



Brittany Holloway-Brown

## The smug style in American liberalism

By Emmett Rensin | Apr 21, 2016, 8:20am EDT

There is a smug style in American liberalism. It has been growing these past decades. It is a way of conducting politics, predicated on the belief that American life is not divided by moral difference or policy divergence — not really — but by the failure of half the country to know what's good for them.

In 2016, the smug style has found expression in media and in policy, in the attitudes of liberals both visible and private, providing a foundational set of assumptions above which a great number of liberals comport their understanding of the world.

It has led an American ideology hitherto responsible for a great share of the good accomplished over the past century of our political life to a posture of reaction and disrespect: a condescending, defensive sneer toward any person or movement outside of its consensus, dressed up as a monopoly on reason.

The smug style is a psychological reaction to a profound shift in American political demography.

Beginning in the middle of the 20th century, the working class, once the core of the

coalition, began abandoning the Democratic Party. In 1948, in the immediate wake of Franklin Roosevelt, 66 percent of manual laborers voted for Democrats, along with 60 percent of farmers. In 1964, **it was** 55 percent of working-class voters. By 1980, it was 35 percent.

The white working class in particular saw even **sharper declines**. Despite historic advantages with both poor and middle-class white voters, by 2012 Democrats possessed only a 2-point advantage among poor white voters. Among white voters making between \$30,000 and \$75,000 per year, the GOP has taken a 17-point lead.

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*FINDING COMFORT IN THE NOTION THAT THEIR FORMER ALLIES WERE DISDAINFUL, HAPLESS RUBES, SMUG LIBERALS CREATED A CULTURE ANIMATED BY THAT CONTEMPT*

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The consequence was a shift in liberalism's intellectual center of gravity. A movement once fleshed out in union halls and little magazines shifted into universities and major press, from the center of the country to its cities and elite enclaves. Minority voters remained, but bereft of the material and social capital required to dominate elite decision-making, they were largely excluded from an agenda driven by the new Democratic core: the educated, the coastal, and the professional.

It is not that these forces captured the party so much as it fell to them. When the laborer left, they remained.

The origins of this shift are overdetermined. Richard Nixon bears a large part of the blame, but so does Bill Clinton. The Southern Strategy, yes, but the destruction of labor unions, too. I have my own sympathies, but I do not propose to adjudicate that question here.

Suffice it to say, by the 1990s the better part of the working class wanted nothing to do with the word *liberal*. What remained of the American progressive elite was left to puzzle: What happened to our coalition?

Why did they abandon us?

*What's the matter with Kansas?*

The smug style arose to answer these questions. It provided an answer so simple and so emotionally satisfying that its success was perhaps inevitable: the theory that conservatism, and particularly the kind embraced by those *out there* in the country, was not a political ideology at all.

The trouble is that stupid hicks don't know what's good for them. They're getting conned by right-wingers and tent revivalists until they believe all the lies that've made them so wrong. They don't know any better. That's why they're *voting against their own self-interest*.

As anybody who has gone through a particularly nasty breakup knows, disdain cultivated in the aftermath of a divide quickly exceeds the original grievance. You lose somebody. You blame them. Soon, the blame is reason enough to keep them at a distance, the excuse to drive them even further away.

Finding comfort in the notion that their former allies were disdainful, hapless rubes, smug liberals created a culture animated by that contempt. The result is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Financial incentive compounded this tendency — there is money, after all, in reassuring the bitter. Over 20 years, an industry arose to cater to the smug style. It began in humor, and culminated for a time in *The Daily Show*, a program that more than any other thing advanced the idea that liberal orthodoxy was a kind of educated savvy and that its opponents were, before anything else, stupid. The smug liberal found relief in ridiculing them.

The internet only made it worse. Today, a liberal who finds himself troubled by the currents of contemporary political life need look no further than his Facebook newsfeed to find the explanation:

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**How politics makes us stupid**

**Study finds Daily Show viewers more informed than viewers of Fox News.**

*They're beating CNN **watchers too.***

*NPR listeners are **best informed of all.*** He likes that.

*You're better **off watching nothing** than watching Fox.* He likes that even more.

The good news doesn't stop.

Liberals aren't just better informed. They're **smarter.**

They've got better grammar. They **know more words.**

Smart kids **grow up** to be liberals, while conservatives **reason like drunks.**

Liberals are **better able** to process new information; they're less biased like that.

They've got different brains. **Better ones.** Why? Evolution. They've got better brains, top-notch amygdalae, science finds.

