Explaining the New Class Cleavages: Geography, Post-Industrial Transformations and Everyday Culture

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INTRODUCTION

The election of Donald Trump has been a jarring shock to the American political system. In addition to widespread normative concerns about his Presidency, the break with “normal politics” that his administration embodies raises pressing questions the fundamental sources of his electoral strength, and the roots of so-called populist trends in the West more generally. Both the scholarly and popular debates have been unhelpfully divided, however, between those that argue for the role of economic factors, on the one hand, and those that posit cultural factors, such as racism or xenophobia, on the other. In this paper, I argue that to fully explain the political cleavages driving populist trends, political scientists need to better understand the interaction between material circumstances and cultural identity, rather than seeing them as separate. To make sense of the new cleavages at work in the US and elsewhere, we need a better model of how people construct their material interests, one delineating how these interests are shaped by social logics, and embedded more broadly in cultures of meaning. While racism is a critical part of American politics, to use that fact to dismiss the role of economics in shaping today’s political cleavages is an analytic and empirical mistake.

My argument begins with the observation that post-industrial economic transformations have produced a starkly divided economic geography in the US, with cities growing ever more vibrant and rural areas dramatically declining across a variety of important indicators. Although this transformation is widely acknowledged, left unexplored is the impact that this spatial differentiation between regions has on the cultural construction of political cleavages. This paper proposes that the material reality of this pattern of economic activity has generated cultural class bubbles that underlie today’s political polarization, making more likely Trump’s rise. Drawing on the practice turn in political science, I offer an argument about culture as everyday lived experience. This argument helps better account for how economic change translates through culture and identity to become manifest in new political cleavages. Instead of seeing material interests in simple income or wealth terms, as do most comparative political economy approaches, we need to see class interests, and thus preferences, as socially constructed and shaped by place. More specifically, I posit the growing spatial separation of economic opportunity across the US and its translation into cultural identities as a critical factor explaining today’s politics.

My task in this paper is the development of this new conceptual template, which I hope will spur a new set of empirical investigations in future work. To do so, the paper begins by laying out some stylized facts about the 2016 election and how they challenge our traditional ways of understanding the sources of political cleavages. The next sections introduce my argument and surveys the new geography of political cleavage in the US, linking it to the post-industrial transformation of the economy. I suggest how this economic geography may have
an impact on differences in lived experience and create new class bubbles rooted in culture as well as economics. The final section concludes.

THE PUZZLE OF THE NEW POLITICAL CLEAVAGES

What explains the rise of anti-establishment anger, striking political polarization, and rejigged political cleavages that marked the election of Donald Trump? Trump was the candidate whose policy proposals and personal comportment seemed to fly in the face of everything we assume voters desire, yet he convincingly won the American electoral college vote and the US Presidential election of 2016. At a time of overall economic growth, low national unemployment, and stable prices, why did voters turn out in support of a candidate who vowed to dismantle the “rigged” system of the US government, and delink the US from the broader world through economic protectionism and “America First” policies?

Trump’s success was not a one-off event, as traditional left-right politics have been upended in Europe as well. The backlash evidenced in the UK’s Brexit vote to leave the EU, and the rising electoral strength of France’s Marie Le Pen and Holland’s Geert Wilders, all beg for analysis. Something has profoundly changed in established liberal, western order. Once, voters seemed content to support status quo candidates, their engagement with world markets, and their rhetoric (if not always policies) of liberal values. Yet today, a deep cleavage seems to be opening up between these new populists and the tradition of cosmopolitan liberalism, a split that seems to be replacing post-war, traditional left-right partisanship. Established political parties simply seem unable to persuasively address the needs of those excluded from the gains of the new economy nor signal solidarity with their lives (Mair 2013).

The Answer: Economic Interests or Cultural Identity?

The question of how to understand Trump’s victory has fueled intense strategic debates within a Democratic Party struggling to develop a plan to recapture voters. But it also has sparked a range of analyses seeking to map out the fundamental causes of the new politics at work, often attempting to capture the correlation between various socio-economic characteristics, racial, ethnic, gender

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2 Moody's analytics, for example, projected a resounding Clinton win; “Low gas prices and President Barack Obama’s high approval ratings are key factors that favor Democrat Hillary Clinton winning the White House in next week’s election, according to a model from Moody's Analytics that has accurately predicted the last nine U.S. presidential contests.” http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-research-moody-s-idUSKBN12W56]

3 Arguably, even the victory of French President Emmanuel Macron and his new anti-populist En March party, untethered from the political establishment, fits this anti-status quo trend.
identities, and electoral outcomes (McElwee and McDaniel 2017, Voter Study Group 2017). In the majority of these accounts, economic interests are separated out from cultural identity. This is not surprising, as political science has long viewed material explanations as separate from and competing with ideational approaches (Goldstein and Keohane 1993).

In comparative and international political economy, for example, much of the dominant literature on political cleavages begins from an analysis of an individual’s objectively assumed place in the global economy (Lake 2006; Lake 2009, McNamara 2009). The mapping of this position, as defined by liberal economic theory, is the analytic foundation for the theoretical construction of the individual’s interests and thus political preferences in this Open Economy Politics (OEP) approach, whether rooted in class, factors, sectors or firms (Hiscox 2001, Rogowski 1989, Frieden 1991, Milner 1988). The standard OEP approach is materially oriented, with actors’ interests defined purely as the maximization of economic gain. Further, actors understand their specific interests in line with standard microeconomic theory. The assumption is that actors will translate those economic interests in strategically rational ways to support politicians and policies reflecting those interests (Farrell and Newman 2015).

