

TRANSCRIPT
HOW WE GOT HERE
EP 4 – Class

[TAPE] WAR FILM MUSIC

NARRATOR: This is my hometown. It's called Youngstown and it's in the state of Ohio near the Pennsylvania boundary.

NARRATOR: In Youngstown, we make steel and talk steel.

DALE MAHARIDGE In 1944, the U.S. government made a film about Youngstown because it was so important for the war.

[TAPE] NARRATOR: Look down any street in town. You'll see the mills at the end of it. There are 25 miles of them along the Mahoning river and today they're busy day and night. Every eight hours the shifts change 15,000 men to the shift...

There were three shifts. That meant 45,000 workers. Some of them were women despite what the narrator says.

[TAPE] AMBI ROARING

NARRATOR:....This is the ore. It looks like dirt, but in a few weeks it'll become part of a ship, a tank or a gun. And in peacetime, an office building, a bridge or a dam structure...

Youngstown Sheet and Tube was one of the big companies churning out steel to defeat the Nazis and Japan. It was part of building the prosperity that followed the war. Then suddenly everything changed.

[TAPE] DAN CORDTZ: On September 19, 1977, Sheet and Tube... announced that it was closing down most of its Campbell plant....

DAN CORDTZ: In Youngstown...they have a name for the day disaster struck. They call it Black Monday.

More of those 25 miles of steel mills began shutting down. In 1982, they dynamited some of the blast furnaces.

[TAPE] WORKER: Three...Two...One... Fire!

Sound of blast furnace towers exploding: BOOM BOOM.

The explosions that day have come to symbolize the decline of industrial America. In the Youngstown area alone, 50,000 high-paid steel working jobs vanished.

I wrote a book about it. It inspired Bruce Springsteen to write a song.

[TAPE] [BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN](#): They built a blast furnace here along the shore
And they made the cannon balls that helped the Union win the war
Here in Youngstown, here in Youngstown
My sweet Jenny I'm sinking down....

I'm Dale Maharidge. I'm a professor at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. I've written about the working class for 40 years, in books and magazine articles.

This is *How We Got Here*, a podcast that takes a step back to look at the pressing issues facing journalists today--race, class, immigration, gender. The issues we cover aren't snapshots.

They're more like a movie that starts in the past.

And rolls forward to today.

As journalists, we like to say we're writing the first draft of history. But if we don't know our own history, we run the risk of misinterpreting what we see.

What we hear. Of not being able to connect the dots.

In this episode I'm going to explore class in America. Or at least, try to give you a little background.

This is Episode 4, Class

Class – a word most Americans don't like to think about.

Unless it has the word “middle” in front of it.

Youngstown was full of middle class people. Immigrants from Europe and later Black Americans from the South who came for jobs in the steel mills.

They bought into what to them was the American Dream.

[TAPE] [WKBN REPORTER](#): Youngstown was the only city of its size to have two department stores inside its city limits. The Valley had the highest rate of home ownership in the nation.

Houses covered the hills along the Mahoning River valley. Then in the 1980s they started burning--an average of one a day.

Now forests have grown where once smokestacks spat flames into the sky.

Meadows exist where once there were whole neighborhoods.

[4:29] When I was back there a few years ago, a long-time resident took me on a tour.

[TAPE] [MAHARIDGE](#): There's a manhole cover missing back there. That was scrapped out.

Drug use is rampant. People were scavenging to get money for drugs.

[TAPE] **RESIDENT:** Actually one of my cars got burned up back there.
MAHARIDGE: Hmm, yeah.

We came to an abandoned factory where his grandfather worked. There was just a creepy sound of wind banging rusting metal.
The steel mills were all gone. Their closing marked the beginning of a growing sense of despair among white working class people.
And it turned to rage.

[TAPE] **JUDY WOODRUFF:** Chaos at the Capitol a mob supporting and encouraged by President Trump stormed the US Capitol breaking windows and pushing through police with shots fired inside...

The quiet of the abandoned plant -- and that riot at the U.S. Capitol-- they're connected.

[TAPE] **TRUMP SUPPORTER 1:** “What are we supposed to do, okay? The supreme court’s not helping us....No one’s helping us. Only us can help us.”
VICE REPORTER: “Do you think people are angry today?”
TRUMP SUPPORTER 2: Absolutely people are angry. And you can feel it. You can feel the rage, the madness.” [5:54]

Dr. Sherry Linkon is a professor at Georgetown University. Before that she was co-director of the Center for Working-Class Studies at Youngstown State University.