The smug style created a feedback loop. If the trouble with conservatives was ignorance, then the liberal impulse was to correct it. When such corrections failed, disdain followed after it.

Of course, there is a smug style in every political movement: elitism among every ideology believing itself in possession of the solutions to society's ills. But few movements have let the smug tendency so corrupt them, or make so tenuous its case against its enemies.

"Conservatives are always at a bit of a disadvantage in the theater of mass democracy," the conservative editorialist Kevin Williamson **wrote in National Review** last October, "because people en masse aren't very bright or sophisticated, and they're vulnerable to cheap, hysterical emotional appeals."

The smug style thinks Williamson is wrong, of course, but **not in principle.** It's only that he's **confused** about who the hordes of **stupid, hysterical people** are voting for. The smug style reads Williamson and says, "No! You!"

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Elites, real elites, might recognize one another by their superior knowledge. The smug recognize one another by their mutual *knowing*.

*Knowing*, for example, that the Founding Fathers were all secular deists. *Knowing* that you're actually, like, 30 times more likely to shoot yourself than an intruder. *Knowing* that those fools out in Kansas are voting against their own self-interest and that the trouble is Kansas doesn't know any better. *Knowing* all the jokes that signal this knowledge.

The studies, about *Daily Show* viewers and better-sized amygdalae, are *knowing*. It is the smug style's first premise: a politics defined by a command of the Correct Facts and signaled by an allegiance to the Correct Culture. A politics that is just the politics of smart people in command of Good Facts. A politics that insists it has no ideology at all, only facts. No moral convictions, only charts, the kind that keep them from "imposing their morals" like the bad guys do.

*Knowing* is the shibboleth into the smug style's culture, a cultural that celebrates hip commitments and valorizes hip taste, that loves nothing more than hate-reading anyone who doesn't get them. A culture that has come to replace politics itself.

The *knowing* know that police reform, that abortion rights, that labor unions are important, but go no further: What is important, after all, is to signal that you *know* these things. What is important is to launch links and mockery at those who don't. The Good Facts are enough: Anybody who fails to capitulate to them is part of the Problem, is terminally uncool. No persuasion, only retweets. Eye roll, crying emoji, forward to John Oliver for sick burns.

The smug style has always existed in American liberalism, but it wasn't always so totalizing. Lionel Trilling claimed, as far back as 1950, that liberalism "is not only the dominant, but even the sole intellectual tradition," that "the conservative impulse and the reactionary impulse ... do not express themselves in ideas, but only in action or in irritable mental gestures which seek to resemble ideas."

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*THE SMUG STYLE HAS ALWAYS EXISTED IN AMERICAN LIBERALISM, BUT IT WASN'T ALWAYS SO TOTALIZING*

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Richard Hofstadter, the historian whose most famous work, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, this essay exists in some obvious reference to, advanced a similar line in writing not so well-remembered today. His then-influential history writing drips with disdain for rubes who regard themselves as victimized by economics and history, who have failed to maintain correct political attitudes.

But 60 years ago, American liberalism relied too much on the support of working people to let these ideas take too much hold. Even its elitists, its Schlesingers and Bells, were tempered by the power of the labor movement, by the role Marxism still played in even liberal politics — forces too powerful to allow non-elite concerns to entirely escape the liberal mental horizon. Walter Reuther, and Bayard Rustin, and A. Philip Randolph were still in the room, and they mattered.

Sixty years ago, the ugliest tendencies were still private, too. The smug style belonged to real elites, *knowing* in their cocktail parties, far from the ears of rubes. But today we have television, and the internet, and a liberalism worked out in universities and think tanks. Today, the better part of liberalism is Trillings — or those who'd like to be, at any rate — and everyone can hear them.

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On June 26, 2015, the Supreme Court found that denying marriage licenses to same-sex couples constituted a violation of the 14th Amendment. After decades of protests, legislation, setbacks, and litigation, the 13 states still holding out against the inevitable were ordered to relent. Kim Davis, a clerk tasked with issuing marriage licenses to couples in her Kentucky county, refused.

At the distance of six months, it is surprising that she was, beyond a few short-lived and empty efforts, the only civil bureaucrat to do so. One imagines a hundred or a thousand Kim Davises in the country, small administrators with small power, outraged by the collapse of a moral fight that they were winning just a few years prior.

