

ORDINARY HARDWORKING FOLKS: ECONOMIC RESTRUCTURING AND THE
MAKING OF POPULIST IDENTITIES IN A MAINE SMALL TOWN

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Abstract**ORDINARY HARDWORKING FOLKS: ECONOMIC RESTRUCTURING AND THE MAKING OF POPULIST IDENTITIES IN A MAINE SMALL TOWN**

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The economic recession and the election of President Barack Obama in 2008 unleashed right-wing movements characterized by populist claims that political leaders are neglecting the interests of American “ordinary folks.” Though recent developments have spurred this reaction, even before the economic recession, populist ideas and politics influenced the people and communities struggling to adjust to the insecurities of the new economy. Based on research conducted in 2006 and 2007, this dissertation explores the relationship between conservative populism and economic decline through the story of a predominantly white former manufacturing town in central Maine.

Though there was not an organized populist movement in central Maine when I was conducting research, appeals to “the people” for limited government influenced political battles over community development and town budgets. Well-intentioned community revitalization leaders deepened the divide between themselves and “ordinary townspeople” as they worked to develop a competitive post-industrial town with a thriving downtown, bustling farmers market, and expanding population of artists and “professionals.” Several sets of ideologies informed these politics; namely, individualism, valuing hard work and struggle, whiteness, and the idea of the small town as a place safe from poverty. But this dissertation counters perceptions of individualism and hard work as prefigured American or small town cultural ideals. First, these ideas

are contested. Just as workers attributed value to working hard, struggling, and persisting through difficult times, they also blamed their economic troubles on structural economic change, their employers' low wages, and greedy corporations. Second, decades of neoliberal politics and the experience of surviving on low wages influenced individualism and class consciousness. Alongside increasing economic insecurity, for example, local programs taught "soft skills" and state and national campaigns demonized welfare recipients and praised the hardworking Mainer. Ultimately, reacting to economic decline as "ordinary hard working folks" weakened the role of class as a framework to explain life in central Maine under advanced capitalism.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

During the 2008 presidential election, shortly before the last debate, then-Senator Obama met a man in Ohio named Samuel Joseph Wurzelbacher. He was young, white, and had the tough look of a blue-collar laborer. He told Obama that he planned to buy his employer's plumbing business, which made more than \$200,000 a year, and asked if he would be victim to a tax increase under his plan. That "Joe the Plumber," as he was called, really made \$40,000 and reportedly did not have a plumbing license was not important (Rohter 2008). The powerful imagery of this blue-collar white man from Ohio garnered national spotlight. He was a symbol of the hard working Middle American man who just wanted to work his way up and keep his money. During the final campaign debate, both candidates looked into the camera and spoke directly to Joe as if they were speaking to all Americans. Of course Joe does not represent everyone, but he resonated with politicians, the media, and possibly the electorate in part because he was seen as ordinary. "Joe the Plumber" is now a speaker and a contributor to Regular Folks United, a website founded by a former GM employee that seeks to "give a voice to Middle America" (www.regularfolksunited.org).

Early in the following year, in the first few months of the economic recession and of Barack Obama's presidency, the Tea Party—a grassroots movement made up of an amalgam of conservatives calling for limited government, lower taxes, and individual responsibility—began holding rallies across the country, particularly in opposition to the

economic stimulus package and health care reform. They charged President Obama with defying American individualism and trying to create a socialist country. Compelling national figures such as Sarah Palin rallied followers with populist language: “The soul of this movement is the people—everyday Americans who grow our food and run our small businesses, and teach our kids and fight our wars” (Palin 2010). For “Joe-the-Plumber,” Tea Party supporters, and other burgeoning conservative populists, their political identity has been dependent on being ordinary, hardworking Americans, entitled by their ordinariness to low taxes and freedom from government.

The recent steep economic decline and resistance to the politics of President Obama spurred the popularity of the Tea Party. But to understand this populist reaction, to understand why “Joe the Plumber” was such a prominent (if short lived) figure in the 2008 elections, it is important to examine the lives of ordinary small town folks before the economic recession. How did post-industrial economic decline and neoliberal politics influence this Middle American ideal? And, conversely, how did the Middle American ideal affect response to declining jobs and wages. This dissertation explores the work, beliefs, and politics of residents in a struggling small town in Maine in order to more deeply understand the meaning of “ordinary folk.” To do so, I consider the role of populism in community politics and economic development and examine several sets of beliefs that inform conservative populism. I found that the complex, multi-faceted and contested components of populist identities impacted how central Mainers analyzed the source of their economic discontent. That is, residents reacted to jobs loss, economic decline and new demands on family life less often as workers or poor people and more

often as “ordinary struggling hard working folks,” an identity that weakened the role of class as a framework to explain life in central Maine under advanced capitalism.

The Making of Populist Identities in Skowhegan

Skowhegan, Maine is a nice town. There are some empty buildings downtown, especially since the recent recession, as well as several strip malls and large parking lots, but it is as quaint as any other small New England town. And its economic story is also familiar: a boom in manufacturing in the late 19th century led to a sharp growth in the town’s population—immigrants came to work (especially from French Canada) and businessmen came to invest. From lumber mills and textiles to shoe manufacturers and paper mills, the town has since witnessed the cyclical growth and demise of its manufacturing industries. Like many towns and cities across the country, retail and service jobs have been replacing manufacturing jobs through company cutbacks or the closing of one small mill at a time. In the fall of 2003, film crews came to town for the HBO movie *Empire Falls* based on the Richard Russo book of the same title. Russo wrote the novel while living and working in nearby Waterville. The filmmakers were looking for a town that would appear, as Russo described, to be struggling to transition from an industrial economy. A local government official recalled the weeks of filming:

When *Empire Falls* came here. I remember the first day when they were here, and walking around the downtown, cause we’re trying to sell the downtown, “make the film here,” you know. And there was a guy getting ready to paint on the streetlights down there. He was scraping and getting ready to paint it. And he [someone from the film crew] says, “no don’t touch it, just leave it, ‘cause we want that, you know, a town that’s on the decline.” People were saying, “hey this is great, they’re going to make a movie about us...” But think about it, what’s so attractive, what’s so appealing about Skowhegan. It’s because we’re a town on the decline.

Though many townspeople would not describe Skowhegan as a town on decline but as a beautiful place with expanding opportunities for the future, its unemployment and poverty rates are consistently well above the state average and its teen pregnancy rate is one of the highest in the state (Pickett 2007). The town's historically working class foundation means that fewer jobs have required a college degree. The percentage of residents with a bachelor's degree is 12.6 percent (and 11.8 percent for county residents) compared to a national rate of 24.4 percent (Bauman and Graf 2003; Skowhegan 2010). Yet this mostly white, working and middle class small town could easily be described as a typical or ordinary American town. It fits the oft called upon myth of the peaceful small town, with its quirky, wholesome hardworking residents. This contradiction between the mainstream small town imaginary and the experience of economic decline is the subject of this dissertation.

Political battles over community development plans and government spending in Skowhegan formed along class-inflected community divisions between the "liberal elites" and the ordinary townspeople. This populist reaction appeared to be about the struggles of "the little guy," but in fact obfuscated class categories, often to the benefit of "the big guy." The "liberal elites"—a group of business owners, artists, lawyers, and other "professionals" (many of whom were relative newcomers)—led efforts to help Skowhegan transition into a successful post-industrial town. They optimistically envisioned a town with a riverside condominium, new markets for farmers and artists, and a growing nature tourism industry. Though not all members of this group were liberal or elite, they were often perceived to be so by a second group, the workers and business owners (often long-time residents) who did not share the same vision for the

town as the newcomers. The second group was against spending taxpayer money on projects that they suspected either would not work or would change their town according to the “liberal elites” interests. Development project skeptics came to see themselves as ordinary townspeople in contrast to these new people and their plan for the town. These divisions had the potential to draw attention to the class divide in the town—to show how low and middle-wage workers had different interests and less power in the town than elite leaders. But some of the loudest voices speaking against the proposed changes or against the use of taxpayer money to invest in the town were successful—in some cases wealthy—business owners. These leaders often spoke on behalf of “the people of this town” or “taxpayers” as if their interests were the same as struggling working class residents. Community development proponents also often spoke of development skeptics in cultural terms (as pessimistic, uneducated townspeople who were afraid of change) while their detractors rarely phrased their objections in terms of class interests but rather described themselves as ordinary taxpayers or townspeople. In effect, debates over municipal budgets and downtown revitalization created a populist sensibility that worked to conceal the operation of class.

What it means to be an ordinary townspeople in Skowhegan was particularly informed by the following concepts: hard work, the small town imaginary, whiteness, and individualism. Each of these concepts represents a set of contested ideas and practices. Many workers and middle class residents, for example, attributed value to working hard, struggling, and persisting through difficult times but also criticized their employers for paying low wages, not giving them enough hours, or not providing health insurance. Though residents did question the work ethic, in an economic climate in which finding a

good job was not easy, employers, economic development groups, and social service agencies actively promoted the belief in the importance of hard work regardless of pay or work conditions. As is common in the new economy, in Skowhegan, wages were often low, benefits were inadequate and workers were quickly fired and hired depending on an employer's needs. Even the lucky ones with well-paying manufacturing jobs in the paper mills were often unsure how much longer they would last. Middle-aged former factory workers found themselves retraining in completely new fields and sometimes even these new jobs proved elusive. Other fast food and retail employees saw neither an opportunity for promotion, nor a means to transition to another industry. Welfare and other national and local training programs for low-wage workers sought to assure that they sustained this belief. Public and private organizations collaborated in Skowhegan, for example, to create a program aimed at teaching the unemployed and underemployed basic work and self-discipline skills like punctuality, time management, and appropriate dress. Employers and some community leaders thus reframed the challenges of the new economy as a decline in the hard worker.

Through the valorization of the myth of the ordinary white worker, struggling but working his or her way up, whiteness helped to shift the focus of working class and poor Skowhegan residents away from class and toward an identity based on ordinary hardworking Mainer. Many working and middle class residents scorned a loosely defined group of "undeserving" poor and working class people for being lazy, drug-addicted, welfare-dependent, dangerous problems. Though some of these "problem whites" criticized their employers or other elites, they also denounced welfare recipients and lazy workers and maintained faith in the American dream. Whiteness contributed to

the populist trope of the hardworking Mainer by deterring those at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder from questioning their class position. Though many scholars describe poor white people as “less white,” I argue that they are able to maintain their whiteness and benefit from its privileges. Though they may at times identify or be identified as poor, they are also able to see themselves as white workers.

In popular culture and social science, the white small town is often portrayed as an ideal American place while discussions of poverty and inequality are associated with urban people of color and rural southern whites. Before conducting research, I suspected that the small town imaginary, the idea of an idyllic community where everyone knows each other, would prevent middle class residents from seeing the poverty in their towns. Though some informants believed there was little problem because “we take care of our own,” surprisingly, most residents acknowledged the many people struggling in their communities. At the same time, though, they downplayed the significance of poverty and class. They talked about poor people but they were less likely to define the town itself as poor or struggling. When a report from National Public Radio described Skowhegan as a dying mill town, many town leaders objected, some writing letters of complaint to the radio station. Informants talked about the differences between the “haves and have-nots” but said in small communities like Skowhegan, people still interact and financial differences do not determine friendships or economic mobility. A mid-level factory worker typified this contradiction between an awareness of poverty and class divisions on the one hand, and a repudiation of its significance, on the other:

You have the people that don't make much money and then you have the [wealthy people] of the town that have all the money. ...[But] I mean you could still go to a bar around here and you could have somebody that makes 200,000 a year and somebody that makes \$10 an hour in the same place.

Such popular understandings of life in the small town downplayed the power of economic structure.

American economic individualism asserts that each individual is responsible for his or her own success or failure and anyone can overcome poverty or economic hardship. In a town transitioning to the new economy, residents emphasized personal responsibility to save money, to take low-paying jobs, and to “do whatever it takes” to get ahead. Defining independence as the ability to earn a wage, some chastised welfare recipients as dependent on the state and blamed them for causing the town’s problems. But alongside this faith in individualism, most central Mainers recognized structural economic change and its effect on the community. They clearly identified the shift in jobs from well-paid manufacturing to lower paid service work and many believed this shift was among the biggest causes of problems in the community. Working class people valued individual mobility but also expressed a sense of injustice that corporations and the wealthy profit while they struggle to get by.

This is not, then, a story of how the idea of the ordinary hardworking American stifled resistance in a small town in Maine. Though I found expressions of accommodation to hegemonic ideologies—the neoliberal emphasis on self-help, faith in American individualism, dedication to the work ethic—I also found counter-hegemonic and non-hegemonic responses to economic decline. The lives of the people of the Skowhegan area reveal a series of battles over the meanings of populist identities: resistance to the demands of the new economy existing simultaneously with dedication to working hard while being paid little; complaints about overpaid CEOs as well as a respect for the power of local business elite; and a recognition of poverty, but

surprisingly, a minimization of class. Nor is this a story of how a rural culture of hard work or a moral proclivity to family and community maintain rural conservatism. As the impact of the Tea Party demonstrates, populisms can shape global political and economic policy, but global and national policies also shape these populist identities. As I will discuss below, beginning in the 1960s, a national conservative movement has downplayed class identities by appealing to white working and middle class constituents as ordinary Americans. In Skowhegan, local and national neoliberal projects, social stratification systems (namely, gender, race, and class), and the practice of living with debt, low wages and unstable jobs influenced the ongoing construction of populist identities. For many low-wage workers, for example, individualism was not a self-blaming ideology from above, but a source of hope and a sense of control over one's life. In the words of a factory worker in his sixties, "You have to have a positive attitude and you'll make it. And there will be setbacks but you climb up out of them." The concepts that give meaning to "ordinary American," including individualism, independence and related "various mainstream notions of white, male unencumbered selves," thus are not innate, but are historically, politically, and socially constructed through "contexts of power and domination" (di Leonardo 1998, 81).

Populism and the National Construction of Ordinary Folks

Broadly, populisms are political discourses, movements, and identifications that capitalize on a sense of "the people" in opposition to an elite and/or marginalized "other." These politics are not unique for naming "the people" as their constituency—most politicians claim to speak on behalf of the people—but for the degree to which they call

upon “the people” versus “the others” (Panizza 2005). Populist rhetoric creates these self/other categories by homogenizing diverse sectors of citizens. As Ernesto Laclau explains, “The ‘people,’ as operating in populist discourses, is never a primary datum but a construct—populist discourse does not simply *express* some kind of original popular identity; it actually *constitutes* the latter” (Laclau 2005b, 48 emphasis in original). The idea of “ordinary folks” excludes as much as it includes. Because populisms form in existing gendered, raced, and national systems, social divisions and inequalities are called upon to construct the oversimplified categories of “the people” versus “the other.” White male English-speaking native-born citizens, for example, can most easily lay claim to being “ordinary Americans” without being designated political “special interests” (unless they represent a union).

Certain political and social contexts tend to lead to populisms. There is an inevitable social distance between politicians and the people they represent, if only the high status accorded to any leader. But populisms arise particularly when this gap is widened and citizens feel their needs or interests are not being met by their government (Panizza 2005). Political scientist Francisco Panizza, considering populist politics around the globe, identifies four different circumstances in which populism is likely to become a “dominant mode of identification:”

1. Economic, political, natural crises lead to a “breakdown of the social order;”
2. People lose faith in political traditions or political parties;
3. Changes in the structure of the economy, culture, or society;
4. New forms of political representation or a new means for people to connect with one another (2005).

Several of these conditions are recognizable in current Tea Party politics, namely the economic crisis, the changing structures of society (symbolized by the election of the

first black president), and the new forms of representation and connection in talk radio, cable news, and the use of the internet to organize supporters. Panizza's characterizations are a reminder that right-wing populisms may contain legitimate grievances or motivating factors. In this case, the economic crisis sparked the Tea Party's decline in faith in the current political system.

With the political turn to the right described in greater detail below, there has been a shift in who qualifies as "ordinary hardworking folk." Whereas in the late 1800s, producerism focused on the laborer, the farmer, small shop owner, and manufacturer, since the 1960s conservative populisms have been based on the "ordinary American" who works hard, overcomes struggle and defines him or herself against a "spendthrift, immoral" political and intellectual elite (Kazin 1998, 5). Populisms on the political left have thus tended to use concepts of "the people" that more closely overlap with class categories. The late 19th Century Farmer's Alliance and Populist Party, for example, were primarily concerned with the plight of the small farmer. Though they sought to eliminate unfair competition of burgeoning capitalists, they did, however, eventually ally with the middle class and use capitalist practices to their advantage. Many populisms on the left, the Populist Party included, have not defined intellectuals as "others." Intellectualism in terms of the education of the masses was an explicit strategy of the Populist Party (Postel 2007).

Despite the influence of right-wing populisms and national politics on local concepts of what it means to be an "ordinary American," local histories and cultures combine with economic circumstances and national political ideologies to shape the meaning of populist identities. As anthropologist Don Kalb explains, in populist

movements “actual outcomes on local grounds are intermediated by various path-dependent ‘critical junctions’ that link global process via particular national arenas and local histories” (Kalb 2009, 209). It is through these critical junctions that I investigate populism as a mode of persuasion and a mode of identification (Kazin 1998; Panizza 2005). I seek out the local and national social categories, political processes, and lived experiences that shape what it means to be an ordinary hardworking American.

On a road that follows the river out of Skowhegan, a long white single-story building houses the library and former home of one of Skowhegan’s most famous residents, Margaret Chase Smith. A moderate Republican Senator and Representative, she is remembered for being an early vocal opponent of Joseph McCarthy and for being the first woman to be placed in nomination for president at a major party’s convention. The winner of the Republican nomination at that 1964 convention was Barry Goldwater. Though Goldwater ran an unsuccessful bid for the presidency, he launched a new style of conservative politics based on grassroots mobilization that targeted mainstream suburban white Americans. His career marks the beginning of right-wing populist politics and an era of Republican political power.

Since the Goldwater campaign, the ordinary average American has been a political trope dominated by the right that incorporates both middle and working classes. Politicians created a broad-based, cross-class electorate of ordinary folks by capitalizing on existing alliances of gender, race, religion, and nationality. Barry Goldwater and later George Wallace used white middle and working class backlash against the Civil Rights Movement and fears of racial integration to create a sense of “the people” that excluded

blacks but relied on a class alliance between white middle and working classes (Rieder 1989). Though whites in part opposed the structural changes of the Civil Rights Movement *themselves*, conservatives also made a conscious effort to win over white working class votes. That is, conservative politicians “re-created themselves as the authentic representatives of average white Americans,” while defining “average” against immigrants, people of color, and welfare recipients (Kazin 1998, 246). In so doing, they were able to garner support of the white working and middle classes under the shared identity of the “ordinary American.” Politicians’ appeals to “Middle America,” a term that became popular in the 1960s when speaking of the “great mass of ordinary Americans,” both drew upon an existing sense of who was “ordinary” (and who was not) and helped to define this sense (Kazin 1998, 253).

Business leaders and conservative activists reached the public by combining grassroots organizing and direct mail campaigns (McGirr 2001) with the institutionalization of conservative ideology through the establishment of think tanks, Public Action Committees, corporate public relations departments, and foundations. Richard Nixon worked to capture the southern and white ethnic vote with an account of his humble biography and with an appeal to the “silent majority,” workers, taxpayers and average Americans who did not identify with the politics of the New Left. While the populism of Goldwater and Wallace was often too radical to be seen as ordinary, Ronald Reagan effectively mainstreamed similar conservative politics. He did so by demonizing feminists, (black) welfare recipients, affirmative action and other “special interests,” on the one hand, and elite bureaucrats, on the other, in order to appeal to the “average taxpayer.”

Democrats and the political left also contributed to the creation of conservative populisms and the merging of white middle and working classes. Under Bill Clinton, Democrats reached out to white working class voters not through class-based politics (which would risk ostracizing upper and middle class voters) but through race-coded politics that preserved the idea of a classless but raced (white) “middle America.” As David Roediger explains, Democrats used welfare reform, “three-strikes” criminal justice, and discussions of NAFTA as a preventative tool for Mexican immigration in attempt to regain Reagan Democrats, appealing to white workers as white (and racist) and avoiding civil rights and labor constituencies (Roediger 2002). Race-inflected politics also attracted the white upper and middle classes who, Roediger contends, “probably were the real prize being pursued” (2002, 63). The hardworking average American, the ordinary folks to whom politicians appealed, thus continued to encompass white working and middle classes and reinforce the marginality of immigrants and people of color.

Not only did the focus on threats to morality, religion, and white supremacy play on the fear of white mainstream Americans, as David Harvey points out, it also diverted Americans “from capitalism and corporate power as in any way having anything to do with either the economic or the cultural problems that unbridled commercialism and individualism were creating” (Harvey 2005, 50). But working class traditionally Democratic voters also had to be *directly* persuaded that conservative, market-oriented economic policies were in their best interests. Richard Viguerie, a conservative organizer and Goldwater campaign worker, recognized the importance, for example, of changing the public perception of Republicans as “the obedient footsoldiers of the Fortune 500.” Business groups like the Chamber of Commerce and the Business Roundtable distanced

themselves from far right politicians and used rational, economic propaganda to convince the public that a free market based on “individual freedom, incentive, initiative, opportunity and responsibility” would ultimately serve the worker (from the 1970 Chamber of Commerce mission statement, quoted in Phillips-Fein 2009). Through media campaigns and grassroots mobilizations of local business owners, industry organizers assured that American working classes saw business-friendly government policies as beneficial to them.

These political efforts to unite white middle and working classes and convince them of the importance of a free-market economy helped to define what it means to be a hardworking, ordinary person. Throughout this dissertation, I address the merging of working and middle class whites through individualism, hard work, struggle, small town imaginaries, and whiteness. I explore how, in a time of economic restructuring, these identities and ideologies are lived and resisted in everyday life.

Political and Economic Restructuring in the United States

Since the 1970s, manufacturing industries have decreased in the United States and Europe and grown in developing countries. Remaining manufacturers have cut jobs, pay, and benefits. Political leaders have responded by deregulating financial markets and privatizing social services, further redistributing wealth upwards (Duménil and Lévy 2004; Harvey 2005). Wall Street investors, themselves subject to overwork and frequent lay offs, have advocated mergers and acquisitions and mass layoffs for their corporate clients, defining downsizing and insecurity as part of doing business in advanced capitalist America (Ho 2009). Wages have declined and family members have had to work more hours to keep up with rising costs of food, health care, and education

(Gusterson and Besteman 2010). Finally, imperialism strains domestic budgets and increases policing and fear (Lutz 2001; Piven 2006) as the United States secures its domination in international politics and the global economy with military power (Lutz 2001; Lutz 2009; Vine 2009).

Critical US ethnographers have documented the dramatic effects of these political and economic processes. Several recent edited volumes call attention to this state of advanced capitalism and securitization as threats to American democracy and stability (Gusterson and Besteman 2010; Maskovsky and Susser 2009). This crisis of security, privatization, and inequality forms the backdrop against which I analyze the formation of populist identities in Skowhegan. More specifically, this dissertation addresses the literature about the effects of political and economic restructuring on everyday life and the hegemonic and counterhegemonic neoliberal ideologies and practices that emerge within this politico-economic climate.

Gender and racial inequalities have structured the new economy and influenced the experience of economic change (Lamphere 1987; Susser 1997; Zavella 1987). Economic restructuring has had the most devastating effects on poor people and specifically on poor communities of color (Davis 2004; Williams and Prince 2002). But the increased demands for flexible labor, rising cost of living, and decreased benefits have also strained the working and middle classes. Heightened financial insecurity has increased the numbers of unstable, “near poor” and diminished the middle class, putting more people on the verge of an economic breakdown (Newman and Chen 2007). Americans have become dependent on credit card companies and other high-interest loans to maintain a middle-class lifestyle, to survive a financial crisis, or simply to make

basic payments. This debt has led to constant financial insecurity (Sullivan, et al. 2000; Williams 2004). Though middle class over-consumption contributes to debt, credit card companies also prey on the most financially unstable, creating greater class inequality at the same time blaming individual financial mismanagement so that debtors “feel personally responsible for social problems” (Williams 2004).

The world’s largest cities are centers of international flows of people and goods. They house global financial centers and political elites (LiPuma and Lee 2004; Low 1999; Sassen 1991). Small towns, though, are also global phenomena that should not be represented as isolated, insular places. Not only do larger social processes act upon small communities, but small communities affect these processes as well. The town manager in a small town outside of Skowhegan, for example, courted financial investors from Boston and hydroponics specialists from Holland for months before the company built a giant tomato greenhouse in his town. Despite anthropology’s history of approaching communities as isolated, bounded entities, recent anthropological work on rural, small town Americans describe these communities as *part* of national economic and political practices.

Like their urban counterparts, rural and small town ethnographies have explored the family and community survival strategies in response to economic insecurity. Margaret Nelson and Joan Smith conclude that families in Vermont with “good jobs” (full-time jobs with benefits) are better able take advantage of other opportunities in the informal economy (Nelson and Smith 1999). Small town studies have tended to focus on morality, religion, individualism, and Americanism when compared to similar ethnographic work in urban areas (Cattellino 2010). Characteristics of small town

economies, such as limited public transportation and limited employment opportunities, create a distinction between economic declines in rural versus urban or suburban areas. As Janet Fitchen points out, rural industrial towns are sometimes slower to transition to technology and financial services and more likely to be devastated by the loss of a single company (Fitchen 1991). Still, the particularities of a community—its economic history and proximity to urban centers, transportation systems, bodies of water, and national resources—affects the experience of economic restructuring as much as the urban/rural distinction (Winson and Leach 2002).

Classic farming and fishing industries in post-industrial small towns increasingly use the inexpensive labor of legal and illegal immigrants. Anthropologists have also explored new rural small town growth industries, including meatpacking, call centers, and prisons (Buchanan 2002; Rhodes 2001). A collection of work on the growth of large meat-packing industries in the Midwest (and their shift from urban centers) address how communities adjust to the poverty and housing shortages that they can bring (Fink 1998; Stull, et al. 1995). Small communities desperate for jobs bring in industries with low-pay, bad working conditions, and frequent turnover (Stull, et al. 1995).

I combine a focus on community-based effects of economic restructuring with an investigation of race, gender, and place-based privileges associated with the white small town worker. Like whiteness scholars who approach race and white privilege as a barrier to class positions (Buck 2001; Roediger 1991; Roediger 2005), I discuss how such categories of privilege maintain class-based inequalities. In Chapters Five and Six, for example, I demonstrate how working class consciousness is deterred by the myth of the

white worker and by the homogenization of working class, middle class, and business elite residents against the government and “liberal elites.”

Secondly, I am influenced by work on hegemonic and counter-hegemonic ideologies and practices within this politico-economic climate. Alongside the changes in economic policy on the late 20th and early 21st centuries, national government and business elites have promulgated a discourse and ideology of individual responsibility and “market triumphalism” as a solution to social ills (Goode and Maskovsky 2001). Neoliberalism re-centers the self in dictating how Americans are to respond to economic change: repackaging themselves as a set of skills (Urciuoli 2008), identifying the psychological or behavior limitations to their success (Lyon-Callo 2004), and marketing their town to compete with others. Neoliberal policies that emphasize self-help and self-sufficiency increasingly dictated the politics of industrialized nations and community development professionals, including leaders of small town and rural development (Herbert-Cheshire 2000; Pini 2006). In this dissertation, I explore how these ideologies and their corresponding practices have influenced the meaning of “ordinary folk;” specifically, how political and business-driven demand for hard work and individual responsibility contributes to the construction of the American “culture of individualism.”

Though the effects of the hegemonic discourses have been far reaching, as Maskovsky and Kingfisher point out, neoliberalism is not a complete project (Kingfisher and Maskovsky 2008). Residents are shaped by and react to these changes on their lives and in their communities. And global processes like economic restructuring and neoliberalism do not indiscriminately and universally act on communities and people

(Gregory 1998b; Ho 2005; Tsing 2004). They are affected by and take on meaning through people's lives.

Anthropologists have explored both the domination of and resistance to hegemonic ideologies like individualism. Post-civil rights and post-colonial racisms, for example, covertly operate under the guise of a color blind society in which all individuals have equal opportunity for success (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Mullings 2005). As a result, anti-immigrant activists do not talk of the inferiority of immigrants but of their abuse of welfare, education, and health resources (Kwong 2010). Conducting research in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, June Nash documented the strength of a value system of "economic rationality, individualism, competition, mobility and equal opportunity" brought on by the corporate hegemony of the General Electric Company. Though the company deserted the town and broke its social contract with its employees, the power of this value system effectively deterred community and employee resistance.

Others have looked at how gender, race and ethnicity contribute to class resistance and accommodation. Louis Lamphere followed the stories of women in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, focusing on how different ethnic groups affected and were affected by transformations in gendered labor from early industrial period of the late 18th century through the 1980s (Lamphere 1987). In this case, work culture brought women together despite ethnic divisions in the workforce. Thomas Dunk also explores working class resistance as intertwined with ethnicity and gender. According to Dunk, the marginal class position of white working class men shapes their maleness, whiteness, and culture: "the specific meanings non-class discourses have for white male workers can only be discerned in the light of their class experience" (Dunk 2003, 153). This working

class culture, then, is a form of resistance though it is also redirected to reinforce inequalities through sexism and racism.

Countering images of passive victims of poverty, social scientists have also written about poor and working class people as actively resisting their oppression, whether through political activism (Gregory 1998a; Susser 1982; Wagner 1993b) or by “gradually altering structural conditions through small but meaningful acts” (Leach 2005). On a daily basis, working men and women resist and act within the family, work, and governmental institutions that structure their lives. Battles for respect and control over one’s labor illustrate that workers are not only victims of neoliberalism or economic decline but are actors who resist (and influence) the confines of low wages and bad work conditions (Anglin 1988; Anglin 2002; Wagner 1993a). Globalization and the growing gap between the rich and the poor threatens community democracy and access to powers of political change (Holland, et al. 2007; Williamson, et al. 2002) and also strains working class solidarity (Gill 2009). But the changing politico-economic climate is also creating new forms of activism (Checker and Fishman 2004) and new solidarities between private and nonprofit community organizations (Holland, et al. 2007; Nonini 2003) and between immigrant and labor-based organizers (Brodkin 2007).

Though neoliberalism and the national mainstreaming of right-wing populism strongly influence populist identities in Skowhegan, Maine, I also found ideas and practice that counter the neoliberal project. I thus draw from the above work by incorporating the everyday moments, ideas, and organized efforts that work against as well as alongside hegemonic ideas. This dissertation contributes to the above literature

by grounding this resistance and accommodation in the formation of mainstream identities.

Place: The Small Town

Despite its tradition in anthropology and its strong ideological location in popular cultures, the small town still holds a hidden place in social science, slipping between rural and urban, finding itself at both ends of the rural/urban continuum. As centers of exchange and service, small towns have been theoretically included in the vein of urban anthropology, though urbanists have more often focused on large cities (Hannerz 1980; Leeds 1994). Small towns have also been studied as the centers for *rural* life and have thus been taken up by rural sociology and anthropology (for example, Bell 1992; Salamon 2003a; Salamon 2003b).

Regardless of population size, “small town” connotes an ideological place of comfort, community, Americanness, and whiteness. With the image of small town comes stories of the industrious young who escape to see the world and the victims who are never able to escape. With active town meetings and politicians kept honest by their daily interactions with people, small town politics is thought to be closer to “real democracy.” In the popular imaginary of the small town, crime is kept in check by the watchful eye of the neighbor, the same watchful eye that combines with close community networks to prevent social privacy. When a murder or violent crime occurs in a small town, the media consistently portrays such events as unlikely and breaking the expectations for small town life (Frank 2003). As Katherine Newman found when studying school shootings, the association of small town life with safety and comfort can mislead

residents themselves, preventing recognition of signs of danger (Newman 2004).

Anthropology has contributed to this small town imaginary. Early scholarship on poor whites in rural Appalachia reinforced stereotypes of a culture of hopelessness and poverty (Tickamyer and Duncan 1990); but just as academics blamed poor urban and rural residents for their own poverty, they also lauded small town New Englanders as virtues of civic participation and responsibility. Several sociologists maintained that civic participation, social connections, hard work, and good schools keep residents out of poverty (Duncan 1999; Hughes 1960; MacLeish and Young 1942). The 1920s foundation of urban anthropology also contributed to the association of inequality, poverty, and social disorganization with urban life rather than industrialization effects which also significant in smaller communities (Hannerz 1980; Low 1996; Mullings 1987).

The discipline also developed and distinguished itself from sociology through the geographically and ideologically distant field site—first through the exotic distant village and later through the closer but often equally exoticized cities. From the 1930s to the 1950s, though, several social scientists used anthropological tools perfected in these distant villages, to “capture” and present an American way of life through research in the American town (Davis 1941; Dollard 1937; Lewis 1955; Morland 1958; Warner 1949; Warner and Lunt 1941; West 1945). Many community studies authors sought to reflect a greater American culture through one small town or city (Lassiter, et al. 2004). They lived among the “natives” and used participant observation and interviews in the spirit of turning the anthropological lens onto oneself. Sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd’s study of life and change in an Indiana town launched this American town genre in 1929

with *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (Lynd and Lynd 1957 [1929]). The Lynds meticulously described the domestic life, education, leisure, religion, and community activities of the people in this city of 38,000. Though *Middletown* was grounded in the town's transition to an industrial community, many studies of American towns muted or ignored macro processes and their impact on the community center. This led to treating class locally or regionally without discussing interactions with greater systems: "our system of class analysis was predicated on the assumption of an internal unity" (Goldschmidt 1955, 1210).

The false sense of small town community togetherness also distracts from structures of inequality, obscuring poverty and the lives of struggling workers (Carbonella 1996). Similarly, the small town imaginary conceals the stories of union representatives and businessmen arriving from South Africa and Holland. Central Maine is a place where poverty, welfare, workfare, and drug use proliferate, where global corporations invest and establish branches, and where business and community leaders implement neoliberal economic development projects. These economic and political processes are part of life in most towns and cities around the country; they simply do not match most people's vision of small town New England.

Place: Maine and Skowhegan

Between 1960 and 2000, Maine lost 45,000 jobs in natural resources and manufacturing and gained 346,000 jobs, 40 percent of which were in the service sector. Though hospital services, Wal-Mart, and fast food restaurants increasingly characterize the economy of the area, two of the areas largest employers are a shoe manufacturer,

New Balance, and a paper manufacturer, Sappi (South African Pulp and Paper Industries) North America. As of 2000, 25.3 percent of workers in Skowhegan were in manufacturing, while 24.3 had jobs in health and education services, 16.4 percent in wholesale and retail, and 15.8 in services other than health or education (Skowhegan 2010). Community leaders in surrounding towns have sometimes claimed that because of the wealth of Sappi and New Balance, Skowhegan's leaders find it unnecessary to cooperate with other towns on economic development efforts. Still, Skowhegan is no longer a mill town and, in the words of several town leaders looking to move the town toward a post-industrial identity, "Skowhegan doesn't know what it wants to be."

With a population of 8,831 people, Skowhegan is the most populated town in the Somerset County, which stretches from central Maine north to Canada. Seventy percent of all jobs in the county are located in four towns on the southern end of the county, of which Skowhegan is the largest. One informant dubbed the area a frontier because, except a few smaller towns and a collection of white water rafting and outdoor adventure companies, the next major town is 117 miles north in Saint Georges, Quebec. Despite the increase in unemployment and economic decline since 2007, the geography of class has changed little. Wealth is more heavily concentrated in the southern part of the state and town centers like Skowhegan are better off than the smaller outlying towns. Many of the smaller towns within a 30-minute drive from Skowhegan, towns with populations from a few hundred to almost five thousand, had 2006¹ unemployment rates close to 10 percent compared to Skowhegan's 2006 rate of 6.1 percent and the state rate of 4.6 percent

¹ But because the economic conditions around the nation changed dramatically since I conducted fieldwork in 2006 and 2007, I will use economic data from before the 2008 recession to describe the economic conditions during the 20 months that I conducted fieldwork. I will comment on the economic conditions in the Skowhegan area since the recession at the end of the dissertation.

(Kennebec Valley Council of Kennebec Valley Council of Governments 2007). The state is divided into “two Maines” (a term used by state economists and journalists), the prosperous counties on the southern coast and the interior northern counties. When I was conducting research, Cumberland, York, and Sagadahoc counties, located on the coast and closer to Boston, had the highest median household incomes (between \$48,264 and \$49,970 per capita annual income in 2005) and the lowest poverty rates (between 8.2 and 9.7 percent in 2007). Meanwhile Somerset county and Washington County, located on the south west corner of Maine bordering New Brunswick, had per capita incomes of \$32,000 and \$28,000 and poverty rates of 17.2 and 20.1 respectively (Acheson 2006; Acheson 2008b; Acheson 2009). “The Volvo line” (as one informant put it) separates southern Maine and its high levels of income, education and employment from interior and northern Maine.

The county’s unemployment rate, fluctuating between 6 percent and 9 percent when I was doing research, was often almost twice the state and national rates. At 25.3 percent, its 2005 child poverty rate was well above the national average of 18.5 percent (Acheson 2008b). Despite growth in the southern part of the state, Maine ranked 39th in 2006 per capita personal income (\$31,931 compared to a national average of \$36,629), a drop from a ranking of 32nd in 2004. In the state at large, more people held multiple jobs (8.2 percent) when compared to the national average (5.2 percent) (Maine Economic Growth Council 2008).

Maine has the oldest median age of any state in the country (42), a fact that is often repeated at community and economic development meetings. The aging population taxes the state with retirement and Medicare payments. Higher percentages of income in

Somerset County (27.6 percent) come from transfer payments (“payments for which no current services are performed”) when compared to national rates (14.7 percent) (Acheson 2008b). Though transfer payments include food stamps, TANF, Medicaid, and unemployment insurance benefits, government retirement and disability benefits and Medicare make up the largest portion of this income. Compared to ten and twenty years ago, fewer people are born in the state, more youth are leaving, and fewer are entering (Heminway 2002). Whereas the birth rate was comparable to the national average in 1960, it fell to 25 percent below the national average in 2000 (Sherwood and Mageean 2004) and the state ties Vermont in the smallest percentage of the population under age five (Miller 2009). For rural, in-land counties (like Somerset County), the low birth rate can be attributed in part to young adults leaving the area in their childbearing years. More people are moving to Maine than moving away (after years of higher out-migration), but for youth between the ages of 10 and 24, there is a net out-migration (Heminway 2002).

Analysts also fear that there will not be enough educated, young, middle-class professionals to cover the “good jobs” of the new economy (Heminway 2002). Throughout my research, statements such as “all of our young people are leaving” and “we need to create jobs that will enable our children to stay in Maine” were commonplace. Because I grew up in central Maine and was returning, many people considered me to be part of a small group of young people who were moving back to the area after going to college and working elsewhere. Such discussions, though, often left out the many young people who had stayed in central Maine since graduating from high school, getting jobs right away, going to community college, or getting married. Maine

anthropologist Ann Acheson reported hearing this described as a “brain drain” phenomenon, all the best young people moving away and leaving, as the saying goes, the “cream of the crap” behind (Acheson 2008a).

Despite its aging population, some characteristics of working class life mirror national characteristics. Twenty percent of Maine working families are single female headed households—just as twenty percent of the nation’s working families are headed by single women—and one third of low income families (those with incomes below 200 percent of the poverty level) are headed by single women (Wise 2008). Local adult workers are also often filling the low-wage, low-benefit jobs traditionally reserved for teenagers (Newman 1999). But unlike many areas of the United States, in Skowhegan, low-wage workers are primarily white and native born. Though in different regions of the state migrant laborers from Canada, Mexico, Central America, and Jamaica work picking apples, raking blueberries, and serving tourists in hotels, temporary immigrant workers are rarely visible in Skowhegan—with the exception of Central Americans who sometimes stop in town before traveling further north to work in the logging industry.

In what is, according to the 2000 census, the whitest state in the nation, 2.4 percent of Skowhegan residents² did not identify themselves as white. The percentage of people of color is less than one percent for many smaller surrounding communities. Despite their relatively small populations, people of color have been living and working in the state since its inception, serving as mayors of its largest cities and state senators

² About 280 people identified themselves as Black, American Indian, Asian, Pacific Islander, two or more races, another race, Hispanic or Latino (any race). With 95 people checking “two or more races” this was the most popular category, followed by Hispanic or Latino at 64 people.

and representatives.³ Describing Maine as a white state leaves out the historical and current presence of African Americans, Native Americans and other nonwhite Mainers as well as the stories of migrant workers and growing immigrant populations.

For the thousands of people living in the surrounding towns, Skowhegan is the urban center they travel to for food shopping, work, or school. In the communities north of town, many of which are as small as a few hundred people, if a sawmill, school, or other major employer closes, few if any options remain and commuting to Skowhegan becomes one of the best hopes for jobs. Students living in five bordering towns attend Skowhegan High School. Communities are not bounded places but, as Anthony Leeds described, are nuclei linked to other localities and to society at large so that “any city or town is part of a total system—a societal system of localities” (Leeds 1994, 55). While many of my informants lived in Skowhegan, some worked in the town but were not connected to the town’s politics or social network. Others grew up in the town but traveled elsewhere for work. This dissertation, then, is not only about the Skowhegan as defined by its geographical boundaries, but about the people who are connected to the town and to each other through the economy.

The story that the people of central Maine tell in the following chapters may have been told differently at a different time. As in other parts of the country, the banking and finance industries are increasing their power over capital in the state, well beyond the personal and housing credit markets. A private equity division of Fidelity Investments

³ People of African descent have been coming to and living in the area now known as Maine for as long as Europeans have, though their history and presence has largely been hidden (Talbot and Price 2006; Stakeman 1989). John Brown Russworm, one of the first African Americans to graduate from college went to Bowdoin College in Maine. Maine’s largest cities, Portland and Lewiston, now both have significant and growing populations of refugees from Somalia, Cambodia and the Sudan.

(Devonshire Investors of Boston) owns Backyard Farms, for example, a new tomato greenhouse and one of the biggest coups for local economic developers while I was in Skowhegan. The new 25-acre greenhouse built near Skowhegan employs more than 100 people. Investment firms also increasingly own forested land, an industry previously dominated by paper companies. This shift has rapidly increased in the last decade. In 1994, sixty percent of large tracts of land (those greater than 5,000 acres) were owned by the forest industry while financial investors owned 3 percent. By 2005, the forest industry owned only 15 percent of these tracts and financial investors owned 33 percent (Hagan, et al. 2005).

There are also many local, national, and global political events that influenced the lives of many people in the communities of central Maine while I was conducting research. The United States, for example, was engaged in the Iraq War. Periodically I was reminded of the impact of the war on the community, as when the fire department chief announced the return of a staff member from Iraq or on Sundays when a small group of protesters met on the bridge in the center of town with anti-war posters (part of the national “bridges of peace” campaign that began with the Iraq war in 2003). On occasion I heard people complain that the federal government was spending so much money on the war that there was little left for the local development projects. Support for the war was waning in the nation and in Somerset County during the years I was conducting fieldwork. The yellow flag “support our troupes” car decals that seemed omnipresent in the Skowhegan area in the years following September 11th were on sale for \$.25 at Wal-Mart in 2007 and have since disappeared. For those who did not have

close family and friends in the military, the war often slipped to the back of their minds.

