



ERPI 2018 International Conference  
Authoritarian Populism and the Rural World

**Conference Paper No.41**

**Boomtown Poison: Political Culture Under the Shadow of  
Lead Poisoning in West Texas**

*Riad Azar*

17-18 March 2018

International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague, Netherlands

**Organized jointly by:**



**In collaboration with:**



**Disclaimer:** The views expressed here are solely those of the authors in their private capacity and do not in any way represent the views of organizers and funders of the conference.

**March, 2018**

Check regular updates via ERPI website: [www.iss.nl/erpi](http://www.iss.nl/erpi)



# Boomtown Poison: Political Culture Under the Shadow of Lead Poisoning in West Texas

Riad Azar

## Abstract

*How do citizens reconcile conservative politics with the daily consequences of state inaction? How does the lack of access to basic services, such as clean water, shape particular forms of political ideology? Based on 40 in-depth interviews, three months of participant observation, and historical and archival research, this paper examines how political culture is produced and contested in a small working-class community in rural Boomtown, TX. An oil boomtown of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the population of Boomtown has steadily declined over the last one hundred years. Save for a small boom in the 1970s, the crumbling infrastructure, lack of jobs, and contaminated water containing twenty-eight times the federal limit of lead are consequences of socioeconomic transformations that are not unique to Boomtown, but are characteristic of rural America. Rather than seek to argue that residents are beholden to an ideological contradiction and/or false consciousness, this project seeks to understand a “paradox” (Katz 2001): how support for authoritarian populism emerges from rural dispossession and is legitimized through everyday practice. By paying particular attention to not only what residents say, but also what they do (Jerolmack and Khan 2014), I argue that political ideology must be understood as a lived experience rooted in the routines, decisions, and practices of everyday life. While some residents resist the evidence and continue to consume the water, many residents purchase bottled water for consumption, cooking, and bathing. By observing and analyzing how residents engage with a contaminated water supply, I argue towards a moral economy of rural dispossession which provides ideological support for populist authoritarianism.*

## Introduction

How do citizens reconcile their conservative politics with the daily consequences of state inaction? How does the lack of access to basic services, such as clean water, shape particular forms of political ideology? How do space and place mediate thoughts and feelings about politics? The 2016 election of Donald J. Trump to the presidency of the United States shook the world. What's more is that his election was only one in a chain of elections that have brought many to question the entire international order: Brexit, the rise of Marine Le Pen, the rise of far-right governments in Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia, etc. The global rise of populist authoritarianism (Scones et al. 2017) eerily reflects what social theorist Jürgen Habermas would call a legitimation crisis (Habermas 1975), or cultural sociologist Ann Swidler an "unsettled culture" (Swidler 1986:282), where culture has a powerful and independent role in producing new modes of action.

## Literature Review

Many recent studies have focused on the role of space and place in how people think and feel about politics. Two monographs in particular focus on the contemporary United States. The first, Katherine Cramer's *The Politics of Resentment* (2016), introduces the argument for rural consciousness, a political consciousness rooted in place. Rural consciousness, an extension of the conceptual and theoretical literature on group consciousness (Miller et al. 1981), places the discourse of outsider resentment at its center, showing how resentment shapes and frames political identity and ideology. The second, Arlie Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land* (2016), describes the emotional work needed to turn space into place. Place and placemaking in this text are immaterial practice; the beliefs and emotions that Hochschild's respondents communicate lay the groundwork for how they conceptualize place and their role within it.

Through a qualitative case study of Boomtown, TX<sup>1</sup>, a small town in West Texas poisoned by contaminated water containing twenty-eight times the federal limit of lead, this paper seeks to extend the discussion of the role of place within the formation of political ideology. I argue towards an understanding of ideology as interactional, constructed within the confines of space and place and in conversation with the objects and institutions that are the demonstrable and tangible products of rural dispossession, economic depression, and decline. Through this, I hope to shed light on how the material practices of place and placemaking – as they relate to Boomtown's contaminated water – produce a specific within-group consciousness, a consciousness that is not shared by those who do not partake in those placemaking practices and who do not suffer from the contaminated water. I will illustrate how political ideologies, moral economies, and senses of place, are shaped and mediated by the water.

## Boomtown, TX

Iris, an 83-year-old white woman living alone on the edge of Boomtown, reminisces on her memories of Main Street.