In the days between the June decision and the July 1 announcement that the American Civil Liberties Union would represent four couples who had been denied marriage licenses by the Rowan County Clerk's office, many braced for resistance. Surely compliance would come hard in some places. Surely, some of the losers would refuse to give up. There was something giddy about it — at long last, the good guys would be the ones bearing down with the full force of the law.



It did not take long for the law to correct Davis. On August 12, a judge ordered a stay, preventing Davis from refusing any further under the protection of the law. The Sixth Circuit, and then the Supreme Court, refused to hear her appeal.

Despite further protest and Davis's ultimate jailing for contempt of court, normal service was restored in short order. The 23,000 people of Rowan County suffered, all told, slightly less than seven weeks without a functioning civil licensure apparatus.

Davis remained a fixation. Dour, rural, thrice divorced but born again — Twitter could not have invented a better parody of the uncool. She was ridiculed for her politics but also for her looks — that she had been married so many times was inexplicable! That she thought she had the slightest grasp of the Constitution, doubly so.

When Davis was jailed for five days following her refusal to comply with the court order, many who pride themselves on having a vastly more compassionate moral foundation than Davis **cheered** the imprisonment of a political foe.

The ridicule of Davis became so pronounced that even smug circles, always on the precipice of self-reproach, began eventually to **rein in** the excess. **Mocking her appearance, openly celebrating** the incarceration of an ideological opponent — these were not good looks.





Kim Davis at a rally in September 2015 (Ty Wright/Getty Images)

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But a more fundamental element of smug disdain for Kim Davis went unchallenged: the contention, at bottom, that Davis was not merely wrong in her convictions, but that her convictions were, in themselves, an error and a fraud.

That is: Kim Davis was not only on the wrong side of the law. She was not even a subscriber to a religious ideology that had found itself at moral odds with American culture. Rather, she was a subscriber to nothing, a hateful bigot who did not even understand her own religion.

Christianity, as many hastened to point out, is about love. Christ commands us to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's. If the Bible took any position on the issue at all, it was that divorce, **beloved by Davis**, was a sin, and that **she was a hypocrite** masquerading among the faithful.

How many of these critiques were issued by atheists?

This, more than anything I can recall in recent American life, is an example of the smug style. Many liberals do not believe that evangelical Christianity ought to guide public life; many believe, moreover, that the moral conceits of that Christianity are wrong, even harmful to society. But to the smug liberal, it isn't that Kim Davis is *wrong*. How can she be? She's only *mistaken*. She just doesn't know the Good Facts, even about her own religion. She's angry and confused, another hick who's not with it.

It was an odd thing to assert in the case of Christianity, a religion that until recently was taken to be another shibboleth of the uncool, not a loving faith misunderstood by bigots. But this is *knowing*: knowing that the new line on Jesus is that the homophobes just don't get their own faith.

Kim Davis was behind the times. Her beliefs did not represent a legitimate challenge to liberal consensus because they did not represent a challenge at all: They were incoherent, at odds with the Good Facts. Google makes every man a theologian.



This, I think, is fundamental to understanding the smug style. If good politics and good beliefs are just Good Facts and good tweets — that is, if there is no ideology beyond sensible conclusions drawn from a rational assessment of the world — then there are no moral fights, only lying liars and the stupid rubes who believe them.

When Davis was first released from county jail, Mike Huckabee went to meet her. But the smug style sees no true ideology there, no moral threat to contend with. Only a huckster and a hick: one to be ridiculed, and the other to be refuted. What more, the smug man posts, could there be to say about it? They're idiots! Look, look: This [Onion article](#) nails it.

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Popular story:

Adlai Stevenson, Democratic candidate for president, is on parade. A band is playing. Onlookers cheer. He waves to the crowd.

A woman shouts: "Gov. Stevenson, you have the vote of every thinking person in this country!"

Stevenson replies: "Thank you, ma'am, but we need a majority."

The smug style says to itself, *Yeah. I really am one of the few thinking people in this country, aren't I?*

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In November of last year, during the week when it became temporarily fashionable for American governors to declare that Syrian refugees would not be welcome in their state, Hamilton Nolan wrote [an essay](#) for Gawker called "Dumb Hicks Are America's Greatest Threat."

If there has ever been a tirade so dedicated to the smug style, to the proposition that it is neither malice, nor capital, nor ideological difference, but rather the backward stupidity of poor people that has ruined the state of American policy, then it is hidden beyond our view, in some uncool place, far from the front page of Gawker.

