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Enter Gouldner: The New Class Project in the Trumpian Vortex

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In his work on intellectuals and the New Class at the end of his life, Alvin Gouldner (1979) offered a bold reinterpretation of classical theories about the educated middle classes, or "New Class." In the stress test currently being imposed on democratic institutions by the second Trump Administration, major sectors of this group have come under attack. Although the concept of the New Class and the older theories associated with it have fallen out of favor, important elements of Gouldner's synthesis deserve a revisit in this moment. In particular, theoretical and empirical developments since his death in 1980 enable a broader model of the "classness" of the New Class that expands upon Gouldner's formulation. These include meritocracy, globalization, the rise of the "risk society," and the revival of theories of occupational closure. The threats posed by authoritarian populism may compel broad sectors of the New Class to act together in defense of their interests and values for the first time, generating a new type of social conflict in the United States.

As the social upheavals of the 1960s faded, efforts to understand the sources and significance of the "disobedient generation" led to a renewed interest in the idea of a "New Class" as a distinctive social category of educated professionals, intellectuals, cultural producers, and civil servants.[1] The concept has a long history and multiple strands of development (and analysts have used many different terms for it).[2] It begins with Saint-Simon and Hegel in the 19th century, continuing to critical efforts to understand the fate of the Marxist project in the Soviet Union and its satellites, through to the rise of "managerial capitalism" in the West and the explosion of professional occupations, governmental bureaucracies, and the welfare state since World War II.

The historical appeal of the New Class concept to a wide range of thinkers is striking. Among neoconservatives of the post-1960s era, the New Class concept appeared to provide a valuable descriptor – or perhaps better, a term of opprobrium – for the various groups behind the generational revolt and its "adversary culture." This New Class seemed to be promoting what neoconservatives feared were challenges to both market capitalism and important societal traditions.[3] On the left, it dawned on many that a working class based primarily in the industrial sectors of capitalist economies was both rapidly shrinking in size and seemingly neither desirous nor capable of mounting a serious challenge to capitalism. The search for a new agent of progressive social change began in earnest in this period. As growing numbers of college students and young professionals were, for a time at least, participating in mass social movements, a new form of radical politics seemed to be emerging. The "long march" through the institutions, as cohorts of progressive young people displace older and more conservative people in the public, nonprofit, and even in the private sector, hinted at an alternative strategy for social change.[4]

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[1] As this paper takes Alvin Gouldner's writings as its point of departure, I follow Gouldner (against convention) in capitalizing "New Class" throughout the paper.

[2] Among the more well-known terms: experts, intellectuals/intelligentsia, new middle class, bureaucratic class, educated middle class, upper-middle class, professional-managerial class (PMC), technocrats, knowledge class, service class, the "dominated fraction of the dominant class," salariat, managerial elite, liberal elite, progressive elite, adversarial elite, symbolic analysts, the creative class, socio-cultural specialists, meritocrats, and the Brahmin Left. This linguistic muddle is indicative of the challenging conceptual problems for any type of New Class analysis.

[3] Bruce-Biggs (1979) represents a collection of American neoconservative views, while Schelsky (1975) provides a prominent European example.

[4] For examples of some of the left treatments of a rising New Class from the late 1960s and 1970s, consider Herbert Marcuse [1969] on the larger possibilities of the student movement; Jurgen Habermas's critical assessment [1970] of technocracy and its social discontents; Andre Gorz's (1982 [1980]) "farewell to the working class," and theories critical of the fetishism of economic growth and emerging utopian alternatives (Reich 1970), were in this vein. The rise of the so-called "new" social movements and "identity" politics added fuel (Escoffier [1998] provides a fine summary of these developments). Ronald Inglehart's (1971, 1977) widely discussed "silent revolution," relating to the rise of what he called "postmaterialist" values, was one popular survey-based version; the class analysis pioneered by the Marxist

In 1979, as interest in New Class theory was peaking, a slim book entitled *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class* appeared. Its author, the American sociologist and social theorist Alvin Gouldner, had turned toward an investigation of the nature of ideology and the role of intellectuals and their discursive habits (with particular applications to Marxism) in the final body of work he produced before his early death of a heart attack at age 60 in 1980. At the center of this "project," as Gouldner called it, was *The Future of Intellectuals* (henceforth *FI*). Drawing liberally from a wide range of classical and contemporary social science theories, Gouldner's ambitious synthesis stood out from other 1970s writings about the New Class in several ways. It identified a concrete mechanism—what he called the "culture of critical discourse" (CCD)—as an umbrella concept to account for the core ideological commitments and discursive practices of a New Class committed to science and reason. Memorable phrases highlight his claims about the powers of CCD (for example: "it is the cards, not the player who speaks" [Gouldner 1976, p. ix]; "CCD de-authorizes all speech grounded in traditional societal authority" [*FI*, p. 29]). More speculatively, Gouldner also theorized a scenario in which a broad-based New Class might, given the trajectory of capitalism in the 20th century, be the contemporary social force best positioned to serve as a "universal class" to challenge the "old class" (the bourgeoisie) and free market capitalism associated with it.

Identifying the New Class as a "speech community" was a remarkable insight at the time, given how fraught the politics of language and the destabilization of agreed-upon "facts" would become in the era of authoritarian populism that is now upon us. On the one hand, successful populists frequently exhibit the ability to antagonize their enemies through the disregard of any established forms of knowledge they find unpleasant. Authoritarian populist regimes around the world have aggressively challenged those actors who persist in propounding unwelcome facts and ideas as "enemies of the people." On the other hand, language has assumed elevated importance for segments of the New Class in recent years. The demand for speech perceived to be devoid of racist, sexist, homophobic, or derogatory references to members of disadvantaged groups has been central to the identities of contemporary, especially younger, New Class actors (al-Gharbi 2024).

Erik Olin Wright, which theorizes that the growing middle classes are in "contradictory" locations under capitalism that make their politics less certain than in traditional Marxist class theory, represents yet another angle (e.g., 1978, chap. 3; 1985). The "long march through the institutions" phrase was first coined in 1967 by the German New Left leader Rudi Dutschke.

Gouldner was, to be sure, as much a critic as an advocate of the universal ambitions of the New Class. He readily acknowledged that intellectuals, professionals, cultural producers, and experts of all stripes were often guilty of hubris and hold in contempt those who could not speak in their particular vernaculars or "talk well" (*FI*, p. 85).[5] The New Class is "both emancipatory *and* elitist" (*FI*, p. 84), "capable of ...a Jacobin moralism" (*FI*, p. 86), and thus its rise to power would likely mean a different type of hierarchy, based on merit, in place of the old class structure of capitalism.[6] There is a telling section in *FI* in which Gouldner comments at some length on Noam Chomsky's dismissal of experts as tools of militarism and multinational corporations (*FI*, pp. 39–41). Chomsky's "recitation of the often shameless behavior of the New Class is convincing... its readiness to be the 'servant of power' are among the New Class's more unlovable traits" (*FI*, p. 40). Gouldner notes, in response, that the New Class *may* play a conservative or "service" role, but it doesn't always or necessarily do so, and many New Class people have consciously rejected servitude in a variety of ways (including widespread opposition to the Vietnam War, which was the primary occasion for Chomsky's intervention). For Chomsky, "the trouble with the New Class is not that it is an elite, but that it is not a *moral* elite" (*FI*, p. 40). This hardly fits recent work on young intellectuals, who are all too often chastised for being overly righteous in their political activities.[7] Offering a theory as to why college professors overwhelmingly tend to be liberals, Larry Summers once proposed that talented young conservatives who have no moral compunctions about capitalism and making money will naturally be drawn to fields like finance, business consulting, or management where they can earn a great deal of money, while equally talented young people with liberal or left views critical of inequality often seek out academic employment (Summers 2007;

[5] In other examples, Gouldner notes that intellectuals may display "obsessive puzzle solving," while "obsequious professors may teach the advanced course in social cowardice" (*FI*, p. 44). More generally, he worries that "the New Class is anti-egalitarian in that it seeks special guild advantages—political power and incomes—on the basis of its possession of cultural capital" (*FI*, p. 20). The influence of Pierre Bourdieu, who was one of the initial editors of Gouldner's journal *Theory and Society* (along with Randall Collins) before a falling out, is largely unacknowledged in *FI* (e.g. Bourdieu does not have an entry in the index to the book and only a very brief mention in the bibliographic essay at the end of the book).