A young shoe factory employee explained how the war drifts into the background:

I follow the war to a certain extent. But I guess I'm kind of set in my ways. It doesn't—it affects me, but it doesn't. We're going to have to pay for it one way or another, so, I don't know. ... You'll see it on the news. Or if you see another young person passed away over there but it's not a topic of conversation. [My friend] and I won't sit down and be like, "did you see all those people over there dying in that car bomb today."

Politically, Maine has been known for a balanced party divide, for electing moderate Democrats and Republicans, and for its growing number of independent voters. Republicans, though, dominated Maine politics until the 1950s and have recently come into power again (Palmer, et al. 2009; Potholm 1998). Though Skowhegan has a nearly equal number of voters registered as Democrats and Republicans, the town has previously shown support for conservative populist candidates. Skowhegan residents, and Mainers in general, were particularly strong supporters of Reform Party candidate Ross Perot. He had offered the people an explanation as to why they had been hurt by the 1991 recession: the "giant sucking sound" of American jobs being pulled overseas. Americans had a target in Chinese workers and elite, tax-happy politicians in Washington. Perot was one of the most successful third party candidates in recent history. In Maine he captured more votes than any other state (30 percent) and in Somerset County Perot garnered a greater percentage of votes than in all but four other counties in the nation, foreshadowing the region's proclivity toward populist politics.

On Methodology

The findings in this dissertation are based on 20 months of fieldwork in Skowhegan and its surrounding communities in 2006 and 2007. During this time, I was

active in municipal and community development organizations, worked at a golf course, and volunteered at several social service agencies (as I will describe in more detail below). I also conducted formal, tape-recorded interviews with 36 people, spending between one and a half and three hours on each interview. The voices of these 36 people are the most prominent in this dissertation, though I was also influenced by the informal interviews and ongoing conversations I had with people throughout my months of conducting research. Finally, I corroborated some of my initial findings from participant observation and interviews with a three-page community-wide anonymous survey, from which I garnered 206 responses.

Maintaining the anonymity of informants while including important and relevant identifying characteristics is particularly challenging in a small town. Often, even indicating a person's line of work or explaining how I came to meet an informant would easily reveal his or her identity. I have done my best to maintain the balance between anonymity and ethnographic detail by changing the names of informants and occasionally leaving out or altering other descriptive characteristics (such as the name of an employer). As a result, at times, descriptions are sometimes more general than I would like. I use the term "town leader," for example, when referencing many different types of local leaders, from a stay-at-home mom active in town politics to a local successful businessperson.

Skowhegan was familiar to me even before I began conducting research. I moved to there when I was in fifth grade and stayed until I graduated from high school. Since then, I have returned several times a year to visit with friends and family. My research began as I struggled to find a job in the first months of 2006. I would eventually teach a

course about American cultural diversity at the community college, occasionally substitute teach in and around Skowhegan, and work at the golf course owned by a family that was a friend of my brothers. I worked at the pro-shop, taking admission before people went golfing and serving them beer when they finished. Though I had hoped to be a part of conversations about jobs and the economy, golfers, it seems, mostly talk about golf. Still, through the job I met local politicians, religious leaders, teachers, and paper mill employees (at a cost of \$28 for a round of golf, the course was relatively affordable for those with middle incomes). The paper mill employees' schedules—working three long days followed by three days off—though exhausting, worked out well for golfers.

My familiarity with the area and its prominent leaders and groups helped me to gain quick access and acceptance at public community and municipal government meetings. I introduced myself in these group settings and made appointments to meet with representatives to explain my project and listen to people's initial ideas. Throughout my fieldwork, I volunteered weekly at the soup kitchen, housed in the basement of the Catholic Church's former school building. The soup kitchen served meals to a usual crowd of 15 to 35 people three days a week. The regulars included several working families and young adults but also many people who were retired or who had a mental illness and were living on a fixed income. Many of those who came to the soup kitchen used it as a supplement to food bought with food stamps or taken from the food cupboard in town. Despite the location, the crucifix and religious posters on the wall, the priest (who would stroll in a few times a year to check up on us), and the occasional proclamation that one should not swear in a house of God, religion was not a common

topic of conversation among volunteers or guests. We talked mostly about problems or updates with family, health, and work. We also talked about local politics (the building and financing of a new jail, the consolidation of schools, the greenhouse being built in Madison), and rumors about changes in the town—about the woman running for selectperson who had been convicted of embezzlement, about a new Wal-Mart coming in (which never happened) or a change in ownership at the Empire Grill (which did). I also became active in Main Street Skowhegan—a network of volunteers and one paid employee dedicated to strengthening and beautifying the downtown—and in an organization of religious groups and unions working to improve jobs in central Maine.

Most of the people I conducted formal interviews with were drawn from those I met at these and other field sites or from the recommendations of these informants. Though I tried to avoid using the information I learned from old friends, family, and classmates, they at times helped to connect me to informants. I conducted the anonymous written survey in the final month of my field work, distributing it at the soup kitchen, the golf course, the break lounge at McDonalds, a doctor's office, the hospital, and several laundry mats. The three-page survey asked questions that were based on responses from the interviews I had already conducted.

Being white and having grown up in Skowhegan, I had many of the benefits and drawbacks of being an “insider,” but as anthropologists have shown (Abu-Lughod 1991; Narayan 1993), researchers can never be complete “insiders.” I, for example, was not born in the area, nor were any members of my family. I moved to Skowhegan in fifth grade and I did not (like many ‘locals’) grow up going to school with my cousins or having birthday parties with aunts, uncles and grandparents. All of my extended family

lived out of state. Secondly, I had moved away and (worse yet) I was coming from New York City, a city associated with wealth, over-education, and snobbery. Though some admired the adventurousness of living in New York, saying, “I would love to move somewhere like that but I don’t think I ever could,” others would say, “I can’t stand going to the city” or “I like to visit but I would never want to live there.” Especially when I first began my fieldwork (and had only recently come from New York), I could easily have been seen as some sort of a “big shot” who thought she was better than others. The perception of the city as a place of wealth came up when I was meeting with a young woman, her children, and her mother in their home. When the seven-year-old brought over a remote control held together with duct tape, her mother said, “it’s broken. We have to get a new one.” Her grandmother laughed and added, “I duct taped that so that nobody gets cut. You wouldn’t see duct tape in a New York home, probably.” Third, depending on the context, I was a class outsider, both because of my education and connections to my middle class family. In elite and middle class social networks, my education and status as “an anthropologist,” helped me to gain entrance and respect. I became more of an insider in some social groups than I had ever been when I was growing up in this community.

The degree to which I was an insider was both a help and a hindrance to my research. I often found myself working with committees (on tourism, economic development, community heritage, for example) that my father had been active on before he retired from his 20-year position as the adult education program director. I was quickly welcomed into most of these groups, not as a distant researcher, but as my father’s daughter. For those who did not know my family or me, talking about my

history in the town usually made people more open and comfortable (as when people would say, “oh, I didn’t know you were a local girl”). Informants give up their anonymity when they start talking to researchers, so giving up who *I* was—and placing myself in local social and religious networks, for example—helped to even the researcher/informant relationship. I also started research with a general sense of the well-known people, organizations and events from the last 20 years. This helped me to quickly understand local gossip and to pay attention to the often-covert class-related differences.

On the other hand, residents made assumptions about what I knew or what I understood. Those who knew me, even tangentially, before I began doing research may have shaped their talk based on what they thought I might want to hear, avoiding blatantly racist or sexist comments, for example. Though this did not weed out all racism and sexism, it may have led to more “careful” talk, especially during formal interviews. Finally, after a year and a half of research, when I was still being introduced, not as an anthropologist, a student, or a researcher, but as “André’s daughter,” I worried that in some contexts, residents were not guarded enough.

This is an ethnography of the interactions of ideas and practice evident in the daily lives of the people of the communities of central Maine; interactions between the middle class and the working class (and their perceptions of each other), between ideas and practice, between work and home, and between the individual and the community. Because I wanted to learn about the class perceptions of people in various economic and social positions in the community, I reached out to people in a variety of jobs and status positions: local government and community leaders; owners and managers of local

companies; low and high-wage blue and white collar workers; and unemployed workers and welfare recipients. Though I was able to interview people in each of these categories, my middle class connections guided me toward middle class informants, especially at the beginning of my fieldwork. Those in positions of power—local government officials, owners or managers of companies, and leaders working to improve the town—understood why I wanted to talk to them about the changes in the economy or their thoughts on how the area should plan for the future. It took a concerted effort to roll my snowball sample in another direction. I sought out existing and new working class informants and usually explained that I not only wanted to talk to economic development officials but to “everyday working people.” Some working class people still had a discomfort or guardedness about being interviewed or becoming involved.

Throughout the dissertation, I use “low-wage worker” to refer to someone who is working for minimum wage or slightly higher and “well-paid worker” or “blue-collar middle class” to refer to those who have paper mill jobs and other well-paying jobs that do not require advanced degrees. I use both “middle class” and “elite” to describe business owners, local politicians, and well-paying high status jobs such as doctors and lawyers. Though such social categories are essential for a social science analysis, people cannot be easily sorted into groups. Though these categories inform my understanding of populism as a response to economic decline, they cannot encompass the diversity of informants’ lived experiences, or my own class-informed experiences as a researcher. People “have lives that shoot through overly rigid, static, either-or-designations of class” (Jackson 2001, 86). Which class vocabulary, for example, could best describe the single mother who does not have a degree beyond high school but grew up in a middle class

family and is proud of being able to use public assistance in order to remain active in her child's life? Or the family who struggled for fifteen years, getting by on food stamps and occasional state supplements until their children were old enough to support themselves and both parents found well-paying jobs. How people define their own class is also influenced by the categories social scientists use (Wilensky 1966). Social scientists and everyday people use "class" to talk about a variety of different phenomena and to explain a variety of economic divisions. Most commonly, when Americans refer to class, they refer primarily to a distribution of wealth and goods. The objective theories of social science and the folk models of everyday life cannot be neatly differentiated. Though class categories may imply a static picture, I hope that the ethnographic detail in the pages of this dissertation provides enough information about a person to reveal the false boundaries of the category.

Chapter Organization

The following chapters trace the making of populist identities in Skowhegan through historical economic change, work in the new economy, community development efforts, perceptions of lazy workers, small town politics, and stated beliefs about individualism. Chapter Two begins with an introduction to Skowhegan and then traces the formation of class through the economic history of the town and its people. Using original data from interviews as well as secondary sources, I focus on the concept of independence and its relationship to class. Though the early American farmer, small businessman, and logger are still called upon as exemplars of independent masculinity, this independence took on meaning in relationship to "untamed" Native Americans and

enslaved people. As central Mainers became more entrenched in wage labor, the meaning of independence shifted to include those laboring under a boss (Fraser and Gordon 1996), though not without resistance.

Middle American populisms draw heavily on two interrelated beliefs: 1. the importance of hard work and struggle; and 2. the faith in the individual as responsible for his or her own economic future. I address the concepts of hard work and work ethic in Chapter Three and return to discuss individualism at the end of the dissertation. In Chapter Three, I analyze the challenges of the current labor force through the lives of three Skowhegan workers. These workers' stories illustrate the experience of being forced out of an industry, of working for a company that could close at any time, and of moving from one low-wage job to another. I then address how the importance of hard work is maintained under these new work conditions. Alongside changes that have made it more difficult for working class people to make a living, there has been an ideological change, a concentrated effort on the part of states and corporations to renew faith in the work ethic through employee monitoring, local and national soft skills "training," and media campaigns that laud the good worker and demonize welfare recipients. Several scholars have approached working class focus on hard work as a sort of resistance to the consumerism of corporate capitalism (Doukas 2003) or as an attempt to maintain a sense of morality and family life through poverty and economic insecurity (Newman 1999; Newman 2006; Sherman 2009). Though I agree that hard work contributes to individual pride and sense of morality, in this chapter I argue that employers and government programs assure that hard work continues to be a central value for low-wage laborers.

Chapter Four describes how disagreements over how to imagine the future of Skowhegan help to define “the people” against optimistic community leaders. The optimists, a primarily middle-class group of newcomers and locals, envision a community with a vibrant downtown, new employers, a bustling farmers market, and a growing stratum of “professionals.” According to local, state, and national community development organizations this vision, supported by the small town imaginary and the myth of the Maine hard worker, helps to maintain the town’s “quality of life,” making it attractive to outside investors and corporations seeking a new home. The powers of local status networks and outside capital thus privilege this optimistic vision of Skowhegan. Working class residents along with some business leaders and local politicians see this middle class plan for the town as an outsider-motivated aim to change “their” town. They thereby define themselves as ordinary residents in contrast to the new vision and the people who propose it. Optimists respond by deeming detractors pessimistic, backward, and unwilling to accept the inevitable change of globalization, further distinguishing themselves from the skeptical populists.

Chapters Five and Six describe how concepts of white workers and “the people” homogenize different class interests. I ask why poor and working class Skowhegan residents do not rise up against those who blame them for the town’s problems, looking specifically at how populism unites workers and the middle class as one group. Though many residents blame segments of workers for economic decline, in Chapter Five I suggest that these problem workers are able to see themselves in the myth of the white American worker and are thus deterred from questioning their class position. American conservative populisms often describe struggle as valiant and moral,

particularly when followed by redemption. When combined with whiteness and the myth of the white worker, this allows even poor Skowhegan residents to consider themselves to be “ordinary hardworking Mainers.” In addition, the image of the white worker (as well as the sense that poor whites are “not black”) is strong enough that their “whiteness” is not threatened. This chapter therefore counters whiteness scholars’ claim that poor whites are “less white” because they do not have the economic privileges of middle and upper class whites.

Because populisms are often defined by the distinction between the ordinary folks and the elite, they are often presumed to reveal class discontent. In Chapter Six I show how local populist politics conflate working class interests with that of middle-class and elite business owners, obscuring the role of class in appeals to “the people.” A budget dispute at a Skowhegan town meeting demonstrates how elites use distrust for local government and working class language and dress, defining “the people” as taxpayers concerned with overspending. Though class impacts local calls for decreased spending and smaller government, populist rhetoric minimizes class and hides the elite interests that benefit from these policies.

Finally, individualist ideologies have been one of the many explanations for the lack of a working class political movement in the United States and have also been regarded as the driving force behind recent populist insurgencies (Lilla 2010). But individualism and independence are “invented traditions.” Michaela di Leonardo argues that sociological studies of individualism as an American cultural trait and threat to community are in fact reporting a white, male, middle-class perspective (di Leonardo 1998). In Chapter Seven I dissect the explanations of class, individualism, and mobility

of white, middle and working class men and women in Skowhegan. I argue that residents have both individualist and class-conscious interpretations of their economic situation and that it is ultimately how these beliefs are organized that is most important.

CHAPTER TWO

The Historical Formation of Independence and Class

Don and Betsy, both in their late 70s, have been around long enough to watch their town change through cycles of prosperity and hardship. They have raised three grown children and have both worked in the shoe shop (a term used to refer to any of the several shoe factories in the area) along with a collection of other jobs, including his work as a logger and a cab driver and hers as a diner cook and an office worker. Don continues to work part-time doing grounds maintenance to supplement their Social Security income. They, like many others of their generation, harken back to a day when the town was bustling with business and life was better:

Betsy: You know where the shopping center is right down on East Front Street and Waterville Road, as you're at the lights? There used to be a woolen mill right from the corner, all the way up to where the shoppin' center ends...And another one, way over down the hill you can't travel anymore. That was a woolen mill.

Don: Where New Balance is now that used to be a stitching company.

B: ...And we had shoe shops. There used to be one on North Avenue, there was one on...

D: Where Howard Fairfield⁴ is?

B: Where the drapery factory is now, there used to be one there. There used to be one on Spring Street. Mr. Medwood had one. There was one in Norridgewock.

D: ...There was one in Harmony [outside of Skowhegan]. Like I say, everybody used to work in the shoe factory. It was not big money but everyone was working doing something. That was part of why everybody got along. It was better. Then, as they [the factories] were starting going out, everybody started working in stores or, you know, a different aspect of work.

⁴ Howard P. Fairfield makes snowplows, tractors and other municipal equipment.

Their vision of Skowhegan was one of a decline. The loss of manufacturing jobs, the decline or stagnation of wages, and the rise of the cost of living created a community in which many people are struggling. Don believed changes in the economy prompted a downward slide in the town, saying, “if there was more work, there’d be a lot less problems.” Still, when asked to explain why people are without work, both Don and Betsy blamed workers for not having a strong work ethic, for being satisfied with welfare dependency, and for not teaching their children the value of work or respect for their employers. Don believed poor parenting was giving rise to welfare dependency, crime, and underemployment.

Gordon is about the same age as Don and Betsy and also spent five years working at one of the shoe shops in the 1950s. He started working there, in part, to join his wife, who has since died. After the shoe shop, Gordon worked construction in the summers and later worked in the post office, where he saw his salary double after the 1970 postal strike. He, like Don, continues to do seasonal grounds maintenance, trying—and usually succeeding—to outperform the teenagers with whom he works. When I first told him I was doing research about changes in the economy in the area, Gordon responded that he did not think people’s lives had really changed that much:

Gordon: Oh, you don’t see it. People don’t see it around here. Nothing’s changed. It’s not any worse....There are people who are struggling, but there always have been people struggling.

Claudine: Even in the big heyday of Skowhegan?

Gordon: Yea. Oh yea. There’s always poor people.

It is not that Gordon did not notice the changes in the industry in the area. When I interviewed him more than a year later, he talked about how the area had lost a great deal of paper mill jobs due to automation and how it was hard to find a good job now. But after spending almost 70 years working, after watching his parents work on their farm and in the textile mills, and now watching his children struggle, he concluded that you can never really get ahead by working, you can only just “get by.” In fact, Gordon believed that someone with no money, no family to support, and nothing to lose, probably has a better chance of “making it” than a working man or woman. The worker just keeps working; scraping by day after day, month after month.

Don and Gordon’s different interpretations of life in Skowhegan highlights two economic contexts that influenced conceptions of class and independence in this small town: the impact of economic restructuring on the town and its people and the consistent unequal power relationship between workers, employers, and government leaders. Economic restructuring in Skowhegan is generally similar to that experienced in most American communities: settlement, industrialization, post-industrialization and the economic booms and busts of each era. Employers’ power over workers affects how this economic restructuring occurs. As each industry declined, from textiles to shoe factories to the last remaining paper mill, companies protected profit by cutting workers’ pay and benefits and threatening to close their doors, move south, overseas, or outsource if workers complained or demanded more from their employers. And new industries have moved to the area particularly when cheap labor is available, from the woolen mills of the post-Civil War depression to the recent arrival of a giant indoor nursery for tomatoes. How these changes occurred is also particular to small northern New England towns.

Extraction industries like logging provided the capital for the transition to manufacturing. Whereas in the Southern United States, goods were often directly produced or harvested by slave labor, in New England mills sometimes used southern-picked cotton to produce cloth. Factories in central Maine were also smaller than the complexes in southern New England or the Midwest, making Skowhegan's story different from that of the company town.

How people of central Maine go about making a living has changed; but, whether working in textile mills, big box stores, or schools, workers have been working and employers have been managing pay and work conditions. "There's always poor people," as Gordon put it, and, on the flip side, as long as there has been wage labor, there have been elites benefiting from this labor—whether the local "self-made man," the entrepreneurs migrating from the large mill towns of southern New England, or the far-away owner of Wal-Mart. "The independent worker" has taken on its (ever changing) meaning through the relationships between workers and owners, between Native Americans and the white settlers and through the economic change which shaped these relationships. This chapter traces the ongoing formation of class and the concomitant formation of the "independent worker" through structural economic change in the community and the changing relationships between workers and employers.

Defining Class

Through this story of class formation, I also explain my approach to the study of class in Skowhegan. Class is formed through the tension between the simple inequality attached to a job—the imbalance of power between the owner of a large corporation and

its minimum wage employees—and the overlapping layers of status, authority, and racial, ethnic, and gender difference. On the one hand, global and national economic and political forces shape class in Skowhegan: industrialization, national economic depressions, slavery and immigration policy. The decisions of Wall Street investors, of Sappi owners and executives in South Africa, of the Boston-based owners of New Balance have tremendous effects on the lives of Skowhegan residents. On the other hand, small business owners' and middle class volunteers' power to define the interests of the town affects the experience of class in Skowhegan.

A relatively small number of people hold the majority of capital and power in the world and it is they who primarily determine the conditions under which the rest of workers will survive. Wealth, and the control of the means to produce wealth, is held increasingly in the hands of a few. Workers have resisted and adapted to the elites and the confines of industrial wage work. They have accepted their positions, masking the dependent, unequal relationship between employers and employees by imbuing wage work with independence and masculinity. For low-wage laborers, even the “heyday” of industrialization did not enable independence from employers; but Skowhegan area workers have also demanded higher wages, organized with the Industrial Workers of the World, and fought off the Ku Klux Klan. Class is also experienced and lived through race, and gender but also through status, culture, and political and social power.

Rather than homogeneous blocks of common interest, “class and classness are better understood in terms of relations that develop historically within a social field” (Wolf 1999, 65). The meaning of “middle class” or “working class,” then, is shaped by historical events particular to the United States, Maine, and Skowhegan. The meanings

of independence and masculinity were also created alongside class, helping to shape and being shaped by the formation of working and middle classes in, for example, the transition from farming, crafts and small businesses to wage labor. The meaning of independence also formed in opposition to Native Americans (viewed as overly independent undisciplined savages), enslaved people, and paupers. In this chapter and throughout the dissertation, then, I emphasize how race, gender, and social status influence the experience and the creation of class.

Welcome to Skowhegan

When traveling from the South toward Skowhegan, on most days, you will know when you have crossed the town line when you notice that rotting-egg smell, well known to residents of paper mill towns. Most people in the area do not mind the smell. It's only on particularly heavy or overcast days that the smell travels into town and the paper mill, now Sappi Fine Paper North America, employs 840 people. Sappi is not the only paper mill in the area. There is another paper mill 10 miles away in neighboring Madison, a town of 4,600 people. A collection of investors, including Calvin Coolidge, built a sulfite pulp mill on this site in the late 19th century. Madison Paper Industries, now owned by the Finnish company, Myllykoski, supplies paper for the New York Times.

Some of the wealthier people in town live on this route between Waterville and Skowhegan, just north of Sappi. Their houses are closer to the river and set back from the warehouse-like businesses with particleboard siding next to the road. Five miles down the road, past the drive-in movie theatre, as the businesses and homes get closer together but before you get to "the lights," is New Balance. New Balance employs 740

people in the area, 365 in Skowhegan and more than 375 in the nearby town of Norridgewock. In Skowhegan, a large parking lot separates New Balance from the road. Its factory store is in an old elementary school, across the parking lot from the five-story brick building, where workers make men's running shoes. The yard in front of it is recently landscaped with picnic benches, trees, and paths, but the thump and clank of the machines inside remind the passer-by that this is a working factory. In fact, long before New Balance came to town, there was a woolen mill in this same building.

The neighborhood behind New Balance, the South Side, stretches back to the river with homes packed closer together than in other parts of town, indicative of former mill housing. During the industrial boom of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, this section of town was a working class, mostly French-Canadian neighborhood. On the north side of the river, the town was divided between Madison Avenue, where more Protestant and more middle class residents lived, and North Avenue, which housed more French Catholic workers. Both the South Side and North Avenue are still primarily working class neighborhoods with three and four family apartment buildings interspersed with middle class single-family homes. It is also common for a doctor, lawyer or teacher to live beside a Wal-Mart employee or someone who they suspect is unemployed or "living off the state." The lack of zoning laws also means that houses, churches, and businesses are interspersed. Two roads that climb hills out of town and a few other streets in town are known for their large houses owned by relatively wealthy families. In this part of central Maine, 17 percent to 24 percent of homes are trailers (depending on the town). These long and narrow, single floor, inexpensive homes are packed together in trailer parks or dispersed in neighborhoods and

rural roads. Skowhegan, like many towns, has several trailer parks, which vary in size, upkeep, space between trailers, and reputation for violence and police presence. Trailers and small homes are scattered among larger, manicured middle class homes on the outskirts of town and in small communities surrounding Skowhegan. The closest neighbor might be a few yards or a few miles away.

The Kennebec River and the two bridges that cross it geographically divide the town of Skowhegan. Tourists drive through town on the way to the coast, Quebec, or Maine's western mountains. Waterville, a college town and similarly deindustrializing city of 20,000, is within commuting distance at 20 miles south of town. Drivers compete with large, 18-wheel trucks hauling up to 100,000 pounds of logs or pulp, transporting their product from the northern forest to paper mills and sawmills.

Skowhegan's name is said to come from the Abenaki settlers' designation of this location on the Kennebec as "a place to watch" for fish. Past the Height Chevrolet Dealership, in the parking lot behind the Cumberland Farms gas station, is one of Skowhegan's most famous landmarks, locally known as "the Indian." A graduate of Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Berdard Langlais, created this 62-foot tall wooden sculpture in 1969, deemed the "Worlds Tallest Indian" by Roadside America. Local perceptions of Native Americans are firmly located in the past and called upon to represent the town. The high school maintains an Indian mascot, for example, and the two plaques on "the Indian" read, "Dedicated to the Maine Indians, the first people to use these lands in peaceful ways," and "Copyright 1969, Skowhegan Hospitality Association." The town of Madison, just upriver from Skowhegan, celebrates Father Rasse Days every August, holding a parade and lobster bake in honor of the French Jesuit

missionary killed in a 1724 English attack. The English raid killed as many as 80 Abenaki and burned much of their village. The Madison celebration honors Rasle as a heroic and peace-loving man who was adored by the Abenaki people. Some Native American legends, however, remembered him as a traitor who was paid off by the English to give up the people of Norridgewock (Eckstorm 1934).

Across the parking lot from “the Indian,” in front of the former county jail,⁵ in a three story large white building, is one of the town’s five bars. For years it was called the KVI (Kennebec Valley Inn), where people of various ages drank in excess at picnic-like tables, listened to country and classic rock music, and maybe rode the electronic bull. If you arrived at KVI close to midnight on a weekend, you would probably find several of people with glazed eyes stumbling and laughing or arguing, and you might get invited to a house party up the street. When I was conducting fieldwork, this same old building was a bar and dance club called Rumors that played hip-hop and pop music on Friday and Saturday nights. The bar retained its rough edge (evidenced by several holes kicked in the wall) and was said to be a hot spot for drug activity.

A century earlier, when the lumber mills and woolen mills were at their peak, Rumors was the Maine Central Hotel, where businessmen traveling to a town of much wealth and promise would stay. An early 20th century Skowhegan publication described the hotel:

Good rooms, excellent food and courteous attention are always guaranteed and the house has become the popular stopping place for commercial travelers, who are keen to appreciate the comfort of a homelike place...The house is steam heated, equipped with

⁵ The country jail was still operating in this old building when I was conducting research. As I will discuss elsewhere in the dissertation, the jail has since moved to the outskirts of town (into neighboring Madison). The former jail is currently being converted into a gristmill and is the site of the weekly farmers’ market.

all modern conveniences, such as electric lights, baths, reading and writing rooms, a ladies' parlor, etc. and a dining room has a seating capacity of 30. (Sibald n.d.)

When this description was written, Skowhegan was an up and coming town. Manufacturing success was creating a place where elite businesspeople and travelers mingled. The strong manufacturing sector supported Skowhegan's downtown businesses, banks, hotels, and clothing shops. The town has since survived the loss of the textile industry, the growth of shoe industry, and the decline and rebirth (and decline again) of lumber and paper industries. In the second part of this chapter, I turn to the formation of class and the shifting meaning of independence from one economic era to another.

The Independent Worker

I will begin by talking about an era in which wage work was less common, considering the historical significance of the independent farmer and logger and the sort of mythical status these occupations would develop. Farming and logging were idealized even as they incorporated wage work. Nationally, the trope of the hardworking, independent farmer is so strong that it hides the important role of wage labor and slave labor in food production (Fink 1998). Farmers and woodsmen are still deemed beacons of masculine rugged individualism (Campbell, et al. 2006), despite (and perhaps because of) the hard, dangerous work they do, and despite the important contributions of women to farming in New England (Sachs 1983; Snow 2003).

Independence and Dependence Before the Factories

The mythical roots of American individualism and manhood can be found in the pre-industrial era; the era of the small businessmen, independent loggers, and skilled craftspeople, during which fewer people worked for wages. The first residents of European descent in central Maine were subsistence farmers who moved to the area from present-day Massachusetts in the 1770s. In the next century, the area slowly developed, its residents primarily working for themselves as farmers, lumberjacks, potters, carpenters and other craftspeople. European settlers harvested timber from the central Maine forests to build their homes and farming equipment. Men then worked in the woods cutting trees for saw mills or worked in the gristmills and tanneries. Women continued to work at home spinning wool into yarn and began to work for wages in the first spinning mills of the early 1800s.

Logging has been associated with independent masculinity due to its isolation from women and family and the required strength and danger involved in the work of lumberjacks. Lumbermen lived in isolated camps in the northern woods, working in deep snow and below zero temperatures. As the industry developed, workers guided logs down the river in the spring to move them from the woods to the sawmills in the towns. This work was famously so dangerous that “one false step, a faltering nerve, a miscalculation of the eye, was enough to send the driver into the water to be drowned or bruised and ground beyond recognition by the churning logs” (Jensen 1971 [1945], 36). This danger and isolation prompted historian Vernon Jensen to write, in 1945, that “nowhere in our broad diversified economy can an industry be found that has been any

more ‘American’” (Jensen 1971 [1945], 18). The dangerous and strenuous manual labor, then, is both characteristically masculine and American.

The tough, independent masculinity of logging continues to be called upon today as evidenced by the explosion of reality television programs in the late 2000s: *AxMen*, *American Loggers*,⁶ and *Swamp Loggers*. These shows go inside the logging industry; emphasizing a masculine control over nature and machinery and the danger of loosing thousands of dollars from inclement weather, muddy roads, and befuddled employees. The History Channel describes *AxMen* with a masculinity and Americanism that is similar to that described by Vernon Jensen more than sixty years earlier: “Danger is a full-time job, as these brave men put everything on the line each and every day to retrieve the timber with which we build our country” (The History Channel 2009).

As Protestants, according to Max Weber, settlers chastised idleness and worked hard because they had a moral and religious duty to do so and because they were promised the reward of salvation (Weber 1992 [1930]). But the hard work, independence and freedom that we today associate with the farmer, the independent logger and the small businessman, are not inherently tied to these professions. According to Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon the pre-industrial concept of “dependency” did not have the same individualistic, immoral connotation that it carries today. Rather, it denoted a social relationship, as when a colony is dependent on its colonizers and when workers, enslaved people, and serfs are dependent on their employers, owners or kingdom to make a living.

⁶ The reality show filmed in northern Maine is titled *American Loggers* even though many workers in the North Woods are not American. The French accents of the Canadian and Franco-American loggers are not often addressed on the show and the “pre-commercial thinners,” the mostly Central American migrant workers who clean out brush to facilitate tree growth, are completely hidden.

It is these dependent relationships, particularly white settlers' contrast to enslaved people, Native Americans, and poor whites that gave meaning to the independence of land-owning whites (Buck 2001).

Land taken from Native Americans and granted to settlers thus enabled Europeans to become independent farmers, loggers, and craftspeople. Colonists settled first in coastal Maine. Though missionaries and explorers had followed the river north, most of inland Maine remained New England frontier until the mid to late 18th century.⁷ Long before the first European settlers—Joseph Weston, Jonathan Oakes, and Peter Heywood—traveled from Massachusetts to what is now the center of town in Skowhegan, the Kennebec Abenakis lived along the river.⁸ By the time the Westons and Heywoods arrived, Abenaki attempts to fend off the English by allying with the French had failed. Warfare had decreased the Abenaki population and sent others north and east toward Canada. Still, early settlers lived alongside native people. English settlers just north of Skowhegan reported that most of the native people died of small pox shortly after their arrival and the remaining survivors emigrated upriver (Hanson 1989 [1849]).⁹

In 1769 the Plymouth Company advertised that it would give away land along the Kennebec to those willing to develop it. For the elite owners and political leaders of the Plymouth Company, the land of what is now central Maine would be useful and

⁷ Though the lives of doctors, lawyers, ministers and businesspeople are recounted in local histories, it is more difficult to learn the details of lives of the marginal working class and poor people and particularly of people of color. Little is told about the lives of paupers in Skowhegan, for example, unless they were involved in a controversy. One history book, for example, tells only of a 13-year old girl who was convicted of murdering a 3-year old boy in the first capital trial in the county in 1827. Both were paupers “in the family of Andrew Lovell” (Hanson 1989, 357).

⁸ This naming has varied in spelling and pronunciation depending on whether accounts are from the French or English.

⁹ In French and Indian wars, Abenaki sided with the French, in part, it is said, because clashes with English settlers were more violent than their relationships with French missionaries.

profitable only if developed into towns, where settlers would be responsible for defending their new territory from Abenaki. The new settlers not only created a buffer between the elites (hired by English royalty) and Abenaki, but free land propelled settlers into an agrarian middle class (Buck 2001; Rolde 2004). Peter Heywood owned the first mill in what is now Skowhegan and by 1833, Samuel Weston (the son of the first settler) was an officer at the first bank of Skowhegan. His descendants would help to launch the town's First National Bank in 1863. English settlers changed the habitat by clearing land and harvesting timber and also threatened livelihood of natives by hunting, depleting food sources and revenue-producing furs. In 1769, the same year as the Plymouth Company's advertisement for free land along the Kennebec, three Penobscot leaders (who lived east of the Kennebec and the Abenaki people) were forced to seek economic assistance in the form of land for their people from the Governor of Massachusetts¹⁰ (Rolde 2004).

In contrast to the independence of the farmer, Native Americans were seen as too free and too independent. Abenaki survived by hunting, fishing, and gardening. They moved seasonally while European settlers homesteaded, enclosing private land, growing food and grazing sheep and goats. Abenaki forms of subsistence violated European men's duty to provide for their families (Silverman 2003). Whites viewed the independence of Native Americans pejoratively and used this to rationalize taking Native American land (Roediger 1991). Michael Kimmel has argued that forcing Native Americans into a paternalistic relationship with the state, enabled white farmers and

¹⁰ The Penobscot leaders (Espequent, Anson, and Arexes) explained to Governor Bernard, "We should be glad of a sufficiency at present for our hunting but as hunting is daily decreasing, we would be glad of a tract of land assigned for a township settled upon us and our posterity for the purposes of husbandry" (quoted in Rolde 2004, 138)

artisans to see themselves as independent (Kimmel 2006 [1996]). That is, when Abenaki Indians entered into a dependent relationship with the American government, white farmers had no need to be threatened by their independence.

Though the area that is now Maine always had a relatively small population of people of African decent, enslaved Africans' dependent relationship with people of European descent still affected the meaning of dependency for white farmers, loggers, and businessmen. European settlers throughout the colonies forced Africans into dependent relationships with whites. Slavery was such a prominent institution of the colonies and early republic that it affected even the first white residents of central Maine. The slave-owning elite and the slave trade were concentrated in the older costal towns of southern Maine, particularly before the mid-18th century (Talbot and Price 2006). Central Maine's earliest white residents, though, were migrants from Massachusetts and southern Maine who would have been familiar with concepts like "slave labor." In the early 1900s, many black Mainers arrived from Canada, probably descendents of escaped slaves, freedmen, and loyalists who had been resettled to Canada after the revolution (Elgersman Lee 2005; Stakeman 1989). Though their stories are diverse, African Americans came to Maine (whether as visitors or permanent residents) as seamen, railroad porters, coachmen, loggers, servants, cooks, and waiters (Elgersman Lee 2005; Talbot and Price 2006). The black population in central Maine remained small and has not been well documented.¹¹ Geographical place names such as "negro bridge" testify to

¹¹ Though the lives of doctors, lawyers, ministers and businesspeople are recounted in local histories, it is more difficult to learn the details of lives of the marginal working class and poor people, and particularly of people of color. Little is told about the lives of paupers in Skowhegan, for example, unless they were involved in a controversy. In 1827, in the first capital trial in the county, a 13-year old girl was convicted of murdering a 3-year old boy. Both were paupers "in the family of Andrew Lovell." (Hanson 1989, 357).

the presence of black residents in rural central Maine towns. Many of these offensive place names remained in effect until the 1970s. Census research documents a black population in Skowhegan and surrounding towns in the 19th century, though in any given census between 1820 and 1870, none of the towns of Somerset County listed more than 15 people as Free Colored Persons, Black, Mulatto or Colored (Talbot and Price 2006). At the time local historian Helen Coburn¹² wrote her two-volume history of Skowhegan in the late 1930s and early 1940s, Skowhegan's black residents included a singer, an oilcloth factory worker and a restaurant owner. Several of the black residents Coburn described were children, presumably servants, who lived with local elites (including a judge and a Colonel's sister) for only a few years before moving away. Coburn refers to one resident as "Jane Johnson, more commonly called Jane Darky" (Coburn 1941, 201).

Though white farmers and early independent loggers were not dependent on the wage rates, working conditions, and commands of employers, many still struggled to support themselves. Widows, the elderly, those who suffered from mental or physical illnesses or who were for any reason unable care for themselves and their families became dependent on their municipality. These paupers were given "outdoor relief" (monetary support that allowed them to stay in their own home) or joined others who could not support themselves on a poor farm, where they worked as farmers under the guidance of a town-appointed director (Piven and Cloward 1971; Wagner 2005). Local taxes supported poor farms, though the farms also operated as businesses, occasionally making a profit. Beginning in 1839, Skowhegan sent its poorest residents to the town farm (Hanson 1989 [1849]). The farm closed in 1951 after state and national programs

¹² Helen Coburn was the niece of Abner Coburn who, as I describe below, was a key figure in the logging industry.

like Social Security began to replace local aid (Martin 1983). Towns and cities larger than Skowhegan also committed paupers to the more punitive penitentiary or workhouses, where hard work was expected to reform the moral characters of the poor. In the mid-nineteenth century, elites campaigned against outdoor relief, claiming that it would lead to moral inferiority and corrupt the “desire of honest independence” (Wagner 2005). Though most farmers could easily become dependent on aid through an illness or death of a spouse, this period marked a transition toward a public perception of dependency as moral inferiority (Fraser and Gordon 1996).

Indeed, Maine law testifies to the blurred line between poverty and criminality. In addition to drunkards and beggars, towns could jail idle persons guilty of “neglecting their callings or employments, [or] misspending what they earn.”¹³ In small towns, paupers were auctioned off to farms that could use their labor or given away at town meetings, their fate decided by town officials or the voting public. After death, medical students autopsied and dissected the bodies’ of paupers. Unless a family claimed and took responsibility for burying a pauper after his or her death, town officials, officers at almshouses, prisons, and hospitals, were required to contact appointed physicians and

¹³ Houses of Correction: Revised Statutes 1930, Chapter 153
 Sec. 6. Rogues, vagabonds, idle persons, etc. may be committed. R.S. 1916, c. 143, sec 6
 “A municipal or police court, or trial justice in his county, on complaint under oath may commit to jail or to the house of correction in the town where the person belongs or is found, for a term of not more than ninety days, all rogues, vagabonds, and idle persons going about in any town in the county, begging; persons using any subtle craft, jugglery, or unlawful physiognomy, palmistry, to tell destinies or futures, or to discover lost or stolen goods; common pipers, fiddlers, runaways, drunkards, night-walkers, railers, brawlers, and pilferers; persons wanton or lascivious in speech or behavior, or neglecting their callings or employments, misspending what they earn and not providing for the support of themselves and their families, all idle and disorderly persons having no visible means of support, neglecting all lawful calling or employment and misspend their time by frequenting disorderly houses, houses of ill fame, gaming-houses, or tippling shops.”
 (Carruthers 1940, 23)

state officials “to take and remove any and all such bodies to be used within the state for the advancement of medical education” (Carruthers 1940).

Though white male paupers were dependent on municipalities and even had little ownership over their bodies at death, enslaved people were not eligible for this state of dependency and white women’s eligibility was contingent upon the settlement of her husband or father. White women received outdoor aid, but they had to do so through the settlement of their husbands or fathers. If a woman was committed to a mental hospital, for example, the town where her husband lived (rather than the town of her own residence) would be required to cover her expenses, even if they had not lived together for years (Burkett 1916). Court records also show that “the wife of a slave” in Maine was denied support on the ground that neither a woman nor an enslaved person was eligible to establish a settlement.¹⁴

Despite the New England tradition of town meeting politics, as in other parts of the country, political participation was limited to white, male property owners during the early years of the republic, making voting and public participation an elite activity. In 1820, the year Maine separated from Massachusetts and entered the union as a free state as part of the Missouri Compromise, men who did not own property were for the first time able to vote. Poll taxes and restrictions on voting for those who received aid prevented the poorest residents from voting. An 1830 Maine Supreme Court case carefully defined paupers to keep them from voting, declaring that even if paupers repay

¹⁴ Though state law stated that those in need living in a village at the time it was incorporated as a municipality were automatically eligible for support from that town (without having to wait the required five years), an 1820 case declared that this did not apply to the wife of a slave: “Since a wife is not permitted to gain a settlement separate from that of her husband, and a slave cannot acquire a settlement in his own right, the wife of the slave does not acquire a settlement by residence in a plantation at the time of its incorporation” (Carruthers 1940, 45).

the town or the person or institution providing support, they cannot vote in state elections; “for surely paupers do not change their character, even if by their labor they defray all the expenses of the almshouse where they are supported” (Burkett 1916). African Americans and white women were, of course, also blocked from the polls.

The dependency of paupers, enslaved people (and later, their descendents), and Native Americans gave meaning to the concept of independence (Fraser and Gordon 1996). Paupers were dependent on the aid of the municipality and dependent on the Overseers of the Poor, usually middle class or well-to-do townspeople who were elected to this position to assure that those in need received aid. But industrialization and the advent and increase of working for wages would reframe the meaning of independence. Any work that seemed too much like “slave labor” would have to be redefined so that white men could work under the power of a boss for low wages and still see themselves as free and independent.

Early Industrialization: The “Independence” of Wage Work

Logging did not begin as wage work. From the late seventeenth century (before Skowhegan area was settled) until the Revolutionary War, men cut tall pine trees from the northern forests and sent them down the rivers to the Atlantic Ocean to sell to the British to be used as masts (Calder 2006; Calvert 1986). Pre-cut lumber was also a popular item shipped to the West Indies in seventeenth and eighteenth-century trade routes that sometimes included the buying and selling of people of African descent (Talbot and Price 2006). Loggers in the northern forests began providing wood for a growing shipbuilding industry on the coast and, in the mid 1800s, for sawmills and the early paper

mills. Before the development of the mills in Skowhegan, harvesting trees and selling them to saw mills was a means for farmers to make it through the cold, unproductive winter months. In the mid 1800s, lumber became a major industry fueling the growth of Skowhegan.