“We had a Montgomery company. JC Penny. There was Joseph's department store. We had two jewelry stores. Had a big bus station. Down here was a Greyhound Bus and all come in, and uh... We had two, three, four grocery stores, I think it was. When I was a kid, we only got to come to town once a week, maybe, on a Saturday...”

I find her stories striking. Today, Main Street in Boomtown is a collection of dilapidated buildings, fading For Sale signs, and makeshift Police tape. The red Thurber Brick roads, characteristic of the old West, are left unfilled with gaps that expose the dirt underneath.

---

<sup>1</sup> All respondent and place names have been changed for confidentiality

Two months after my first visit to Boomtown, one of the larger buildings on Main Street caved in and collapsed. Through the broken windows, a large pool of snapped cement, corroded wood, and old electrical wires capped the trees and weeds growing up through the cracks in the concrete floor.



Main St., Boomtown, TX. June 2017.

Iris's house is a collection of mnemonics. She sits on a faded La-Z Boy across from the television set, behind a wooden fold out table where her half-filled crossword rests. This is where she spends most of her day, eating "TV dinners or something that I stick in the microwave. I don't eat that much, and I never want nothin' to eat." The walls on all sides are filled, top to bottom, with pieces of her life: photo albums, a worn American flag, magazines and newspapers clippings, and dusty boxes. Even her home, which she has lived in since 1975, is built on the leftovers of the town.

"This place here, it used to be the old teepee oiltown...back in the old days...they say there was little shacks put up everywhere, and there was a whole mess of tents...there was so many people here."

Her grandfather, who she calls "Daddy", arrived in 1920. "Mama", her grandmother, arrived the year after. When I ask her why her grandparents made the move, she says, "The oil field I guess. It was something, it was better work." Iris can't remember when the oil companies started shutting down their operations, "I wasn't even thought of at that time, I don't think."

After the oil companies closed, Iris tells me, Daddy moved out to the countryside. Outside the city limits of Boomtown, he practiced subsistence farming raising peanuts, plums, peaches, apricots, grapes, pears, and apples. In the garden along the side of the house, the family grew red beans, green beans, and black-eyed peas. Aside from a few trips alone "on a bus or train out there [to California], and I was just... five or six years old", Iris never saw her biological mother. Her story is interrupted by her grandson, Branden. "I'm fixing on headed to Snyder [another oil town], gotta make that money." Iris laughs as they hug and say goodbye.

Iris's favorite memories of Boomtown are from her childhood, riding into town on Daddy's flatbed truck on a Saturday afternoon. "I got to get me some orange soda pop, and one of those packages of peanuts where I put in my soda pop... That was my big deal when we got to come to town." While her memories of the past are bountiful, she has trouble recognizing today's Boomtown.

“the younger generation, they’ve had more the drugs and uhm... and they don’t... (sighs)... a lot of ‘em, they would rather go out and steal then go to work. And spend more time doing harder work, saving something...I’ve seen a lot of that.”

When I ask Iris for an example, she takes a long pause.

“There’s a family across the street here. I hate to talk about my neighbors, but they’re Hispanics...One of the boys and this girl, they’ve lived together for I don’t remember how many years. They’ve had five kids, well, their parents live there too. And of course, everybody else lives there too but, he didn’t have to get out and work too... His mother does all kinds of jobs.”

-----

“It’s sad when you’re playing home and the other team, from an hour away, brings a bigger crowd.” Iris’s 39-year-old adopted son, Wesley, laments on the state of his town. The discovery of oil in Boomtown a century ago brought commerce, prosperity, and people. In those days, Boomtown’s population skyrocketed to a high of approximately 40,000 residents. Reminders of the glory days are inscribed on the streets of the town, where Boomtown is unique from other areas characterized by rural poverty. The usual signifiers of trailer parks and mobile homes are difficult to come by. Old houses, leftovers from the boom, dot every street – shuttered, abandoned, and collapsing.

The dispossession lives in their bodies. On a sunny day in July, Clint and I are sitting on rickety steel bench in Memorial Park when he tells me,

“You can look at somebody in the face and see, you see your family...I had some of the old guys think I’m my dad [laughs]. ‘You look just like your dad Johnny, look just like him.’ And I do the same thing he did. He drove an oil truck, right here in town...And I look like him and I drive an oil truck here in town, and a lot of the old timers think, you know, ‘that’s [Johnny], can’t believe he’s been driving that oil truck all these years’ [laughs]. [pause] My dad died years ago.”