[6] "Even as it subverts old inequities, the New Class silently inaugurates a new hierarchy of the knowing, the knowledgeable, the reflexive and insightful. Those who talk well, it is held, excel those who talk poorly, or not at all. It is no longer enough simply to be good. Now, one has to explain it. The New Class is the universal class in embryo, but badly flawed" (*FI*, p. 85).

[7] The young sociologist Musa Al-Gharbi (2024) has recently developed a powerful new line of critique of what he calls "symbolic capitalists," whose ability to deploy knowledge to create economic advantage is vastly more important than the "wokeness" right-wing critics point to as the principle offense of the contemporary New Class. As always, these contradictions are vital, and remain an unresolved tension.

see also Fosse et al. 2014). For Gouldner, the most devastating point is that Chomsky cannot explain Chomsky: "he cannot account for his own authentic resistance" (*FI*, p. 41). Even while acknowledging these flaws and limits of the New Class, Gouldner argued that it was nevertheless the "most progressive force in modern society" (*FI*, p. 83) and the "best card history has given us to play" (*FI*, p. 7). As a response to the rise of contemporary authoritarian populism, this claim potentially gains a new kind of currency.

These are breathtaking claims for a slender volume of just 117 printed pages and perhaps 40,000 words (including the substantial notes and bibliographic essay accompanying the text). Although Gouldner does not quite say so directly, the model for it was nothing less than Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's 1848 essay for the Communist League, with a similar presentation in the form of short theses.[8] Just as Marx and Engels could occasionally praise the progressive character of the bourgeoisie when contrasted with the landed aristocracy, so too was Gouldner's advocacy and qualified enthusiasm for the New Class sharply muted by an acknowledgement of the limits of its claim to "universal" status. But the working class too was always a contradictory class: demanding democratic rights and greater social equality, but also regularly incapable of anything more than what Lenin famously derided as "trade union consciousness," at least without the guidance of party intellectuals. In short: if the proletariat had not been up to the task assigned to it by classical Marxism, in the future, it would be intellectuals and the intelligentsia who would have to play the role of change agent (or, in darker times, defenders of gains previously achieved and now at risk).

The theoretical and empirical case against the New Class thesis has long appeared decisive. Survey researchers in the 1980s failed to find evidence of a distinctive New Class politics in public opinion data in the aftermath of Gouldner's work (e.g., Brint 1984, Macy 1988; but cf. Brint et al. [2022] for an update that finds much stronger evidence). The rise of shareholder value (or financial) capitalism (Fligstein and Goldstein 2022) and the political mobilization of business interests against the mid-century liberal agenda (Hacker and Pierson 2010) significantly altered the American political economy while simultaneously enabling some members of New Class occupations to become

[8] There is one hint of this at the very end of *FI*, where Gouldner writes: "The *Communist Manifesto* had held that the history of all hitherto existing society was the history of class struggles: freeman and slave, patrician and plebian, lord and serf, guildmaster and journeyman, and then bourgeoisie and proletariat. In this series, however, there was one unspoken regularity: the slaves did not succeed the masters, the plebeians did not vanquish the patricians, the serfs did not over throw the lords, and the journeymen did not triumph over the guildmasters. *The lowliest class never came to power.* Nor does it seem likely to now." (*FI*, p. 93, emphasis in the original).

wealthy in their service of capital.[9] When professional-class liberals gained power inside the Democratic Party, they drove the party's neoliberal agenda (Mudge 2018, chap. 5). Gouldner, and indeed most of the other New Class literature as well, also lacked a good theory of right-wing intellectuals, traditional and organic, including those who developed the contemporary authoritarian populist agenda. Indeed, it would not be unfair to say that the New Class concept—Gouldner's version, or others—was consigned to the discard bin for failed social science concepts quite some time ago.

But history moves in unpredictable ways. The global rise of right-wing populism, particularly in its authoritarian, anti-system form, I argue, augurs for a reconsideration. Authoritarian right-wing populist governments around the world challenge and often seek to destroy democratic norms, scientific expertise, and the privileges and powers of the New Class (whose commitments to reason and science often stand in the way of the authoritarian populist disinformation machine). The rise to power of Donald Trump, especially in his second presidential term beginning in 2025, has brought this conflict to the United States. The idea that "experts" (and their fellow-travelers in the media, the professions, and the universities) should have autonomy in their own spheres and be relied upon to produce expertise to guide public policy (especially through regulatory decisions in the "administrative state") is now being contested, directly and on multiple fronts. The takeover of classically populist themes, such as producerism and anti-elitism, have been turned against the New Class. This "new class war" (Markovits 2019, chap. 3; Lind 2020; Sandel 2020), in which professionals and intellectuals are framed as a self-serving and unproductive "elite" harming the interests of ordinary people, is taking a fundamentally different form than anyone might have envisioned in the recent past.

In the rest of this paper, I proceed as follows. I start with an exegesis of the Gouldnerian New Class thesis, beginning with the context of the theoretical developments of the late 1970s which Gouldner synthesized into his unique conception of the New Class. In part two, I take up a discussion of how developments and scholarship since 1979 can augment Gouldner's model by deepening our understanding of the "classness" of the New Class. I then turn to the specific form of American authoritarian populism in the Trump era, focusing on the anti-intellectual/New Class agenda that has emerged so clearly in Trump's second term. I conclude by discussing the possibility of a kind of defensive class formation among the intelligentsia, broadly defined, and how it may be compelled to emerge as a meaningful tool of resistance, although that remains quite uncertain.

[9] In its 2024 survey of law firm partner's compensation, the consulting firm Major, Lindsey, and Africa LLC (2024) finds that *average* law partner compensation in the United States reached $1,411,000 (and the report finds that equity partners at the top global firms received nearly $5 million).

Gouldner and the Knowledge-Based New Class

King and Szelenyi (2004, chap. 7) usefully characterize the New Class theories that emerged in the West in the 1970s as "knowledge" based: that is, leading theories were emphasizing how knowledge and expertise can serve as the foundation for claims to power. The vast expansion of higher education since World War II undergirds the knowledge hypothesis. In 1950, just 6% of Americans over 25 had at least a bachelor's degree, while in 2024 it was about 38%. Among younger cohorts, college completion rates are even higher; for people between 35 and 39, old enough to have entirely completed their educations, 44% now have a BA or higher (and fully 17% of this group also has a master's, professional, or doctoral degree). Educational expansion helped make possible a vast expansion of the New Class. A simple analysis of census data for the full-time workforce demonstrates the vast changes wrought by the expansion of higher education. In the 1950 Census, less than 6% of all American workers were employed in one of the professional or socio-cultural occupations consistent with a narrow, occupation-based definition of the "New Class" (i.e., our definition excludes people working in fields like finance and corporate management, as well as those in semi-professional occupations such as nurses and police officers). In 2023, the Census Bureau's American Community Survey shows this same group of New Class occupations at 24% of the entire workforce (see Manza and Rosenblum [2025] for the details of this analysis).

The simultaneous growth of the public and nonprofit sectors in rich democracies was an important and parallel development. Consider one empirical example. The critic of technocracy Jeffrey Friedman (2019, p. 6) notes that while the full list of regulations in *The Federal Register* was a "mere" 22,877 pages in 1960, it had risen to some 178,722 pages by 2014.[10] Ever more regulations require ever more personnel and expertise to implement and respond. Also significant were vast expansions of the health care system (both public and private), higher education, nonprofits, the tech sector, and so forth. The growth of these sectors seemed to suggest a fundamental shift towards a knowledge-based economy (most famously postulated in Daniel Bell's *The Coming of Postindustrial Society* [1973]). Bell, for example, argued that in all arenas of social life, new forms of scientific and technical expertise were displacing older forms of local knowledge, in the process expanding non-market sinecures for educated workers. Gouldner (*FI*, p. 6) would refer derisively to Bell's new middle class as "benign technocrats," and it is true that Bell presented his thesis as a kind of "social

[10] The economist William Baumol (1967) famously argued that rules and regulations (and the "unproductive" personnel who administer them) inevitably expand over time, and virtually never contract. A pointed recent analysis of the consequences of the steady growth of regulation and the administrative state as often invisible "termites" is advanced by the Italian economist Vito Tanzi (2017).

forecasting" exercise, not social criticism or political analysis.[11] But the general trend Bell and others were pointing to was undoubtedly correct.