Dr. Linkon has written two books about Youngstown and the working class. She joins me now.

I wish we were doing this under that beautiful oak tree in your backyard.

SHERRY LINKON Wouldn't that be nice? [Laughs]

DM Yeah...I love that oak tree.

SL The sound wouldn't be as good, but it's a beautiful tree.

DM We'd have a good time though. [Laughs]

SL We would. We'll have a good time this time too.

DM Oh, we always have a good time talking about class.

SL That's right.

DM Ever since I've known you I've talked about class. So we're going to take a, let's start by going way back in time...

SL Okay.

DM ...to the late 70s and early 80s. And kind of frame the scene then. How were people reacting to the mills shutting down back there, starting with Black Monday 1977 and into the early 80s when I started coming there. What was going on?

SL You know, I think there was a lot of shock. There had been some signs that the industry was in trouble but people really didn't believe it was going to shut down and it happened very suddenly. I mean people literally went to work on Monday and were told that their jobs were ending...

[TAPE] [SHARON LOVEJOY, CBS MARCH MAGAZINE](#): We talked to Becky Dominic and her sister Margaret Nicalek, whose husbands worked in the mill.

[BECKY DOMINIC](#): We have this good girlfriend that we grew up with since before well maybe around first grade. And she — and I just was crying really there were just no words to be said you know. And she says, her husband says now I know what that smog meant to you. Yeah that's my bread and butter. You know, that's everything.

...And people didn't know how to deal with that. They didn't know what to expect. Youngstown had been a steel town for 70, 80 years by that time.

[TAPE] [LOVEJOY](#): Frank was brought into the mill by his father-in-law Bob Dill, who had been brought in by his uncle back in 1945. Everyone thought the mill would go on forever. Today, only son Jim continues his job in the mill. And at the age of 57, after 32 years of service, Bob has been laid off too.

There's a scholar named Bob Bruno who grew up on the southside of Youngstown. And he talks about his father saying that, you know, the mills were these huge, solid structures and they had always been there. And the idea that that was going to go away was just hard for people to believe. And I think that was true for a lot of individuals but it was true for the community as a whole. Nobody knew what to make of this.

DM Right, the contract was broken. It was a contract. That's how I felt about it. And the political scene. Okay this is Ronald Reagan's first term in office. How did things play out politically back then?

SL Well politically I think the most important thing contributing to that was one a sense that people like Reagan had said multiple times, now this, this kind of thing wouldn't happen on my watch. You know, Reagan was elected in 1980. And the first shutdowns in Youngstown were in 1977. Reagan campaigned in part by coming to Youngstown and standing in front of one of the shuttered steel mills and saying had I been president, this would not have happened.

[TAPE] [PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN](#): Then in a rather unorganized fashion Reagan spared a few minutes to answer some questions from the press, calling the closed mill a ghost town. We just had a drive through a ghost town. And if ever there was an example of the falseness of the philosophy that has governed this country for too long...that somehow in Washington they can run everything....

And it was probably the first of a long series of statements, not quite promises, but statements made by various politicians saying: I would do better...

[TAPE] [PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON](#): Your hard work and your enduring values have been a shining example to all America.

Who never did.

[TAPE] [CLINTON](#): Now those same virtues and values will bring this region back and carry America into the 21st century, still the world's strongest force for prosperity and peace and freedom, still a place where the American dream is alive for every single American who is willing to work to achieve it.

And that was the beginning of a long political slide here into what John Russo and I have called the politics of resentment. That people really were, frankly, pissed off, that the government wasn't doing more to help them. That other institutions weren't doing more to help them. And the idea was, nobody gets who we are. Nobody understands why we matter. We gave our heart and soul to this country. You know, Springsteen sings, in words that I think he borrowed from you, Dale, and you know, in words he borrowed from Joe Marshall, we built the tanks and guns that won this country's wars.

[TAPE] [SPRINGSTEEN](#): These mills they built the tanks and bombs
That won this country's wars
We sent our sons to Korea and Vietnam
Now we're wondering what they were dyin' for
Here in Youngstown
Here in Youngstown

There was that sense that Youngstown had been a place that mattered, that steel workers were people who mattered. And over and over, they got messages that said, Yeah, they really didn't. And people got angry.