Clint was born in Boomtown in 1956. He left in 1974, right after high school, working oil truck jobs in West Texas, Colorado, Kansas, and Wyoming. “I got into it because after high school they had a boom out in West Texas, and they were needing workers. The pay was as good as a desk would make at that time after you completed college.” He returned to Boomtown in 2004.

“I wouldn’t move back here, except for I already had a job when I moved back here, and I wanted to move back here, and I found a job doing the same thing I was doing out in West Texas, I could do it here, where I wanted to live. They had a brand-new truck they were putting here that needed 3 drivers for it, and doing the same thing I was doing out there, except it was a chance to come back home...”

When I ask him about his childhood, he replies:

“It was just a happier time, you know...everybody had nice houses, everybody had nice lawns, everybody had enough money to live off of. The mother could actually raise the children while the father worked. You know, we didn’t get into this ‘we need money so bad both parents have to work to makes ends meet.’...You start looking at the wages, and you start looking at the cost of living, the wages have not kept pace with the cost of living, it’s like, you work harder than you ever had and you have less than you ever had. You know, we’re poor now, even if we’re employed. [laughs]...My parents would look at a family now...and see a husband and wife both working, and they’d be shaking their head like, ‘I feel sorry for those people, they’re so poor that both of them have to work.’ [laughs] You know. Struggling with the bills, and they’re like, ‘man

they don't get to ever have vacations, they don't ever get to take trips', you know. 'They don't get to sit around with their friends and drink tea out of pitchers.'”

Boomtown's local institutions are also struggling. Churches, the backbones of rural American society, struggle to retain membership. I talk this over with Nina, the local librarian, sitting in the couches next to the window of the Boomtown library.

“The church in Boomtown's really, I mean it's diminished, and then you look around our church in Middletown [neighboring town], and you see all these Boomtown people, and you think if all these Boomtown people were at church in Boomtown, you know, the church here would be bigger.”

Many residents, who are avid churchgoers, informed me they have long moved on to neighboring towns for their weekly mass.

Boomtown is also a food desert. After realizing that talk of food and water were not the jokes they were couched in (Clint: “If it wasn't for Jodie, I'd starve!”), the interview transcripts and field notes lit up in patterns of thirst and hunger. A few minutes after our conversation about the declining church population at the Boomtown library, Nina tells me,

“I think I see a little bit more realism now, because of the people in my life. The people that walk through [the library door] and they have these issues and they need this. Luke came in and said 'I'm gonna starve to death in this town.' Well, you're not going to starve today! You know...I think it's different to be here than to be at church on Sunday, it's different to be here.”

Nina's library has one book shelf which showcases 5 rows of popular fiction. It is clear that she serves many other local needs. She continues,

“Luke was here for a purpose, and he felt like *he* had lost his last job, his own fault, because he hadn't called in. I mean *he* felt recrimination, and um, [pause] and he wasted his last groceries, his last noodles or whatever, [pause] with Boomtown water.”

-----

Boomtown has a water problem. It is complex and layered. At best, it is confusing. At worst, it is sadistically punishing to Boomtown's most vulnerable. In Nina's words, “the water's great! but by the time it gets here...” She is referring to the water that arrives in Boomtown from the county supply. Documents show that the water supply is tested as it leaves the plant at the county water treatment facility and passes government regulations. According to Clint, “They've been saying the waters bad because the guys that laid the lines used such crappy materials.” Cracks, leaks, and breaks in the main line allow dirt and other contagions to seep into the water supply. When these happen, the city sends out a boil notice, letters sent to all the residents of town instructing them to boil water in order to kill the bacteria. Nina tells me, “the water lines, they break out here from time to time, and you go out and look at them.” She stops and looks down. I ask her what she sees. “Old. Old. Cast Iron.”

“So, we filled up the water, woke up the next morning, and have five dead fish.” Courtney first discovered something was off when the water began affecting her animals. “That's the water our donkeys are drinking, that's the water we are bathing in, that's the water we brush our teeth with and these fish died like that, can't be good. So, it's scary.”

