to think that immigration takes jobs, to agree that government should discourage outsourcing, and to favor the use of torture. And while Trump’s positions on these issues were attractive to populists, these citizens are the second most pro-Democratic Party group (55 percent identify as Democratic but only 27 percent identify as Republicans). Further, White populists are the second most likely ideological group to think that Blacks have too much influence on politics and thus may not be as bothered by Trump’s racially-oriented campaign. (Carmines et al. 2016:390)

Additionally, as Kornhauser might predict, Carmines et al. note that Trump was able to use both the traditional media and social media to speak directly to this valuable audience
(see also: Sides et al. 2018). However, despite the evidence that populism played a role in
the presidential election, a number of contemporary researchers would point out that this
understanding of populism and authoritarianism as the overlapping, driving dimensions
of Trump support leaves out a key element hinted at by the final line of the quote from
Carmines et al. above: bigotry, resentment, and power devaluation.

Declining Status, Racial Resentment, and a Sense of Breakdown

While the news media initially focused on purported “economic anxiety” as pushing
Trump support, researchers consistently drew attention to the degree to which racial resentment
and perceptions of a decline in status better correlated with a vote for Trump than economic
variables. Mutz (2016) shows that a decline in income or a perceived lowering of economic
standing between 2012 and 2016 did not significantly impact the likelihood of Trump support.
Rather, Mutz’s research concludes that changes from 2012-2016 “in indicators tied to
racial/global status threat were far more influential as… predictors of greater likelihood of
Republican vote choice” (5). This leads Mutz to suggest the key variable for many Trump
supporters is concern about white/American status decline relative to nonwhites, immigrants, and
other countries.

As McVeigh (2009) shows, conservative reactions to white status decline from
immigration and changing racial composition have a long history, affecting Ku Klux Klan
membership as far back as the 1920s. A number of recent ethnographies have documented both
the racial animus and resentment that many whites feel with regard to their social status (see
Wuthnow 2018). As Gest (2015:16) states,
…white working class people’s rebellion is driven by a sense of deprivation…

More specifically, white working class people are consumed by their loss of social and political status in social hierarchies, particularly in relation to immigrant and minority reference groups. Their politics are motivated and pervaded by a nostalgia that reveres, and seeks to reinstate, a bygone era.

Gest (16) also found that the whites he spoke with, “believe that minorities have been given social advantages at the expense of white working class people.” This was a key element of the “deep story” told by the white conservatives Hochschild (2016) studied, who saw themselves as struggling while other people (nonwhites, immigrants) got to “cut in line” ahead of them. Unfairness, and a perceived violation of moral standards, is mapped on to racialized and classed identities. Similarly, Cramer (2016:61) found that the conservative, rural, white Wisconsinites she interviewed had “a strong sense that urbanites get the resources and make the rules and are dismissive of the needs and concerns of rural people.” Burke (2015:98) also discovered consistent feelings of “disenfranchisement” among Tea Party activists, noting widespread concerns about “the declining middle class, about unemployment… watching rural communities decline and watching their kids and grandkids struggle.”

Another key element of the status decline felt by many whites is racial resentment. Echoing Drutman et al.’s (2018:5) finding that support for authoritarian tendencies is connected to “negative attitudes toward racial minorities,” Miller and Davis (2018:20) note that “White Americans who do not welcome the presence of immigrants/foreign workers, people who speak a different language, or people from a different race, are much more likely to value an institutional alternative to democracy,” such as army rule. Bonikowski and DiMaggio’s (2016)
analysis of “restrictive nationalists, who defined being American in exclusive ways but felt let down by their country, would predict this. In their words, “restrictive nationalists’ preoccupation with boundaries, combined with their relatively weak pride in the nation’s accomplishments, generalizes to negative views of minorities and of immigrants, as well as fear of many kinds of penetration of the nation’s boundaries” (968). Certainly, in the ethnographies mentioned previously, white Americans regularly voiced their resentment at people of color and immigrants, as well as suggested they had been left behind by the country they loved (Burke 2015; Gest 2016; Hochschild 2016; Wuthnow 2018).