The neoconservative view of the New Class in the 1970s, with which Bell is (sometimes improperly) lumped together, saw these social-structural shifts toward education and knowledge-based work as contributing to the growth of an "adversarial culture" and lack of enthusiasm for market capitalism that paralleled Gouldner's claims about the New Class's radical impulses. More pointedly, neoconservatives believed the New Class was contributing to the erosion of traditional norms and institutions (Bell 1976; Bruce-Briggs 1979). And they were not wrong; traditional cultural institutions—especially religion and the family—were indeed undergoing rapid change from the 1970s onward (e.g. toward secularization and declining religious participation, cohabitation, single-parent households, and same-sex marriage).

Gouldner, as we have already suggested, stood out from the rest of the New Class theories of the late 1970s in key ways, while holding common ground in others. For instance, he shared a Marxian background with many of the most prominent New Class theorists of the 1970s, including the neoconservatives, making the use of "class" concepts comfortable.[12] Gouldner's first major scholarly works in the 1950s were landmarks in the field of industrial and organizational sociology, but from the 1960s onward he turned his attention to the development of an unorthodox and "reflexive" radical social theory. He drew insights from European critical theory, the sociology of language, and Pierre Bourdieu's body of work on cultural capital.[13] His work then turned to a deep re-reading of classical and contemporary Marxism, albeit through a very particular lens focused on the social bases and interests of Marxian leaders and intellectuals (Gouldner 1980, 1985). The influence of Marx on Gouldner's late work

[11] Gouldner's critique of Bell isn't quite fair. For example, towards the end of his book, Bell (1973, p. 362) writes: "While these technologists are not bound by a sufficient common interest to make them a political class, they do have common characteristics. They are, first, the products of a new system in the recruitment for power (just as property and inheritance were the essence of the old system). The norms of the new intelligentsia… are a departure from the hitherto prevailing norms of economic self-interest which have guided a business civilization. In the upper reaches of this new elite… men hold significantly different values, which could become the foundation of a new ethos for such a class."

[12] The famous "New York intellectuals" who dominated the neoconservative movement were especially antagonistic toward the new social movements of the 1960s and early 1970s and tended to view them in class terms. These thinkers typically had Trotskyist or Communist fellow-traveler backgrounds in the 1930s before shifting to the right. For this history, see the classical treatment in Wald (2017). Gouldner overlapped biographically with many of these figures, growing up in the New York metropolitan area and attending college in the City University of New York system, but the young Gouldner was a CP member who attended Brooklyn College, not City College of New York where the Trotskyites had their strongest presence.

[13] By far the most famous of his writings of this period was his *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*, an extended critique of Talcott Parsons and the alleged conservatism of the sociological project (Gouldner 1970).

is apparent in his adoption of the language of class (as opposed to less theoretically loaded concepts like "strata" or "experts"), as well as in his borrowing of a teleological view of history as the history of class struggle from *The Communist Manifesto*. This led him to two central theses. First, Marxism itself is an ideological project of the critical intelligentsia. In places in *FI*, Gouldner implies that Marxism is a foremost example of *a*, if not *the*, ideology of the New Class (for example: "Marxism has been the midwife of the New Class, but those she brings into the world may never see themselves in their own mirror" (*FI*, p. 87).[14] Gouldner notes, too, that Marxist movements have uniformly been created and led by intellectuals: "the early Bolsheviks were dominated by intellectuals who believed in the rule publish *and* perish" (*FI*, p. 54). But these dissident thinkers would be powerless on their own, as the intelligentsia anywhere in the world was too small to be a credible independent social force of its own until well after World War II. Marxists, indeed all revolutionary intellectuals, necessarily had to rely on other social groups (i.e., the proletariat or the peasantry) to bring about the socialist revolution they dreamed up and argued over so endlessly.

In obfuscating the class origins of movement leadership, Marxism thus lacks one of Gouldner's central intellectual virtues: the capacity for reflexivity and self-understanding (a point highlighted in Gouldner's response to Chomsky noted above). In failing to identify itself as the voice of the social forces—workers or peasants—who provide the shock troops of resistance, it elides the class contradictions inherent in revolutionary movements. Only an "outlaw" Marxist, by contrast, can admit to this condition and address its implications. Fast-forwarding to the late 20th century, the vast expansion of the New Class (and corresponding erosion of the industrial working class) presents an opportunity, not just a hindrance, to the possibilities for a socialist future.

But why would the New Class desire some form of socialism? Gouldner hypothesized that New Class members inevitably have, or will, at some time in the future, experience a "blocked ascendancy" in either status or income (e.g., *FI*, pp. 62–63). The theory rests on the idea that an overproduction of certain groups can result in demographic pressures for social and political change when (and because) some members of those groups will be denied opportunity. Gouldner leaped at some speculative empirical

[14] Gouldner includes this characteristically incisive, if ambiguous passage in *FI* (p. 75): "Marxism has always lived a double life, vaunting theory, arguing that emancipation from the present cannot be achieved without it, yet suspecting and sneering at *theorists*…. Marxism wishes to vaunt the function, but to stigmatize the functionary. This serves to conceal the alien *elite* origins of its own theory, so dissonant in a social movement purporting to be proletarian. That is why Marxism aims at the 'unity of theory and praxis' saying nothing about its relationship to the theory-*maker*, to the theorist-intellectual."

arguments advanced by some in the 1970s (e.g., Richard Freeman's [1976] thesis about the "overeducated American"). How could capitalist labor markets possibly absorb an eventual 600% increase in the college-educated share of the population?[15] Though some classical models of revolution make precisely this argument (e.g., Goldstone 1991), to date these scenarios have not come to pass. In fact, the opposite has largely proved to be the case (Goldin and Katz 2008), so much so that without the massive importation of highly educated immigrant workers, many rich countries would have faced significant labor market challenges.[16]

This leaves us with Gouldner's theory of the "culture of critical discourse," or CCD. It is important to conceptualize CCD as representing much more than just a characterization of the performative act of speech (or other forms of communication), although Gouldner did note the distancing aspects of professional vernaculars. CCD embeds norms that prioritize reasoning based on knowledge priors and a search for an elusive "truth" (or the best available approximation). Critical speech is distinct from everyday speech acts, which do not require the same care and precision. In this sense, critical speech embeds normative commitments that are shared across professional contexts. The lawyer, the engineer, or the therapist are, in their professional settings, engaging in norm-infused discourse that is bounded by what is allowable and must (by definition) be open to new evidence and reasoning. At one point, Gouldner even seems to slip, referring to a "culture of critical *and careful* discourse" (*FI*, p. 84; emphasis added), which is a better (if less concise) formulation of the broader thesis.

If CCD is the language (and culture) of the New Class, alternative forms of everyday speech or media discourse that willfully disregard its norms and procedures are not simply inappropriate but constitute direct challenges to the entire premise of the New Class. Gouldner writes, for example, that CCD "stresses the importance of particular modes of justification, using especially explicit and articulate rules.... [It also] requires that the validity of claims be justified without reference to the speaker's societal position or authority" (*FI*, p. 28). This aspect of CCD is most obviously visible in the performance of scientific and professional experts (with the seminar room being the ultimate example). By contrast, conspiratorial claims-making or lying in politics and

[15] Gouldner expends four full pages (*FI*, pp. 66–70) quoting from a variety of early to mid-1970s speculative projections by government and foundations of dubious quality. He quotes the conclusion of a Carnegie Commission report asserting that "Nearly 30 percent of male four-year college graduates are [even] now in blue-collar, sales, and clerical jobs that do not make full-use of their education..." and concludes "we could end up in a political crisis as in Ceylon, Egypt or India" (*FI*, p. 67). Two steps removed from the empirical research, he commits the classic error of extrapolating from recent trends into future realities.

[16] In the United States, there was an *undersupply* of college-educated labor from the 1980s onward, pushing up the income premium for college-educated workers (see Hout 2012).

media have a deeper meaning when they become normalized. As the historian Sophia Rosenfeld (2019) elegantly reminds us, the relationship between truth and democracy today has significant parallels to the long struggles over knowledge and science in the Enlightenment. When "alternative" facts become legitimate, we have crossed a rubicon in which democracy itself may no longer be possible. It is, in short, an ongoing struggle that has been reignited by contemporary authoritarian populism.