Similarly, in the fields of comparative and American politics, scholars have focused on the ways that income predicts partisanship and electoral cleavages, finding that conservative parties and leftist parties traditionally closely track wealthy and working class voters, respectively. Indeed in comparative politics work on Europe, class, most often coded straightforwardly as income, has been studied as a major part of the development of the modern party system. A tight linkage between income and parties has also been a focus of American politics scholarship, as the Republicans have historically done better with rich voters than poor ones in almost every US election in the post-war era. In most instances, the top third of income has voted between 10 to 20 percentage points more Republican than the lower third (Gelman and Azari 2016, Gelman, Park, et al., 2009).

However, data on the 2016 American election does not seem to neatly fit many of these literatures’ predictions on how income translates into partisan divides. For example, “the exit polls reported that Clinton won 53 percent of the under-$30,000 vote and 47 percent of those making over $100,000, a difference of only 6 percentage points, much less than the usual income gap” with similar minimal income-voting gradients in other surveys (Gelman and Azari 2016, 11). A very large Gallup survey found little evidence that a simple coding of a voter’s economic situation correlated with support for Donald Trump (Rothwell and Diego-Rosell 2016). Instead, the results showed “mixed evidence that economic distress has motivated Trump support. His supporters are less educated and more likely to work in blue collar occupations, but they earn relatively high household incomes and are no less likely to be unemployed or exposed to competition through trade or immigration” (Rothwell and Diego-Rosell 2016, 1). Trump’s win continued an ongoing trend of professionals moving towards the Democratic Party on one hand,
and managers and self-employed towards the Republicans, with routine white collar workers (service, sales and clerical) and blue collar workers clustered in the middle (Hout and Laurison 2014, 1040). But this trend was not easily captured by straight stories about votes for Trump being driven by economic anxiety based on income level.

The shortcomings of the initial pass at explaining the election through simple material economic correlations has caused many observers and analysts to turn to a second, opposing (but equally monocausal) story: culture and identity politics. But the approach taken by most commentators is a very narrow one: it is racism or xenophobia that has propelled Donald Trump to the White House (and is also to blame for the success of Brexit and populist candidates in Europe). Trump’s nativist rhetoric and xenophobic policies were the appeal, in this view, to American voters. Early reactions to Trump’s win, in op-eds and blog posts, painfully and angrily took up this explanation, as with one Vox article’s title: “Donald Trump’s Victory is part of a Global White Backlash” (Beauchamp 2016).

Anyone following the campaign, and now Trump’s Presidency, can easily see how Trump’s ‘Make American Great Again’ tropes can be readily understood as a call to the return to glory of white male privilege. Trump’s statements in the wake of the tragic Charlottesville violence by white supremacists in August 2017 were unvarnished racism. Some Trump supporters have displayed truly vile racism, sexism, xenophobia, and islamophobia, and have clearly been empowered by Trump himself to express these hateful sentiments. Trump’s appointees and White House staff are themselves in some cases part of the “alt-right” of white nationalism and nativism. Since Trump’s election, the rise in hate crimes against minority populations are horrifying and seem to validate this racism story.

Yet the racism argument also doesn’t easily square with the initial data on the 2016 election. Many commentators have noted that millions of white voters across the United States voted for Obama, the nation’s first black President, and then switched to Trump (Weigel 2016). While national level figures make the white working class, less educated voters who swung from Obama to Trump seem less than decisive in the outcome, close analysis shows that Clinton “lost primarily because of the narrow but deep swing among white working-class voters who were overrepresented in decisive battleground states” (Cohn 2017). The racism argument also fails to address the decisive low voter turnout for Hillary Clinton among minority voters. Trump actually won a slightly smaller percentage of white voters than Mitt Romney, but ultimately prevailed because minority voters and the young did not turn out for Clinton as they did for Obama (Ramakrishnan 2016; French 2016). Trump also won slightly more Hispanic voters than Romney, carrying over third of their vote despite rhetoric and policy statements about building walls on the Mexican border that seem to indicate contempt for Hispanics, particularly recent immigrants (Krogstad, Jens Manuel and Mark Hugo Lopez 2016).
In addition to being unconvincing empirically, the argument that Trump’s victory is due only to racist hate has had an unfortunate and self-defeating effect, as it has brought many people to see any effort to understand any Trump voters’ motivations beyond racism as itself abhorrent. While coastal elites have made J. D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy* a best seller, and *New Yorker* writers have fanned out to talk to rural white communities largely ignored before the election, these activities have come under fire from liberals who are disgusted by the values on display by the Trump supporters. Some mock arguments focused on economic anxiety and caution against the Democratic Party engaging with any of the underlying economic issues that may be driving the Trump win. Yet while some of Trump’s votes are no doubt simply due to racism, some may be due to something going on with class cleavages—not just income, but education and occupation as the statistics above suggest. But existing research does not seem to readily provide the tools to assessing those felt economic realities by looking only at either national data or individual level characteristics.

So, we are left with gaping divides among voters, strategists, and scholars themselves, and an unsatisfying explanation of the electoral success of Donald Trump and the broader transatlantic questioning of the very foundations of the post war order. How should we then begin to explain these very complicated politics, seemingly unprecedented in the postwar era?

**It’s Both: How Economic Culture Shapes Political Cleavages**

I argue that the puzzle of today’s political cleavages has to be understood in terms of the interaction between economic circumstances and culture, rather than opposing them as competing explanations. Humans are social creatures, and politics and markets are embedded within broader social structures made up of social interactions. Identity is always and everywhere with us, in the voting booth, on the job, in the family, or in the church. It is therefore a fundamental analytic mistake to imagine that our rationality is separate from our social identity and culture. So, while material circumstances are vitally important to explaining political cleavages, I propose a different way of understanding their impact, by situating them in these broader cultural settings, allowing us a fuller understanding of how interests are formed and understood.  