DM How did the press cover the initial shutdowns, did they see the anger? Or was there, was there failings? What do you, how do you feel about that?

SL You know, I think they saw the anger, I think they mostly focused on loss, however. Youngstown became the poster child for deindustrialization. It became the place that journalists over and over came to say, this is what the changes that are going on in our economy — this is what it looks like. And a lot of people are losing out.

So at first, it was really a story of sympathy, and a story of trying to make sense of what this might mean. You know, the local press did a particularly good job of capturing the social loss. Within the first few days after the shutdown was announced, they recognized that Youngstown's identity was about to change and nobody knew where that was going.

For national media that was less clear. The idea that making steel was a way of life, not just a way of making a living — I don't think they quite got that.

[TAPE] [JIM LEHRER](#): Robin, the hard facts and figures on what's happening in the steel industry go like this: profits, as measured by the rate of return on investment, have plummeted -- from 6.3 percent in 1974 down to 3.6 percent in 1976 and to 1.4 percent for the first six months of this year.

But they were interested in what was happening in Youngstown because it was the first place where something this big had happened. And they knew fairly quickly that it was going to happen in Detroit and in Pittsburgh, and in Cleveland and in Buffalo.

[TAPE] [ROBIN MACNEIL](#): If you live in Youngstown, Ohio, Johnstown, Pennsylvania, or Worcester, Massachusetts, you don't need to be told that one of this country's major basic industries is in deep trouble. The steel industry has recently announced the closing of plants in those towns, laying off thousands of workers.

But Youngstown was kind of the first the beginning of that story, and therefore became the symbol of that loss.

DM And how did the media do later in the 80s and 90s, when things really got entrenched?

SL Uh, they did pretty badly. They really made it a story about failure. And by the end of the 1980s, they were beginning to frame questions about Youngstown, you know, for a while, maybe mid-80s, they came and they

asked questions like, Are things getting better yet? Have people solved this? Has Youngstown been reborn?

And when that didn't happen, a decade, maybe 15 years after the mills started to shut down, then they started to ask questions like what's wrong with Youngstown? Why aren't you people getting your act together? What is failing here? And they found all kinds of things to blame for the problems: they found political corruption, they found a long history of organized crime, they found a lot of people who, you know, weren't quite sure at first whether they should get any kind of retraining and what to do with that, a lot of the retraining that was offered wasn't very good.

And then they were hearing a lot of messages from economists and commentators saying things like, this is just part of a natural cycle of destruction. And we will have a new, a new birth in places like this new kinds of jobs are going to come in, it's all going to be okay if only you will go to college. If only you will just have some patience. If only you will do a little bit of that proverbial American, pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. And when that didn't happen, they had to find something to blame, and they blamed it on the weaknesses of Youngstown.

DM Wow. And what would have helped if reporters had framed the issue in terms of class, we have to remember while Youngstown is sinking down, the 1% are getting richer. I don't, I didn't see people connecting those dots very much.

SL No, not at all. There was a built-in assumption that the interests of the corporations and the decisions they were making were inevitable, that they didn't really have much choice. And there was very little discussion about who was benefiting from that other than workers in places where work paid less...

[TAPE] [YOUNGSTOWN STEEL UNION MEMBER](#): US Steel has chosen not to keep up with steel production. They bought steel from Japan, they've invested money in Japanese steel, our pension funds have been invested in that...

...So workers in Mexico, workers in China, even workers in the southern US; they were the ones who were gaining. And so the understanding of class was about pitting workers against each other.

[TAPE] [YOUNGSTOWN STEEL UNION MEMBER](#):...The rate of profit has been greater elsewhere. So that's where they've gone and they don't care about the workers. They don't care about making steel.

But not about what work meant to working class people. Very little about the dignity of the working class, very little about the social compact that had existed between the owners and developers of the steel mills here and the

workers who moved here from all around the world to come work in those mills.

[TAPE] [BILL DILL](#): Now I'm, I'm, I don't have the security, the thoughts or the future that would look good to me. My life is stopped at 57. My earnings is done. Thirty-two years of my life is gone. And now I must retire at 57.

All of that got erased. And the only story of class was about the working class is passe. The working class is dying. The working class needs to reinvent itself. You know, so that 10, 15 years later — I tell the story in one of my books that I met someone at a cocktail party and when she found out that I studied the working class, she looked at me said, 'Do we still have a working class?'