A Touch of Class?

One issue that has continually destabilized New Class theory—in both Gouldner's writings and essentially all New Class theories—is the question of the appropriateness of the "class" concept to describe the group. In most of the New Class literature, class is, at best, a "muddled" concept (Bell 1979). As the American socialist Michael Harrington (1979, p. 123) once pithily put it, "the very concept of the New Class is about as solid as jello." Indeed, it is an inevitable question that arises in the entire sociological literature on "what is middle about the middle class?" (Wright 1986; Hout 2008). In what sense do highly educated people working in different professional or managerial occupations have common material or ideal interests, shared in some meaningful fashion, that might provide the basis for collective action?

In the classical tradition, a "class" can be said to exist when five conditions prevail: (1) a stratum comes to share material and ideal interests in the society in which it is embedded; (2) they tend to share lifestyles, attitudes, and behaviors; (3) they have or develop organizational forms in which collective action is possible; (4) members of the group reproduce themselves through marriage and intergenerationally; and (5) they enter into antagonistic relationships with other social forces. We can make a case that the contemporary American New Class has to a significant degree achieved versions of (1), (2), and (4), while the third (organizational capacity) and the fifth (antagonistic social relations) may only now be emerging in the context of authoritarian populism.[17]

[17] My formulation of the minimum expectations of a class extends from Weeden and Grusky (2005). Consider for example the leading (and still influential) neo-Marxist account of the New Class in the late 1970s, that of John Ehrenreich and Barbara Ehrenreich (1979), who assert that while members of what they call the "professional-managerial class" (PMC) had drifted leftward in the 1960s and created a mass base for the social movements of the time. But they also emphasized that other PMC members were not in alignment with workers and many occupational groups within the PMC explicitly aligned with capital against the working class (especially, of course, the "M" in the PMC). On balance, the group as a whole is wishy-washy, sometimes left, sometimes right, and sometimes centrist, and often divided amongst itself. The possibility that the PMC could have distinct class interests of their own, rather than merely floating between workers and capitalists, is outside the Ehrenreichs' frame, as the historian David Noble suggests in an incisive critique (Noble 1979).

Gouldner's own 1979 account, however, offers too neat a formulation of the historical process of class formation to be convincing. For various theoretical and empirical reasons already considered, his scenario (CCD and blocked ascendancy as the basis for a new socialist movement) led by the New Class was and is implausible; the New Class has done just fine under capitalism, benefiting from various alliances with corporate and philanthropic interests, has not experienced anything approaching widespread blockage, and thus has little reason to fight for a post-capitalist social order. But a synthesis of recent developments in both social theory and empirical research does provide ways of building upon Gouldner's original formulation, one that leads us directly into an analysis of the challenges created by the ascendancy of authoritarian populist ascendancy. In the rest of this section, I consider four critical components and developments that have sharpened the "classness" of the New Class. First, analysts and critics of meritocracy as a tool for class reproduction have sharpened our understanding of the gatekeeping processes surrounding New Class membership, as well as the social and cultural meanings of meritocracy for those who cannot force their way through. Second, the rise of what is now widely described as the "risk society" has created novel opportunities for claims to power (i.e., policymaking authority) and in the demand for the services of experts to address those risks. Third, economic and cultural globalization provides a material and ideal foundation for the cosmopolitan impulses of the New Class (while also generating sharp divisions between it and other social groups). Finally, the revival of interest in social closure processes (Weeden 2002; Mackert 2024) has identified occupation as a powerful source of class action and social closure, and in an age of union decline and shareholder value capitalism, it is New Class occupations that still retain autonomy and high levels of closure resources. The relevant literatures and social science understandings on each of these topics have developed significantly since Gouldner's death. To explore and integrate these developments fully would go beyond the scope of this paper, but we can indicate some of the directions in which the New Class/authoritarian populist cleavage has unfolded.

Meritocracy and its Critics

We can start our look at the classness of the New Class with the processes by which credentialing and sorting that happen through the educational system have combined to produce a system of outcomes based on what is widely referred to as "merit." A vast social science literature has emphasized the importance of educational attainment for individual life chances and for magnifying the gap between those who can attain it from those who cannot. Universities are powerful sorting machines (Stevens et al. 2008), and those young people with the strongest privileges and preparation and the

highest level of cultural capital are the most likely to gain admission to top schools and to be rewarded with the best opportunities upon finishing. The historical rise of meritocracy—especially in the U.S. and U.K.—has thus sharpened the divide between the New Class and everyone else: now, even the children of wealthy business owners must compete with the children of the professional upper-middle classes in the scramble for admission to top universities and the attainment of excellence within them. Evidence abounds that New Class parents invest heavily in their children's education and have been quite able to reproduce their own successes intergenerationally (Reeves 2017; Markovits 2019). And there is a small cottage industry of studies showing how, despite considerable effort, a "true" meritocracy of equal opportunity for all has remained far out of reach even as rich universities seek to provide admission to disadvantaged groups (see e.g. Goldthorpe and Jackson 2008; Marsh 2013; MacNamee 2023).

In this sense, meritocracy is linked to both class reproduction and class inequality, so much so that it can almost be said to provide a foundational ideology for the New Class today. While educational attainment remains the dominant source of upward mobility for some children of poor and working-class families (Hout 2012), no society has yet gotten majorities of their citizens to attain college degrees, even among younger cohorts (and especially if we consider the attainment of the increasingly important post-graduate degree as the critical outcome [Torche 2010]). The rising importance of educational attainment has shifted the goalposts in favor of New Class privilege. The continual push by (mostly well-educated) politicians and policymakers, even in the neoliberal era, for *more* education programs and *more* education spending as the central solution to societal inequality not only reinforces one of the most important sources of New Class power but also ensures the reproduction of New Class privilege intergenerationally. In this sense, it recalls a kind of class reproduction that the bourgeoisie historically enjoyed (see for example Sandel 2020).[18] And it is central to what meritocracy critic Daniel Markovits (2019, ch. 3) has called "the new class war."

Changing patterns of marital homogamy have accelerated the importance of these trends. Rising rates of intermarriage among the college-educated has meant that children increasingly live in combine the incomes of two college-educated parents (Schwartz 2010; Mare 2016). It has also made family inequality itself an increasing barrier to reducing societal inequality, as families with stable marriages are far more likely for college-educated couples (Carbone and Cahn 2014). Further, the investments

[18] One can find innumerable examples of claims about education as the key to reducing inequality among politicians and policymakers in traditional left and right parties. Former U.K. Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair outdid most with his continual invocation of "education, education, education" as a central policy plank in his breakthrough 1997 election campaign, and continued to use that phrase long thereafter.

in children that sociologist Annette Lareau (2002) has described as the "concerted cultivation" of their capacity for achievement add to the disparities between families with college-educated parents and those without. In these ways, the family itself becomes a key mechanism compromising equality of opportunity.

In addition to class reproduction via education, the meritocratic society, at least potentially, imposes a kind of status loss on those who do *not* succeed in schooling, sharpened in an era of declining opportunity for those without college degrees (and thereby elevates status discontent as a source of political behavior).[19] For example, Michael Sandel (2020) has recently proposed that the meritocratic system—in both the educational and occupational hierarchies—can become a source of humiliation and anger for the majority of people who, by definition, cannot succeed in the relevant contests. This is a challenging claim to document. A large qualitative literature, with titles like *Strangers in Their Own Land*, *We're Still Here*, *White Rural Rage*, *The Forgotten*, *The Overlooked Americans, Dying of Whiteness, The Politics of Resentment*, *The Big Squeeze, Broke and Patriotic*, and *Stolen Pride* testifies in various ways to the sense of loss and disrespect felt by many. It is also true that most right-wing populist politicians seek to capture those frustrations in their backward looking rhetoric, recalling a mythical golden past. And there is some survey-based evidence to support the frustration/disrespect/anti-meritocracy theme, albeit with research ongoing (e.g. Carella and Ford 2020; Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2022).