These two themes: racial resentment and status devaluation, are bolstered by experimental data that finds reminding whites that they may become a numerical minority in the future raised support for Trump (Dover et al. 2016) and decreased support for welfare, which they perceived as primarily benefitting nonwhite recipients (Wetts and Willer 2018). This is consistent with traditional CB ideas about strain, threat, deprivation, and status devaluation. Mobilization, in Smelser’s (1962) value-added theory, emerged out of a perceived strain or status decline as one saw the conditions of society changing or felt deprived when compared to others (see also: Gurr 1970). Similarly, Gusfield’s (1963) classic work on analyzed the prohibition movement in the early 1920s as a “symbolic crusade” aimed at bolstering the declining status of native-born Protestants vis-a-vis immigrant Catholics who came to the U.S. between 1890 and 1920. Alcohol consumption, or abstinence, became a key identity marker, distinguishing those of moral uprightness or perfidy, and was further posited as important to national well-being. It is no coincidence that the U.S. outlawed liquor and closed the doors to immigrants within two years of each other.
What has caused this sense of socio-moral threat and resentment of status decline among Trump supporters? Once again, classic CB theory points us in a useful direction: the disruption of the quotidian. In their piece on CB “breakdown theories,” Snow et al. (1998) use the apt phrase “disrupting the quotidian” to refer to the experience of having one’s everyday routines violated. This, the authors note, is a larger theme in CB literature- when routines are interrupted, collective action becomes more likely. Earlier CB theorists such as Smelser (1962) tended to see this in terms of a larger societal breakdown that created “strains” in society, or with regard to the “anomic” states of individuals. Later theorists challenged these ideas, noting that movements are not necessarily more likely during times of breakdown and individuals who join movements tend not to be isolated. Snow et al. note, however, that there are other, more fruitful ways to think of “breakdown,” including intrusion into the private and protected, changes in taken-for-granted subsistence routines, or shifts in the structures of social control. We would argue that certain aspects of contemporary society have actually increased the degree to which these disruptions are felt by people, in ways that help us better conceptualize the contemporary political landscape.

As Edelman (1988) notes, political news is in the business of creating “spectacle.” Rather than merely a presentation of facts, political news is designed to use symbols and appeals to identity and emotion to construct a reality. Edelman, writing in 1988, could not have foreseen the rise of increasingly partisan cable news and the endless proliferation of internet punditry, yet the 24-hour, on-demand news cycle inherently means that the spectacles created by the news are available to us at all times, often literally in our pockets. Video of terrorist attacks, news about school shootings, footage of police violence, and reports of sexual assaults are presented to audiences on a dispiritingly regular basis, often paired with interpretation by either professional commentators or members of the digital crowd. Effectively, people really are confronted with
more “spectacle” than before. Images of black death at the hands of police, children in tears after school shootings, and offensive leaked recordings of the President, along with the incensed commentary that accompanies such events, intrude into our consciousness almost constantly, not to mention the more banal, yet stressful, ubiquity of advertising and other stimulation. While such concerns are often publicly dismissed as manufactured outrage or excessive sensitivity, perhaps we would find more sociological purchase in seeing the current era as one where the quotidian faces radical disruption on a regular basis.

We can see a number of contemporary socio-political phenomena as a result of how the disruption of the quotidian creates feelings of status decline or threat, and not exclusively among white Trump supporters. People often mobilize around perceived threats (Maher 2010) and, unsurprisingly, the moral shocks (Jasper 1997) of seeing images of police brutality replayed endlessly on social media, the election of a president who bragged about sexually assaulting women, and the Parkland school shooting contributed directly to Black Lives Matter, the Women’s March, and the March for our Lives, respectively. All of these are examples of the kinds of disruptions that Snow et al. (1998) suggest may trigger social movement action. The Parkland shooting represented an intrusion into a routine place normally considered safe. Images of police brutality challenge notions of social advancement and security for African-Americans. Similarly, such images, along with the election of Trump, certainly represent changes in the structure of social control to many Americans who may find themselves losing trust in existing authority figures.

Additionally, we would note that CB theory, along with contemporary work on identity in politics, would note that perceived disruptions are as important as “real” disruptions (see Longo and Baker 2014). This suggests that examining how threats to everyday life are perceived
and constructed is important. Trump is, undeniably, a master of “disrupting the quotidian.”

Assisted by conservative media outlets, Trump regularly stokes fears among his base that immigrants threaten Americans’ resources and safety. Conversely, the near constant barrage of salacious political news that intrudes regularly into everyday life threatens the quotidian for Trump detractors. Additionally, because digital media tends to function on an attention economy, any spectacle that sends people rushing to screens feeds the system, encouraging ever more disruptions.