By the 1830s, textile mills were developing in southern New England, creating new demands for workers and products from small northern New England towns. At the mid point of the 19th century, agriculture was still the primary economic activity in central Maine, though small manufacturing businesses were “gaining ground” (Hanson 1989 [1849], 332). Logging, though, was one of the first industries in which a small group of elite controlled a large number of workers and had significant power over the community. In Skowhegan, and most of central Maine, this elite control is represented by the ascendance of one of its prominent citizens, Abner Coburn, who, by the time he died in 1885, had built the local lumber industry, become one of the state’s largest landowners, provided capital for Skowhegan’s first modern mills and for the central Maine railroad, and served as governor of Maine.

Born in Skowhegan to prominent farmers and descendants of one of the town’s founders, Coburn symbolizes the mid- and late-19th century trend of individual families accumulating a great deal of money and power. Like many great American industrialists, he is remembered as a “self-made man” with little education who, through his own hard work, was able to move from a childhood of farming to become a man a great wealth. Abner Coburn and his brother, Philander, had surveyed land under his father and, in 1830 they began buying land in central Maine and harvesting its timber. Over the next 20 years, as the Kennebec Log Driving Company (incorporated in 1835), they bought more

and more land (150,000 acres by 1870) and employed more and more workers to harvest it. The Company was in charge of getting logs down the Kennebec River. Each log was marked to identify its owner; all logs were sorted as they reached their destination (Calvert 1986). In order to cut roads, harvest the trees, bring them to the river's edge and drive the logs down the river, the Kennebec Log Driving Company employed 860 men, and used 228 oxen and 152 horses. In one season, as many as 150 million logs were guided down the river; this particularly high number was reported in 1887 (Calvert 1986).

Though independent logging continued, as Coburn and other companies bought up land, logging became wage work. Pay ranged from \$18 a month for swampers, who cleared an area before trees were cut down, to \$50 to \$65 dollars a month for the camp boss, in charge of the crew (Calvert 1986, 194). In the 1870s through the 1890s, logging crews were increasingly comprised of immigrant labor, often fewer than 10 Maine-born white workers to more than 50 Scandanavian, English and French Canadian, and sometimes Native American men (Robbins 1956). Though local men still joined the drive, others moved with the lumber industry as it developed in the western United States. The earliest French Canadian migrants to Skowhegan (those arriving before or shortly after the mid-19th century) relied on the logging industry. The "little Canada" that was forming in town emptied of men in the winter and spring when they went to work. Men often worked at others' farms in the summer in exchange for produce while women washed clothes or stitched shoes at home (Coburn 1941, 197). Farmers also continued to use logging to get through the winter months and rented their oxen to the log drive for extra income. Full time loggers felled trees in the winter, drove logs down river in the spring, and worked in the sawmills and prepared for the next season in the summer. As

the industry developed, leading lumbermen moved with the industry to the western United States and Maine companies increasingly recruited immigrant workers from Canada and southern New England.

Though loggers' reputation for independence and tough hard work persisted, they came increasingly under the authority of logging companies. Workers had little control over their long hours and difficult conditions. The "old-time lumber barons" were known to cheat their workers out of pay, automatically docking workers for goods that they may or may not have used or inflating charges for room and board or clothing (Pike 1967). Though Abner Coburn had a "remarkable reputation for generosity and square-dealing" (Pike 1967, 245), history has left little evidence of his workers' opinions on the matter. In 1845, laborers for the Kennebec Log Driving Company made \$1.25 per day (Wood 1971). According to Vernon Jensen, "that many workers were exploited or taken advantage of by those who operated under relentless forces in an industry which has always been vulnerable to an ever devouring, ruthless, cutthroat competition has been, perhaps, inevitable (Jensen 1971 [1945], 4)."

As Coburn developed capital from timber harvesting, he invested in other industries in the town and around the state. The first paper mill in Skowhegan (and one of the first in the state) was started by Abner Coburn and his partner in 1851. Though paper, at this time, was still made from rags, rather than wood pulp, this marks the beginning of a relationship between timber harvesting and paper mills that still exists today. That is, until the last few decades (as investment firms have increasingly taken ownership of land), paper mill owners have also been large landowners, harvesting the wood they needed to make their product. Coburn, along with a business partner, built

one of the first large lavish hotels in the area in the woods north of Skowhegan (Calvert 1986). He also helped to fund the creation of a railroad connecting Skowhegan to the southern cities of the state in the 1880s and later became president of the Maine Central Railroad. In 1855, a few years after the paper mill opened in Skowhegan, Coburn helped to found Maine's Republican party. He would later serve in the House of Representatives and as one of Maine's Civil War governors (1861-1864). Several important town landmarks, Coburn Park, the original town office building and the library, were also built by Coburn. The reach of his economic influence signifies the beginning of elite oversight and power over industry and community. The "independent" logger thus helped to build an empire of wealth for Skowhegan's industrialist. Despite the loggers' dependence on the owners of land and transportation companies, and despite the degree to which Coburn (and other lumber kings) benefited from the work of loggers, these workers were still associated with the ideal image of an independent, hardworking Mainer.

While central Mainers were working in the woods, on farms and in small businesses, in urban southern New England, manufacturing was growing quickly. In fact, even before the development of modern mills in this area, the growth of manufacturing was already impacting northern New England. Young women left the small town farms of northern New England to work in the developing mill cities of New Hampshire and Massachusetts (Dublin 1981; Hareven 1978; Moran 2002). Small mills in towns like Skowhegan also manufactured products for large southern New England mills. In Skowhegan, the three-floor lumber and planing mill of Adams and Burns (both of whom

came from local farms) employed six to eight people to make picker sticks and loom sweeps for the cotton and woolen mills in Fall River, Massachusetts (Sibald n.d.).

The late 19th century industrial boom in the United States created a segment of wealthy capitalists who bore political, social and economic control over workers. Still, workingmen maintained a sense of independence by reframing dangerous, hard work as a sign of masculinity. With industrialization and the increase in factory work, working people both resisted the confines of their new working conditions and again created new meanings for independence.

Industrialization: Resistance and Independence in the Factory

Capital from the lumber industry and from the mills of southern New England created the foundation of Skowhegan's industrial boom. In 1874, months after the country had been launched into a depression caused by the rapid heavy investing in railroads and industry, a group of Skowhegan residents bought two parcels of land and began building a modern woolen mill. The Coburn Woolen Mill, named after Abner Coburn, one of its investors, opened in 1875 and employed 75 people. The original investors sold the three-story Coburn mill to its manager from Massachusetts who added a second building to the property.¹⁵ Skowhegan's woolen industry thus began in the midst of a depression. Throughout Skowhegan's history, a new industry has come to the rescue at points during which a company can draw from a reserve of labor. In the midst

¹⁵ It seems Abner Coburn continued to have influence over the company when it was sold to the mill's manager, Lewis Anderson. After one year Anderson divided ownership with a man who had been the finance agent of a local company of which Abner Coburn was president (Coburn 1941)

of economic decline, employers argue that wages need to be low in order for a company to survive and workers, eager for jobs, will take what they can get.

The success of the larger mills in cities like Lowell, Massachusetts and Manchester, New Hampshire created the capital and the investors wanting to extend the industry to smaller towns like Skowhegan, Norridgewock, and Madison (Rivard 2002). For the next two decades, executives from southern New England built small textile plants, spinning mills and shoe factories in Skowhegan and its surrounding towns. Two men from Massachusetts, one of whom had sold yarn to a textile mill in Skowhegan, started the town's first spinning mill, Maine Spinning Company. The first shoe shop was built in the late 1800s by a developer from Lynn, Massachusetts who had been looking for a location for a factory and decided on Skowhegan after meeting a Skowhegan businessman in a hotel in northern Vermont. A Massachusetts man who also owned shoe factories in central Maine and Massachusetts owned the Commonwealth Shoe Factory, which was in the same building that New Balance operates in today. The American Woolen Company, a conglomerate of 8 struggling mills in southern New England, bought 18 more mills around New England in 1899, including what was the Coburn Mill (The American Woolen American Woolen Company 1901). Four decades later, the mill employed up to 750 people in Skowhegan, making women's coats and suits (Coburn 1941, 942). The American Woolen Company would eventually own three mills in Skowhegan and 59 mills (employing 40,000 people) around New England (Moran 2002).

By 1900, then, Skowhegan was quickly becoming a wealthy industrial community. The shoe factory, dairy farms, and textile factories were all operating and employing hundreds. Though French Canadians had been working in the area in small

numbers since the 1830s, manufacturing created such a demand for their labor that by 1941 they made up more than 40 percent of the population (Coburn 1941, 196). Most had left struggling farms in Canada to try a life of wage labor in the United States. The push and pull factors were so strong that one-quarter of Quebec's population migrated to the six New England states between 1860 and 1900 (Moran 2002, 115). Textile workers arrived with their whole families, often staying with relatives and planning to return to Canada after earning enough money. Most New England mill towns had a "Little Canada." French speaking Canadians were connected to each other through institutional networks of Catholic Churches, parochial schools and a French press¹⁶ (Roby 1996). Throughout New England, they were rejected by Yankees for the lack of English speaking skills and often clashed with Irish immigrants who had already established themselves in mills, communities and churches (Moran 2002). Though Skowhegan had had an Irish population since the mid 1800s, the Catholic Church was not built until 1882 (though a Waterville church had established a mission in Skowhegan in 1871), indicating that there had not been enough Irish Catholics in town to warrant the building of a church. An early 20th century publication on the growth of Skowhegan, described a successful, bustling town at its peak:

Instead of the first little mills we have the Coburn Woolen Mills, the Marston Worsted Mills, Pulp Mills, Mitchell's plant, sash and blind factories, Steward Brothers' grist mill, the shoe factory, Skowhegan Jersey Creamery, and other industries too numerous to mention...Our Streets are well kept and full of busy, happy, reasonably good people, and our shops betray the fact that we want many things and have the money to buy them (Sibald n.d.).

In addition to fine goods stores that carried women's furnishings and furs in "rare variety and value," Skowhegan also boasted a cigar maker, an oriental rug

¹⁶ By 1912, there were 43 Franco newspapers and magazines in New England (Roby 1996, 614).

manufacturer,¹⁷ and an interior decorator who also worked in New York. The downtown offered a “brisk, modern and metropolitan appearance.” A trolley connected Skowhegan to Madison, where vacationers could take a steamboat across the lake to connect with Lakewood, a resort that included an inn, restaurant, theatre, and later a golf course. Lakewood, which would maintain its status as a resort for the rich and famous into the early 1960s, is still running a community theatre and separate inn and golf course.

Missing from this image of a bustling, successful town, though, are the hardships that most of the town’s workers endured to create this wealth. Wages for factory work were so low that entire families often worked in the mills, including children (Moran 2002). Even by 1908, an investigation of child labor in cotton mills found children under the age of fourteen illegally working at all seven Maine mills studied (Palmer 1911). Families were often packed into tight living quarters with little money for building maintenance; mill owners often also owned (and sometimes neglected) worker housing. Such living conditions increased diseases like diphtheria and typhoid fever in towns like Brunswick, Maine, where 70 people died in one summer within the 4 blocks of mill housing (Moran 2002, 127). The loud noises of machinery and the dim lighting and detailed tasks of thread and needles destroyed hearing and eyesight; the repetitive motions of the work destroyed hands. Bosses and managers were reputed to take advantage of young female workers, promising raises that they often did not get (Moran 2002). Without safety regulations, accidents on the job were more frequent. When browsing the headlines of the local paper in the early 20th century, the danger of working

¹⁷ This was a 2-floor, six loom operation started by a local white businessman who previously dealt flour, potatoes, and coal and wood. Skowhegan did have a small number of Chinese residents in the early 1900s, several of whom came from California. As was common of the early Chinese population in the US, they tended to be single men working as laundrymen. Census records show several Chinese men to be borders in the same house in town (Libby 2006).

in a turn of the century mill is quite apparent. On one page of the July 1, 1904 paper, for example, I read in relatively small print, “man mangled by machinery while shutting down the cards in the Indian Spring Mill;” and “night operator at the New England Telephone Company in Skowhegan was burned on the head and face with explosion” (The Somerset Reporter 1904).

With the growth of industrial capitalism in Skowhegan, the numbers of independent farmers, small businessmen and loggers also declined, and people increasingly worked for wages. Nationally, by 1900, two-thirds of Americans relied on wages. In Skowhegan, this transition was not marked by a sudden construction of a massive woolen mill, but by men, women, and children slowly supplanting farming with wage work. In part due to the difficult and dangerous living and working conditions described above, in the late 19th and early 20th century, the meaning of the independent hardworking American more readily incorporated the masculine independence of a worker who stands up to his or her boss. Though local businesses and newspapers warned workers of the dangers of union organizers, union members and striking workers could still be described as ordinary folk.

Farmers and craftspeople who were accustomed to scheduling their own work and leisure activity became increasingly under the control of the clock and increasingly dependent on an employer's wages. Herbert Gutman, E.P. Thompson and others have documented that in both England and the United States, early industrial workers recognized these new forms of control. They resisted the confines of the factory by leaving work early, frequently not coming to work, drinking on the job, and socializing. It took time clocks, factory whistles, and rules against drinking and leaving factory

grounds to instill this industrial discipline on workers (Gutman 1977; Montgomery 1979; Thompson 1963 [1966]). Managers and supervisors of the growing corporations replaced the old middle class. As Stanley Aronowitz put it, there was a “transformation of the old ‘self-made man’ into a salaried employee of the corporation” (Aronowitz 2003 [1992], 266).

Daniel Rodgers warns historians not to oversimplify this process, though, saying that “working-class cultures have been far too diverse and the ties between gross levels of economic development and working-class mores far too tenuous to fit the grand schemes half-consciously accepted” (Rodgers 1977, 659). That is, some factory workers accepted their new schedules without complaint and some pre-industrial farmers, loggers and craftspeople resisted the confines of their working schedules. And, as discussed above, even the “independent farmer” depended on the work of women and children, enslaved people and paupers.

There is some evidence that the high absenteeism that many industrial managers complained about applied to Skowhegan workers. Workers frequently left factory work to care for their farms. Like many other immigrants, French Canadians maintained ties to family in Canada, often sending money they were making to family back home (Chodos 1991). In the 19th century, immigrants periodically or seasonally left wage work in central Maine to return to farms in Canada, some of which were being run by extended family. Summer editions of the paper often posted names of workers who returned to the Skowhegan area after working in shoe factories and sawmills in southern New England for the winter (The Somerset Reporter 1904).

Workers in Skowhegan resisted the demands of industrial labor through strikes and union activity. The woolen and worsted mills of Skowhegan were organized under the Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance in 1903, though it quickly dissolved. In 1906, though, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) formed Pioneer Local No. 379 in Skowhegan (Scontras 1985). At a time when it appeared that the mill was going to go back on a promised wage increase, one of the local's greatest leaders, Mamie Bilodeau, was fired, followed by several of her coworkers. Believing that the company was trying to eliminate union members, in early 1907 all of the Marston Worsted Mill's 230 workers walked out. The strikers faced many obstacles. The local newspaper described the strike as organized by outsiders from IWW (though it was locals who had contacted the IWW). The United Textile Workers published a letter in the local paper warning workers not to strike with the militant IWW, claiming that they had no standing as a trade union. The letter threatened to send United Textile Workers' members to fill their positions if the strike continued. The workers picketed despite temperatures reaching 44 degrees below zero and, after almost four months, won all of their demands. The IWW's relative success after a three and a half month strike enabled the union to organize textile workers throughout the country (Foner 1965).

Unions had little luck organizing loggers, in part because of their isolation and migration, but also because industry leaders fought against labor unions. Some logging unions formed sporadically around the state—including the Log Drivers and Woodsmen's Union, organized in Madison in 1904 but lasting only about a year. Men sometimes responded to logging's difficult conditions by fleeing the camps. This was especially true when employment firms began recruiting workers in cities throughout

New England, particularly Bangor and Lewiston, Maine and Boston, Massachusetts. In selling the job, recruiters misrepresented the work conditions to potential recruits. They may not have been told about the 30 to 60-mile walk from the train, the ten to fourteen-hour days, or the sparse conditions of the camps. When the men arrived in the north woods after several days of travel, they were ten to twenty dollars in debt for the costs of transportation and clothing and supplies from the company store (mittens, coats, and boots that could handle the freezing temperatures). In 1907, lumber companies wanting to protect their investments, convinced the State Legislature to pass a law making it a crime punishable by a \$10 fine or up to 30 days in jail to abandon a job while in debt to the company store. Though labor supporters made several attempts to repeal the law, calling it peonage, it remained in effect for ten years (Scontras 2002).

Organized labor asserted that the power and connections of the lumber industry prevented the legislature from repealing the peonage law earlier. This was not the only time that the industry was cited for having powerful connections in state and local government. In fact, as late as 1970 the lumber companies were generally believed to control Maine politics (along with power companies and shoe manufacturers) (Hodgkin 1993). But particularly during times of national anti-immigrant and anti-Communist fervor, as with the Red Scare of the early 1920s, lumber companies had help. Local newspapers instilled fear in communities with foreboding reports about violent strikes and worker uprisings around the country; activist groups like the Ku Klux Klan organized small business owners against labor organizations; and state and local politicians legally supported the work of the Klan (Breton 1972). When representatives of the IWW came to Greenville, Maine to organize loggers, the Ku Klux Klan responded. In February

1924, the Klan staged a cross burning at a small organizing meeting after the IWW called for a boycott of unsupportive businesses. The IWW leaders did not leave town as requested but called in 175 loggers from the surrounding camps, most of whom were French Canadians, common targets of the Klan. Though the workers succeeded in holding off the Klan, two weeks later, IWW leaders were sentenced to two years in prison on charges of conspiracy (Scontras 2002). Later that same year, in a mill town just south of Skowhegan, workers successfully defended themselves with sticks and rocks, chasing a Klan mob from the center of town.

Workers not only resisted the wages and conditions of industrial work with strikes and defiance, but they also accepted this new way of working, changing the meanings of independence, masculinity and family in order to do so. As industry developed and men and women became more dependent on wages and confined by the rhythms of the factory, they invented new meanings for independence. Rather than rejecting the conditions of the factory, as Skowhegan's Worsted Mill workers did in 1907, they embraced factory life and their duty to work and provide for their families. In order to maintain this sense of individualism and independence despite patriarchal control, workers recast the meaning of independence to include making a living and supporting a family by earning wages. Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon explained this process in their article on the history of the concept of dependency:

Radical working men, who had earlier rejected wage labor as 'wage slavery,' claimed a new form of manly independence within it...Through their struggles, economic independence came eventually to encompass the ideal of a family wage, a wage sufficient to maintain a household and to support a dependent wife and children. Thus, working men expanded the meaning of economic independence to include a form of wage labor in addition to property ownership and self-employment (Fraser and Gordon 1996, 242).

Whereas the dependency of workers on a boss had been, as Michael Kimmel suggests, an insult to masculinity, “equivalent to social and sexual dependency” (Kimmel 2006 [1996], 31), working hard, and accepting wages and working conditions in order to support one’s family and the commodities and leisure activities of the middle class also became signs of masculinity. In the early 1900s, companies around the country responded to unrest and union organizing by offering benefits to employees like profit sharing, paid vacations, and recreational facilities (Jacoby 1997). This welfare capitalism encouraged workers to adhere to a middle class lifestyle, engage in community leisure activities, and denounce drinking and rowdiness (Brody 1980; Fine 1993). The family wage may have been an ideal, but for low-wage working men and women like those working in the textile mills (and later shoe shops) of central Maine, it was not a reality. The focus on men as wage earners still clearly influenced working class masculinity. Some men responded to the dependency they faced in the factories or in the woods with toughness and rowdiness. This rough working class masculinity influenced life outside the factory walls. Standing up to the boss, though, did not lose its masculine toughness either.

Demise of Textiles and the New Patriarch

When textile companies began to fail in the 1930s, New England, the center of American industrialization in the 19th century, watched its successful industries go bankrupt or pack up and move south in search of cheaper labor. With the demise of this industry, companies responded with a tactic that is again common today, lowering wages or demanding more work from their employees and threatening to leave if workers did not accept these conditions (Moran 2002). In 1934, textile workers around the country

reacted by striking in what would be the largest and most widespread strike in American history, stretching from New England to the South. But unionization efforts in the Southern states failed and textile executives warned their northern New England employees that they could not keep up with union wages and would be forced to move south. Like community leaders today who proclaim that central Mainers need to face up to the fact that manufacturing is gone, a textile mill executive announced, “New Englanders must go back to work and stop living in the past” (Moran 2002, 235).

In 1940 Skowhegan, as the textile industry was declining, Harold Alfond and his father, both of whom had been working at a shoe factory in southern Maine, bought an empty shoe mill in Norridgewock, just outside of Skowhegan. Four years later, Alfond sold Norwock Shoe to the Shoe Company of America for an almost one million dollar profit and stayed on as the company president until it closed in 1981. Alfond started a second shoe company, Dexter Shoe, in 1956 in an old textile mill in Dexter, Maine. As that business expanded, he started another factory in Skowhegan. He is thought to have started the outlet shop phenomenon in the 1980s by opening a store to sell factory seconds.

Alfond brought the era of the shoe shop and another boom to Skowhegan. The selection of jobs, though, was still limited. A manager at a social service organization who grew up in town in the sixties and seventies, for example, explained that his parents had had to move out of state for a few years for work, saying that “even back then” there were limited job opportunities, “unless you were going to work in the shoe shops or work in the woods.”

Working for shoe manufacturers was not easy. Employees were paid by piece and pay was low for both men and women. The few higher-paying jobs were reserved for men. A woman who worked in the shoe shop in the late 1960s described the gender division: “There were a lot of men bosses...In their offices there were [female] secretaries. The cutters made really good money, but they were all men.” When machines broke down, as often happened, workers could not work for the few hours it took to fix the machines. Several workers described planning for these breakdowns, working extra hard to get ahead. And as with early factory work, the repetitive motions of cutting leather and stitching shoes wore down the bodies of employees. A lawyer who worked on many workers compensation cases in the 1980s and 1990s, described the difficulty of consistently seeing injured workers:

[There was an] epidemic of repetitive motion injuries that were produced by piecework...I mean some days it would just make you nauseous to see the numbers of people whose lives were ruined. You know, *not* well-educated people. These were sixth grade-educated people with carpal tunnel or joints deteriorated. They had nothing to do to make a living. And they were very, very heavily dependent on our capacity to do something for them under workers comp laws.

Still, many residents of central Maine spent most of their working lives in the shoe shops run by Harold Alfond. Some people who worked under him remember him fondly. They talk about how he knew all his workers and how, if one of them was in a bind, he would help them out. That is, he took care of his workers, as he would take care of the region and the state with his charitable giving after his retirement. This paternalistic role of the Skowhegan area’s major elite developers and capitalists was mimicked in *Empire Fall’s* fictional depiction of the area, in which the family that owned a shirt factory and textile mill in the early 20th century worked to appease their employees

with summer parties. Long after the textile industry declined, the descendants of these fictional capitalists controlled the town through their wealth and charity.

But workers were not all dutiful children. Some former employees describe Alfond as a boss who made his employees work hard, paid them little, and saved a lot for himself. Neither Norwock Shoe nor Dexter Shoe was unionized, but, despite his paternalism, employees did strike and make demands of Alfond. Raymond, a man in his late 70s who lives (and has lived) in Madison, was proud of the worker he witnessed stand up to Alfond. Raymond had been working at the shoe shop for several years in the 1960s on the cutting floor when the cutters were looking for a raise of “so much per piece.” He said they were already making above state minimum. The cutters “decided one day,” as he put it, to walk off the job. He explained, with pride, that the place could not run without their work because the other workers relied on the leather they cut to do their jobs. The managers got involved and then they called in Harold Alfond. Alfond said, “No man is worth what you’re asking for.” Raymond remembered a coworker shouting back, “Mr. Alfond, you say no man is worth that much? Then how can you justify bringing in \$500 a week?” After that, according to Raymond, Alfond agreed to a wage increase. Raymond not only relayed the existence of dissent to Alfond’s paternalism, but he maintained a pride in standing up to and questioning one’s employer.

Raymond’s brother, Gordon (mentioned at the beginning of the chapter), worked for Alfond for five years in the 1960s, and also believed it is important to keep employers in check and supported unions as a means to do so. In fact, he had recently gone to a town official who he believed had unjustly fired a relative of his for a health problem that was interfering with his work. He added to his complaint that it also was not right that

the prisoners in the county jail were cleaning up the roads without pay. Still, Gordon did not chastise Alfond's practices as an employer as his brother did. Nor did he condone them or look up to Alfond and his charitable work. During an interview, even though it seems that I am trying to incite some long forgotten anger, Gordon did not blame Alfond for the difficulties of working in a shoe shop:

Gordon: Yea, Alfond owned it and run it when I was working there.

Claudine: What'd you think of him?

G: I didn't know him personally.

C: I've heard some stories about his practices and not paying well.

G: I never had any problems with him.

C: Now you see his name all over the place.

G: [laughs] Yea. Now he's giving away his money.

C: In an article in the paper about Alfond, they quoted a woman who used to work at Norwock shoe saying something like, "every time I see him giving away money I think, Yea, that's a little bit of my money that he's giving away."

G: Yea. Well, A lot of the jobs in the shoe shops were not very high paying jobs and they're awful hard work so some people probably figure that way.

Though he believed that employers can get greedy and did not condemn workers for organizing or standing up to their employers, his complacency with Alfond and factory work relays Gordon's expectation and acceptance of struggle. Through the middle of the 20th century, central Mainers continued to work in shoe shops, lumber mills, in the woods, and the remaining textile mills. The lucky workers found their way into the Madison paper mill, which had been operating since 1899. In 1940, one in five New Englanders worked in the textile or shoe mills. In Skowhegan, there were four lumber mills, four woolen mills, and Norwock Shoe; but by the end of 1981, all of these

mills had closed (Martin 1983). By 1977 the numbers of shoe and textile in New England workers had shrunk to one in ten. Manufacturing was on the decline.

Industrial Decline and the New Economy

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the economic future of the Skowhegan area was once again uncertain. When a workers' compensation law firm asked Allen, a then Massachusetts-based lawyer, to move to Skowhegan to represent workers in 1982, he was not sure if there would be enough people left for him to represent. He recalled his hesitation to move to an area that seemed to be under distress:

I don't know if I want to come. You've got—the Shoe Company of America has closed. The factories were empty. The one over here was empty. That thing in Norridgewock on the riverbank was empty. Dead empty. Closed. Chains on the door. And the Madison Paper Company was dead. Dead completely. And in '82, I mean Skowhegan; I have to remind myself of how bad it was. Dexter Shoe was still cruising along. But it was a tough place to work. There were no benefits. Just above minimum wage. They were very rough.

Throughout the country, incomes were decreasing in the 1970s and 1980s (if inflation is taken into account), and it was becoming more and more difficult to find full time jobs with benefits (Tilly 1996). In 1963, several Skowhegan businessmen and other residents recognized a need to counter industrial loss and created the Skowhegan Industrial Committee (later the Skowhegan Economic Development Corporation). In addition to the loss of textile mills and the decline in the shoe industry, throughout the state, jobs in agriculture, forestry and fisheries industries declined by 11.6 percent. The jobs in nondurable goods manufacturing jobs declined by 44.7 percent (Colgan 2004). The population of the state of Maine grew by 29 percent between 1970 and 2000 but the majority of this growth was in the wealthier southern part of the state with abundant tourism, urban sprawl and a growing technology industry.

Skowhegan, like other small towns across the country (Nelson and Smith 1999), experienced a burst of reindustrialization after the loss of major industries in the 1970s. Allen's concern that there would not be enough manufacturing workers to support another workers' compensation lawyer, though, proved unfounded. His boss had told him not to worry about the town's economy saying, "Skowhegan's always come back. Something will turn up." In retrospect, Allen thought he was correct:

Well, in point of fact it was already happening. In 1976 they had built the pulp mill down there, in the south end of town and set up the Sappi building. And then in 1981 they built PM1, Paper Machine One, and then they built paper machine two and then they built paper machine three. And the money, the number of people they have to employ to run those machines and the amount of pulp they had to drag out of the northern forest. I mean, SD Warren, which became Scott Paper, supplied you know a source of revenue into this greater Somerset community that was way beyond anything that the Shoe Company of America was providing. So he was right. And in the 1980s, this place boomed.

Alfond sold Dexter Shoe to Warren Buffet in 1993, before its final decline. Dexter closed its Skowhegan factory in the early 2000s and New Balance took over the building as a warehouse.

The paper mills are still running, still employing hundreds of people in central Maine at high wages and New Balance is still employing hundreds to make shoes; but neither industry is stable. Despite the existence of these two major manufacturing employers, the decline and instability of manufacturing has continued. In 1990, the paper and wood products industry was responsible for 16 percent of the total earned income in Somerset County, of which Skowhegan is the largest town, and the shoe industry for approximately 14 percent. By 1999, paper provided only 9 percent and the shoe industry 6 percent of the earned income in the county (Allen 2002). The decline in jobs in the wood products industries continued from 2000 to 2005, dropping from 10,800 to 6,731 jobs, a 38 percent loss.

Recent economic restructuring in this area is not characterized by the closure of one factory, as was the case in towns like Millinocket, Maine where the unemployment rate hit 30 percent after its paper mills closed. Instead, it is the closure of many small mills, some of which were bought out and replaced by others and some of which are empty buildings. It is downsizing and decreasing in wages and benefits. It is, little by little, loss of companies and the stores and other industries that relied on them. It is, as with Sappi, the *threat* of closure of more industries, which would mean job loss and a town government that could not afford its services. Though I often heard from Skowhegan residents that Sappi will not close for a long time because it is a relatively new mill, others heard rumors that the mill is investing little in updating its facilities and equipment. Every time another paper mill closes, the demise of the Skowhegan mill seems a little closer. In the spring of 2009 Sappi closed its operation in Michigan, one of its four mills in the United States (Sappi Fine Paper North America 2009). Economic restructuring in central Maine is also characterized by the new major employers: the hospital, the school districts, a T-Mobile call center, a small municipal equipment manufacturer, an enormous tomato greenhouse, Wal-Mart and other big box stores. Thus, following national and global economic trends, the economy in central Maine is progressively marked by a precipitous decline in manufacturing industries and a growth in global corporations and communications, information and technology industries, and in part-time and temporary jobs.

Struggle in a town transitioning to the new economy is not confined to the low-wage workers who have lost jobs, income and benefits. Local executives of manufacturing and wood products industries have struggled to keep their companies alive

and their employees employed. Some small businesses that relied on customers with manufacturing jobs have watched their profits decline. Unlike many low-income residents, these middle class workers rarely worry that they will not be able to pay medical bills, fix their car, or buy food for their families. Still, several local employers spoke of the difficulty of laying off their employees, of not knowing if their business would survive, and of struggling to find a way to keep a business going in what seemed like an impossible economic situation. An employer at a mill that has had to lay off hundreds of workers in the last ten years explained the challenges of keeping a manufacturing company operating:

I invented and designed another machine to make the [widgets] even cheaper on an automatic machine. And I presented it to the customers that we manufacture for. And one of them wrote back to me and said, “if you gave it to me for zero labor, I can still get it cheaper in China.” How can you beat ‘em? I never made a [widget] on that machine. It’s still upstairs, collecting dust. So I tried. I tried.

Similarly, the owner of a gift shop describes how she attributes part of the struggles of her business to a floundering local economy:

Oh, I think [the loss of manufacturing jobs] has had an extremely negative effects on the people here. I have seen it in my business just since Dexter shoe closed. I mean those ladies used to come over here every Friday. And, you know, they might not spend a hundred dollars every Friday but if there were 20 of them who popped in every week and spend \$10 even, they came every week.... That [the loss of Dexter Shoe] was a real significant one. And then any of the little ones. I’m sure like, any of the small ones, you know, Wood Tech in North Anson, any that take away from someone’s employment. ... And it hurts everyone. If you’re not stopping and spending at the corner market then she can’t come shop here on a regular basis. You know, the fingering out effects. It’s incredible.

In 2000, fourteen percent of Skowhegan residents worked in retail, a sector of the new economy that usually pays minimum wage and leaves workers few avenues to find better paying work. In a matter of 10 years, larger central Maine towns like Augusta have quickly expanded to big box store capitals. Many residents, like Don, are worried

that the area cannot survive without manufacturing: “Well, somebody’s got to work somewhere. Everything can’t be all service jobs.” A middle-class man who works in the health care industry explains:

But in central Maine we have more stores, well just looking at the Augusta/Waterville area, I mean, we have more stores now than we have anything else. I mean how many Best Buys and Wal-Marts and superstores can an area support that’s losing it’s manufacturing capacity. People wonder where the money comes from.

Commuting has increasingly become necessary for work, particularly in rural areas and small towns north of Skowhegan, where, if a small mill closes, there are few other options for work. When MBNA (a major credit card company) opened call centers in 1993 at several locations around the state, some central Mainers commuted 45-minutes or more to these twelve-dollar an hour jobs. Thirteen years later, though, MBNA announced that it would close most of its Maine facilities.

It is not only low wage jobs that have come to the area. One of Skowhegan’s recent successes had been the survival and growth of its medical industry. The Skowhegan hospital, one of the few remaining independent hospitals in the state, employs more than five hundred people and has led to several other medical-related businesses, such as a medical insurance software company started by two former Emergency Room doctors at the Skowhegan Hospital. Many of the higher-paying jobs are most likely going to people who are not from the area but many local workers, some of them former manufacturing workers, have been transitioning into the health field. The demand for nursing degrees has been so high that the local education system is struggling to meet the requests: in 2006 the community college had a two-year waiting period to get into its nursing program.

Though the jobs of the new economy have come a long way from the 12-hour days, child labor, and unsafe condition of the first factories in Skowhegan, retail, fast food, and call center jobs heavily discipline their workforce. Not unlike the repetitive motions of the factory, sales associates and fast food workers are limited in their tasks and routinized and monitored by new technologies (Leidner 1993). Call centers, a burgeoning industry in small towns throughout the country, rely heavily on new technology to weed out potential bad candidates and to monitor employees (Buchanan 2002). At most call centers, workers are on a point system where they get docked for not making a sale, staying on the phone too long, missing work, or going to the bathroom. An informant told me of a pregnant woman who had to get a doctor's slip so that she could go to the bathroom more frequently than other workers—though she was still docked points. Management monitors workers' points, instilling fear in some workers that if they do not keep their points up, they could lose their job. Call success is also used to motivate workers by creating competition between teams of employees. In a publication ranking T-Mobile one of Maine's best places to work, a human resources representative explained how workers compete to be more successful than other employees: "The Oakland Call Center's culture is driven by high performance. Employees want to know where they rank in comparison to our partner center" (Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) 2006). Though jobs at the call center pay fairly well and have good benefits when compared to working in fast food or retail, they do not pay as well as teaching, paper mill or construction jobs. Parents who are working to support a family are more and more forced to work in low-paying fast food and retail jobs and other jobs formerly reserved for teenagers (Newman 1999; Stack 2001).

Though telemarketers and other service workers certainly feel the pressure of being closely monitored, these jobs are still seen as creating independence in that they allow workers to participate in the market economy. In Chapter Four I will address in more detail the changing conditions of work, the means by which workers are resisting and acquiescing to these changes.

The increase in service industry jobs deepens the working class divide in town between the workers with well-paid blue-collar jobs (unionized and unionized) and those with low-paying (minimum wage or slightly higher) non-unionized jobs with few benefits. The new economy has created several different categories of workers in Skowhegan: well-paid blue collar (such as those in construction or at the paper mill); well-paid white collar (such as education and health services workers); low-paid retail and service; and low-paid blue-collar and agricultural workers. Residents openly talk and joke about the high salaries of paper mill workers, as when I overheard a man at the golf course say, “What, you think just because I work at the paper mill I’m made of money?” This disparity in pay and benefits of unionized versus nonunionized jobs contributed to the belief that unions were unnecessarily helping people who already had a lot of money and threatening the local economy by driving wages up. Scott, a paper mill worker, described this division in Skowhegan and surrounding towns when he explained his theory that anti-union sentiment in the area was motivated by jealousy:

So they had a strike, a 16-week strike in 1980, I was president of the union at [the mill]. And as we do anytime there’s a labor dispute or strike, we had, we asked for mutual aid... So it came down to the local level...It’s interesting to think, who gave and who didn’t give. ... And I had some people that were union members that didn’t want to give to the people who were on strike after a couple weeks because [the union workers are] the reason why their grocery bills were so high—because they made so much money that they had to compete with them for groceries. It was just jealousy. ... They didn’t realize that those people live, even though they may have more money than you, they may live in a little bit nicer

house, they might have a little bit nicer car, they're still hurting right now. And I think it's based on jealousy. People see people in [the mill] and it's unfortunate that the people in the general area don't make as much money as the people that work in the mill.

Though paper mill workers have been able to buy their way into the middle class with their big houses and newer cars, most do not have the same autonomy and power over their work as, say, doctors and hospital administration and also have the added instability of working in a declining industry (Zweig 2001). Their schedules are particularly challenging. Workers are split into two, twelve-hour shifts: 5:30 in the morning to 5:30 at night or vice versa. They work three-day shifts, have three days off, and then work three night shifts, though some employees prefer to swap with other employees so they can work either days or nights. Though mill workers value their jobs and will commonly spend 20 years or more at the mill, I often heard (especially from those nearing retirement age) that they could not wait to “get out.”

The decline in wages and benefits for some service workers has led to an upsurge in middle-class service jobs for others. Skowhegan, as the county seat and the largest town in the county, is the community center for health, social and legal services. Many of these services have been growing—despite state budget cuts to social services and the rising costs of providing health care. The hospital, a branch of a statewide mental health organization, the state social services offices, the courthouse, and the county jail all underwent major expansion or rebuilding projects in the years surrounding my research. Though Maine's education system was in the midst of consolidation and teachers were being moved around or pushed out of the district, public schools are still among the largest employers in the area. The strength of the health and social services industry led

to a strong white-collar middle class segment at the same time the paper mill led blue-collar middle class was shrinking.

Nearing the end of an interview with Don and Betsy (the retired shoe shop workers who I mentioned in the beginning of the chapter) and their grown daughter, we talked about what kind of development would work best for the Skowhegan area. They talked about bringing in someone who knew how to make money and who would be committed to the community, would not leave its workers jobless at the first sign of a better investment. They talked about how the T-Mobile and L.L. Bean call centers seemed to be good for the nearby towns in which they are located and how another big box store might employ a good amount of people. When I asked what they thought would happen if the industries did not come, their answers showed both an awareness of how economic change can affect the town and a sense that workers just keep working, despite changes. Jen, the daughter, thought that without a change or something new coming to Skowhegan, “It will be a ghost town. It will be a town in trouble.” Her mother, though, after 75 years, thought, “We’ll have to plug along like we have been for quite a while.”

Betsy, who had lived through times in which this was “a town in trouble,” was ready to keep struggling along. Throughout the economic changes in the community, workers have resisted change and found ways to maintain independence despite the dependency of work. In the first decades of European settlement in Skowhegan, independence of European farmers and craftspeople was enabled by access to land and defined against the “savage,” overly independent Native American, and the dependent

slave and pauper. With industrialization and the formation of the wealthy capitalist and the wage laborer, workers redefined independence so that their dependency on employers did not interfere with what it meant to be hardworking and independent. Even so, the conditions of factory life when juxtaposed to the stories of the fat-cat industrialists, particularly in the decades surrounding the turn of the 20th century, meant that the “common man” could join a union, participate in a strike, or otherwise resist the work conditions and still be an ordinary worker. Independence could mean standing up to the boss and fighting back against work conditions and compensation. French Canadians in New England have a reputation for having been passive workers, for a loyalty to church and family before labor activism. Yet in early 20th century Skowhegan, a French Canadian woman led the fight against the textile factory. The degree to which this resistance was an “ordinary” part of working life may have changed, but resistance did not disappear. Harold Alfond took care of his workers and the people of Maine at the same time he paid low wages for hard work. Some shoe workers were thankful for the job and others demanded higher wages. Throughout the cycles of economic change, the ordinary hardworking Mainer has both resisted the confines of work and learned to accept it while maintaining a sense of independence. Now, in the new economy, workers are divided among the declining affluent blue-collar men, the low-paid service and shoe shop workers, and those in more stable middle-income health, mental health, and social service sector jobs. Middle and low-income workers face increasing debt and costs of living. Though some workers refuse to adjust to the new demands of the economy, hard work remains an important value despite this fragility and insecurity. This is the focus of the following chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

Working in the New Economy

The white working and middle classes in the United States more easily fit the image of ordinary hard working folks in the 1950s and 1960s, when Americans were buying their way into a middle-class lifestyle. But in 2006, workers who had been forced out of the shoe making or lumber industries were coping with the loss of a long time job and were often unprepared to start a new life in a completely different industry. Many of the remaining manufacturing jobs were unstable. As workers in manufacturing and resource industries have moved into jobs in information, service, and technology, they have had to adjust to the changing expectations of physical presentation, dress, and communication in, for example, the logging versus telemarketing industries (see Bourgois 2003 for an illustration of the complications that can accompany such transitions). Employers were less likely to invest in workers, but instead relied on temporary workers or paid low-wages with an expectation of high turnover, offering little opportunity for advancement. Anthropologists Hugh Gusterson and Catherine Besteman point out that high employee turnover is often part of company strategy, quoting a memo from a Wal-Mart executive which explains that a long-time employee is more costly but not more productive than a new employee (Gusterson and Besteman 2010).¹⁸ Finally, family structure was changing alongside economic structure. Because of the growing

¹⁸ In the words of the 2005 memo, “the cost of an associate with seven years of tenure is 55 percent higher than one with one year of tenure, yet there is no difference in his or her productivity” (Gusterson and Besteman 2010, 3).

number of single parent families, the decline in the family wage—the Fordist conviction that one wage should be enough to support a family—and the increase of women in workplace, more households have had to rely on child care while parents work.

These structural changes have created new working conditions and new demands from workers. Though ideologies of the “work ethic” have long contributed to worker self-regulation, new emphasis on privatization and individual responsibility reinstates the importance of hard work. Work ethic, then, is not a cultural phenomenon; nor is it particular to the white working class. As the income gap grows and workers must work more hours in unstable and flexible jobs, public programs and employer regulation act to assure that hard work continues to be seen as a central tenant of ordinary Americans.

In the first half of this chapter, the stories of three different workers, Pat, Chrystal, and Matt, along with my own job-hunting experience, illustrate how the conditions of the new economy have changed workers’ lives in central Maine. In the second half of the chapter, I argue that despite increasing difficulty to “make it” simply by working hard, political promotions, soft-skills training, welfare and workfare training, and employer demands affirm the importance of hard work regardless of compensation.

Good Jobs are Hard to Find

One of the most common explanations of a failing work ethic was that people today just don’t want to work. That they would rather sit at home than look for a job and they were not willing to accept jobs that did not pay enough or that were “beneath” them. Many people in town had the impression that, despite a decline in jobs, there were still plenty of jobs out there. A man working at a manufacturing company echoed the

language of many others when he said, “If they want to work. They can work.” But just as employers complain that it is hard to find good workers, many workers profess that it is hard to find a good job.