A crucial first step is to move away from aggregate economic conditions and instead to drill down into a granular county-by-county map of the winners and losers from America’s post-industrial, 21st century economy. This allows us to see how the geography of economic growth and vibrancy has starkly changed over the

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4 This is but one way; there is a much broader agenda of unpacking the interaction between material and cultural factors, such as Inglehart and Norris’s (2017) examination of how economic and structural conditions make more likely support for populist authoritarianism, or Cavaille and Ferwerda’s (2016) work on distributional conflict and support for right wing parties in Europe.
past three decades, creating new spatial expressions of economic haves and have-nots that belie the more positive overall numbers regarding the American economy. Spatial disparities matter not only for economic reasons, but for how they generate very different everyday, lived experiences that shape how we see the world and make meaning—in a word, culture. I hypothesize that these different lived experiences have created cultural bubbles that contribute to political polarization in the United States, namely deep cleavages between the supporters of establishment politicians on one side, and those voters who resent that status quo as failing them on the other. In this view, the economy is not just about income or social segmentation, but the ways in which the particular lived experiences in different cultural bubbles create class identities. The argument can be sketched out as follows:

Post-industrial economy → geographic divides → different lived experiences → cultural class bubbles → political cleavages

Consider this. A college graduate in Portland, Oregon, rides his fixie to his job as a dog walker—underemployed, but finding meaning in his daily routine, drinking kombucha while picking up used books at Powell’s. He lives in an environment full of opportunity, even if he may not take advantage of the various potential jobs around him to get wealthy. He may in fact make the same hourly wage as the greeter at Walmart in Hazel Green, Alabama, a middle age man without a college degree who used to have a well-paying welding job, until a robot costing $8/hour to his $25 replaced him on the factory floor. But their lived realities are entirely different, despite their similar income levels. Or think of the medical student working in a hospital for less than minimum wage, for whom the future is bright—despite her making less per hour than someone plowing driveways and trimming trees in her neighborhood. Merely coding these individuals in terms of their income, as many analysts do, would tell us very little about their social identities and thus little about their politics.

The everyday life for that dog walker in Portland and the greeter in Hazel Green is profoundly different in terms of the culture reproduced through their lived experiences and interactions with others. Place matters: on the one hand, the PDX setting of ramen noodle shops and web design firms. On the other, the setting of economic decline and unraveling social fabric that comes with counties struggling to stay afloat in the American economy.

Those differences between the dog walker and the Walmart greeter are part of the social stratification and segmentation that creates what I am calling class bubbles, where the everyday practices and lived reality differ dramatically and

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5 For comprehensive data on American political polarization, see Pew Research Center (2014).
consequentially depending on place, on your geographic location. Place does much more too: it also helps determine the degree of diversity in ethnic, racial, religious and other identities around you. It also determines your access to a rich or impoverished environment of public goods, the arts, education, in addition to the basics of economic circumstances such as jobs and rising home prices. Ultimately, it may also produce cleavages in peoples’ broader sense of hope, opportunity, and potential for dignity and meaning in the world, differences reinforced by the environment and the everyday interactions one is embedded within.

This broader appreciation of how everyday life translates into partisanship helps make sense of why Trump’s “Make America Great Again” trope is piercingly relevant to some voters, but makes no sense to others. It also explains why a comprehensive Gallup study found mixed economic drivers for the 2016 vote, but noted that “living in racially isolated communities with worse health outcomes, lower social mobility, less social capital, greater reliance on social security income and less reliance on capital income, predicts higher levels of Trump support” (Rothwell and Diego-Rosell 2016, 1). It is this notion of how differently placed communities create polarized cultural bubbles that we need to unpack.

THE NEW GEOGRAPHY OF POLITICAL CLEAVAGE

The story starts with the ways in which post-industrial economic agglomeration in the US created a distinct electoral map in 2016. A critical cleavage in the last American Presidential election is rooted in economic geography, but it is not the conventional “blue state, red state” story of old. Instead, we need to look at a more granular, county level. My story starts with the observation that the counties Hillary Clinton won constituted two-thirds of the nation’s GDP, whereas President Trump carried only one-third of US output (Muro and Liu, 2016).

This startling result represents a break from earlier elections, when Democratic and Republican nominees had a more equal distribution in terms of the spatially expressed vibrancy of their economic base. The table below captures the change from 2000 to 2016, in the number of counties won and their aggregate share of GDP. Whereas Al Gore won counties contributing 54% of American GDP in 2000, Hillary Clinton won counties constituting 64% of GDP. Moreover, and importantly for our story of geographic polarization, Clinton’s aggregate GDP carried with many fewer counties than Gore did (472 out of a total of 3,056, versus 659 for Gore). The trend of economic concentration of activity translating into political polarization between the Republican and Democratic candidates seems to have ratcheted up dramatically over the past few decades.
The second empirical observation important for our story is the finding that the candidates in this election also found their supporters in two very different geographic settings. Hillary Clinton won in many fewer counties, but her counties were much larger in population size and density than Trump’s counties.
Thinking in terms of the theoretical arguments made earlier, the everyday environment for Clinton voters is on balance much more likely to be an urban and economically vibrant one, against the small towns, exurbs and rural everyday world that Trump voters live in. A graphic prepared by Brookings (above) illustrates the division very starkly, as the squares colored blue, which Clinton won, are large counties that make up the clear majority of the country’s current GDP. The red squares are striking in their small size (aside for three blocks at the top that represent parts of Long Island, NY, the Fort Worth Texas area, and the Phoenix area, all of which went for Trump). As the authors state: “Clinton’s “base of 493 counties was heavily metropolitan. By contrast, Trumpland consists of hundreds and hundreds of tiny low-output locations that comprise the non-metropolitan hinterland of America, along with some suburban and exurban metro counties” (Muro and Liu 2016). This distribution in voters represents a change from earlier elections, where the county-by-county analysis showed a much less stark difference between the percentage of American GDP going to the Democratic versus the Republican presidential candidate.