Clint found out in bits and pieces. “At times, you could physically smell the water...and the rust, I mean, I've seen, you just get a glass of water and it's red with the rust color in it.” With no one to warn her, Iris got the news on her own. “I could go in there and take a shower, and my eyes burn like the mist...that damn water in my eyes.” Her suspicions were confirmed when she started receiving boil

notices from the city. “they send you big ol’ page after page after page of stuff and of course half of it I don’t understand.”

Aside from individual effects, the water crisis effects the community and its institutions. According to Courtney, “there were several times when they have to flush the water and everything so we are without water in the town.” The local school has yet to develop a contingency plan. She continues,

“There’ve been a couple of times where they just shut down the school, but I guess it became so frequent... the kids would come home and say, ‘I didn’t have water, we didn’t have water today.’ You could bring bottled water, but, I noticed, we went up there to pick up the kids, the water fountain had trash bags and taped just so that no one used them.”

“When my kids come home, I say, please don’t drink the water.” Nina walks me through how she negotiates with her son-in-law. “We have boil notices often, and a lot of people don’t know it, you know because how do you keep up, but within like five days there was like 3 breaks in the lines...” But boiling cannot fix all the problems; the water crisis has an individualized component.

When I first arrived in Boomtown and began hearing about the water, I coded my interviews and field notes for cases of *toxic uncertainty* (Auyero and Swistun 2008). After 40 interviews, I began to notice a different pattern. “When your house tests really high with lead, granted it could be your pipes...” Debra, Clint’s wife, mentions. “Uh... it’s got uh... what do they call it? I think it’s got some lead in it...” Iris says. The frequent leaks and breaks in the Boomtown municipal pipes allow dirt and bacteria to come in to the water pipes, which affects all homes on the municipal water supply. The household variation exists because the older houses in town were all built with lead pipes. If those pipes have not been replaced, those households may have lead-contamination *in addition to* the bacteria.

Jordan moved to Boomtown from North Texas in the 1980s. He and his wife, Melinda, bought a fixer-upper and rebuilt the whole structure, one floorboard at a time. “I think most of the larger [municipal] pipes have never been lead...I mean the lead pipes were the one inch, two inch, you know, local on-site kind of thing.” When they were rebuilding their house, they were careful to replace all of the pipes with brand new PVC, and no soldering. I ask Jordan what the old pipes looked like:

“Oh Jesus Christ, they were absolutely terrible. I mean, the water lines were the, galvanized and some of them were cooper and the sewer lines had the old, there was an asbestos kind of fiber pipe that they used for like, back in the 30s. And the clay tile, and then the cast iron, and then some PVC. You’d get a little section of PVC...When I was taking the old stuff out [water and gas pipes], it crumbled in my hand. I mean, that’s an explosion waiting to happen.”

It became clear that, while the municipal pipes could be prone to increased levels of lead due to corrosion of the cast iron and the cast iron sockets used to repair leaks, danger also existed within the home. This creates a complex variation of risk that began to map onto other existing social categories and divisions. Those who do not replace their pipes, like Jordan and Melinda, have their lead risk exponentially amplified. This amplification disproportionately affects the poorest of Boomtown’s residents.

The dispossession experienced by Boomtown’s residents is rooted in place through the water crisis. Kasey connects the dots between the water and city politics:

The water’s the biggest deal here in this town I think. The City, The city hall, period. It’s just the, it’s just a problem here. The waters too high, we can’t drink it, it’s ridiculous. Our water bill runs one hundred and twenty five to one hundred and fifty a month.

But many are acutely aware that the problem is just the tip of the iceberg. From the Debra’s perspective, “they are working on it. And you can’t take something that’s broken, to the extent that something like Boomtown is broken, and expect it to be fixed in a month.”



For Clint, the water crisis is symbolic of the many challenges rural America faces:

“These lines have been here in the ground 50 years, they figured in 50 years we'd be living in floating cities and driving flying cars, they had no idea we'd be drinking rusty water out of the pipes that our grandfathers laid, you know! I mean, that's what's going on.”

While Boomtown's residents live through their decline, they try to keep it up, and love their town.

Nina expresses a sentiment I heard consistently, “Well I care about my town and I don't wanna, I don't wanna, um, I wanna be honest, but, not *too* honest.” Ideas against badmouthing the town were common, with many comparing Boomtown to an annoying younger brother. “He drives you crazy, but if someone else starts beating on him, you got a problem.”

