



A Tale of Two Moralities, Part One: Regional Inequality and Moral Polarization

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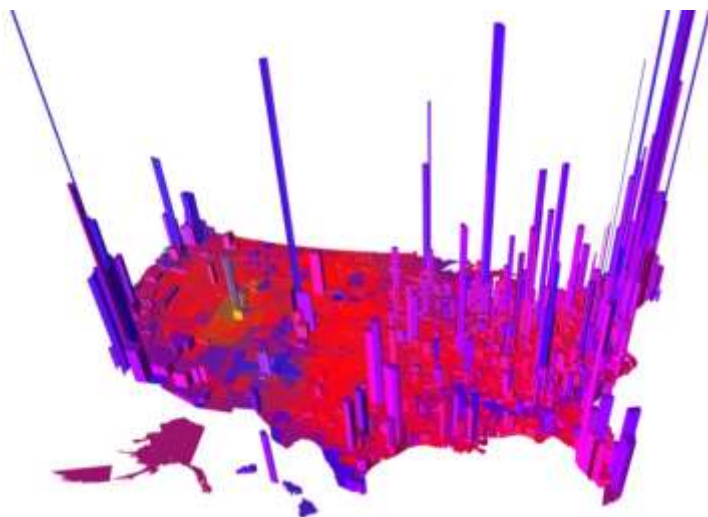
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The United States is not very united.

Americans have been sorting themselves along ideological lines into like-minded regions of the country, increasing polarization in congressional voting patterns, and creating a striking division in political preference and party loyalty between city-dwellers and the denizens of low-density exurban and rural counties.

That's how Hillary Clinton managed to lose the Electoral College vote to Donald Trump despite beating his overall vote total by nearly three million votes. There are more Democratic voters, but they're densely concentrated in a handful of Democrat-heavy cities and states, while Republicans are spread relatively thinly but evenly across the country's non-urban expanse.

Here's a useful illustration of the pattern from Robert Vanderbei, a Princeton mathematician and operations research expert:



The height of each tower is proportional to the “voter density” so that the volume of each “tower” is proportional to the number of votes.

This is, in effect, a picture of two nations with rival worldviews inhabiting a single territory. It doesn't take a big leap to get to a picture of American electoral politics as a low-grade civil war between sectarian factions—basically a war of religions, of identity-constituting moral worldviews, in which neither side is very clear about what their religion is.

“The People” vs. “the Elite”?

Because America's highly-schooled creative, political, academic, and business classes tend to cluster in liberal cities, the town-and-country split corresponds to a rough class distinction between so-called “elites” and non-urban non-elites. Underline “rough” here.

People of color number heavily among urban non-elites, and tend to vote with (mostly white) urban elites, so it's wrong to conflate the town-and-country divide with the elite/ordinary folks divide. Many, many millions of ordinary Americans aren't white and live in big cities. That said, the United States will remain a white-majority, white-dominated country for another few decades. Populist anti-elitism, as it has manifested itself behind Trump, seems to me largely a reaction of non-city-dwelling whites against urban whites and the cosmopolitan, multicultural conception of American identity they affirm.

But let me repeat that “white people who don't live in cities” is not remotely the same thing as “the people,” *most* of whom *do* live in densely populated metropolitan areas, and many of whom are African-American, Asian, and Hispanic. And it's important to clarify further that “white people who don't live in cities” is also not remotely the same thing as “the white working class,” as there are many millions of non-urban, white people with college degrees and upper-class incomes. The ruling political, business, and cultural classes in Republican-dominated places like to pretend that they're “just folks,” too, but they're aren't. They're elites.

And keep in mind that white people *generally* favored Trump—58% to 37%—including wealthy white people and white people with college degrees. Clinton *barely* won a majority of college-educated *whitewomen*—just 51%. All that said, the election probably did turn on, among other things, Trump picking up support among working-class white voters who have voted Democratic in the past. But voters with incomes under \$50,000 *decisively* preferred the Democratic candidate, as usual. Surely they count as “the people.” And Trump wouldn't have won if he hadn't prevailed among voters making more than \$100,000, as Republicans usually do.

I'm taking pains to be clear about who we are and aren't talking about when we're talking about “elites” and “the people” for a reason. It has become conventional wisdom in some circles that “the elites” and “the people” are divided by cultural and informational “bubbles” that offer incompatible perspectives on the facts of the world and the nature of a good society, and thus regard each other with mutual distrust and contempt. All this demographic complexity aside, the conventional wisdom that there is a widening cultural gap between “the people” and “the elites,” and that the rise of populist nationalism is due to backlash against “the establishment,” contains more than a grain of truth. But we need to get much clearer about what exactly that truth is.

Because “the establishment” (including the Republican political establishment) is relatively cosmopolitan and liberal (in the broad sense), an outpouring of populist anti-establishment

sentiment is going to assume a nationalistic, illiberal form more or less by default. The good news is that anti-elite anybody-but-Hillary-ism doesn't really imply serious public appetite for anything like alt-right authoritarianism. The bad news is that the liberal-democratic capitalist welfare state and the so-called "neoliberal" global order is far and away the best humanity has ever done, and we've taken it for granted. We could very well trash it in a fit of pique, and wind up a middle-income kleptocracy boiling with civil strife and/or destabilize the global order in a way that ends in utter horror.

It is *very important* to keep this from happening! And that means it's important to understand the mechanisms underlying our cultural and moral polarization. That's what I'm going to begin to do in this (long!) post, in a preliminary, speculative, exploratory spirit. I want to push a little deeper than the prevailing journalistic narratives have gone, and churn up some credible empirical hypotheses that I hope will help us eventually home in on the correct diagnosis. Then we can hazard some recommendations that may help reduce polarization and mitigate its bad effects. I'll do that in a future post.

Why Is Our Moral Culture Polarizing?

