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Introduction

Locating populism in the United States is a tricky business because American political culture is pervaded by populistic elements. Populism’s foremost defining characteristic, its anti-elitism – its sense that some set of ‘genuine’ people are suffering at the hands of a (variously defined) set of economic, political, or cultural elites – is to be found throughout the country’s history, across its political spectrum, and in every campaign season (Judis 2016; Kazin 1998). Still, there are historical moments in which movements or individuals projecting more explicitly populist signals resonate with a sufficient base of citizen concerns to win public acclaim and even electoral success. Ours is quite clearly one of those moments, with Donald Trump, on the political right, and Bernie Sanders, on the left, regularly referred to as populists (e.g. Oliver and Rahn 2016).

We also are in the midst of a ‘disinformation order’ (Bennett and Livingston 2018), in which core societal institutions for describing and discussing reality are faltering (Waisbord 2018). ‘Fake news’, misinformation, and disinformation from a variety of sources are widely circulated in social media (and some news media).

What do these phenomena have to do with one another? In this chapter, we describe the political and informational logics of the contemporary ‘populist zeitgeist’ (Mudde 2004) as it exists in the United States. We begin with a brief historical review demonstrating that tendencies towards populism and susceptibility to misinformation are long-standing – even characteristic – aspects of American political culture. We then turn to the populism and misinformation of the current day, which we argue are well understood as extensions of those older patterns, shaped by the contemporary political-economic context and the twenty-first-century information environment.
A brief terminological note: we are wary of too prescriptively drawing the borders of populism (Judis 2016). Generally, our conception of populism is stylistic (cf. Moffitt 2016), understanding populism as a way of representing politics that emphasises ‘the people’ in opposition to elites, and that views the people as a repository of deep moral righteousness yet, in some way, under the subordination of self-serving elites. This rougher conception enables us to connect to several related themes in American political culture.

‘Jealousies of power’ in the founding of the republic

Discussions of populism have a tendency to view the American populist movement of the 1890s as populism’s genesis moment. But populism’s central concerns, its scepticism and hostility towards elites, and its suspicions about elites’ efforts to subvert the people’s will can be found even deeper in the American political psyche.

This becomes visible when we move away from the specific terminology of populism and consider related habits of thought. Looking back to the rhetorical heroes of the American Revolution, Jessen (2019) notes that ‘an abiding suspicion of power was implanted in American political culture well in advance of the Revolution’ (685). He adopts Alexander Hamilton’s phrase ‘jealousy of power’ to capture this manner of instinctive scepticism, anti-elitism, and anti-authority thinking.

This innate anti-elitism was, early on, set against a vision associated with Jefferson, who imagined democracy to rest with citizens who are ‘sensible, hard-working, independent folk secure in their possession of land, free of the corruptions of urban poverty and cynicism, free of dependence on a self-indulgent aristocracy of birth, responsible to the common good’ (Bailyn 1993, 503). This notion of American democracy as grounded in the wisdom of common, productive folk set apart from, and often against, the corruptions of privilege and power has been an enduring contribution to our self-conception. It has made the central elements of the populist binary readily available to American political thinking. In some ways, the ideal’s silence on the dependence of eighteenth-century agrarian economics on slavery, especially in the South, also has provided populism with a toxic racist undercurrent that has never fully resolved.

Inborn distrust of elites and authority also has a tendency to prompt speculations about what actually lies behind authorities’ actions, distrust of authorities’ explanations, and theorising about the hidden reality. Jessen notes that ‘conspiracy theories are used to explain why governments fail to represent their people’, and details their prolific invention and deployment in the pre-revolutionary period (Jessen 2019, 682, emphasis in original). And rather than delusions of clinical paranoiacs, Wood (1982) observes, the eighteenth-century conspiracy tradition might be better understood as the product of the emergent Enlightenment ideal that individuals can find the truth – independent of ordained experts – by reasoning through available evidence.

Deep suspicion of authority and conspiratorial habits of thought did not dissipate with the successful revolution; both continued to be prominent features of politics in the young republic as the former radicals became political competitors, weaving conspiratorial accusations into the original fabric of American democracy (Kazin 1998).