In particular, because meritocracy is based on individual achievement, tournament "winners" inevitably view their own personal success as hard-earned, and thereby deserved (a point effectively made by Daniel Markovits [2019] in his critique of meritocracy). Like populist Michael Lind (2020), the social democratic political philosopher Michael Sandel worries that highly educated people in decision-making positions risk being "tone-deaf" to the sentiments of the masses (2020, p. 17). Telling people "you can make it if you try"— even in the well-meaning terms of those on the left determined to end racism, sexism, and all other forms of opportunity inequality – can be a form of humiliation for those who fail to gain entrance. Sandel writes "no one likes to be looked down upon," and "the meritocratic faith adds insult to injury" (2020, pp. 25–26). The British sociologist Michael Young (1958), who invented the term meritocracy, long-ago raised the fundamental cultural point about humiliation in his dystopian novel: in a world in which meritocracy is paramount, humiliation is

[19] It is important to acknowledge the classical distinction, associated with Max Weber, between class-based hierarchies and those based on status distinctions. But any group, including classes defined by market situation, can have a sense of status (and status loss); for a helpful discussion of these issues in relation to the rise of populism, see Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2022).

inevitable. Not everybody can get ahead, even if "they try."[20] Sandel strikingly claims that credentialism has become "the last acceptable prejudice" in the modern world. How, he asks, is Durkheimian solidarity possible in a world where so many kinds of human labor are degraded in this way?

The Risk Society as Key to New Class Power Resources

The 19th-century origin of experts and professions in the context of the rise of capitalism sprang in part from firms' need to mitigate private market risks. The recognition of the importance of risk management started in insurance, law, and engineering, with colonialism generating a significant further need for expert management of risk for investments in far-flung locales (alongside the strategic use of military force to repress opposition). From the mid-19th century onward, it was the growth of the state and its assumption of responsibility for regulating contracts and preventing third-party harms that took center stage, ushering in an ever-growing government leviathan that would soak up much New Class labor. In the 20th century, human resource management (HR) and the scientific management of operations have become staples of the capitalist landscape and opened niches for new kinds of expertise and control.

In these cases of private sector risk management, the New Class appears in the form of service to capital, which in turn gives rise to the alternative view of the group as a "service class" (e.g., Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992, chap. 1; see also Goldthorpe 1995). But in the period after World War II, *public* risks arising from social and technological developments became a central source of a new type of New Class growth, facilitating the growth of the public sector and parallel non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the non-profit sector. In the mid-1980s, the German sociologist Ulrich Beck (1986) introduced the concept of the "risk society" in an effort to capture the many ways in which contemporary societies were riven with conflicts over the recognition of new and/or potential risks in need of continual management (that is, rarely if ever can they actually be "solved"). For example, the rise of social insurance in the 20th century represented a vast expansion of the regulation of "social risks" (of poor health, poverty, and lack of opportunity). Technological risks and environmental risks are two other widely discussed examples. These risks appear so widespread, and they create such

[20] Young has had to repeatedly remind his readers that he intended his novel as a warning against, *not an endorsement of*, meritocracy (the proposition it is now commonly cited for). The point seems to be forgotten, as his original novel becomes a touchstone that no one bothers to actually read. In an op-ed, Young (2001) writes: "The book was a satire meant to be a warning (which needless to say has not been heeded) against what might happen to Britain between 1958 and the imagined final revolt against meritocracy in 2033."

uncertainties, that Beck asserts that the "script" of modernity no longer provides an adequate guide to action. Although pitched in the language of critical social theory by its early theorists (such as Beck and Anthony Giddens), the concept of the risk society struck a chord with so many contemporary social scientists that it is now a standard phrase in the lexicon of social problems.

Since the late 20th century, the multiplication of real and potential risks had accelerated, as technology, especially artificial intelligence (AI), pandemics, climate change, financial engineering, and economic globalization have all become aspects of modern life. Attempting to manage them requires new kinds of professional and scientific expertise. But a full understanding of the expansion of risk goes deeper. For example, the invention of the idea of "human rights" that cross borders has, since first being propounded by the 1948 United Nations adoption of the Declaration of Human Rights, expanded our conceptions of rights and risks into *global* issues (e.g., Moyn 2012), opening the door to cross-border migrations to escape social and political persecution. The expansion of domestic rights-based thinking has also extended into an endless array of socially constructed forms that authoritarian populists find particularly problematic when applied to the rights-based protections of historically disadvantaged groups in businesses, schools, and other organizations. In the United States, the rise of "diversity, equity, and inclusion" (DEI) has been one way in which the New Class—in universities and the public sector—has pursued a moral agenda (one that cuts against the stark Chomskyian position described above). In short: in the contemporary world, every government and large corporation now devotes ever-growing resources to reducing those risks or harms that gain social certification.

Empirical evidence of the growth of risk management strategies across nearly every arena of social life abounds. Consider tax policy. The political scientist Jeffrey Winters, in his historical work on oligarchy, notes that the U.S. Federal Tax Code has steadily grown from 400 pages in 1913 to 71,684 by 2010, both created and serviced by an army of tax lawyers and accountants whom Winters aptly describes as the "Income Defense Industry" (Winters 2011, p. 217). There is a clear general logic to the process: every newly recognized social problem—such as the need to tax wealth-holders—requires intervention, and each intervention introduces new realms of response. In other words, each wave of regulations raises further complications, necessitating more and further regulations. Path dependency kicks in; once established, a regulatory field gains actors, complications, and often further growth. Highly regulated capitalism of the kind found in rich countries in the 21st century creates both exceptional opportunities

for the right kinds of New Class experts *and* the conditions for populist resistance to expert domination.

This is not the place to launch into a full dissection of the risk society thesis, or an assessment of whether, or to what extent, it accurately describes a genuinely new phase of human history.[21] Those are not our questions. But what should be flagged here is one largely absent but critical piece of the risk society hypothesis: the *process* by which risk awareness is generated and *who* is in a position to offer their services to solve the risk at hand. Paralleling the critique of functionalist models of social problems in an earlier generation (cf. Spector and Kitsuse 2001 [1977]), in which social problems/risks were said to be objective and obvious to all, risks are *always* social constructions that experts play key roles in promulgating; and that a counter-elite, often well funded by corporate sources, can be counted on to deny (Orestes and Conway 2010). Experts generate perceptions of risk, and when successful, they thereby create opportunities (sometimes immense opportunities) for those who might try to solve or mitigate them (as risk managers, expert scientists, governmental regulators, and so forth). This means the short answer to the question of which social groups generate claims about risk would be none other than members of the New Class. Today, a job description for many professionals, managers, scientists, engineers, governmental bureaucrats, and many other occupations could well be "please help find solutions to solve or mitigate problems by applying your professional/scientific expertise by dealing with existing government regulations relating to the same." It is crucial to distinguish private and public risk, however, as it is the vast expansion of the latter in recent decades that helps us grasp its importance for the rise of the New Class.

So, the endless creation of new risks and the compliance rules and regulations that inevitably follow leads toward rising technocratic control over social life. If an earlier wave of social critics was already worried about this (Jacobs 1963; Marcuse 1964; Habermas 1970), modern critics find only a deepening sense of crisis that technocrats struggle to successfully manage (e.g., Habermas 2015; Friedman 2019). The sense of disconnect between those doing the regulation and those subject to it is perhaps an inevitable feature of risk expansion, but all except the most controversial cases of risk

[21] Risk society theorists certainly acknowledge risks in pre-capitalist, pre-modern societies. The central claim, however, is that there has been a shift from natural to human-created risks, especially technological ones, what Giddens (1994) calls the "scientization of nature," suggesting that one definition of the rise of the risk society is when humans stopped worrying about what nature had in store for us versus what we have done to nature. Climate change is ground zero for such thinking, but it is only one example of many.

reduction tend to proceed without significant democratic control, giving some credence to the right-wing populist "deep state" metaphor.[22]

The Globalization Process: Cosmopolitans Versus Locals

As flows of people, ideas, and capital across borders have accelerated in recent decades, the mass popular base in support of these trends has been strongest among the New Class (even if the primary beneficiaries are large corporations in search of cheaper labor). Evidence that highly educated people support cross-border immigration far more than anyone else is by now well established (e.g., Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014; Lancee and Sarracin 2015). When authoritarian populists turn toward immigrant removal and limiting free trade, they are attempting nothing less than to strike a decisive blow to the cosmopolitan imagination. Trump's famous slogan "America First" is a typical expression of both ethnonationalist and anti-cosmopolitan sentiment (Bonikowski 2017). Nowhere was this class divide clearer than in the case of the Brexit vote in the U.K., one explicit case in which globalization was put to the voters (e.g., Clarke et al. 2017; Norris and Inglehart 2019).