Recent work by Jonathan Rodden has born out, at a more granular level, the split between the urban and the rural vote in this past election. Rodden finds that democratic voters even in majority Republican, economically stagnant counties tend to cluster in dense, urban settings. Rodden notes that “...the same political geography found in big cities is also on display in smaller postindustrial towns. There is a fascinating fractal-like relationship between population density — which is the upshot of early industrial activity — and Democratic voting. As one zooms in to lower and lower levels of geographic aggregation, the relationship only reappears in finer detail.” (Rodden 2016). Complementing these studies, research done by the National Association of Counties (NACo) also found that the majority of swing counties that voted Republican in 2016 are the counties more likely to be experiencing a weak job recoveries after the 2009 recession (NACo 2017).

In addition to the GDP data, real estate prices are another way to empirically capture this divergence in the economic geography of Trump versus Clinton voters. A study by Zillow noted that their analysis of housing prices demonstrates Clinton and Trump supporters have been living in two economies, as shown below. Note that the graphic traces out data not by state, but a finer-grained county by county electoral results, showing a pronounced difference between the housing values of Clinton versus Trump voters. Clinton’s voters median price increased since 2000 from $138,000 to $250,000, an increase of 82 percent, where the counties where Trump carried the day the price increased just 52 percent over the same period, from $101,000 to $154,000. Clinton’s counties experienced more instability in prices with volatility and loses outstripping the Trump counties after

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the financial crisis, but a steep appreciation in the last few years (Ehrenfreund 2016). This speaks to the economic environment of voters not directly captured by straightforward income data.

A final empirical observation that bears on the spatial material reality of Trump and Clinton voters is a statistical analysis by *The Economist* that again uses county level data (compiled by The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington) “on life expectancy and the prevalence of obesity, diabetes, heavy drinking and regular physical activity (or lack thereof)” (Economist 2016). The analysis of the Republican vote in the 2016 election in comparison to 2012 found that “Together, these variables explain 43% of Mr Trump’s gains over Mr Romney, just edging out the 41% accounted for by the share of non-college whites” even when controlling for race, education, age, sex, income, marital status, immigration and employment. These findings echo those of Case and Deaton on the unprecedented downwards trend of American working class whites’ health outcomes (Case and Deaton 2015). They also provide another example of the geographic differences in the lived experiences of Trump and Clinton voters.

Finally, a powerful determinant of Trump or Clinton votes was county level educational attainment. Nate Silver’s analysis of 981 U.S. counties with 50,000 or more people found that the Trump-Clinton political cleavage was most clearly explained by the share of the population that had completed at least a four-year college degree (Silver 2016). The differences were stark, and particularly telling in those counties where incomes were high but college graduates scarce, which went for Trump while the better
educated but less prosperous counties voted Democratic. These local county level conditions tell us much more than the state level in the case of education and the 2016 vote.

All of this data suggests that rather than thinking about the US electoral pattern as pitting red states against blue states, or looking only to aggregate national data, or focusing only on individual voters’ characteristics, it is useful to think in more local terms, such as cities versus rural and exurban areas, particularly when attempting to sort through the question of the relative importance of culture and material circumstances. Of course, as it is not the majority of the popular vote that elects US presidents but rather the electoral college, which like the Senate numerically inflates rural votes over urban, it is those spatially dispersed voters who take a privileged place in explaining the 2016 outcome. But how might we understand the underlying drivers at work in producing the geographic distribution of these election results?

The Post-Industrial Transformation Of America

The above data on the geography of the 2016 Presidential election suggest that a key starting point for understanding the American populist backlash is the transformation of the US over the past decades from an industrial into a post-industrial, digital economy. Just as with Lipset and Rokken’s (1967) seminal work on the ways in which the industrial revolution rejiggered political cleavages in the 20th century, underlying shifts in the very nature of the economy is a critical starting point in understanding today’s unexpected politics.

One aspect of the post-industrial American economy has been well documented: the startling rise of levels of economic inequality in the US over the past few decades (Piketty 2014). However, another key development has received less attention. The US today is a place with dramatic differences in the economic geography producing, on the one hand, economically dynamic areas engaged in the 21st century economy, and on the other, low growth, deindustrialized areas largely shut out of such gains. This geography of economic difference is important because it generates very different social realities and thus everyday practices for its citizens. Even if income levels are similar, the lived experience of someone in a declining area is decidedly different from a person with similar income in a part of the country enjoying growth and opportunity, creating the basis for a whole new sort of political cleavage in this new economy.

The general outline is familiar to most, but its political implications are less widely recognized. Starting in the 1970s, the transition to a post-industrial economy, based on the creation of knowledge and manipulation of information

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rather than the production of food, goods, and services, brought about an accelerating and irreversible shift in the overall distribution of income and wealth in the US (Devine and Waters 2004, Svalfors 2005). Those who worked in American manufacturing industries saw their stable, economically secure and politically prominent status begin to fall behind. Since then, in comparative terms, the US has had a striking disjuncture between who gets the gains for growth since the late 1970s, shown in the table below.