Developments in the nineteenth century

The movement that would give populism its name emerged in the last decades of the nineteenth century, most strongly among farmers and industrial workers in the American South and West. The movement’s origins lay in a crisis of legitimacy resulting from the growing concentration of economic wealth and political power in the hands of large corporations and financiers, which
were both remote (concentrated in the Northeast) and increasingly dominant in the lives of farmers, through lending practices and currency management. Crucial, as well, was the populists’ disillusionment with both the Democratic and Republican Parties, which they perceived as ignoring their interests.

In response, in 1892, the populist movement coalesced into a third party, the People’s Party, with a platform privileging agricultural issues, labor protections, regulation of the monopolistic railroad industry, and government intervention in the financial markets. The movement was strategically and discursively organised around the need to return power to the industrious people of the country. As one scholar notes, the populists wanted to ‘restore the government of the Republic to the hands of “plain people”’ (Federici 1991, 32).

This was a powerful expression of what Kazin (1998, 13) calls the ‘producer ethic’ – a belief in the virtue and moral value of productive, material labor, set against means of making money that involve no material creation. Rhetorical framers of the populist movement, such as Tom Watson and Ignatius Donnelly, explicitly interpreted the economic–political conditions of the 1890s as a perversion of Jefferson’s dream. (Note that the populists’ vision conceptualised hard-working producers in terms mainly of white citizens; segments of the movement excluded or actively denigrated, to varying degrees, Chinese immigrants, African Americans and newly arrived eastern Europeans; Judis 2016).

Populists used newspapers, newsletters, and books to communicate with and mobilise publics, and some of their content included conspiracy theories of various sorts (Ostler 1995). Seven Financial Conspiracies Which Have Enslaved the American People (1887) – a book argued to be one of the most circulated populist publications – figured prominently in the early populist movement. The work advanced specious reasons for a variety of contemporary economic problems while claiming that Wall Street moneymakers, the banking system (Jewish bankers in particular), and the deliberate manipulation of the press were complicit in the hardships of ordinary Americans. Most spectacular was the book’s ultimate claim that US government officials were collaborating with a clique of British financiers intent on looting the states (Ostler 1995).

**Populist firebrands in the 1930s**

From the populists until Father Coughlin’s anti-Semitic and anti–New Deal turn in the late 1930s, American populism was essentially a movement of agriculture and labor, fundamentally concerned with the power of unfettered, monopolistic capitalism in American life; the need for government intervention to remedy injustice; and, often, the reticence of the major parties to act in the interests of working people (Kazin 1998). Indeed, Judis (2016) credits Huey Long’s left-populist pressure with substantially strengthening Roosevelt’s New Deal.

Coughlin is notable here both for his later rightward turn and embrace of conspiratorial thinking and for his use of radio as a new communication medium. Coughlin’s weekly radio programme began as a religion and politics broadcast in a Detroit suburb and was later syndicated around the country. His early politics were left leaning, inflected by his Catholic background: he aligned himself against ‘money-changers’, bankers, sometimes capitalism in general, and communists and sided with the citizens being harmed by the forces controlling the country (Kazin 1998). By the 1930s, CBS was airing Coughlin across the country to an estimated 30 million listeners (Modras 1989). His use of emotion and indignation and his nature of speaking ‘around’ centres of power articulated one of the first ‘challenges to middlebrow journalism’ then developing (Peck 2019, 65).

In the later 1930s, Coughlin espoused anti-Semitism and admiration for the Nazis and other fascist regimes. Anti-Semitic conspiracy theories in particular were integrated into Coughlin’s
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populist style, ‘carried out in the name of “the people”, whose innate virtue is threatened by external, alien forces’ (Cremoni 1998, 30). CBS cancelled Coughlin when the priest refused to allow the company to moderate his programme, but Coughlin quickly established his own autonomous radio network (Kay et al. 1998).

### Populism’s rightward turn in the post-war era

Following in Coughlin’s steps, after the Second World War, American populism’s foundation shifted from left-leaning critiques of the economic system to right-wing concerns over cultural elitism and governmental power (Kazin 1998). Factors shaping this evolution included the transformative New Deal, growing fears of communism, and economic growth that led growing numbers of Americans to identify as middle-class consumers and taxpayers.