One interesting idea in Gouldner's earliest writings about experts was his contrast between "locals" and "cosmopolitans." This, he thought, set experts and professionals apart from the less educated and sophisticated "old class," and, of course, the working masses.[23] Long before he turned to his investigation of intellectuals, Gouldner had produced a pair of still-influential essays on the local/cosmopolitan divide distinguishing those whose lives are rooted in a narrow world of local community versus those who are outward-looking, have other options, and can lead more cosmopolitan lives (Gouldner 1957, 1958). He writes that "Experts... in part because their relatively complex, seemingly mysterious skills, derived from long formal training, lead them to make a more basic commitment to their job than to the organizations in which they work... because of their intensive technical training,

[22] For Donald Trump, the "deep state" is simply anyone who opposes him or challenges his agenda. But between the two Trump presidencies, the deep state metaphor was expanded by Trump sycophants to justify the destruction of the "Administrative State" altogether. Here is how the Heritage Foundation's *Project 2025* characterizes it: "The next conservative President must possess the courage to relentlessly put the interests of everyday Americans over the desires of the ruling elite…. The Left derives its power from the institutions they control. But those institutions are only powerful to the extent that Constitutional officers surrender their own legitimate authority to them" (Dans and Groves 2023, p. 9). The second Trump presidency has empowered its officials to degrade these institutions in a variety of ways described in more detail later in the paper.

[23] Here, of course, Bourdieu's influence is apparent, although it is primarily seen in *FI* through Gouldner's appropriation (and partial misuse) of the concept of cultural capital (Szelenyi and Martin 1987).

experts have greater opportunities for horizontal job mobility and can fill jobs in many different organizations" (Gouldner 1957, p. 288).

These observations have only gained traction in the decades since Gouldner first penned them. Most obviously, the vast increase in flows of people, capital, and cultural ideas across borders produced significantly different impacts among groups of citizens. The advance of globalized capitalist markets has proved an especially valuable factor monetizing a wide range of professional skills; knowledge-based "talent," especially at the high end but trickling down everywhere, is ever more marketable and profitable (Freeland 2006). Trade wars are, among other things, class wars (Klein and Pettis 2020), and the New Class has leaned strongly toward one side, in favor of openness on all fronts. This was one of the hallmarks of professional class liberalism, where in the Clinton and Obama years there were significant extensions of various free trade agreements that advanced the neoliberal agenda. Global opportunities benefit not just corporate interests, but many New Class sectors as well. Medical clinics, law firms, Hollywood film studios, global architects, large engineering groups, and colleges and universities have established profitable global revenue streams that enhance overall returns to New Class incumbents. The contemporary high-tech sector, barely in its infancy at the time Gouldner wrote *FI*, marked a vast further expansion of the nexus between knowledge and profit in the global context.

There are other good reasons to view cosmopolitanism as a resource for the New Class and, correspondingly, as a target for its right-wing populist opponents. Consider, for example, the contrast between upwardly mobile youths from impoverished rural communities and the poorer and less educated peers they leave behind. "Rural brain drain" is a global phenomenon, one in which young people from rural areas who *do* manage to obtain college degrees are far more likely to live as adults in cities or suburbs than to return home or settle in a similar community (see Carr and Kefalas [2010] on the U.S. case). It is one of the great ironies of this process that rural parents drawn to populist discourse may also well want their own children to obtain the very tools and credentials that allow them to escape the communities they come from, even as right-wing populists promise to restore those communities.

It is in large measure in relation to globalization that we can begin to understand the powers of the backward-looking nature of authoritarian populism's "ethnonationalist" turn (Bonikowski 2017). At one level it is simply about the exclusion of foreign others. In the mythical past celebrated in right-wing populist rhetoric, people "knew" what it meant to be "French" or "English," before the changes initiated by immigration and the disruptions of global culture. In this sense, it is hardly surprising

that authoritarian populism and nationalism have made such sturdy bedfellows. Of course, romanticizing the nation's past always involves a set of social constructions which, by definition, must leave out immense detail and complexities. In particular, a hallmark of contemporary authoritarian populism is the evocation of fear and dread, an immanent apocalypse as "our" way of life is lost at the hands of experts (Ostiguy 2017; Peck 2019; Wodak 2020). The New Class, by contrast, aligns itself with the idea of a better future: understanding progress as real (if uneven) and believing that a future is possible in which improvements in public policy and/or technology, combined with improved schools and fairer treatment of everyone, will make a better world possible. A better world, as opposed to a better or purer nation, is a key distinction. This forward versus backward leaning, and all of the racial connotations it implies, is a consistent and pervasive marker of New Class versus right-wing populist ideals.[24]

Social Closure as Occupational Power

One of the central ways status groups protect the interests of their members is by excluding non-members from access to rewards and opportunities, the process of social closure that was revived beginning in the late 1970s (Weber 1978 [1922], pp. 340–46; see Parkin [1979], Weeden [2002] and Macklin [2024] for inspired treatments). While closure is most widely studied in relation to race/ethnic and gender divisions, it offers a powerful way of understanding class divisions as well (Grusky and Sorensen 1998; Weeden and Grusky 2005). Occupations are places where individuals form social networks, engage in some kinds of collective action (e.g., promoting or protecting occupational interests), and often share social and political attitudes and reinforce their shared belief structures. But not all occupations are equally able to exercise closure. Historically, two kinds of closure dynamics can be observed: from below, unions exerted control over hiring and promotion processes, while from above, professional occupations engaged in monopolistic practices to prevent uncredentialed people from competing for clients. With unions in decline everywhere, today it is professional (and semi-professional) occupations that still maintain sturdy closure practices. These may be based on state-regulated monopolies that include extensive educational credentialing requirements that limit the numbers of people who can practice within any professional domain, or through professional gate-keeping practices. Limiting access to professional opportunities creates greater rewards for expert knowledge.

[24] This distinction, between progress as a central ideology of the New Class without acknowledging the harms and disruptions it brings in its wake, was central to Christopher Lasch's (1991) work that has influenced the American populist right.

These occupations are also associated with policy and political attitudes and behaviors, a powerful mechanism of class formation (Weeden and Grusky 2005).[25]

Occupational closure is, in short, a relevant and powerful tool of class advantage, and it has occasionally generated populist backlash. In particular, we can see the populist critique in the form of attacks on certain occupations that assert professional authority against popular will. No better example of this can be seen in the sharp populist push-back against public health guidelines during the Covid pandemic, where stay-at-home orders and mandatory vaccinations triggered significant popular resistance against the advice of experts (and the corresponding implementation of that advice by government officials). The environmental space provides another example, whereby populist resistance to overwhelming scientific evidence about the human sources of climate change has transitioned from well-funded corporate sources to mass confusion and the loss of a social consensus in favor of finding ways to radically reduce carbon emissions (Gundersen et al. 2022).

The New Class in the Populist Crosshairs

It is a widely accepted proposition, popularized by political scientist Cas Mudde (2004, 2007), that populism is a "thin" ideology, compatible with a range of policy and political positions across left and right (although it is in its right-wing form that populism has proved vastly more successful around the world). Populist movements in America have a long and complex history (Kazin 1995). The late 19th-century agrarian populist movement had an explicitly anti-monopoly agenda, challenged the inequities of the financial system within which farmers were compelled to participate (and suffer), and more generally posed an early and systematic challenge to illiberal democracy in the U.S. South (Goodwyn 1976; Postel 2007). Various forms of "populist" mobilization can also be found in the New Deal era (the Townsend movement, Huey Long's Share Our Wealth Movement, the popular radio broadcasts of the Catholic Priest Charles Coughlin) (Brinkley 1982; Kazin 1995, chaps. 5–6; Amenta 2008). In his history of American populism, Michael Kazin also includes the remarkable labor mobilizations of the mid- to late-1930s under the banner of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), as well as that era's Popular Front, as further examples of the enduring power of populism on the left (see also Frank 2018, chap. 1).

[25] To be sure, not all New Class occupations have closure mechanisms. Anyone can become a journalist, television producer, or a consultant with minimal or no formal credentials, although at least an undergraduate college degree has become increasingly essential to pass through informal gatekeeping processes in most cases.