And the assumption was that if you weren't an industrial worker, you weren't working class. And so part of what happened is the story, part of the story that got missed was how the working class was changing as the work that the working class did was changing.

DM Did you see a lot of blame... finger pointing towards that towards immigrants?

SL You know not, I don't think in the 1980s. I think that came later. In part, I think in the 1980s, many of the people working in the mills were close enough to their parents' generation of immigrants that when they thought about immigrants they didn't think about people coming to work in factories from Mexico.

Now, they might have thought about the guy they worked next to whose family came from Mexico in 1926. And they thought about their parents and grandparents who came from Poland and Ireland and Germany and wherever. So immigrants were not the problem.

Workers in other countries were the problem. But it wasn't so much about who was coming here. It was about the jobs leaving here to go to where those cheaper workers work.

DM Right. And of course the bashing would happen, probably I guess, in the second and third generation: the sons and daughters and grandchildren of the steel workers.

SL Right, and that would happen in part because we had more and more a national narrative about immigrants coming and taking jobs here.

[TAPE] [PETE WILSON AD NARRATOR](#): They keep coming. Two million illegal immigrants in California. The federal government won't stop them, at the border, yet requires us to pay billions to take care of them.

And that started in the western US with agricultural workers and spread as things like meatpacking became jobs that were...they'd always been done by immigrants. But they were more and more done by immigrants. This is a little bit less true for industrial labor and a little bit less true in a place like Youngstown.

DM Right, I covered Governor Pete Wilson in California in the 90s. So I had an eye witness seat to the start of all of that.

[TAPE] [GOVERNOR PETE WILSON](#): Californians who work hard pay taxes and obey the laws. I'm suing to force the federal government to control the border. And I'm working to deny state services to illegal immigrants. Enough is enough.

One thing that gets me and I don't understand it, and maybe you have some insight, I came to Youngstown over the years, again, and again and again. It was sort of my bellwether place that I kept visiting. And you didn't have to be a genius to see the anger rising in people there. But why did the East Coast media misstep? What was going on there?

SL Well, I would say that class was going on in part. And what I mean by that is that people who were college educated, who were living in communities where the majority of work was white collar, office work, professional work, looked at people like the residents of Youngstown as throwbacks to an earlier time, who were refusing to adapt to the way the world was. And it was very easy to blame them. It was very easy to see them as different from the quote unquote, mainstream and that something was wrong with them. It goes back to that story that says, you know, if Youngstown isn't recovering after all of this, something must be wrong with those people. Not understanding things like the limited access that people had to education. Or why someone in a working class family would decide to stay in Youngstown, instead of moving to Houston to follow the energy and its industry. It was just a, we have a class divide not only between the 1% and the workers, but between what John Russo would call if he were here the coastals. The coastal elite who were kind of the upper middle class, upper, the professional class. And increasingly, that includes journalists. And for them, this middle of the country, just, it just didn't make sense. They didn't know how to tell that story. These people weren't like them. And so they didn't know how to represent them.

DM How do journalists get out of their comfort zone? The trope is go to the bar, the blue collar bar. But how do you how do you avoid that? And why should you avoid that? And what should journalists be doing today?

SL Oh, so I'm not sure that not going to the bar is the answer. The bar is not a terrible place. The problem is that the bar has, has two limitations. One is bars are often, not always racially segregated. So you reinforce the story of

the white working class. Bars are also often gender segregated. So you get the story of white working class men. And when you go to the bar, you usually come in with the story in your head that you already know you want to tell. You know what you're looking for.

You're looking for the angry, laid-off, former steel worker who is drowning his sorrows in multiple beers. As opposed to trying to figure out well, where is the working class in Youngstown now? What are their jobs like? What are their lives like? Why would somebody stay here?

And for that, you might have to go to church. You might have to go to school...

At the Center for Working Class Studies where I was the co-director for 17 years we were doing all of this research and talking about all these things. So reporters would come through Youngstown all the time wanting to tell that story. I don't think I once had a reporter come and say 'can I come talk to your students?' They didn't want my students. They wanted my students' parents, and they wanted my students' fathers. You know, it was as if they came with a story already in mind.