It was in this period that the nonpareil of American conspiracy theorising, Joe McCarthy, appeared. McCarthy articulated a powerful blend of populist resentment, anger, and apocalyptic warnings of communist subversion. Tying elite politicians (Adlai Stevenson) and media (New York Times) to the communist cause, he presented himself as defending average Americans and traditional American culture.

The widespread fear of subversion – by foreign ideas but in the heart of American government – was ripe for conspiracy theorising, and McCarthy delivered. He found a conflicted partner in the news media, producing a tension that presages twenty-first-century populism. On one hand, McCarthy courted the media and relied on them not only for his own political self-aggrandisement but also to maintain regular communications with the public (Federici 1991). On the other, he waged a relentless war on the press, lambasting them for unfavourable coverage and accusing many outlets of communism. For their part, the media struggled in covering McCarthy. Despite his steady deluge of attacks, misinformation, and disinformation, wire services avoided negative reporting for fear of alienating publishers, and newspapers had trouble unwinding McCarthy’s misrepresentations. As one scholar of the era wrote, ‘It was no wonder that so many people were convinced that McCarthy was exposing Communists. The newspapers had said so’ (Bayley 1981, 217).

### The long 1960s and American populism

McCarthy is too often seen as an exceptional character, extracted from the wider political stream that produced him, including bipartisan anti-communist panic (Ribuffo 2017). In fact, he represented a form of right-wing political jealousy that long outlasted him. From the 1950s through the 1970s, several forms of conservative activism were taking shape in opposition to the New Deal, the civil rights movement, and cultural change. These included suburban citizen activists (McGirr 2015), media activists critical of the press and culture industries as purveyors of social liberalisation (Hemmer 2016), and Americans of moderate means who combined support for New Deal programmes such as Medicare and Social Security with culturally conservative attitudes and hostility to welfare and affirmative action (Warren’s “Middle American Radicals”; 1976).

George Wallace, the most explicitly populist politician of the second half of the twentieth century, appealed strongly to this latter group (Warren 1976). Although a supporter of the New Deal, Wallace innovated a populist campaign that emphasised the resentment felt by white Americans uncomfortable with growing federal power and wider cultural change. In the cultural-political context of his time, this ultimately meant siding with the ‘defense of the average (white) American against the tyranny of Washington bureaucrats. Big government was on its way to imposing its way on the average person’ (Judis 2016, 34).
Populism and misinformation

Growing anti-governmentalism

Wallace’s pairing of anti-governmentalism with white backlash was simultaneously a manifestation of deep currents of American populism, reflective of the geo-political reality of the United States at the time, and an early step in what would become a defining feature of conservative (and Republican Party) thinking. It is worth digressing briefly into the profound implications that changing public attitudes towards government – basic ideas about what the nation’s governing institutions could and should do – have had for American populism and American political culture.

Though a pan-cultural shift (Rodgers 2011), it was on the political right that anti-governmentalism took a particularly powerful form as Republican leaders, notably Nixon, Reagan, and Gingrich, largely adopted Wallace’s populist formulation of a culturally conservative ‘middle America’ resenting ‘big government’s’ intrusion into its wholesome way of life while eliding its (overt) racism (Kazin 1998). This was attractive to middle-American radicals and their descendants, including the Tea Party, whose mixed views on economic redistribution saw the middle class as squeezed between a hostile government elite and a sponging underclass (Skocpol and Williamson 2013). This resentment of government was married to a much smaller but extremely well-funded movement of billionaires and think tanks advocating laissez-faire economic policies that has pulled the Republican Party strongly to the economic right (Hacker and Pierson 2016). At their intersection, the Republican Party found a formula with the potential to appeal to diverse constituencies, including the white working class they increasingly courted, on its way to becoming, in Skocpol’s (2020) words, a party of ‘billionaire ultra-free-market fundamentalism and popularly rooted ethno-nationalist resentment’ (4).

Lessons from American populist history

Several points from this (very brief) survey of the history of American populism through the twentieth century bear repeating. First, ‘jealousy of power’ represents a deep tendency in American political thought that is always present but tends to breach the surface during periods of democratic misrepresentation and crises of legitimacy (Judis 2016). Note that such crises often relate to objective circumstances but also are phenomena of perception, dependent on citizens’ interpretive frameworks for understanding their conditions (e.g. Hochschild 2016).

