Rethinking Economic Structure: Dreams, Nightmares, and Threats

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1. Introduction

Any call for rethinking, reimagining, or restructuring must begin with an explanation of what is wrong today and a vision of a different world. The current situation is deeply worrying though there is much about the past that was good that we should try to retain or revive. I believe in (original sense) liberal democracy with its personal freedoms, its free markets, and the innovations that came with both. The past three centuries have brought immeasurable increases in human wellbeing, in the ability of people to lead their lives in ways that matter to them, unconstrained by misery, deprivation, and disease. We are enormously wealthier than were our ancestors, and these gifts have come, not just to a few in rich countries but, to a greater or lesser extent, to billions of people around the world. This took a long time, and there were many setbacks, some of them in living memory, and some of which cost millions of lives. History gives no warrant for uninterrupted improvement. Even so, the last thirty years, with its expanding trade and globalization, has seen the largest reduction in global poverty and global disease in world history. The world has become much less unequal; the benefits of wealth and health have been extended from a few to many.

I start with this because I do not want the rest of this paper to be misunderstood. I want all of the good things to continue, but I believe that they are under serious threat, and that there is danger of losing them if we continue on the path of the last quarter century. With luck, good judgment, and better policies, it should be possible to turn today's setbacks into temporary interruptions and not into a major derailment that could set us back for decades, or even centuries.

The world is old, and there were many centuries of early death and deprivation before there was any sign of improvement; it is possible that the last three centuries were the exception, not the rule.

2. The dark side of economic success in the United States

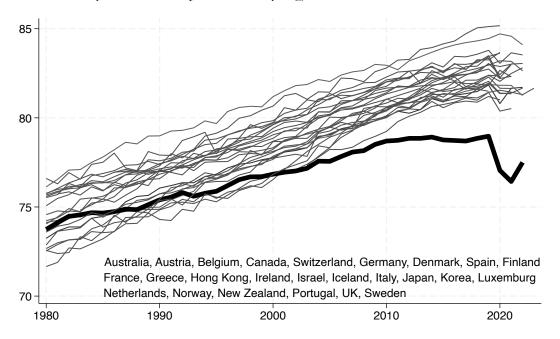
The financial crisis was a great wake-up call. I do not have to go over that ground again except to note its importance in shifting attitudes away from a generally benevolent view of market capitalism as currently practiced, with riches at the top benefiting everyone, at least in time, and towards the view that the system was rigged to promote rent-seeking by banks, healthcare, tech, and other businesses, enriching them at the expense of most Americans. The failure to punish those who caused the crisis still rankles with many, worse still that they were allowed to keep their ill-gotten gains. After the crash, it was much harder to believe in trickle-down, or to believe that whatever it had delivered in the past, late 20th century capitalism was structured to help the majority. Even before the crash, the shared and rising prosperity of the thirty years after the war had become a distant dream. I also find it difficult to believe that the rich world has proofed itself against recurrences. Indeed, it surely has not, as judging, for example, by the banks' lobbying against the increase in capital in Basel III; banks will not voluntarily sacrifice profits to make the system safer, and they likely have enough lobbying power to subvert compulsion.

In the US, though not in much of Europe, there has been a strong economic recovery prompting much self-congratulation in the American media. Not only has GDP growth been strong, but the distribution of wages has improved, with workers at the bottom doing relatively well.³ The gini coefficient of money income fell between 2021 and 2022, the first such fall in a decade and a half.⁴ Yet, wages and incomes are at best one component of wellbeing. They are not the ends of life but one of its means. Among the ends are consumption, health, families, communities, and judged by several of these, most Americans are doing not better, but worse than Europe. Indeed, some

have argued that if we want to look at national wellbeing, the best place to start is not with national income, but with life expectancy.⁵ Mortality is not only inherently important but is often a sensitive indicator of other failures in people's lives.

As has been known for many years, and has prompted three National Academy Reports, ⁶ life expectancy in the United States has done very poorly. Figure 1 shows life expectancy at birth from 1980 to 2022 for the US, in the heavy black line, and 25 other rich countries—including Canada, Western Europe, Korea, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. In 1980, the US was in the middle of the pack, neither particularly good nor particularly bad, but as time passed, American life expectancy drifted down relative to comparable countries and is today far below any of its comparators. This was true before the pandemic, and indeed, there were three years in a row, 2016, 2017, and 2018 when life expectancy was lower than in the previous year, a rare event that had not been seen since the influenza pandemic after the first World War. The mortality effects of the COVID pandemic can be seen in many of the plots but are particularly catastrophic for the US.