Central to populism across all its ideological forms have been, as the intellectual historian Christopher Lasch demonstrates in his important later work, ideas about the moral virtues of "producerism," in which those who make things are the embodiment of what is good in capitalism (Lasch 1991, 1994). This conception was at the heart of the great "labor question" of the 19th century, with both an agrarian/artisan ("proprietary producerism") and a socialist ("industrial producerism") version (Currarino 2011). As Lasch presents it, producers were people who worked independently or owned their own businesses, sought to be as self-sustaining as possible, and prioritized family, thrift, "honest work," community and active citizenship. Producers were uncomfortable with (or in some cases in active resistance to) modern "progress" (be it the rise of mass production industries, urbanization, or the relentless expansion of consumer goods; see Lasch 1991, pp. 277–78, passim). For Lasch, the tragedy of the 20th century lies in both the demise of opportunities for "honest work" and the rise of New Class experts dispatched to tell people how to take care of themselves (be it through therapy and family control policies [e.g., Lasch 1977], social engineering and planning via the state, or in modern educational systems dominated by rote learning and credentialing).[26] The educated "jargon" of the New Class, and its secularism and hostility to tradition, is viewed by Lasch as a kind of culture war weapon launched by professional-class liberals who have lost their connection to working people (see e.g., 1991, pp. 492ff.).[27]

The right-wing dominance of populist themes in American political life evolved in stages, and these have been widely dissected in a now vast literature that need not be rehearsed in any detail here. The key developments: the rise of a politicized Christian Right and its successful integration into the conservative coalition (attacking the trend toward secularism, pronounced among the New Class); the political transformation of leading business organizations since the 1970s toward active opposition to taxes, the welfare state and most types of public intervention into the economy via regulation; the consequences of the growth of immigration and population diversity since the immigration reform of 1965, combined with the critical civil rights legislation of that era, which contributed to the political realignment of racially resentful white voters (magnified by the election of America's first Black president in 2008); the rise of a right-wing "echo chamber," centered on right-wing talk radio, Fox News, the

[26] In a revealing (and touching) discussion, Lasch mentions the challenges he and his wife faced in attempting to raise their children to do "honest work" and resist the pressures of meritocracy (Lasch 1991, p. 32). See also his interview with Casey Blake and Christopher Phillips (1994).

[27] It is perhaps not surprising in this context that the Svengali of the Trumpian right, Steve Bannon, attributes his own conversion to populism to having discovered Christopher Lasch ("I was just doing my thing, had my own finance firm.... Then I read Christopher Lasch"; see his interview in Brooks 2024).

Murdoch newspapers, and the *Wall Street Journal*'s editorial page; and the role of right-wing billionaires in funding it all, beginning with the creation of multiple and well-funded think tanks in the 1970s, the Tea Party movement from 2009 onward, and their eventual embrace of Trump's presidential campaigns and the political and intellectual infrastructure behind them.[28]

One could imagine most or even all of these developments might have occurred without resulting in what Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum (2024) have recently characterized as the pursuit of "ungoverning": how the assaults on the American administrative state (and, one might add, other democratic institutions) the Trump presidencies have pursued seek to render effective governance itself impossible.[29] Indeed, the contemporary right-wing populist backlash is as much a departure from traditional conservatism as it is from professional-class liberalism. It is surprising, for example, to note that a significant number of *new* spending programs were initiated during the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and the two Bushes, while virtually none were eliminated or even significantly retrenched (see e.g., Kenworthy 2014, pp. 166–67). These "mainstream" conservatives cut taxes and trimmed programs and bureaucracies at the margins, and rolled back some kinds of regulation, but they did not attempt a full-on destruction of governmental capacity nor to undermine America's place in the world (even as the tragic military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq did lasting damage to the latter).

What the newer authoritarian populists have achieved in their take-over of the Republican Party (Hacker and Pierson 2020) cannot fully be grasped without understanding the growing dominance of a particular kind of ideological framing that takes—and distorts—traditional populist themes. For example, the classical producerist trope easily translates into a "makers versus takers" claim, in which entrepreneurs and rural and working-class white voters have been cast as the "makers," while immigrants, poor people, and major segments of the New Class (including virtually

[28] It would be folly to attempt to summarize all of the scholarly and journalistic accounts of these developments. A few particularly influential examples: on the Christian Right and the Republican Party, see Williams (2010); and for the more recent resurgence of white Christian nationalism, Gorski and Perry (2022); on the political mobilization of business, see Hacker and Pierson (2010) and Mizruchi (2013); on racial realignment, see Tesler (2016); the right-wing echo chamber is dissected in Jamieson and Capella (2010); right-wing political money: Mayer (2016) provides a superb journalistic account; the rise and importance of right-wing think tanks is analyzed in Medvetz (2012).

[29] By ungoverning, Muirhead and Rosenblum (2024) mean the attempt to destroy the capacity of administrative agencies in the federal government, thereby undermining their legitimacy and hopefully leading towards their elimination or radical downsizing, the clear goal of *Project 2025*. Their analysis, published right before the second Trump presidency, brilliantly describes and anticipates many of the more extreme moves that began almost immediately after Trump's second term began.

the entire public sector) are cast as "takers." In his important analysis of the type of populism performed on Fox News, based on a deep reading of their version of populist style, sociologist Reese Peck (2019) convincingly demonstrates the connection between the framing of a "liberal" (New Class) elite and the valorization of ordinary people and "common sense." The style of Fox News borrows heavily from tabloid television, deploying "authentic" voices (as chosen by Roger Ailes, the CEO of Fox News until a sex scandal pushed him out in 2016), many of whom proudly note they didn't graduate from college (e.g., Glenn Beck and Sean Hannity, as well as right-wing talk-radio icon Rush Limbaugh). Fox's non-journalistic anchors in prime-time have consistently extolled the makers/takers distinction (in various forms), do not hesitate to invoke racial and anti-immigrant stereotypes, and attack intellectuals, professors and universities, experts, and government bureaucrats at every turn. Indeed, Fox anchors (and other sectors of the right-wing echo chamber) have succeeded in constructing a vision of the New Class as a bunch of exploiters who use their power to actively discriminate against ordinary people while promoting efforts to help people of color. Although the specific topics each night may vary, Peck identifies a consistent set of underlying themes: cultural populism and a particular type of producerism that contrasts "hard-working people" with bureaucrats and intellectuals. Fox (and other parts of the right-wing echo chamber media) continually contrasts itself with the more sober content of the higher-brow *New York Times* or CNN and MSNBC as the media of the New Class (Peck 2019, p. 126ff).

The anti-democratic, authoritarian element of contemporary right-wing populism around the world—and in the U.S.—has been most powerful when it is seized by a particular political entrepreneur, the "Strongman," and in an institutional context that provides a strong role for an individual leader. The Strongman is a political leader who is especially skilled in manipulating information and ideas to challenge the political mainstream in pursuit of power and control, and in highlighting the alleged crises and haplessness of their opponents (cf. Ben-Ghiat 2020). America's Trump shares many characteristics with other post-war authoritarians around the world, albeit with some twists. Trump's biographers all note that his biggest pastime in life, even while in the White House, is watching the news, looking for nuggets he can deploy against his perceived enemies. In particular, Trump lives in the world of Fox News. There is an all-too-true joke that the fastest way to a job in the Trump White House is to appear on Fox News aggressively defending the President and denouncing his opponents (Allsop 2024). The order of causation between Trump himself and the right-wing echo chamber he has emerged out of is a bit of a chicken-and-egg question, but there is little doubt Trump is especially cunning in weaponizing authoritarian populist themes. Along the

way, he has also empowered a new generation of right-wing activists and thinkers who have been increasingly successful in attacking the relative privileges of the New Class.

There are several distinctively Gouldnerian themes that arise in the populist era. One is the populist campaigning style. The nearly universal reliance of authoritarian populists on a uniquely "low" style of political discourse, filled with fanciful claims-making and a refusal to suggest concrete policies that can be rationally debated, could not be further from CCD norms. For Americans, the sharp contrast between Donald Trump and Barack Obama highlights this distinction: the "low" style of Trump (and other populists) often involves "appeals that are transgressive, improper, and antagonistic in that they are intended to shock or provoke" and ignore or largely downplay specific policy commitments (Ostiguy 2017, p. 74; see also Moffitt 2016). Contrast this with Obama, who consistently displays a classic New Class political style. Obama was frequently criticized for speaking like a "professor" in his public performances, taking the time to explain the underlying logic and evidence of his positions.[30] Populists do the opposite: they employ simplistic terms that stand out and their "low" discourse is measurable with contemporary computational tools (e.g., Oliver and Rahn 2016; Bonikowski and Gidron 2016). The details of public policy and political institutions are almost studiously avoided in favor of repeated expressions of crude principles. Trump is by no means unique. The founder of Italy's populist Five Star Movement, Beppe Grillo, labeled his first mass political rallies as "vaffanculo" (fuck off), calling for the destruction of Italy's political class. Argentina's Javier Miliei famously enjoyed bringing a chain-saw to his political rallies. And Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro told his citizens to "stop whining" about the covid epidemic, even as a quarter million Brazilians had died. And so on.