The Jeffersonian tradition and related ‘producer ethic’ (Kazin 1998) have also contributed to the inborn populism of American political culture, telling a powerful moral story about hardworking people who contribute materially to society but are burdened by the predations of elites. As we have seen, however, this ethic has almost always been conceptualised in particular racial terms: at its most innocuous, simply conceptualising producerism in implicitly white terms and in other cases actively depicting members of non-white groups either as incapable of dignified productive work or as actively colluding with elites.

The chameleonic nature of populism means that it is heavily dependent on how the poles of ‘people’ and ‘elite’ are formulated, and this has varied across American political movements. Most significant for our remaining discussion is the shift that took place in the mid–twentieth century: prewar populism tended to understand the people as industrial workers and agrarian producers and the elite in economic and financial terms. Government, in this formulation, could serve to protect the working classes. The right-leaning populisms of the post-war period, by contrast, have seen elites more in cultural terms (Peck 2019) and emphasised their alliance with an undeserving underclass, forming a pincer threat to the hardworking middle class. Concordantly, the government, especially the federal government, became an enemy: bloated,
captured by cultural elites, and now a threat to traditional (white) American culture. In this conceptualisation, economic elites blend to a surprising degree with the middle class – especially small business owners – all of whom can now fall under the frame of ‘job creators’ (Hacker and Pierson 2016).

Finally, since the eighteenth century, a certain logic has tied jealousy of power to the unmasking of machinations occurring behind the visible scenes of power; when a political order becomes highly suspect, especially when elite communicators are associated with that political order, the temptation to hypothesise elaborate conspiracies becomes intense.

There is a tendency to dismiss conspiracy theorists as clinically disturbed. But this is probably short sighted if our goal is to understand the appeal of this manner of thinking and its considerable resistance to factual correction. Hofstadter (1965) describes conspiracy theories as built on mountains of ‘evidence’: 313 footnotes in one of McCarthy’s pamphlets and a 100-page bibliography in a book by Robert H. Welch, co-founder of the John Birch Society, concluding that far from being disinterested in facts, such theorists had an ‘extravagant passion’ for them (37). In this light, we might better think of conspiracy theories as attempts to knit together a coherent explanation of the world when centring institutions of social epistemology have been degraded or delegitimised.

**Populism and misinformation in the twenty-first-century United States**

These trends are actively visible today, now shaped by new developments across society, media, and technology.

**Democratic crisis and polarisation**

A multi-faceted crisis of democratic legitimacy now provides the backdrop to American politics. Post-industrialisation and years of neoliberal hegemony have transformed the economies of Western democracies, yielding levels of inequality not seen in the post-war period, stagnation of living standards for the middle and working classes, and the inflating precariousness of many aspects of life. Historically low levels of trust in governmental, social, and media institutions reflect the inability of these institutions to address these problems (Achen and Bartels 2016).

American life has also polarised along multiple dimensions. Divisions between young and old, college educated and not, non-white and white, urban and rural have all increased in their relevance for electoral politics, culture, and outlook on life – reducing Americans’ opportunities for cross-cutting exposures and common ground (Mason 2016). Though to depict American polarisation as somehow non-partisan or symmetric is empirically dishonest: the Republican Party has transformed itself from a conventional political party into one with the rather singular vision that government itself is a problem to be dismantled (Hacker and Pierson 2016).

At the nexus of the legitimacy crisis and rampant polarisation are signs of democratic deconsolidation – the weakening of citizens’ commitments to democratic practices and norms (Foa and Mounk 2017). This includes democratic norms of discourse and truth-telling: Trump’s constant promotion of untruths is well known, though we would do well to remember that it was to describe the administration of George W. Bush that the neologism *truthiness* was coined. Still, it was startling how little Trump’s flouting of speech norms cost him (Kreiss 2017); Republicans embraced his candidacy in full knowledge of his habitual lying.

Kreiss (2017) argues that Trump’s success lays bare a rupture in the epistemology of the civic sphere: the general democratic commitments citizens hold to seek common understanding of
political affairs. In the face of widespread delegitimisation, it appears that partisan identity – itself driven in great part by out-group animus – has overtaken civic solidarity in shaping political opinions, interactions with political information, and electoral choices.

