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# Social Class As Racialized Political Experience

DOI 10.1515/for-2017-0006

**Abstract:** Common markers of social class include income, wealth, education and family background. Though these capture staple pedestrian elements of class, they understate something substantial – social class is produced by political experiences. Building on this observation, I argue that social class is constructed and reinforced via political institutions that differentially affect the daily experiences and life trajectories of Americans. Viewing class through this lens (instead of more simply as a function of income or education) enables clarity on two critical features of the American political system: (1) its deeply racialized institutional practices (2) its dual inclusionary/exclusionary governance structures. Most broadly, this essay pushes us beyond a view of class as a set of variables that affect political outcomes and towards inquiry into the ways that political institutions produce class. Ultimately, such a conceptual pivot illuminates additional pathways for transforming economic and political relations in the United States.

## Introduction

Consider the crude groupings that come to mind when we think about social class: “poor” “working class” “middle class” “rich.” The most straightforward way to distinguish these strata is by income or wealth. Other relevant characteristics include education and family background.<sup>1</sup> Though these capture staple pedestrian elements of class, they understate something critical – social class is produced by political experiences. By this I mean that class categories are (1)

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<sup>1</sup> We might also widen the circle to include culture, though that is trickier conceptually. There are some analytically and theoretically sophisticated analyses of culture and class (see Lareau 2003; Lamont and Small 2008; Small et al. 2010). There are also problematic takes on the topic (see Moynihan 1965; Lewis 1966; Ogbu 1978). I do not emphasize either in this essay.

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*constructed* and (2) *reinforced* by the state.<sup>2</sup> Per the first point: relations between denizens and the state<sup>3</sup> *construct* social class, not simply because the state has power to dictate economic fortunes, but (more crucially) because a person's connection to and interaction with the state imbue income, wealth and education with significance and because the state in large part determines whether material resources translate into power (or lack thereof) in other realms. As such, the state plays a role in rendering "class" legible and forceful as a social category.

On the second point: relations between denizens and the state *reinforce* social class because once class categories are operational (i.e. class has been infused with political meaning), the state influences how people across economic strata encounter and interact with political institutions and thereby differentially exposes denizens to experiences that can fortify class groupings.

Though analytically distinct, these processes of construction and reinforcement are entwined and difficult to distinguish in practice. My task in this essay is not to tease them out, but to demonstrate how together, they reveal an important conceptual lacuna in our understanding of politics and social class. Scholars of contemporary American politics have largely concentrated on the effects of class on politics (i.e. class as an independent variable) while neglecting the effects of politics on class (i.e. class as the dependent variable).<sup>4,5</sup> By emphasizing the role of the state in constructing and reinforcing class, I attend to the latter.

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**2** Not all political experiences are mediated via the state, but that is the genre of political experiences that I emphasize in this article. Definitions of the "state" abound (Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol 1985; Ansell and Torfing 2016). I do not intervene in definitional debates here. Instead, I follow Ansell and Torfing in defining the state in terms of four key elements (1) it is a "politically organized coercive, administrative and symbolic apparatus endowed with general and specific powers" (2) a "clearly demarcated core territory under more or less uncontested continuous control" (3) it has "a stable population under which the state's political authority and decisions are binding" (4) it is an "idea" that "denotes the political imaginary..." (Ansell and Torfing 2016, pp. 72–73).

**3** It is worth noting that though I often refer to "the state" in the singular, I follow Hills (1999) in recognizing that the state is not "an individual speaking with a single voice... Rather, a state actually incorporates a bundle of different subdivisions, branches and agencies..." (Hills 1999, p. 1201).

**4** Much of this work explores the relationships between class (variably construed) and political participation. For examples see: Verba and Nie (1972); Gaventa (1980); Beeghley (1986); Cohen and Dawson (1993); Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995); Lijphart (1997); Lawless and Fox (2001); Walsh, Jennings, and Stoker (2004); Cho, Gimpel, and Wu (2006); Gelman (2009); Schlozman, Verba, and Brady (2012); Krauss (2015).