As with other areas that have seen a decline in industry, central Mainers have had to cope with a paucity of available jobs. A good job that pays well, has benefits and the possibility for advancement, is particularly hard to come by, but even a part-time, minimum wage job can be hard to find. Particularly in the smaller towns and more rural areas surrounding Skowhegan and to its north, when an employer closes its doors, there are few options for work. Still, many people seemed to believe that anyone could go to the major employers in the area—Wal-Mart, Hannaford (the grocery store), New Balance, or the hospital—complete an application and get a job. My own job search in the area did not prove so easy. Motivated primarily by my need to pay my rent, I began looking for a job even before I arrived in Maine by reading the local newspaper.

In late 2005, when I was settling in, the selection of jobs was slim. In a regional newspaper that covers Skowhegan, Waterville (a small city 30 minutes away with a population of 30,000) and other surrounding towns, weekday papers often listed less than 10 help-wanted advertisements and the Sunday paper will include 15 to 30. Like most papers, the ads include standards that I learned to weed out quickly. When I decided I did not want to be an exotic dancer, a road construction flagger, operate a skidder or otherwise work for logging companies, or travel more than 20 minutes outside of Skowhegan, I was left with perhaps one or two new advertisements. I monitored several on-line job banks and conducted searches at the Career Center (the state run job placement and training center) and one employment agency (which was a 45-minute

drive away). Both proved fruitless. I found my visit to the Career Center especially trying. After signing in and spending several minutes familiarizing myself with the computers, I began checking off requirements for my job search: location, education, skills, type of job, etc. When I was finished, my search yielded no jobs. I tried again with different requirements. No results. I then realized that if I erased all search requirements except location, I had a list of less than 20 jobs, several of which were in construction or working in the woods. This process was even more frustrating, I'm sure, for the man across from me who had worked off and on in the logging industry. Presumably he could not read or could read very little because an employee at the center was reading all the options aloud to him. I applied to jobs at the grocery store, Wal-Mart, and the night shift at New Balance. I applied to waitress at several local restaurants, to clean hotel rooms, to substitute teach, work at group homes, and to teach at the community college and at the local adult education department.

Looking for a new job often means spending money you do not have. A middle-aged man who had been laid off from his low-wage job when the lumber mill he worked at closed kept me up to date on his job search when I saw him at the soup kitchen. After several months of knocking on doors, he reported that, "Looking for work is expensive." He would drive twenty miles to ask a company for the second time if they were hiring and remind the administrative assistant that he was looking for work. But after several weeks, he was getting worried: "I can't afford it. I'm driving all over the place."

After completing a packet of paperwork to substitute teach and meeting with the assistant superintendent of schools, by December, I was on the "call list." This meant I would be called the day a sub was need, for which I would be paid \$45 per day (I often

worked more than seven hours). After spending \$50 for the required finger printing, I did not get called to substitute until mid February. I continued to substitute teach a few times a month throughout my fieldwork. When I finally got a job as a waitress at a local fried chicken restaurant, I needed to buy a new shirt, pants, and shoes in order to fit the uniform requirements. I worked several days before I realized that I was also supposed to bring my own notebook for taking orders. All of these expenses may seem small, but when I was not working and was not sure when money would start coming in from a new job or how long it would last, they added stress to my joblessness. My job search accentuates the oft-ignored challenges of looking for work, challenges that could, in fact, influence some unemployed workers to stop looking for work or to refuse to take low-wage jobs. And while I was hearing many people argue that lack of desire or initiative to work prevented the unemployed from working, I was doing anything I could think of to get a job. When I finally procured a regular low-wage job, it came from my connections, not my effort. A friend of my brothers heard I was looking for work and offered me a job as an attendant and cashier at the golf course he managed.

From Factory to Nursing Home

Particularly because I could imagine this all as part of my fieldwork experience, my own frustrations with looking for a job pale in comparison to the many people in the area who are being forced out of jobs—and often industries—that they have been working in for years. Patricia was one of those people. Pat worked for 21 years at a company that manufactured wood products. She was married and had two children, both of whom were young adults when I knew her. She lived in the same small town outside of Skowhegan that she grew up in. Pat and I volunteered together at a social services

agency. Every time I saw her she seemed to have another tragedy to face. She often minimized them, dealing with them quietly, as was the case when she came in to volunteer saying she had to come in late because her sister had died that morning. With all the challenges in her life, volunteering connected Pat to friends and made her feel good; she liked to help people.

In the 1990s, when things were going well for Pat's employer, the manufacturing company had 200 employees. In 2006, when they announced that they planned to close, Pat was one of only 12 people still working there. A neck injury, which she was sure resulted the strain on her body required at work, forced Pat to stop working a couple weeks before the company actually closed. When she applied for unemployment insurance, she was told she did not qualify because she had left early. In her mid-50s, Pat found herself forced to look for a new job in a completely different line of work, recovering from neck surgery, and, because her 401K meant she did not qualify for Medicaid, without health insurance. When I asked Pat about what prevents people from getting or holding a job, she talked about the fear of applying for a new job:

Pat: I was afraid of going to these places by myself. I would sit outside and think, "You got to go in. Open the door. Step out. Go up them steps." I did it aloud, to talk myself into it...It didn't seem to be *as* bad once I went through the door. 'Cause there was a friendly face there. And, "Hello, may I help you." And I gave her the application. ... But to go over there by myself, the second time, [for an interview]. Walk through them doors? Aint happenin' [laughs]. I drove right by. I was like, "I got to stop there." I drove around the block, came back again, looked at the building, "I need to stop." I parked the car. I sat there. Then I drove off. [laughs]

Claudine: But you came back?

Pat: I came back *two days later*. [laughs]. I said "Come on. Get the initiative. It's not that bad." But it is. Because I was afraid of being rejected...It was baad. It's like, I'm 50 years old, I know no one's going to hire me. I just know it. I went in with that attitude, "they're not going to hire me."

And they did not hire her. After a few months of unemployment, Pat did get a job as a part-time nurse's assistant at a nursing home. She liked working with people and "moving all over the building" in her new job but she was overwhelmed with all that she had to learn. She was required to take a course and pass an exam before she started working and was so shocked to hear she had passed that she tearfully hugged the teacher who gave her the news. She enjoyed the residents in the home but was nervous about learning all of the home's policies and procedures and completing her tasks at the required fast pace. In the first few months of her job she was struggling to deliver medication to nursing home residents within the allotted time. There was little time to talk to patients or track someone down if she had a questions and yet she knew the potential dangers of making a mistake. She was still exceeding her time limit.

The Instability of Work

Working in the new economy in central Maine, a job is easy to lose. The manufacturing companies still hanging on could close. The new industries settling in the area could be bought up and close their Maine branches. Especially in low-wage jobs with high turnover, if employees complain about their jobs, there is always someone else who could do the job, without complaint. Or, from an employee's perspective, jobs that pay minimum wage, have no benefits and have little room for advancement can be replaced by another such job without losing much. The experience of losing (or leaving) a job is not uncommon.

Matt, a mid-level lumber mill worker in his 40s, began working right after high school pouring concrete for \$4.50 an hour until he got his first job at a sawmill 18 years

ago. He started out on the green chain, sorting lumber for not much more than minimum wage. He worked his way up to foreman in one mill and later became a buyer at another. He had a good job, making \$45,000 a year when the company he was working for closed in 2007. He found a new job quickly, but it was out of state, about four hours from Skowhegan. His daughter was just beginning college and his son lived with his mother (Matt's ex-wife) closer to the new job. Matt decided to try the move. The last time I talked to him, he was renting a room closer to work and driving home on the weekends. Though the company he was working for now seemed stable, Matt, like many other workers, had moved from one company to another:

If they try to start the mill back up they're going to have a hard time, I think, because people have new jobs. People are moving on. They don't feel comfortable going back to their uncertain—uncertainty.... There was a mill in Madison, it was there thirty, forty years... It's gone now. But I worked there for fifteen years. And I was quality control. I was a foreman, you know. I had a good job there too. And that closed too. That's the first job I had—six years ago—that closed. And then I went to work for Letourneau's. Yea. I worked there for a year and geez, it didn't feel very stable there to me. So then I went to Jackson. Well, in the mean time, Letourneau's closed, and then Jackson closed and then Letourneau's opened back up again. Well, that's not stable either, you know. I wouldn't want to go work for them, knowing it's just unstable. The woods industry is unstable in Maine. I hope it gets better.

Matt had a lot of insight into the lives and struggles of both employers and workers and always tried to understand a situation from others' points of view. Though he had shared custody of his children, they seemed to take priority in most of his career and life decisions. Despite the instability of his job and the lumber industry, at the time of our interview he had just spent more than half of his retirement savings to help his daughter pay for her first year of college.

The central Maine economy was in flux. Loss of faith in the stability and comfort of a job was not felt only by those who lost a job. When jobs are being lost, companies

moving out or being bought out around you, workers recognize the instability of their own jobs. Those with lower incomes and lower levels of education carry the most worry about the security of their jobs (Jacobs and Newman 2008). Many people working in manufacturing, for example, or in logging or the pulp and paper industry had watched their industries change. When a paper mill or a shirt manufacturer closes in a nearby town, or even in another part of the state, Skowhegan residents read about it in the local paper and talked about it with their neighbors. In the words of a salaried mill worker, “every time there’s a downturn, people get scared that something’s going to happen.” Sappi Fine Paper North America cut hundreds of jobs in the United States in 2001, 2005, and 2009, mostly in their now-closed Michigan plant (Monroe 2009).

Compared to their parents and grandparents, workers today are less likely to remain in one job for most of their lives. This increased job mobility applies particularly to men working in the private sector and to men and women working for the city or state (Farber 2008).¹⁹ Today’s young workers are still affected by the demands of flexible workforce despite not having had Pat’s experience of being forced out of a lifelong manufacturing job. Across class, young people are more likely to spend their early adult years working in several different jobs. For middle class workers, though, this is seen as more acceptable process of shopping for the best job while for low-wage workers it is often understood to indicate a lack of commitment.

The reliance on part-time, temporary, and contract workers in service industries means that workers are accustomed to working for companies that have little

¹⁹ Because women have only recently begun spending a lifetime in the workforce, they are spending more time in one job than in the past. Government jobs (like those of teachers, postal workers, and police officers) have been more stable than private sector jobs (Farber 2008).

commitment to them. Employers also seem to have the sense that if employees complain or do not perform up to the employers expectations—if they have a “bad attitude,” are not working fast enough, or are taking too long to train—they can be easily replaced by another worker. Though Matt believes that it is hard to find good workers, that there are many workers who are lazy, do not come to work on time, or will drink on the job, he also faults employers for not investing more in their workers:

There’s certain ones that you’ve got to work with too. You know, they might have a little bit of flaws, but a lot of them, if you work with them, they might end up being great employee. But [employers] don’t always work with them. If they aren’t working, they let them go. Yea. We went through one right after another over there in [the lumber mill]. For weeks, months, every week we had to hire somebody else. I was on the safety board there. So I had to orientate them for the safety. And I was doing, two or three every week. Well, there was only like thirty of us but there was always somebody gone, somebody leaving, somebody getting fired. That was steady.

Whether it is because there are a lot of “bad workers” or because of a lot of “bad jobs,” many jobs have frequent turnover. I only worked at the chicken restaurant for five days before I was fired. I did not make it past the training. I was admittedly overwhelmed during this first attempt at waitressing. When I was fired, my supervisor told me I was not taking initiative. I had only been living in Skowhegan for a couple months, but I was already hearing many people talking about the problem with work ethic and I thought, I am one of them? I am a Gen Xer, maybe I do not know the value of a good days work? Do the other waitresses think I am a slacker? I easily internalized work ethic complaints.

Even before her boss gathered the remaining workers and announced that the company would close, Pat had reason to question the stability of her job. There was the steady decline in employees and periodic layoffs at her company but there was also the flux in the jobs of the people around her. Her husband changed jobs several times before

finding a part-time job at the supermarket and her grown daughter was out of work. She also witnessed coworkers unjustly losing their jobs. Several years ago she overheard her employer talking about speeding up a machine that several of her coworkers were working on in order to justify firing them, demanding a production that was impossible to achieve. When Patricia lost her job, she also gained a fear that she was not going to be able to find another job:

Claudine: What did you think when you first heard that [the factory] was going to close?

Patricia: Ohhhhh, my. "There goes my life." 'Cause I was gonna work there until retirement. You know. I was comfortable. That was it, I just got too comfortable. You really can't get comfortable in the place where you work because it changes.

C: What do you mean comfortable? How should people....

P: Well, I knew I was going to be able to go there everyday. Have a job.

C: How would you suggest people do it differently? [pause] What advice would you give to someone else who is working?

P: To do the job as best you can and be aware that you can be let go and it doesn't take a real magnificent reason. It could be some small thing. It could be at the discretion of the employer.

Patricia may have had a good work ethic. She went to work consistently for more than 20 years, trusting that her commitment to her employer would be rewarded with continued work at the company. But after the experience of losing her job, she advises workers not to get comfortable because no one is safe at their job. This discomfort and feeling of instability comes from working for 19 years with a company that left town as she was nearing retirement. Though the manufacturing company that Pat was working for closed its doors, relocating across the country, other struggling companies downsize or cut the hours of their employees, or hire workers with the intention of only keeping them on through a busy season. This is common with retail and restaurant jobs that need

more workers during the summer, but as this mid-level worker in the paper industry explains, it is also common in manufacturing companies that do not have a consistent demand for their product:

This past six months we were running all the machines, we were full out. All of a sudden—very unusual for the summer time—the demand just kind of dropped off. So we ended up going from thirty-three machines (which requires about ten people to run) down to 19. And they had just recently hired some people to cover that extra load....In the summer time, there's a lot of vacations so there's a lot of [extra work] that needs to get done. So the fall is usually when people get laid off.

One informant who had a managerial position at a technology company was asked to cut his work down to two days a week. Shortly after this, his wife was laid off from her secretarial job of 16 years. They both suspected that many companies lay off older workers to avoid paying their benefits:

We've had a lot of our friends, once you turn 50, they find a way to get rid of you. And they say, "well, there's no contract, we don't *have* to keep you. We can just say you're done and you're done." And it doesn't do any good to argue with them because when the time is right, they say, "there's the door" and you're out.

Most employees, according to the couple, were looking out for the good of the company above that of their employers. They believed that companies would fire employees to avoid paying retirement benefits. Other informants talked about a dedicated full time employee being "let go" only to be replaced with part-time workers for whom they were not required to pay health insurance. Though companies that lay off workers when closing or moving across the country sometimes help to pay for retraining, workers are often still met with a paucity of well-paying jobs for which they could use their new skills. As Matt describes, even if retraining is possible, finding a job in the

worker's new field can still be challenging. Matt's brother was hoping to start a new career in accounting but ended up in retail and highway construction:

Claudine: Do you see a lot of other people that you work with that are in the position of starting over?

Matt: Yea. I do. Well, like my brother. My brother works in mills. Maybe not in sawmills. But like, he did like woodworking mills. Made a lot of small products, you know what I mean. But he went to college down to [community college] and he couldn't find a job afterwards. And he put 2 years of college in. His unemployment run out. So now he's working two jobs. He's working on the highway somewhere and he's going to Wal-Mart at night. Working four or five hours. So he's working two jobs, going crazy.

Workers who have been laid off or have watched their coworkers come and go thus often distrusted their employers or had a hesitant dedication to their jobs. Pat, for example, advised that workers should not trust their bosses because they could fire their employees without "a real magnificent reason." The warnings that workers should not count on their jobs is a rational reaction to the downsizing and frequent turnover of jobs. It indicates that workers are in fact reacting to the instability of the new economy.

Dead End Jobs/Investing Little in Workers

Without faith in the stability of a job or an employer's dedication to his or her employees, workers' commitment to their jobs wane. Low-wage jobs that do not offer benefits or the possibility of improving income or position are less likely to garner the commitment from employees simply because of an ethic of dedication to the job.

Chrystal, unlike Pat, did not grow up in an era when working at the shoe factory was an anticipated career. She was in her mid-20s, worked part-time at Subway, and lived with her three children and her mother, Loraine. Chrystal had her oldest child when

she was still in school but graduated from high school and had since completed a few semesters of college. She had been married and divorced and spent several years living and working in the South before moving back home. Chrystal had received public assistance through TANF (Temporary Aid to Needy Families) for most of her working years. Loraine had waited tables and done factory work earlier in her life; now she was living on mental health disability benefits. This family fit the stereotype of a welfare recipient—young mother with several children and generations of women “on the system.” Chrystal was also a driven and goal-oriented mature woman who was going to college, working, trying to get off welfare and raising three children.

When, during an interview in her home, I asked about what kinds of jobs she has had, her seven-year-old daughter stopped what she was doing and began the answer for her: “Kentucky Fried Chicken, the pizza place, Dunkin Donuts, Applebee’s,” the list went on. Chrystal did agree that there was a problem with work ethic, particularly among young people (though she seemed to exclude herself from this category). People would be better workers, according to Chrystal, if they were more disciplined. Despite having a career of low-paying jobs, she bragged that her bosses were always complimenting her on her work ethic. Though probably well versed in impressing middle-class visitors, she seemed motivated to be good at what she was doing:

I really like to excel and be like, “Ok, you have 80 employees, but here I am and I’m doing really good.” I really like that. I mean, I think that’s something that I work for too. To get a raise. To get promoted, or whatever.

Chrystal rarely had a hard time finding a new job. She explained her many jobs by saying, “I got in a habit of staying for three months, leaving, staying for three months, leaving. Working two or three jobs at the same time.” She struggled the most with jobs

that were not in the food industry. She worked briefly at the same factory that Pat worked at but could not keep up with the required production. She left several jobs when she had a conflict with the manager or her coworkers. These conflicts included a boss who was sexually harassing her and another who she said did not believe women should be working. She admitted that she did not always have such “good reasons” for leaving. Sometimes she just did not like the job.

Despite my impression that Chrystal was a hard worker, her story reveals several signs of what was considered to be a bad work ethic: defying a boss, fighting with coworkers and failing to commit to one job and work her way up. In moving from job to job, Chrystal refused to follow the work ethic’s demands that she work hard and dedicate herself to an employer regardless of the conditions, pay or degree of commitment that the employer offers her. From her perspective, because working her way up from a fast food restaurant job is not plausible nor desirable, one low-wage job is as good as the next. She focuses instead on staying in a job when she likes her boss and coworkers.

The reliance on flexible labor and the instability of work is also evident in the employers’ lack of training and investment in workers. When Patricia started her new job at the nursing home she had a lot to learn. As described above, she was particularly nervous about distributing medication to residents. She did not understand the medications she was giving out and said that even if she did, she was so rushed to distribute them that she would have little time to double check that patients were getting what they needed. Pat recognized the importance of this task and would have liked more support to prevent an error rather than in response to one:

You know what I wish they would do. When you’ve got a new girl coming in, don’t just say, “ok, you’ve got this certificate, you’ve got second floor.” Because

when I did that, I was like, [re-creates talking to herself, taking a deep breath and saying,] “ok, [pause] how am I gonna do this?”

When the nursing home assigned a supervisor to Pat, she took this to mean she was not good at her new job; that she made too many mistakes. She was not sure of herself or the stability of her new job.

After Chrystal left the pizza shop, she went to an employment agency that specialized in temporary jobs like shoveling roofs and driveways, raking and mowing lawns, and flagging. She quickly got a job at the new tomato greenhouse. This 25-acre greenhouse built in 2006 brought 90 new jobs to the area, most at about nine dollars an hour. Chrystal worked there for five hours. Like Pat, Chrystal may have been influenced by the fear and intimidation that often comes with working a new job but that particularly accompanies a job in a completely new industry. More comfortable with service industry work, she was not sure how to be a new employee at a job that required isolated, repetitive work. According to Chrystal, the company did not properly prepare her to do the job:

Ok, first, they talk up [that] you have to have a great personality. You have to be *really* charismatic. You have to be extremely social. ... you walk in and *nobody* is like that. *NOBODY*. Um, they don't train you. They make you sign a bunch of paper work, they make you watch a bunch of videos and they give you a pair of shears and they say, “here you go.” And your supervisor is not there by your side to help you. I didn't see my supervisor helping anybody. Um, she was very, [said gruffly] “hey, what's up.” ...And I was in this *huge*, they called it an aisle. And it's just tomato plants. And they had told me to cut the suckers, and I'm like, “ok, so, I'm new to this and I really don't know what a sucker is.” ... and she hands me a bag and a pair of scissors and she goes, “you're going to need this bag.” I was like, “ok.” I didn't find out what I was going to use this bag until break time. And I didn't even know it was break time. ...I mean I walked out of this aisle looking for this person who, I don't even know her name. And I stopped somebody and I'm like, “Where's my supervisor?” And they're like “what's your supervisor's name” and I'm like [embarrassed] “I don't know?!” You know. They're hard on you. Like, I finished the aisle. And she's like, “finally.” It took me the whole day, to do *one* aisle. And when I get it done she looks at it and she's goes, “no, you need to do it again.” And I was like, “and you want me to do

eight of these in a day?...It *was* a *quarter* mile long, the aisle. It was so unbelievable. Um, a lot of people were, if they couldn't do the job they were, let go. But yet they weren't being trained to do the job. So, what the heck, it's a catch-22. You can't, you can't just expect somebody to just walk in and know how to take care of tomatoes. Because you hired them at *@Work* [temp agency].

Regardless of her ability or inability to effectively complete the required tasks, five hours is a limited time to invest in a new worker, particularly if the training was a meager as Chrystal described. Chrystal moved on to another low-wage job from here.

Changing Family Structure

Just as the types of jobs have changed, families have changed, affecting who can go to work and when. In 1970 almost two thirds of married couples in the United States had a spouse who stayed at home (Kaye 2007). Today, of families with children, almost two thirds do *not* have a parent at home (that is, they are headed either by a single working parent or two working parents) (Boots 2004). The situation in Maine is no different. Sixty-five percent of children under five need child care and almost one quarter of families in rural Maine said they do not have good choices for quality child care (Lahti, et al. 2009). More workers, then, are balancing the demands of family *and* work. Working class women in Skowhegan have been working in the woolen mills and shoe shops before the feminization of labor, usually taking responsibility for home and work. But with the more widespread entrance of (middle class) women into the workforce and the increase in single-parent families, employers are confronting new demands from workers to attend to their families. Employers can interpret these demands or requests to be work ethic problems or a lack of commitment to work. In the following excerpt from an interview, Gary, a middle-aged man who has lived and worked in central Maine for most of his life, describes his own difficulty dealing with these changes as a

supervisor. Gary works in a male-dominated industry and is active and well known throughout the community. Fewer than fifteen people call him boss.

Claudine: Have you heard people talk about a Maine work ethic? Do you think there is a particularly strong Maine work ethic?

Gary: I think there is a strong work ethic. Although we're dealing with generation MTV right now.

C: So you think it's changed some?

G: It has changed. I mean, right now, right. It's a generational thing. When I came on, in '75—you were probably just born then, right?

C: Yea, actually, that was the year I was born.

G: And, uh, you worked six days on and one day off. That's what it was. We never had a weekend. We worked six days, had one day off. And you worked a 48-hour week. And we didn't think anything of it, you know. You call me? I'll be there. You want me to work my day off? I'll be there. You know, it was like typical. And we thought about the job, more. The job came first because we knew without that job, my family would suffer. I may not be able to put food on the table and pay the bills. So when you had a child that was sick, you say, you know, "well, you take care of the child or get your mother to take care of the child," or whatever. "I can't take off time from work. I've got to go to work. I've got to be to work." Nowadays, it's like, a guy will call up and say, "listen, my child is sick, I really want, I really need to be with my child today, she's got a cold," or whatever. And, your first thought is, "oh, come on. The kids got a cold," you know. But you're dealing with a different generation, so what you try to do is say, "Ok. Do you need the day off so that you can be with your child, because your child is sick?"

C: So what's changed?

G: Well, this, I think is a societal thing. I mean, I've, we've had training on generation X. And I think that what's changed is that people don't look at the job as being—yeah, it's important, but my family, you know. It's like values have changed a little bit, kind of swung around 180, in that it's more important. I mean I had one guy, one kid, one [worker] called me. And, uh, he's a good guy. He called me and his son had a, his son was sick. It wasn't, it wasn't life threatening or anything. He called me. He's on his way to Bangor. He lived in [a town between Skowhegan and Bangor]. He's on his way to Bangor. And I said, "Derek, I don't have anybody." I said, "I don't have anybody here to work." He said, "you can fire me if you want to, but I'm going to Bangor²⁰ with my wife

²⁰ Bangor is second largest city in the state so the family may have been bringing the child to the hospital or a specialist.

and child.” And you have to, as an administrator, you have to realize that, OK, we’re talking about a different people with a different work ethic now. And their values have changed and if you want to be successful, you don’t want to be a knucklehead—and you can be a knucklehead and say, “no, I want you here or you are out of a job.”... You kind of have to work around the problem. And I was able to work around it. He went into Bangor, came in the next day and worked. The kid’s fine. But it’s like, it’s like, in ‘75 we would have never thought of saying that. Never thought of saying, “ok, I’m not coming in because my kid’s sick.” You know, I mean, if the kid, the kids in the hospital, that’s one thing. But you just, you know, you just didn’t think of saying that... And so, it’s about society, it’s not about them as a person. Yea it is about them as a person, but they didn’t get that way on their own. Things have changed around some so we [managers and employers] have to adapt too. But I think overall, people have a good work ethic.

As a manager, he was struggling to come to terms with a change in how family structure affects the work place. Gary speaks with pride of the men of the 1970s who worked six days a week to support their families. His initial reaction was to chide his employee, thinking he had a bad work ethic when he called in to stay home with his child. Instead, though, he took the incident as a lesson in how work ethic has changed.

Though Gary calls it a change in “mind think,” this story reflects the change in family and work structure: the increase in women working outside of the home, in single-parent families, in the need to have two parents working (resulting from the decline in wages), and (as with Gary’s story) the increase in the role of men in parenting. When he says, “well, *you* take care of the child or get your mother to take care of the child,” the “you” he was talking to seems to be his wife. Fewer people are able to say, “you take care of the child,” than they could in the 1970s Gary was describing. Workers, however, are still often deemed to have bad work ethics when parenting interferes with work, whether because of a sick child or requested time off for a school event. Lis Hojgaard investigated how parental leave for fathers affected men in white-collar jobs in Scandinavia (Hojgaard 1997). Some men were denied opportunity for advancement,

according to Hojgaard, because they took time away from work. After taking leave, fathers became peripheral figures in “men’s work culture,” masculine bonding that extends beyond the office and helps create networks and opportunity for career advancement. Other men try to compensate for the feminization of work by further embracing a masculine work ethic and increasing the amount they work.

The above descriptions of Patricia, Matt, and Chrystal’s work lives reveal that “bad work ethics” are often reactions to the conditions of the new economy. First, these stories question whether there is in fact a work ethic problem by offering several other interpretations of work attitudes or behavior. Employers at New Balance may have thought Patricia did not want to work, for example, when she did not go to her first interview because she was panicking. And taking a lot of days off or coming into work late may not be a reflection of a lack of dedication to a job but, rather, an indication of a lack of affordable childcare.

On the other hand, workers’ behaviors are not misunderstood. They may not be following the rules of being a good worker. As Matt’s description of his coworkers testifies, there are workers who are simply not following the rules of work:

I mean you’d have better workers if they weren’t on drugs, probably, you know? [laughs] And that’s the way it is in a lot of the mills, half of the people smoke pot. That’s what they do. That’s probably not good, you know....And I don’t think they care, you know what I mean? They’re getting money from somewhere, they don’t care. They don’t want to work.

As these stories suggest, some workers may have the qualities attributed to a “bad worker,” but this behavior is in part a refusal or inability to accept the “flexible” work conditions of the new economy—a refusal to take a low-wage job with no future or a refusal to follow the rules in a job that pays little money. Chrystal moves from job to job

and does not commit to working at any one place that does not pay well or offer promotion possibilities. Patricia warns others not to trust their employers or expect they will provide work. Economic changes create the potential for resistance and the potential for the meaning of “ordinary folks” to include stories of struggle, not the struggle and redemption trope that is part of the image of the hard worker, but stories of struggle as unjust. Workers are not simply adapting to the new work requirements and embracing hard work with little rewards without resistance.

Keeping People Working: The Value of Hard Work

Regardless of the degree to which workers are actually resisting the confines of the new economy, politicians, employers, and workforce development teams assure that they keep working hard. Employers’ and workers’ are both complaining. Employers complain that they cannot find enough good workers. They tell each other stories about the man who did not show up to work but called in from jail, about the worker with a bad attitude, and the woman who takes a lot of breaks or who calls in sick every time their child has the sniffles. A community leader who is tasked with bringing more jobs into the area asked, almost rhetorically, “Why do we have employers looking for workers in a county that has six or seven percent unemployment in any given month?” This leader works with employers who tell him that their employees do not want to work or they do not have the basic knowledge of how to behave at work. Town leaders, liberal and conservative, often agreed with employers’ assessment of workers in the area, and workers themselves often spoke just as strongly about the problems of the work ethic of their coworkers, neighbors and acquaintances. Whether a response to a growing problem

with bad work ethics or a measure to prevent this lack of work discipline, economic restructuring has coincided with an effort to “retrain” workers in individualism and work ethic. At the same time well-paying jobs are disappearing, politicians and employers have been working assure that people do not lose faith in the ideologies that keep them working.

Before I discuss how employers, government officials and others succeed in keeping people working, I will examine the meaning of the ideal hard worker. Most people defined work ethic, at base, as working hard and “giving your all” to a job. More specifically, though, throughout my fieldwork, in interviews, meetings, and informal conversations, I heard workers, employers, and politicians describe problem workers with the following attributes. He or she,

- Does not do the job to the best of his or her ability
- Does not value work for work’s sake (does only what he or she has to do to get a check)
- Is too selective when looking for a job
- Frequently defies or does not pay attention to orders
- Starts fights with the boss or coworkers
- Will quit easily over a disagreement or an uncomfortable task
- Makes careless mistakes and bad decisions
- Spends too much time socializing at work
- Complains about work conditions, pay, or not getting enough breaks or sick time
- Comes to work late
- Takes too much time off because of children or family problems
- Comes to work high, hung over, or tired from partying
- Is dirty, unshaven, or inappropriately dressed
- Has tattoos, body piercings, or missing teeth

Those who are violating this work ethic, then, are fighting with their boss or with co-workers and they are questioning or defying orders. They are not able “to get along” with others and they have problems, “just plain not being able to take direction.” Those with a good ethic are good “team players” and are, as one employer put it, just doing

what they are told. They communicate well with their employee and coworkers, are courteous and pleasant and do not have quick tempers.

Hard workers see work as more than just a paycheck; they value work for work's sake and for the company's sake. They are willing to "go the extra mile." They want their employer to succeed and they are willing to work harder and longer to make it happen. As one manager pointed out, it is not only the health and happiness of the employee that is the concern here. A commitment to pride in one's work "is going to transcend to doing good quality product." Doing a good job is also self-satisfying for the good worker. Workers (like the following woman who works in social service) also speak of the importance of doing work well and with pride:

People who are proud of what they do, do things very well. And people who see it as just—"I'll go do it because I have to do it, no other way." "I like my paycheck" and, "can't you give me a little more because I really need it, because I need a new snowmobile"—their levels of achievement and their levels of accomplishment are totally different.

Good workers do not complain about the work they are given. They recognize that they are lucky to have a job and appreciate that their employer has provided them with the opportunity to work and a paycheck. Hard workers are also grateful for any time off and benefits that come with the job and do not ask for additional money or benefits. They do not whine about not having the tools to do their job, not getting enough hours, working too much, or not getting enough sick days. The worker quoted above alludes to a second part of the importance of giving all of yourself to the job, putting work above leisure and family. Though there is a time for being with family, for fishing and hunting, and snowmobiling, they should not interfere with work. Those with a good work ethic will seldom have to leave work to care for a child and will avoid taking time off for leisure activities. Roger, the owner of a successful construction company, spent the first

20 years of his working life putting up drywall and driving a truck. He now finds that too often his workers put recreation above work:

[The good worker] will put the work ahead of going fishing. Fishing doesn't give you food. Well, it does give you food, [but]...he's got a time to work, and he's got a time to play. It's called the forty-eight/four—forty-eight weeks working, four playing, over a year's period. And right now, he's forty-eight playing and four working.

Employers sometimes have differing opinions on what makes a good worker.

While some employers were most concerned that employees follow directions, others wanted employees to be better at directing themselves. Roger asked workers to do what they are told without questioning while Greg, a high-level manager at another large company, encouraged questioning. For Roger, his ideal worker takes orders well: “he's here and he does his work and he says, ‘tell me what to do and I will do it.’” Greg, on the other hand, emphasized that with a good work ethic, workers make good decisions by themselves. The good worker will not simply do what they are told, but will seek to improve on what they are told to do:

[People with good work ethics are] going to do the job right the first time. And they're not going to come in and, you know, we don't want our [workers] to come in and swipe their badge and leave their brain at the door. We actually want them to come in and be engaged and when they're processing, you know, a [widget], think about, why am I doing it that way? Is there a better way I can do this that's going to save me time, in essence save the company time?

Many people complained that workers today are always making mistakes and poor decisions. In the words of one manager, “[workers with bad work ethics] have absolutely no knowledge base at all. Common sense is an uncommon thing.” Several employers and managers complained that workers did not ask if they had questions but simply did their work, making mistakes and seeming not to care if they did something wrong.

Finally, workers with a good work ethic will come to work clean and appropriately dressed, and sober. If they drink alcohol or use drugs outside of work it will not affect their job. In the words of a town leader who works with many different employers:

What kinds of things do people do that keeps them from getting or holding a job? I would say their attitudes and their behaviors are probably the two biggest things. Showing up hungover consistently, or doing drugs on the job or at lunchtime or not being a team player. ... I seem to be hearing more about bad hygiene, you know, among workers, employers complain about how people look on the job, how they show up for interviews.

Workers also complained about the work ethic of other workers. Don, the 75 year-old former logger and shoe shop employee, for example, strongly proclaimed that people do not want to work anymore, but also believed that things would be a lot better if there were more good jobs in the area. When asked to explain why people are without work or struggling, he blamed workers for lacking a strong work ethic, for being satisfied with welfare dependency, and for failing to teach their children the value of work or respect for their employers. He described poor parenting as a cause of welfare dependency, crime, and underemployment. At the same time, he recognized the effect of underlying structural change:

People won't work...[Today's workers'] just, they, if they can't get fairly big money, they don't want to do it. It's not worth it. They don't stop to think, I always say you've got to creak before you can walk. Of course, if there was more work and more factories, maybe they would do more 'cause everything they've got now is overseas. China, Japan, Taiwan.

As indicated by his last comment, Don was not sure how his recognition of job loss fit in with his belief that people should be willing to take any job, even if it does not pay much. But despite this conviction of the importance of hard work, when it came to his own job, he questioned the work ethic. He complained about the high gas prices and criticized his

employer's unwillingness to pay what he saw as a living wage. He planned to confront his employer:

And it's got to the point where, you need to travel in there to work, by the time you do this here, it's just, it's almost not worth it. And yet I don't like to feel like I'm going to quit, you know. I'm going to see if I can't work out something....If they want me to do this little bit more, they can pay me. That's the sad part of it, 'cause some people [employers]...they feel, well, it takes \$10 for me to get by but you're going to get by on \$5, that's it. They're not thinking. But it just don't happen that way.

Matt similarly both derides those who do not work hard and understands the difficulty of low-wage work. Workers with bad work ethics often "have to be let go." He sees this as workers' fault when they do not follow the basic rules of how to be a good worker:

They don't come to work. Or they come to work drunk. You know, it's the whole, the whole nine yards. There's a lot of people that are late all the time.

At the same time, though, he understands, from experience, why workers would give up on work when they are asked to do too much without enough reward:

You come work on our green chain [sorting lumber]. I could see why people made it a couple days then went home. It's very hard work. It's strenuous. Backbreaking, all day, everyday...for not much money, ya. When I started working at [the lumber mill], at nighttime, the shift was from 5:00 at night to 3:30 in the morning. You're on that green chain. There's nothing like it. It gets to 30 below zero in the wintertime. I was getting paid, what?, six bucks an hour, you know. And I made it, but barely.

Employers who did not identify work ethic as a major problem tended to work at companies that were known in town for offering good jobs with decent pay and benefits. Several employers, union members, and activists advocating higher wages and worker rights believed employer behavior and policies had a great affect on worker behavior. In the words of an advocate for economic justice: "People don't want to work? Well, offer them something to live on and maybe they will work." They felt that a good job with good benefits in which workers are respected and challenged would create better

workers. Matt also linked the conditions and pay of a job to work ethic, saying that people work harder if they are being paid well:

There's a lot of people that don't want to work. You know they'll work for a few days and have some money in their pocket and then move on. But you know there's a lot of good ones, like at the paper mill. You get into the paper mill in Madison. You make good money. People stay there, making, fifty, sixty something thousand dollars a year. Seventy thousand dollars a year. You get dedication then.

Though complaints about workers were common from both employees and workers themselves, not everyone touted the virtues of the Maine work ethic or warned of its demise. When I asked, "How would you describe the work ethics of central Mainers," 42 percent chose, "Central Mainers are very hard workers" and 29 percent of people said the work ethic in this area is about the same as any other place.²¹ A middle-aged social worker who had struggled financially earlier in her life, represents those who believe that work ethic, good or bad, is not having a significant impact on the economy:

I think the work ethic is really good from the people that I've met. You know, the ones that I've talked to, they don't mind hard work. They don't mind getting out there, in general. You always hear stories, you know, whatever. But the people I come into contact with want to do something. Very few of them are lazy. They're not shirkers.

Though nostalgia and welfare rhetoric most likely exaggerate the problem, as the work opportunities, pay, and benefits have decreased, some workers may be "renegotiating" the work ethic contract with their employers. This raises the question,

²¹ How would you describe the work ethic of central Mainers?

42.2% Central Mainers are very hard workers.

28.6% We have a problem with work ethic (showing up late, skipping work, quit when something happens workers don't like, etc.).

38.8% Young people today have bad work ethics.

29.1% Work ethic in this area is about the same as any other place (21.8% fairly good, 7.3% bad).

are workers not making strong commitments to their work and their employers because employers are not making strong commitments to them? Though some authors have described young people as lazy and uninterested in work (Filpczak 1994; Jurkiewicz and Brown 1998), are young workers less loyal to the companies they work for because they have not had the experience of working for a company that is loyal to them?

(Tulgan1996). Workers in their late teens and twenties, who are often described as the worst violators of the work ethic, have seen their incomes decline (with the exception of the economic boom of the 1990s), have been more vulnerable to job loss during mass layoffs, and are less likely to have health insurance (DeFreitas and Duffy 2004).

The work ethic operates as a form of self-discipline, an internal drive to become a hard worker that does not need direct employer motivation. But other more subtle forms of self-discipline may be just as effective. In Nicole Constable's ethnography of Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong, domestic workers who live and work under severe restrictions, consent to their working conditions out of fear brought on by their tenuous immigrant status and by employees withholding of wages. At the same time they discipline themselves, appealing especially to national and personal pride calling on Filipinas to be cooperative and diligent. Self-discipline is a particularly subtle, all-encompassing form of control. According to E.P. Thompson, new factory workers in early 19th century England could not be controlled simply by the promise of wages. They "did not measure the return of labour exclusively in money-earnings, and they rebelled against the notion of week after week of disciplined labour" (Thompson 1963 [1966], 357). Incentives, like wages and good working conditions, could not produce the same degree of compliance as what Thompson borrowing from Eric Fromm calls inner

compulsion. Thomson agrees with Max Weber that religion nurtured this internal drive to work and with it the necessity to restrict oneself from play, alcohol, violence, and sex. Work, it was believed, developed self-discipline which would structure life and prevent the moral wandering like sexual deviance, vulgarity and drunkenness (Thompson 1963 [1966]; Weber 1992 [1930]). As I discussed in Chapter Two, during early industrialization employers had to impose strict rules and regulate the coming and going to work with whistles to counter workers' tendency to leave during work or come to work intoxicated (Gutman 1977). Unions and owners worked together to cultivate "gentlemen" out of the railroad workers known for overdrinking (Taillon 2002). As Foucault describes, the employer has power over what the worker looks like. This sort of control over the body has become standard part of employment. Employers and town leaders often discussed poor dress and physical appearance as an obvious deterrent to success, joking about how people go to an interview wearing jeans and a T-shirt. Physical appearance, though, has also been an historical site of battle for control between workers and employers.

Acts considered work ethic violations can also be seen as workers refusing the confines of the new economy. Companies that have cut costs by hiring part time or temporary workers with no benefits are expecting these workers to perform at a rate equal to full time workers receiving a family wage. In her book, *Selling the Work Ethic*, Sharon Beder refers to this process as a breaking of the employment contract (2000). Employers have broken the unspoken agreement that good work will be rewarded with job stability and promotion. Though they are offering less, employers are expecting the same hard work and commitment from employees. Workers' acts and behavior of are not

always forms of resistance but are collections of resistance, power, and accommodation (Constable 1997; Lamphere 1987). Still, to keep people working in the new economy and to combat any supposed decline in work ethic, employers, the media, and nonprofit, government, and private training programs reinforce the value of work for work's sake.

Employers and Discipline at Work

Through the history of wage (and unwaged) labor, employers have experimented with many different means of control and discipline—from the abuse of slavery and the locked doors of sweatshops to the incentives of the piecemeal system and the computerized monitoring of call centers. Through this practice, employers regulate what it means to be a good worker, reinforcing these values in their workforce by rewarding the good worker and disciplining the bad worker.

Workers are, of course, often frustrated with their jobs and their bosses; but if they “complain” too much to their managers, they risk being seen as lazy or difficult. Employers and managers control employees and the meaning of hard work by firing, reprimanding, or failing to promote workers who do not work hard enough or do not follow the established norms of a good work ethic. For one manager at a manufacturing company, everyone should have pride in his or her work. He looked up to and followed an ethic of a former boss who taught him that hard work means always doing your best, working as you would if you were the owner of the company:

I had a boss many years ago that said, “If you’re going to work doing a job, do it like it was yours. If you’re not going to do that, then don’t bother coming into work, so I can turn around and fire you.”

Firing or simply not hiring workers who appear to have a bad work ethics is a common and consistent response. When I was talking to a supervisor at a company in Skowhegan about what his co-workers and the people who work under him complain about, he talked at first about machines breaking down, making it difficult for workers to complete their work. He does not, though, like to listen to too many complaints:

But I think that if you don't want to work, don't work. That's my view on a lot of stuff. Be like, you know what the jobs consists of, you've been doing it. We can find somebody else. To me, I think, you can find somebody else that won't complain.