Figure 1: Life expectancy at birth for the USA and 25 other rich countries (Source: Human Mortality Database, https://mortality.org)



The United Kingdom is included in the data in Figure 1. Despite spending relatively little on health, and despite the depredations of austerity policies following the Financial Crisis, it outperforms the US in terms of life expectancy, by 2.4 years in 2019 and by 4 years in 2021. That is not so, however, for one of the component countries of the union, Scotland, whose life expectancy trajectory is remarkably like that of the United States, except during COVID, where it did badly, but nothing like as badly as the US. To find countries whose life expectancy is worse than the US, it is necessary to look to countries in Eastern Europe, to Russia and the once satellites of the former Soviet Union, though several of those, including Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Slovenia and Slovakia are close catching up with the US or have actually done so.

In our book,⁷ Anne Case and I tell a story of why the US has done so much worse than other countries over the last forty years. Many of the negative forces in the US are present in other rich countries, including deindustrialization, automation, and community destruction, but America has handled them less well. Europe has a comprehensive welfare state, largely financed by a value-added tax; those national systems were constructed in part to deal with trade shocks in Europe's relatively open economies, something that the US did not need for most of its history. European countries have regulated pharma companies in a way that has prevented them from igniting an opioid epidemic by getting rich through addiction and death. It was not that pharma did not resist; the Sackler's subsidiary, Mundipharma, operated out of the same playbook as Purdue—and is still doing so in 2024—but the regulatory and political regimes were less easily subverted. Other policies, such as antitrust and the treatment of unions may also have played a role in preventing citizens being exploited by corporations to the extent that has been the case in the US. The decline of private sector unions in the United States, to six percent of the workforce, has deprived working people, not only of higher wages and control in the workplace, but also of local and national political power that, at least to an extent, was a counterbalance to corporate power, what Galbraith called countervailing

power.⁹ Scotland is also a place whose citizens have been ruled by people in London for whom they did not vote and who do not represent their values and interests, as exemplified by the fact that 62 percent of Scots voted against Brexit.¹⁰

The people who are worst affected by the American failure to handle deindustrialization are those without a four-year college degree, and we can see this distinction in the morbidity and mortality records. It is important to note that those without a four-year degree are in the *majority*, currently 62 percent of the population.

Given that we do not know whether a new-born will go to college, I here document life expectancy at 25, sometimes called *adult* life expectancy, and defined as the expected number of years of life beyond 25, calculated using the age-specific mortality rates in each year. Like life expectancy at birth, it is not a projection, but a summary of current year mortality rates, but in this case, for adults. While most people who are going to get a BA will have obtained it by age 25, that is obviously not true for everyone, an error that I am neglecting.

Figure 2: Adult life expectancy for Americans with and without a four-year college degree (Source: National Vital Statistical System, see Case and Deaton, 2024)

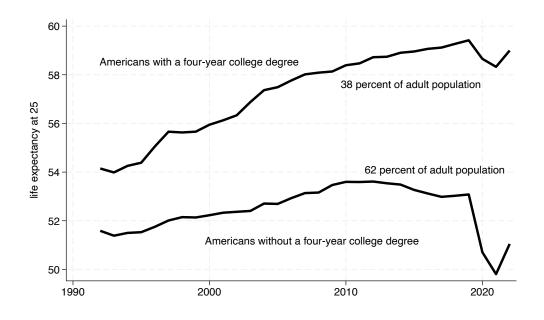
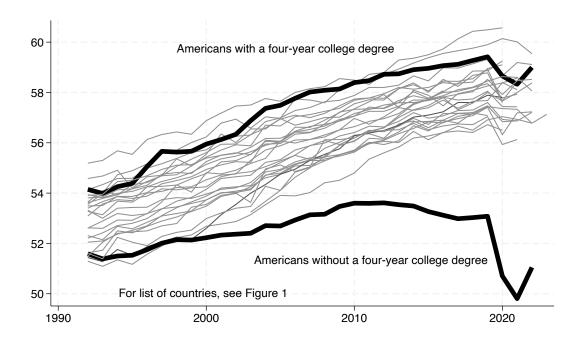