One place to start is to ask why it is that people, as individuals, gravitate to certain moral and political viewpoints. Jonathan Haidt's "[moral foundations](#)" theory—which shows that conservatives and liberals have different moral sensibilities, sensitive to different moral considerations—is perhaps the best-known account. But there are others.

In a [2012 piece for the *Economist*](#), I surveyed some of the research in personality psychology that indicates a correlation between political ideology and a couple of the "[Big Five](#)" dimensions of personality—[conscientiousness](#) and [openness to experience](#), in particular—and then connected that to evidence that people have self-segregated geographically by personality and ideology. It's an interesting post and you should read it.

The upshot is that liberals (low conscientiousness, high openness to experience) and conservatives (high conscientiousness, low openness) have distinctive personalities, and that there's reason to believe we've been sorting ourselves into communities of psychologically/ideologically similar people.

To make matters worse, as [Cass Sunstein's work on group deliberation shows](#), we tend to radicalize in the direction of our predispositions when we're surrounded by people who already agree with us. In short, we're moving into bubbles of people who resemble us and an echo chamber effect pushes our opinions to extremes.

That's one sort of story of increasing cultural and political division. It's a pretty pessimistic story, because it suggests that our moral and political commitments are built into our personalities, more or less. Gladly, it's also an incomplete story.

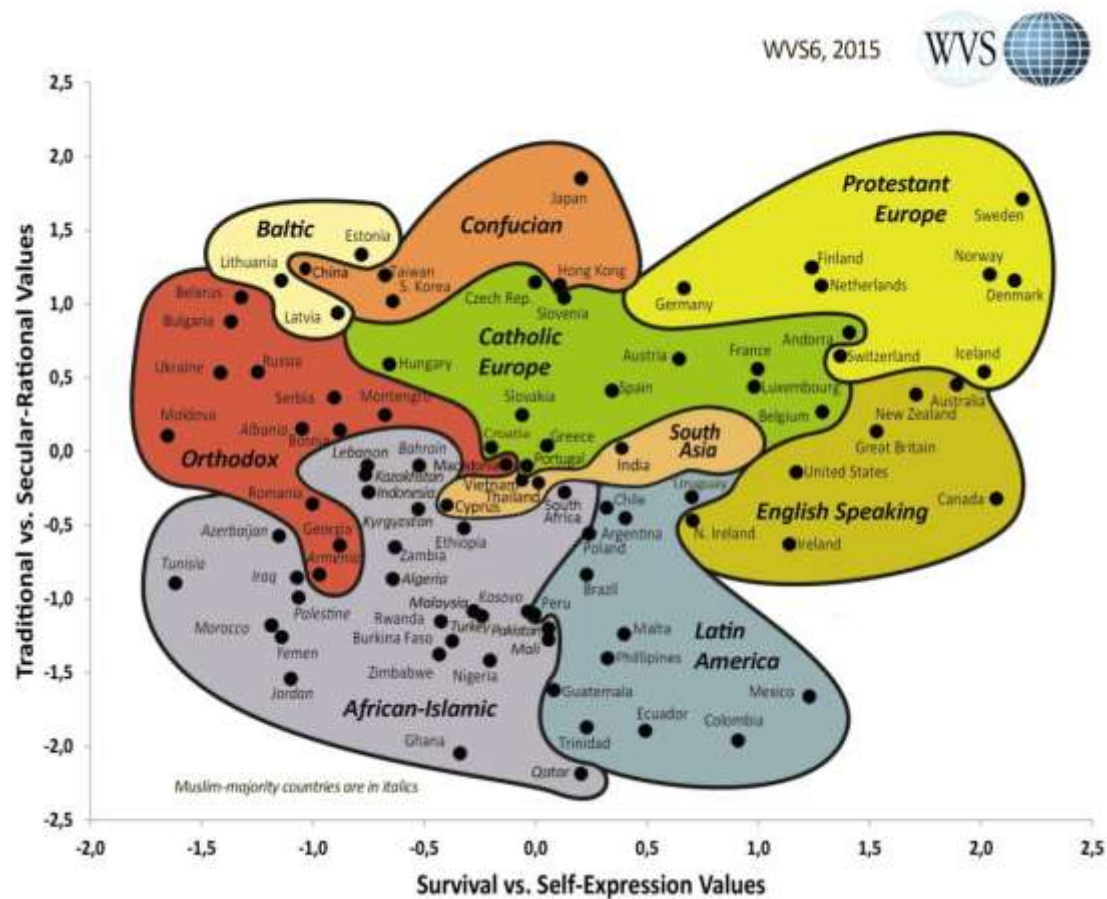
As illuminating as personality-based accounts of moral and political commitment may be (and I'm a really big fan of Haidt's work), they don't tell us very much about *change*. Geographical sorting and echo-chamber radicalization are surely part of the story about moral polarization. But none of this can help us make sense of how *whole cultures* become more liberal in their attitudes over time, and they do.

Here's the problem. Knowing that a certain personalities incline to conservative or liberal opinions doesn't tell us what the *content* of those opinions will be at any given point in history. Conservatives fifty years ago opposed interracial marriage, but now they mostly don't. Why not? Haidt and his colleagues find that conservatives have a stronger sense of moral purity, contamination, and disgust than liberals. That was as true in 1967 as it is in 2017. But conservatives in 1967 were likely to find interracial marriage a *disgusting* contamination of racial purity in a way that most conservatives in 2017 just don't. What changed? There's little reason to believe that the psychological attributes that incline an individual to conservative or liberal attitudes have much changed. It's much more likely that the cultural triggers of the conservative purity and disgust response changed. And why did that change? Because our entire culture has become more broadly liberal—more egalitarian, tolerant, and individualistic—in its attitudes, shifting the whole range of opinion in a broadly liberal direction.

So how does *that* happen?

Post-Materialist America

Ronald Inglehart's theory of "post-materialist" value change is the most helpful place to start in understanding cultural liberalization.



This is the World Values Survey cultural map. You'll see it has two dimensions. One ranges from "traditional values" to "secular-rational values." The other ranges from "survival values" to "self-expression values."

