

PAUL KRUGMAN

The Mystery of White Rural Rage

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Will technological progress lead to mass unemployment? People have been asking that question for two centuries, and the actual answer has always ended up being no. Technology eliminates some jobs, but it has always generated enough new jobs to offset these losses, and there's every reason to believe that it will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

But progress isn't painless. Business types and some economists may talk glowingly about the virtues of "creative destruction," but the process can be devastating, economically and socially, for those who find themselves on the destruction side of the equation. This is especially true when technological change undermines not just individual workers but also whole communities.

This isn't a hypothetical proposition. It's a big part of what has happened to rural America.

This process and its effects are laid out in devastating, terrifying and baffling detail in "White Rural Rage: The Threat to American Democracy," a new book by Tom Schaller and Paul Waldman. I say "devastating" because the hardship of rural Americans is real, "terrifying" because the political backlash to this hardship poses a clear and present danger to our democracy, and "baffling" because at some level I still don't get the politics.

Technology is the main driver of rural decline, Schaller and Waldman argue. Indeed, American farms produce more than five times as much as they did 75 years ago, but the agricultural work force declined by about two-thirds over the same period, thanks to machinery, improved seeds, fertilizers and pesticides. Coal production has been falling recently, but thanks partly to technologies like mountaintop removal, coal mining as a way of life largely disappeared long ago, with the number of miners falling 80 percent even as production roughly doubled.

The decline of small-town manufacturing is a more complicated story, and imports play a role, but it's also mainly about technological change that favors metropolitan areas with large numbers of highly educated workers.

Technology, then, has made America as a whole richer, but it has reduced economic opportunities in rural areas. So why don't rural workers go where the jobs are? Some have. But some cities have become unaffordable, in part because of restrictive zoning — one thing blue states get wrong — while many workers are also reluctant to leave their families and communities.

So shouldn't we aid these communities? We do. Federal programs — Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid and more — are available to all Americans, but are disproportionately financed from taxes paid by affluent urban areas. As a result there are huge de facto transfers of money from rich, urban states like New Jersey to poor, relatively rural states like West Virginia.

While these transfers somewhat mitigate the hardship facing rural America, they don't restore the sense of dignity that has been lost along with rural jobs. And maybe that loss of dignity explains both white rural rage and why that rage is so misdirected — why it's pretty clear that this November a majority of rural white Americans will again vote against Joe Biden, who as president has been trying to bring jobs to their communities, and for Donald Trump, a huckster from Queens who offers little other than validation for their resentment.

This feeling of a loss of dignity may be worsened because some rural Americans have long seen themselves as more industrious, more patriotic and maybe even morally superior to the denizens of big cities — an attitude still expressed in cultural artifacts like Jason Aldean’s hit song “Try That in a Small Town.”

In the crudest sense, rural and small-town America is supposed to be filled with hard-working people who adhere to traditional values, not like those degenerate urbanites on welfare, but the economic and social reality doesn’t match this self-image.

Prime working-age men outside metropolitan areas are substantially less likely than their metropolitan counterparts to be employed — not because they’re lazy, but because the jobs just aren’t there. (The gap is much smaller for women, perhaps because the jobs supported by federal aid tend to be female-coded, such as those in health care.)

Quite a few rural states also have high rates of homicide, suicide and births to single mothers — again, not because rural Americans are bad people, but because social disorder is, as the sociologist William Julius Wilson argued long ago about urban problems, what happens when work disappears.

Draw attention to some of these realities and you’ll be accused of being a snooty urban elitist. I’m sure responses to this column will be ... interesting.

The result — which at some level I still find hard to understand — is that many white rural voters support politicians who tell them lies they want to hear. It helps explain why the MAGA narrative casts relatively safe cities like New York as crime-ridden hellscape while rural America is the victim not of technology but of illegal immigrants, wokeness and the deep state.

At this point you’re probably expecting a solution to this ugly political situation. Schaller and Waldman do offer some suggestions. But the truth is that while white rural rage is arguably the single greatest threat facing American democracy, I have no good ideas about how to fight it.

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