Figure 2, which is updated to 2022 from recent work with Anne Case, ¹¹ shows adult life expectancy for the two educational groups for the years 1992 through 2022. The gap rose from 2.6 years in 1992 to 6.3 years on the eve of the pandemic, to 8.5 years in 2021, falling to 7.9 years in 2022. For those without a four-year college degree, adult life expectancy reached its all-time high in 2010–12, eight years before the pandemic, while for Americans with a college degree, adult life expectancy continued to rise. Johan Mackenbach and his collaborators have looked at differential life expectancy by education across more than two dozen countries ¹² and the only examples they have found of life expectancy going up for the educated while falling for the less educated was immediately after the end of communism in the former Soviet Union and some of its satellite countries. Not the sort of comparison that Americans should welcome. The widening gap during the pandemic is at least partly, but probably not fully, explicable by working conditions, with educated Americans more easily able to work safely at home.

It is extraordinary that these gaps should have widened so much over thirty years, a very short period by demographic standards. There are two different worlds here, one of them much better than the other.

Figure 3 plots adult life expectancy for the two groups in the US is alongside aggregate adult life expectancy for the same 25 countries shown in Figure 1. Americans with the four-year college degree have done as well or better than the averages of other countries, placing with the best achievers, typically Switzerland and Japan, while those without the degree have done much worse than any of the other 25 countries. I note that it is not possible to split the results by college degree for the other countries, but the work by Mackenbach and his coauthors show no examples of the educational divergence—one measure going up, and one going down—that has occurred in the US.

Figure 3: Life expectancy at age 25 for Americans with and without a college degree and for 25 other rich countries (Source: US Vital Statistics and Human Mortality Database, https://mortality.org)



The literature on educational differences in life expectancy is at least half a century old, ¹³ and an often-raised issue is whether the relative deterioration in the health of those who do not go to college is a selection effect. The average health of the less educated group will decline as more people go to college if those who go to college are healthier than the average among the previously less educated. Most recent writers ¹⁴ find little evidence of this; the health of less-educated Americans is declining relative to collegegoers whatever the method used to deal with the selection. In our own recent work, ¹⁵ Case and I have looked at the large increase in college attendance by men in the birth cohorts around 1947, who went to college to avoid serving in Vietnam. The fraction of men with BA degrees in those birth cohorts is the highest yet recorded, with much lower fractions before and after. Yet the mortality gap grows from cohort to cohort irrespective, no matter whether the fraction with a BA is rising or falling.

3. Causes and consequences

Anne Case and I have documented¹⁶ that rising mortality is only one of the several misfortunes besetting Americans without a college degree. Surveys show rising self-reports of pain among the less educated, including for sciatic pain, something that is unlikely to be reported by someone who has not experienced it. Measures of extreme mental distress are rising, as are measures of difficulties in socializing, while rates of marriage are falling. Unstable serial cohabitations are common among those without a college degree, leaving many children separated from one or even both of their birth parents. As is the case for life expectancy, these dysfunctions are either not changing among those with a college degree—sciatic pain, difficulty socializing—or are worsening more slowly—marriage rates and extreme mental distress. Economic measures for those without a college degree have done well recently, but the long-term trends are dire. The college wage premium is currently 80 percent, double its value of 40 percent in 1977.¹⁷ Wealth, once equally owned by those with and without a college degree, is now three-quarters owned by those with a BA, ¹⁸ albeit with a larger number of people. Real median wages for men without a college degree are lower now than at any time in the 1980s.

For mainstream economists and commentators, capitalism is a hugely productive and innovative system that generates widespread benefits for the many. Certainly, no one should doubt the power of markets to enhance efficiency, to process information, and to encourage innovation. That certainly seems to be a good description of the US economy from the Second World War up to around 1970. But there has also long been a view from the left that capitalism is exploitative, that it uses market power in both goods and labor markets to extract excessive profits, to depress real wages, and thus to ramp up inequality. Since 1970, and especially since the mid-1990s, this alternative view seems to be increasingly descriptive, especially when coupled with a concern shared with libertarians, that once government becomes beholden to corporations, it stops serving its

citizens and becomes complicit in their exploitation. More Joan Robinson than Milton Friedman. It is not that one view was always right and the other always wrong. More that there has been a change from a more to a less beneficial capitalism, especially for less educated Americans, whose rising mortality I have documented and that is arguably attributable, at least in part, to the change in the way that capitalism has been operating.