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"Many of America's political leaders are warning of the dangers posed by Syrian



**Why have weddings and houses gotten so ridiculously expensive? Blame inequality.**

refugees. They are underestimating, though, the much greater danger: dumbass hicks, in charge of things," Nolan wrote. "...You, our elected officials, are embarrassing us. All of us, except your fellow dumb hicks, who voted for you in large numbers. You — our racist, xenophobic, knuckle-dragging ignorant leaders — are making us look bad in front of the guests (the whole world). You are the bad cousin in the family who always ruins Thanksgiving. Go in the back room and drink

a can of beer alone please."

Among the dumb hicks Nolan identifies are "many Southern mayors" and "many lesser known state representatives." He cites the Ku Klux Klan — "exclusively dumbass hicks," he writes. "100%," he emphasizes — despite the fact that the New York Times, in **an investigation** of white supremacist members of Stormfront.org, found that "the top reported interest of Stormfront members is reading." That they are "news and political junkies." Despite the fact that if "you come compare Stormfront users to people who go to the Yahoo News site, it turns out that the Stormfront crowd is twice as likely to visit nytimes.com."

"They have long threads praising *Breaking Bad* and discussing the comparative merits of online dating sites, like Plenty of Fish and OKCupid," the Times reports.

In **another piece**, published later the same month, Nolan wrote that "Inequality of wealth — or, if you like, the distribution of **wealth** in our society in a way that results in poverty — is not just one issue among many. It is the root from which blooms nearly all major social problems."

He's right about that. But who does he imagine is responsible for this inequality? The poor? The dumb? The hicks?

Hamilton Nolan isn't stupid. He has even, lately, argued that even the worst of the rubes **must be allies** in class struggle. Yet the trouble is still swallowing what "motherfuckers" those people are.

Nolan is perhaps the funniest and most articulate of those pointing fingers at the "dumbass hicks," but he isn't alone. It is evidently intolerable to a huge swath of liberalism to confess the obvious: that those responsible have homes in Brooklyn, too. That they buy the same smartphones. That they too are on Twitter. That the oligarchs are making fun of stupid poor people too. That they're better at it, and always will be.

No: The trouble must be out there, somewhere. In the country. Where the idiots are; where the hicks are too stupid to know where problems blossom.

"To the dumb hick leaders of America, I say: (nothing). You wouldn't listen anyhow," Nolan writes. "My words would go in one ear and right out the other. Like talking to an old block of wood."

It's a shame. They might be receptive to his concerns about poverty.

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If there is a single person who exemplifies the dumbass hick in the smug imagination, it is former President George W. Bush. He's got the accent. He can't talk right. He seems stupefied by simple concepts, and his politics are all gee-whiz Texas ignorance. He is the ur-hick. He is the enemy.

He got all the way to White House, and he's still being taken for a ride by the scheming rightwing oligarchs around him — just like those poor rubes in Kansas. If only George knew Dick Cheney wasn't acting in his own best interests!

It is worth considering that Bush is the son of a president, a patrician born in Connecticut and educated at Andover and Harvard and Yale.

It is worth considering that he does not come from a family known for producing poor minds.

It is worth considering that **beginning** with his 1994 gubernatorial debate against Ann Richards, and at every juncture thereafter, opponents have been defeated after days of media outlets openly speculating whether George was up to the mental challenge of a one-on-one debate.

"Throughout his short political career," ABC's Katy Textor wrote on the eve of the 2000 debates against Al Gore, "Bush has benefited from low expectations of his debating

abilities. The fact that he skipped no less than three GOP primary debates, and the fact that he was reluctant to agree to the Commission on Presidential Debates proposal, has done little to contradict the impression of a candidate uncomfortable with this unavoidable fact of campaign life."

"Done little to contradict."



George W. Bush and Al Gore during a presidential debate in 2000. (Tannen Maury/AFP/Getty Images)

On November 6, 2000, during his final pre-election stump speech, Bush explained his history of political triumph thusly: "They misunderestimated me."

What an idiot. American liberals made fun of him for that one for years.

It is worth considering that he didn't misspeak.

He did, however, deliberately cultivate the confusion. He understood the smug style. He wagered that many liberals, eager to see their opponents as intellectually deficient, would buy into the act and thereby miss the more pernicious fact of his moral deficits.

He wagered correctly. Smug liberals said George was too stupid to get elected, too stupid to get reelected, too stupid to pass laws or appoint judges or weather a political fight. Liberals underestimated George W. Bush all eight years of his presidency.