Perhaps the biggest challenge for Boomtown residents, which galvanized their love of the town, politics, and the water crisis, was the failure to open the municipal pool, a historic and symbolic treasure for the community. The water crisis forced the bills up and drained the city's resources. “This was the first year [2017] that it ain't ever been open, I mean, it is a really big deal” Nina whispers.

In the spring of 2016, the city announced that they would not be able to afford opening the pool for the summer season. The residents of Boomtown organized, attending city council meetings and taking an active role in civic life. People were “working together to get it open, and regular people like me” Nina stresses. ‘Regular’ people “would jumble together \$200, or \$100, if they can make it work.” Eventually, the pool was able to open for two months of the season on a reduced schedule. This year, however, things took a different turn.

“Our city manager's trying, trying to, you know, make ends meet. I mean, if you're broke, and in a hole, you quit digging. You don't keep making, you know, your situation worse” Nina explained to me. The “people power” that opened the pool proved to be insufficient when the season arrived in 2017. “I think we had last year to see, the lay of the land, you know. How difficult it was, how expensive it was, and what a burden it was, and how it's only like a two-month thing.” Nina takes a long pause and concludes her story. “Don't have any money...Hope doesn't fill a swimming pool, you can't fill the swimming pool with hope. It takes money. It takes water. It takes fixing the leaks. It takes [pauses], and it's a big pool...” The pool continues to haunt her.

“I can say I'm sad all day long. I'm sad, I don't like it. I want the kids to have it, I love it to hear the kids scream, I love to hear them jumping in. I can hear it through the windows. I can hear them going off the diving board and screaming, and I like it.”

### **The Moral Economy of Water**

I began to see nuances in how citizens understood the Boomtown water crisis, how they talked about the costs of the crisis, and the strategies they employed in their everyday life to navigate it. In tracing out the patterns of these nuances, I analyze their experiences through the concept of the *moral economy*. As theorized by historian E. P. Thompson (1971), a moral economy is a social structure operating in the background of grievances, and organizes those grievances “within a popular consensus as to what were legitimate and what were illegitimate practices...This in its turn was grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations...” (79) Within this moral economy, Boomtown residents express and rationalize their grievances. The water crisis forms a “keyhole issue” (Hochschild 2016) through which we can understand both rural dispossession and the background in which residents' grievances emerge, as well as the norms and obligations they impose on themselves and other players in the social and political field. Key to this moral economy are questions around who is to blame for their suffering and how they imagine they could fix their situation. Here we begin to see two different sets of responses: between natives and outsiders, everyday folks and city employees, the poor and the middle class, and Trump voters and Clinton voters. In what follows, I sketch the differences and particularities in these two moral economies.

Debra, a 35-year-old white woman, has an interesting perspective on Boomtown. She grew up a few miles away in Middletown, and knew of Boomtown's reputation as she was growing up. "[It was] a Po-dunk town full of a bunch of drug addicts and alcoholics" she says. But after moving to Boomtown in 2005 when she married Clint, her perspective changed. "Then you learn and you get to meet like, the other mothers." Moving in with Clint gave Debra an opportunity she never imagined. "I'd never owned a home, and Clint made sure I understood that it's not his house it's *ours*, and that makes things different...suddenly I'm a homeowner and I'm in a whole other social class, a whole other group of people."

Debra's story demonstrates the material basis of place making, a shift grounded in the ownership of real assets, that morphed the way that she understood her community and her place within it. But then the water came. "I mean you could see that there's definitely something there. Like if you pour water in a clear cup and you can see stuff floating around in it, and you're like, 'I'm not going to drink that.'" Her experience became shrouded in cynicism. "Boomtown, just [sigh], I don't know if they can't afford it or they just choose to spend their money otherwise, like buying brand new police vehicles right off the lot." Eventually, her perspective became all the more real as she began to take on the place making practices that define Boomtown natives: a fear of the outsider. Debra's story gives us a clue into the complex moral economy that is constructed around the experience of the water crisis. Mediated by her cynicism of the city's institutions, her frustration directs itself outwards.

But not everyone lived through the experience of dispossession. Some sought out Boomtown for a quiet country life away from the city. Jordan and Melinda, white and 70 and 71 years old respectively, moved to Boomtown with hopes of a job.