Table 1: Income growth and inequality 1978-2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income group (distribution of per-adult pre-tax national income)</th>
<th>China</th>
<th>USA</th>
<th>France</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full Population</td>
<td>811%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bottom 50%</td>
<td>401%</td>
<td>-1%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle 40%</td>
<td>779%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 10%</td>
<td>1294%</td>
<td>115%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>incl. Top 1%</td>
<td>1898%</td>
<td>196%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>incl. Top 0.1%</td>
<td>2261%</td>
<td>321%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>incl. Top 0.01%</td>
<td>2685%</td>
<td>453%</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>incl. Top 0.001%</td>
<td>3111%</td>
<td>685%</td>
<td>158%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Source: Alvaredo, Chancel, Piketty, Saez and Zucman, 2017.

After the global financial crisis and the Great Recession, data indicates that these trends have only worsened, as the top 1% of Americans initially captured all the income gains from the recovery over the first five years, although the gains are now starting to spread (Saez 2015; 2016). As important as these overall numbers on inequality are, however, to understand the politics of today, these changes need to be put in the context of their spatial distribution and how that generates on the ground social realities.

Over the past few decades of the transition to the knowledge economy, U.S. economic activity has grown increasingly concentrated in large, “superstar” metro areas, such as Silicon Valley and New York, and along the coasts of the US (Morrill 2015). A variety of data portrays a stark concentration in economic growth, new business creation, and the nature of employment over the US (Moretti 2012). The divide has accelerated after the Great Recession, as some areas have pulled away while others stagnate or fall behind (Florida 2016). In the years from 2011 to 2016,

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8 Unfortunately, there has been relatively little work on the link between increasing income inequality and the uneven geographic distribution of income groups, with a recent review noting “it is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon” and “the details of how and why it has grown have been much less thoroughly investigated than those related to income inequality.” (Reardon and Bischoff 2011, 1934).
the top ten metros for job growth have been a mix of knowledge-based and service-based metros. As Florida summarizes: “The tech hub of Provo, Utah, tops the list with a 26.8 percent increase in jobs; Austin (21.9 percent), San Jose (21.3 percent), San Francisco (19 percent), and Raleigh (18.5 percent) also number among the top ten. Cape Coral-Fort Myers (25.8 percent), Orlando (19.6 percent), and North Point-Sarasota (18.9 percent) in Florida and Riverside (19.3 percent) and Stockton (18.2 percent) in California complete the top ten” (Florida 2016).

While striking, the numbers above lump together all types of jobs: the situation looks even more geographically divided when we separate out low from high paying jobs. A recent study by the National Employment Law Project categorizes jobs into 3 types: high-wage jobs which pay $21.14 or more per hour; mid-wage jobs which pay between $13.84 and $21.13 an hour; and low-wage jobs which pay $13.83 an hour or less (NELP 2012). These categories have been used to map job growth in the US, as seen in the following graphics, which look at the geography of job growth in America’s 100 largest metros between 2011 and 2016 (Florida 2016). Note that the data only uses the 100 largest metro areas, out of a total of 382 possible metropolitan statistical areas in the US, so does not fully represent the entire economic geography of the US, which would likely be more extreme if it included the smallest counties.

High-Wage Job Growth By Metro Area (2011-2016)
The map above zeros in on the share of high-wage jobs by metro area between 2011 and 2016. The graphical representation fits our intuitions that it is the technology and knowledge concentration in the Bay Area and the Boston-New York-Washington corridor that are drawing the most high paying jobs. Florida (2016) summarizes the data as follows: “San Jose is first, where high-wage jobs have accounted for more than 60 percent of jobs, followed by Washington, D.C. (57.1 percent), San Francisco (54.7 percent), Bridgeport-Stamford (51.2 percent), Boston (50.6 percent), Seattle (48.3 percent), New York (46.6 percent), Hartford (46.5 percent), Minneapolis-St. Paul (45.8 percent), and Denver (45.2 percent).”

Low-Wage Job Growth By Metro Area (2011-2016)

The geographic reverse appears when low-wage jobs are mapped in the post-Great Recession era, as in the map above. The largest circles of concentrations of low wage job growth are in the South and some parts of the Rustbelt. Again, the author summarizes: “McAllen, Texas, has the largest share of low-wage jobs, with nearly 65 percent of its jobs falling into this category. El Paso (58.4 percent) and San Antonio (48.7 percent) in Texas also have large concentrations of low-wage jobs, as do Deltona-Daytona Beach Florida (56.3 percent), and other Florida towns. The
hard-hit Rustbelt metro of Youngstown, Ohio (49.9 percent) also numbers among the ten metros with the largest share of low-wage jobs.” (Florida 2016). Middle wage jobs present a more mixed picture, but again present a mix of mainly Rustbelt and Sunbelt metros, as Allentown, Pennsylvania, has the largest share of mid-wage jobs (33.2 percent).

Taken together, these maps provide a stark picture of the divides in America’s economic reality, one that is empirically demonstrated in a host of similar studies (Moretti 2012, Kopf 2017). The recovery has been not so much jobless, but rather has produced a group of winners and a group of losers when it comes to how good those jobs are. The geographically small group of winners—mainly knowledge and tech hubs but also some service-oriented metros—have accounted for the bulk of job growth overall and for most of the high-wage jobs, but also a good number of the mid-wage, and low-wage jobs. As Florida writes, “If anything, America’s jobs divide has become even more pronounced in the past several years, with the gaps between a dozen or so big winners and the rest growing ever larger. America is not only beset by rising income inequality, it faces deepening regional inequality in jobs, wages, and opportunity as well” (Florida 2016).