George W. Bush is not a dumbass hick. In eight years, all the sick *Daily Show* burns in the world did not appreciably undermine his agenda.

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The smug mind defends itself against these charges. *Oh, we're just having fun, it says. We don't mean it. This is just for a laugh, it's just a joke, stop being so humorless.*

It is exasperating, after all, to have to live in a country where so many people are so aggressively wrong about so much, they say. You go on about ideology and shibboleths and *knowing*, but we are *right* on the issues, aren't we? We are *right* on social policy and right on foreign policy and right on evolution, and same-sex marriage, and climate change too. Surely that's what matters.

We don't *really* mean they're all stupid — but hey, lay off. We're not smug! This is just how we vent our frustration. Otherwise it would be too depressing having to share a country with these people!

We have long passed the point where blithe ridicule of the American right can be credibly cast as private stress relief and not, for instance, the animating public strategy of an entire wing of the liberal culture apparatus. *The Daily Show*, as it happens, is not the private entertainment of elites blowing off some steam. It is broadcast on national television.

Twitter isn't private. Not that anybody with the sickest burn to accompany the smartest chart would want it to be. Otherwise, how would everyone know how in-the-know you are?

The rubes have seen your videos. You posted it on their wall.

*Still don't get why liberal opinion is correct? This video settles the debate for good.*



I have been wondering for a long time how it is that so many entries to the op-ed pages take it as their justifying premise that they are arguing for a truth that has never been advanced before.

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## *WE HAVE LONG PASSED THE POINT WHERE BLITHE RIDICULE OF THE AMERICAN RIGHT CAN BE CREDIBLY CAST AS PRIVATE STRESS RELIEF*

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"It's an accepted, nearly unchallenged assumption that Muslim communities across the U.S. have a problem — that their youth tend toward violent ideology, or are susceptible to "radicalization" by groups like the Islamic State," began an **editorial** that appeared last December in the New York Times. But "after all," it goes on, "the **majority of mass shootings** in America are perpetrated by white men but no one questions what might have radicalized them in their communities."

But this contention — that Muslims possess superlative violent tendencies — has been challenged countless times, hasn't it? It was challenged **here**, and **here** and **here** as far back as 9/11. The president of the United State challenged it on national television the night before this editorial was published. The Times itself did **too**. The myopic provincialism of anybody who believes that Muslims are a uniquely violent people is the basis of a **five-year-old** Onion headline, not some new moral challenge.

The smug style leaves its adherents no other option: If an idea has failed to take hold, if the Good Facts are not widely accepted, then the problem must be that these facts have not yet reached the disbelievers.

In December 2015, Public Policy Polling **found** that 30 percent of Republicans were in favor of bombing Agrabah, the Arab-sounding fictional city from Disney's *Aladdin*.  
Hilarious.

PPP has run joke questions before, of course: polling the popularity of **Deez Nuts**, or asking after God's job approval. But these questions, at least, let their audience in on the gag. Now liberalism is deliberately setting up the last segment of the population actually willing to endure a phone survey in service of what it knew would make for some hilarious copy when the rubes inevitably fell for it. This is not a survey in service of a joke

— it is a survey in service of a human punchline.

As if only Republicans covered up gaps in their knowledge by responding to what they assume is a good-faith question by guessing from their general principles.

It may be easy to mistake with the private venting of frustrated elites, but the rubes can read the New York Times, too. It is not where liberals whisper to each other about the secret things that go unchallenged. Poll respondents are not the secret fodder for a joke.

This is the consequence of "private" venting, and it is the consequence of *knowing* too: If good politics comes solely from good data and good sense, it cannot be that large sections of the American public are merely wrong about so many vital things. It cannot be that they have heard our arguments but rejected them — that might mean we must examine our own methods of persuasion.

No: it is only that the wrong beliefs are *unchallenged* — that their believers are trapped in "information bubbles" and confirmation bias. That no one knows the truth, except the New York Times (or Vox). If only we could tell them, question them, show them this graph. If they don't get it then, well, then they're hopeless.

The smug style plays out in private too, of course. If you haven't started one yourself, you've surely seen the Facebook threads: Ten or 20 of Brooklyn's finest gather to say how exasperated they are, these days, by the stupidity of the American public.

"I just don't know what to do about these people," one posts. "I think we have to accept that a lot of people are just misinformed!" replies another. "Like, I think they actually don't *want* to know anything that would undermine their worldview."