Ed, the owner of a struggling manufacturing company, explained that employees who refuse to follow their employer's definition of a hard worker are fired, not only to rid the company of the "bad worker" but to prevent new ideas about what should be tolerated at work from spreading. Though workers at Ed's company never received high wages, when the company was doing well, they had health insurance and stable jobs. Now, after hundreds have been laid off, those remaining do not receive health insurance and cannot be sure how long they will have their jobs. Though Ed is proud of the family atmosphere he believes comes with working for his company, he sadly admits that most of the people who work for him are poor. By this he meant that they live paycheck to paycheck, with no extra money for doctors' bills, car repairs or unplanned expenses. Still, he believed he was working hard to keep the company going and keep as many people employed as he could. He spoke highly of his workers as "real salt of the earth people" and said, in general, they had great work ethics. Over the years, though, he had hired some workers who caused problems. He saw resistant workers as potential threat to the company:

Workers, sometimes—and it's not general—on occasion you'll come across someone who has a distorted view of what he is obliged to do for the money he's getting paid. ...I'll give you a case in point. We do [widget making]. And I had

six machines running and I knew what each machine was capable of producing. It was capable of producing anywhere between four and six hundred [widgets] a day. Well, this fellow was running the machine and he was producing two hundred [widgets]. So I went down and I color coded all the components to make it easier for him. ... I did all this for about a week, maybe two weeks and it didn't improve. So finally I went down to him and I said, "how come this guy right here is working right beside you is doing what he's doing, the same material, everything the same, the same machine, [and he is producing more]." I said, "how come?" He said, "well, if you pay me more money, I'll do more work." I said, "Well, that's very nice. You can punch your card. You're out of here." I don't need employees like that. Their attitude is rotten. So he was gone. ... With people with attitudes like that, I don't want them, because it's the bad apple that permeates. Before you know it they've got everybody [saying], "I'm not getting paid enough." I'm paying you *as best I can*.

As many manufacturing companies are forced to cut employees, pay, or benefits and new companies offer less work at lower wages, Ed's story becomes increasingly important. Workers may in fact be responding to economic change like Ed's "bad apple," in ways that are understood to be bad work ethics (sometimes appropriately and sometimes inappropriately). And just as Ed fired his worker with a bad attitude (in part) to prevent the attitude from spreading, employers and those vested in having a disciplined work force are taking action to keep workers from questioning the deleterious effects that economic change has had on them.

In addition to firing workers with contagious bad ethics, employers sometimes reward good workers. Roger says he has to go through about twenty-five bad workers before he can find one good one but when he finds good workers he rewards them with pay raises. Roger told stories of the bad workers being lazy, not coming to work, coming in late, and, in one case, quitting without telling anyone and taking an expensive piece of equipment with him.

So, when he finds employees he likes, according to Roger, they can work their way up in his company. He expects other companies to have the same philosophy:

Claudine: What if someone is making minimum wage, \$7 an hour, what would you suggest they do? You know, they've got a family, people to support. How do they get out of that situation and make more money?

Roger: Let's put it that way, when you start to climb a ladder, you're going to start with the first [step], right? That's exactly the same thing in life. I got some girls²² here that started at \$350 a week or \$8.50 an hour. You can ask them right now, they gross, six, seven, eight hundred dollars a week plus bonuses because they *show* me the interest they have for the company to make it work.

He believed that unless there was something wrong with the worker, the spot at the bottom is only temporary. As described above, Roger values workers who accept their jobs without complaint. Those who work through heat and illness and do what they are told without question will earn his respect:

[Today's workers] are never happy. They have a lot of problems. [But] you're going to have some [good ones]. I've got a kid, he's eighteen years old, he did every job that I told him, every time, everyday. There's no question to be sick. There's no question that he got drunk the night before, he's here. And I really highly respect that. And he's got a job here and he's going to go really far....He's not saying it's too hot. He doesn't have no complaints.

Employees at the entry level are encouraged push themselves to work hard without complaining about conditions or pay. As an employer, Roger rewards his employees who model his perception of hard work and company loyalty, helping to assure that workers maintain faith in the importance of hard work. Unfortunately, for many companies these rewards are given in small increments that are not enough to pull workers into the middle class.

Public Campaigns: Demonizing the "Undeserving" and Congratulating the "Deserving"

²² He is referring to female office workers. Female workers are often referred to as "girls," regardless of age, particularly if there is a group of women working together.

Public campaigns that demonize welfare recipients and local campaigns that praise Maine hard workers, effectively reassure that hard work remains an essential value of ordinary Mainers, despite the challenges of the new economy. Conservative populisms in the United States have consistently defined welfare recipients as one of the “others” against which ordinary Americans are defined. Politicians, social scientists and the media used the rhetoric of the lazy welfare recipient to convince the public to restructure welfare in the early 1990s. Media campaigns, beginning in the 1960s, implied that welfare and other social and family programs prevent self-sufficiency and focused particularly on black families as the problem (Gilens 2000; Gilens 2003; Misra, et al. 2003). Efforts to gain support for welfare restructuring led to an increase in media and political campaigns that demonized welfare recipients, characterizing them as nonworkers (Gilens 2000; Morgen and Maskovsky 2003). Capitalizing on racist beliefs about urban poverty, politicians like Newt Gingrich—backed up with the work of social scientists such as Lawrence Meade and Charles Murray—disseminated the idea that welfare causes dependency and discourages work (Hernstein and Murray 1994; Meade 1986). In the early 1990s, politicians debated whether the reform should focus on family, with Republicans advocating for a focus on changing women’s reproductive behaviors by discouraging teen pregnancy and out of wedlock births (Rogers-Dillon 2004). Though the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) discouraged single parenthood, its primary aim was to encourage self-sufficiency and work. Once in place, public assistance workers who were also taught to believe that they were enabling women to find jobs, helped to promote individualism and work ethic as they “compel their clients to attain ‘self-sufficiency’” (Morgen 2001). All welfare

recipients, in fact, become part of a program that coaches recipients to believe that personal responsibility means working for wages, regardless of how low those wages are (rather than, say, caring for ones children) (Schram 2000).

The national rhetoric of the “undeserving poor,” of welfare cheats, and the culture of poverty influenced claims of failing work ethic in central Maine. Conversations about bad workers often include discontent about the state of the welfare system, about lazy people who do not work at all but live off the system and misspend their money. Hard work and dedication to one’s employer provides workers with a sense of morality and distinguishes them from “non-workers” (Newman 2006; Sherman 2009). As I argue in Chapter Five, even welfare recipients and those who are in and out of work can embrace a populist identity by identifying with and aligning themselves with the idea of the white worker.

The critique that people do not want to work is tied to the perception that there are a lot of people in the area on public assistance, food stamps, and state health care. Welfare recipients, it is said, use the system because they are lazy (they do not want to work and they will do what they can to avoid it). They have lost the motivation, interest, and pride in work and would prefer to “live off the system” than to find a job and go to work. In an extension of this argument, the system itself creates this laziness.

Several town leaders in Skowhegan were clearly influenced by these misperceptions and stereotypes about welfare recipients and poor people. The following town leaders’ description of the poor work ethic of students reveals several common perceptions of welfare recipients. The people he is criticizing are presumably white, but he is influenced by rhetoric of the “welfare queen” and urban poverty:

We had a superintendent of schools into some meetings a few months ago. We were talking about this [worker-focused] program that I think you've heard about. And one of the superintendents of schools said, "we have the same issues with our students. They are unmotivated. They won't come to class. They won't come to school. They come to school [and] they won't participate. They won't study. And we have issues just getting them on the bus." And they, they being the school district, provide alarm clocks for the families so they can get up in the morning. I guess they heard that they don't have them, or whatever. But the bottom line is, they bought them alarm clocks. They went to the homes. They had to go to some of the homes to show mummy how to use an alarm clock because mummy had never used one, because mummy never had to get up to go to work—or daddy or whoever, I don't want to genderize it, but...so what's that tell you about people's motivation? And they're—how do they survive? They survive through welfare transfer payments and some amount of underground economic activity that's not taxed, that we don't know about. And they have low expectations. They have low needs. They are on subsidized housing, subsidized food programs, and they don't have a lot of, they don't have any expectations. So they don't have very big needs. It's difficult.

This town leader is assuming that because mothers are dependent on the state, they do not know the basics of how to live as workers, like using an alarm clock to prevent tardiness. As the theory goes, they will thus pass this culture of nonwork on to their children unless, as he describes, schools or other social programs intervene to stop the teaching of this culture of dependency. He links the problem of the worker and work ethics to generalizations about the working poor. Much of the onus for teaching work ethic through discipline and modeling the importance of work at home is on the mother. This comes out when the above town leader describes "mummy's" responsibility to prepare her child for school and teach the importance of timely arrival, he then corrects this assumption, saying he does not want to "genderize it." This culture of dependency—a learned culture of poverty that is passed down, taught by mothers and promoted by "the system"—is blamed for driving the decline of the work ethic.

Myths about the good worker can be just as effective at promoting hard work as those of the bad worker. On the flip side of rhetoric and media campaigns that demonize

the poor and the welfare recipient, are those campaigns that hail the worker, and, in fact, indirectly tell Mainers that if they work hard, their employers will stay in Maine and new companies will come looking to hire them. Local legend has it that Mainers are such tough, hard workers, that they can go anywhere in the country and tell a potential employer they are from Maine and they would likely be hired on the spot. Workers talk about how the Maine work ethic is recognized around the country. Chrystal and Loraine, the fast food worker and her mother described above, both left the state to work elsewhere when they were young; Loraine in the seventies and Chrystal in the late nineties. They described being recognized as good Maine workers:

Loraine: Mainers are very hard working people. As a matter of fact, when I left Maine for the first time when I was 18, the minute they found out I was from Maine, I was hired.

Chrystal: Yea, I got jobs like that [snaps fingers] because they hear you're from Maine.

Loraine:You put 300 percent of yourself into the job, and they know that.

Talk of the strong Maine work ethic is not limited to workers. Government officials, businesses, and other organizations publicly tout the fabled strong Maine worker in attempt to lure new businesses to the area. Politicians and local leaders remind workers that their good Maine work ethic can prevent a company from leaving and that hard working Mainers will bring in new companies. The implication, then, is that a strong work ethic can bring in more jobs. Governor John Baldacci was quick to praise the high quality of Maine workers when called to comment on the relocation of new companies to the state. He also praised workers when companies closed facilities or laid off workers, assuring Mainers that he had faith in these workers. When MBNA closed its

call center in a town 45-minutes from Skowhegan thirteen years after building it, Baldacci assured workers that they would help lure other businesses to this site: "This is a field where Maine excels. These workers are a premium, which helps explain the interest by other companies" (Jespersen 2006).

Similarly, a trade association for the software and information technology industry reported on its website,

Maine people are known for their strong work ethic and commitment to delivering quality performance every workday. In Maine, labor disputes are rare. Maine employers consider their workers their best asset. (TechTechMaine: Technology Association of Maine n.d.)

As TechMaine implied here, the value of the Maine worker goes beyond putting in good day of work. This hard worker does not come at a high price. In central Maine, businesses relocating to the area can get this hard worker at low wages. Though inexpensive electricity seemed to draw Backyard Farms to the Skowhegan area, the availability of inexpensive labor was also a primary concern. A company representative explained to townspeople at a town meeting that he had heard the stories of the mills closing in the area and thus was not concerned about finding the one hundred workers he needed. But one local leader who talked with company representatives as they were deciding where to local their plant, relayed that inexpensive labor was of a primary concern:

That's a fairly labor intensive business so, low, relatively low wages compared to central Massachusetts or central New York or any where else they might have been able to do that, was obviously going to be a locational advantage for them. And it's awful to think of, but I mean that's one of the things we have to offer.

In addition to individual workers' work ethic being blamed for job loss, the general decline of work ethic in the area is also given as an explanation as to why a company decided not to move to the area (that is, they couldn't find enough good workers). The myth of the hard working Mainer helps to create good workers by encouraging Mainers to work hard as any good Mainer should. Yet individual Mainers are still blamed for unemployment and underemployment from the economy or the state to the individual. Whether touting the strong work ethic of Mainers or bemoaning the problems of the failing work ethic, these public campaigns describe the health of the economy as dependent on the worker and his or her culture and attitude regarding work.

Training for a Bad Job

In *The Job Training Charade*, Gordon Lafer marks the early 1980s as a shift in focus in national labor market policy from creating jobs to training workers. The Job Training Partnership Act, passed by the Reagan administration in 1982, responded to the unemployment crisis with federal programs for training youth and "dislocated workers," beginning a trend of responding to economic decline with job training. Proponents of training usually cite a "skills mismatch," as the cause of unemployment—the theory that workers' skills do not match the skills needed by employers. The government allocates money to job training accordingly—between \$3.2 billion and \$5.3 billion in 2002, with states spending up to \$700 million a year each (Mikelson and Nightengale 2006).

Retraining workers who have lost their jobs in manufacturing or preparing young workers for a new economy driven by technology and services should be part of the response to structural economic change. But it is important to consider who is being

trained for which jobs. Many new jobs are not well-paying jobs that involve significant training. Rather, deskilling has made labor cheaper for employers but meant that there are fewer jobs that require specific education and training. The Center for Law and Social Policy discovered that from 2000 to 2007 the percentage of low-income workers receiving more advanced training at Career Centers (including occupational skills training and one-on-one counseling) had decreased from 84 to 54 percent (Baider 2008). Workers with some college education were twice as likely to receive training from their employers as those with a high school education or less (Mikelson and Nightengale 2006).²³ When employers train low-wage workers, the instruction tends to be more specific to their job and thus less transferable (Shields 1996). In an economy that demands a more flexible workforce, in which workers are more likely to change jobs several times, job-specific training does not necessarily prepare workers for jobs in the new economy. Both the Job Training Partnership Act and the Workforce Investment Act that replaced it in 1998 emphasized businesses working closely with state and local government to prepare workers for work.

Much of the training for low-skilled jobs is geared toward preparing entry-level workers to accept the lower-wages and instability of new economy jobs. According to employers, “soft skills” are the skills that are most in demand for entry-level employees. “Soft-skills” is a term used by management and job training experts to refer to social, behavioral and emotional skills often encapsulated in the ideology of work ethic. Several researchers have reported an increase in employer demand for “soft skills” among low-wage workers (Capelli 1995; Ferguson 1993; Moss and Tilly 2001). This purported

²³ See Swift and Peerla (1996) for a discussion of the emphasis on self-esteem and attitude adjustment in Canadian training programs.

burgeoning call for ‘soft-skills,’ may be connected to the growth of the low-wage service economy, where jobs increasingly require social interaction. Soft skills training, though, also functions to discipline an increasingly flexible workforce.

When conducting research among low-wage workers in the New York City health care industry, sociologist Ariel Ducey participated in soft skills training. Though the healthcare system left employees overworked and underpaid, Ducey discovered that soft skills training would “harnesses” workers’ complaints and struggles by teaching participants to ignore the structural problems of the hospitals as work sites. Hospital staff cannot control their managers’ attitudes, their angry patients, or the decision of the hospital to assign workers to units they were not trained for, but that they could control their attitude and response to these situations. The effect of soft skills training on the anger or grievances of workers is to “depoliticize it, and turn it inward upon the self” (Ducey 2008, 138). The talk of the importance of “soft skills” can thus be seen as a demand for disciplined workers.

In Skowhegan, it was not only new economy employers who decried the fall of the work ethic or emphasized the importance of soft skills, but workers, social service officials, and employers of low-wage workers in various occupations. Prompted by employers’ complaints about poor work ethic, several organizations in the Skowhegan area joined together to offer soft-skills training. The Workforce Investment Board, representing business and local government interests, developed a certificate program designed to prepare participants for work. The program garnered support from chambers of commerce, Career Centers, adult education programs, public and private economic development organizations, and local employers. One other town in Maine had piloted a

similar program and community-based soft-skills training courses had been running for years in other states. According to presentations and promotional materials for the Maine program, the 60-hour course teaches participants soft skills such as understanding “why people work” and how to communicate and take direction.

Participants are taught and evaluated on practices for good dental health, cleanliness, hygiene; how to behave, dress, interact with others in the work place; how to balance job, career, family life, and leisure; and how to increase self-esteem and confidence. They learn the importance of arriving to work on time, of dressing appropriately for work, and of being pleasant with their bosses and coworkers. The premise, or hope, is that workers can be taught to change their behavior and attitudes and to embrace work for work’s sake. Though reminiscent of the self-discipline training that Dorinne Kondo experienced in the late 1970s and early 1980s in Japan, this movement to discipline workers relied on workers volunteering themselves as people who need to be taught how to work (Kondo 1990). When I finished fieldwork organizers were still struggling to find participants for their first course. The program has since expanded to several locations throughout the region and added 20 hours of computer and technology training to the course.

The leaders discussing the development of this training program often talked about it with laughter and sarcasm. Though they believed it was an important means to prepare the unemployed and to help workers find jobs, they also seemed to find it hard to believe that people would have to be taught basic skills like timely arrival. The program’s developers chastised workers who defied their bosses, suggesting that these workers did not understand the constraints of a boss-employee relationship. One of the

program's developers, for example, mocked a worker who quit his job and later announced, "They tried to tell me what to do. What's up with that?"

This emphasis on soft skills in Skowhegan appeared in a national report on welfare reform. A 2001 Urban Institute on the effectiveness of welfare reform in rural areas chose Somerset County (of which Skowhegan is the county seat) as one of the twelve sites it used as case studies. The profile of Somerset County in the report's appendix described the barriers to employment and service as a lack of the "soft skills required to attain a job"²⁴ (Pindus 2001, A-12). They have problems, according to the report, "interacting professionally with workers and/or bosses, 'attitudinal issues' and time management" (Pindus 2001, A-12). These ideas clearly reflect the interpretations of a small number of social service and community leaders.

Whereas "soft skills" training seeks to teach the value of hard work ideologically, by impressing on students the importance of these ideas, welfare-to-work programs seek to discipline workers through the practice of work. Nationally, since 1996 welfare reform, recipients of public assistance have been asked to put "work first." States were forced to initiate time limits and reduce their welfare roles regardless of the local availability of jobs, training or education (Miewald 2003). As I will discuss below, Maine is unusual in the degree of training and education that it allows its TANF recipients to do in place of work. Still, all recipients of public assistance in Maine participate in ASPIRE, Maine's training and employment program, and log at least 30 hours per week of work. Those who are not able to find a job need to "volunteer" at a

²⁴ Other barriers described include the lack of transportation, an absence of "marketable skills," and domestic, sexual, and alcohol abuse.

public or nonprofit organization to fill those hours.²⁵ Other acceptable activities include on-the-job training, job search, work-study, study time, and other job skills or training, though there are limits on the number of hours or months that these activities will “count.” By working, whether volunteering at the local library or working at Dunkin Donuts, welfare recipients are said to be learning the value of work and gaining “soft skills” and basic job training. Political scientist and labor activist Gordon Lafer explained how training through low-wage work has been largely reduced to lessons about how to be a good, disciplined, hard worker:

In program after program, it appears that welfare-to-work ‘training’ serves largely as a disciplinary mechanism, aimed at disabusing participants of the notion that they can refuse, resist, or even complain about the type of job they are offered. Simply put, the goal of much welfare training appears to be to get poor people to embrace hard work at low wages, and to suffer this fate willingly (Lafer 2002).

Maine, however, does have a program which helps students go to college while receiving public assistance. Those who qualify for TANF and enroll in a two or four-year college can participate in the Parents as Scholars (PaS) program and receive benefits while getting an education. Participants are not required to “work first,” though many will balance work, school, and parenting. Those who I spoke to who were on this program were grateful for the opportunity it provided, but also said it limited their career choices. The law establishing the Parents as Scholars program does not restrict the type of degree participants must be enrolled in, though it must be an approved two or four year program. Still, some recipients have had trouble getting their programs approved.

Ashley grew up in a middle-class family but, as a single mother without a college

²⁵ TANF benefits serve as payment for their volunteer hours. Recipients, then, cannot be forced to “volunteer” for what would be less than the hourly minimum wage. That is, their monthly benefits divided by the number of volunteer hours cannot be less than minimum wage (Main Equal Justice Partners 2010).

education, she decided to use the PaS program to get a degree while raising her children. She changed her mind when she learned that she would have to change what she wanted to study in order to participate:

They tell you to get it [your degree] in nursing or education. And I'm like, what I'm going to do, I'm going to make more money than a teacher is going to make. Cause I'm thinking I want to do writing or publishing ... I'm going to get more, but they won't let me. ... People who are afraid, who have been living like this [in poverty or on welfare] their whole lives would say, "ok, I'll become a teacher." And I'm like, "you're not going to tell me what I can go to school for. I'm not going to choose my degree based on the \$400 you give me every month. You are not worth it." So I volunteer.

Ashley did continue to go to college, then, and receive public assistance through ASPIRE, but because her education hours did not count toward her required 30 hours per week of work, she had to add volunteer hours to qualify. Through a friend she found a nonprofit that was willing to be flexible with her hours. Chrystal (the single mother of three discussed earlier) stopped going to college when her caseworkers told her that her liberal arts degree was not "goal oriented." Because school hours no longer qualified, in order to meet her requirements to receive ASPIRE she had to replace school hours with work hours. She fell behind in her schoolwork and stopped attending classes. She planned to start taking classes again as soon as she could; but when I saw her several years later she had not yet made it back to school.

Though corporations target low-wage, entry-level employees with disciplinary work ethic training, employers also train their mid and upper-level employees to be more "flexible," to empower themselves and to work better with teams (Lafer 2002; Martin 1994). In both cases, workers are being "trained" to understand themselves as responsible for their own economic future (Dunk 2002; Dunk, et al. 1996; Lafer 2002). Worker training that does not set out specifically to teach work ethic nevertheless often

reinforces the importance of hard work, encouraging workers to focus on their individual problems and discouraging a group or class-based analysis of job insecurity. Through ethnographic research on retraining programs responding to massive job loss in Canada, Thomas Dunk documented how counseling programs encouraged laid off workers to forget about their lost jobs and what they were owed and to focus on their individual careers. In addition to disciplining workers, such training programs help to strengthen individualism in general in that “counseling and retraining services reinforce an instrumental, individuated, and competitive understanding of job loss and economic adjustment” (Dunk 2002, 879).

Hard work and dedication to one’s job seems reasonable in work places that have good working conditions and offer high salaries. Under what conditions does struggle become abnormal and unacceptable? Enduring struggle and hard work is part of what makes someone an “ordinary American.” Maintaining the populist commitment to hard work means assuring that a willingness to work for low pay and to put up with harsh conditions can be seen as morally worthy even in these circumstances. In response to job loss and the need for flexible labor, workers are retrained and inculcated into the value of hard work, shifting blame away from the economy and the employer.

CHAPTER FOUR

Creating a Viable Place

At an early morning community meeting of business owners and regular town leaders, a guest from a state development office spoke about how to make Skowhegan a tourist-friendly destination, stressing the importance of creating an open and welcoming community. Retail workers and community members should be helpful and pleasant, he said, because tourists not only spend money when they visit; they are also potential big investors. To make his point, he told a story about an executive from MBNA who summered in Maine. After a friendly fireman had helped him out of a bind, the executive decided to “invest in the people” of Maine and open several call centers around the state, eventually employing 3,000 people, mostly in telemarketing jobs (Yap 2006). He dismissed the end of this story—that four of those call centers closed and most of these jobs were lost when Bank of America acquired MBNA 13 years after the company started these back offices—the point was that small towns attract investment by having good attentive service workers and by living up to outsiders’ expectations of small town life.

In this meeting and others, a segment of primarily middle class optimists proposed a vision for the future of the town that depended on the image of the comfortable and classless small town—the bustling farmers’ market, the quaint downtown, the friendly and welcoming community. According to community development experts, Maine’s economic future is dependent on its ability to maintain a “quality of place” that

has the ability to recruit businesses (especially technology-driven industry that “could be anywhere”), keep young people in state, and increase tourism (Reilly and Renski 2008; The Brookings Institution 2006). Maintaining “quality of place” is thought to be particularly important for attracting creative industries. Not surprisingly, on more than one occasion, a town leader suggested I pick up a copy of the bestseller, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, in which Richard Florida purports that the successful post-industrial city will cater to the interests of artists, scientists, professors, computer programmers, and other creative professionals (Florida 2002).

A group of working and middle class residents in Skowhegan believed this small town “creative class” vision of Skowhegan was idealistic and motivated by outsiders who wanted to change the town too quickly. As varying factions sought to sustain or reinvent their community, residents who were resistant to efforts to develop and “beautify” the town came to see themselves as representative of ordinary townspeople. They were, in turn, chastised for being against change and against development, further delineating community development leaders from “the people.” In this chapter, I describe how shaping cities and small towns for the “creative class,” though often put forth by well-intentioned leaders seeking to prevent over-development, are based on a vision of a particular elite group. In central Maine, these development efforts helped to define a populist sense of regular people against the group of middle-class revitalization leaders.

I begin by describing in more detail the small town and Maine imaginaries upon which the middle class and capital-backed vision for development depends. I then break down the groups of town leaders vying for power in the community before finally

describing the community debates over the visions for the future of the town and their significance for defining populist identities in Skowhegan.

Maine and Small Town Imaginaries

Small towns have a reputation for creating simple, peaceful lives for their residents. They are places people would want to go to get away from a busy life. Ronald Reagan talked about urban areas as places of crime, race riots, and welfare abuses at the same time mythologizing the nation as one “homogeneous small town, stocked with friendly people of middling incomes who had a ‘quiet, unselfish devotion to our families, our neighbors, and our nation’” (Kazin 1998, 262). This vision of the small Maine town plays an important role in regional economic development. Communities are told that they must compete with other towns and cities around the country to bring in potential employers. Small towns less than a fraction of the size of Skowhegan build industrial parks and offer tax incentives to lure in business even though tax incentives and other subsidies have not paid off in terms of job gain (Breslow 1999). Leaders in Skowhegan strategize about what their community has to offer as “each person, each local community, each state, and each national government must view itself as a competitor with every other and promote its distinctive comparative advantage to outside market players to attract global capital” (Holland, et al. 2007, 5). Towns like Skowhegan cannot offer quick access to international shipping ports, but can offer a unique “quality of place.” Small towns therefore have incentives not to disrupt their image. Signs of poverty, of over-development, and sometimes of a new population of immigrants or people of color can all be seen as a threat to the small town imaginary. Anthropologists

working in a small North Carolina city, for example, found that a population of Latino laborers was thought to be threatening the “inviting Southern small-town image in the global competition for outside capital” (Nonini 2003, 173).

Economists and community developers say that towns like Skowhegan have a unique claim to “quality of place.” This is, in part, the idyllic imaginaries of the hardworking Mainer and of small towns. “Mainers” are unique in their alliance with the archetypical ordinary hard working man or woman. To talk of the “real Mainer,” as tourists venturing away from the coast might, conjures an image of a strait-talking, stubborn, hard living, boot-wearing person who requires few luxuries beyond hunting and fishing. The more “authentic” Mainer is rough and hard working, a persona that aligns most with a working class man. But this masculine prototype applies to women as well. A “good Maine woman” is tough, strong willed, and not afraid to get dirty. She can be contrasted to the “prissy” city girl who spends too much money on clothes and make-up. Most informants saw only pieces of themselves in this ideal type and were hesitant to stereotype, also describing Mainers as anyone who was born or lived in Maine. Still this fictional Mainer was easily recognizable and was supported by informants’ descriptions of Mainers as “self-sufficient,” “independent,” “hard working,” and “contentious.” Maine is widely associated with nature and wildlife. The state’s image as a natural place with down-to-earth people has been used to sell toothpaste (*Tom’s of Maine*), water (*Poland Spring*) and other products across the country.

“The Mainer” has a strong work ethic and he (or she) is not wealthy. As Sue, a middle-aged town leader described, southern Maine, with its costal communities, proximity to Boston, and stronger economy, is thus seen as less “real Maine:”

Claudine: What do you think a Mainer is? How would you describe a Mainer?

Sue: Well, I think there's lots of different kinds of Mainers. ...I guess my opinion is just, hardworking people that are just trying to make ends meet. You know, I think the average Mainer isn't a rich person. Um, and I guess when I think of a Mainer, it's just people who just want to enjoy the outdoors and make a living.

C: And that fits for central Maine?

S: Yea, if you were talking about southern Maine, I'd disagree.

C: What would a southern Mainer look like?

S: Well, it just seems that southern Mainers are more yuppie types and they want to get rich.

As Sue indicates, “real Mainers” are not wealthy but are simple, ordinary hardworking folks. Following this description, the image of Maine *worker* is of a particularly hard worker. As described in Chapter Three, politicians and development officials looking to bring companies to their area often boast about the tradition and culture of hard work in the state. According to the legend, companies will relocate to the state because of its workers and out-of-state employers will seek out Maine workers to relocate to their state. The website of an organization dedicated to attracting business to Maine quoted the President and CEO of Nestlé Waters North America (the parent company of Poland Spring) supporting this vision of the Maine worker: "Maine's work ethic is strong. Our team of 550 employees is dedicated, smart, and representative of a deeply-rooted culture of hard work throughout the state" (MaineCo 2008). A 2006 report on the future of the Maine economy conducted by the Brookings Institution, called on development officials to go further in capitalizing on this Maine brand in economic development plans. The report described “Maine’s reputation for Yankee ingenuity and resourcefulness” as increasingly important for innovative economic development planning (The Brookings Institution 2006, 6). The image of the tough

hardworking Mainer is not disruptive to “quality of place” because, at the same time it serves employers looking for low-wage laborers in stores and restaurants, the myth of the white worker is as American as that of the comfortable small town.

The second factor contributing to the “quality of place” is the idyllic status of the American small town. Maine, in particular, according to the Brookings report, is “world-renowned” for “its distinctive towns and villages and the stunning natural areas that lie between them” and should thus capitalize on this selling point (The Brookings Institution 2006, 64). The attraction of the “distinctive towns and villages,” though, depends on the historical mystique of the small town. Before urban industrialization and the dominance of the city, 19th century American literature such as Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of Seven Gables* and Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* depicted the small town as an ideal place (Holbling 1995). On the other hand, these idyllic representations competed with critical images of small town life as boring and its people as materialistic, selfish and uneducated. By the time small town literature moved to the Midwest as with Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street* (1920) and *Babbitt* (1922), “the town in general and the mid-west small town in particular [had] in the 20th century become synonyms for lackluster mediocrity and petty consumerism, as well as bleak and graceless architecture” (Holbling 1995, 99). These positive and negative images both contribute to the small town imaginary. Current authors like Garrison Keillor and Bill Bryon, for example, describe the small town as the simplistic and petty as well as quaint and wholesome. Companies like Bartles and James’ wine coolers, Motel 6, County Tyme Lemonade, Chevy trucks have all used the “‘aw shucks’ sentimentality of small-town America” to market their product (Wright 2000, 9).

A town with “quality of place” will have a sense of “community” and strong dose of “social capital.” In his bestseller, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam warned that Americans were suffering from a decline in civic participation and were thus losing a sense of togetherness (Putnam 2000). He documented a declining membership in civic groups like the Boy Scouts and the Rotary Club since the mid-20th century. Accordingly, some economists and social scientists call on small town economic developers to reclaim this sense of community. They argue that economic decline and concomitant middle class exodus threatens community stability and local democracy: “Communities that experience economic displacement and long-term population decline will inevitably lose a substantial portion of their social-capital-enhancing long-term residents” (Williamson, et al. 2002).

But not all interaction can be measured in numbers of Boy Scouts and Lion’s Club members. This sort of club membership often says more about the middle class than the social networks of working class or poor people. Community is also present when friends look after each other at a bar, help a friend fix his or her plumbing, or loan the equipment they need to fix their car. Particularly among working class families in the area, friends and family help to raise each other’s children or offer temporary housing to combat homelessness. Volunteering weekly at the soup kitchen, I saw people looking out for each other. A person or family with a working car would often pick up a few other people on the way who needed a ride. They shared their problems with each other and took food back to their neighbors. If soup kitchen visitors or their friends were homeless (and they were not staying in their cars or at a campground) it was usually other down-and-out people who helped by offering them a place to stay or connecting them with

resources. Older women who had enough money, hired friends from the soup kitchen to help with odd jobs around the house. Experiences such as these create community and are a form of civic participation but are less often recognized as part of “quality of place.”

Poverty and class-segregated neighborhoods and social networks do not fit the image of the American small town. Before I began research, I suspected that many central Mainers, particularly middle class residents, might not see or think about the poverty and class difference in their communities. They would dismiss poor people as a small portion of the community, not enough to constitute a problem. Those who believed that their communities lived up to the national image of the American small town would see everyone living comfortably together. In 1939 and 1940, John West, studying in a poor Midwestern farming town, found that most residents saw inequality and divisions based on class and status as something that exists in the cities but not in their small town and I expected to find the same perceptions in Skowhegan in 2006 (West 1945).

Several middle class people I interviewed confirmed this expectation; they did not believe that poverty was a problem and did not see large numbers of people struggling to get by. These residents saw their towns as comfortable, safe places, sometimes contrasting rural and small town living to the poverty and destitution in the city. In small towns, according to a woman who had lost her office job after 20 years, “we take care of our own”:

There’s dinners and suppers, you know. You read the paper, they’re always having a benefit supper for some family that’s got medical problems or, you know, a death in the family or just lost their home in a fire. People rally around to support them in more rural areas. You just don’t have that in larger cities.

Scott, a paper mill worker, would have agreed but he had learned otherwise from his involvement with his church and social service organizations. He heard about people

coming to his church for help and through his political efforts to increase the minimum wage in Maine, he heard stories of families living on low wages. Though this made him more conscious of poverty and struggle, he believed that most of the people around him were not aware of, or do not think about, the economic struggles of people in his community:

We have a tendency to live in cocoons. Our jobs are busy—taking care of our work responsibilities, taking care our families and spending what little free time we have on recreational things with our families—and you don't really see, unless you get involved with organizations that deal with that, that there is a problem.

The poverty in the Skowhegan area is not comparable to the condensed poverty in Washington D.C. or Mississippi. But the 16- 22 percent of people in Skowhegan and surrounding communities that fall below the national poverty rate²⁶ (and the many more who fall above this line but struggle to pay bills and feed their families) still clash with the image that many residents and outsiders have of small town communities.

If I had done only participant observation, I might have thought Scott's cocoon theory was an accurate assessment of much of the middle class. When talking about the economy and town revitalization, the idea that some people are struggling economically was rarely discussed (except as lazy people who did not want to work). But in response to the survey question, "Are there a lot of people struggling to get by in this area?," 80 percent of respondents chose, "there are a lot of poor people and families living in our communities" and only three percent agreed that "we don't have a problem with poverty." This recognition of poverty and struggle may have been high because the survey question implied an inclusive definition of poverty (people struggling to get by).

²⁶ The percentage of individuals in the nation that fell below this rate was 12.4 percent.

In interviews, those who understood poverty to refer to extreme destitution—homelessness or living in unsafe conditions with almost no food or possessions—were less likely to see it as a problem in central Maine. Those who defined it as an occasional inability to pay for bills and basic necessities believed it was more common.

Departing from the image of the idyllic New England small town, then, most residents of the Skowhegan area recognized that struggle and poverty existed in their communities. Though they might acknowledge poverty, they were less willing to describe their town as a poor community. Several incidents that challenged the small town image testified to this. In 2007, National Public Radio's Adam Davidson came to town to do a piece on *New Balance*. As he started to talk to people, he decided that the story would, instead, be about a town in transition: "Former Mill Town Struggles to Stay Afloat." He described a town in which the industry had dried up and in which the townspeople and its leaders were caught up in a debate over whether to "save or invest." Though he talked to those hopeful about revitalization, he ended with the pessimistic tone of those who "wonder whether Skowhegan will be able to survive at all:"

Mary Jane Clifford, of the town general assistance office, says the town's young residents are facing a crisis. She says there's nothing in Skowhegan for the smart young people, who end up leaving.

"I'm dealing with a lot of young people who really seem unemployable," Clifford says. "They've dropped out of school. Their families have thrown them out. They have no plan. Many of them are heavily tattooed, heavily pierced."

Clifford says globalization might have caused the town's decay, but it's up to the town – its residents and leaders – to find a way to bring it back to life. But she admits that she just doesn't see that happening.

"It's almost like watching the death of a town," she says. "It's like watching a town just fold up. It's very sad, and I think that's some of the fear and frustration that's in the town. It's not the way it used to be. Things aren't, but you wonder if it's ever going to be good again."

Some townspeople agreed with this “dying mill town” image of the town and used it to support a call for a renovated town with downtown coffee shops and art galleries, a river rafting course, a bustling farmers’ market, and a well-supported artist community. Others, though, were upset about this unflattering portrayal of Skowhegan. Current and former residents wrote letters to NPR and local newspapers emphasizing all that they love about their town and the work that many people were already doing to insure a prosperous future for the area.

Homelessness also threatened the small town image. Certainly many people were or had been homeless without the community reacting. From social service workers or soup kitchen patrons, I heard stories of people living in their cars (or, in one case, in a broken down school bus in the woods), staying with friends, or living in campgrounds for the summer and scrambling for housing when the weather got cold. There are also visible, but accepted signs of poverty and mental illness; like Allen, who walks the streets, pushing a three-wheeled cart with empty bottles, waving and greeting passers by. Many residents know him by name and he and his cart were even included in a student mural of the town that hangs in the town hall. But when a man and his skinny dog took up residence for a number of days by the river directly behind the downtown buildings, people started talking. Some residents were appalled that this should be allowed to occur in Skowhegan. A columnist in the community newspaper wrote that she had tried to help by housing him in an apartment above her home but he had flooded the apartment. At a community meeting, a police officer and social worker explained that he was not *really* homeless but he had been offered a place and people were already working with him.

Not only was he more visible than those living in their cars or staying with friends, but his temporary downtown accommodations were reminiscent of images of urban poverty.

Similarly, when Main Street (the organization aimed at revitalizing the downtown) wanted to apply for a grant that would require designating the downtown as a “slum and blight” area, some residents were appalled; a community meeting ensued and the issue made it into the paper. Skowhegan qualified under the blight definition because of poor water pressure, sewer overflow, and more than 80 percent vacancies on second and third floors in downtown buildings. In the words of the Main Street Director as quoted in the newspaper: “What we have in the downtown is a case of blight, according to state and federal definitions. It is an area in which there are a substantial number of buildings that are detrimental to the public health, safety or welfare (Pickett 2006).” Though selectmen voted to accept the designation and apply for the grant, some people would rather forgo the grant money than call Skowhegan a “slum.”

Still, most people were not willing to say that class or economic divisions really impacted how people interacted in the community. Some interviewees did believe that financial status influenced who a person socialized with and was the primary division in the community. Whether they talked about the “have and have nots,” the workers and the business owners, or the town leaders and “the people,” when I asked about what divides our community, answers commonly brought a recognition of the existence of class-inflected groups. Other, mostly middle class, informants identified the different status groups but described them as having little significance, either because indicators of status (cars, clothes, homes, etc.) did not reveal any sort of “real” difference or because the groups interacted as if they were not distinct groups. Middle class interviewees were

particularly uncomfortable when I asked what it means to be poor or how he or she could tell if someone is rich. Answering these questions requires using stereotypes and generalizations and few people were comfortable admitting that they employ stereotypes. But this may also confirm what West described in Plainville, a belief that class distinctions are morally wrong (West 1945). Informants usually believed or implied that a person should not be judged or treated differently based on the amount of money or possessions he or she has. This does not mean that they do not judge or act based on class perceptions but that they feel that if they admit to it, they would reveal a flaw in their own characters. Openly describing poverty or wealth in the community could imply that they were judging their neighbors. Instead, it was common for middle class interviewees to answer either with the statistics about unemployment in the area or by saying, “you really never know.” Status indicators are talked about as irrelevant and inaccurate indicators of financial resources. “Hippies” and back-to-the-landers (who I describe in more detail below) are often given as examples of proof that one should not pay attention to status indicators. Some people dress in ripped up jeans, look dirty or live in a small house but still have more money than “you or I will ever know.” Informants were hesitant to judge neighbors based on class and status, believed in the irrelevancy of status indicators and thus grant class very little significance. Class, rather, was often relegated to mere perception, or as the following business man put it, “perceived stature:”

Everything is relative. And everything is perception. Uh, if you drive a new pickup truck, you’re probably wealthy. Everything’s perception. Have you read the book, *The Millionaire Next Door*? You ought to read it. Because all that glitters is not gold. And there can be a fair amount of wealth and you’d never guess it and there can be a fair amount of flash and there ain’t no wealth. So it’s very difficult. It’s all in perception. And, how do I phrase it, I don’t want to say “class” but, perceived stature, I guess. If you’re a doctor you’re here [indicating height with hand] and if you’re a shoe shop worker you’re here [gesturing to the low point on the invisible scale]. And to some degree that’s

not fair. Cause I know a lot of professional people, medical and otherwise, who I'd go out and have a couple beers with just as I would the shoe shop worker. But a lot of it's perception. And some of it's envy. As I'm sure you've heard from a lot of people. Some of it's, well, daddy gave them this and mommy gave them that. And they never had to work a day in their life and all this stuff. Which may or may not be true. But it's perception.

In describing class as mere perception rather than real material difference, this informant and others minimized the significance of class differences. This means covering up some real class divisions in the community. Though there is some degree of inter-class networks and connections, particularly in the smaller towns outside of Skowhegan, as I describe throughout this dissertation, class divisions are apparent and affect daily life in these communities.

Social networks of white-collar middle class residents are distinct from those of blue collar lower and middle classes. This was particularly apparent when, after months of interviewing mostly town leaders and economic development officials, I was trying to reach more working class informants. Several middle class informants stressed how little class affected their choice of friends, explaining that they are friends with shoe shop workers as well as teachers and company managers. At the end of the interview I would ask if they could connect me with any of these friends at the shoe shop because I was looking to get more workers' perspectives. I would usually leave with more names and numbers of business owners or local political leaders, but in terms of workers, "no one comes to mind." Though residential segregation is not as stark as in urban areas, several neighborhoods are primarily working class and poor (with several houses occupied by teachers or politicians scattered among them) and a few stretches of road are known for their large nice homes.

Despite a perception that class is not a barrier to friendship, working class and poor people tend to socialize with others in the same class. When I ask Chrystal about wealthy people in the area she first says, “Wealthy? I don’t know any,” but then stresses that there is interaction between “us” and “them:”

I don’t think they segregate themselves from us, too much. I mean, they still socialize. I still see them at WalMart. You know what I mean. I still see them at Hannaford, rather than Sams Club... I know the Bradfords, they live on, like the North Road or something, that he was very wealthy. They were raised very wealthy. They owned horses. That’s my only experience.

Though, as described above, Chrystal is downplaying the significance of class by stressing that there is some interaction between herself and wealthy people, she also seems aware that she does not know much about wealthy people. She talks only about the one or two families she has known who she would describe as wealthy. Also, throughout my conversation with Chrystal, as she described her friends that were out of work, it was clear that many of the people she interacted with were in similar economic circumstances as she was: “Everyone in this area is on MaineCare. Because there’s NO insurance;” “Of the people I know, I don’t know many people that own a house.” In this small town, despite neighborhoods that are less class-segregated than most northern cities in the United States, class and status still socially segregate residents.