So to do that differently, you have to look at workers in Youngstown now. And you have to look at younger generations. Not saying that you shouldn't be talking to the laid off steel workers. But the idea, the assumption that the only place you find them is in the bar is where the problem lies. And the assumption that the only way to understand the working class is to understand former industrial workers is also the problem.

DM One of your books is about the second and third generation children of the steel workers. You taught these people. How should reporters be covering this generation now?

SL I would love to see them talking to this generation about their jobs, to talk to them about what is it like to work at Walmart?

What is it like to have gotten a college degree and now have the only job that you can get be a manager at a Kohl's? What is it like to go to school after working 40 hours a week in a bar or restaurant?

You know, you go to the bar, that trope about going to the bar is about talking to the patrons, not to the people who work there. I think if reporters would talk to them, they'd hear two things that are very interesting. One is they would hear that a lot of younger people heard all the stories of what happened to industrial workers. They went to college to try to avoid that and they're still struggling.

And they feel betrayed by the promise that if you do everything right, in quotes, everything will turn out okay. They are frustrated that their jobs don't provide the kinds of solidarity, security, sense of meaning that their fathers and grandfathers had in the jobs that they did.

You know, that they talk about, you know, the kind of shame of doing a job that involves stocking grocery shelves, where you're out in public, doing work that isn't particularly doesn't seem particularly physical or particularly

hard, there's no skill to it, and you're not producing something that has meaning.

I think if they would talk to younger people about their work, they'd have a much better understanding of how the resentments and anger of the working class are not just about the loss of industrial jobs. It's about the poor quality of the jobs that's replaced those jobs.

DM And the rise of Trump, this is part of the reason journalists missed Trump doing so well in places like Youngstown — its environs. In the city proper he didn't do so well. But in the greater Mahoning Valley area, he did very well. Why did they miss that again, yet again?

SL Well, and I'm not sure they missed it entirely. I mean, I think there were plenty of stories that said, in places like Youngstown, Trump is doing better than people like us might have expected. Why is that?
And so there were all these stories about let's try to understand that old white working class. The problem is that that story became the only way to understand the rise of Trump. And they missed the fact that there were quite a lot of people who were actually doing okay themselves, but we're worried about their kids, were worried about changes in the economy, were worried about the cultural shifts of immigration and greater attention to racial justice and felt like people like them were being ignored in American culture. They made it so narrowly a story about the economic hardships of these places and I think that actually missed the complexity of the support for Trump, which is not just people who are still angry 40 years later that the steel mills shut down. Or those —honestly, I think it's relatively few people in Youngstown who fully believed Trump when he said, I'm going to restart those steel mills. Don't sell your house, there's going to be great jobs here.

[TAPE] [PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP](#): Let me tell you folks in Ohio, in this area: don't sell your house. Don't sell, do not sell it. We're going to get those values up. We're going to get those jobs coming back. And we're going to fill up those factories or rip them down and build brand new ones. So it's going to happen.

I'm not sure a lot of people actually believed that practically. But Trump spoke to their resentment and their anger.

And that wasn't unique to the former industrial working class. That moved on up the line to lots of people who were actually pretty comfortable, and that part of the story got missed almost entirely.

DM Another thing I see is, a lot of reporters see the white working class as monolithic and it's not. If you're in Youngstown and you're a former steel worker, ergo you will vote for Donald Trump. That's not true. And how do reporters avoid getting into that trap of typecasting the white working class?

SL Well, I hate to say it the easiest way is also the hardest way, which is you have to talk to more people. So you need you need a wider range of folks. You need to not go to one bar, need to not go to one classroom. Because if you go to the corner bar and you get the group of people who are sitting there talking, they're likely to be friends and be talking to each other all the time and have the same views. Really what I want them to do is, and this will sound kind of crazy, I want them to go play golf at the public golf course in our neighborhood where my husband goes multiple times a week every summer and plays with a group of people ranging from their 40s to their 80s. All white men, largely Italian American. I think a couple of them might once have been industrial workers, but others owned stores and were teachers and worked in all kinds of different jobs. And among them, they hold a wide range of views. And to see them, listen to them debate with each other, you know, what's the right way? Who do we believe? Who do we trust? You get reminded that you can't just talk about any group, you can't talk about the white working class, you can't talk about the white middle class, you can't talk about Black and Brown people as if they were all the same. In all of those groups, there's going to be variation. But the other thing is: much as I love that reporters keep coming to Youngstown because I think Youngstown matters, if you really want to get that story don't just come to places like Youngstown. Go to Columbus, which in Ohio is the city that is thriving the most. And talk to the people who've moved there for all kinds of up-and-coming jobs. some of which are white collar and are doing pretty well, but a lot of them are, they're not even blue collar, they're sort of T-shirt collar. They're the orderlies at hospitals, they're the janitors who are cleaning up buildings at night. They're all kinds of people doing working class jobs who get missed. But that's a much more diverse range of the working class. If you really want to understand the working class, stop imagining that they're just one group and get out and find them in all of the different places where they are.

