

Rural Shame Helps Fuel Trump Backing by Poor

written by Roger Bybee | February 7, 2025



In the wake of the November 5 election, the question again arises: Why do such large segments of Americans vote against their own immediate and seemingly obvious economic interests?

In particular, what drives the rural very poor into the arms of politicians like Donald Trump whose servility to large corporations and billionaires is so transparently obvious? Pike County in eastern Kentucky exemplifies, in extreme form, this confounding pattern as part of the second poorest Congressional district out of 435. It ranks lowest on a “well-being” index of all counties in the nation. Across the United States in 2021, the rate of deaths from drug overdoses in the United States was 32 per 100,000; in Pike County, the rate was 91 per 100,000.

Pike County is also the second most conservative district, with the county rewarding Donald Trump with 80 percent of the vote in 2016, 2020, and 2024. The stance of Trump on a wide swath of issues affecting the working class and the poor—the minimum wage, universal healthcare as a right, strong taxation of corporations and the super-rich—is simply outside ordinary political discourse in the county. Talk is dominated by the discussion over the new visibility of trans people, the “stolen” 2020 election, and the “threat” posed by immigration.

This paradox of poverty coexisting with right-wing politics that deepen the poverty and reinforce stark inequality in Pike County is the relentless focus of Arlie Russell Hochschild, a UC-Berkeley sociologist, who in *Stolen Pride: Loss, Shame, and the Rise of the Right* presents crucial insights into this syndrome. Hochschild immersed herself thoroughly in the lives of Pike County residents in their communities and isolated “hollers” for six years. The product of her deep dive in Pike County is the fascinating, richly detailed *Stolen Pride*.

Pike County has been devastated by the simultaneous disappearance of mining jobs and an immense inflow of opioid pills driven by a pharmaceutical industry unconcerned about widespread addiction and overdose deaths.

Hochschild carefully peels back the layers of daily life to reveal how the emotions of shame and loss of pride so deeply colors how individuals and the community view social and political issues. “If you succeeded, you felt proud. If you failed, you felt shame” in what Hochschild calls the emotional “pride economy.”

But these judgments about oneself occurred within the framework of a severely crippled material economy. Kentuckians have felt intense pride in being of use through hard work and personal responsibility. Yet “their beleaguered economy greatly lowered their chance of success and vulnerability to shame. This presented victims with a dilemma: how to respond to unwarranted

shame.”

The reality of disappearing work and high wages creates few options except for the “unwarranted shame.” One indicator of shriveling opportunity for success: the number of coal jobs in Kentucky fell from 30,498 in 1990 to 3,874 in 2020. (In particular, job losses actually accelerated rapidly under Donald Trump despite his talk of restoring coal jobs, with Pike County coal jobs falling from 6,460 to 3,911 during his administration.) The remaining coal jobs are non-union and are based on “mountaintop removal,” which leaves behind stripped landscapes, polluted water, and the constant danger of coal-slurry pools collapsing on communities located below.

Efforts to compensate for the loss of possibilities for success and rekindling a renewed sense of personal pride, like teaching ex-miners and other displaced workers skills in computer coding, have failed to fill the gaping holes in the area’s economy. Along with the sharp decline in well-paid job opportunities, people in Appalachian communities like Pike County have experienced a sense of painful loss in their heritage and their land now despoiled by mountaintop removal, while their proud tradition of ingenuity has been devalued in the twenty-first-century economy.

In this context of declining opportunity and a loss of social cohesion, one response has been reliance on OxyContin and other opioids. Eastern Kentucky and West Virginia were targeted by huge drug companies, led by Purdue Pharma, and literally millions of pills flooded these areas, as Eric Eyre details in *Death in Mud Lick: A Coal Country Fight against the Drug Companies that Delivered the Opioid Epidemic*. In Pike County, opioids have produced ruined lives and numerous deaths through overdoses.

Across the nation, the spread of opioids now claims nearly 100,000 American lives annually. With an economy of rapacious corporate offshoring of jobs and other sharp reductions in the prospects for those without college diplomas, there has been a sharp growth in the use of opioids and other “diseases of despair”—namely, drugs, alcoholism, and suicide. America witnessed about 600,000 more deaths than expected during the 1999–2017 period, as Anne Case and August Deaton outline in *Diseases of Despair and the Future of American Capitalism*. “Especially hard hit has been white, blue-collar men without a bachelor’s degree,” Hochschild points out.

Paralleling the self-destructive behaviors associated with a loss of self-worth, there is also a marked outward-facing pattern of hostility toward recipients of government assistance despite the widely recognized landscape of widespread poverty afflicting Pike County. Even though Kentucky receives 40 percent of its state budget from the federal government, and more visibly, 22 percent of Pike County residents relying on SNAP (food stamps) benefits for survival, resentment is high against those who are labeled “takers” rather than “makers.” But more people actually receive SNAP than bother to vote and hence lack political power.

This has proved to be extremely fertile ground for Donald Trump, whose claim of a stolen election in 2020 (despite sixty-two court cases finding no proof of fraud) dovetails with the sense that Pike County, too, has been somehow victimized by outside liberal forces and its residents’ sense of rootedness also “stolen.”

Trump is hailed by some in Pike County as “our bully” willing to take on the Democratic Party, the media, and federal government, collectively perceived as “the bigger and badder bully,” which Pike County alone cannot fend off, as Hochschild explains.

Trump has skillfully played out what Hochschild calls an “1-2-3-4 anti-shame ritual” that resonates forcefully in Pike County where shame is never far beneath the surface of consciousness. The ritual begins with a provocative statement or action by Trump—whether it be leaning on Georgia officials

“to find 11,780 votes” or, more recently, threatening to punish and jail his opponents among Democrats and “the enemy within.” Stage 2 is the predictable public shaming by liberals and progressives. Third is Trump’s claim to be an unfairly picked-on “victim,” asserting to his followers that “I am a victim for you” and “I’m in pain, as you are. I’m suffering *for you*.”

This is followed in Stage 4 by Trump “roaring back” by launching crude, bombastic, transgressive, and menacing counterattacks on his critics, with shocking accusations of such sins as being “Communist,” “Radical Left,” or “corrupt.” The roar is designed to rally his most hard-line followers, overwhelm critics with its ferocity, and put unprepared critics on the defensive, if not in fear of “retribution.” A central aim: to reframe public discourse through the use of extreme language and proposals that come to dominate discourse.

But even in Pike County’s politically forbidding, barren environment and the overarching influence of Trump, new organizing efforts keep popping up and reaching out to seek independent political power. Coalitions emerge to protect the environment from immensely destructive coal mining via mountaintop removal. Local movements challenge political machines rooted in serving corporate interests like coal, other portions of the fossil-fuel industry, and major utilities.

But as insurgent groups battle the corporate-controlled economy, they still must tenaciously battle the deeply rooted fatalism and passivity flowing from the “pride economy,” which *Stolen Pride* so insightfully explores.