

Points of View

Immediately after the elections, various groups were blamed by mainstream leftist and progressives. Many of these groups are misunderstood and are being poorly characterized. Training for Change asked people from some of these groups to write a Point of View from their perspective.

– Daniel Hunter, Training for Change

POINT OF VIEW: WHITE WORKING CLASS PEOPLE

My people have never been secure, but in the last thirty years it's gotten worse. In my parents' generation one wage-earner was often enough to put food on the table and handle health care, so the mom could be a full-time mom and we could do more as a family – eat dinner together, go to the Little League games, do whatever. More decent housing was available for families like ours. Our neighborhoods were stronger, and we felt more community. Our children could look forward to earning more income some day than the parents, and be able to get more comforts and leisure activities.

More of us were in unions so we had some defense against the boss. More of us were in the same towns or city neighborhoods as our relatives so we could get more support through hard times in our lives. Maybe there were only two or three major industries in our cities but at least they were there and could be counted on. Most of our faith communities were stronger and we could count on the leadership to look out for us and remind us of the eternal truths even if we were often skeptical about some of them. And we could count on our armed forces, mostly made up of ourselves, to keep our towns and cities out of harm's way.

My people have never been treated fairly, considering the country couldn't run without us. But times *were* better: we were more secure, and we got more respect -- especially from the Democratic Party which we used to think was our party.

Now things have changed. There are lots of reasons to distrust the Republicans, but we have to ask: where's the party of Franklin Delano Roosevelt? Where's the party that fought for the unions and respected working class people like me? What we see now is a party run by millionaire politicians and Hollywood liberals and Volvo-driving upper middle class professionals who couldn't care less what my real-life conditions are. I hear people run down the military answer to the threat to American security, but when are they going to tell us their answer to the threat? What was Howard Dean's alternative for national security, for example? What was Kerry's?

Maybe the jet setters don't need community, but we do. And our communities are disintegrating. I'm not racist, but I will admit that I don't always know how to talk with black people or Latinos and it's harder for me to trust them than people that I've always lived with. Is that so different from the white upper middle class suburbs that the Howard Dean types live in? And gay people – there are people at work that I think

are gay and they pull their weight and I don't have a problem with that – but I do worry about giving them everything like the right to marry. Every time I try to have a conversation about that with some pro-gay rights person I get sneered at and condescended to. If gay rights is about how dumb I am, well, that's the same old class snobbery I get all the time. I don't need Democrats to tell me I'm dumb when I've heard that all my life.

Let's face it: every winning presidential candidate since FDR has been the one who has been the most populist. Think of Harry Truman vs. Dewey. Or Clinton vs. the senior Bush. Bush junior is rich and has rich friends but so did FDR, and I felt respected by both of them. I didn't feel respected by rich Kerry or most of his rich friends out campaigning. When I'm scared for my future and my family and my choice is between two candidates that each have pluses and minuses, I'll go for one who can at least talk to me with respect.

POINT OF VIEW: RURAL MIDWESTERNER

I grew up in a small mostly working class town in the heart of the Midwest. I'm proud of growing up in an area that calls itself the crossroads of America. Some people joke that means we just connect the two coasts. But I enjoy pointing out that we grow the food that feeds the coasts, we build the buses and cars, the infrastructure that keeps the coasts going; we are traditional people that respect our history.

When I see the Midwest mostly "go Red" (and not in the communist sense) it's not that I'm proud of that. I want the Midwest to complexify its perspective even more and to not succumb to homophobic and sexist overtures. But I want it to do more than switch to "Blue." I want it to be fully respected for what it has to offer and have that integrated into a vision for greater harmony and justice.

What do I mean?

In my small town, all the families knew each other and were connected with each other. Unlike cities where people seem to bounce around, we had a tight network, a woven community fabric. Generations of families knew each other and grew up with each other. Families knew and cared for each other.

So when our industrial base began moving to Mexico and out of the country, my town turned to each other for support. The unions had failed at keeping our jobs safe. And so we valued community and held on to the fabric of community – it means survival to keep it. That means we believed in keeping traditions alive; to different people that meant different things, but included: 4th of July Celebrations to honor our ancestors, Girl Scouts who still went door-to-door, Sunday afternoon church dinners, our annual Rose Festival, jazz concerts (we were the first place jazz was recorded). Yeah, we like apple pie, too.

To change any part of the fabric of that community means to change us all.

So when I hear that my town voted for Bush, I'm not surprised (it votes socially conservative every year). After all, what does the democratic party have to offer my town to help it in its survival? Better yet, what do progressive activists offer to me? Outsiders can talk about shifting economic analysis, but let's talk about the survival of the community, too (that's what I hear when I hear the right talking about "morals" and "values").

I hate hearing that the issue is just "education" – that Midwesterners (or Southerners, or rural folks) just need to vote in their class interest or understand the economics of the issue. What us rural folks have to offer is a concrete ability to build community and hold communities together – sometimes that shuts people down, but it's also an effective weapon against economic terrorism. Until you can appreciate that strategy we've developed and respect our wisdom – that means changing your minds (not just changing ours!), you'll never be able to work with us.

POINT OF VIEW: AFRICAN-AMERICAN BAPTIST

My father is a Baptist Evangelical fundamentalist minister. My grandfather, too. Scared you yet? I can actually scare my activist friends when I say that.

Isn't that quite a reflection on both some Christian Evangelicals – and the activists who get scared?

My father (the evangelical pastor) fights against racism daily by helping kids make college work for them, keeping people out of jail – working to dismantle the whole prison industrial complex, and mentoring black youth. In the 80s he was targeted by the FBI for teaching liberation theology. (The US has a history of targeting Christian radicals.) He's also fought in church politics to keep Christian theology centered on the love that Jesus Christ taught. And in the past decade he's become increasingly in despair as he gets isolated – isolated from the Christian support that *is* growing more conservative and progressive leftists who range from barely tolerant to downright nasty.

Him and dozens like him – because he's not alone. Just recently he attended an international conference in Thailand for Christians trying to keep social and economic justice issues at the forefront of Christian theology. Around 40% of Christian evangelicals voted for Kerry. We can be evangelical (which means we believe it's worthwhile to spread the word) and be all for bringing down the empire. We're worth being allies with.

(Can I tell you how hard it is to have to write that? My tradition, African-American Baptist, was the mainstay of the Civil Rights Movement? And now we're suddenly just a homophobic, hate-filled group?)

I've been on the board of directors for the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America for several years. Every time I mention it I have to add: "We're the radical Baptists" – as if I should apologize for being in a religion whose fundamental tenet is that people can have their own beliefs (we call it autonomy of the church).

The misunderstandings of Christianity makes it hard for me to be involved with many leftist activists – and I know others who are strong in faith communities can sometimes find this to be true, too. It keeps the movement from growing when up to 80% of US Americans identify as Christians and yet I get hostile reactions when I talked about my God. It keeps me from talking about morality (which *doesn't* mean bashing gays) or the spiritual warfare I see going on or how my personal relationship with God is keeping me strong.

Rather than bashing my people, find ways to embrace us and let us be ourselves and our religious tradition.