Community Divisions and Elite Groups

The effect of large-scale change on people in former manufacturing communities happens according to local networks of power and status. These overlapping networks create interests that influence how residents react to development plans (Leach 2002; Nash 1989; Ramsay 1996; Winson and Leach 2002). For large employers, for example,

increased development could mean new companies drawing from the same labor reserve, potentially leading to higher labor costs. For small business owners, competition from national retail chains could threaten their businesses or wealthy outsiders could usurp their local political positions (Ramsay 1996). Class, family reputation, local political position, and networks of friends are all important determinants of power and status in a community. A family or individual can become a more active, prominent member in the community by owning a local business, working for the town or being elected to a position in local government. I describe below several important and overlapping elite groups that helped to shape Skowhegan politics.

Employers and Company Owners

Owning a company that provides jobs grants status and power. Business owners have the ability to determine who works in their company and under which circumstances. Those who wield this power include a group of absent elite, the owners of larger companies in town such as Wal-Mart, McDonald's, New Balance, and Sappi. Though not local residents, they still impact the lives of the area's workers. The owners of New Balance are seldom in Skowhegan, but have a presence in that they are understood to be committed to keeping jobs in the United States and investing in Skowhegan and Norridgewock despite the financial incentive to close the plant and increase overseas manufacturing. Several New Balance representatives work with local groups and the company has donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to health education and a community playground. Dexter Shoe founder Harold Alfond and his wife Dorothy Levine lived in central Maine during the summers until their deaths (Dorothy in 2005 and

Harold in 2007). Though no longer living, they still influence the area through their charitable foundation (though his paucity of donations to Skowhegan led to rumors that Alfond did not like the town or its leadership) and through the stories of those who once worked for Mr. Alfond. At a 2006 community meeting about the building of a new elementary school in Norridgewock, for example, there was a discussion about whether the gym should remain intact so as not to offend Mr. Alfond—who had funded the building of the original gym.

Any employer in town can influence town politics through their access to government officials. In general local representatives of large corporations are less active in the town than the leaders of small businesses, a change from the days when the patriarchal mill owner governed the town. Employers who are active in the community, particularly those who grew up in the area, have a strong influence on the town and often on local economic policy. These leaders include the CEO of the Skowhegan hospital (one of the few independent hospitals left in the state), the family that owns a successful specialty ice cream business, and a family that owns several car dealerships. Several businesses in the area that may have started out small a generation or two ago, have grown into multi-million dollar enterprises. Others are relatively high-salaried executives who have moved to the area from another part of the state or country to lead businesses (like the 25-acre tomato greenhouse in Madison). Both the “home-grown” and the imported elite in this group live in the community (though sometimes they head south for the winter).

The Power of Public Positions

Some town leaders gain their elite status through a public position in which they are known and interact with many people in the community. This includes small business owners, religious leaders, town officials, and major employers. Families and individuals who own local business such as gift shops, insurance companies, flower shops, and hardware stores are in some cases successful businesspeople maintaining their stores for generations. There is, therefore, overlap between this category and the business elite, but their leadership and popularity comes more from their active role in town, or the historic roles of their families, rather than a reputation for being wealthy. In fact, some of these leaders describe themselves as living on the edge, simply trying to keep their stores open.

There are eight churches in Skowhegan proper and one or two churches in each of the smaller surrounding communities. In addition to leading their congregations, several religious leaders are active in local politics. At community meetings on the future of the town or on youth and crime, a minister often gave a speech or led a discussion group. Because poor people often went to churches for help, several religious leaders met weekly to discuss requests that they received for housing, food, and money.

The “Liberal Elite:” Back-to-the-Landers and Artists

In the 1960s and 1970s, a movement to escape materialism and urban life brought many young couples from New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania “back to the land” of rural New England. Often with the help of local farmers, they grew their own food and sought to “live off the land.” These homesteaders followed in the idealized tradition of

the self-sustained farming family, the inspiration for the movement north. In central Maine, some families or groups of families settled in rural areas and smaller communities outside of Skowhegan (Wormser 2006). Though few people still live without electricity and running water as they did in the earlier years, many maintain a commitment to the environment or are politically active in anti-war campaigns. Others continue to practice their politics by using solar power, conserving energy, buying organic food or shopping at the farmers market. Many who had to work to support their lifestyle became teachers, artists, carpenters, and doctors.

There is not a single group of former back-to-the-landers, but rather overlapping networks of people, groups clustered based on when they moved to the area, which town they moved to, and often the degree to which they have integrated into the mainstream. New families who moved to the area more recently have joined these social networks, especially doctors, college professors, artists, and others invested in organic farming or environmentalism. The groups socialize with each other, particularly at annual holiday parties (Christmas, Thanksgiving, and the Fourth of July) during which the social network often replaces large family gatherings.

Overlapping with this group is a greater artist community, some of who are associated with the nationally renowned Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Though this artist-in-residency school has been in existence since 1946, it is not particularly integrated into town life. I remember hearing about it when I was growing up in Skowhegan, but I did not know where it was until I began conducting fieldwork. Those whom I met from the former back-to-the-lander group, however, had met artists

from the school at parties over the years, or at the 4th of July Independence Day parade in West Athens (just north of Skowhegan).

Many “locals” still view “hippies” and former hippies as wealthy snobs who think they are better than them or as outsiders who brought in their liberal politics. It is often presumed that they (unlike the local business elite) have not had to work for what they have but rather live off of the trust funds of their wealthy families. They are accused of pushing their values on others and of being more interested in their own politics than in the community. Former back-to-the-landers also have stereotypes and generalizations about other townspeople: they are conservative and their politics derive from a lack of education or knowledge; they have unhealthy eating habits (eat fast food and processed food) and are thus often overweight; and they are engrossed in popular culture and consumerism.

Though members of this segment of the “liberal elite” are or have been involved in political positions in their communities as school board members, selectpersons, or community organizers, much of the power of this group comes from the social networking of the group itself. They support each other’s businesses and help to connect each other with jobs. The children of former back-to-the-landers, who are in my own generation, grew up together and also socialized with each other, often continuing to maintain connections despite having relocated around the country.

With the exception of the absent elite, many people belonging to the different groups of elite described above are also town leaders in that they are active in community politics. They participate in local clubs or organizations (such as the Chamber of Commerce, Rotary Club, Masons, Downtown Business Association, or the Tourism

Council) and plan town events (such as Skowhegan State Fair, Maine Maple Weekend, Log Days/Harvest Days, Moonlight Madness, and the Holiday Parade). Most leaders are active in a variety of these organizations and sometimes socialize with each other, though there are many different factions within and between the groups. Some lead revitalization efforts, others oppose them. Of course elected and appointed government officials are also active in town politics. As described below, in 2006 and 2007, leaders and townspeople were divided. Many town leaders promoted a new vision for Skowhegan while others, particularly a number of small business owners, sided with skeptical townspeople.

The Conflict Over Community Identity

When I asked interviewees about what they thought the area would look like in the next ten to twenty years, I heard a mixture of optimism and pessimism. Business and political leaders who had been working on economic development projects or downtown revitalization saw the potential for Skowhegan to become a tourist destination or an artist community with a thriving downtown. Others, more often working class residents, hoped that Skowhegan would follow other communities around them and lure in a call center or more shopping centers. Still others, often those who had worked or were working in declining industries, had little hope for the future. Matt, the mid-level employee in the woods industry described in Chapter Three, expected that in 10 years Skowhegan would either be about the same or in decline. He expected that more and more young people would leave town to go to college and look for good jobs, saying, “It would be interesting to see in 10 years, but I don’t see no big fix coming real soon.” Despite his lack of faith

that the economy would improve and the area would prosper, he believed it *could* happen; it just was unlikely.

There have been many people working for years to try to create a new vision for Skowhegan, including town and county economic development corporations, town governments, business associations and community groups. There were people in town who were particularly optimistic about the future of central Maine. They were excited about the family from Florida who agreed to buy the old middle school (for one dollar) and turn it into a hotel. They believed that the group that was working to create a water park (for kayakers and rafters) in the river would get the millions of dollars they needed for an environmental study and would eventually build the water course attracting outdoor enthusiasts and other tourists (many of whom already passed through Skowhegan on their way to go white water rafting). They envisioned that a developer would buy the mill on the river (where small wooden products were made until 2006) and convert it into condos, enticing wealthy people to move to the town. These new residents would then start shopping downtown and dining at new restaurants and cafes that would be supported by this new wealth. They trusted that the artist community, in years to come, would have a place in town to sell and display their work. They were working to create a farmers market that was more than the two or three stands that used to show up for a couple hours on Saturdays.

In 2005 Skowhegan was awarded the Main Street designation and some of these same leaders, as well as residents and business owners who had not been active, were brought together around a vision for Skowhegan's future. Based on a national model of committees and boards, Main Street Skowhegan worked to improve the community by

revitalizing the downtown area. Though some participants were skeptical, many Main Street Skowhegan organizers and volunteers subscribed to this optimistic vision of the area. I also supported such development while I was conducting research, both as an active participant in Main Street and as someone with social connections to several optimists.

Though this vision was not an articulated development plan, its components are familiar: a neighborhood or town that has lost a manufacturing base is revitalized into a comfortable community with coffee shops, boutiques, unique restaurants, and a vibrant arts scene. Business people and politicians are simultaneously working to bring in companies and jobs through town and county economic development corporations. In industrialized cities around the world, the departure of manufacturing has left empty warehouses and neighborhoods that have slowly been filled by artists and restaurants. When developers have wanted to turn a deindustrialized community into a profitable investment, artists and students have sometimes acted as buffers, converting “bad neighborhoods” into profitable real estate and allowing investors to slowly convert old buildings into condominiums and retail space (Zukin 1982; Zukin 2010). New England cities like Portsmouth, New Hampshire and Northampton, Massachusetts have effectively transitioned from defunct manufacturing towns to hip post-industrial cities. Central Maine, though, has limited local capital and is hours from an urban center or large population of wealthy professionals. Still, town leaders are hoping to lure wealth with plans for renovated condos, new high tech industries and mobile or “virtual” workers who live in central Maine while working for big-city corporations. Most of those working to revitalize the town were aware that there was not enough wealth in town

to support high-end stores or restaurants. They would, though, discourage more big box stores, thrift stores, dollar stores, fast food restaurants, and furniture rental stores.

There have been many signs of renovation in Skowhegan. In 2007, the locally owned market, George's Banana Stand, re-opened after being closed for two years and a Tractor Supply store and a Dollar Store moved into a strip mall that had been empty for years (except for one of Skowhegan's three Chinese restaurants). In recent years, a promising clothing store, bakery, and gift shop opened downtown and a new owner spent thousands of dollars renovating the historic movie theatre. Local musicians and nationally-known folk artists have started to play to packed houses at the town hall auditorium, which had been used almost exclusively for town meetings and dance recitals for years. A particularly active and relatively new resident brought together farmers and artists, strengthened the farmers market, started an annual national conference on bread-making, and purchased the recently vacated jail to create a grist mill (for grinding grain into flour) and bakery.

Still, many people in town are pessimistic, unsure of the future, and do not trust that the leaders are guiding the town in the right direction. They feel left out of this new vision of the town, have little hope that the seemingly glamorous projects would work, or do not want tax dollars risked on the possibility that they might. When an article in the paper announced that the local artist and community organizer was accepted as a buyer of the old jail, pages of commentary followed, most of which doubted the success of the plan and chastised the "hippies" who they thought would go there. When someone supported the new owner of the old jail, writing, "At least this gal has a plan," a detractor responded, "RIGHT.....a plan to appeal to about what? Maybe 5% of the

population?...Do Not try to make Skowhegan a tourist destination. You will not like it!
 ... Dillusions of granduer. [sic] Get a job.”

Those working to improve the town were frustrated with such people who seem to get involved only to complain. Margot, a leader in Skowhegan’s revitalization described the frustration of working in a pessimistic town:

Claudine: Do you think there’s a sense in the community that we’re at that point of trying to figure out our future?

Margot: It depends. It’s hard to say. The people who I surround myself with? Yes. Greater population? I don’t think they get it. I think they just say, there’s not enough jobs, not enough good paying jobs. Very pessimistic. I have a, I have a hard time with how much negative energy there is in this town.

C: What are they pessimistic about?

M: Anything and everything, I find. You know, it was so exciting when we were awarded the community development block grant. And I’ve heard people say, “Well, that’s a waste of money. Why would, why apply for grants? If we don’t apply for grants then that money will come back to us in taxes from the state, correct?” It’s like they don’t get it. They don’t get that if we didn’t go for these grants, another town would. Then looking at the trees [being planted in the downtown]. Everyone wanted trees. So we did the research and we picked two types of trees and 90 percent of the conversations have been, “you chose the wrong ones.” You know, or “they’re too little,” or “people are just going to tear them down,” or “why did you get those street lights versus other street lights.” Not, “wow, this is going to look great. Good job with the money and it’s not coming out of my property tax.” I’m finding so many people in this town, the glass is always half empty.

There is reason to be pessimistic. Many of the changes in town are primarily cosmetic and can only promise to indirectly create jobs by attracting more tourists or people wanting to invest to the area. There are still a lot of empty storefronts and parking lots in parts of downtown and in the strip malls that went downhill after Wal-Mart opened in 1990. Since the economic downturn began in 2008, several new stores and restaurants have closed. Skowhegan’s two industrial parks have not brought in new companies but either have empty lots or have only shifted a company from another part

of town. After the town had paid thousands of dollars for asbestos removal, in March 2008, the gutted middle school building collapsed under the weight of the snow. The Florida couple counted their loss in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. The pessimists were not surprised and saw this a fitting end to a doomed project. The optimists organized a “buy a brick” campaign and auctioned off pieces of the old school to benefit town redevelopment. A newspaper article announcing the campaign featured a photo of two town leaders each holding a brick and smiling while atop a pile of rubble from the destroyed building.

Many working class people do not see their interests being served by town revitalization. Regardless of its legitimacy, this pessimism and anger has a class component to it that is often overlooked. They see its leaders as an elite clique of people who are more concerned about developing the town in their image than creating jobs. This is evident in the above post about the gristmill, which described the plans to sell homemade bread and organic fruits and vegetables as appealing to only 5 percent of the population. In addition to the pessimism about this business venture this and other responses imply that this plan only is appealing to a select group of locals and to those outside the community (tourists). On the survey I conducted, next to the option to indicate that there are some people struggling in the area “but we take care of our own” (a comment that I heard from some people in interviews), one respondent wrote, “Yea right. All the ‘community’ cares about is feathering their own nests and drawing tourists to ‘shop downtown Skowhegan.’” One woman I spoke with articulated this apparent disconnect between the vision of the revitalization team and the needs of the people in the community:

I don't hear a lot about all the stuff we're talking about [people in the town who are struggling]. It's our population base. How are *they* all going to benefit? And I don't think that's Main Street Skowhegan's "focus," which is fine. But... the community should benefit. I mean I think the people here, if they're living at a \$15,000 level, a quality of life at poverty, would we expect in three years that that same people will have moved up to the next notch? I don't think that's a focus of anybody right now. ...

[She recalled a conversation she had with a town leader working on revitalizing the town.] I said, "well, you know, that's great if we revitalize the downtown, but typically, you know how outside money comes in, the very people that are part of the community are priced out of their own community." He goes, "I know, but that's the way it happens." It's like, *WOW*. Well, if that's the way that happens, who are we on this side, managing basically damage control so the fallout isn't that bad. ... I'm not sure how much everybody—not everybody—is really paying attention to the community.

The problems that can result when communities successfully transition are well known. Costs of housing rise, working class people who once sustained the community can no longer afford to live there, homelessness increases and wealthy or middle class newcomers replace many working class residents. Vincent Lyon-Callo described how this process has affected Northhampton, Massachusetts, a small New England city that those working to revitalize Skowhegan might describe as a model community of the new economy. Development of coffee shops, restaurants, and boutiques in the downtown did not bring high-paying jobs (Lyon-Callo 2004). They did bring rising housing costs. Lyon-Callo worked with the cities growing homeless population in the late 1990s, most of whom struggled to find a job that gave them enough money and working hours to pay the rent. Ten percent of the homeless shelter population gave up on the city to try to find more affordable housing elsewhere.

In general, small business owners and middle class residents have more power than poor and working class residents to make decisions in local politics (Ramsay 1996). They are thus more likely to have their interests represented in development plans. The "rise of the creative class" (Florida 2002) brings a sort of bourgeois consumption culture

to which some Skowhegan residents object. But those who question local revitalization efforts do so for reasons other than distaste for organic food or coffee shops. Chrystal, for example, the mother in her mid-20s who works at Subway, questioned whether downtown revitalization would really help the town:

You put more stores, more people are going to spend money. You know what I mean? The money's not coming from anywhere. It's just re-circulating through the community. There's no money coming from outside. I think we need to open factories again. I'm sorry to say, but we need a factory to where we are producing something and it's going out, that money is coming in from somewhere else. Because there's no money here.

Regardless of the feasibility of Crystal's idea that "we need to open factories again," her hesitancy to support restaurant and retail-based development is not based on discomfort with change but on a concern about the economic future of the town and its people. Also, many central Maine residents did not have faith that the vision of the optimists could be enacted, even if they supported this vision. Following their reputation as pessimists, they do not think Skowhegan has the potential to become a tourist destination or a thriving post-industrial town. In the words of a mid-level New Balance employee,

There's not a whole lot to promote as far as tourism around here... 'yuh, there's WalMart. Oh, there's some fast food places'...I can't imagine staying around Skowhegan for a day to look at the sites.

There is not an organized movement of resistance against developing or enhancing the town and not all resistance is coming from working class or poor people in the community. In fact, owners of successful businesses discourage development that could threaten their businesses or raise taxes. As several informants pointed out, those

who are benefiting from the current economy have “a huge stake in the status quo, keeping things the way it is.”

Legitimate concerns about the possibility of being “left out” of revitalization are ignored or dismissed as negativity. When town leaders complain about the pessimists and the difficulty they present in moving the town forward, class components are seldom discussed. Rather, those working to revitalize the town often blame the townspeople for being “uncomfortable with change” and for keeping the community down. One leader saw central Maine as more isolated from the changing global worlds and described the town and its people as less advanced than urban areas: “when people have lived for generations a similar way, isolated from these larger impacts [of globalization], then, it’s harder to make the shift.” The problem, according to many people working on revitalization, is that these pessimists are living in the past, unable to come to terms with economic shifts and still unable to face the truth: “manufacturing is not coming back.”

One leader was excited that as a cultural anthropologist, I would be able to study and explain why people in the area would resist change. He believed that there was a local culture that was preventing the town from moving forward:

I kind of look to you [Claudine], whether you know this information from your studies...I believe that people, the human animal is such that we would rather, the majority of us, we would rather slowly deteriorate our conditions together, than to risk breaking out of that mold and experiencing, perhaps, success or failure.

Middle class optimists, then, often believed fear to be a cultural reaction of “the people” to the possibility of change. At times, there were subtle class references when town leaders discussed the resistant pessimists. A sympathetic leader, for example, explained that some residents were resisting because leaders were creating a town that would be

“catering to a different set of folks.” But seldom did those working toward revitalization of the area question the “culture” of the wealthy or the middle class in town or what contributes to the “bourgeois chic” vision of development (Zukin 1982).

This struggle over the vision and implementation of a new community strongly parallels a divide between blue-collar workers and new white-collar leaders that Kathryn Dudley described in Kenosha, Wisconsin after Chrysler closed its plant in that Midwestern city; a divide between white-collar leaders who were actively directing the community’s post-industrial future and blue-collar workers who were seen as deterrents to this future. Kenoshans spoke of the divide in more openly classed terms such as blue collar and white collar, perhaps because the divide between locals and new renovators was made prominent by the presence and sudden absence of the auto manufacturer. Still, the words of a city official in Kenosha referring to blue-collar pessimists also summarizes the complaints of many of Skowhegan’s leaders of revitalization: “their way of thinking is a combination [of] conservatism and resistance to change, fear of the unknown” (Dudley 1994, 61). As Dudley found in Kenosha, “only blue-collar workers are expected to sacrifice their cultural traditions for the greater good of the community...blue-collar way of life is itself portrayed as an impediment to progress” (Dudley 1994, 55).

When I asked the same revitalization leader who spoke of her frustrations with the pessimism in the town why she thought that pessimism existed, she responded that people were struggling:

I think over the past couple of decades, there’s been a lot of broken promises from town government and they haven’t seen results and it’s kind of trickled into their home lives when they hear there’s going to be new jobs, higher pay, and it doesn’t help. And the cost of living. And, you know, the price of gasoline and heat and food. We live in a community where 53 percent of our kids are on the federal food program at school and 49.9 percent of our community is low to

moderate income. How much can you be optimistic about when you're not sure how to get out of this rut?

But despite this leader's mention of an economic component to community development resistance, critics of the pessimists often refer to them not as blue-collar workers or low-wage workers but as people afraid of change. Conversely, those complaining about leaders pushing change talk about "snobs," "people from away," or cliques. I also heard critics refer to those working to develop the town as doctors and lawyers or "the doctors' wives" (a category that ignores the careers and individual identities of these women). In the words of an informant who describes himself as on the periphery of the revitalization efforts:

It's like high school all over again. It's this whole clique from away that do these things and then, and they're exclusive....I think there's people who don't want to participate because they're not in the clique. And that shouldn't be what it's about. It shouldn't be about who's friends with who, it should be about wanting to help the town.

A segment of Maine community and economic development strategists profess that hypothetical out-of-state developers and corporations looking for a place to do business seek out communities with "quality of place:" idyllic scenery, access to wildlife, thriving downtown with quality restaurants and stores, and few signs of poverty or dangerous neighborhoods. But the vision for "quality of place" supports revitalization projects around the country; projects that seek to create vibrant upscale postindustrial communities. But each city, town, or neighborhood must then compete with other such communities to lure new investors and wealthy visitors to shop and eat in their towns. Other large potential employers have a different set of interests. They look for a place with hard workers that are well trained, can be paid low wages, and will not be likely to

strike. Because proponents of a creative economy are not directly concerned with the conditions of low-wage laborers, employers paying low-wages only become a problem if they disrupt the small town image.

The optimists' plan for a postindustrial economy is influenced by neoliberal development politics in which towns become competitors in a market to attract capital. Potential investors are thus well positioned to make demands on communities. Resistance to development plans is often silenced by the assertion that globalization is an inevitable force for which communities must prepare themselves. But, as Steven Gregory explained, "capital and its allies" also wage political campaigns depicting those who resist as backward in order "to secure acquiescence, if not support for certain economic strategies and goals" (Gregory 1998b). Many of those working to strengthen the downtown are not thinking of capital or making the town more attractive for a new business. They want to help their town. Some want to strengthen or save their own business or expand their dining choices beyond fast food. Others have watched businesses close and downtown buildings abandoned after Wal-Mart moved in and want to help revive the town. Still others believe in supporting local farmers and expanding access to fresh food. But, the community is being shaped by a particular class-based vision of the town and, to the degree that the plan is developed based on what will sell to potential investors, by the interests of capital.

As residents and groups of business owners, back-to-the-landers, and pessimistic residents debated the future plan for Skowhegan, class alliances were redefined and solidified (Gregory 1998a). Middle class professionals seldom discussed how town revitalization would create well-paying jobs for local workers or affect former

manufacturing employees. Rather, they talked about bringing new wealth into the town, encouraging tourists to shop and eat in their town, and creating new outlets for artists and farmers to sell their goods. As with Florida's theory of the creative class, the noncreatives were expected to somehow rise with the betterment of the town (Peck 2005). In solidifying the elite, the meaning of local populism took shape. The optimists' vision for the future of the town, seen as an elite plan proposed by an exclusive clique, helped to define the pessimists as ordinary folks. The influence of class on the formation of this sense of ordinary townspeople was dismissed or ignored by most town leaders in lieu of cultural explanations that blame the detractors for being pessimistic and negative, backward and unable to accept inevitable change, and uneducated about globalization and community development. Because some business owners and other middle class residents were also vocal opponents of proposed changes, some ordinary townspeople seemed to be resisting change in order to protect their privileged position in the community. And certainly, in part, they were. Despite its potential to make visible the interests and social positions of poor and working class residents in Skowhegan, the debate over community development thus contributed to the obfuscation of class.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Problem Whites and the Myth of the White Worker

Most central Mainers believed the lack of jobs was one of the biggest problems in the area; and half of survey respondents identified a lack of well-paying jobs and a rising cost of living as the major cause of poverty. Yet residents in and around Skowhegan also attributed local economic decline to lazy workers and welfare recipients. They blamed a group of people that they describe with those familiar “culture of poverty” character traits: laziness or refusal to work; preference for state dependency; inability to make decisions about education and family; overuse of drugs and alcohol; and lack of parenting skills. In fact, 52 percent of survey respondents believed that one of the biggest *causes* of economic problems in central Maine was an overabundance of welfare recipients.²⁷ These respondents would not likely have claimed to be talking simply about “poor people” because some poor people (the hard working, honest, deserving poor) are deemed more worthy of support. Because 98 percent of the town and most welfare recipients are white, these troublesome poor and working class people were not differentiated by race. Residents were not blaming whites as a group. If they were, laziness and alcoholism, for example, would have become characteristics associated with being white. Rather, they were talking about a group of problem poor and working class white people (though that they are white is never mentioned but assumed). Problem

²⁷ At 52.4 percent, “too many people are living off the system (welfare)” was the most common answer to the question, “What is the biggest *cause* of problems with the central Maine economy?” The second most common answer (chosen by 50 percent of respondents) was that “the jobs don’t pay well or don’t provide benefits.”

whites were not devoid of class-consciousness, but many maintained faith that anyone can “make it” and blamed fellow poor and working class residents for their own struggles, raising the question, why do these poor and working class people not respond as a class when they are derided as such?

David, a middle-aged man who I met at the soup kitchen, could easily be judged to be one of Skowhegan’s problems. He relied on social services, struggled to support himself, and had children from more than one relationship (one of whom spent several months in jail). Though many interviewees claimed that it was not possible to detect someone’s class based on appearance, he did not look middle class. He was tall and lanky and always dressed in a well-worn t-shirt and jeans. He was missing several teeth, was rarely clean-shaven, and generally looked disheveled.

David, though, talked a lot about work and did so with a masculine confidence that transformed his scruffy appearance into that of a rough blue-collar worker. He would arrive at the soup kitchen straight from his job as a forklift operator at a construction company. “It’s the working man,” a fellow volunteer would often announce when David arrived. He usually replied, “How we doing today?,” and eventually added a word or two about his day at work. When he lost his job, he talked about how hard he was working to look for a new one. When I asked him about the jobs and economy in central Maine, David brought up the importance of hard work and added that there was a big problem with work ethic. He occasionally talked about challenges at work, as when he had to work with a rude and patronizing new manager. He prided himself on bringing such problems directly to his boss. David was well liked by the soup kitchen volunteers; he rarely left without proper good-bys and accolades for the cook. He fit the description,

then, of both the derided and the lauded Maine worker. He was both the workingman and the problem Mainer.

Whiteness scholars who have written about white poverty have argued that poor whites like David are raced differently than middle class and elite whites (Conley 2001; Gibson 1996; Hall 2000; Hartigan 1999; Hartigan 2005; Wray and Newitz 1997). They focus on the differences among whites, emphasizing that not everyone has equal access to the privileges of being white. Though poor and working class whites do not have the same advantages as wealthy whites, as Kirby Moss writes in his Midwestern ethnography, poor whites can disassociate themselves from poverty and instead identify “with forms of privilege because they see themselves in Whiteness and all of its promise” (Moss 2003, 2). As David’s case illustrates, the trope of the “average American worker” is accessible even for problem whites. It is part of the promise of whiteness. In this chapter I argue that whiteness helps to create populist identities that are not class-based. White workers in central Maine can differentiate themselves from the problem whites by aligning themselves with the image of the white worker. By slipping into the mythical category of a white American worker, poor and working class whites are deterred from questioning their class position.

The Problem People

In the spring of 2006, work began on the long-neglected sewer and water systems, creating a mess of traffic and dust in the downtown during the busiest time of year, the summer tourist season. Among other efforts to encourage people to shop downtown during the construction, a group of business owners and other citizens organized a Kids

Construction Day, a free event held on a hot Saturday afternoon in August. I volunteered, helping children decorate plastic hard hats with paint and stickers. Next to my booth was an unsupervised sand box with small prizes buried in the blue sand. Though many children walked by the sandbox, a few stopped and spent some time digging for prizes. One boy, probably about eleven years old, walked over to me as I was allocating space for hard hats and paint. I recognized him. He and his mother and younger siblings came to the soup kitchen from time to time and I often saw all of them walking around town, even in bad weather. He asked me, "I got a [gift certificate for a] free ice cream cone and I did not know that was in there, so can I get another one for my sister?" Knowing there were more than enough prizes left in the sand box I said, "Sure" and he returned his sister's inferior prize and began looking for another free ice cream cone for her. I might not have remembered this interaction, but several days later when the organizers met to discuss the event, the sand box became the center of the conversation. Some of the organizers were bothered that several children were digging for good prizes and not just reaching in, pulling out one prize, and moving on. They discussed one boy in particular who they said they saw put his prize back and look for another. The problem, they said, is with the parents: they should be watching their children more closely and stop them from digging for the best prize. They also blamed parents for not instilling the right values in their children, for not teaching them to be thankful for what is given to them and what they have without asking for more.

For several of the organizers, then, the boy's actions were symbolic of a greater frustration: while they work hard to improve the town, some residents not only give nothing, but take from the town and feel they deserve what they take. This belief that

there was a segment of lazy residents in town was not limited to this group of organizers. Doctors, shoe stitchers, and teachers talked about locals who do not want to work, are caught up in drugs and alcohol, and are passing bad values on to their children.

Like most attacks on the dependent, “undeserving” poor, the “certain element” in the town are said to choose their lifestyle of poverty. I often heard stories about people who do not want to work, are not educated, are caught up in drugs and alcohol, are dependent on the state, and are passing these values on to their children. Though they are not relegated to one neighborhood, there are spaces in town that people would associate with the type of people bringing down the town: an apartment building said to be a hot spot for drugs, one of the trailer parks, or a rough bar in town. Residents might deride those who are not working or “living off of the state,” but full time workers could also be blamed for the area’s problems if they were the wrong “type of person.” Both during interviews and when listening to everyday conversations about the problems in the area, I repeatedly heard the following descriptions of problem people during my fieldwork:

They do not work but are dependent on the state.

They do not care about the town.

They are renters, not homeowners.

They live in-town where they have moved to take advantage of its proximity to services or they live out “in the middle of nowhere” with an unreliable car.

They spend their money on snowmobiles, trucks and four-wheelers and shop at Wal-Mart.

They eat junk food and are overweight.

They are undereducated or do not value education.

They are alcoholics, drug addicts or spend their weekends drinking and partying.

They are violent and are usually fighting with their family and friends.

They have made the wrong choices about their jobs, their education, their family, and their homes.

They are bad parents, teaching all of their bad habits to their children.

They have too many children, have children too young, and are not equipped with

the knowledge of how to raise a well-behaved child.

Many people told stories of individuals they know or know of to back up their claims of the problems of dependency in the town—a neighbor who was home all the time, the woman who was overheard in the town office teaching her daughter how to get the most out of general assistance, or a friend who worked at the Department of Health and Human Services (the government agency that administers TANF) and talked about seeing the same families there repeatedly. The stories were used to back up their perceptions of this group of people in the area. A mill worker in his 30s believed there was an abundance of welfare recipients around town:

I know a lot of the welfare people that, you can go to the bar first of the month and they're out. They're out all over the place. It's the same thing going to Wal-Mart, it's like they hit the lottery up there. You can't even move up there, first of the month. Just in case you go, don't go on the first of the month.

Experiences like shopping at Wal-Mart on a busy day at the beginning of the month, then, act as proof to those who experience it that there are too many people on welfare or that people are to blame for their own poverty. Though such proof was usually clear to the informant, further questioning revealed ambiguity. Sarah, an elementary school teacher, talked about too many residents being on state healthcare and too many becoming dependent on welfare in general. She believed this was a problem because she saw students growing up on assistance. Some of this knowledge or experience, though, was based on assumptions:

Sarah: I don't begrudge anybody assistance, because everybody has difficult times, *everybody, absolutely everyone*, but I begrudge generations of welfare.

Claudine: Do you see that?

S: Yea, [I teach elementary school] and I saw generations of it, in less than 20 years time.

C: So did you talk with your students about this or...how did you learn about it?

S: It was more than obvious, you know, and I mean, we had one kid leave 8th grade with a girl pregnant, and it just went on from there. And that was the beginning.

C: For that family?

S: No that was the beginning of what I was right there entrenched in, of my personal experience of generations of welfare.

Though “problem people” are primarily poor and working class, they were not described in class terms but in cultural terms, characterized by learned traits being passed down from one generation to the next. Sometimes conversations might revolve around a single stigmatizing trait: why would families choose to live way out in the woods if they cannot afford a reliable car?; why do they keep moving when they have kids; or how can they afford that truck? A group of middle-class professionals were talking about the high rate of motorcycle ownership in the area, for example, when one woman quipped, “Yea, they buy motorcycles but they can’t feed their children.” Several people in the group agreed and added with disgust that they often see numerous snowmobiles in driveways of modest homes. Other times, criticisms intertwine allegations of dependency, crime, and family dysfunction. A police officer at a community meeting, for example, referred to people who have food stamp cards as some of “his people,” rhetorically linking crime and public assistance.

This “group” of problem people is not a clearly defined or visibly linked to race, ethnicity, immigrant status, or neighborhood. A certain apartment building, road, or extended family can have a bad reputation; but they are not large enough to create a social category. Still, residents might talk about “certain people” or a type of person who causes problems. A middle-aged town leader, for example, struggled with how to categorize the people he saw as a problem for the town:

There is certainly a culture, there is a group, I don't know if they're cohesive in any way, but there is a whole stratum of our population that is dependent, dysfunctional, vulnerable to drug dealing and alcohol abuse, driving abuses, to living on the fringes of the criminal society and they're supplying huge challenges to [the Department of Health and Human Services] and the child protective agency here in town. And there is a reason why we have two district court judges who are very, very busy.

Despite the association of Mainers with hard work and ingenuity, for one police officer, “the typical Mainer” was part of the problem. One of the first questions I asked him was, “what does it mean to be a Mainer?” He immediately began talking alcohol and drug addition, bad parenting, domestic violence, and welfare dependency:

To be a Mainer, yea. Typically, from a law-enforcement perspective, I think—cause we deal with a certain element, and we deal greatly with the same people all the time—a Mainer is someone who is—consumes a great deal of alcohol, probably has drug dependency issues. They're probably battering their wives. They don't hesitate about drinking and driving. They pay their taxes even though they hate to. They generally have support for law enforcement but they don't want to pay for it. I think, I think they're family oriented, but it's sometimes to the point where they fail to see that maybe if a child is having issues and they have to contact the police, it's not because the police are picking on their son, or their daughter, maybe it's because their parents have their blinders on. Or maybe they failed in what their responsibilities were in rearing the child. We see that a lot. Adults that have dependency issues, we see their kids, they're diverting to pharmaceuticals, pill crimes and things like this. But that isn't something that is, that is, a Maine thing. That's a nation-wide thing but it just seems to hit us hard because we have—economically we can't compete with those other areas. We don't have the money. So these kids, they develop these dependency issues, and don't know what it's like to succeed. And they're going to be on the welfare roles and, they're going to—it's just a bad situation.

This is an especially negative depiction of problem Mainers. As a police officer who had been working for many years in the area, frustrated that he seemed to be making little difference, he was anxious to talk about what he saw as problems and had little patience for subtlety. Though his description of the “certain element” in the area is particularly scathing, it nevertheless represents a common general sense of the problem people in town and the havoc they cause for the community. Though some, like the

police officer, may partially attribute alcoholism, drug abuse, and welfare use to economic decline, this vague, hard to identify group is still ultimately blamed for the town's problems.

The negative characteristics associated with “white trash” and “trailer trash”—poverty, low levels of education, bad hygiene, teen pregnancy, sexual deviancy, violence and physical and sexual abuse—underlie perceptions of the problem poor of the Skowhegan area. Informants were generally familiar with these terms, though I seldom heard them. Such impolite words were probably hidden from me. “Trailer trash” seemed to be used more often, perhaps because there was little need to specify whiteness. In the South, though, poor whites distinguished themselves from and elevated themselves from their black neighbors (hooks 2001). In literature, social science, and media, these stereotypes are often portrayed as legitimate cultural attributes of poor rural whites (Allison 1992; Chute 1985; Wray and Newitz 1997). For many of its readers, Carolyn Chute's novel, *The Beans of Egypt Maine*, linked Maine with rural white poverty (Chute 1985). Despite the association of rural poverty with whites and urban poverty with people of color, it is important to note that in rural United States, poverty rates of people of color are more than double that of (non-hispanic) whites (Beal 2006; Duany and Plater-Zyberk 1992).

“White trash” stereotypes were in fact included in a profile of Somerset County in a national report from the Urban Institute on welfare reform in rural areas (Pindus 2001). In addition to a lack of “soft skills,” transportation problems, and an absence of “marketable skills,” the report described the barriers to employment and service to be “high rates of spousal, child, sex and substance abuse.” In sociological language, the

report relayed its informants' explanations that this abuse is high because central Maine is a mostly white, rural population:

This [high rates of abuse] was attributed to in part the fact that the county is characterized by a very homogeneous population dominated by patriarchal family structures. In addition some felt that the remoteness of the area (homes are spread far apart from one another) sometimes makes it easier to hide these types of problems. (Pindus 2001, A12)

Another attribute associated with “white trash” is a tendency toward anger and violence. I heard this sentiment from several middle class people in central Maine; that is, they believed that a group of people in town who lived off the state, drank alcohol and used prescription drugs were also prone to fighting and violence. The following excerpt from an interview with a middle class town leader relays a discussion he had with a psychiatrist friend, assessing the severity of “petty” violence:

There's a lot of welfare here and a lot of troubled kids, a lot of abused kids, a lot of violence between husbands and wives. One psychiatrist was telling me that he, I mean he caters, his practice is oriented almost entirely to people on Medicaid and who've got severe temper problems and stuff. And he's said, I can't tell you how many people come into my practice, women and men alike and the sole train of conversation is how they would like to beat the shit outa somebody... and they go on and on and on. It's like they're on Oprah and they're telling these stories about what was done wrong to them and it's petty and slight. And he says, I can't even get into it. I can't understand why those kinds of things should be the subject of such obsession on their part. And uh, and I can't seem to bring them out of that, into anything larger. He found it very disturbing. Short tempered, short-fused, a real tendency toward, constant expressions of violence, without necessarily any follow through, but, just constant obsession with interpersonal relationships that are in tension with each other, in the family and outside the family.

Claudine: So he didn't seem to have much of an explanation of why that would be?

No but he says he's had more than his fill of it in his practice. He doesn't know what to do with it. I think some of these kids are being, his expression was that they are being raised by wolves. They might as well be raised by wolves. He says, if I can get them by ten or eleven, I feel as though I can do something with them. But once they reach 12 or 13—they're brought up in these households that are pretty hostile and dysfunctional, he says, I don't have anything to work with. When they're in their teens, they get into the schools and they're just drifting into

a state of perpetual dependency. They are prime, prime targets for the drug sales. Drug dealers. And he was thoroughly discouraged.

Though the informant was relaying the psychiatrist's opinion, he was using the story as evidence of the problems with people in the area. He did not use the phrase "white trash," but he talked about people as perpetually dependent, having violent, "hostile and dysfunctional" families, and even used animalistic imagery, saying "they're being raised by wolves." This is the white trash stereotype without the label.

The problem whites, though, are not limited to "white trash." The level of social deviancy and poverty associated with "white trash" is not required for middle class residents to describe someone as part of the problem. As I describe below, it may simply mean being working class and not fitting into the new image of the town that many town leaders are trying to create.

Whiteness and the New Town Image

The efforts to "revitalize" Skowhegan and the vision of what this should be, often led to discussions about those who were seen to hamper this vision, exemplified by the incident with the boy on Construction Day. In the previous chapter I discussed how community divides between class-inflected groups of pessimists and optimists affected the revitalization process. Many of the business owners, town administrators, elected officials, and others working to improve the town believed that changing the character of the town was a positive goal (despite any resistance) and that even if housing costs rise, forcing some people out, this would be better than having a town or a segment of the population that is unappealing and perhaps dangerous.

In the years when I was in Skowhegan, there were four to five bars in town. As with most towns and cities with smoking bans, it was common, especially on Friday and

Saturday nights to see groups of three to five people smoking in front of a bar. In the large municipal parking lot adjacent to downtown (and by the movie theatre and the former jail) one can often find several cars parked while people are talking in, on, and around them. At the first community meeting I attended, called by the town government to discuss how people envisioned the area's future, I was surprised to hear townspeople complain that Skowhegan had too many bars. Several residents at the community meeting were concerned that this could be a problem for tourism, (people driving through the town would not want to see people hanging out on the sidewalk in front of the bar or in the parking lot). Those who frequent the restaurant and pub on the edge of the river, a bar where doctors, lawyers and business people might lunch or go for a beer, are less likely to be seen as part of the problem than those who frequent the bars known for fights, drugs and excessive drinking. It is at these bars where, at closing time, police cruisers drive by or pull up and flash their lights, encouraging the crowd to disperse.

When I asked people (both working and middle class) about this complaint about the number of bars in town, many disagreed. Some people liked to have a bar to go to after work, or on the weekends. Others said that the problem was not with the number of bars, but with the people and their excessive drinking. Still, I continued to hear that there are too many bars or too many bar hoppers, particularly from those who were concerned about the image of the town or who were trying to bring new businesses to the area. The voters at the 2006 Skowhegan town meeting passed a loitering ordinance proposed by Main Street (the organization working to improve the downtown), which sought to discourage people from "hanging out" in the parking lot and areas around town. Some supporters said the intent was to help police, in the language of the ordinance, "regulate

the conduct of persons on public ways who are committing violations of law.” The ordinance, though, was also a means to regulate “prevailing community standards” (a phrase used in the first line of the ordinance) and, in a sense, clean up the town. Main Street had also proposed a second ordinance banning adult bookstores and video stores near schools to prevent developments that might distract from their mission to enhance the community. Though several people at the town meeting (including a prominent lawyer) objected to the loitering ordinance as a potential civil rights violation that could be enforced at the discretion of an officer (Would it be applied, for example, to the junior high students who gather in front of the movie theatre, waiting for their parents to pick them up?), it was easily passed into law.

When too many problem whites attend community events, people start to grumble. Many “hippies” who founded an annual anti-government, anti-establishment 4th of July parade held outside of Skowhegan complained, for example, that too many rowdy “locals” on loud four-wheelers had been taking over the event. Similarly, discussions about “the element” also came out when a downtown Skowhegan “Moonlight Madness” event was brought back in 2007 after a several-year hiatus. Moonlight Madness had been a summer event downtown in which the street was closed off to cars in the early evening. Many businesses opened their doors, local bands played, town leaders took turns in the dunk tank, and adults and teenagers walked back and forth, hanging out with their friends and bumping into people they had not seen in a long time. Many of the downtown business owners and event organizers said they had stopped planning the event when the crowd became too wild. They described a lot of drunken people, a growth in the tacky fair-like booths, and strange people “coming out of the woodwork.”