**5** It is worth noting that sociologists and psychologists also offer a significant corpus of work on social class and socialization (Bronfenbrenner 1958; Kohn 1963; Kamii and Radin 1967; Bourdieu 1990; Nash 2003; Lareau 2003; Gilbert 2014). Given these and other literatures, it is not novel to suggest that social class is a construct, that there are processes that create it, or that various kinds of life experience are part and parcel of such processes. Nonetheless, I emphasize something that is less prominent in the social scientific literature: the role of the state in creating and reinforcing class by generating political experiences.

To clarify the pertinence of this conceptual pivot, it is useful to consider an example. Angie, an African-American woman from Michigan who I interviewed while doing research for a book on Medicaid<sup>6</sup> consistently identified as “poor” (Michener forthcoming). In describing the reason why social policy seemed rigged against people like her, Angie said this:

You know, in anything, the poor are always who suffer the most and you know the saying, he who has the gold makes the rules, it’s most certainly true because they don’t care...you know the people who make these rules and these guidelines they don’t know anyone on Medicaid they don’t have any poor people in their family, you know, they don’t care. That is why they are willing to chop so many services...

Perhaps the most straightforward explanation for Angie’s social class identification is that it reflected her income. Though she was employed, Angie relied on Medicaid for health insurance because she did not make very much money. However, Angie had not always been penurious. For numerous years prior to our interview she was married to a firefighter and lived in an economically secure household. During that period, she had private health insurance and what one might consider a “middle class” lifestyle. However, after divorcing, Angie encountered government in negative ways and came to view herself through the prism of poverty. Her relationship to the state made particular class constructions more salient to her: constantly battling being kicked off of the Medicaid rolls, skirmishes with recalcitrant and vindictive bureaucrats and other such experiences helped to cultivate her self-perception as “poor” and gave that category politically significant meaning.

Importantly, different experiential configurations can lead to dissimilar class constructions. Dani was an Asian-American woman I interviewed around the same time as Angie. She also lived in Michigan (just a few miles away from Angie). She had also been “middle class” before unexpectedly having her first child and being unable to find well-paid work. In Dani’s view, though she was a Medicaid beneficiary, she was still “middle class.” She was in the midst of a “rough time” but was sure she would come out of it. When Dani spoke of other Medicaid beneficiaries or of people living in poverty, she referred to them in distant terms like “those people.” She pointed out that she had gone to college (so had Angie) and (unlike Angie) she noted her empowering experiences with the state: she was “well spoken” and she was not what government bureaucrats “expected” so they listened to her and treated her like a person. This left Dani’s “middle class” self-perception intact. Her interaction with the state thus reinforced her class status even in the face of prolonged economic precarity.

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<sup>6</sup> Medicaid is a federal-state program and the largest source of health coverage for low-income Americans in the United States.

I offer these examples to illustrate how experiences with the state can both construct and reinforce social class. If we set out to understand the relationship between politics and class in these women's lives, we could not adequately do so by narrowly conceptualizing class as income. Nor would we get a complete picture by thinking only about (non-state) socializing agents like families or peer groups. Fully grasping the linkages between class and politics in these cases requires analysis of the various ways that Angie and Dani experienced the state.

The broader point is that across the socioeconomic spectrum, state institutions heterogeneously shape daily life and thereby play a key part in producing social class. As a scholar of poverty, I understand this most clearly with respect to those who are economically marginal, so that is my focus. Some of the institutions through which the state most potently affects the lives of indigent Americans include prisons, mental institutions, immigration enforcement agencies, courts (criminal and civil), social welfare agencies, public hospitals and schools. This list is not exhaustive but it points to the two core features of the American political system that I highlight in the succeeding pages.

First, this list signals the enduring and striking racial disparities marking the political institutions that establish and perpetuate class boundaries (Pettit and Western 2004; Soss et al. 2011; Sharkey 2013; Van Cleve 2016). Such inequities stem from processes of racialization that have been a fundamental part of the American state from its origins through its subsequent development (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Quadagno 1994; Brown 1999; King and Smith 2005; Lowndes, Novkov, and Warren 2008). Racialization refers to, “the way in which people are sorted into racial categories, resources are distributed along racial lines and...policy shapes and is shaped by the racial contours of society” (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Gotham 2000, p. 293). While my central claim is that the (American) state constructs and reinforces social class, an essential corresponding observation is that the state processes at work in producing class are (and have been) profoundly racialized (Reed 2002). For example, consider the Federal Housing Authority (FHA). Since its inception, the FHA has been the linchpin of homeownership, a prominent indicator of class status and economic mobility in America. Yet, between 1934 and 1968, through overt practices of racialization such as redlining (i.e. denying mortgages in certain neighborhoods based on racial composition) and through less blatant practices promoting urban flight and suburbanization (i.e. funneling financial support to residential developments on the outskirts of metropolitan areas), the FHA became a vehicle for racial segregation at the very same time that it was helping to expand and transform the American middle class (Gotham 2000). Such racialized class production did not only affect Black people, it systematically (i.e. as a result of institutional forces, not individual differences in behavior) shaped the experiences of *all* Americans. For instance, by segregating Black communities,