As countries become wealthier, their people generally become less and less concerned with mere physical survival and the values associated with survival, and more and more concerned with self-expression and autonomy. People animated by survival values prefer security over liberty, are suspicious of outsiders, dislike homosexuality, don't put much stock in politics, and tend not to be very happy. In contrast, those fueled by self-expressive values prefer liberty over security, are welcoming to outsiders, tolerant of homosexuality (or most any expression of the real, authentic, inner self), are more positive about politics and political participation, and tend to be fairly satisfied with life.

Cultures also tend to transition from "traditional" to "secular-rational" attitudes about the grounds of moral, cultural, and political authority as they modernize and gain distance from mass poverty and material insecurity. Traditionalists about authority are generally religious; prize traditional notions of marriage and family; esteem obedience; and wave the flag with zesty, patriotic pride. In contrast, people with secular-rational values are less religious; aren't so troubled by Heather having two Dads; are more likely to question and defy authority; and take less pride from national membership.

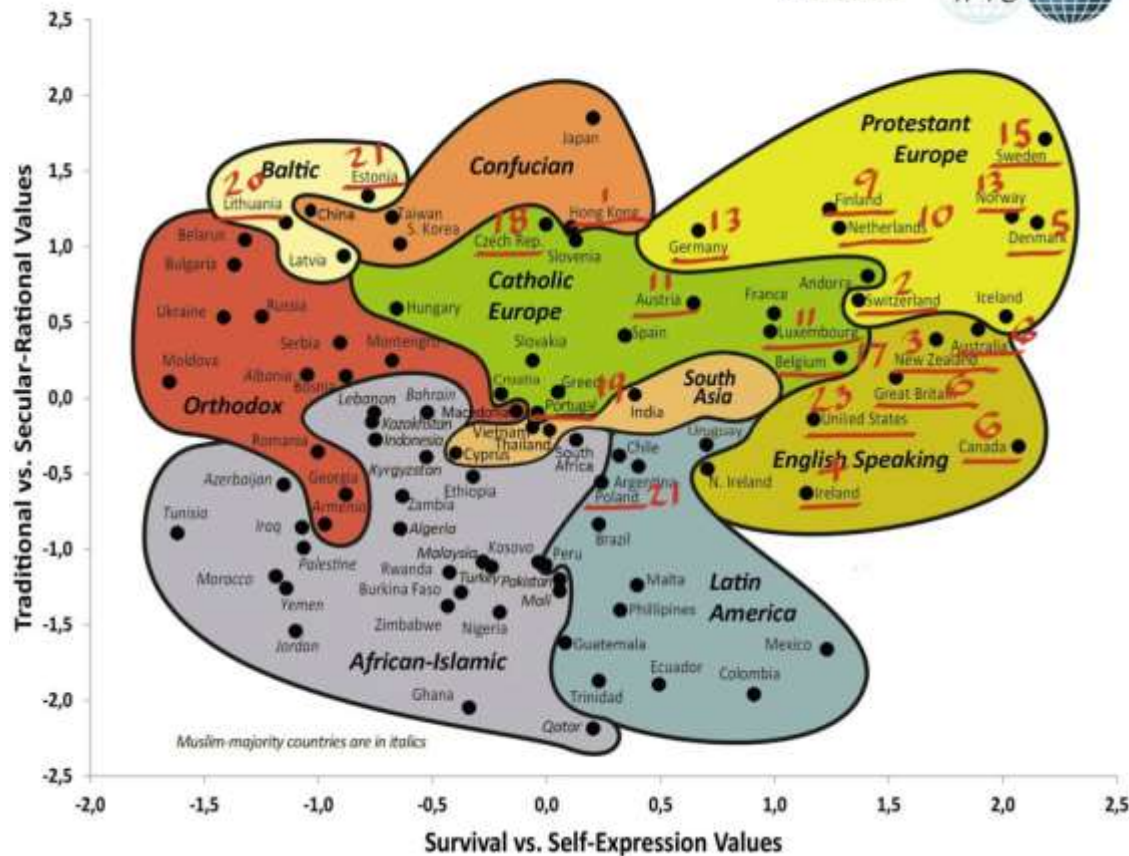
You might wonder about causality. Maybe "post-materialist" values cause economic growth. That's probably true, too. But the WVS data are clear enough that we can be confident that growth does cause value change. **Inglehart and Christian Welzel write:**

This strong connection between a society's value system and its per capita GDP suggests that economic development tends to produce roughly predictable changes in a society's beliefs and values, and time-series evidence supports this hypothesis. When one compares the positions of given countries in successive waves of the values surveys, one finds that almost all the countries that experienced rising per capita GDPs also experienced predictable shifts in their values.

(For those interested in digging deeper, the best current overview of the theory is Christian Welzel's *Freedom Rising: Human Empowerment and the Quest for Emancipation*. It's an impressive body of work with a great deal of data and analysis behind it.)

If you care about freedom and liberal values generally, the fact that rising prosperity tends to produce increasingly "post-materialist" cultures in which secular-rational and expressive values overshadow traditional and survival values is profoundly important. Why? Because countries with moral cultures that emphasize self-expressive, secular-rational values demand and enjoy the most freedom.

Take a glance at the top ten countries in the Cato Institute's Human Freedom Index—Hong Kong, Switzerland, Finland, Denmark, New Zealand, Canada, Australia, Ireland, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands—which I've tagged with their Freedom Index ranks on the WVS cultural map below. You'll see that almost all the world's freest countries rate relatively highly on both dimensions of post-materialist values. But a high prevalence of self-expression values in particular strongly predicts a high level of freedom.



Now take a look at the United States.