"Well first of all we had a Nissan Datsun B210, which was the best car. It was the cheapest car anyone could buy [laughs], that's what we were driving. It was about 10 years old, and it, it overheated coming up the hill, so we limped into town. We came into town hot, sweaty, with a change of clothes for the interview."

Jordan had just finished his PhD in Biology and was interviewing for a position at the local community college. When I asked him what his first impressions of Boomtown were, he tells me a story from his job interview. "[The Dean] was looking for something positive to say about Boomtown, and about the job. And he said, 'um, um, let's see. Free Parking?'"

Jordan and Melinda were fulfilling a lifelong dream; building their own house. "When I called City Hall to ask about the code, they said, 'What code?'" They purchased a dilapidated shotgun style home, former housing for oil workers, and renovated floorboard by floorboard. "One of the raptors at the very front was signed 1919" Jordan says. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the shifts in the American economy, Jordan and Melinda both cast their votes for Clinton. Their house is unaffected by the water crisis – as pointed out previously, they changed their pipes.

Based on a demographic survey that I passed out after the interviews, those who come from outside are more likely to have a guaranteed job, a stable income, and less extreme water problems. Therefore, Boomtown's water is structured *and* structuring. It is *structured* in the sense that the recipients of the most toxic water are those who do not have the finances to renovate their property – to fix the lead pipes in their old homes. It is *structuring* in how it affects their moral economy: who is to blame, and what they think about people who are suffering from lead water.

Aside from the health effects of the lead and bacteria, the financial burden of the water crisis and its avoidance are devastating to those on a low income. Boomtown residents believe that their water bills have been increasing in order to finance the constant repair of the municipal pipes. Speaking about her co-worker, Nina says, "Water bills 153 bucks and he's on fixed income, that's a whole lot of money." Echoing the devastating bills, Kasey says, "And how's people 'sposed to live 'n six hundred or seven hundred dollars a month? It's impossible. The water bills a hundred and fifty." Living on a fixed

income, paying the water bill is felt on the dinner table. According to Iris, “I’ve got my social security and retirement that, it’s uh... it’s what I get. It’s 19 sumthin a month, and then I have to pay the bills and buy some groceries, and that’s about it.” Debra speaks to the precarity of balancing on the poverty line,

“then you work and you make just enough money that you can’t get Medicaid and food stamps but not enough money to pay the bills and have food. I mean, it’s a real thing. When you fall between the cracks, it happens. More often than not around here.”

Residents spoke of water bills between \$100 and \$300 a month, for water they cannot use. Some claim that they still use the water for bathing, which I find devastating based on my personal experience. From my field notes:

I use the bathroom and turn on the water pump to flush. The water that comes out stinks so heavily of ammonia, much stronger than the kitchen sink, that I vomit in my mouth and begin to gag. I get myself out of the bathroom and try and take a few gasps of fresh air to calm my stomach. I didn’t manage to get out soon enough before leaving a trail of vomit and mucus on my t-shirt. I head to the Loves truck stop to wash myself with soap and pick up a bottle of water.

And this does not include the cost of buying bottled water. Residents spoke forcefully about the additional \$50 to \$150 a month they would spend for drinkable water. When Courtney found out about the water crisis, “we just bought bottled water, and did not drink [from the tap].” According to Debra, “Oh we pay about \$200/month in water. For bottled water.” Nina invested in a more permanent solution, but still does not trust it. Speaking about her new refrigerator, “It’s got these really expensive filters, so I will drink the water, and I will take the ice from my refrigerator, but with my kids home, you know, I always have bottled water.”

### **Political belief and exposure to lead**

The moral economy produced by those suffering from the *stratified distribution of the water crisis* does not blame Democrats, directly. No resident spoke in such blunt terms. However, the boundary making that I found between insiders and outsiders, regular folks and city employees, and the poor and the middle class, pointed towards something.

Jonah and Loretta, a 64 and 72-year-old white couple, met online and married in 2004. Jonah is from Los Angeles and Loretta is a Texas native, hailing from Lubbock. When Loretta moved out to California to live with Jonah, she hated it. “The climate was fine, most of the people were OK. But our houses were so close together we could hear our neighbors. I’m sorry, I’m from Texas, we have a whole lot of nothing between you and somebody else.” When they decided to move out to Texas together, Loretta laughed at Jonah, as they were taking in the “whole lot of nothingness” from inside the windows of their U-Haul.