the FHA stunted social relations between “working class” Whites and their Black counterparts. The resulting racial isolation may have had broad social and political consequences for the American polity. This example shows why – even as I advance a conceptualization of class that stresses its constructedness – I keep a continual eye on processes of racialization.

The second point underscored by the list of institutions enumerated earlier is that it accentuates two faces of the American state (Soss and Weaver 2017). On the one hand, state institutions like schools, public hospitals and civil courts are (ostensibly) meant to *incorporate* all people under the banner of a supportive and protective liberal democratic government. These institutions compose the inclusionary apparatus of the state. On the other hand, prisons, criminal courts, mental health facilities and immigration enforcement agencies compose the punitive, restrictive, delimiting and disciplinary arms of the state. Even when these institutions work as intended, they are meant to *exclude* less desirable members of the polity. Together, the dualistic functions of the American state operate in the manner I stress above: as engines of racialized class production that disproportionately *exclude* some populations from protective and empowering political institutions and disproportionately *include* those same populations in repressive and disempowering institutions. These twin processes differentially mark the lives of low-income people across racial and ethnic groups, sifting them into their respective places on the bottom end of the American economic strata. The state executes such sifting by institutionalizing political experiences that construct and solidify the economic status of putative class populations.

Shortly, I will describe carceral and civil legal institutions in order to provide concrete examples of this. I pick these cases because they fittingly illuminate the two-faces of the American state. A “liberal-democratic” lens on the state emphasizes the *lack* of political incorporation that economically and racially marginalized Americans face. Per this framing, when government works as intended, it should benefit those whose lives it touches and when this does not happen, it is because of institutional inadequacies (Soss and Weaver 2017). Under such a scenario, political ills like economic and racial disadvantage stem from the insufficient incorporation of “race-class subjugated” populations. Civil legal institutions embody this first face: they are designed to be inclusionary and intended to provide protections and safeguards. When this does not happen, it is because of institutional inadequacies.

Contrastingly, the “second face” of the state represents its repressive, restrictive and regulatory capacities. This flip side is exclusionary by intention, not defect. Carceral institutions characterize this face most dramatically. Together, carceral and civil institutions demonstrate how dual governance structures produce political experiences that are the material with which class is created and woven into the fabric of American life.

This formulation of class eschews the still too common notion of the US as a “weak” state (Novak 2008) and instead embraces a more complex (and intellectually generative) narrative.<sup>7</sup> Arguably, the American state is “weak” with regard to social welfare protections: lacking universal health coverage, generous welfare benefits and so on. The inability to marshal the resources necessary to provide civil legal representation to indigent Americans reflects this. At the very same time, the state is “strong”: maintaining a pervasive police presence in impoverished communities and sustaining massive surveillance and containment efforts among those who are marginalized via carceral institutions.<sup>8</sup>

## Carceral Institutions

The rapid rise of the US incarceration rate began in the 1970s and continued into the proceeding decades. These patterns were largely fueled by the imprisonment of impoverished Americans, most of whom faced dismal material conditions prior to incarceration. This is evident by the lopsided concentration of incarcerated individuals at the lower end of the national income distribution (Rabuy and Kopf 2015). For example, in 2014, 57 percent of incarcerated men reported (pre-incarceration) incomes of less than \$22,500 dollars, compared to only 23 percent of non-incarcerated men. Similarly, 72 percent of incarcerated women earned incomes below the \$22.5 K threshold, compared to 48 percent of non-incarcerated women. As shown in Figure 1, such income disparities hold across race/ethnicity and gender.<sup>9</sup>