Contemporary conditions of collapsing political legitimacy echo earlier eras in which populists have risen to prominence. And while there have been recent bursts of left-wing American populism, from Occupy Wall Street to Bernie Sanders, it has been on the right that a powerfully cohesive narrative of delegitimisation has taken hold. Scholars such as Cramer (2016) and Hochschild (2016) have documented how the experiences and perceptions of many (mostly white) Americans have informed their support for leaders sounding populist chords, from Wisconsin’s Scott Walker to Trump. What they reveal is a profound sense among many such citizens that their society is being transformed economically and culturally and that their own lifestyles are mocked and disrecognised by cultural and political elites. Hochschild (2016) demonstrates that the people she studied tended to understand their experiences in reference to a ‘deep story’ that was surprisingly consistent from person to person, all across the country. This story conveyed resentment that despite working hard and playing by the rules, these communities had decayed because powers above them have allowed other, less deserving groups to cut ahead in line.

The conservative media system

Importantly, such a deep story is not only an organic set of perceptions citizens tell one another; it is also fed and validated by a media system that has fundamentally transformed in recent decades. Most significant here is the development of an alternative media system supporting conservative causes. Intensifying after Goldwater’s 1964 loss, the conservative media movement has long seen itself as oppressed by a more powerful cultural, political, and media establishment (Hemmer 2016). This populist ethos has been a hallmark of the conservative talk radio of the 1980s and 1990s, and a mainstay of Fox News’s identity.

The billionaire funding of much conservative media is, of course, not populist in any economic sense. And here we must be careful not to place the blame for our disinformation order too squarely on populism per se; because suspicion of government, scientific expertise, and the news media have been assiduously cultivated by very un-populist factions within the conservative movement, most of all those devoted to advancing laissez-faire economic ideology and policy (Hacker and Pierson 2016). When their opposition to the government’s role in managing public problems has run up against scientific evidence, such as in the case of climate change, this movement has developed tactics to misinform and confuse the public and systematically undermine public faith in scientific and journalistic institutions (Oreskes and Conway 2011).

But many conservative media display a powerfully populist style, conveyed in tabloid aesthetics; deviations from and overt rejections of ‘high modern’, ‘aspirational’ mainstream journalism; and repeated claims to be the lone voices of reason in a liberal media system; they project cultural populism (Peck 2019). Headlined by Fox News but now stylistically joined by a wide array of both mainstream and marginal digital sources, this ecosystem provides a steady supply of stories that map onto, reinforce, and elaborate the deep story; they also dabble, to varying degrees and with varying levels of concern for fact, in apocalyptic warnings that American culture is being systematically undermined (Polletta and Callahan 2017). As Benkler and colleagues (2018) have shown, this is genuinely an alternative system of media outlets, significantly more detached from centrist journalistic organisations than partisan media on the left. On the left, we suspect, the lack of a widely held and coherent deep story, combined with the tighter coupling of left political conversations to the political-media centre, has prevented the development of a misinformation apparatus on a scale comparable to that of the right (Benkler et al. 2018).
Misinformation in the social sharing system

Today, the long legacy of American populism and ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ (see Sedgwick 2003) and an explicitly oppositional partisan media apparatus recombine with social media. The new attention economics of the social sharing economy democratise individuals’ opportunities to communicate and establish major financial incentives (alongside any political agenda) for outlets and individuals to accrue audiences – primarily accomplished by stimulating anger and indignation in order to induce sharing across social media networks (Pickard 2019). Here, the plentiful supply of mis-, dis-, and malinformation meets citizens feeling acute resentment and social deprivation.

The unprecedented speed and reach of messages in this system are having effects we are only beginning to contemplate. Unlike earlier conspiracy theories, which were necessarily conveyed in relatively scarce and infrequent pamphlets and books, today’s misinformation is reproduced and circulated on a daily basis. And although the evidence of comprehensively walled-off “echo chambers” is thin, the products of a substantial sub-ecology of disinformation that runs from 4chan, 8chan and Reddit into Breitbart and more establishment media (including the President’s Twitter feed) can provide sceptical citizens with a daily ‘inoculation’ against more mainstream interpretations of events (Stroud 2019).