They moved in for the space. Jonah laughs that he bought a building downtown with cash, where he moved in his collection of old radios. He spends his time “in the workshop”, fiddling away with his various gadgets. His workshop is in one of the crumbling buildings off of Main Street.

Loretta tells me, “We get out here and we find out right away that, people here are just, strange. You see. And I mean, I’m used to small towns, and you know, people like that. But this...” I sit with them at the local diner, the only restaurant in town, and ask for an example. Jonah interjects, “I have a new mission in life now, every time somebody says something referring to our ex-president as ‘that n\*\*\*\*\* in the White House’, I says ‘you can’t even get that wrong, he’s a mulatto!’ [laughing]” Loretta has learned to not be so forceful with her opinions, “I learned right away to keep my mouth shut, because I don’t want my house burned down or my dogs shot.”

Strangely, Jonah is a registered Republican. When I ask him about this, he says, “I don't vote that way a lot cause the ones that they got are nothing like the ones I signed up for 40 years ago.” When I ask for an example, “40 years ago if they had somebody like Ted Cruz open his mouth on the Senate floor the way he does now, they'da taken him out back and beaten him to death.” Both Jonah and Loretta voted for Clinton, and have voted Democrat since Ronald Reagan.

“There's just a level of stupidity here that there just wasn't somewhere else, you know, and I honestly figured it out” Jonah explains to me, clinking as he spoons the creamer into his pale white coffee mug. He goes on to name three. The first are the “dopeheads...crack critters that look like they'd had a hard life.” The second are the “rich...there's about 15 or 20 people that own about 90% of the money in this town...they don't pay taxes...they don't give a shit about nothing, especially downtown.” Lastly, “there's the majority of the rest and all they wanna do is do this: 'Oh it's not 1950 anymore! Oh God, it's not 1950 anymore!' [in a mocking voice, then stern] It's never going to be 1950 anymore!” Loretta jumps in with glee, “And you gotta lotta this: 'It's their fault! It's not my fault! I'm an innocent party!'...they always gotta point the finger at somebody else.”

I ask them if they know about the water crisis in town. Jonah responds in a manner suggesting he's having a conversation with another resident of Boomtown:

“Here's your science stupid. Here's an example. Every once in a while, somebody starts pissing and moaning about, 'the toilet looks like nobody flushed it' or 'the water tastes like crap, I can't even shower in this water, what am I paying for?' And this seems to me the common rallying cry in this town. And if you ask anybody in the city, like the City Manager, the Mayor and the Water Department, they all say the same thing. 'You need to talk to the County Water Supply District. They're selling us garbage water.' Because it couldn't possibly be *their* fault.”

When I ask them if they have had any problems with their water, Jonah speaks bluntly. “We've been here 8 years, and with one exception, we've had crystal clear water the whole time. Doesn't smell funny, doesn't taste funny, doesn't look funny.”

The boundaries constructed between insiders and outsiders, reflecting partisan affiliation, go both ways. During my 57-mile ride to the grocery store, Tamela sighed when I told her I live in Austin. I asked her what she thought about the city. “You know, it's full of *those* people, ‘Oh, when I lived in Germmmannyyyyy’” she said in a mocking tone. “I'm thinking, you didn't live there, you just went on a yay-cay-tion...Jesus.”

The city workers deny the water crisis because of state neglect. The Democrats, on the other hand, deny the crisis because of their social position. They are unconsciously reinforcing what regular folks who suffer from the water view as an unjust, elitist, and criminal power structure, furthering the insider-outsider binary. Rural resentment (Cramer 2016) found its way into the discourses of the residents I spoke to, but rather than speaking about an urban other somewhere outside of confines of Boomtown, they spoke in concrete terms about the strangers in *their* land (Hochschild 2016). Reminiscing about growing up in the countryside, Clint laments:

Clint: We had a little bit of acreage back there, we didn't own the land, but back then they didn't, nobody *owned* the land. It was like, you could, you're free to roam, and that's something that has changed. Now everybody's so protective of their property, you walk on the plot and they'll wanna throw you in jail.

I: Does that happen often?