According to the Cato index, the U.S. ranks an inglorious 23rd in terms of combined political and economic freedom, wedged between two former Soviet republics, Estonia and Latvia. Except for Iceland (which has a population smaller than Des Moines metropolitan area), *every* country to the right of the United States in self-expression values does better on Cato the freedom index. Self-expression values are evidently particularly important for generating political support for high levels of freedom. Secular-rational values, which are relatively high in a number of relatively despotic countries, and relatively low in Ireland, which ranks 4th on the Cato index, and Canada, which ranks 6th, are evidently less tightly connected to political and economic liberty.

Secular-rational and self-expressive values tend to move in the same direction over time, but they don't always, and in the United States they haven't. If you watch the below animation of the cultural map through time, you'll see that since the World Values Survey began, the United States has become significantly more secular-rational, while losing ground on self-expressive values. (In the early oughts, we were about where New Zealand is now on that dimension.)

However, the World Values Survey results for countries as populous, diverse, and geographically large as the United States can be misleading. Small aggregate shifts can hide large swings in particular regions and sub-populations.

I live in Iowa City, Iowa, which is part of a widely dispersed archipelago of extremely self-expressive, secular-rational college towns. If the collection of college towns were its own country, I'm sure we'd have seen it trending over the decades toward the far Northeast corner of the WVS values map, out past Sweden.

Likewise, it appears that America's big cities have never been more resolutely liberal. As I noted at the outset, the partisan split between town and country—between densely and sparsely populated counties—was incredibly stark, and helps explain the extreme gap between the popular vote and the Electoral College result.

If the United States has shifted slightly toward survival values and away from self-expressive values *in the aggregate*, it seems likely that there has been a *large* shift toward survival values in large swathes of the country that swamped the forward march of college towns and big cities toward self-expressive values. Likewise, a small aggregate shift toward secular-rational values can conceal a much larger shift in the places liberals live, offset by a somewhat smaller shift toward traditional values elsewhere.

That suggests that the United States may be dividing into two increasingly polarized cultures: an increasingly secular-rational and self-expression oriented “post-materialist” culture concentrated in big cities and the academic archipelago, and a largely rural and exurban culture that has been tilting in the opposite direction, toward zero-sum survival values, while trying to hold the line on traditional values.

The positions on the two axes of the WVS values map are determined by responses to a bunch of questions on the survey. As best as I can tell, America's aggregate slide toward survival values was the result of responses to questions on the importance of political participation (declining), national pride (increasing), and the priority of social order and economic security (up) relative to democratic voice and free speech (down). These were small changes, but—again—my hypothesis is that this reflects relatively large shifts away from self-expression values in conservative places, swamping a smaller shift in liberal cities toward greater self-expression values.

If true, this would help explain the sense of a widening cultural gulf between America's city-dwelling “elite” and non-urban moral cultures. For a certain group of Americans, liberalizing post-materialist cultural change has been ongoing. For another, it has stalled or reversed. If we were to plot urban “blue” America on the WVS map, my guess is that it would fall in the “Protestant Europe” zone, perhaps somewhere between the Netherlands and Norway. If we were to plot low-density “red” America on the WVS map, I'd guess it would, like Northern Ireland, fall on the border of the “Latin America” zone, near Uruguay and Argentina.

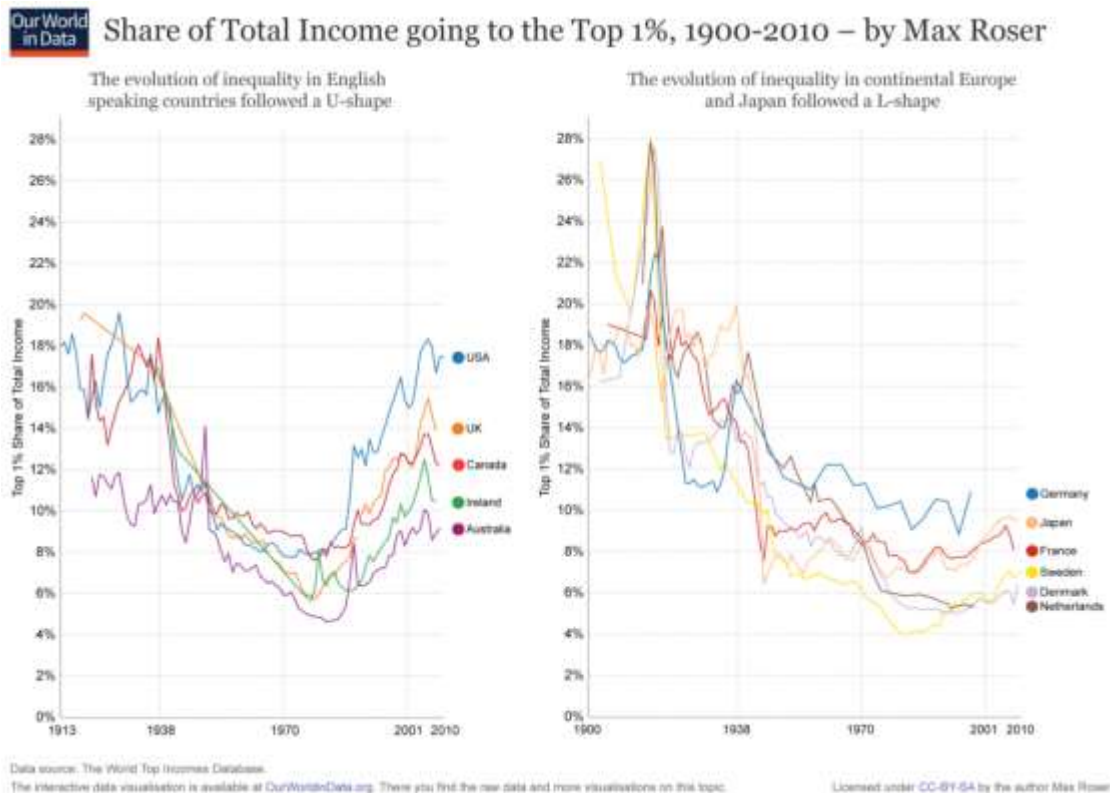
This is speculative. I have not dug into the U.S. WVS data, and don't know if there's regional info that would show us where attitudes changed the most. (A dive into similar question on the GSS might clear this up, but I haven't done that either.) There are lots of possibilities. For example, Hispanics, African Americans, and Asians generally have more conservative social values than urban whites, and changes in attitudes among these groups could account for some or all of the aggregate shift.