**Agglomeration in the Digital Age**

This phenomenon is not surprising to some scholars, even as it is striking in how quickly economic concentration is accelerating over time as we move further into the digital economy and away from the era of industrial employment. A robust literature in economic geography explains why economic activity is not spread out evenly, as the cost of spatial interactions among the factors of production means that returns to scale will drive clustering of economic activities in certain locations. Firms have found that it is more profitable, for example, to locate in places with good market access, which of course are places with large populations, which in turn benefit from job growth when the firms’ set up shop. Inward labor migration tends to occur to follow the jobs, and a positive feedback is set up, where population drives market size, firm location, higher wages, and rising population (Venables 2010, 743). This agglomeration cycle is subject to very strong cumulative effects, as the path dependency of the start of this cycle might be the siting of an early town on a seaport location, such as Boston, whose attractiveness to firms eventually far outstrips the original economic rationale for the location. In addition, there are a variety of externalities, such as the drive for robust institutions to protect economic activity or education to support an effective labor force, that are pervasive and add to the seemingly inevitable concentration of efficiency, productivity and growth (Venables 2008, 751). Counterintuitively, this geographic agglomeration is only accelerating with the rise of the knowledge economy, as the power of the internet and its virtual world has not reduced the importance of physical place for investment, production, employment, sales, and consumption.

The economic geography literature predicts that with full labor mobility, “income differences will be eliminated but activity will have a spatially lumpy
distribution, as population becomes concentrated in cities.” (Venables 2008, 751). But if labor is not fully mobile, which is the case in the real world, “the disparities may be manifested through spatial income inequalities.” (Venables 2008, 751). That labor mobility has fallen by half in the US since 1990 means that these inequalities have been exacerbated at exactly the time that the agglomeration effects have increased (Ganong and Shoag 2016, Kaplan and Schulerhofer-Wohl 2015). The trends in disparities of costs of home ownership between the economically vibrant parts of the US and those stagnant areas exacerbate the agglomeration effects as well, as rural home ownership tends to predict lower worker mobility (Monchuk, Kilkenny, and Phimister 2013). The path dependency and self-reinforcing mechanisms of this spatial inequality in economic activity generate cultural bubbles that have real consequences for American politics. In the final section below, I start to unpack how these economic circumstances might generate culture and how place links to new class identities.

**LIVED EXPERIENCE: PRACTICE AND THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF CLASS**

Social action, of which voting is but one example, has multiple logics. Scholars have developed various categories to express these different motivations. Max Weber laid out four “orientations” of social action: instrumental rationality, value rationality, emotion or affective rationality, and habit (Hopf 2010). Others have illuminated these logics by emphasizing the multifaceted human search for material rewards (wealth, income), emotional rewards (love, affection, sex) and symbolic rewards (prestige and social standing) (Massey 2007, 1).

Yet while many would agree that humans are always more than a simple story of *homo economicus*, they resist the notion that these logics can intertwine in causally important ways, or that this co-constitution is amenable to systematic study. Instead, most political scientists still cling to the notion that humans toggle between two operating systems in our calculations and behaviors: a “logic of consequences” versus a “logic of appropriateness,” where the former is our rational, instrumental selves and the latter is a normatively driven state where instrumental rationality is overridden and put aside (March and Olsen 1984).

Such a model would start with the observation that our “logics of appropriateness” actually shape our “logics of consequence.” The cultures that we are part of filter how we see our material realities and how we evaluate whether we are winners or losers from a particular policy or electoral outcome. Class formation and class structure therefore are both dependent on meaning creation, on people interpreting their placement in the economy in certain ways to create a felt identity and category of social action (Sewell 2000, Thompson 1991). In this way, economic circumstances and identity interact. Yet despite evidence suggesting that local contexts and networks of social interaction influence political attitudes and behavior,
“Most models treat independent variables such as social class as universal characteristics, however—as meaning the same thing to all people in all places...” Social class is not a pre-given characteristic, however. Rather, its meaning is learned in context—in the home, neighborhood, school, workplace, and so on. Class positions are interpreted according to how we learn about them and from whom, and many of the sources live in or close to our homes.” (Johnston and Pattie 2005, 184).

It is this social construction of class and its impact on how people perceive their electoral interests that we should be looking at to understand the changing political cleavages of the post-industrial economy. Thinking about culture as practice, set against the starkly diverging economic geography I have laid out above, provides a way forward.

**Culture as What We Do**

Culture can be defined as a process of meaning making, shared among some particular group of people. Meaning making is a “a social process through which people reproduce together the conditions of intelligibility that enable them to make sense of their worlds” (Wedeen 2002, 717; Geertz 1973, 5). Indeed, although it is very difficult to see culture when it is all around us, it is vital to recognize that such routinized and widely shared sets of understandings are crucial in stabilizing our social, economic and political institutions (Meyers et al 1987). In this, culture becomes a social structure, dynamic and subject to change by the agents or people within it, but structural just the same (Sewell 1992). By seeing culture as practices of meaning making, we are able to probe into the ways in which actors are making their worlds intelligible and manageable, in both emotional and cognitive ways (Wedeen 2002, 720).