Further, as Zuckerman (2019) points out, there are substantial social and entertainment dimensions to the games of interpretation that take place in online communities such as Reddit, 4chan, and QAnon; there, conspiracy theorising is actively peer produced (Starbird et al. 2019). Harkening back to the days of Father Coughlin or Joe McCarthy, the excitement is still in the assembly of innumerable clues and in fitting them to an interpretation that reveals the fissures in official narratives of events and buttresses a satisfying understanding of the world. But the activity is now massively distributed and prolific.

This reveals several important points about misinformation and its populist connections in our era. We might do well to distinguish fully fledged conspiracy theories (of the sort peddled by McCarthy, or, today, Alex Jones or QAnon) from other forms of more piecemeal misinformation that are invented by online entrepreneurs of disinformation and circulated by partisan networks through digital media. The latter mis- or disinformation is, as Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019) put it, ‘conspiracy without the theory’. This is the sort of misinformation promoted by Trump and is driven by the need ‘less to explain than to affirm’; examining its information content misses its purpose of conveying identity solidarity. Here, the authoritarianism of Trump’s populism is clear: in his pronouncements of clear falsehoods, without even a coherent conspiratorial hypothesis, he announces his dismissal of any ‘collective effort to produce agreed-upon facts and reach consensus on the correspondence between assertions and reality’ (Waisbord 2018, 2–3) and his intent to exercise power without democratic constraint.

What Muirhead and Rosenblum may overlook, however, is the power of the deep story to serve as a meta-narrative device into which both elaborated conspiracy theories and everyday, mundane misinformation can be set. With a widespread underlying narrative describing the illegitimacy of political opponents, the government, and the press, variations on the theme (the “deep state” seeks to destroy Trump, Hillary Clinton leads a paedophilia ring in Washington) may seem plausible or, at the least, satisfyingly irritating to East Coast liberal snobs.

Conclusion

Our observations on American populism and misinformation dispel the notions that populism and misinformation are somehow novel and that populism is itself the primary explanation for
Populism and misinformation

our current era of ‘post-truth’. Our reading of the case suggests that American political culture is especially susceptible to populism and, in fact, always carries deep populist currents, owing to a long-standing phobia of the exercise of power and easily accessible notions of an imagined hardworking but put-upon ‘real’ American. Moreover, our analysis shows that in the evolution of the Republican Party and conservative media over 50 years, wealthy ideologues have done more than their share to cultivate messaging organs – and widespread distrust of centrist information institutions – that now undergird ‘post-truth’ politics.

This analysis suggests that populism and misinformation share common origins more than a linear causal relationship. Populism assumes prominence in contexts in which democratic legitimacy is called into question as it clearly is in the United States’ current period of economic precarity and political polarisation. Its contemporary details are shaped by socio-economic circumstances that led one major party, for strategic reasons, to disavow major institutions of governing and public deliberation. The combination of the collapse of centrist meaning-making institutions with the explosion of digital media and the attentional economics they have developed has proven a fertile culture for misinformation. The capacity of media sub-ecologies to relentlessly re-articulate underlying resentments and supply endless resentful interpretations of current events is a permutation of misinformation the US has not seen before and poses a grave threat to democratic culture.

What hope is there for the reconstruction of broadly shared commitments to a common project of truth-telling under these conditions (Waisbord 2018)? Unfortunately, the underlying democratic crisis is not easily remedied. How a crisis of legitimacy is constituted is fundamentally a question of perception and interpretation: of the stories citizens – and their media – tell about groups in society and whether each is treated fairly. Here we should extend the line of research Hochschild and Cramer have pioneered and further explore how our communication system facilitates certain understandings and not others. Similarly, the now well-developed disinformation networks in digital will not be easily unwound. What will remain critical is the correction of misinformation by our core media institutions (Bode and Vraga 2015) and greater public accountability of major social media platforms that house these networks.

Finally, we caution against condemning populism itself as the root of the problem; any given populism’s tenor and its relationship to democracy depend greatly on its particular conceptualisation of people and elites. Clearly, populism contains the potential for terrible racism, division, disinformation, and anti-civic disruption, but is probably better to call out these problematic aspects directly, as in ‘authoritarian populism’, ‘ethno-nationalist populism’, or, when appropriate, fascism. Because condemning populism will not address, and may even obscure, the underlying, and to some degrees genuine, origins of the populist impulse: the sense of many Americans – on left and right – that the political system treats them unfairly, that they have marginal economic opportunity, and that they are scorned by their fellow citizens.

References