That said, I think there's a good deal of evidence to suggest that my hypothesis is true. So let's suppose for the sake of argument that the net movement toward survival values is mainly accounted for by a shift in attitudes among non-urban whites. If this is what has happened, what might explain it?

Inequality and Post-materialist Value Polarization

Let's revisit the fundamental idea behind Inglehart's theory. When people become more materially secure, they worry more about self-realization and less about survival. In effect, the climb Maslow's hierarchy of needs. If people lose a sense of material security, you'd expect them to shift back a little toward survival-oriented values.

Well, the United States recently went through a big recession, but so did the rest of the world. That, and the wave of foreclosures that precipitated it, might account for some of the shift toward survival values. But then there's the U.S.'s unusual sharp increase in income inequality, which is symptomatic of a deeper trend in diverging material conditions.



Comparing these charts with our WVS/Cato mashup graphic, you might reasonably infer that the Cato Freedom index downgrades countries for the high tax burden and expensive redistribution that has kept Northern European inequality from rising as sharply as it has over the past three or four decades in the Anglosphere. But inequality has risen *most* sharply, and to the highest level, in the United States, and the U.S. rates rather *less* free than any of the English-speaking or EU countries in this chart, despite the advantage the index gives to relatively low levels of government spending. Indeed, all of the WVS "English Speaking" countries are in the Cato Freedom Index top ten, *except for the United States*, which doesn't even make the top twenty.

If you're searching for ideas about why the United States' has been sliding away from liberalizing self-expression values, and becoming less and less free, it makes sense to look at the things that differentiate the U.S. from its English speaking cousins. Significantly higher economic inequality is one of those things.

You'll have to **take more word for it** when I say that the mere fact of an increasing gap between the lowest and highest percentiles in the income distribution doesn't tell us anything very useful. Everything depends on the mechanisms that drive inequality. And I can't review all the mechanisms driving inequality here. I'll just say that the combined effects of technology and education are a big part of the story—much bigger than globalization. Declining manufacturing employment, which is without a doubt important to the question at hand, has *much* more to do with automation than offshoring. (And that's why Trump's strategy of punishing firms who move production abroad is more likely to hurt working-class Americans qua consumers more than it will help them qua workers.)

“Skill-biased technical change” is the economist's term for the fact that advances in technology increase the productivity, and thus the pay, of highly-educated workers more than less-educated workers. Because the U.S. system of primary education is incredibly variable in quality, and garbage on average, we've been unable to meet market demand for skilled workers, further driving up the wage premium for education, while leaving people in areas with ineffective schools struggling to get by without the sort of skills the labor market wants. Meanwhile, the minority of highly-educated Americans are becoming more and more heavily concentrated in cities, and have been enjoying steadily increasing incomes.

The increasing return to skills is one mechanism driving rising inequality. The increasing geographic clustering of the highly-skilled is a closely related but different mechanism.

The Great Divergence: Rich Cities Pulling Away from Everybody Else

The increasing concentration of “human capital”—people with the most economically valuable skills—has created a positive feedback economic loop in some places and a sort of death spiral in others. In his book *The New Geography of Jobs*, the economist Enrico Moretti calls this regional separation in educational level and productivity “the Great Divergence.”

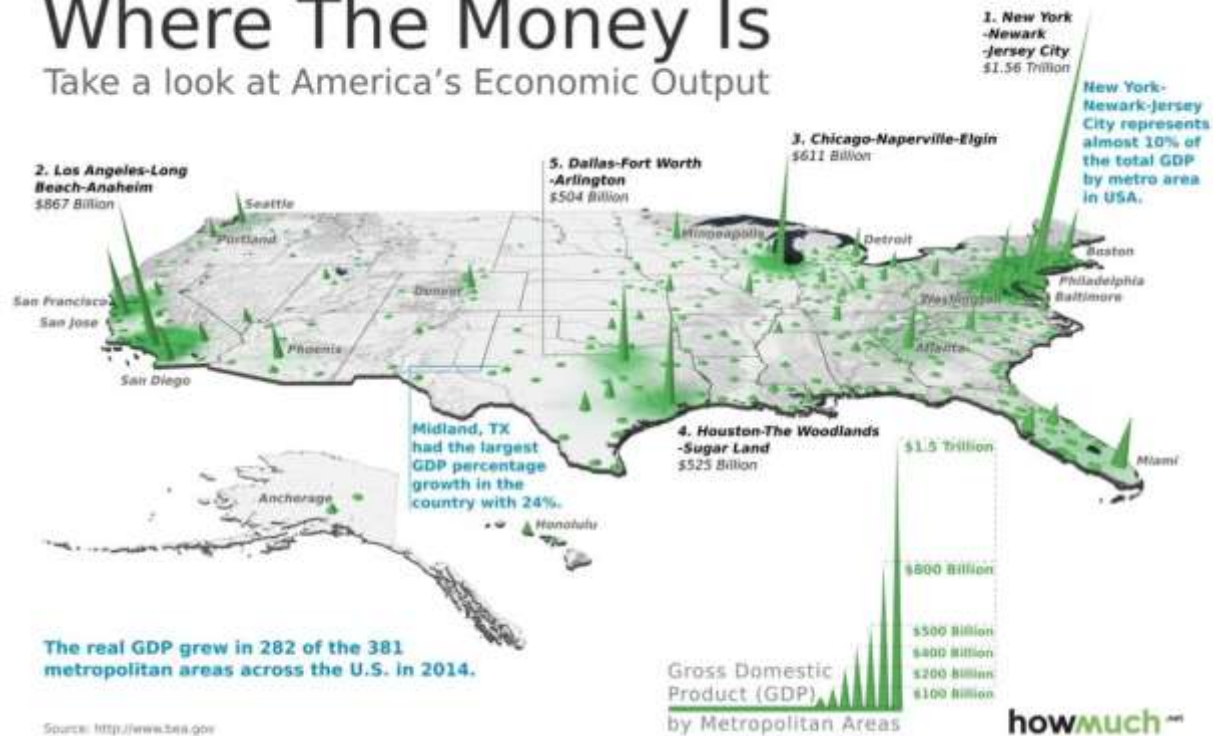
“A handful of cities with the ‘right’ industries and a solid base of human capital keep attracting good employers and offering high wages,” Moretti writes, “while those at the other extreme, cities with the ‘wrong’ industries and a limited human capital base, are stuck with dead-end jobs and low average wages.”