Practice—our day-to-day experiences and actions as humans--is what solidifies and makes real social constructions, or contradicts and inverts them (Wedeen 2002, Pouliot 2008, Swidler 2002). Pouliot helpfully points out that we should spend more time as scholars considering what people actually do (Pouliot 2008). Pouliot emphasizes the routines that become a “way of life”, and cause actors to be thinking “from” a certain situation rather than thinking “about” it (Pouliot 2008, 257). The practice approach draws on Bourdieu’s idea of practical reasoning, providing a way to understand the political consequential processes of class creation by highlighting the common-sense and inarticulate grounds for action, and demonstrate how cultural is consequential for outcomes (Bourdieu 1990). Recalling our discussion about the need for an expanded notion of the motivations that drive social logics, beyond the simplicity of the *homo economicus*, an analysis of the class cultures that arise from everyday practices allows for a new way of

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9 This use of practice is in line with the so-called practice turn in international relations (Pouliot 2008, Neumann 2002, Adler and Pouliot 2011, Pouliot 2008 and 2010, McNamara 2015). For useful a reviews of the literature, see Bourbeau 2017.
thinking about the US case. But first we need to make a link between the idea of practice as culture, and the role of place, specifically the economic geography of divergence in the United States.

**Place and Identity**

The potential causal importance of the various types of cultures that are generated by everyday practices among geographically co-located class groups creates new ways of thinking about political cleavages (Dowling 2009). By seeing culture as practices of meaning making, we are able to probe into the ways in which actors are making their worlds intelligible and manageable, in both emotional and cognitive ways (Wedeen 2002: 720). In this telling, our identities (and political preferences) are a function not only of where we are in the economy, but the day to day experiences that create different ways of seeing the world and our place in it.

That geography of everyday life is a crucial part of that world. It includes how you spend 8 or more hours a day working (or not working, or as a stay-at-home caregiver), the physical reality of your living conditions, your neighborhood, how you spend your leisure time, the experiences of the people you interact with, the church or synagogue you attend and so on. The practice of everyday life also includes the hierarchy of wealth, status and power that accrues differentially to participants in these social settings, and that are reinforced, or challenged, by daily practice (St Clair 2015, Zuckerman 2005). In such a view, our sense of political identity is created across our everyday realities in ways that are profoundly shaped by, but do not simply track income. The clustering of economically dynamic activities creates complex, interlinked experiences and opportunities that offer very different senses and meanings about politics, not least of which Presidential elections, that need further study.

In sum, rather than flattening out people’s economic circumstances into universal notions of “working class” or “export sector” or “middle income earners,” we need to root the economic unit of analysis in a particular social context in order to understand the politics in play. One important way to do so is to recognize that this social context will have an inescapable spatial expression, as where and with whom we carry out our everyday practices matters for the shape and contour of those practices and their political repercussions for identity and thus political interests and preferences, as we will see next. And transformations in the nature of the economy and its geographic agglomeration will have a big impact on that.

**Class Bubbles & Political Cleavages**

The final step in my argument is to make the link to the new political cleavages that have produced our current politics. We have robust data on the rise of spatial inequality, and on political polarization, but is now needed is a better specification of the channels by which class bubbles are socially constructed and ways to empirically observe them and their manifestation in political cleavages. The
channels encompass the material realities of everyday life, and the role of social interactions, both face to face and in virtual communities, in constructing individual and collective political preferences. While political scientists have not developed off the shelf approaches to capture these processes, future work should draw on a combination of works in sociology, geography and anthropology to get at the ways that political cleavages are constructed out of geographically anchored everyday practices.

There are a range of qualitative, ethnographic studies that suggest the geographic variations in everyday practices, whereas quantitative assessments might find correlations between observable implications of my argument, and GIS studies can map the presence and absence of variables across space to plot out these relationships. One goal would be to create research designs to capture variation in the areas I am specifying as important: economic agglomeration in the new economy, differences in lived experiences and practices, activated class identity, and political cleavages. This would likely start with an account of the cultural manifestations of the everyday realities that are faced by Americans in the largely rural, relatively racially and ethnically homogenous areas being left behind in the new economy, on the one hand, and for urban dwellers in more cosmopolitan settings on the other.

One way into these differences in lived environment is to consider the findings about the growing divergence between cities and rural areas in terms of education and the impacts of agglomeration attracting more and more of the highly educated. As Moretti notes, it is not only the enhanced productivity of the highly educated than results in better wages, “the presence of many college-educated residents changes the local economy in profound ways, affecting both the kinds of jobs available and the productivity of every worker who lives there, including the less skilled. This results in high wages not just of the skilled workers but for most workers.” (Moretti 2012, 5). Multiplier effects have been found to create 2.5 additional jobs in local goods and services for every additional skilled job in the tradable sector (Moretti 2010). But the story is more than jobs and wages, as the “sorting of highly educated Americans into some communities and less educated Americans into others tends to magnify and exacerbate” cultural identities, health, family stability, crime rates and, most important for our questions, politics (Moretti 2012, 5). Plugging this sort of economic impact into what we know about neighborhood effects could lead to important observations about how the economic geography divides is playing out into political cleavages (Deluca and Rosenbaum 2014).

Another important range of observations would be around the changing nature of work in the geographically divided America. It has been difficult to get systematic data on the ways in which what some scholars call “alternative work arrangements” has grown, but work by Katz and Krueger (2016) begins to catalogue nationally work not tied to regular hours and full time, permanent work
relationships. Others have offered analyses of the gig economy (Muro 2016, Hathaway and Muro 2016), and precarious work and irregular scheduling (Kalleberg 2012, Golden 2015). A deeper dive into how this creates uncertainty and a differential sense of security and view of whether things are improving or not in the nation is necessary.