Put another way, there once was a social contract that encouraged innovation and wealth creation but that also shared power and resources among all citizens. It used a robust tax system that paid for public goods and that accomplished modest redistribution, it enforced regulations to protect against the misuse of market power and was buttressed by powerful unions who represented working people and who, among other accomplishments, used to ensure that nationwide increases in productivity were passed through into higher real wages for working people.¹⁹ That contract has been increasingly cast aside as we have moved into a no-holds barred economy. As writers across the political spectrum have documented, 20 this is now not one world but two. Educated elites and workers are increasingly segregated, living in different places, reading different books, watching different television and getting their news from different sources. They rarely meet across the divide and have few opportunities to sympathize with or understand each other's values and concerns. The elites regard the non-elites with disdain and condescension, while the non-elites have come to believe that the system is rigged, and to reject anything associated with higher education, including not only universities, but institutions, such as the CDC, the legal system, and even science itself. In Congress, 94 percent of Representatives and all but one Senator have a BA, 17 percent of Senators and 12 percent of Representatives have a degree from the Ivy League, and about half of all legislators have a higher degree. There is much to be said for educated rulers, but it is surely unsafe to exclude the persons and viewpoints of the majority without a BA, and the "best and the

brightest" have not always proved to be wise rulers. Private sector unions, once a counterbalance, are gone.

Here are some of the key changes that have harmed working people.

Taxes.

As documented by Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman,²¹ many of America's wealthiest individuals pay little tax because they can arrange to receive very little income and because there is no wealth tax. At the corporate level, companies are allowed to move their corporate headquarters to low tax countries such as Ireland. To add insult to injury, pharma companies sometimes avoid tax altogether in the US, while charging ten to twelve times as much for their drugs in the US as in the low tax jurisdiction, where pharma prices are regulated to bear some relationship to their health and economic benefits. Pfizer received a tax refund from the US in 2023, despite annual sales of more than \$58 billion. The US corporation tax is 21 percent, two to four times Pfizer's tax rates in 2019 through 2022.²² It is hard to imagine a better illustration of government's collaboration with the wealthy to undermine the social contract.

Market power

Economists have increasingly documented monopolistic and monopsonic practices in goods and labor markets leading to higher prices and lower wages.²³ ²⁴ There is much evidence of private equity abuses in settings where "consumers" have little or no choice, or where choice can be eliminated by consolidation; examples are hospitals, ambulances, elder care homes, and prisons.²⁵ Antitrust enforcement has been emasculated or has at best been asleep at the wheel

Extraction through the healthcare system.

In the 1970s, the share of American GDP devoted to expenditure on healthcare was less than 7 percent, rose to nearly 20 percent in 2020, and was 17.5 in 2022. France, the United Kingdom and Switzerland are currently next in terms of shares, at around 12 percent.²⁶ Yet, as we have seen, the

growth in healthcare spending in the US relative to other rich countries has come with a dramatic fall in outcomes. The excess is an avoidable burden on the country, whose federal deficit problems are almost entirely attributable to the high cost of healthcare.²⁷ Because so much of the system is funded through employer provision of insurance, a cost that varies little with the salary of the employee the premium for the CEO is much the same as the premium for her driver—the system encourages the elimination or outsourcing of low skill jobs, so that few American corporations today employ their own transport, security, cleaning, or food service staff. ^{5, 28} Our lavishly funded hospitals, expensive drugs, and well-paid healthcare CEOs come at the expense of good jobs for less skilled workers. Because the loss of good jobs is central to the story of addiction, alcoholism, and suicide, the American healthcare system is not saving lives, it is costing lives. The healthcare industry is one of the largest and most effective lobbyists; in 2023, there were 3,310 healthcare lobbyists in Washington, half of them "revolvers" who were previously legislators, aides, or regulators.²⁹ The industry is particularly fond of using free-market rhetoric to discourage price control or other forms of regulation, while using its power to choke competition.³⁰ The lobbying is not confined to one party: the Democrats in Congress or in the administration are as susceptible to lobbying as are Republicans³¹ and every congressional district has at least one hospital.

Globalization and trade

The benefits of globalization have not been equally distributed. The effects of trade on jobs have been particularly controversial. The losses of jobs have been well documented, especially through exposure to China which accounted for perhaps 2 million lost jobs.³² Standard economic analysis—the benefits to trade are almost a sine qua non to qualify as an economist—argues that lower tariffs are always in the (net) national interest, with consumers benefiting from lower prices, and new jobs created among exporters to replace those lost by industries exposed to trade. It is also noted that many of the manufacturing jobs that were lost were doomed in any case, and that more jobs were

lost to automation than to trade. Beyond that, there is job churn in the US with many jobs lost and gained every year, as many as 2 to 3 million a *month*, relative to which even 2 million jobs lost over a *decade* or so is very small. Jobs must be reallocated over time to maintain efficiency and the defenders argue that, rather than preserving jobs through tariffs, the individuals and communities should be compensated for the closures but closed just the same.