The prediction of the theory of post-materialist cultural change is that increasingly materially comfortable city-dwellers will be increasingly attracted to self-expression values and a secular-rational conception of normative authority. Conversely, those exposed to economic stagnation or decline are likely to move in the opposite direction.

It's important to really soak in the extent of the Great Divergence. Here's a helpful visualization of the vastly unequal relative regional contributions to America's economic output :

Where The Money Is

Take a look at America's Economic Output



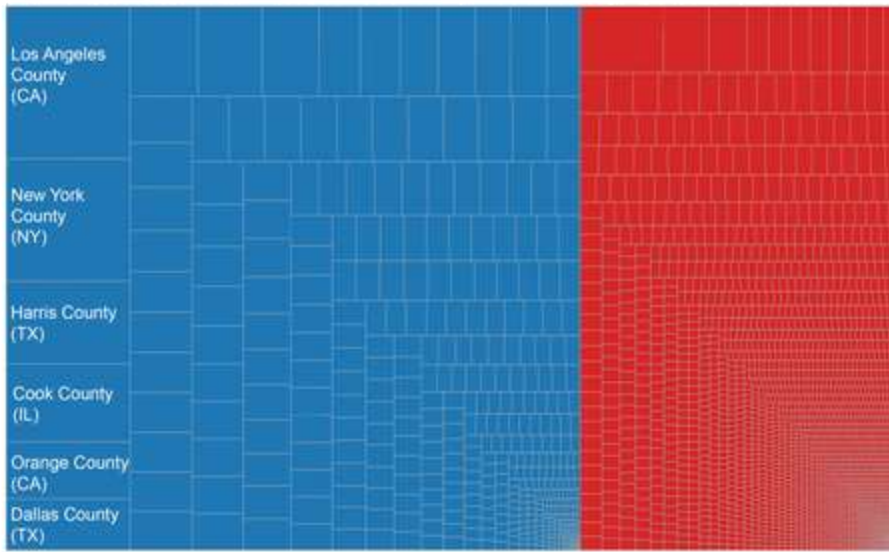
The geographic concentration of economic production has increased over the past fifteen years, due to the feedback between human capital concentration and the choices of high-productivity firms to locate in those places. As the *Economist* noted last March:

In 2001 the richest 50 cities and their surroundings produced 27% more per head than America as a whole. Today's richest cities make 34% more. Measured by total GDP, the decoupling is greater still, because prosperous cities are sucking in disproportionate numbers of urbanising Americans. Between 2010 and 2014 America's population grew by 3.1%; its cities, by 3.7%. But the 50 richest cities swelled by 9.2%.

It probably has not escaped you that low-density Trump country is not home to America's big economic winners.

Mark Muto and Sifan Lui at Brookings have **pointed out** that the Trump vs. Clinton population density divide really amounts to a high-output/low-output economic divide. With few exceptions, the counties responsible for a more than a trivial portion of American GDP preferred Clinton over Trump.

Candidates' shares of 2015 Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by county in the 2016 presidential election



The less-than-500 counties won by Hillary Clinton generated 64 percent of America's GDP in 2015

The more-than-2,600 counties won by Donald Trump generated 36 percent of America's GDP in 2015

Source: Brookings analysis of Moody's Analytics estimates.

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The growing gap in economic output between big cities and the rest of America implies that Republican-leaning counties account for a dwindling share of the national product. According to Muto and Lui, in the 2000 election, which also featured a split in the popular and electoral votes, Bush won 2397 counties, accounting for 46% of GDP, while Gore won 659 counties accounting for 54% of GDP. In the 2016 election, the general pattern repeats: the Republican candidate wins many many more counties responsible for a smaller share of American economic output, but the asymmetry has become even crazier. Clinton took just 472 counties, which account for 64% of GDP, while Trump took 2584, which account for just 36% of GDP. That's amazing.

We have to be a bit careful here about the rich/poor divide. Rich *states*, and especially rich *cities*, tend to tilt Democratic, but it remains true that rich *individuals* tend to tilt Republican. The preference of the relatively rich for the GOP seems to be dwindling, however. According to exit polls, Trump beat Clinton by just 1% among those making \$100,000 to \$250,000 and by 2% among those making more. It's likely that Trump did much better among high-earners in relatively conservative cities, but lost the rich vote in the richest cities, like his own.

It's also the case that income inequality is highest in the richest cities—the richest people there are *very* rich and the poor people are as poor as anywhere, but there are more of them. And incomes have been stagnant or declining at the bottom in a good number of big cities.

But I don't think cities are where we should expect to see the greatest effects of economic insecurity on the sort of moral culture the World Values Survey tracks. My guess is that the

aggregate shift toward relatively illiberal survival values is coming from heavily white, non-urban places. That is to say, I suspect cultural and moral polarization is being driven by the Great Divergence—by inequality *between* densely and sparsely populated regions—rather than by inequality *within* cities, where the gap between rich and poor is the widest. Here's why.

