



Whites, Blacks, and the Morality of the Privileged

Michael Javen Fortner, Claremont McKenna College

The extreme growth of economic inequality has forced political scientists to reassess the ways in which economic power shapes American politics and policy. In this vein, Nicholas Carnes's *White-Collar Government: The Hidden Role of Class in Economic Policy Making* convincingly documents how the "shortage of people from the working-class in American legislatures skews the policy-making process towards outcomes that are more in line with the upper class's economic interests." This contribution is timely and insightful, but it has only just scratched the surface.

This is not the first time wealthy individuals dominated the nation's political class. Since southern landed gentry and northern professionals and financial interests composed our founding documents and erected U.S. political institutions, governing has never been a working-class affair. Even so, the nation has witnessed moments of great reform. Though most were "of the manor born" and far from working class in backgrounds or experience, President Theodore Roosevelt, the "trustbuster," and other early 20th-century progressives in both political parties were critical of the concentration of wealth and concerned about the economically disadvantaged. A leading historian of progressivism, George Mowry, points out that "few reform movements in American history have had the support of more wealthy men." Interestingly, the backgrounds of progressive reformers in general mirror those of the politicians Carnes discusses. In his canonical book, *The Age of Reform*, Richard Hofstadter sums up a survey of the careers and backgrounds of 260 Progressive Party leaders throughout the United States: "Almost entirely native-born protestants, they had an extraordinarily high representation of professional men and college graduates. The rest were businessmen, proprietors of fairly large enterprises."

To be clear, these men and women were not unaffected by the prejudices of their station. Still, despite their backgrounds, they became advocates for the poor and critics of unrestrained business power. So we may need to ask what has changed. How is it possible that a significant proportion of professionals and other elites in both parties worked on behalf of the interests of the working class at the beginning of the 20th century, while at the beginning of the 21st century a preponderance of such elites in both parties work on behalf of the interests of the upper class?

Deciphering the uniqueness of this historical moment requires unpacking the meanings and functions of class categories. Occupations primarily define Carnes' conception of class, and, as a result, he underestimates the cultural and moral features of an individual's social status. He rightly notes, "People in a given class tend to have similar interests because of their similar places in society. Some recognize these common bonds and consciously identify with their class. Others are driven by their social endowments to adopt certain habits without giving much thought to how their place in society influences their views and choices." But class does more than that. It also encompasses norms and values that define virtue and an individual's obligations to other members of their class and to people from different backgrounds. At one time, for example, the norms imbibed by many upper-class do-gooders impelled to them to understand "how the other half lives," even as they also judged the lifestyles of the poor.

Particularly instructive are the historical relationships between black political elites and the working-class African Americans they often come to represent. African American politicians have always come from the upper strata of black society and have always been interested in the plight of the poor. Popular theories of contemporary black politics suggests that successful blacks are more progressive than their white counterparts, because they still believe their own personal opportunities are fundamentally connected with the fate of disadvantaged blacks. Although this interpretation is persuasive in some ways, a new generation of scholars has been revising this traditional view by documenting the ways in which the actions of black political elites are shaped both by material interests and by class-based norms, particularly Christian values, American democratic principles, and remnants of Victorian ideology. My own research on the development of crime policy during the 1960s and 1970s chronicles the ways such norms shaped middle-class black understandings

of their interests and their obligations to the urban black poor. Ultimately, a grasp of the content of middle-class moral views is essential to make sense of historical moments when successful African Americans judge and condemn the urban black poor, as well as to comprehend other moments when they care deeply and empathetically about "how the other half lives." What is more, it is clear that social institutions like the black church can reinforce shared class interests and inculcate ethically inclusive norms that emphasize Christian charity and the common good.

Returning to the issues Nicholas Carnes urges us to consider, I suggest that a full analysis of how the backgrounds and experiences of legislators steer contemporary U.S. economic policymaking towards the interests of the wealthy must consider waning ideals of reform among upper-income whites. It is important to trace the transformation of U.S. civil society and understand shifts in the norms that define the obligations felt by people of means toward those less privileged. Two quite ideologically opposed scholars, Theda Skocpol and Charles Murray, point to consequential shifts in ethical and civic outlooks among privileged whites. For Skocpol, the decline of mass-membership, cross-class, white voluntary associations has had an important effect on American elite morality, while Murray points to the ways in which white America is "coming apart."

In *White-Collar Government*, Nicholas Carnes sounds a wake-up call for anyone concerned about the health of American democracy and the fate of the working class majority. Following his example, scholars and commentators must expose the class influences so pervasively at work in contemporary U.S. politics. As this happens, due note must be taken of changing social moralities. Elites affiliated with both political parties used to exhibit a greater commitment to democratic reform, even white men and women originally born to the greatest privilege. But things appear to have changed at the top of American society, especially among the most privileged whites. In order to fully understand what has happened – and what may come next – analysts must probe not just occupational experiences, but also the moral understandings attached to privileged statuses and the impact – or perhaps increasing ineffectiveness – of societal institutions that can cultivate and reinforce ethical norms and social values. Even if more men and women from everyday occupations run for and attain public office, U.S. government will likely continue to be significantly influenced by privileged Americans. What such elites believe about their obligations to the poor and commitments to society as a whole has always mattered – and will continue to weigh in future national policymaking.