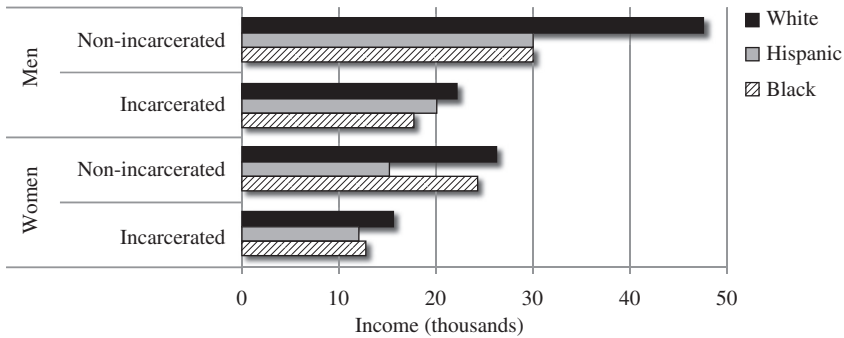
These outcomes are not solely a result of individual behavior (e.g. poor people committing more crime). Economically disadvantaged Americans are *excessively* incorporated into carceral institutions even after accounting for crime rates (Western 2006; Travis et al. 2014). People living in poverty are at greater risk of being beset by police authorities within their neighborhoods and schools, arrested for minor offenses, and targeted by statutes that criminalize activities like asking for help, sharing food, or lying down in public (Dolan and Carr 2015). A variety of distinct experiences follow from such punishment practices. These

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<sup>7</sup> I am hardly the first to observe the multi-dimensionality of the state (for just a few relevant examples see: Skowronek 1982; Skocpol and Finegold 1982; Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol 1985; Skocpol 1992; Bense 2000; Novak 2008; King and Lieberman 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Note that in my view carceral institutions encompass prison and jail but also include a “continuum” or “archipelago” of related institutions (e.g. police, courts, halfway houses) with “separate and diffused methods” for reaching the most marginal communities (Foucault 2012 [1977], p. 297).

<sup>9</sup> They also extend to education, another conventional class indicator (Travis et al. 2014).



**Figure 1:** Income Differences Between Incarcerated and Non-Incarcerated Persons. Median annual incomes for incarcerated people (prior to incarceration) and non-incarcerated people ages 27–42, by race, ethnicity and gender (in 2014 dollars). Source: Prison Policy Initiative Report.

include being stopped, searched and frisked by the police (Rios 2011; Stoudt, Fine, and Fox 2011; Goffman 2015), being helped, hurt or humiliated by lawyers and judges in criminal court (Van Cleve 2016), being assisted, assaulted or discriminated against by authorities within jail or prison (Rafter 1990; Rathbone 2007; Law 2012) and being fined, disenfranchised and systematically excluded from society even after serving one’s time (Pager 2007; Dilts 2014; Harris 2016).<sup>10</sup>

Quite vitally, the political processes that generate these experiences are racialized (Pettit and Western 2004; Kohler-Hausmann 2010). It is not just that carceral institutions have differential racial effects because people of color are more likely to be poor (though that is true) or to commit crimes (though that is sometimes true). These institutions are systematically biased against people of color across and within economic groupings. Though Black people commit some crimes at higher rates than Whites (for a variety of complex reasons), criminal behavior does not account for disparities in arrests, sentencing and incarceration (Travis et al. 2014). For example, in 2010 Black Americans used marijuana at 1.3 times the rate of Whites but were arrested for marijuana possession at 3.7 times the rate (Edwards and Garcia 2013). Similarly, though Blacks and Latinos were targeted in nearly 84 percent of “stop-and-frisk” searches in New York City, the likelihood that the stop of an African-American yielded a weapon was half that

<sup>10</sup> Such experiences directly implicate federal, state and local governments and profoundly affect political behavior – not just among those who are incarcerated but also among friends, families and communities collatorally touched by the carceral apparatus (Burch 2013; Walker 2014; Lerman and Weaver 2014).

of White New Yorkers and the likelihood that the stop of an African-American yielded contraband was one-third less than that of Whites.<sup>11</sup>

Economic status is a primary basis for the racially patterned distribution of punitive political experiences. The carceral arm of the state thus constructs class by linking material disadvantages to correctional containment. This has implications for ideas (what types of people one thinks of when hearing the word “convict”), ideologies (how much one supports punitive government responses to crime) and power (whether formerly incarcerated persons can or will vote) across economic strata. Hence, through carceral institutions, the state produces and reinforces class by investing class markers like income and education with ideational, social and political meaning. Distinct but comparable patterns hold in the domain of civil law.