Certainly, the critiques of breakdown theories are correct: strains by themselves are not enough to create a social movement. Yet, if we take Snow et al.’s more nuanced understanding of breakdown, and couple it with what we have learned about politics, meaning, and identity since the original CB theories, we can begin to construct an understanding of how the near constant disruptions of everyday life in our contemporary political landscape may engender mobilization. Additionally, by understanding when disruptions of the quotidian become connected to status decline and resentment, we can see how the constant barrage of both “real” and “perceived” disruptions via ubiquitous media nurture feelings of strain, status decline, and resentment in many Americans. However, we need to account for political action, as well. How does one move from populist sentiments and a feeling of status decline to action? For that, we turn to the idea of emergent norms.

*Emergent Norms*

By a number of measures, hate crimes have risen in the U.S. over the last three years. For example, after a six-year decline, hate crimes have increased dramatically each of the last three
years in California, including hate crimes against Latinos jumping 51% since 2016, against Muslims 24%, and against Jews 27% (Porter 2018). While we acknowledge the potential problems with hate crime tabulation and reporting, we take seriously the suggestions that Trump’s behavior and rhetoric with regard to race and religion have facilitated the increases (Mindock 2017; Palmer 2018; Porter 2018). Certainly, the timing raises the possibility. Six years of falling hate crime numbers ran into reversals as Trump became a major national political figure; it would suggest that Trump’s rhetoric and political style matter in shaping people’s behavior. CB theorists, worried about the influence of elites on fickle masses would undoubtedly suggest as much.

While it is difficult to measure directly the effects of elite discourse on individual action, it is difficult to ignore media stories of high school sports fans in California, Utah, and Washington chanting “build that wall” at opposing teams composed of Latino players. Some social science research also points to the possibility that Trump’s rhetoric has shaped recent political behavior. Stenner (2005), for example, argues that perceived normative threats “activate” authoritarian impulses, stirring in some the desire to try and create assurances for themselves. Her research suggests that, indeed, the disruption of the quotidian, creating feelings of threat, causes latent authoritarian tendencies to bubble to the surface. Gilens and Murakawa (2002), in a review of the literature on elite cueing in politics, find that research strongly supports the notion that elites provide guidance for how to activate such assurances against threat. They do this through providing heuristics that allow people to make sense of issues, particularly complicated issues, reducing them to more comprehensible chunks. Additionally, audiences often use motivated reasoning, seeking out elite cues that already match their values and viewpoints on the world (see also, Lenz 2013). While it’s difficult to demonstrate that elite
behavior *causes* changes in peoples’ actions, given the existing authoritarian, populist, and racist sentiments discussed above, it is easy to imagine how Trump’s campaign rhetoric and behavior in office could have provided cues and legitimacy for people, activating tendencies that might have been previously submerged (see Sides et al. 2018).

Additionally, there is evidence that such cues can exacerbate the values and behavior they suggest. Schmuck and Matthes (2017), for example, find that anti-immigrant advertisements by right-wing parties in Europe strengthened animosity towards immigrants in their experiment. Outside of the laboratory setting, Smith (2017) documents a case where the “illegal Latino voter narrative” created a situation in which *all* Latino voters were seen as suspect, thus pushing poll workers to do things such as ask Latinos for IDs when they went to vote. More anecdotally, Trump rallies have often featured violence against protesters and acts of hostility towards the media, often stoked by Trump himself, by suggesting that protesters should be punched, that he would pay the legal fees of anyone who clashed with protesters, and calling the press “the enemy of the people” (Lind 2016; Tisdall 2018). Taking all this together, it’s not difficult to imagine that Trump’s rhetoric, focus on certain topics and issues, and bellicose style have shaped or legitimized the political beliefs and public behaviors of some in this country.

Indeed, Turner and Killian (1957/1987) would suggest as much. Their “emergent norm theory” postulates, against earlier CB theorists who saw “crowd” behavior as anti-social, random, or irrational, that people in groups typically follow behavioral norms when acting. What changes are the norms themselves. When situations are confusing, new, or multifaceted, the taken-for-granted norms that typically govern behavior may seem inappropriate, outdated, or ill-equipped for the new situation. As a candidate and then as President, Donald Trump has consistently broken normative political expectations, such as casting aspersions on a sitting
Senator with a distinguished military record, or giving political opponents belittling and derogatory nicknames. As is often noted, he has dispensed with “dog-whistle” references to racialized prejudices, instead expressing openly his distaste for members of minority racial and religious groups.