They tend to do it in the comment section, under an article about how conservatives are

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**"Late-breaking sexism": why younger women aren't excited about electing a woman president**

difficult to persuade because they isolate themselves in mutually reinforcing information bubbles.

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What have been the consequences of the smug style?

It has become a tradition for the smug, in editorials and essay and confident Facebook boasting, to assume that the presidential debates will feature their candidate, in command of the facts, wiping the floor with the empty huckster ignorance of their Republican opponent.

It was popularly assumed, for a time, that George W. Bush was too stupid to be elected president.

The smug believed the same of Ronald Reagan.

John Yoo, the architect of the Bush administration's torture policies, escaped *The Daily Show* unscathed. Liberals wondered what to do **when Jon Stewart fails**. What would success look like? Were police waiting in the wings, a one-way ticket to the Hague if Stewart nailed him?

It would be unfair to say that the smug style has never learned from these mistakes. But the lesson has been, *We underestimated how many people could be fooled.*

That is: *We underestimated just how dumb these dumb hicks really are.*

*We just didn't get our message to them. They just stayed in their information bubble. We can't let the lying liars keep lying to these people — but how do we reach these idiots who only trust Fox?*

Rarely: *Maybe they're savvier than we thought. Maybe they're angry for a reason.*

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As it happens, reasons aren't too difficult to come by.

During a San Francisco fundraiser in the 2008 primary campaign, Barack Obama offered an observation that was hailed not without some glee as the first unforced error from then-Senator Cool.

"You go into these small towns in Pennsylvania," Obama said, "and, like, a lot of small towns in the Midwest, the jobs have been gone now for 25 years and nothing's replaced them. And they fell through the Clinton administration, and the Bush administration, and each successive administration has said that somehow these communities are gonna regenerate, and they have not. And it's not surprising then they get bitter. They cling to guns or religion or antipathy toward people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations."

It's the latter part that we remember eight years later — the clinging to guns and religion and hate — but it is the first part that was important: the part about lost jobs and neglect by two presidential administrations.

Obama's observation was not novel.

The notion that material loss and abandonment have driven America's white working class into a fit of resentment is boilerplate for even the Democratic Party's tepid left these days. But in the president's formulation and in the formulation of smug stylists who have embraced some material account of uncool attitudes, the downturn, the jobs lost and the opportunities narrowed, are a force of nature — something that has "been happening" in the passive voice.

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*IF THE SMUG STYLE CAN BE REDUCED TO A SINGLE SENTENCE, IT'S, WHY ARE THEY VOTING AGAINST THEIR OWN SELF-INTEREST?*

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This, I suspect, will one day become the Republican Party's rationale for addressing climate change: *Look, we don't know how the dead hooker wound up in the hotel room. But she's here now, that's undeniable, so we've gotta get rid of the body.*

Today, it is the excuse of American smug mind: Where did all of these poor people come from?

If pressed for an answer, I suppose they would say Republicans, elected by rubes voting against their own self-interest. Reagan, Gingrich, Bush — all those Bad Fact-knowing halfwits who were too dumb to get elected to anything.

Well, sure. In the past 30 years of American life, the Republican Party has dedicated itself to replacing every labor law with a photo of Ronald Reagan's face.

But this does not excuse liberals beating full retreat to the colleges and the cities, abandoning the dispossessed to their fate. It does not excuse surrendering a century of labor politics in the name of electability. It does not excuse gazing out decades later to find that those left behind are not up on the latest thought and deciding, *We didn't abandon them. The idiots didn't want to be saved.*

It was not Ronald Reagan who declared the era of big government. It was not the GOP that decided the coastally based, culturally liberal industries of technology, Hollywood, and high finance were the future of the American economy.

If the smug style can be reduced to a single sentence, it's, *Why are they voting against their own self-interest?* But no party these past decades has effectively represented the interests of these dispossessed. Only one has made a point of openly disdaining them too.

Abandoned and without any party willing to champion their interests, people cling to candidates who, at the very least, are willing to represent their moral convictions. The smug style resents them for it, and they resent the smug in turn.

The rubes noticed that liberal Democrats, distressed by the notion that Indiana would allow bakeries to practice open discrimination against LGBTQ couples, threatened boycotts against the state, mobilizing the considerable economic power that comes with an alliance of New York and Hollywood and Silicon Valley to punish retrograde Gov. Mike Pence, but had no such passion when the same governor of the same state joined 21 others in refusing the Medicaid expansion. No doubt good liberals objected to that move too. But I've yet to see a **boycott threat** about it.