DM The Bureau of Labor Statistics had a study a few weeks ago that came out the bottom two quintiles of Americans in 10 years, will be making less money than they do now.

The third quintile will be about static. So 60% of Americans are going to be doing worse, or at best, where they are now in 10 years. And that leads to the next question. How does this gonna play out politically in 2022 and 2024? And how should journalists be covering working class issues regarding those elections?

SL I think that's a great question but I think it begins with a problematic premise. Which is that this is something that's going to happen in the next 10 years, not that this is something that's been happening for the last 25 years. And so my answer would be we already saw what happens with that. Because the people in the lower quintiles have been shifting increasingly to lower wage

jobs, to jobs that offer less security, jobs that are much more likely to be gig jobs, contingent jobs, temporary jobs. This has been happening for a while. And that's part of what fed the Trump revolution.

[TAPE] [WOLF BLITZER](#): We have a major projection right now, Donald Trump will take Ohio. A big relief for Donald Trump. No Republican has ever won the White House without Ohio.

[ELLIE MERRITT](#): What changed was that Trump turned several of our northern counties red...like Laraine county and Ashtabula county. Those are counties that haven't been red since Regan in the 1908s.

[RICK REITZEL](#): Coffee drinkers in both the Home Slice Bakery and Cafe and Choffey's in downtown Delaware were more than willing to say why they voted for Trump.

[ROBIN DOWNING](#): We're tired of the way things are and we want things to change.

A lot of people who are angry about that not only the people in that lower 60%, but people who were in the middle of that, and maybe even on the bottom of the top 40%, who looked at all of that and were scared and said something is changing here and our economy is in trouble, we have to find a better way. We have to start protecting American jobs. We have to start fighting back against global trade.

So I think we've been seeing that. I think the question for 2022 and 2024 will be about how the recovery from the pandemic gets shaped. And how much the Biden's administration and the Democrats will be able to do federally and what will happen on the state level that might begin to push back on that. And some of that is about things like the minimum wage, some of it is about union drives. You know, Amazon, the Amazon workers in Bessemer lost the vote a month or so ago, but that doesn't mean that that kind of battle is over....

[TAPE] [TIM STENOVEC](#): We begin with a vote in a small Alabama town that could have had huge implications for Amazon's business model. We learned late this morning that workers at an Amazon warehouse have overwhelmingly rejected the effort to unionize.

[JENNIFER BATES, AMAZON UNION ORGANIZER](#): To me, a lot of the companies expect you to sign a piece of paper stating that you will work for me, and you will go home when I tell you, you will go to break when I tell you and you will take what I give you.

[BATES](#): So there's a power of oppression that has been placed on working people. And for a long time, even those who have spoken out they have not been heard.

And so part of it is about what happens with all of that. And part of it is about how we tell the stories. And that goes back to journalists.

And the idea that, you know, how do you, how do you document what these policies do? So I would love to see stories that look at Amazon workers and follow them over some time and see what happens. Amazon continues to grow. They hired a couple of hundred thousand people last year. While everything else was tanking, Amazon kept growing.

So let's see more and more about what those jobs look like and how that shapes people's politics. Let's find out what happens if an infrastructure bill can get passed, and there are more jobs doing construction, what does that do for industrial work in the working class? Does that in fact create good jobs? And will people be able to trace the source of those jobs? Will that begin to turn around what has been a 40 year long public narrative that says the way you grow the economy is by cutting taxes of the wealthiest people, because they will then create better jobs. We know that doesn't work. But people keep buying it.

DM Have the capital riots on January 6, how did they play into all of this? You know, mostly guys — there were some women there —but those guys, are they part of this rage? Or is this, is that just a really outlining group?

SL Well, so they're definitely part of the rage, but they're not necessarily part of the working class rage.