Given the new digital media landscape, the entrance of atypical political actors such as Trump, as well as Senator Bernie Sanders, and the decline in status felt by many, it’s easy to imagine how people may have been primed for following new, “emergent” political norms that suggested different ways to act in public were not only legitimate, but marked one as having the important identity of not being a “loser,” (one of Trump’s favorite epithets). These behaviors were particularly evident in campaign rallies, where crowd approval was loud and vocal. As President, Trump continues to make public appearances that have the atmosphere of campaign events rather than public speeches by a statesman, the events seem to have some of the same cathartic release for participants. Trump himself acknowledged this shift when he defended his undisciplined and incendiary Twitter rhetoric as “modern day presidential.”

The abnormal nature of the 2016 election, then, with outside-the-box political actors, very different rhetoric and discourse than previous elections, confusion about likely outcomes, and redrawn lines of allegiance, provided the space for social actors to seek out new ways to express themselves and act politically. Previously anathema sentiments, such as the open expression of white supremacy or actively calling oneself a socialist, have entered the public dialogue as older political norms break down. Trump himself, through his bellicose style and eschewing of traditional rules of order, provided elite cueing for large swaths of the electorate who received via his example emergent norms for legitimate political behavior (Sides et al. 2018).
A Synthesis for Future Sociological Work

Taken together, the various ideas we have discussed present a somewhat clearer picture of 2016: widespread populist and anti-elite inclinations coupled with a mistrust in political institutions, authoritarian tendencies as a growing dividing line between the left and the right, and racial resentment/fear of declining status among many (white) folks, all contributed to Trump support. Trump was able to use his economically protectionist, culturally conservative, nativist, racist, and authoritarian rhetoric to capture parts of the electorate that had often been more disparate, while holding on to enough mainstream Republicans to eke out an unlikely popular vote loss/Electoral College win. Additionally, his example has cemented the shift in norms of political behavior for many, allowing for more open expression of racialized resentments, xenophobia, or authoritarian tendencies than has been accepted in at least a half-century. Taking this view forward, what can sociologists learn from the 2016 election for future research?

Thrice married cultural conservative Newt Gingrich is often asked how he can promote “family values” while not always living them. Gingrich typically responds "It doesn't matter what I do… People need to hear what I have to say” (Richardson 2010). Hypocrisy and privilege aside, Gingrich is, speaking a great truth about politics when he responds in this way: ‘it’s the discourse, stupid.’ When we examine the CB themes discussed in this paper- authoritarianism and its connection to right-populism, racialized resentment and status decline, emergent norms, and disrupting the quotidian- we may sidestep some of the pitfalls of the classic CB approaches by focusing on discourse and identity. Mid-century CB theorists tended to focus on (a)
psychological states and (b) the degree to which these states were or were not “rational,” or based in readings of structural situations deemed “real” by the theorists. However, we suggest that there is more sociological purchase in thinking about these themes less as psychological states and more as discourses. This allows us to hook these resurgent CB themes into contemporary research in social movements and politics in fruitful ways. We turn now to outlining a theoretical path forward that highlights CB themes while avoiding the problems of the tradition. In particular, we suggest that (a) by understanding authoritarianism and populism as discourses as opposed to personality types, and (b) by incorporating CB insights with contemporary work on identity, we can generate a fruitful research agenda to understand contemporary politics.

First, a key finding of contemporary work on social movements and politics is the importance of discourse, understood in a variety of ways. From Edelman’s (1988) aforementioned work on the construction of spectacle via the language of political news, to Snow and his coauthors’ (Snow et al. 1986; Benford and Snow 1988) work on framing, to more recent work on social movement narratives (Braunstein 2012; Polletta 2006) and political talk (Eliasoph 1998; Harris-Lacewell 2004; Perrin 2006), a great deal of work has highlighted that how politics is discussed matters deeply for how people understand issues and actors. While CB theorists tended to focus on personality or psychological states as the key dimension in understanding authoritarianism, populism, or status decline, we suggest we are better served by understanding these CB concerns in light of contemporary work on political discourse.