Early in the marriage equality fight, activists advanced the theory that when people discovered a friend or relative was gay, they became far more likely to support gay rights. They were correct. These days it is difficult for anybody in a position of liberal power — whether in business, or government, or media — to avoid having openly gay colleagues, colleagues whom they like and whom they'd like to help.

But few opinion makers fraternize with the impoverished. Few editors and legislators



and Silicon Valley heroes have dinner with the lovely couple on food stamps down the road, much less those scraping by in Indiana.

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If any single event provided the direct impetus for this essay, it was a running argument I had with an older, liberal writer over the seriousness of Donald Trump's presidential campaign. Since June 2015, when Trump announced his candidacy, this writer has taken it upon himself each day to tell his Facebook followers that Donald Trump is a bad kind of dude.

That saying as much was the key to stopping him and his odious followers too.

"Ridicule is the most powerful weapon we have against any of our enemies," he told me in the end, "but especially against the ones who, not incorrectly, take it so personally and lash out in ways that shine klieg lights on those very flaws we detest.

"If you're laughing at someone, you're certainly not respecting him."

"Anyway," he went on, "I'm done talking to you. We see the world differently. I'm fine with that. We don't need to be friends."

*Ridicule is the most effective political tactic.*

*Ridicule is especially effective when it's personal and about expressing open disdain for stupid, bad people.*

*Political legitimacy is granted by the respect of elite liberals.*

*You can't be legitimate if you're the butt of our jokes.*

*If you don't agree, we can't work together politically.*

*We can't even be friends, because politics is social.*

*Because politics is performative — if we don't mock together, we aren't on the same side.*

If there is a bingo card for the smug style somewhere, then cross off every square. You've won.

I would be less troubled if I did not believe that the smug style has captured an enormous section of American liberalism. If I believed that its politics, as practiced by its supporters, extended beyond this line of thought. If this were an exception.

But even as many have come around to the notion that Trump is the prohibitive favorite for his party's nomination, the smug interpretation has been predictable: We only underestimated how hateful, how stupid, the Republican base can be.



A Donald Trump rally in Pittsburgh. (Jeff Swensen/Getty Images)

Trump capturing the nomination will not dispel the smug style; if anything, it will redouble it. Faced with the prospect of an election between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, the smug will reach a fever pitch: six straight months of a sure thing, an opportunity to mock and scoff and ask, *How could anybody vote for this guy?* until a morning in November when they ask, *What the fuck happened?*

On March 20, Salon's David Masciotra **wrote** that if Trump "actually had the strength to articulate uncomfortable and inconvenient truths, he would turn his favorite word —

'loser' — not on full-time professionals in the press, but on his supporters."

Masciotra goes on:

Journalists found that in the counties where Trump is most dominant, there are large numbers of white high school dropouts, and unemployed people no longer looking for work. An alliance with the incoherent personality cult of Donald Trump's candidacy correlates strongly with failure to obtain a high school diploma, and withdrawal from the labor force. The counties also have a consistent history of voting for segregationists, and have an above average percentage of its residents living in mobile homes.

The kicker: "Many conservatives, and even some kindhearted liberals, might object to the conclusions one can draw from the data as stereotyping, but the empirical evidence leaves little choice. Donald Trump's supporters confirm the stereotype against them."

Here's the conclusion I draw: If Donald Trump has a chance in November, it is because the *knowing* will dictate our strategy. Unable to countenance the real causes of their collapse, they will comfort with own impotence by shouting, "Idiots!" again and again, angrier and angrier, the handmaidens of their own destruction.

The smug style resists empathy for the *unknowing*. It denies the possibility of a politics whereby those who do not share *knowing* culture, who do not like the right things or know the Good Facts or recognize the intellectual bankruptcy of their own ideas can be worked with, in spite of these differences, toward a common goal.

It is this attitude that has driven the dispossessed into the arms of a candidate who shares their fury. It is this attitude that may deliver him the White House, a "serious" threat, a threat to be mocked and called out and hated, but not to be taken seriously.

The wages of smug is Trump.

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Nothing is more confounding to the smug style than the fact that the average Republican is better educated and has a higher IQ than the average Democrat. That for every overpowered study finding superior liberal open-mindedness and intellect and knowledge, **there is one** to **suggest** that Republicans have the **better** of these qualities.

Most damning, perhaps, to the fancy liberal self-conception: Republicans score higher in susceptibility to persuasion. They are willing to change their minds more often.