## Civil Legal Institutions

Just as men of color disproportionately experience the winnowing of their citizenship through the criminal justice system, women of color (and low-income women more generally) do so via the civil justice system. Perhaps ironically however, the civil law represents the “liberal democratic” face of the American state. Its core functions include protecting housing rights, securing access to health care and other public benefits, representing borrowers in disputes with lenders and resolving family crises (e.g. domestic violence, child custody). Like its carceral counterpart, civil law is an institution that generates inequitable political experiences, with stark consequences for everyday life among economically vulnerable populations (Sandefur 2008). Since there is no federal constitutional right to counsel in civil cases,<sup>12</sup> low-income Americans are both disproportionately in need of civil legal safeguards and significantly less likely to have recourse to them. For every person that receives publicly funded legal assistance, there is another turned away because of insufficient capacity (Legal Services Corporation 2009). In fact, there is less than one civil legal aid attorney to help every 10,000 Americans living in poverty (National Center for Access to Justice 2016). As a result, most litigants appear in court without lawyers, and vast majorities do so because they cannot afford one. Many such liti-

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<sup>11</sup> See: <https://www.nyclu.org/en/stop-and-frisk-data>.

<sup>12</sup> In *Gideon v. Wainwright* (1963), the US Supreme Court found a right to counsel in criminal cases. This requires that counsel be appointed for indigent defendants in state court facing imprisonment due to felony charges. In *Argersinger v. Hamlin* (1972) the court again supported the right to counsel in criminal cases. This requires that counsel be appointed for indigent defendants in state court facing imprisonment due to misdemeanor charges. No similar federal rights exist for civil cases.



gants have incomes low enough to qualify for legal aid, but paltry investments from national and state governments make for under-resourced legal assistance agencies that cannot meet such demand (Legal Services Corporation 2009).

Lack of access to adequate legal representation has meaningful consequences for the experiences of low-income Americans. Evidence suggests that access to legal services narrows health disparities, improves communication between public institutions and impoverished communities and may help to alleviate poverty (Housman and Minoff 2014; Powers 2015; Teufel et al. 2015; Cunningham 2016). Furthermore, unrepresented or self-represented (known as “pro se”) litigants are at a dramatic disadvantage in a court system that is highly specialized and designed for experts. A randomized experimental study of the effects of legal assistance for low-income tenants in New York City housing court found that legal assistance had substantial effects on case outcomes independent of the actual merits of the cases (Seron et al. 2001). For example, tenants with legal assistance were 32 percent less likely to have final judgments against them relative to their pro se counterparts. When low-income Americans are able to secure legal representation, they are better positioned to experience the courts as a political institution that can work in their favor. Most commonly, however, indigent litigants who are denied access to legal representation and have negative experiences of the courts (Tyler and McGraw 1986; Zimmerman and Tyler 2009).

A substantial literature demonstrates that when dealing with the legal system, people value being heard and having an opportunity to give voice to their concerns (Folger 1977; O’Barr and Conley 1985; Sheppard 1985; Tyler, Rasin-ski, and Spodick 1985). Moreover, pro se litigants have a harder time understanding what is happening in court and thus experience more frustration with the legal process (Zimmerman and Tyler 2009). Most generally, “the feeling of being denied access to the system, due to lack of financial resources to consult with and retain counsel, clearly leads to negative feelings about the courts and the law” (Zimmerman and Tyler 2009, p. 504). As a result, “plaintiffs encounters with the courts are typically sobering and discouraging” (Merry 1990, p. 3).

In the critical arenas of life where civil legal representation can have a concrete effect on a person’s ability to navigate economic disadvantage, low-income Americans lack access to it. For example, in New York City 60 percent of litigants in family court reported that they could not afford counsel, 76 percent of those in housing courts were unrepresented and seventy percent of homeowners facing foreclosure had no attorney (Report from the New York State Unified Court System’s Office of the Deputy Chief Administrative Judge for Justice Initiatives;<sup>13</sup> Lawyers Committee For Better Housing 2003; Krenichyn and Schaefer-McDaniel

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13 See [https://www.nycourts.gov/reports/AJJI\\_SelfRep06.pdf](https://www.nycourts.gov/reports/AJJI_SelfRep06.pdf).