The Urban Poor and Working Classes Are Probably Liberalizing, Too

Poorer people in rich cities are likely to be first- or second-generation immigrants and/or people of color. Now, these groups tend to be relatively socially conservative in a number of issues, just as post-materialist theory predicts relatively poor people will tend to be. However, I think there's reason to believe that living in big rich cities will have a somewhat offsetting liberalizing influence on relatively disadvantaged city-dwellers.

First, the non-white urban poor and working classes especially benefit from liberal norms of racial and economic equality, particularly multicultural tolerance and inclusion.

Second, they tend to identify with the Democratic Party, which is the more reliable champion of the rights of immigrants and minorities, and favors public aid for the poor. As Jacob Levy noted in his insightful post yesterday, the position of the typical partisan voters is whatever the party's position happens to be. The Democratic Party platform is more and more determined by wealthy, highly-educated urban professionals with extremely secular-rational and self-expressive values. This exerts pressure on poorer Democrats toward more liberal positions than their material circumstances would predict. (The sensitivity of individual opinion to partisan affiliation is sometimes posed as an objection to post-materialist value change theory, but I think it's just a complication.)

Third, the values of well-educated, wealthy, city-dwelling professionals increasingly dominates the cultural and moral ethos of cities, and people tend to absorb the ambient culture.

Fourth, the rising tide in cities creates demand for services that raises *some* if not all boats. The wages of the typical worker with a high-school education rise with the percentage of the local population with a four-year college degree.

Fifth, the urban lower and working classes benefit in a number of less direct ways from the wealth of their cities. Rich cities are relatively *nice* and have been getting nicer. Crime is way down, there's good infrastructure, public transportation, accessible public-assistance programs, the availability of a whole host of public and commercial services, pleasant public spaces, decent if low-paying jobs in relatively attractive and friendly workplaces, and a generally upbeat, productive, forward-looking, non-despairing ethos.

These considerations, taken together, are why I'd wager that the values of the urban poor have recently moved a bit in a liberalizing, post-materialist direction, despite the fact that poverty has become worse in some big, rich cities. That is to say, to the extent that American moral culture is polarizing, I think that the less privileged denizens of cities are likely to be moving on average in the same direction, if not at the same rate, as their highly educated, well-to-do neighbors and Democratic Party coalition partners.

The Material Insecurity of Low-Density White America

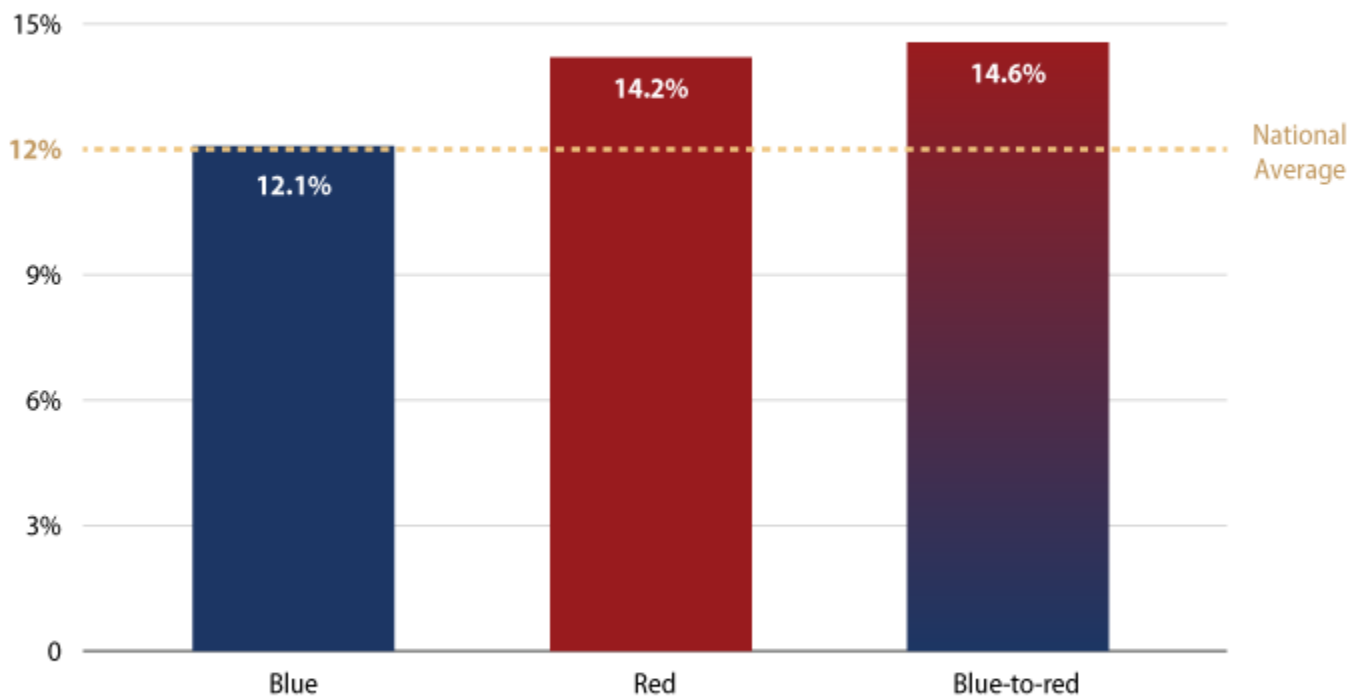
While the urban poor and working classes have benefited in a number of ways from the concentration of human capital and wealth in their cities, very little has trickled down to the rest of America. Much of the problem is that, as Moretti emphasizes, the “good jobs” are increasingly concentrated in big cities. This means that wage growth generally has been very low for the (mainly white) middle and lower income classes outside big urban centers. But there’s more to material security than income.

There’s also wealth. Americans tend to store their wealth in their houses. Much of the country still has not recovered from the housing crises. As Michela Zonta, Sarah Edelman, and Colin McArthur of the Center for American Progress observe, counties that shifted from Obama in 2012 to Trump in 2016 had unusually high rates of negative equity.