When a group of business owners and town leaders were chatting before a meeting, one woman described going to this nice family event for years and then attending one year and thinking, “Who are these people?” These new people who she did not recognize apparently made for a crazy event. Several people joked that the event had become, like its name, “madness.” A couple of business owners agreed, stating, “I did not want those people in my store.” Though a gift shop or a hardware store is hardly a good place for young drunk partiers, the objections to the direction of the event, as with the loitering ordinance, seemed also to be that a certain type of people and a certain, less “family-friendly” atmosphere, was taking over.

Whiteness and the Escape from the Problem

In effect, it is poor and working class people who are subject to condemnation as problems. Despite claims that poor people are lazy or living off the state, most people work at least part-time, even if they are in and out of jobs, or occasionally mowing lawns, painting a house, or selling jewelry. Those viewed at times as the problem can at other times be viewed or view themselves as ordinary, striving to get ahead like everyone else. This is true of struggling workers around the country, regardless of race. Katherine Newman, for example, found that most of her informants, young black and Latino low-wage workers in Harlem, strongly believed that anyone can “make it” out of the low-wage struggle and into a more comfortable middle class life, despite racism and discrimination (Newman 1999; Newman 2006). But whereas most poor and working class people of color recognize racism and its impact on the American Dream (Hochschild 1995), problem whites in Skowhegan ally themselves with the mythical, all-

American white worker. Kelly Feltault described a similar operation of whiteness when she wrote about crab-pickers in Chesapeake Bay. Though white crab-pickers worked for wages in a factory, they had a “self-employed, middle-class consciousness” while their black coworkers did not (Feltault 2005, 3). By working hard and not questioning their class position, the problem people can slip into the white privilege category and ignore what they have in common with immigrants, African Americans and other workers.

Few people in central Maine would see themselves as belonging to a group of problem whites. Those who would likely be categorized as part of the problem because they received public assistance, drank a lot, or changed jobs frequently, also blame a segment of workers or the unemployed for not working hard enough, not trying to get a job, not being disciplined, and thus, not deserving what they received. In the survey I conducted, low-wage workers were even more likely than middle-income workers to blame welfare recipients and workers for their own problems. When asked why people are on welfare, 57 percent of low-wage workers (compared to 33 percent of middle income workers) chose, “They prefer to live off the system;” and 52 percent of low-wage workers believed people have bad work ethics because “some people are just lazy,” compared to only 22 percent of middle-income workers. At 68 percent, this response was particularly high for low-wage blue-collar workers. Low-wage workers were also slightly more likely to believe that people become poor because they make bad decisions with their money.²⁸

²⁸ Interestingly, rather than placing blame directly on workers, middle-income respondents were more likely to deflect blame to bad parenting. Seventy-one percent of respondents with middle-income jobs believed people are on welfare because they learned that way of life from their parents/grandparents; a figure that was also high (49 percent) for low income respondents. Sixty-nine percent of those with middle-income jobs believed people have a bad work ethic because

This is not to say that poor and working class people all blamed poor people for their own struggles. Those who were on welfare, used to be on welfare, or who were in and out of a job, were also sympathetic to the difficulties of others in similar situations. They found fault with their employers, local elites, the state and the welfare system. Central Mainers who were unemployed or worked in low income jobs, according to the survey, were much more likely to believe that “the deck is stacked against the little guy.” Forty-one percent of low-income workers chose this response to the question, “Who can ‘make it’ in this country?,” compared to 15 percent of those with middle-income jobs. Still, workers who were just scraping by without public assistance were sometimes resentful of those who received food stamps, health care, or other public assistance. As with middle class people, low-wage workers employed stereotypes and misconceptions about welfare recipients, convinced that their neighbors “sit at home all day,” comfortably supported by the state. In the words of one middle-aged man who works at a mill, “the welfare system people live better than the working class.” A truck driver, when asked if he believed “if you work hard enough, anyone can make it,” responded, “Anyone can make it if he didn’t have to give half his pay check to support the welfare in this state. Let the people who don’t want to work go hungry. Very tired of supporting them.” Despite their common economic struggles, then, workers can use a misconception that welfare recipients are nonworkers to define themselves outside of the “problem” category, believing that they work hard while welfare recipients do not.

Despite sharing some experiences and circumstances with those they criticized, most people saw themselves as different, focusing on the characteristics of their lives that

there has been a “break-down of the family” and “parents don’t teach their kids to work.” This is still a class-infused blame as it is directed toward working-class parents.

would make them less like problem people and more like workers. A social worker in her forties, for example, was very critical of the welfare system and of welfare recipients despite having spent several years on welfare when she was younger. Her life path, in many ways, had followed that of the stereotypical welfare recipient in that she had five children, did not have a degree beyond high school, and was a single parent. She described herself, though, as very different from most welfare recipients today. She now worked full time and supported her family. She believed that most welfare recipients were raised in families that relied on support and had come to depend on welfare themselves as a consistent means of support, while she had used welfare to get out of a difficult time. Though having children kept her from finishing college, she believed she was different from other welfare mothers in that she always valued education and planned to go back as soon as all of her children were in school. This social worker is like the many welfare recipients (including several of my informants) who support welfare reform, embrace the rhetoric of individualism and self-sufficiency, and employ stereotypes to describe welfare recipients. They are able to do this without insulting themselves by making a “moral distinction” between themselves and “all those ‘other’ bad welfare mothers who fail to live up to social standards” (Hays 2003, 219).

Whiteness contributes to conservative populisms in that it helps working class and poor people to describe themselves as hard working and struggling, but not poor. As such, they are able to define themselves out of the problem and align themselves with the idyllic industrious Mainer and American who may face tough times but picks himself or herself back up and keeps going. When I asked informants what it means to be poor, people almost always described someone poorer than themselves. Chrystal was no

different. In an interview with her and her mother, I asked how they could tell if someone is poor. Chrystal began by hesitantly using some of the tropes of the problem white poor, but her mother brought the description closer to home:

Chrystal: Well, I really hate to say it, but, they're at the store-- [laugh's] I don't want to be, I really hate the stereotypes but the ones in [town], they're buying a 40 oz with every last cent in their pocket, with their dress down clothes and—you know what I mean? I mean not all of them, but...

Lorraine: Not all of them.

C: But I know some people....

L: Not all poor families are like that.

C: Their clothing. Their clothing is really a big thing a lot of the time. I really hate to say that....

L: It's the clothing, because they have to take hand-me-downs...I have to take hand-me-downs. I can't always afford to go out, to be in style.

C: Right, I mean...But I'm thinking in terms of people who are less, people who are poorer than me. And my income is, you know, \$500 a month. So I'm pretty frickin' poor.[laughs] But, um, but I dress good...

In this moment, then, Chrystal was both recognizing her own poverty and distinguishing herself from it. Though she made only a little more than \$8,000 a year, she emphasized that her dress and her behavior made her different from those who made less money. Though both Chrystal and her mom believed “the system” worked against them, they also believed that by working hard, taking low-paying jobs (rather than having no job at all), and saving their money, they were not like the alcoholic in torn clothes. This contributed to their philosophy that *anyone* can “make it;” they simply had to work hard and, as Chrystal said, be willing to “put up with whatever it takes.”

In a primarily white town, race was brought up much less often in conversations about work than it would be in more diverse areas. When I was teaching race and racism at a central Maine community college, though, students contrasted the idea of the hardworking American to defiant people of color. Though many students had recently lost manufacturing jobs or were struggling to find a place in the new economy, they remained faithful that their hard work would be rewarded. Some students associated questioning or complaining about structural injustices with people of color and immigrants in particular and working hard without complaints, with Americans in general. In fact, when we talked about undocumented immigrants working long hours for very low wages, several students would respond that Mexicans should not be complaining. Some students worked the same demeaning jobs as the immigrants they were reading about, but rather than be inspired by their stories, they would more often respond that they too worked several low-wage jobs, but they did so without protesting. They often described working hard and just scraping by as central to the American story. Their perception of the American worker was that of a dutiful hard worker, while immigrants and other people of color complained about racial and class injustice. To an immigrant who was working two jobs at low wages, they would reply, “congratulations, you have assimilated.” Though few would admit to equating the American worker with whiteness, they more openly talked about people of color protesting the challenges of work and not embracing their Americanness. Many of my students, then, embraced populism’s focus on struggle as redemptive rather than unjust and chastised immigrants and people of color for not doing so as well.

Middle class employers, social service agencies, and economic developers remind problem people that they should be working hard; that it is *their* duty to work for Maine and for the nation. As companies have closed down, been bought out or contracted to workers outside of the United States, business leaders and local politicians reinforce white workers' privileged position by calling on them to work hard and get trained to prevent being humiliated by workers outside of the US. In addition to assuring the privileged placement of the American worker and the mythical association of the working class with the white male, this rhetoric inspires workers to work hard for little money.

Skowhegan economic development leaders frequently touted projections that China and India threaten the position of the US economy and of American workers in the global hierarchy. In his book, *The World is Flat*, Thomas Friedman warns readers that if the United States is going to maintain its superpower position, it is going to have to get its workers caught up with the technology of globalization (Friedman 2005). Friedman's warnings are nationalistic. He does not write specifically of the white American workers but of American workers in general; Asian countries and their technological and capitalist breakthroughs are cited as greater threats to Americans than Europeans. At planning, economic development, and education-related meetings in Skowhegan, facilitators handed out copies of Friedman's articles or cited his book and warned participants that our students cannot compete with those of India and China. Economic developers and education leaders use Friedman to call for changes in how technology is taught in schools, or to call for a renewed emphasis on improving the work ethic in the area. Friedman and his local supporters thus portray new overseas companies as threats to the rightful privileged position of local white workers.

Development leaders also criticize Skowhegan residents for not having the work ethic or drive of workers in China or India or of Mexican immigrants to the United States. According to this logic, when companies move out of the state or the country, local workers are partially to blame. One representative of a local development agency told me he had watched a documentary on a man moving from his village to Shanghai, finding a job, and starting work the next day. He said most Mainers are not willing to move for a job and will be too picky about which job they will do and when they can start. They need to be more like the people in Shanghai. Similarly, some praise immigrants to the US, saying the problem is with the white Mainers who do not want to work. An Internet posting following a newspaper article about Mexican workers in Maine epitomized this sentiment:

What is worse: Illegal aliens working back breaking, menial jobs in Maine ---or---non-working, able-bodied, Legal Americans that are drinking away three weeks of the month, the fourth week spending their welfare check at Wallyworld? Hmmm? Illegal alien vs Fat, Lazy, Leaching off the system for generations legal americans that could be out doing the menial job the Illegal is doing (Comment reacting to Cassidy 2006).

A white American²⁹ who is on welfare or not working, according to this posting, is worse than a working, nonwhite “illegal alien.” As this sentiment illustrates, working hard without complaint elevates people of color and immigrants (as well as whites) into the image of the righteous, struggling Americans. White welfare recipients break their pact as white American workers; they should be working as hard as “illegal aliens working back breaking, menial jobs.” According to Don, the former logger in his late 70s, Mexicans and other imported labor are taking jobs that should go to local residents. Though he implies that there are not enough jobs, he also blames local whites who do not

²⁹ Because the population in Maine is 97 percent white, most readers would assume the writer is referring to *white* lazy Americans unless the he or she specifies otherwise.

want to work (or who do not want to work for a low wages) and the state for helping people survive without work:

To me, that's the thing, if they had enough places to put people to work instead of bringing in all these Mexicans and all these other ones. And telling these people [white locals], you've got to work, period. If you want to survive, you've got to work.

A contractor who works in several paper mills in the area explained to me that workers themselves react to local companies being bought out and sold overseas with a strong resentment against the people of the nations that take over the company. Now that workers do not have an entrepreneur like Harold Alfond to look up to, they are demoralized by seeing their money go to a "foreign" company (as with the Skowhegan paper mill which is owned by a multi-national corporation that originated in South Africa). When I asked him how it is different for workers to see their money and hard work go to Alfond versus a corporation outside of the US, he responded that workers are shamed by not being able to produce for their nation:

...Yea, that Alfond, he may be an asshole to work for but he's a Maine guy, you know. "Not Ching Wong Tong. What is that? What city are they from? Where? They look different. Their eyes are different, they're funny, you know. Then the Germans, didn't we beat them in World War II. Holy shit we should have beat them harder or something, cause they're kicking our ass economically." That's what the average high school, maybe high school graduate/GED person sees. They see the people their fathers fought in World War II and they own everything as far as they're concerned... they're invaders, they're foreign invaders, whereas Alfond is the devil you know. Rather than the devil you don't know. And when you see the local hero getting beat up by somebody from another school. I mean you might hate him and resent him when he steals your lunch money in the hallway but at least he's your bully, not somebody else's. So I think that's a whole other level of demoralization...But Maine people pride themselves on, you know, tough, and surviving and doing what they need to do.

This interviewee believed that most workers share this anti-foreigner sentiment. I agree that many people who lose their jobs to competitors outside of the US have some race-infused nationalistic sentiment against the countries from which these corporations

are based. But I usually did not hear this sentiment when it might be expected. Workers in central Maine not only placed blame on companies based outside of the United States and their workers but also had a more complicated description of the different players in the global economy. When chatting with friends about her work, someone asked Pat, the middle-aged former factory worker, if the product she assembled at the mill she worked at is made in China. She explained which part of the product was made in China and then commented on how well it worked: “they make nice smooth edges, not squared off.” Others, like Matt, named the growth in international markets as part of the cause of the closure of several mills in the last few years, but he also mentioned that the state, and US-based companies are also part of this relationship (that is, he did not describe foreign invaders taking “our” jobs):

There’s a lot of foreign competition. That doesn’t help, I see that. Cause we’ll buy logs and we’ll send them over to China. And uh, they’ll do that wood up and cut it into lumber and send it back over here for less than what we can produce it for right here. So that puts a strain ‘cause they’re importing cheaper lumber. And uh, a lot of that happens. This company I work for right now. We do ship stuff overseas so, you know. Everybody feeds into it a little bit too. You know. If we could, could we stop all the imports? I think we’d be better off. We probably will never be able to stop them now, with the Free Trade Agreement. It would take something really big to change that.

Matt shifts the blame from China and Chinese workers to government trade policies, companies that capitalize on inexpensive labor, and everyone who inevitably “feeds into it.” Rather than seeing globalization as an international threat to the white worker, he focuses on jobs, trade, and the structural conditions that led to the decline in the lumber industry. While some workers and employers bemoan the loss of the hardworking Mainer to industrious immigrants and overseas workers, in effect supporting

the myth of the white worker, others, like Matt, counter the myth with structural analyses of economic change.

The Welfare Queen and the Mythical White Worker

Two mythical characters influence the invention of the “problem whites” and their escape from the problem: the welfare queen and the white worker. National attacks on the lazy poor influence local perceptions of poverty and low-wage workers. The descriptions of working class and poor people in Skowhegan are familiar because we have heard them many times before. It is the race-infused anti-welfare rhetoric that helped Reagan win the support of the white working class, helped Clinton pass welfare reform, and today galvanizes ordinary Americans to protest government programs. The rhetoric of the “undeserving poor” (those who are to blame for their own poverty (Gordon 1994; Katz 1989) has justified directing money away from many public support programs. The use of the culture of poverty and the racing of welfare through the image of the welfare queen in the 1960s and again in the 1990s relied on an anti-dependency rhetoric.

Despite the long history of public wrath concerning segments of the poor who participate in national public programs, as described in Chapter Two, the meaning of dependency has changed. In an early small town ethnography, James West describes white Midwesterners reacting with similar sentiment to the Works Progress Administration’s social programs of the 1940s: “That gub’ment money has ruined half the people but they cain’t stop it;” “[social programs are] making people unwilling to work and ruining people’s characters” (West 1945, 30). Not surprisingly, then, the

national media of the 1930s scorned dependency, but at that time, criticism was directed toward labor programs (unemployment insurance, Works Progress Administration programs) and the white men who used them. Women and their children were not the brunt of criticism as white women were supposed to be dependent on their husbands. Many New Deal social programs excluded black Americans and reinforced inequality and segregation through the denial of these benefits. Now, unemployment relief, an essential benefit for white men who are losing manufacturing work, is seen as more acceptable than welfare.

When the welfare rolls increased for black (and white) women in the 1960s, rhetoric against public assistance was redirected toward families, and black women were subsequently demonized for receiving aid (Misra, et al. 2003). Media (which indeed travels to this primarily white corner of the country) overrepresented black poverty and depicted welfare through unsympathetic characters, exaggerating the association between African Americans and poverty and welfare (Gilens 2000; Williams 1995). Newsmagazine stories about poverty featuring images of white people were more often sympathetic in their portrayals of poverty, focusing on hunger or lack of medical care while stories of black poverty featured “welfare queens” abusing government programs by having children to receive more aid, buying Cadillacs and drugs, and living comfortably “on the system” (Gilens 1999). Scholars have documented how racism and a stereotypical link between welfare and African Americans in fact deterred poor and working class whites from supporting public programs, programs that would be in their own self-interest (Quadagno 1994; Williams 1995). According to Jill Quadagno, then,

just as racial divisions and the exclusion of people of color from unions weakened the labor movement in the United States; white racism weakened the social welfare system.

When central Mainers complain about people “leaching off the system,” they are talking about local whites. The caricature they describe is more related to the “white trash” image depicted above than to that of the welfare queen. But stereotypes and misconceptions about welfare recipients and poor people were popularized through racist depictions and stereotypes of black women on welfare. White discomfort with and misperceptions of black poverty helped to create the meaning of dependency as targeted at mothers on public assistance. Racist mythology surrounding welfare, then, has influenced perceptions of local welfare recipients. It maintains a bottom level against which white welfare recipients can distinguish themselves.

The trope of the white (male) worker, like that of the welfare queen, has national historical significance. Considering that race, class and gender give meaning to American citizenship, the white male worker has become a sort of quintessential American character, a full citizen of American national belonging. Workers do not have the power of white capitalists, but the white American worker maintains a privileged positioning, a “very American” image of white coal miners and lumberjacks. This image gets called upon in politics to win over white votes, as “Joe the plumber” did in the 2008 presidential elections.

An historical conflation of Americanness with whiteness (Roediger 2003, Morrison 1993) and with worker productivity (Katz 2002) has enabled this myth of the white worker as a strong American hero. Workers of color were long excluded from labor organizations and labor history despite the centrality of their work to American

productivity. And exclusion of racialized populations from certain industrial work also contributed to the privileging of industrial labor. At the turn of the 20th century, for example, industrial wage work represented an opportunity for poor southerners to increase their status. Because Southern whites could work in these growing industries more readily than African Americans, whiteness regulated access to the privilege of belonging to the industrial working class (Brattain 2004, 5). As David Roediger explains, the exclusion of workers of color from popular conceptions of the working class continues today: “in popular usage, the very term *worker* often presumes whiteness, as in conservative Democrats’ calls for abandoning ‘special interests’ and returning the party to policies appealing to the ‘average worker’” (Roediger 1991). Racial and ethnic groups are hierarchically ordered based on their degree of distance from the white center of power (Williams 1989). American nationality has not been able to escape its white supremacist beginnings, in the same way that the idea of the “Mainer” connotes whiteness. In Chapter Three, I showed how workers in Maine are compared to a mythical hard working Mainer. Because of the relatively small population of people of color in Maine, the idea of the Maine worker usually implies a white worker. In fact, people of color whose families have lived in the state for generations remind residents that there are in fact black Mainers (Talbot and Price 2006).

Low-wage work also accords an increased social status when compared to the perceived non-worker (though low-wage workers have less power and social status than middle and high-income earners). Race, religion, and economic dependency can thus prevent citizens from accessing the full rights or social belonging of white American workers. Working hard outside of the home and providing for one’s family, for example,

is essential for gaining the freedom and independence of full citizenship (Collins 2009; Katz 2002; Kessler-Harris 2001). Those who are not working or who need support from the state are not seen as independent. Aiwa Ong takes up how this demand for work and independence intersects with race and meanings of American citizenship in her book *Buddha is Hiding* (Ong 2003). She understands citizenship to be an everyday process of self-making in which immigrants' interactions with the state, religious, and market forces work to determine their place in the nation. Their degree of national belonging also affects their racial designation. As such, immigrants can be whitened or blackened, in part, by their ability to produce or consume. Cambodian women's interaction with welfare offices, then, contributes to their blackening.

As the economy changes and white blue-collar workers with middle-class homes lose their jobs, the mythology of this white worker persists. It has helped to sustain the white, low-wage workers' belief that those who work can get by and even get ahead. Under Fordism, the popular image of the ideal American worker was of a white, blue-collar man providing a living wage for his family. The numbers of people who actually fit such a category is declining. Since the 19th and early 20th century, the myth of the white worker has shifted to incorporate white ethnics and the increasingly female workforce. Women can align themselves with the idea of the white worker by becoming a family provider or, in the case of a heterosexual two-parent home, by taking on the role of a stay-at-home mom, fulfilling her domestic duty and allowing her husband to work, but only if the husband brings in a livable wage. If a family is near poverty, both parents should be employed to prove that they are hardworking; single mothers must work outside of the home. Irish, Jewish, Italian and other "new" European immigrants at the

turn of the 20th century qualified as “free white persons” and could thus become naturalized citizens and could legally marry whites, yet still were “not quite white.” In the words of historian and American studies scholar Matthew Frye Jacobson,

It is one of the compelling circumstances of American cultural history that an Irish immigrant in 1877 could be a despised Celt in Boston—a threat to the republic—and yet a solid member of The Order of Caucasians for the Extermination of the Chinaman in San Francisco, gallantly defending U.S. shores from an invasion of “Mongolians.” (Jacobson 1998, 5).

In Chapter Two, I discussed several historical cases in which Skowhegan residents lived in varying states of “dependency.” At the turn of the 20th century, paupers, French Canadians and other immigrants did not meet the ideal of the white Maine worker. When woodsmen abandoned their jobs deep in the Maine woods, for example, some lumber companies and politicians attributed the problem to the shift in workers from “men of original stock” to Canadians and Europeans recruited from Boston and other urban areas:

The time has been when the woodsmen were natives of Maine exclusively, men of original stock who settled the towns and villages of New England. They were sturdy and aggressive and had a large sense of personal honor and took pride in their work (1911-1912 labor report quoted in Scontras 1995).

With the help of government programs like the New Deal and its corresponding rewards of homeownership, immigrants shed their “in between” racial status and became (ethnic) white Americans. Access to skilled labor and middle class suburban homes “whitened” ethnic immigrants (Brodkin Sacks 1998; Ignatiev 1995; Roediger 2005).

Stories of struggle and hard work, essential components of recent populisms, can also whiten. Whiteness can incorporate different and downtrodden whites. Politicians capitalize on the rags to riches immigrant story to gain the respect and the votes of the ordinary American. Though many Ellis Island immigrants assimilated to white America,

whitened by their move up the class ladder, Matthew Jacobson's *Roots Too* asserts that white ethnics can now maintain their ethnic difference. Celebrating Italian, Irish, or French Canadian ethnicity does not compromise whiteness as it did in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Rather, it affirms the power of whiteness. Particularly if white ethnics profess an alliance to the story of the immigrant who worked hard to provide the family with a middle class life, they gain the privileges of whiteness: “[collective, ethnic identities] did not disrupt, but actually bolstered the racial whiteness that had long held the key to American belonging and power relations” (Jacobson 2006, 7). Similarly, if problem whites in Skowhegan appear to be working hard, digging themselves out of poverty, they can lay claim to the narrative of the struggling white worker. The question remains, though, when do wages become too low and work too unstable to maintain the myth? When, as Pem Buck puts it, will whiteness be revealed as an illusion (Buck 2001)?

Implications for Whiteness Studies

In this chapter I focus on how race, or, more specifically, white supremacy (Leonardo 2004), affects the operation of class in this small town. There are many cultural categories through which to understand how working poor people and welfare recipients are talked about and categorized in the Skowhegan area. But social scientists most often examine the white American small town landscape through churches, families, regional divisions, and schools (Beal 2006; Greenhouse 1986), while racism and race are studied in urban areas, among people of color or diverse groups. Race and racism are social systems, though, that apply to predominantly white environments like Skowhegan, in addition to operating in communities of color. Though overt racism

continues, racism also covertly structures class, education, gender and nearly every social and political institution in the country.

Whiteness has historically deterred working class whites from questioning their class status. According to Pem Buck and Theodore Allen, it was not until the end of the 18th century that “white” and “race” began to take on meanings similar to that associated with the concepts today. The ruling class indeed persuaded workers of European descent that they were “white” by offering them privileges such as land and the vote (Allen 1994; Buck 2001). By inventing a category of racial privilege (“white”), the elite prevented a powerful class-conscious alliance among European and African descended workers. David Roediger similarly demonstrates how the social elevation of white status allowed workers to accept the discipline of work. Emphasizing the agency of the white working class, he shows how the fear that wage work was no different than that of enslaved people led workers of European descent to distinguish themselves from workers of African descent by imbuing whiteness with superiority (Roediger 1991; Roediger 1994). Building from Du Bois’ concept of the “psychological wage,” Roediger claims that whites gained psychological benefits from thinking of themselves as superior to enslaved people (Du Bois 1962). Even when working alongside black workers in the North, “whites could still use Blacks as a counterpoint to come to terms with their own acceptance of steady and even regimented labor” (Roediger 1991, 180). Though Skowhegan’s “problem whites” seldom work alongside people of color, whiteness still deters them from recognizing their class position in that they can use the myth of the white worker to disassociate themselves from poverty and describe other workers as lazy.

Many scholars writing about white poverty claim that poor and working class whites are raced differently than middle class and elite whites. In certain geographical and historical locations, poor whites *have* been endowed with a sort of biological inferiority. In the late 19th and early 20th century, for example, eugenicists claimed that poor rural whites (including recent urban migrants) were lazy and prone to criminality, feeble-mindedness, and lechery, blaming “poor hereditary stock” influenced by incest and cross-class and interracial sex. Scientist proposed solving the problem of white degenerates with forced segregation and institutionalization or compulsory sterilization (Wray 2006). I maintain, though, that the problem people in Skowhegan are not darkened, nor do they create a new racial category. The stereotypes about the problem people are not attached to being white in the same way that the welfare queen has been attached to blackness. The disparaged group of problem whites in Skowhegan has had little effect on the power of whiteness and perceptions of the shirkers have not tainted Skowhegan’s reputation. The local economic developers are still able to sell the area to companies looking to relocate as a charming small town populated with hard working Mainers.

That white welfare recipients and poor whites are not less white, counters the interpretations of several scholars. John Hartigan, for example, approaches poor whites as racial others and exceptions to the definition of whiteness as privilege (Hartigan 1999; Hartigan 2005). Hartigan describes whiteness and white trash as a conceptual “odd” combination because whiteness is about the privilege of being white and white trash is about poverty. This disjunction led to him to chose the title, *Odd Tribes*, in reference to poor whites. He also contends that the lived experience of poor whites demonstrates that

the significance of race depends on class positioning. Though he agrees that whiteness does grant privilege, he asserts that what it means to be white depends as much on intraracial/interclass experiences as it does on interracial experiences. In his words, “the powers and privileges attributed to whites nationally are severely attenuated by certain local contexts, particularly circumstances of local minority group status and access to limited social and economic resources and opportunities” (Hartigan 2005, 15). That is, lack of class privilege and local racial minority status takes away from the privilege and power of whiteness. Though I agree that poor whites do not have the same power as wealthy whites, white supremacy still significantly benefits poor whites.

While Hartigan’s theory posits that problem people like those in Skowhegan are a disruption to the privilege of whiteness, I describe whiteness as part of the process of creating a sense of privilege, even for poor whites. In this majority white town, the meaning of whiteness is formed less through interactions between white “haves” and white “have-nots” and more through the idea of the white worker as mythical national character. Those who would likely be categorized as part of the problem because they lived in a trailer park, received public assistance, or changed jobs frequently, often still blamed a segment of residents for not working hard enough or not being disciplined. Race, ethnicity, and gender do not clearly distinguish the problem worker from others, making it easier for most people to exclude themselves from the “problem” category. It seems that some working class whites have been persuaded that working hard for low wages, without complaining, is part of their whiteness. American conservative populisms often describe struggle as valiant and moral, particularly when followed by redemption. By working hard problem whites can be considered or consider themselves a

quintessential Americans, even if they are seen by some or at times see themselves as problems. This allows even poor Skowhegan residents to consider themselves “ordinary hardworking Mainers.”

CHAPTER SIX

“The People Spoke:” Town Meeting Populism

In late 2006 and early 2007, a growing faction of angry residents in Skowhegan claimed that “the people” were victims of over-taxation and secretive, dishonest government officials. They charged the new town manager (who came from more affluent southern Maine) with inefficiency and overspending. At a town meeting, a contentious budget created a battle between those who accused the town government of overspending and inefficiency and the government officials and townspeople who advocated investing in the town. The meeting revealed a general anxiety about stagnant wages, rising cost of living, and declining benefits. But these working and middle class anxieties were united against the government and the “liberal elites,” calling not for higher wages or better benefits but lower taxes and smaller government. Conservative populisms often seem to be anti-elite in that they pit “the little guy” against “the big guy,” or ordinary working people against “big government” or “big business.” But “the big guy” can lay claim to being an ordinary taxpayer too if he can describe himself as struggling and hard working. That is, the trope of the ordinary hardworking American can support elite interests. The budget dispute at this Skowhegan town meeting demonstrates how populist politics highlight some class-inflected differences while hiding other forms of class power.

Many Skowhegan residents had legitimate anxiety about economic conditions. They were angered by their loss of incomes, jobs, and economic security, and they

directed their anger toward people in positions of power (local government and the liberal elite). Though many populist movements have allowed economically or politically oppressed people to gain power, they have also helped groups maintain their power. Populisms often attract middle-class dissenters who perceive that they are being squeezed between big business/big government and immigrants, African Americans, or poor people taking “their” jobs or tax money. A perceived threat to the white middle class’s racial and economic power, for example, motivated the late 19th century Ku Klux Klan, Nazi Germany, and recent European anti-immigrant movements (Berlet and Lyons 2000; Buck 2001). Right-wing populisms equate the struggles of the poor and middle class. A successful businessman and a low-wage worker seem to both be fighting for the same cause, in this case, to decrease taxes or limit government spending. And though populisms are organized against the elite, because only a segment of the elite are blamed (in Skowhegan, liberal elites), populists question inequalities without questioning capitalism.

Town Meeting Populism

On June 2nd, 2007, nine days before the Skowhegan annual town meeting during which taxpayers approve the town budget, a group of disgruntled residents began circulating a petition asking that the selectmen oust the town manager. They charged him with excessive government spending, secretive decision-making and a leadership style that angered and divided town employees. Critics also claimed that he spoke to the townspeople with an elitist and condescending tone. The local newspaper quoted one man as saying, "He's got an attitude of being very aloof, like he's above you," reflecting

the perception that he was not one of the people. At selectmen's meetings before and after the town meeting, I heard both public tirades ("the problem is you, Mr. Tarr.") and private comments, usually focused on overspending or problems conveying information.³⁰ Though many business owners worked with the local government on revitalization projects, they still often found themselves in adversarial groups. Business owners accused town government of spending too much money out of town and of not listening to them or taking their interests into account. Referring to a debate earlier in the year about changing downtown traffic patterns, one business owner claimed local businesses had little voice in whether or not a change would occur: "It was pretty much, 'this is what we're going to do and you're going to do it.'"

At the 2007 town meeting, two different groups of leaders stood out: one that envisioned a new future for the town and advocated "investing" in this future, and a second that focused on minimizing town government and its expenditures. Many of the "investors" were also active in other community revitalization efforts. They were primarily middle class professionals--small business owners, some elected officials, doctors, lawyers, and artists, several of whom moved to the town in recent years. They believed the town needed to invest in Skowhegan's downtown and community programs and that several projects to fix road, sewer and water system problems had already been put off for too long. The group of leaders demanding smaller government also included business owners and investors, but they were often resistant to town revitalization efforts. They claimed that Skowhegan's time to invest in the town's infrastructure had passed with the loss of industry; that the town should learn to live on a leaner budget. Both of

³⁰ The petition could only put political pressure on the board of selectmen but townspeople could not vote to oust the town manager. In April 2008, though, this pressure had its desired effect when the board of selectmen decided not to renew Phil Tarr's contract.

these groups represented local elite interests—the first a liberal, professional elite and the second a hard-working, business savvy elite. The second group, though, best laid claim to being ordinary taxpayers.

Although most Maine municipalities used to rely on town meetings for governance, the tradition is waning with population growth. As of 2005, 55 of the municipalities in the state had switched to another form of government (Palmer, et al. 2009). Municipalities with town meetings vary in whether or not they have a town manager, selectmen, or councilors. Skowhegan elects several part-time selectmen who hire and have authority over a full-time town manager and other department heads. The board of selectman and town manager hold meetings every two weeks during which members of the public can request to be put on the agenda and speak to the board. By and large, though, “the people” are less active in government decision making at times devoid of controversial issues. They are more likely to react to local plans to increase or cut budgets, build a new landfill, or allow a new topless bar (none of which require a long-term commitment) than to serve on or attend budget committees or selectmen’s meetings (Platt 1992). Town meetings are, in effect, a representative form of government because only a small percentage of the voting population attends meetings (Zimmerman 1999). Several local governments, including Skowhegan, have talked about doing away with the town meeting, arguing that too much power was being given to “the person who speaks the loudest” and that, even with an attendance of several hundred, the budget is being decided on by only four percent of the population. But most residents still bring a sense of duty and a belief in their right to be heard to town meetings.

As symbols of democracy and the rights of “the people” to influence government, town meetings lend themselves towards populist expression. Despite being held up as an ideal of American democracy, town meetings have never given equal power to residents. The poorest and the most wealthy in a community are less likely to attend and participate (Bryan 1995). Still, political and academic leaders like Thomas Jefferson, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Ralph Waldo Emerson praised this form of local government, helping to elevate the town meeting to a symbol of participatory democracy. Many active residents in Skowhegan take their governing responsibilities very seriously. These dedicated few spend hours reading through budgets and going to the town hall to request extra paperwork. Others who do not do the background work still take advantage of the right to be heard at the meeting. In general, residents vote by raising their hands, making public statements with their votes, even if they do not walk to the microphone to ask questions or urge their neighbors toward a certain conviction.

This was the third town meeting I had been to in Skowhegan, so I knew well who the vocal townspeople would be. There was a lawyer who talked at length, usually mentioning that he had been attending town meetings in Skowhegan since he was a child. There was the school board member who would occasionally offer an alarmist warning that we could one day have the police knock on our door to tell us that our son or daughter had been killed (if the town did not increase the police officer wage or if a bolt came off an old plow). There was Richard Harvey.

Richard Harvey, known to most everyone as one of the wealthiest people in town, usually played a particularly prominent role in the meetings. He grew up in Skowhegan (as did his father) and owns several businesses that sell construction equipment. Much of

his money is now said to be in real estate and people often joke that he owns half the town. At town meetings he would sit toward the back of the room with his wife and sons (both of whom work for the family business). He always wore a baseball cap, jeans, and a loose-fitting T-shirt. While others walked down the aisle to the microphone, Richard would remain in his seat to make his comments (until the moderator insisted otherwise), yelling in a loud, gruff voice with a central Maine accent. Some residents who were not as well known or active in the town as Richard Harvey still spoke up regularly during the annual town meeting. Others came, listened, and quietly raised their hands when it came time to vote. Participants included office workers, teachers, shoe factory workers, town employees, construction workers, truck drivers, and people who were retired from all of these occupations.

Many townspeople arrived at the 2007 meeting angry. A recent state law allowed town budgets to increase only by certain increments before voters would have to approve the overall addition (as well as approving an amount for each budget item). At this meeting, elected officials were going to ask residents to approve an eight million dollar budget that was more than one million dollars over the levy limit. Some residents took this request to mean that the town manager, the budget committee, and the selectmen were overspending and mismanaging tax dollars. Talk about the budget override brought more than about 300 people to the meeting, making it one of the biggest crowds in years.

The first article of a town meeting is always to elect a moderator. Rumors that a group of disgruntled townspeople were going to nominate one of their own, rather than the man who has moderated town meetings for many years, prompted a lawyer to jump out of his seat quickly and nominate the usual moderator before others had a chance. The

townspeople began going through the budget, article by article, discussing, questioning and then deciding whether to accept proposed budgets for the police and fire departments, general operations and social services. The meeting followed *Robert's Rules of Order* but the language and flow still seemed overwhelming, especially for those who were unaccustomed to the rules as I had been—"point of order, Mr. Moderator;" "motion carries;" "I would like to make an amendment. There is an amendment on the floor. You can't make an amendment within an amendment.;" "The amendment is defeated. We are now voting on the original motion." Even seasoned town meeting voters were confused at times about what was being debated.

Early in the meeting, the town manager attempted to explain the high budget. He listed all of the expenses that had increased for the town since the last year (health insurance, electricity, and gas) and explained that the deteriorating sewer system needed to be fixed. After he finished, an older man with a strong Maine accent walked to the microphone:

... How many senior citizens do you see before you who are living on fixed incomes? We have the same issues, the same problem. We have dental work. We have increases in food. We have increases in gas. And there's only one bulk of money in the entire room and that is the people! It is not banks, it is not municipalities, it is not government, it is people. And I'm telling you, my pocket is *empty*!

The hall erupted in clapping and cheering. A similar argument was consistently made throughout the evening. Townspeople compared the town budget to their family budgets and insisted, "just because you want to spend the money, doesn't mean that the money is there to spend." When the Road Commissioner, for example, requested money for a new truck because one of his had more than 150,000 miles on it, a resident countered that her car had more than 150,000 miles and *she* had to make do because she could not afford

another one. Critics knew how to live off of a small amount of money and they expected the town to sacrifice as they had.

The conviction that “we can’t have the people that *work* for us [town employees] living better than we live” was particularly evident in the objections over town employee’s health insurance. Many townspeople were outraged that some part-time elected officials received health insurance and that police and fire department workers received family coverage at 50 percent (which town officials explained could not be changed because they were under union contract). Voters debated for 20 minutes about whether or not to increase the police department secretary from a part-time to a full time position. Paying for health care for this \$20,000 a year position was the point of contention. A middle-aged woman voiced what seemed to be behind many complaints about high health insurance costs: “there’s so many people getting health insurance [in the budget] but the townspeople don’t have it. Because nobody can afford it, because we’re paying for them [town employees].”

Still, as the evening wore on, the voters passed articles without significantly reducing the amount suggested in the budget. Then, a lawyer made a motion to amend an article, suggesting an *increase* from the budget item request. The clash between those who wanted to work with the town government and invest in a new vision for Skowhegan, and those who distrusted the government and its proposed spending came to a head. Richard Harvey began by raising his voice from the back of the room:

Richard: There is a limit to what we can pay in this town. You’re going to drive the senior citizens out. Nobody’s going to want to come to such a high tax place. ... You’ve *got* to cut the budget. We can’t afford to keep going up, up. All the towns around us are staying within the LD level. Why can’t we? We’re a million over.... There *is* a limit. People, you’re going to have to buy a forklift here, in a year, to put your tax bill on to get it in the mailbox.

The room erupts with laughter, clapping and cheering. Ted, a family doctor from the Midwest who has been practicing in Skowhegan for almost 10 years, walks down the aisle and speaks calmly into the microphone.

Ted: ...I think that we all have to pay the piper. The reality is, that the bills need to be paid. A police car needs to be paid [for]. Not everybody can afford it but there is money in this town. There's a lot of people owning property ... And if we come together and pay it, there will be a lot less people hurt than if we don't provide these services. And the people that will be hurt the most are the people that have the least money. Because the rich people can pay for what they need. Make that clear, rich people can pay for what they need....And we're certainly not going to be able to increase our job base with a poorly maintained town. Cause I know that no doctor will come to town and see it falling to pieces and say, "Oh great! I want to come here and work." Nurses say the same thing. Police officers say the same thing. Town officials say the same thing. And people who buy construction equipment say the same thing.

There are a few nervous giggles at this rare and bold attack on Richard Harvey and a few loud claps from several supporters. There is then yelling in the back of the room about how the Ted must be paying off the moderator for allowing him to give this speech.

It was after midnight when the town voted *against* the override. They had approved most of the amounts requested per article so that at the end of the night, the budget was still almost one million dollars over the levy limit yet voters did not approve this final amount. They would have to reconvene to begin the process again. In the two weeks between the meetings, the Budget Committee met and developed a budget that would not require any override. This budget would cut funding to the library (most likely forcing it to close) as well as several social service agencies, and cut several positions in each department. Department heads warned that this would mean ending youth programs at the recreation center, fewer roads would be repaired, and people would lose their jobs. More than 400 people came to the next meeting, many to assure that these services did not get cut. Before the meeting started Val Anderson, the former town manager, was in the lobby handing out a piece of paper with a suggested budget requiring an override of six hundred thousand dollars rather than one million.

This meeting proceeded with much of the same arguments and emotions as the last: “we’re all underpaid and overworked. We’re all understaffed. What we’re trying to do is cut some money.” and “This town can’t afford [this budget]. Young people with families can’t afford to feed their children. We have to cut out the frills.” But this time, the *former* town manager and another lawyer (Luke McAlister) proposed amendments to each article that followed the budget they handed out before the meeting. Each time, Richard Harvey did not object and Richard, his family and friends all silently raised their hands in favor of the amount. Toward the end of the meeting, a resident stood up and protested that deals had been made in private. Luke explained these were not deals but compromises to try to help the town and get the budget through. Before midnight, almost all of these previously agreed on amounts had been passed and the town approved a \$600,000 override.

Anger and Economic Decline

Many people at this meeting were angry. They were angry at the town manager, the budget committee, and the selectmen for overspending and mismanaging tax dollars. They were angry with Ted and others who were willing to keep the budget high in order to invest in the town and this vision. They did not trust the government officials and group of long-time residents and newcomers who envisioned vibrant changes for the community. In part, the anger at this meeting is representative of the frustrations of a town trying to respond to economic restructuring. Owners and managers of local mills have watched their businesses dwindle, parents have watched their children bounce from job to job, and workers have taken pay cuts and struggle to support their families. When

money becomes sparse for residents, when taxes increase, and when there is a growing realization that Sappi and other major sources of tax income will not always be there, tension and anger creep into community politics and daily life. Town leaders and other residents argue about how tax money should be spent and who should be blamed for failed projects. Townspeople start to lose faith in leaders when plans to lure new jobs stall in the planning stage and react with pessimism and mistrust even at hopeful signs of improvement. Leaders get frustrated when months of work and planning for a redevelopment project are hastily rejected. Middle class business owners, small manufacturing company owners and managers who have watched their businesses decline are also angry. They have lost customers or have been forced to compete with big box stores. Battles, then, ensue over lost parking spaces, traffic flow, and streetlights.

Critics directed their anger at government officials and the local professional elite, but their objections reveal that many people were struggling. Angry residents complained that the town was spending too much on employee health insurance, but to make this argument, they spoke of how few townspeople could afford health care. To argue that too much money was being spent on salaries, they spoke of how little money they made. To argue that taxes should not increase, they spoke of how they could not afford a larger bill and were struggling just to get by. The town “needs to take a hit,” it was argued, because “the people” had taken a hit. They were angry that they are being denied affordable health care, were not getting paid enough (“we are all overworked and underpaid”), cannot afford “luxuries” or taxes, and, in some cases, are struggling “to feed their children.” They are angry that *they* have had to “take a hit” and that the town government and other town leaders did not seem to understand this.