The Republican coalition tends toward the center: educated enough, smart enough, informed enough.

The Democratic coalition in the 21st century is bifurcated: It has the postgraduates, but it has the disenfranchised urban poor as well, a group better defined by race and immigration status than by class. There are more Americans without high school diplomas than in possession of doctoral degrees. The math proceeds from there.

The smug style takes this as a defense. Elite liberalism, and the Democratic Party by extension, cannot hate poor people, they say. We aren't smug! Just look at our coalition. These aren't rubes. Just look at our embrace of their issues.

But observe how quickly professed concern for the oppressed becomes another shibboleth for the smug, another kind of *knowing*. Mere awareness of these issues becomes the most important thing, the capacity to articulate them a new subset of Correct Facts.

Everyone in the *know* has read "The Case for Reparations," but it was the reading and performed admiration that counted, praised in the same breath as, "It is a better *history* than an actual case for actually paying, of course..."

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Pretend for a moment that all of it is true. That the smug style apprehended the world as it really is, that *knowing* — or knowing, no inflection — did make our political divide. That the problem is the rubes. That the dumbass hicks are to blame. They can't help it: Their brains don't work. They isolate themselves from all the Good Facts, and they're being taken for a ride by con men.

Pretend the ridicule worked too: that the videos and the Twitter burns and *destroying* the opposition made all the bad guys go away.

What kind of world would it leave us? An endless cycle of jokes? Of sick burns and smart tweets and *knowing*? Relative to whom? The smug style demands an object of disdain; it would find a new one quickly.

It is central to the liberal self-conception that what separates them from reactionaries is a desire to help people, a desire to create a fairer and more just world. Liberals still want, or believe they still want, to make a more perfect union.

Whether you believe they are deluded or not, whether you believe this project is worthwhile in any form or not, what I am trying to tell you is that the smug style has fundamentally undermined even the *aspiration*, that it has made American liberalism into the worst version of itself.

It is impossible, in the long run, to cleave the desire to help people from the duty to respect them. It becomes all at once too easy to decide you know best, to never hear, much less ignore, protest to the contrary.

At present, many of those most in need of the sort of help liberals believe they can provide despise liberalism, and are despised in turn. Is it surprising that with each decade, the "help" on offer drifts even further from the help these people need?

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## *IT IS IMPOSSIBLE, IN THE LONG RUN, TO CLEAVE THE DESIRE TO HELP PEOPLE FROM THE DUTY TO RESPECT THEM*

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Even if the two could be separated, would it be worth it? What kind of political movement is predicated on openly disdaining the very people it is advocating for?

The smug style, at bottom, is a failure of empathy. Further: It is a failure to believe that empathy has any value at all. It is the notion that anybody worthy of liberal time and attention and respect must capitulate, immediately, to the Good Facts.

If they don't (**and they won't**) you're free to write them off and mock them. When they suffer, it's their just desserts.

Make no mistake: I am not suggesting that liberals adopt a fuzzy, gentler version of their politics. I am not suggesting they compromise their issues for the sake of playing nice. What I am suggesting is that the battles waged by liberalism have drifted far away from their old egalitarian intentions.

I am suggesting that open disdain for the people they say they want to help has led them



to stop helping those people, too.

I am suggesting that in the case of a Kim Davis, liberalism resist the impulse to go beyond the necessary legal fight and explicitly delight in punishing an old foe.

I am suggesting that they instead wonder what it might be like to have little left but one's values; to wake up one day to find your whole moral order destroyed; to look around and see the representatives of a new order call you a stupid, hypocritical hick without bothering, even, to wonder how your corner of your poor state found itself so alienated from them in the first place. To work with people who do not share their values or their tastes, who do not live where they live or like what they like or know their Good Facts or their jokes.

This is not a call for civility. Manners are not enough. The smug style did not arise by accident, and it cannot be abolished with a little self-reproach. So long as liberals cannot find common cause with the larger section of the American working class, they will search for reasons to justify that failure. They will resent them. They will find, over and over, how easy it is to justify abandoning them further. They will choose the smug style.

Maybe the cycle is too deeply set already. Perhaps the divide, the disdain, the whole crack-up are inevitable. But if liberal good intentions are to make a play for a better future, they cannot merely recognize the ways they've come to hate their former allies. They must begin to mend the ways they lost them in the first place.

*Emmett Rensin is deputy First Person editor at Vox.*

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