Clint: Yea. It's so bad, everybody's putting up game fences, and it's, I think it's because the city, city people moving out to the country and buying the property. Cause people right here selling out, dying off, it's, you're getting an influx of city people and they're very protective of

their property out here that they put the game fences up. There's No Trespassing signs everywhere.

None of the Boomtown residents explicitly blamed Democrats – few of them even identified with a political party – and very rarely were they forthcoming with their political views. Aside from a handful of occasions, politics *as* politics would only come up when the question of voting behavior was asked explicitly. Strikingly, the insider-outsider dichotomy plays out even among those who once voted Democratic. While Democratic voters from outside remained Democratic, Democratic voters native to Boomtown crossed the aisle to vote for Trump. Iris explains, “It was to not vote for Hillary. And I did vote for her husband, I did vote for Bill Clinton. And Bill Clinton is a likeable person, he is likeable. I liked him. I even *forgave* him.” Wesley, who comes from a family of “lifelong Democrats”, told us his father would “roll over in his grave if he knew I voted for Trump.”

## Conclusion

Through the ethnographic scenes of Boomtown, TX portrayed in this paper, I argue that Boomtown residents construct a specific group consciousness and sense of place based on their relationship with Boomtown’s water. While all residents are at risk of bacterial infection from the water during line breaks, only some residents experience the lead poisoning caused by the old pipes within individuals’ homes. The stratified distribution of the water crisis is reflected within residents’ discourses about themselves, their town, and their ideological opponents. It also maps onto existing social divisions within the town: insiders and outsiders, and the poor and the middle class. These social divisions, in turn, reflect partisan divides and individual voting behavior in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. As outsiders who belong to the middle and upper classes are able to renovate their homes and replace lead pipes, insiders and the poor are more likely to have lead poisoned water pumped into their homes. These differences in social position and lived experience lay the roots for the material determinants of ideology. The consequence of this, as shown through the stories of Jordan, Melinda, Jonah, and Loretta, is a denial of suffering; *they* must be lying or do not understand. For Iris, Clint, Debra, and Tamela, it is a profound mistrust and deep suspicion of the outsider. For both groups, politics and political culture are meditated by the water.

## References

- Auyero, Javier and Debora Swistun. 2008. “The Social Production of Toxic Uncertainty.” *American Sociological Review* 73(3):357–79.
- Cramer, Katherine. 2016. *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1975. *Legitimation Crisis*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 2016. *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. New Press, The.
- Katz, Jack. 2001. “From How to Why: On Luminous Description and Causal Inference in Ethnography (Part I).” *Ethnography* 2(4):443–73.
- Miller, Arthur H., Patricia Gurin, Gerald Gurin, and Oksana Malanchuk. 1981. “Group Consciousness and Political Participation.” *American Journal of Political Science* 25(3):494–511.
- Scones, Ian et al. 2017. “Emancipatory Rural Politics: Confronting Authoritarian Populism.” *The Journal of Peasant Studies*.
- Swidler, Ann. 1986. “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies.” *American Sociological Review* 51(2):273–86.
- Thompson, E. P. 1971. “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century.” *Past & Present* (50):76–136.

ERPI 2018 International Conference  
Authoritarian Populism and the  
Rural World

---

17-18 March 2018  
International Institute of Social Studies (ISS)  
The Hague, Netherlands



## About the Author

**Riad Azar** is a doctoral student in Sociology at the University of Texas at Austin, where he is a fellow at the Urban Ethnography Lab. He holds a MSc in Political Sociology from the London School of Economics and Political Science, and a BA in Political Science from William Paterson University of New Jersey. His research interests include political and economic sociology, informal governance, and organized crime. Riad sits on the editorial boards of *New Politics: A Journal of Socialist Thought* and *Logos: A Journal of Modern Society and Culture*.

**The Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI)** is a new initiative focused on understanding the contemporary moment and building alternatives. New exclusionary politics are generating deepening inequalities, jobless 'growth', climate chaos, and social division. The ERPI is focused on the social and political processes in rural spaces that are generating alternatives to regressive, authoritarian politics. We aim to provoke debate and action among scholars, activists, practitioners and policymakers from across the world that are concerned about the current situation, and hopeful about alternatives.

For more information see: <http://www.iss.nl/erpi>  
or email: [emancipatoryruralpolitics@gmail.com](mailto:emancipatoryruralpolitics@gmail.com)