Recently, a series of remarkable ethnographic works have painted a picture of the everyday lives of working class white Americans in the rural areas congruent with our discussion of the implications of divergences in national economic geography (Gest 2016; Hochschild 2016a; Cramer 2016). These accounts provide some clues about how lived experiences and the social practices in these places are playing out in terms of the emotions that voters have towards politics and, particularly, political elites and establishment politicians. Katherine Cramer’s impressive work on rural resentment in Wisconsin and Justin Gest’s laudable study of white working class voters in Youngstown and East London offer piercing wake up calls for those of us who live in settings where such feelings of hopelessness and being abandoned are far from the norm (Cramer 2016; Gest 2016). For example, Hochschild writes about what she calls a “deep story” that seemed to tie together the various conversations she had in five years of visiting white, tea party families. Her subjects live in Louisiana, the third poorest state in the US and one acutely plagued by the geographic expression of inequality described in the sections above. Even among the middle class, daily interactions with trailer park dwellers with missing teeth and broken homes leads many seemingly economically better off to fear they are but one step away from economic insolvency and the shame of welfare. She writes:

Being middle class didn’t mean you felt secure, because that class was thinning out as a tiny elite shot up to great wealth and more people fell into a life of broken teeth, unpaid rent, and shame. (Hochschild 2016b).

That “deep story” dovetailed with a sense of being separated from other Americans who live in the growth economies of the cities and the coasts, and of being viewed with derision by those people whose way of life seems far away, foreign, and undesirable--yet is rewarded by both the market and government policies. Work on symbolic boundaries and status that tell us how important social meaning is, as illustrated below (Lamont and Fournin 1994, Lamont 2002)

Pervasive among the people I talked to was a sense of detachment from a distant elite with whom they had ever less contact and less in common...“You’re not in the ‘in’ crowd if you’re not a liberal. You’re an old-fashioned old fogey, small thinking, small town, gun loving, religious,” said a minister’s wife. “The media tries to make the tea party look like bigots, homophobic; it’s not.” They resented all labels “the liberals” had for them, especially “backward” or “ignorant Southerners” or, worse, “rednecks.”
... For some, age had also become a source of humiliation. One white evangelical tea party supporter in his early 60s had lost a good job as a sales manager with a telecommunications company when it merged with another. He took the shock bravely. But when he tried to get rehired, it was terrible. “I called, emailed, called, emailed. I didn’t hear a thing. That was totally an age discrimination thing.” At last he found a job at $10 an hour, the same wage he had earned at a summer factory union job as a college student 40 years ago. Age brought no dignity. Nor had the privilege linked to being white and male trickled down to him. Like Sharon’s clients in the petrochemical plants, he felt like a stranger in his own land. (Hochschild 2016b)

How might such ethnographic work might be harnessed to specify more precisely the ways in which practice helps construct class bubbles, with the underlying geography of inequality as the foundational driver of the different patterns of practice? It may be micro-level ethnography on carefully chosen locations that vary in useful ways will help us work through how material and cultural factors generate class identity and ultimately, political polarization. Paired comparisons between geographic locales that share income levels but offer very different opportunity structures because of where they are located, rural/exurba or urban, and thus very different cultures of everyday life offer one way forward.

5. CONCLUSION

The shifts in political cleavages that have emerged over the last few years on both sides of the Atlantic are nothing new, if one takes a historical view. Comparativists have fully explored how the industrial revolution’s dramatic restricting of social, political and economic relationships resulted in the creation of a working class and new left-right political cleavages. More recently, scholars have begun to outline how new cleavages are superceding the narrowly defined version of economic class as the key determinant of political preferences and outcomes. Hooghe and Marks argue for the emergence of a transnational cleavage that has "as its focal point the defense of national political, social and economic ways of life against external actors who penetrate the state by migrating, exchanging goods or exerting rule (Hooghe and Marks 2017, 2). This is all part of an upheaval of the seemingly “frozen” party politics of the last century, which have now been upended in all different directions.

The particular story of these shifts in political cleavages that I have laid out is preliminary. But it suggests an important link between growing geographic economic divergence, culture as practice, and new political cleavages that deserves much more attention. My approach moves beyond the very thin notion of rationality provided by much of traditional political science, and may be better able to explain the complex politics of our time. Human beings are made up of a variety of intersecting motivations, informed by social logics. In this paper, I have argued that our understanding of class-based political cleavages needs to grapple with
culture and identity as generated through everyday lived experience grounded in place, not just income or wealth, if we are to explain the momentous and complex politics we are living through.

From a pragmatic policy standpoint, I am also suggesting that those concerned about the path of American politics and the threats to democracy represented by the Trump presidency need to put aside their bickering about whether it is purely identity politics or purely economic anxiety at work producing our current politics. There have been a number of calls to push back on efforts to understand or engage with Trump supporters and their “so-called white working class angst” because of the view that this legitimizes the racist, anti-Semitic or xenophobic positions expressed by the Trump Administration and some of its supporters.

Despite some scholars and commentators dismissing economic anxiety out of hand as a reason behind Trump’s electoral success, the stark and growing geographic inequality in the US can be demonstratively linked to the populist backlash, even as factors such as racism also matter. Geographic divergences in economic and social living standards, and the broader trends of economic inequality in the US, have yet to be effectively addressed by the mainstream GOP or Democratic candidates or their parties. After global financial crisis, President Obama was unable to stem the tide of an increasingly economically divided country, and Hillary Clinton was never accepted as the candidate with the bona fides to tackle what is viewed by many as a “rigged” system. It was left to the highly unlikely success of the socialist Bernie Saunders, and the eventual winner, Donald Trump, to articulate the views of a minority of the population--but a majority of the electoral college voters--that American was not working for them. Analyzing how post-industrial transformations have created a new economic geography of lived experience offers one way into these complicated times.

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