But there are good arguments on the other side. When tariffs are already low, the net gains are smaller than the gross gains and losses, so there is a very large amount of disruption—gainers and losers—for a relatively small net gain.³³ Under such circumstances, trade deals disrupt society for ever smaller net gains. The economic accounting, in terms of income gains and losses, is seriously incomplete because much of the trade not only destroyed jobs, but whole communities.

Communities are necessary for people to flourish, and, along with meaningful work, are the loci of what John Rawls called the social bases of self-respect.³⁴ My argument here is that, at least some of the morbidity and mortality among working Americans must be attributed to trade, something that is not considered in the income-based calculations, and which would not likely be eliminated by compensating the losers in money, not something that tends to happen in any case.

Obviously, there are trade-offs here; no one should argue manufacturing employment can be restored to its previous levels, but it is surely possible to do better calculations for future trade deals. Note too that trade weakens the bargaining position of trade unions and of labor relative to management.³⁵ The absence of private sector unions means that workers have less say about the direction of technical change and automation than once was the case; history shows that who benefits from technical change depends on how it is implemented, and that the nature of the implementation has always depended on relative power.³⁶ Finally, I note that democracies are supposed to involve those who are affected in decision-making, something that has been notably absent in recent trade arrangements especially as unions have declined. Globalization and the

construction of international rule-making bodies moves decision-making offshore, further weakening national and local democracy. Not content with their domestic rent-seeking, corporations, their lobbyists, and lawyers have become increasingly dominant in US trade negotiations, often bringing harms to people in weaker partner countries around the world.³⁷ *Addiction*

Addiction has always been a corporate strategy, particularly by tobacco and alcohol companies, but has spread to new areas in the last 25 years. The Sackler family reportedly made more than \$10 billion from OxyContin, falsely claiming that it was not addictive, but Purdue is not the only pharma company or pharma distributor that was implicated in the opioid addiction epidemic. When the destruction of communities leaves people with nothing useful to do, there is fertile ground for cultivating addiction, as the pharma companies understood. The supply of addictive drugs can be enormously profitable because supply generates its own demand. When the Drug Enforcement Agency tried to interfere, Congress interfered, shut them down, and changed the law, one of the most egregious examples of legislators being complicit in the deaths of their own constituents.⁵ Once again, it is important to note that while anyone is potentially at risk from addiction, the rise in opioid overdose deaths occurred only among those without a BA.

The addiction model has recently been adopted by sports betting companies after the Supreme Court in 2018 struck down the Federal Ban on sports betting. The industry lobbied state legislators—who come cheaper than federal legislators—to license gambling, also rewarding them with a share of the revenue, and sports betting is now available in 38 states. In those states it is now impossible to watch sports on TV without constant inducements to bet, often on difficult to understand odds or for complex bets. That the ads include help resources for addicts is a clear signal and admission of the harm that they are doing. The NFL, long absent from Nevada because of its licensing of gambling, now has a team in Las Vegas, and one baseball player recently was banned for

life for betting on baseball, including on a team for which he was playing, the first such scandal in over a century. It is unlikely to be the last such case. Heavy advertising of crypto is akin to the gaming industry, and is targeted at those who (for sometimes good reasons) distrust banks, and who are often not well able to bear the risks.

Unions

Unions did not simply wither as they became less effective. They were withered by legislation and by the courts. Unions raised wages for their members, and for many non-members, they policed safety and working conditions, they provided grievance services, they were often part of local social capital, and they provided political representation for their member in local, state, and national politics. Unions have not been popular, and indeed have much bad behavior to account for. Yet it is important to distinguish between private and public sector unions. The former must negotiate with employers and executives, with power on both sides. If firms have market power, as if often the case today, the contest is over the allocation of profits, not over the potential destruction of the industry. Public sector unions, by contrast, negotiate with politicians, who have very different incentives from private sector managers. Paying off a union, and spreading the cost over diffuse constituents, can be a winning electoral strategy, especially if the costs—such as pension benefits—can be pushed forward to be borne by future constituents long after the politician has gone.

