Cracked Krystal Ball

Jonah Goldberg

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I think everyone has gotten a little exhausted with the debate over trade and tariffs — or maybe it's just me. I've certainly had my say. But sometimes someone says something so dumb that you feel compelled to reply. Enter Krystal Ball. Under the headline "I hate Trump, but I love these tariffs," the liberal activist* writes:

Republicans are supposed to be the party of free trade, so it isn't a complete surprise that they discovered a principle of some kind hidden in the wreckage of their party. Democrats, on the other hand, are so obsessed with opposing Trump at every turn that they can't even stop to think for a moment about what might be good for working-class people — the constituency that they are supposed to represent.

Before you go shouting about my macroeconomic illiteracy or the Smoot-Hawley tariffs of the 1930s, or, in the words of Paul Krugman, the "very salutary" effect of the world trading system, let me remind you of something. Donald Trump is president. And Donald Trump is president because we have gutted the working class of this country and had corporate America so co-opt the machinery of government that there is never a win for the blue-collar worker. Never.

Where to begin? If she had written that blue-collar workers haven't benefited *enough* or that that they "feel" like they never get a win, that would be one thing. But the idea that blue-collar workers *never* win because of our corrupt economic system is populist blather.

This sort of piffle is usually pegged to trends that begin in the early 1970s and is often associated with trade and globalization.

Well, since 1970, household income has risen in tandem with trade deficits.

The American family is more prosperous. The average American worker has a longer life expectancy, more leisure time, and a level of material prosperity that cannot be fully captured in economic statistics. In the 1970s, blue-collar workers, like all Americans, had a fraction of the consumer choices they have today. The environment, including the rivers and lakes used by many blue-collar workers, was much dirtier. Factories are safer, as are our cars. Spend 20 minutes poking around HumanProgress.org for all the good news you can stomach.

Part of the problem is that many of the benefits we've experienced over the last half century (or century or three centuries) are so diffused and democratic that they seem invisible to us. Meanwhile, the costs always seem concentrated. Certain industries and interests have suffered. Candlemakers got the shaft with the invention of the light bulb, but the net benefits were enormous. Free trade increases the net benefits but it concentrates the costs. Ball claims to understand this — she just thinks it doesn't matter because blue-collar workers need to have some wins.

The funniest thing about this claim is that Ball is throwing the bulk of the Democratic party's legacy under the bus in order to support a policy she admits is bad on the merits. After all, if blue-collar workers *never* win, then everything the Democrats have done in the name of workers for the last 50 years was meaningless wheel-spinning. It's not my job to defend every Democrat-led initiative aimed at workers over the last five decades. But maybe it should be Ball's?

Indeed, maybe if liberals such as Ball had not spent the last few decades insisting that the plight of working-class Americans was an unending tale of misery and woe at the hands of elites, fewer Democrats would have been inclined to vote for Donald Trump in the first place. After all, Trump simply parroted vast swathes of Democrat rhetoric and promised he would be better at fixing the problems. I mean, if liberals are going to insist that Democratic Congresses and presidents *never* deliver wins for working-class voters, why should those voters support the Democrats? In other words, when irresponsible politicians constantly tell Americans they are getting screwed by the system while filling them with class resentment, there's the danger that voters will believe them.