I think it's important to make the distinction between the rage that exists in this country that is in part about political discourse, in part about the question of who can you trust, in part about the idea that government doesn't actually work well for people, in part about a kind of personality cult around Donald Trump and very much around a sense that, you know, one of the common lines in all of this is that we are losing our country.

And that's very much I think, a white, mostly male —but not entirely male — sense that yeah they're not wrong. The demographics are changing. The politics are changing. The culture is changing. And they're seeing all of that shifting. So that rage comes from a whole lot of things.

It's clearly shaping everything that happens going forward. And it there are many working class people who've been caught up in that, but they're not alone. You know, some of the reports on the capital riots make very clear that many, if not the majority of people who were part of that insurrection were not working class. They certainly were not the laid off steel workers or laid off auto workers or whatever people have gotten laid off from recently.

They were a different group of people who are angry, not primarily about the economy. They're angry about representation. They're angry about culture.

Many of them, the thing that surprised me the most was some reports I read that suggested that many of them were angry about things like mask rules and distancing rules and all of the things that were done during the pandemic to try to keep people safe. So they feel an affront to their liberty. And they've defined this sense of liberty as I should be able to do whatever I want.

So I think it's all of that. It's a more complicated class story than I think has been told, however.

DM Yes, a lot of the people who were at that riot were, they flew in and they stayed at the Hyatt so they were not....

SL And some of them flew in on private jets. I mean...This is not this is not the working class that I know.

DM Exactly, so I think that some of the reporters are misconstruing that. It was, it's a different story.

And then finally, you know, what we do it matters. You're an academic and you're a writer. You've written two books about this and you've written stories.

But I wonder, sometimes I wonder, I've been doing this for 40 years now. I was naive enough at the start to believe that, Oh, wow. If I write about this, the government will do something and there'll be change. And naive child that I was, here I am 40 years later still hoping for change. Is what we do, does it matter?

SL So like you, I really want to believe that it matters. I want to believe it matters because I think that stories matter and getting to the human side of all of it matters.

I think the more that these things become visible, the more people understand the complexity of the issues, that they understand that people are often harmed by economics, by public policy, by the politics of all of it, despite working hard, despite being good human beings.

You and I are both fans of *Nomadland*, which I think was a great book and a great film for capturing the stories of a lot of people who never thought that they would be struggling to get by who never thought that they would find themselves without a permanent home, who never thought they'd find themselves working at Amazon on a seasonal basis or whatever they were doing. For whom the world changed dramatically.

Some of those people went in one direction politically, others of those people went in another direction politically and I'm not sure how they voted matters. But the more that we are aware of those stories, the better off we all are.

Whether that translates into the government will pay attention and come up with a solution, I'm not sure.

We need more and more of these kinds of stories.

DM Yes, Jessica Bruders "*Nomadland*" is a really great case in point.

I have friends on the left who don't like the movie because it wasn't strong enough. It wasn't strident enough. And I tried to tell them no, just by showing these women's stories, by showing your know Fern the main character with Linda Mae, the real life character and Swankie. We really see what happens to people.

When Bruce Springsteen sings about the workers of Youngstown, we, you know, he reached millions where I only reached thousands or tens of thousands.

Bruce Springsteen condensed my entire book into 260 words. You don't have to read the book. Just listen to his song Youngstown and you'll get the book.

[TAPE] [SPRINGSTEEN](#): From the Monongahela valley
To the Mesabi iron range
To the coal mines of Appalachia
The story's always the same

I have to believe we're having an impact. And I'm not going to stop. I don't think you're going to stop either.

SL Nope, we're committed.

DM ... until I can't when they carry me out feet first, then I'll stop.

SL I'm hoping that won't happen for a really long time.

DM Likewise for all of us.

Well, once again, Sherry, delightful talking with you, and I'll keep you posted and I'm sure I'll be seeing you under that oak tree again sooner than later, I hope.

SL I'm looking forward to that.

DM *How We Got Here* is a production of the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism.

This episode was created by me, Dale Maharidge. Joanne Faryon is our producer. Meg Britton-Mehlish and Allie Pitchon are our associate producers. Sound design by Peter Leonard. Additional audio engineering by Jim Bittel and A.J. Mangone. Winnie O'Kelley is our executive producer and Dean of Academic Affairs here at the J-school.

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