Government for or against the people

I believe that government can and often does help the public. But it does not always do so.

Corporate lobbying was virtually absent from Washington in 1970, but has seen spectacular growth since.²⁹ I have already documented the consequences for healthcare. But there is also an issue for states. Many state governments are now under one party control, and several Republican states have, at the behest of corporate interests, passed laws that arguably harm the interests of less-educated workers.³⁸ Those include laws about public health, including smoking and guns, and preemption

laws that prevent liberal cities in conservative states from passing their own more liberal laws.

Recent work argues that this has led to increases in mortality in the states where it is happening so that, for example, states like New York and California, which are blue states and have not passed such laws, have improved their life expectancies, which were once among the worst in the US, while red states in the upper Midwest, which used to be among the healthiest, have fallen back.³⁹

Immigration

Like trade, immigration is a hotly contested issue where the consensus among the elite that immigration benefits everyone, including those already here, 40 is not shared by many less-educated Americans. David Leonhardt's recent summary⁴¹ of the evidence argues persuasively that the elite consensus is less strongly based than often argued. For example, the long U-shape of income inequality in 20th century America almost exactly matches the share of the US population that was born abroad, and for those of us whose houses, gardens, children, and pets are tended by those who were born abroad, or whose parents were born abroad, it is hard to believe that these services would be as affordable without the huge expansion of immigration since 1965. Employers seem to think so too and have routinely opposed deals to block immigration or even to document the status of their employees. The Great Migration of African Americans from the rural south to northern factories from 1920 through to 1970 would likely not have happened had immigration not been severely limited by Congress in 1921, so that northern factory owners were not able to continue hiring the Eastern Europeans who had worked there previously. 42 In this view, it is also a tragedy that Civil Rights legislation in the 1960s coincided with the 1965 Hart-Celler Act that opened immigration to the world, making it harder once again for African Americans to move up to middle-class jobs.⁴³ Once again, community is important here, and natives worry is about changing their communities, about culture rather than economics.⁴⁴ It is notable that the two rich countries where immigration is high and is viewed favorably, Canada and Australia, operate with protocols that select against

unskilled immigrants. Once again, we, the educated elite, are telling the people most affected what is good for them, and when they disagree, dismissing them as xenophobes, racists, bigots, deplorables or worse.

4. Let them eat cake

An educated elite has benefited mightily from globalization, as has corporate America. But these benefits have come without us paying adequate attention to the social contract that was disintegrating as we prospered. We need a new civic bargain, which does not give everyone what they want, but in which our obligations to each other are clearly drawn and widely accepted. The last half century has been a period during which much governance was delegated to markets. Even military service was given over to the market with the predictable result that less-educated Americans fight wars for an educated and wealthy elite whose own children are exempt. Politics of all stripes took a back seat to a general acceptance that modified free markets were the best way for countries to be run, with the modifications becoming flimsier over time. Politics became subservient to economics, and there was no mass political movement to challenge the status quo. At the same time, a global cosmopolitan educated elite has sprung up, much of it wealthy, drawn from many countries, and that has come to dominate international institutions and the transnational networks of governance. It has a huge presence in top Western universities, as well as in successful cities like London, New York, and San Francisco. Immigration, welcomed by the elite, but a source of anxiety to working people, has risen by unparalleled amounts, not just in the US, but in other rich countries.

The current widespread dissent and polarization in the US not only threatens politics as usual but threatens to upend this international order. If we do not repair the rifts, by pulling back and fixing at least some of the changes that I have highlighted, we will finish up, not with destruction, not reconstruction. It is not only we—the educated and wealthy—who will suffer. We

face global problems, particularly climate change, that cannot be solved without international cooperation, and most likely will require large transfers from rich countries to poor countries. There is no possibility that such transfers can occur, or that Americans will permit the international cooperation, when two-thirds of the population has long seen globalization as an instrument of their immiseration, and see the elites who are conducting the climate policies as perpetrating one more outrage.

Colgan and Keohane⁴⁶ wrote as early as 2016 that the current "position is reminiscent of the way that eighteenth century French aristocrats refused to pay taxes while indulging in expensive foreign military adventures. They got away with it for many years-until the French Revolution suddenly laid waste to their privilege. Today's elites risk making a similar mistake."

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¹ With many thanks to Anne Case for comments, and whose work with me underlies this paper.

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