Certainly, concerns about status decline emerge from narratives presented to audiences, often by political elites. Trump himself, along with the conservative media, have pushed a narrative of white American decline relative to nonwhites, and U.S. decline relative to other
countries. Trump’s continuous hammering of the themes that the U.S. has been “losing” internationally or that immigrants have been threatening the American way of life have cemented this narrative in the public discourse. Similarly, Trump’s authoritarian rhetoric frames issues in such a way as to render such statements acceptable and the problem as unilaterally fixable. Certainly, personality and psychology matter—some people have greater tendencies towards authoritarianism than others. Yet the aforementioned research that showed support for authoritarian statements rising or falling depending on who is in office suggest that it’s not merely as simple as “some people are authoritarian.” Rather, the context matters for who is comfortable expressing authoritarian sentiment.

This is already present, to a degree, in CB theory. As discussed earlier, emergent norm theory suggests that new norms allow people to devise behavioral patterns and understandings when situations are confusing. This theory provides a useful theoretical bridge between discursive concepts like framing and narratives and the actual behavior and beliefs people undertake and hold with regard to politics. As people seek to make sense of the world, particularly given the ongoing disruption of the quotidian discussed earlier, the proliferation of narratives and frames provide them with ways to talk and behave with regard to politics. Trump’s discursive framing of issues, as such, has created new political norms for swaths of the American electorate.

And yet the individual is not wholly absent in contemporary work on politics and social movements (e.g., see Jasper 1997 on “biography”). Authoritarian appeals are more likely to resonate with some over others. Yet rather than focus on “personality,” we advocate an approach that will invoke the concept of identity, both individual and collective. Merging contemporary work on identity and CB concerns can shed light on some of the processes we have seen in
recent years. For example, ethnographies of conservative Trump supporters, referenced above, tend to highlight what we might see as the connection between “strain,” identity, and discourse. The rural conservatives studied by Gest (2016), Hochschild (2016), and Cramer (2016) had a deep sense of what Cramer called “rural consciousness,” or “a sense that rural folks are fundamentally different from urbanites in terms of lifestyles, values, and work ethic” (5-6). They derived a sense of identity from a combination of work, faith, family, community, and politics, and drew sharp boundaries between themselves and urbanites, liberals, and nonwhite persons—boundaries that are simultaneously cognitive, affective, and moral. They experienced what Gest calls “externality,” a feeling of profound alienation from institutions. Additionally, the “deep story” (Hochschild 2016) that animates their lives is one of deprivation and status decline. Others (particularly urbanites and nonwhites) have received more than they have while they have seen their livelihoods stall and their communities face decimation. What’s more, the researchers find that people felt a constant stream of negativity was directed at them by those on the other side of the boundary, calling them racist, stupid, and old-fashioned. Far from feeling dominant, they nurture perceptions of persecution, yet moral valorization (Williams 2009). Sides et al. (2018) support this, finding that racial, ethnic, religious, and other salient identities were the driving factor in explaining the outcome of the 2016 election (see also: Achen and Bartels 2016).

It’s easy to imagine how Trump’s anti-elitist appeals to populism, authoritarian nostalgia for the “good old days,” and focus on the status decline of white Americans and the U.S. more broadly, might resonate with people who deeply feel consistently deprived and insulted, providing emergent norms for how to engage with politics. Additionally, we can see how the moral shock (Jasper 1997) of Trump’s election might jumpstart the high level of movement action and resistance to the Trump administration seen since the election.
In other words, the concerns of CB theorists, too often moved to secondary status in the sociology of politics and social movements, may be worth looking at with new, sober eyes. We do not suggest a full return to psychologically-oriented theories about the irrationality of collective behavior. We do suggest, however, that sociologists cannot ignore the themes of authoritarianism/populism, status decline, breakdown, and emergent norms in their empirical and theoretical work. Particularly when we (a) understand these themes less as the qualities of individual personalities and more as part of a discourse that (b) resonates with and provides material to construct individual and collective identities, we see the potential for a conceptual synthesis that helps make sense of the contemporary political moment. As some in political science and psychology are conducting interesting work on these topics, interdisciplinary approaches may help bridge theoretical paradigms. For example, examining authoritarian discourses and how they structure populist identities, or recognizing how the breakdown of the quotidian helps produce emergent moral discourses and collective identities, can synthesize our conceptual and empirical understandings.
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