The low style is combined with an approach to truthiness that represents a further massive violation of CCD norms. Most populist leaders, especially when in power, have trumpeted "alternative facts" and outright lies. Simply trying to count all of Trump's lies and misstatements is exhausting; by one tally, he told over 30,000 lies in his first term alone (Robinson 2021). Daniel Dale, the CNN fact-checker trotted out by the network after Trump's major speeches or debates to rattle off his misstatements and outright lies in real-time, has become something of a national hero, even as the enterprise loses meaning in the vast sea of falsehoods Trump unleashes. Indeed, "fact-checking" is now itself labeled "fake news." Invented and/or invisible conspiracies are

[30] Interestingly, in the late stages of the 2024 election, Obama took a more active role in the campaign against Trump, shifting his tone to nearly match Trump's style, employing mocking humor and direct and vicious attacks on Trump's competence and mental health (Thebault 2024).

another long-standing form of populist discourse, and they are especially galling to a highly educated New Class which believes in documentable "facts" and precise truth claims.[31]

In general, the willingness of populists to say things that "cross the line" is so common as to need theorization. Let's consider in more detail the use of conspiratorial claims-making. Conspiracies emerged as a common style of public discourse in the Enlightenment, alongside partisan newspapers written for popular audiences.[32] But social media has exponentially increased their capacity to spread (Benkler et al. 2018). While conspiracies and countersubversive movements have a long historical pedigree and can be found on both the right and the left (Uscinski 2018), the velocity with which they circulate in the era of social media (and the enhanced tools for dissemination it provides) has measurably accelerated their political uses, and it has been right-wing populists who have readily embraced this discursive environment. Authoritarian populists like Trump, Bolsonaro, Hungary's Viktor Orban, and the leaders of the anti-EU Brexit campaign (Swami et al. 2018) routinely deploy conspiracy language in their campaigns. To be clear: members of the New Class can and have also endorsed implausible conspiracies as well. It is hardly a one-way street. But as the New Class has grown in size and sophistication, their apparent control over establishment media, education, and cultural organizations has left an opening for "countersubversive entrepreneurs" to offer alternative (and often conspiratorial) explanations for such fraught issues as terrorism, crime, social justice movements, anti-Semitism, and many others.

Conclusion

Throughout his scholarly career, Alvin Gouldner sought to advance a critical social science that challenged mainstream sociology to both make good on its core claims and to advance new ways of using social theory to understand a changing world. His early works in industrial sociology remain classics, exploring the changing class struggle in mid-20th-century capitalism. Gouldner's dissection of Marxist intellectuals remains

[31] Muirhead and Rosenblum (2024, chap. 1) note a considerable irony: political leaders generally benefit from well-functioning administration, even as they try to change policy direction. The strategy of the Trump Administration, by contrast, appears to be to destroy that capacity, and then blame governmental agencies for failing to do their jobs.

[32] On the history of conspiracies in the context of the contested relationship between democracy and the truth content of political discourse, see the very valuable account in Rosenfeld (2019, chap. 3). A historian of the enlightenment, Rosenfeld notes that "the Enlightenment taste for peering behind the curtains and doors and exposing bad faith… fueled a publishing industry…that thrived on revelations of nefarious dealings" (2019, p. 104). As the competition for "scoops" increased over time—an astounding 450 papers were operating in Paris alone in the mid-19th Century (2019, p. 63)—the motive and opportunity for conspiracies grew. Already by the 1870s the first appearance of "conspiracy" and "conspiracy theory" began to appear in the Anglo-American press; see McKenzie-McHarg (2018).

a unique contribution. His last work on intellectuals and the New Class has been less influential, but its contemporary relevance is increasingly clear. The authoritarian populist revolt of the "people" against experts and scientists, higher education, journalists, cultural producers, and government bureaucrats has now taken center stage. These developments arose in part because the New Class has grown sufficiently large to assert itself in the political system, and thereby has become a target.

In particular, as liberalism and the Democratic Party came to be heavily influenced by the New Class, both as a growing voting bloc and as party leaders, there has been a marked shift in the party's social policy agenda away from the redistribution agenda of the period from the New Deal to the 1960s. The generation of professional-class liberals from the 1970s onward have sought ever more sophisticated evidence-based, neoliberal-aligned policymaking, and these approaches have had only modest success in improving the conditions they claim to be addressing. A valuable recent collection of essays by a group of young historians (Cebul and Geismer 2025) highlights several aspects of this transformation: ineffectiveness in halting rising high-end inequality (a key development in the decades after Gouldner's passing), a growing reliance on philanthropy and its upper-class agendas, the use of complicated market incentives and paternalistic nudges to achieve policy goals (such as the creation of urban investment banks), a willingness to work with corporations and upper-class philanthropy and accede to their agendas, the transformation of journalism from working-class to college-educated reporters and editors (who bring with them biases regarding what is considered newsworthy), failing to try to prevent union decline, and advancing policies such as DEI that offer individuals opportunities to enter the meritocracy but do little to address the structural conditions that create the need for such policies in the first place.

Ironically, in the last few years, a new, progressive wing of the Democratic Party demanding real redistribution has gained strength. As just one example, the Hillary Clinton of 2016 and the Joe Biden of 2020 campaigned far to the left of their earlier selves.[33] But this leftward shift may have arrived too late to matter, as the legacies and shortcomings of previous decades of professional-class liberalism had already lost

[33] On the recent rise of progressive forces within the Democratic Party, see the various contributions to a special issue of the *Boston Review* on "The New Blue Divide" (February 28, 2024). In their opening contribution to the forum, Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson argue that "A dramatic transformation has taken place in the U.S. Democratic Party. For several decades it was moving rightward on economic issues, following the same trend as many center-left parties in wealthy democracies. But over the past few years it has made a sharp U-turn, boldly embracing broad and costly economic programs, industrial policy, and active regulation. Indeed, in 2021 Democrats pursued the most ambitious and redistributive economic agenda their party has attempted in more than half a century. Contrary to frequent denunciations of Democratic "wokeness" (whether from the right or the left), economic issues—not cultural ones—have become the core of the party's agenda."

a critical mass of voters for the Democratic Party. As their sinecures and privileges come under populist attack, however, the educated middle classes may increasingly be compelled to unify and respond, in the process becoming a key sector in the resistance to authoritarian populism. Consider this small episode in recent American political life: in 2017, tens of thousands of people participated in a global "March for Science" in Washington, D.C. and elsewhere. Some held up signs reading "in peer review we trust," and all protested Trump's early threats to knowledge-based policy (e.g., Achenbach et al. 2017). We do not yet have firm evidence about which social groups were most likely to have participated in the massive "No Kings" demonstrations on June 14, 2025, but it is very likely that the New Class provided much of the backbone of the estimated 5 million protestors (Morris 2025) who turned out across America that day. Above all else, civil rights attorneys, sometimes alongside state attorneys general in Democratic states, have made heroic efforts to protect immigrants from arbitrary deportation as well as in resisting the Administration's efforts to destroy government capacity.

If the argument of this paper is plausible, there remains considerable work to be done to document and advance a New Class challenge to authoritarian populism. As the second Trump Administration pushes its assault on the citadels of the New Class—Harvard and other elite universities, the Centers for Disease Control, top law firms, federal support of research, elite cultural institutions like the Smithsonian, government agencies like USAID and the State Department involved in using foreign aid to help underdeveloped nations—it uses a false language of budget austerity and other manufactured falsehoods to try to destroy the institutions and organizations that house critical segments of the New Class. Whether these efforts lead to an enduring authoritarian populist realignment is not yet clear, but the stakes could not be higher. Gouldner's optimistic view that the New Class is the "best card" left in the historical deck reminds us just how much we may have to place our bets on its survival.

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