2007; Pal 2011). In Chicago, an abysmal 95 percent of tenants were unrepresented in eviction hearings; in New Jersey 93 percent of foreclosure litigants were unrepresented (Pal 2011). Though there is significant geographic variation, under-representation among indigent Americans occurs across the country.

Notably, people of color are most apt to experience the burdens of constrained legal access, especially women (White 1990; Bezdek 1992; Gunn 1995; Myrick, Nelson, and Nielson 2012). In a 2003 New York State survey, 83% of unrepresented litigants identified as African-American, Asian or Hispanic (Report from the New York State Unified Court System's Office of the Deputy Chief Administrative Judge for Justice Initiatives). As of 2015, women make up 70 percent of clients at Legal Services agencies (the primary organization providing civil legal aid for indigent Americans), African-Americans make up 28 percent and Hispanics make up 18 percent.<sup>14</sup> Despite their productivity and effectiveness, legal services agencies are often woefully underfunded and unable to provide the sustained, high-quality representation afforded to the wealthier clients of for-profit law firms.

The civil legal justice system is “one of the major social institutions of contemporary society” (Sandefur 2008, p. 340). Though beleaguered citizens are supposed to find the redress of the first face of the state via civil law, they instead come upon an institution structured in ways that disproportionately disadvantage low-income women (most especially women of color). As these denizens either fend for themselves or rely on underfunded state agencies, they experience the class-tinged shortcomings of legal structures. In this way, the civil legal system constructs and/or reinforces social class by imbuing class markers like income and education with meanings that are ideational (e.g. the belief that law is a tool only for the wealthy), social (e.g. a woman who tolerates the unwanted advances of abusive landlords for fear of eviction) and political (civil injustice may compromise trust in the political or legal system more broadly).

## Class and Politics: A Bi-directional Flow

Scholars, pundits and ordinary people have long been attentive to how social class affects political outcomes. This essay concentrates on the opposite: how political processes construct and reinforce social class by generating particular constellations of experiences with the state. Simply put: the connections between class and politics flow both ways. It is no secret that social class (as it is commonly understood) affects politics: it has consequences for political behavior, public opinion,

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<sup>14</sup> See <http://www.lsc.gov/media-center/publications/lsc-numbers-2015#bfrtoc-client-demographics>.

political representation and more (Lipsitz 1965; Leggett 1968; Hamilton 1972; Gaventa 1980; Baldwin 1990; Cohen and Dawson 1993; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Lijphart 1997; Evans 1999; Clark and Lipset 2001; Gilens 2012; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012). At the same time (and more to the point), political institutions on both sides of the inclusionary/exclusionary divide infuse class with meaning and significance by shaping how it manifests in daily experiences.

Casting class as experience foregrounds its constructedness. Class is a *category of practice* used to identify people who fall within the bounds of widely perceived socioeconomic strata (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). As practice, class categories are a basis for tracking and analyzing behavior and a lens through which to order and comprehend the world. However, “class” is not an objective category that lies outside of political life and regarding it as an *experience* produced by political institutions makes this clear. Doing so prompts us to engage class as a *category of analysis* that can be leveraged to explain social and political phenomena and that must also itself be explained (Brubaker and Cooper 2000).

Moreover, an experiential perspective on class reminds us that it is malleable and changing. Existing class divisions are neither natural nor organic; they were produced by political processes and can be altered by them. Examining the political experiences that undergird class partitions is an initial step towards discovering what kinds of alterations matter for reconfiguring the class landscape in the United States. While offering more precise insights to that end is outside of this essay’s scope, I submit that the theoretical route for getting there involves conceiving of class as a product of politics. This path is not novel, but it is less traveled. In their classic volume, *Bringing the State Back In*, Evans et al. (1985, p. 27) shrewdly observed that,

The meanings of public life and the collective forms through which groups become aware of political goals and work to attain them arise, not from societies alone, but at the meeting points of states and societies. Consequently, the formation, let alone the political capacities, of such apparently purely socioeconomic phenomena as interests groups and classes depends in significant measure on the structures and activities of the very states that social actors, in turn, seek to influence.