FIGURE 1

Housing markets are struggling in blue-to-red counties

Median negative equity rate



Note: Results are for the 2,395 counties for which 2016 2nd quarter Zillow data and preliminary election results are available. These represent nearly 80 percent of national counties.

Sources: CAP analysis of Zillow, “Negative Equity,” available at <http://www.zillow.com/research/data/> (last accessed November 2016); David Leip, “David Leip’s Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections,” available at <http://www.usaelectionatlas.org> (last accessed November 2016).



“This erosion of housing wealth,” they write, “means that a homeowner cannot draw on home equity to start a small business, send a child to college, handle a family emergency, or move to a more advantageous location. For homeowners, this can result not only in economic harm but also in a feeling that their way of life is slipping away.”

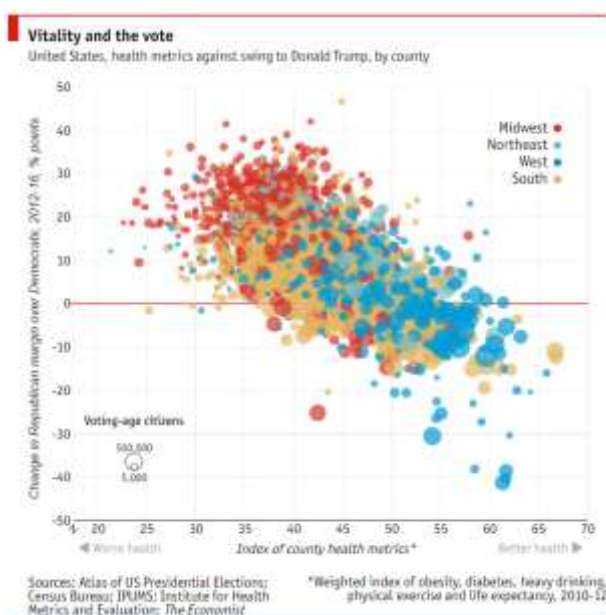
For those of us without rich parents, both income and wealth depend mainly on employment. But working age men in particular have been dropping out of the workforce at an alarming rate. According to the White House Council for Economic Advisors, the labor force participation rate for prime-age men decreased from 98% in 1954 to 88% last year. This is the second largest decrease among any of the OECD countries.

The explanation for this drop is a contested and extremely complicated story for another day. For now, let me just say that I think it has a lot to do with the huge *increase* in women's labor force participation and economic independence over this period, which has shifted power relations between men and women in a way that working-class men have found especially hard to adjust to. It's not *just* about decline in manufacturing employment and the lack of "good jobs" men happen to find suitably dignified, through it is *partly* about that.

In any event, increasing joblessness entails a demoralizing loss of status and social esteem, and that's likely related to Ann Case and Angus Deaton's alarming recent finding of

... a marked increase in the all-cause mortality of middle-aged white non-Hispanic men and women in the United States between 1999 and 2013. This change reversed decades of progress in mortality and was unique to the United States; no other rich country saw a similar turnaround. ... This increase for whites was largely accounted for by **increasing death rates from drug and alcohol poisonings, suicide, and chronic liver diseases and cirrhosis**. Although all education groups saw increases in mortality from suicide and poisonings, and an overall increase in external cause mortality, **those with less education saw the most marked increases**. [emphasis added]

The electoral political valence of these trends is clear. The higher the death rate from overdose and suicide in Rust Belt areas, the more Trump tended to outperform Romney. When it came to predicting Trump's gains over Romney, The Economist found that the only factor that could do better than an area's percentage of whites without college education was an index of public health metrics:



The Economist reports:

The two categories significantly overlap: counties with a large proportion of whites without a degree also tend to fare poorly when it comes to public health. However, even after controlling for race, education, age, sex, income, marital status, immigration and employment, these figures remain highly statistically significant. Holding all other factors constant—including the share of non-college whites—the better physical shape a county’s residents are in, the worse Mr Trump did relative to Mr Romney.

[...]

[W]hat the geographic numbers do show is that the specific subset of Mr Trump’s voters that won him the election—those in counties where he outperformed Mr Romney by large margins—live in communities that are literally dying.

There’s more evidence to support the idea that existential security in low-density America has been declining, but I think this is more than enough.

Provisional Bottom Line

The idea that an increasing sense of material precariousness can lead to cultural retreat from liberalizing “self-expression” values can help us understand why low-density white America turned out to support a populist leader with disturbingly illiberal tendencies. But this idea can also help us understand why our larger national culture seems to be growing apart in a way that has made it seem harder and harder to communicate constructively across the gap.

A shrinking number of counties is accounting for a rising proportion of America’s wealth. Partisan affiliation is breaking along this population/productivity divide in a way that suggests that America’s moral and political culture has been polarizing along this divide, as well. Given the specific counter-majoritarian mechanisms in the U.S. constitution, this is a recipe for political dominance of the less economically productive conservative white minority, who control most of the country’s territory, over the liberal multicultural majority who live in increasingly concentrated urban centers of wealth. To the extent that increasing economic security is liberalizing and stagnation and decline tend toward an illiberal, zero-sum survival mindset, this amounts to a recipe for the political imposition of relatively illiberal policy on an increasingly liberal and increasingly *economically* powerful cities. This is not a stable situation, and bodes ill for the future of American freedom.

I’ve kept this post focused on the sort of economic conditions that drive the advance and retreat of liberal cultural attitudes. I haven’t really talked at all about the way cultural and moral polarization affects the way we feel about and treat one another. But I think the cultural antagonisms generated by the polarizing material consequences of the Great Divergence have their own internal logic, which has led to a sense of winner-take-all culture war hostility that exacerbates the instability of America’s basic economic and political situation. I’ll explore the logic of our quasi-religious culture war dynamic, and some ideas for moderating the toxic ethos of winner-take-all mutual contempt, in a follow-up post.