The claim that I make about the bi-directional flow of class and politics comports with this. Such assertions belie inclinations to uncritically view class as a function of income or education. Instead, we must consider how the state makes class through both inclusionary and exclusionary racialized political institutions.

## The Upshot

Though my focus here has been on those who sit at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, it is worth noting that the core intuition does not exclusively apply to indi-

gent Americans. Political institutions and processes construct and recreate social class across the economic spectrum. The imprint of the state is visible in the lives of those we might consider “working class,” “middle class” and “upper class” (though not necessarily equally visible, see Mettler 2011 on this). As an illustrative example, following Novak (2008), we might take the fictional story deployed by Senator Ernest Hollings (D-SC) during his 1984 bid for president about a “man” who:

came home from the Korean War, went to college on a form of the GI Bill, opened a business with a Small Business Administration loan, made sure his parents’ farm was adequately wired through Rural Electrification and irrigated with assistance from the Army Corps of Engineers, saw his kids get subsidized school lunches at a school that received lab equipment from a National Science Foundation grant, got his mortgage from the FHA and hurricane disaster relief from FEMA, and 1 day, took AMTRAK to Washington to complain to his congressman about getting big government off people’s backs.

Clearly, the state plays a role in constituting social class and political experiences across socioeconomic groupings. Nonetheless, I focus on the most economically marginal Americans because this is where the consequences of state power are brought into sharpest relief. Case in point: we cannot satisfactorily comprehend the causes of poverty (social, economic, political) without accounting for the state – because the state influences the way that people live across all of these domains. In the process, it constitutes class itself, not just by tangibly affecting whether or not people are below the poverty line, but through numerous channels that influence daily life. The examples of carceral and civil legal institutions only scratch the surface of this. Others include social policies that help to provide cash assistance, medical coverage or food; financial policies that offer tax services, aid to attend college, loans for a down payment on a home; place-based policies that support and strengthen struggling communities and much more. Echoing Darius, a middle-aged African-American man I met and interviewed at an unemployment office of the South Side of Chicago: “government can choose what you can do and how you do it.” As a result, government does much of the work of constituting and maintaining class hierarchies.<sup>15</sup>

The benefit of the conceptual turn towards viewing class as produced through political experience is best illustrated with reference to contemporary American politics. In the wake of the 2016 election, pundits and scholars alike have attempted to discern how social class shaped the results. Some accounts depict the “White working class” as economically precarious and disaffected from the Democratic

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<sup>15</sup> To be clear, this does not make government all-powerful; people are still agents capable of marshaling their own political wherewithal. Nonetheless, agency is part of the political processes illuminated in this essay, not outside of them.

Party. Counter narratives suggested that White working class (WWC) Americans defected from the Democrats largely as a result of racism and xenophobia. Assuming the sustained, objective existence of the WWC, prescriptions offered for the Democratic Party ranged from insistence that they take action to draw the WWC back into the fold, to assertions that it is best to abandon them altogether.

By approaching social class in terms of political experience, we can add nuance to this debate. Even if the WWC is electorally significant, it does not exist independent of political processes. Any enduring reconstitution of democratic coalitions thus requires close consideration of precisely *how* political institutions account for apparent patterns among those designated as the WWC. For instance, have state and local policies cultivated racial and economic residential segregation, cutting off “working class” Whites from non-Whites of similar economic standing and from Whites with different economic backgrounds? If such policies contribute to the creation of political silos that incubate racial and economic political divides, then they help to forge the WWC by producing distinct political experiences for “lower class” White Americans (Rocha and Espino 2009; Einstein 2011). We cannot change this unless we recognize class as a category of analysis that is experientially constructed via mechanisms of the state. The advantage of this analytic tack is in dislodging the myth of “class” as an objective phenomenon that exists apart from politics and acknowledging that if politics can create and reinforce class categories, it can also transform them.

The contribution of this work does not lie in the novelty of the aforesaid thoughts, but in productively and explicitly linking them to show how the political processes of class creation/racialization connect to the broader structure of American governance. In the final calculus, I assert a rather straightforward claim: thinking about social class in terms of income, wealth, education, family background or even culture is not sufficient. Conceiving of class as a product of (racialized) political experience enables us to better map its contours and grapple with its consequences for American democracy.

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