But while this anger sounds like class-based populism—like struggling working class residents demanding respect and from a middle class government—the division between government and the dissenters does not fall along these simple class lines. The frustration and anger was not limited to the working class and those with the strongest voices at the town meeting were not those with the lowest incomes. In fact, as one elected official told me, “interestingly, the people that complain to me are usually the people who have had money and really don’t have to worry about not having money.”

Who is represented in declarations of the opinions of “the voters” or “the people of this town?” I will look at how elite business leaders’ connections with and manipulation of the culture and language of “ordinary folks” united working and middle classes while excluding government officials and a “liberal elite.” I focus particularly on how anti-intellectualism and mistrust of “the expert” contributes to this positioning. I will then turn to a discussion of the local and national factors that influence why government officials were seen as targets, rather than a potential means to better the job options and economic opportunity. Farmers and their allies in the Populist Party of the late nineteenth century were critical of bureaucratic government, but they also saw government as “a force for progress, modernity, and equity” and encouraged public ownership of railroads and increased regulation of banking and financial systems (Postel 2007). The angry group of dissenters at the town meeting, though, saw themselves working together against the government.

Defining “The People”: Outsiders and Insiders

Though populists claim to represent or speak on behalf of “the people,” in defining the deserving “common folk,” certain groups are excluded, whether elites, immigrants, people of color or undeserving poor. In Skowhegan, “the people” built on a sense of themselves as outsiders to local politics and victims of patronizing liberal elites (claims that were often warranted) at the same time that their politics were based on the sense that they should be privileged insiders—that they were ordinary hardworking Mainers who should not be excluded from government decision making. The town meeting represents a mythical ideal of American democracy in which all citizens can participate and make decisions. Town meeting votes were originally reserved for white male property owners and founders created the format for order and conformity, not conflict and representation (Schudson 2000). Now, though, perceptions of town meetings as inclusive decision-making forums for deserving, hard working Americans outweigh any recognition of class and gender-based exclusion. The meeting gives many attendees a sense of power and presence in government decision making. Vocal townspeople arrived with the conviction that it is their right and duty to influence the decisions and direction of government. In talking about a proposed change in the flow of traffic downtown, a business owner expressed the common sentiment that the wishes of “the people” should drive government decisions:

I think that the selectmen need to remember that they were elected by the people and they need to *listen* to the people who elected them. And if the people do not want this traffic change, then they damn well better *not* make it! And it doesn't really matter what [the town department heads] think.

The above town leader primarily represents the voice of business owners when he refers to “the people” and their vocal opposition to the changes in traffic patterns. The

town meeting justly grants residents the right to act as decision makers and to dispute the work of government employees and officials, but even while providing a sense of political inclusion, in dichotomizing the government and the people, populism condenses a diversity of opinions and interests into one political constituency. Those who most closely fit the image of the ordinary hard worker are more likely to be included. In addition to government officials and the liberal elite, “the people” often excluded welfare recipients and those seen as not working hard. At several annual town meetings, when it was time to vote on the general assistance budget item, at least one person would stand up, proclaim how hard they worked and say it is not fair that they should have to work so hard to pay the bills of an able-bodied citizen. Predictably, in other contexts (discussions of national politics, college admissions, or job searches), I also heard people deride African Americans, immigrants, women, and other groups for demanding “special privileges.”

Richard Harvey, however, was able to ally himself with “the people” despite his wealth while Ted, the doctor who spoke up against Richard Harvey, was not. The influence that Richard, his family, and fellow business-owner friends had on the town and its voters was noticeable in the support he received when he spoke, and the dearth of voters who spoke out against him. But his power was made even more apparent by the actions of Val Anderson and Luke McAlister—the former town manager and lawyer who proposed the compromise budget at the second town meeting. They talked to Richard and his supporters before the meeting in hopes of getting their compromise budget passed, anticipating that objections from Richard’s faction might threaten the voters’ support of their budget.

While culture and language *reveal* differences between the liberal elite and the working class, they also *conceal* differences between a segment of the business elite and the working people. Some townspeople resented Ted and others like him for asking residents to support a high budget in their town when they (liberal elites) would presumably not struggle to pay a larger tax bill. That is, those who promoted spending and investing could afford it. Yet fewer people seemed to resent Richard Harvey's wealth. He more successfully included himself as one of "the people" and seemed to understand the significance of their tax burden. Richard used cultural capital—his clothes, his accent, his discourse, and the implication that he was most concerned about the town and its senior citizens to minimize the economic disparity between he and most townspeople. Despite his wealth, Richard could more easily be identified as a 'real Mainer' while Ted, though he was very well known and respected, could not hide the divide between himself and working class people. Those who used cultural markers to define themselves as one of "the people," even if they have wealth and power, are less likely to be considered a threat to ordinary folks.

Richard was not fabricating his connections with the townspeople. He grew up in Skowhegan, went to the local public schools, and maintained ties to people in various social strata in the community. Phil, a manager at a chain restaurant, described Richard as a wealthy and powerful character in town, but he believed that his wealth did not prevent him from connecting with "the people" of Skowhegan: "We know some of the same people. Like our buddy's father hangs out with him and stuff and, money's really not an object [it doesn't get in the way of their friendship]. Same thing with [his sons] Zach and Jake growing up." Phil, then, understood Richard and his sons to be genuinely

connected with the people of the town, but he also believed that Richard knew how to use those connections. In Phil's words, "[Richard's] a pretty good smooth talker." Rarely did Richard mention how his investments or business would stand to gain or lose from local political decisions. In town meetings he spoke as a knowledgeable businessman while avoiding talk of the property he owned or of anything that would accentuate his elite status and political interests.

In this case, being a "smooth talker" means speaking as a representative of the common townspeople, minimizing the class divide between he and the working class. He uses jokes and everyday language to make his point and, though he might debate back and forth with a town employee about the specifics of a point, he does not give lengthy speeches to the townspeople. He makes his real concern appear to be with the people or the struggling senior citizens. In a separate controversy—a plan to create a second bridge across the Kennebec River and a new road that would "bypass" the heart of the town—Richard objected on the grounds that "the people" did not want it: "I thought this was a democracy... We voted 2 to 1 in 2004 not to have the bypass. The people spoke (Pickett 2008)." Ted, on the other hand, seemed to be trying to teach the townspeople something, using a more academic language and tone. In this instance, his use of such phrases as "I want that to sink in" and "make that clear" were probably read as patronizing or a sign that "he thinks he's better than we are." More than once, when Ted or a verbose lawyer spoke at town meetings, I would hear someone whisper, "not another lecture." The difference in how they spoke to the voters directed anger away from Richard, an employer and major landowner, and toward the white collar professional.

Richard presents himself as just one of “the people,” no different from New Balance workers, but, to be clear, Richard Harvey did not fool townspeople into believing that he was not wealthy. They knew that he was looking out for his own interests. Rumor circulated that Harvey was really against the second bridge/by-pass project because if the new bridge was built, his supplier was going require that he build a new store closer to the flow of traffic. Richard was also generally believed to be a wealthy man in a town with little wealth. In an interview, when I asked a factory worker what he thought had changed in the town in the last 15 years, he said,

I think it’s kind of the same. Everybody’s still trying to make ends meet and get ahead. I don’t think that’s changed too much....Richard Harvey’s doing better, though [laugh].

Yet he made the interests of other hardworking folks of the town appear to be the same as his: the successful businessman and a low-wage worker fighting together against the liberal elite to decrease taxes or limit government spending.

Finally, despite Richard Harvey’s wealth, he gained some of his power in the community by giving it away. Richard earned respect from many townspeople who saw him as a good guy who “does a lot for this town.” His public donations include high school athletics, the Skowhegan Fair, and the use of his equipment for town parades and community events. Though his real estate investments are rumored to be the largest source of his income, he also gained power through his business, offering favors such as delayed payments to friends who buy his product. As a result, some people were loyal supporters and avoided criticizing him publicly. Even in my recorded interviews, he was often not referred to by name but with vague terms such as “a certain business owner in town” so that his name would not have to be uttered.

Val Anderson, though she was originally from England, had gained power through her 30-year tenure as town manager. She was to be trusted more than the new town manager who was “from away” (a term that generally refers to those who are not from Maine). She is praised and respected by many for keeping taxes low and running the town efficiently but also is said to have been a controlling town manager. In the words of one informant, “if you went to a public meeting and spoke out against her and what people wanted or the town wanted, not only would you be publicly chastised but you would then be hurt financially in your business.” Another town leader believed that because she had kept taxes low, townspeople trusted her regardless of any consequences this may have had:

I was really disappointed. Um, I sat [there] and wondered, you know, who’s running the town? I went to all the pre-budget meetings and never saw her, never saw her group. She went around and talked to some key people, made some decisions, stood up there, made up a number based on what she thought. Sometimes it was approved and sometimes the town changed it. Um, what I don’t think people realize, is the town is spending money now because she neglected projects. They don’t want to realize [that] it’s clay [the sewer pipes] and it’s disappearing. And DEP is mandating fix it or get fined. They’re not holding her accountable. They’re just remembering she never, you know, made the taxes go up.

Val Anderson, then, gained power in part through the people’s mistrust of the government.

As Chapter Three describes, this class-infused culture divide influences debates and planning about the future of the town. Activities like hunting and snowmobiling that have an association with blue collar or working class life can be used to place someone into “the people” category. A town meeting in a small elementary school in Mercer (a town of 675 people just outside of Skowhegan), for example, drew many residents

because Eric Deloria (a former back-to-the-lander) had proposed an article that would ban ATV (All Terrain Vehicle) use on public roads until a trail system was further developed. Residents with a diversity of interests came to defend their positions: who did not like the noise, dust or reckless drivers as well as riders who wanted a place to ride, and those who did not want to be told where they could not ride (even if they did not ride on roads). Eric's vocal opposition to what some see as part of a way of life (riding ATVs), drew attention to what many Mercer residents saw as the difference between his family and themselves. During the meeting, when a townspeople would rebut Eric's position, several of his supporters would giggle and sometimes say, "oh my God." That his friends and supporters seemed to be laughing at other townspeople strengthened the belief that back-to-the-landers think they are better and smarter than "locals."

Anti-Intellectualism

Doctors, government officials, and professionals at this meeting were elite outsiders, not part of "the people." Richard and others drew upon an American tradition of anti-intellectualism—the mistrust and dislike of intellectuals, "experts," and "professionals" tied to the presumption that there is a group of wealthy and powerful individuals who are "out of touch" with the people. According to Thomas Dunk, anti-intellectualism is part of a working-class culture. It places value on practical, "common-sense" knowledge over what is perceived to be fabricated knowledge of experts, teachers, and lawyers (Dunk 2003). At several town meetings and selectmen's meetings, a few residents objected to spending taxpayer money to hire an "expert" when someone who would require a lower salary could do the job just as well. These residents would usually

favor promoting from within rather than looking out of town or, worse yet, out of state for someone trained in his or her field. At a selectmen's meeting, for example, one man suggested that the woman who had served as the administrative assistant to several town planners be promoted and trained in lieu of searching for an experienced town planner (no one followed up on this suggestion).

Practical knowledge of hunting, plumbing, construction, and general car and house maintenance is particularly important for working and middle class men in central Maine. Hiring an "expert" for such work is often a threat to masculinity. A middle-aged man at the golf course, for example, scoffed at a family member who had professional expertise but no practical knowledge: "Don't get me wrong, my wife's cousin is a smart guy—makes \$100,000 a year—but he couldn't change the battery in his car if his life depended on it." At town meetings, residents often ask detailed questions of the town employees and officials that would sometimes turn into a battle of knowledge about road conditions, construction equipment or human resources policy —"how many gallons per day can the sewage system hold?" and "What are the uniforms that the waste management staff wore and, specifically, are they *Dickies*?"³¹ While middle class professionals dominated ongoing community development projects and civic activities, at town meetings, practical knowledge of machinery, plumbing, cars, or budgeting gained from work and life experience could be used to challenge the knowledge on which government policy decisions were made.

Intellectuals should also not be trusted because he or she "takes more words than are necessary to tell more than he knows" (Hofstadter 1962). Before the meeting in Mercer, an opponent of Eric Deloria told other residents to be sure they had their minds

³¹ *Dickies* is a common brand of work clothes and uniforms.

made up because Eric had a way with words. He might be able to sway people away from their convictions. That is, like Ted at the Skowhegan town meeting, Eric was seen as trying to trick people away from the truth with words and intellectualism. According to Dunk, anti-intellectualism is a reaction to a mainstream devaluing of manual labor and the skills and knowledge that results from work in shoe factories and paper mills versus what is learned in universities. It is a “class reaction to the unequal way different kinds of knowledge are validated in society” (Dunk 2003, 151). The sense of being belittled by the elite and excluded from the expert knowledge of government, Dunk sees as a “rejection of and resistance to a perceived dominant culture is expressed and directed into non-class discourses”³² (Dunk 2003, 3). For elites like Richard Harvey, anti-intellectualism then becomes a useful component of populist identity. When professors, lawyers, doctors or others associated with intellectualism propose political changes that counter business or other elite interests, Harvey can ally himself with working class residents as one of “the people” against the over analysis of intellectualism.

Mistrust of the Government/Faith in Business

At this town meeting, as with much populist politics, “the people” saw themselves as separate from and in fact in opposition to the government. The anger against and mistrust of government described above reflects national political changes. Neoliberal policies have minimized the role of the state except to enable participation in the private market (Harvey 2005). Politicians have emphasized limiting government by reducing taxes, regulations, and spending. Devolution and economic decline has also meant that

³² Informants brought their everyday experience into their analysis of the economic situation in central Maine. I often found the response of working class people to be as critical, complicated, and insightful than those of “experts” in the region.

state and municipal budgets are increasingly burdened, putting more pressure on town meeting decision makers to cope with insufficient budgets (Holland, et al. 2007). The Skowhegan debate over the town budget is an anticipated outcome of having less money with which to provide government services. Those asking townspeople to cut the budget or to avoid, for example, hiring a full time assistant in the police department, are putting into practice the 30-year-old global push toward minimizing government.

Of course not all townspeople's objections were driven by longstanding anti-government anger. Many people had grievances directed at local governance based on an often-justified perception of a certain lack of transparency in the town government. The budgets were usually released within a few days of the meeting so the townspeople had little or no time to look at the 50-85 pages of budget and supporting information. It was difficult to compare figures from 2007's budget to the previous year's budget because of a change in the fiscal year (from one ending December 31st to one ending June 30th) and the new software being used by the accounting department. Though I regularly attended selectmen's meetings and other public meetings, I sometimes found it difficult to follow along. I rarely saw a meeting agenda and moderators usually spoke with political jargon and assumed knowledge about the topic being discussed. Town officials often had long and complicated answers to explain away grievances and valid excuses as to why they backed out of promises. In 2006, when skeptics complained that the buyers of the middle school should not be trusted to build condos, the town assured the people that the property would indeed be developed as condos, adding that they were lucky to find a buyer. A few months later, the plan had changed and the new owners were going to build a Best Western hotel.

Residents' interactions with public and private entities influences trust of government. The accessibility of Maine's privately owned forests contributed to the people's view of private versus government enterprise. Paper companies and other large private land owners have traditionally made their land accessible for recreation whereas state and national parks cater to eco-tourists from out of state, charge entrance fees and regulate access and activity within their boundaries. The state is also a source of hunting, fishing, and other land-use regulation and restrictions. A young man in his early 30s who works in manufacturing explained that recent limitations placed on riding 4-wheelers and other ATVs altered his view of the state and its governor:

I don't like [Governor] Baldacci at all...Coming from my standpoint on ATVs and snowmobile use... last year they changed a bunch of laws...unless you own the land or it was a marked ATV trail you couldn't ride anymore...You used to be able to go out the back door and ride—of course, you were on other peoples' land. They posted that now basically.

As he describes, private land owners also restricted ATV use, but he blames government for creating the law that would prohibit riding on land that was not designated for ATVs.

The state ranks 47th in terms of the percentage of forest that is publicly owned. Only 5.5 percent of Maine's forests are federal or state-owned compared to 42 percent of the forests nation wide (Tuttle 2003). In central and northern Maine, it is not hard to find a quiet dirt road or solid ground alongside the river to park a camper or put up a tent. There are many hidden trails that lead to popular places to jump in a stream, pond or lake, and Maine's forestlands have been generally open for hunting, fishing, hiking and other recreation. This traditional access to private land is now in question as forestlands change hands from the paper industry to investment firms that are more interested in development. The financialization of forest ownership gained public attention during my

fieldwork when an investment branch of Plum Creek Timber Company launched a development plan to create a massive vacation community around Maine's largest lake (Hagan, et al. 2005).³³

Anti-government sentiment is infused with class. In upstate New York, for example, Dimitra Doukas found that public meeting debates made visible just how much groups of people angry at the government mimicked class categories: "As local officials announced the next year's budget figures or the next increase in utility rates, angry citizens laid claim to something that looked very much like a separate class identity." Citizens saw themselves as "average Americans," "the little guy" or "the people," in opposition to the "people who think they're better than us," a category that included local politicians and corporate leaders (Doukas 2003, 21). In Skowhegan, critics changed local government officials with "living better" than "the people" and urged them to learn to "do without." Vocal townspeople opposed health insurance packages and new vehicles on the grounds that they were luxuries for many residents and their tax money should not support such luxuries. Opposition to increasing taxes is not only a reactionary political stance against "big government," it also represents a real fear about not being able to "get by." In the following interview excerpt, a factory worker approaching retirement associates taxes with a fear of losing his home:

Taxes, I'm afraid of them. Really I am, to be honest with you. We have things, [my wife] and I. The taxes go up every year and—I don't know, if it ever comes to a time where I can't work, I may have to sell everything I have so that I can survive. And I'd hate to lose the place I live.

³³ The dichotomy between accessible private land and regulated public land is also complicated by individuals such as Roxane Quimby who bought 24,000 acres of land in 2003 for conservation. With owners like Quimby, the critique is less about private ownership and more about rich folks from outside the state who are trying to control locals.

Though the elite status of government officials often contribute to anti-government beliefs of conservative populists elite, in Skowhegan the class distinction between “the people” and those chosen to represent them is not as clear as it is on the national scale or in communities with more wealth. Selectmen included an insurance representative, an oil company manager, and a paralegal, none of whom had four-year college degrees. At a previous town meeting, several residents were outraged when the base salary for police officers was raised from \$11 to \$15 an hour. Opposition to budget increases reveal the low standard of living (limited health insurance, wage increases, and new equipment/basic goods) that residents came to define as normal, but they also reveal changing expectations of government as an institution: that it should be brought down to the economic level of the people, rather than funded to help raise the people up.

Critics of the town budget placed more faith in private enterprise than local government. As a businessman and a local visible representation of economic success, residents valued Richard’s comments. In asking questions about interest rates and how the town was investing its money, he reminded the townspeople several times during meetings that he was a savvy businessman who knew how to balance a budget. Yet he was able to do so without drawing attention to the elite social position that accompanied his wealth. Because Richard looked and talked like other working and middle class residents, his knowledge of private enterprise seemed less distant. Of course Richard does not have the wealth or status of the nation’s top financial leaders (his own money continues flowing up to the manufacturer of the equipment he sells and to the banks that hold the capital of his real estate investments) but his interests were in maintaining or growing existing economic power and status.

Though the politics at this town meeting took the ideas of the people seriously, the meeting also reveals that populism is not only about “the people” challenging the power of elites. It is also about maintaining power. In a town where expenses seemed to be outpacing financial resources, where many residents were themselves facing strained household budgets, the meeting clearly demonstrated a frustration with the struggles of just “getting by.” But in directing anger at the meeting toward the liberal elite and the local government, residents hid the role of class in creating these struggles. Appeals to “the people” to trim the budget did not acknowledge the different class interests of a wealthy businessman and a retired shoe shop worker. Populist rhetoric unites them as victims of government while the needs and interests of the poorest residents are excluded. And while critical residents questioned the power of government and certain groups of new elites, they did not question the power of the business elite. Though anti-intellectualism and anti-government sentiment are, in part, a reaction to the power of the expert and the government official, at this town meeting they also helped to keep property taxes low for large property owners in Skowhegan. In obscuring class inequalities, conservative populisms validate and strengthen them. They “attract people who often have genuine grievances against elites, but channel such resentments in ways that reinforce social, cultural, political, or economic power and privilege (Berlet and Lyons 2000, 2).” Segments of “everyday Americans” fought to lower taxes (even for the wealthy) and do away with safety net programs, ultimately decreasing the capacity of government to respond to their needs.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Individualism

Individualism is an important component of populist identities in Skowhegan. But rather than inherent to the culture of small town workers, it is buttressed by national political projects targeting the middle and working classes. Individualist explanations of inequality are strengthened through work, social services, and welfare while these institutions rarely encourage class-based explanations of inequality. With the decline in unions and burgeoning neoliberal recentering of the self, there are few means to organize people around class and more sources to reinforce economic individualism. Even unions and other groups that traditionally organize for structural change in central Maine sometimes do so by appealing to a sense of individualism. Union leaders encourage solidarity among working people and support the efforts of fellow workers in different industries, but to gain greater support, they also appeal to their workers' individual or personal rights. In the context of a discussion of how unions can appeal to workers who have an anti-union bias, a union representative (Scott) stressed that many workers do not understand that unions can fight for "personal freedom." He gave as examples his union's efforts to change policies that forbid workers to wear beards and to store guns in their cars when at work:

They can tell you how you can dress in that mill. And people don't realize that. You give up a lot of your personal freedom when you work for somebody else...[The union will] negotiate whether or not you can wear a beard when you work—and that was a fight that we had, people couldn't wear a beard...We've

changed that now.³⁴ ...People would go to hunting camp—I'll give you an example—they'll come to work and on the weekends they'll throw their guns in the back of the car, go to work, go to the credit union, and then go to camp and go hunting. You can't do that. You cannot have a weapon in your car, in the parking lot. And if you get caught, there's disciplinary action. ... So there's a lot of local control that you lose, if it wasn't for the fact that you have a union.

In this instance, the union leader is encouraging workers to support the union, not on the basis of collective bargaining or a sense of the worker as different from the manager or owner, but based on the individual rights of workers to wear a beard or keep a gun in his or her car. But, as I will describe in this chapter, individualism and class-consciousness both exist in the ideas of working and middle classes. Following the concept of economic individualism, even in the context of economic decline, workers who are not “making it” are to blame for their own circumstances. This ideology is complicated, though, and sometimes questioned in practice. The prevalence of a belief in individualism does not mean that Skowhegan's working class residents do not also have a sense of class injustice, a sense that many workers and poor people are unfairly suffering. Many working class people expressed a desire to blame something larger than the individual for economic decline or their own struggles, whether that is luck, the government, corporations, or employers.

American Exceptionalism

Over the last century, social scientists have put forth endless explanations as to why the working class political movement in the United States has been weak when compared to other developed nations (for reviews of theories of American exceptionalism

³⁴ Protective respirators will not seal if someone has facial hair. The union fought against a blanket-policy of “no-beards” for a more specialized policy.

see Halpern and Morris 1997; Hoschschild 1981; Kammen 1993; Lipset and Marks 2000). One of the most common explanations for this weakness is that conservative individualism ideologically prevents a class-based analysis of American society (Bell 1961; Chinoy 1955; Hartz 1955; Hochschild 1981; Lipset 1996; Sennett and Cobb 1972; Sombart 1976). But scholars also point to upward mobility, racial and ethnic factions in the working class, the political structure of the United States, and the historical failures of labor organizations as responsible for the relative lack of workers' political representation.

American political and economic systems, according to one set of explanations, afforded workers enough representation and mobility to prevent mass class mobilization (Sombart 1976; Wells 1987). The United States remains one of the most economically polarized developed countries, but during the era of US expansion, the frontier enabled many white settlers to become property owners and move into the middle class (Lebergott 1976; Turner 1977 [1920]), thereby limiting the class injustice against which white workers could build a political movement. Louis Hartz and others have claimed that the country's lack of a feudal past similarly prevented the vast inequalities on which other class revolts were based (Gramsci 1991; Hartz 1955). Finally, the political voice afforded to white workers gave them a sense of democratic inclusion in the country that masked class-based exclusions. White men were given the right to vote, regardless of property holdings, several generations before they were in Europe.

Racism and ethnocentrism have divided the working class between, for example, enslaved and waged workers, Protestants and Catholics, and Irish and Chinese immigrants. These race and ethnic-based divisions hindered a stronger working class

movement and were at times intentionally manipulated by capital to ward off class conflict (Buck 2001; Commons 1908; Davis 1986; Goldfield 1990; Katznelson 1981). More specifically, allowing native-born whites a degree of economic mobility while relegating the lowest paying jobs to immigrants and African Americans, bought the compliance of white workers (Harrington 1972; Roediger 1991). Recently, some scholars have blamed unions failure to systematically reach out to women and people of color for the declining power of unions in the new economy.

Other scholars have claimed that the American political structure inhibited a vibrant labor party. The American two-party system and the difficulty of third parties to compete in this system has squandered attempts at national political presence of labor parties (Lipset and Marks 2000). Selig Perlman and others blamed factions built into American governance, the division of power among states and among the branches of government, which Perlman believed made unions a more effective vehicle for economic reform than political parties (Perlman 1928).

The concept of American exceptionalism itself has been criticized for generalizing and exaggerating European class consciousness while ignoring America's history of violent worker resistance and frequent strikes (Wilentz 1984). The United States has become less exceptional since the increase of European privatization and market-centered economic policy beginning in the 1980s. The country is still unique, though, in its paucity of unions, lack of worker-based political representation, and its limits on state-sponsored services. Rick Fantasia and others insist that this results not from a culture of individualism, but from the exceptional power of corporations to fight unionization and worker mobilization (Fantasia 1988; Fantasia and Voss 2004;

Vanneman and Cannon 1987). As Rick Fantasia and Kim Voss put it, “in the United States, it has been American *employers*, especially, who have had the ‘exceptional’ power to be able to create an exceedingly hostile terrain for labor, aided frequently by a state that openly intervened on their side rather than on the side of workers” (Fantasia and Voss 2004, 35).

Individualism and Social Science

Individualism puts the onus of financial success wholly on the individual, minimizing the responsibility of employers and the state in assuring economic fairness. It is characterized by the beliefs that anyone can make it, that the individual has the power to determine his or her economic future, and that the market provides equal opportunity to all individuals.

Social scientists have disagreed about whether Americans maintain faith in this individualism during economic recessions and periods of decline. On one hand, in times of job loss and factory shutdowns, some scholars observe that workers will at least partially question the American Dream and the validity of individualism (Dudley 1994; Durrenberger and Erem 2005). In Katherine Dudley’s study of Kenosha, Wisconsin, after the Chrysler auto plant closed leaving thousands of people out of work, those who lost their jobs and the fight against Chrysler revised their individualism. For these displaced workers, “on one level, the American Dream is dead” (Dudley 1994, 46).

On the other hand, scholars have argued that individualism remains strong and in fact leads workers to blame themselves for job loss or factory closure (Newman 1988; Pappas 1989). Putting the onus of economic success on the self, according to this theory,

leads workers to blame themselves for their financial problems. Activists and authors Paul Durrenberger and Suzan Erem believed that “without jobs to support their self-righteousness, the ideology destroys any who hold it by ratifying their sense of worthlessness” (Durrenberger and Erem 2005, 3). Other social scientists focus less on self-blame but still maintain that individualism persists even in the face of clear structural barriers. Black and Latino low-wage fast food workers’ faith in individualism propelled them to keep working despite minimal gains (Newman 1999; Newman 2006) while jobless high-tech workers in Texas maintained individualism but also blamed outsourcing for job loss (Chet 2005; Lane 2009). High-tech workers espoused the importance of global competition and disparaged those who could not find new jobs for failing to embrace competition or manage their job loss.

Early American social scientists investigated individualism as a trait of the American “character,” often focusing on how individualism was harming Americans by depriving them of community (Bellah, et al. 1985; Hsu 1971; Riesman 1961; Varenne 1977). Political scientists and historians traced this “ethos” to the politics and policies of early America, the revolutionary fear of a despotic state and the anti-state policies of the Constitution. The United States Constitution emphasizes protecting individual private property and economic interests, and leaves care for the poor primarily to religious and other private organizations. Hervee Varenne, though, reminds us that the concept of individualism depends on that of community, as individualism stems from an American belief in the “material and spiritual welfare of the individual as the constitutive element of society” (Varenne 1977).

An ideological commitment to individualism does not necessarily preclude class consciousness (Katznelson 1981; Scott 1995; Vanneman and Cannon 1987). Though, as I will demonstrate in the second half of the chapter, structures of power in business, government, and civil society teach and reinforce individualism, particularly as it has gained strength and taken new forms with neoliberal policies, workers' ideas are not completely shaped by this ideology. Welfare recipients, for example, both resist and accept the neoliberal ideology of welfare reform, supporting work requirements and declining welfare rolls at the same time they question them. Hegemonic neoliberal ideas coexist with "non-or counterhegemonic interpretations and 'possibilities'" (Morgen and Gonzales 2008).

It should not be surprising, then, that the people of central Maine expressed a sense of injustice at the same time they maintained faith in individualism. Most central Mainers acknowledge structural economic change and the strain that it puts on making a living, and might talk about how much harder it is to find a well-paying job than it used to be, but individualism is strong even amidst personal or community economic change. In this chapter, though, I complicate the notion of economic individualism, showing that it is more than a self-blaming ideology that feeds capitalism. I will begin by breaking down the beliefs of the people in central Maine and later turn to focus on the pressures that re-create individualism: masculinity, the promise of mobility, neoliberal politics and a sense of control over ones life.

Individualism and Class Consciousness in Skowhegan

Even before the recession, most central Mainers knew of and talked about the changes in the economy. They had watched factories close their doors and knew the growing retail jobs do not pay well, and they talked about the decline in pay and the increase in the cost of living. Most people in the Skowhegan area agreed that there was a new economy that was bringing fewer and lower-paying jobs. When asked how the economy has changed in the area, almost 72 percent of those surveyed agreed that “many manufacturing companies have left and new jobs don’t pay as well.” In fact, 58 percent of respondents see the lack of good jobs as one of the biggest problems in the area.³⁵ But ask about why there are people in the area who are without work, on welfare, or not making enough money to support their family, and many people will not talk about the economy but about how people do not work hard enough. In the words of an office worker, “I think if a person’s aggressive enough and they want to work, they can work, and it’s their own fault if they’re not.” Certainly, a major economic recession like the one that began in 2008 would increase the likelihood that residents would blame the economy or a lack of jobs rather than individual effort, but though the unemployment rate in Skowhegan when I was doing research reached 9.1 percent (in winter of 2007), residents combined individualistic, cultural, and structural explanations of low-wages and

³⁵ What are the biggest problems in the Skowhegan area?

57.8%	Lack of Jobs
27.2%	Lack of work ethic (People don’t want to work)
23.3%	High taxes
21.8%	Town leaders don’t understand what the people want or need.
20.9%	Drugs
18%	Cost of living
17%	Residents don’t want things to change
7.8%	Family dysfunction

lack of work. As I describe below, residents use a complex combination of ideas to explain who “makes it” and who does not.

Despite both struggling to get by, and being dependent on state aid, Loraine and Chrystal still believed that an individual is responsible for his or her own economic security (though they both also blamed the state and the economy for peoples’ struggles). They believed it is the responsibility of the worker to move or commute to work if necessary, to take any job, despite low pay or bad work conditions. And, even if a worker is not being paid enough, it is his or her responsibility to make it work and survive by being frugal. Individualism asks workers to sacrifice and, as Chrystal puts it, “put up with whatever it takes.”

Claudine: You hear people saying, “if you work hard enough, anybody can make it.”
Do you agree with that?

Loraine: Yea. That’s true.

Chrystal: Yea.

Chrystal: You may have to look outside of your area.

Loraine: You may have to be a real penny pincher and

Chrystal: You have to be realistic about it.

Loraine: Yea. You have to be really penny pinching. I think it’s possible. You can’t be worrying about the Jones’ next door. You can’t be worrying about how they’re thinking about you right then.

Chrystal: And you have to be able to put up with whatever it takes. Because, I mean, Smitty and Sara, he did not work for three years. He did not want any job at all. He would *not* work at McDonalds, he would *not* work at--he was poor. He ate Ramen Noodles. [laughs] You know what I mean? He just did not care to do what it took to do something. You know what I mean? He didn’t care. He was comfortable where he was and the state makes it very easy to do that.

As described in Chapter Three, employers, economic development leaders, and workers themselves focus on the individual worker and his or her work ethic as one of the most important sites for improving the economy of the area. Don, the 79-year old grounds keeper introduced in Chapter Two, blamed job loss and lazy workers for the problems in the area. He complained that today's workers, particularly young workers, have bad work ethics:

Most of the young people today, and I mean no offense in any way shape of the matter, but they just don't wanna to work. They want 12, 15, 18 dollars an hour but they don't want to do nothing....It's just they don't want to go out and do a days work.

Some of the problem, according to Don and others, is thus a generational change. Chyrstal is herself in her mid-twenties, and thus could be described as a young worker. She explains that her employers are always complementing her on her great work ethic but when I ask her if young people have bad work ethics, she excludes herself from that category and describes younger workers as preoccupied with socializing:

Claudine: I hear people around here saying that young people have a problem with work ethic.

Chyrstal: Young people suck. They really do. They don't want to do it. They don't know how. They don't care. They just hang around, chit chat, or party or they're on their cell phones....And it's like, GET TO WORK. Seriously.

Even those with a strong commitment to individualism may question the concept in practice. In interviews, if my questions strayed from the ideological ("Do you agree, as some people say, that everyone can make it if they work hard enough?") toward the everyday, even if asking about a hypothetical family ("Let's say there is a woman who has two children and she's working but can't seem to make ends meet, what would you say to her?"), informants were less likely to stick to an individualism that faults the

individual for not succeeding. Some people who praise individualism and the work ethic, who profess that the biggest problem in the area is that workers do not want to work, question the ethic in practice. They praise hard work or claim that others have a work ethic problem, but would still be critical of their employers and not put *all* of the responsibility for economic success on workers.

Matt, the wood buyer, believed in individualism at the same time he emphasized local job loss and was hesitant to blame individuals for their own problems in his explanations of how class works. Matt had worked his way up from a minimum-wage job in the lumber industry to one making more than \$40,000 a year. But “up,” for those like Matt who work in unstable woods or manufacturing industries, is tenuous. Though he says a lack of good, well-paying jobs is one of the greatest problems in the area, his belief that an individual can take control of his or her own economic future is not shaken: “Anybody that wants to work, can work,” as he put it, “...there’s absolutely a chance, anywhere in the United States, I believe, if you want to work hard enough.” He believes that hard work and luck are the determiners of success, and that most people who stay at a subsistence level are either not working hard enough or chose not to increase their income or status because they prefer a simple lifestyle.

Matt strayed from his individualistic theories when asked to think about mobility in terms of individual lives, rather than an ideology. When I asked why a (hypothetical) struggling or poor family would not be able to “get ahead,” for example, he searched for reasons other than a failure to work hard. He was not willing to blame his friends, family, and former co-workers who had not done as well as he had for not “making it.”

When I asked Matt why there seemed to be so many families that are struggling, he switched to talking about economic position as an individual choice:

They might not *have* to make all kinds of money, either, you know what I mean. They're satisfied with where they're at. Some people aren't satisfied. They want more money. Or more, whatever, you know what I mean?...You know, money isn't happiness. Some people think it is. You got to have it. [laughs] You got to have it. But uh, some people, they're happy with what they have. They don't have to have all kinds of stuff. I could live in a shack in the woods with just a garden and be happy. ... You know, I've watched [a friend's] life for the last 8 or 10 years. I'm not badmouthing him, I mean he's my buddy, you know, but he could do things differently to do much better. But he chooses to live the way he lives. And there's nothing wrong with that. But he could do better. He could have more. But maybe that's not what he wants. He just wants to be happy, you know. And I think he is. He is happy and he's content with what he has. So it's a choice that people make, I think, you know. With what you really want out of life.

By emphasizing individual choice and varied interpretations of “success,” Matt maintains his individualism without blaming the individual. When I pressed him further to explain, essentially, why not everyone “makes it,” he shifts to an explanation of economic position that relies on sources beyond the individual; namely, luck and opportunities.

Claudine: Do you think there are people that are not happy with where they're at, are working hard, and can't get out of their situation?

Matt: Yea, I think there is. I'm sure there's people that way. They are working hard and they can't seem to get ahead.

C: Why does that happen? How does that work?

M: Why does that happen? Oh my God. Maybe they just don't get the opportunities that some other people get. I think opportunities is huge. You know I worked with a lot of other people that didn't get the opportunities that I did. Why did I get the opportunities before them? I'm not sure. Maybe it was work ethic. I mean. Some people get the opportunities that others don't. I work close with a lot of people and for some reason, they picked me to be their log buyer, you know, it could have been somebody else. So some people don't get the opportunities, they don't get the chances. They don't get the breaks...that some other people get.

Though Matt says that work ethic may have contributed to his promotions, his use of fatalistic language such as “for some reason” and “it could have been somebody else” indicate that he believes that other structures, larger than himself, lead to these opportunities (see Feagin 1972). Individualism insists that everyone work hard regardless of work conditions and pay, promising future rewards, Matt both questions this logic and supports it. He admits that employers should expect less work if they pay low wages, saying, “Yea, \$7 an hour, I ain’t working very hard;” but as soon as he says this, he realizes that this conflicted with his work ethic and he quickly added, “Hey, you got a job, you need to work hard no matter what you got, right?” Several informants who were quick to blame workers for their own economic struggles in interviews also understood the challenges of earning a living, forcing them to make exceptions to their individualist explanations of success. When I asked Matt how someone becomes poor or gets to the point of really struggling, he did not say that it is because he or she has not worked hard enough or made bad choices, but rather,

I guess it could happen many ways. Like, when I got divorced. I tell you that was a struggle. We went from a two-income family to one, with the same bills, pretty much. So, stuff like that happens. I mean that’s nobody’s fault but your own, maybe, but, I mean it happens to a lot of people. And that would be a huge struggle, to go from two incomes to one. I’ve been paying for my house for 8 years now. I tell you, I’m lucky to have it still. It was a struggle.

He seemed to recognize that he was straying from his ideological commitment to individualism when he briefly turned the blame to the individual (in this case, himself) by saying, “that’s nobody’s fault but your own.” He also accepted that there are people who are working hard to “make it,” but who get few opportunities for promotion or who battle with family or work struggles that keep holding them back. His commitment to ideological individualism, then, may not be as strong as even he thought.

In addition to complex interpretations of economic individualism, I heard from working class residents class-conscious complaints about corporations, gas prices, low wages, and problems at work that are “just not right,” as well as separation from and discomfort with wealth. I agree with Gerald Sider’s statement that “we have approached the problem of class consciousness from the wrong direction: we have defined what it is and then looked for it, rather than starting with an ‘actually existing’ working class and listening to how they understand both their changing situation and their need and ability to shape these changes (Sider 1996, 75).” At a social event, I met a young man who was working at the unionized paper mill after years of working for a construction company criticized by union leaders for not being unionized. I asked him which system he preferred. The construction company treated him right, he said, and they never gave him any problems, but he also said that unions had done good things for workers and he was glad to have a job at the paper mill. When I asked if he thought other companies like Wal-Mart should be unionized, he said, “I don’t really get into that” and quickly but politely excused himself. Harold Wilensky, writing in the 1950s, found the class-consciousness model outdated and out of touch because, as he wrote, “the closer one pushed these men to a Marxian model...the smaller the fraction that one could call class conscious.” But anti-socialism and anti-union activity in the United States has considered any rhetoric that is explicitly class-conscious to be undesirable. Researchers who have looked for the language of Marx, or even labor organizing as expressions of class consciousness, could have missed a sentiment of class anger and injustice that is expressed in forms other than strikes, union demands, or workplace grievances. I am not (like Wilensky) measuring class consciousness as the degree to which residents use the

language of labor organizers, Marx, or socialist political parties. Rather than focusing on what is missing from the American “class consciousness,” I focus on what exists.

In Skowhegan, people do not only blame themselves or other workers for economic problems. They blame the economy for lack of work. They blame government. They blame corporations. They blame people who make too much money. They blame whoever is making gas prices and food prices go up. Interviewees talked about the problems beyond their immediate control, such as the lack of jobs in the area, the problems with health insurance, the rising cost of gas, and how difficult it is (or would be) to survive on minimum wage.

Many working class people distrust the state and big corporations, especially companies seen as profiting from the struggles of “ordinary folks” (like phone, electric, and credit card companies). Loraine and Chrystal had a particularly strong sense of injustice. Loraine told stories about how she had been wronged by the state, her past bosses, and men, and how she stood up to them. She said welfare exists because women are left to care for their children alone and she criticized the state for trying to control the lives of the people who receive assistance. Loraine said she learned a lot about how to fight and stand up for herself from her daughter. When I arrived at their house to talk to them, Loraine had just gotten off the phone with the phone company. They had been overcharged, two months put on one phone bill. She was angry but said she might have let something like that go had her daughter not shown her the importance of challenging such authority.

When we were talking about the ASPIRE’s childcare reimbursement program, Chrystal described how, as a childcare provider, she fought to get payments from the

state for women on ASPIRE. Before she “got divorced and had to be on state,” she worked caring for the children of women on ASPIRE. She fought with the state to get paid, believing that she was fighting for herself but also for the mothers of the children she was caring for:

Claudine: So it’s hard for [child care providers] too?

Chrystal: Yup. Especially if that’s your business and it’s based on the state and that’s where your income is coming from. When I took ASPIRE for daycare, I had to fight with them for three months. And one woman was like, “you’ll get it, you’ll get it, you’ll get it.” One woman said, “oh, it looks like you need to go find yourself a job.” Or something. And I said, “I’m sorry, but this *is* my job. What would you do if your boss called you up one day and said ‘can’t pay you today ‘cause I don’t have enough money.’” I was like, “give me a break, you would quit.” I was like, “you want me to work for you. ‘Cause these women, they need their jobs, they need day care for their kids.” I said, “I’m working for you guys so that these women can get off the state.” I said, “you’re telling me I can’t get paid because you can’t afford it?”... I was like, “OK, if you don’t pay me, I’m going to make her [the mother] pay me.” And so then they finally sent me a check.

Though Chrystal managed to get paid, she was of course not able to solve all the problems with the program. Later, when she was looking for childcare for her children, she had a hard time finding a provider who would accept a child whose care was being paid for by ASPIRE. Providers who had stopped taking “ASPIRE kids” told Chrystal stories of caring for a child for more than two months without getting paid and of waiting for 12 different payments for various children.

The conviction that something is not right, that someone or some other entity is profiting while they struggle, though, is found even more prominently in people’s everyday complaints than in the ideological explanations of economic insecurity that informants shared during interviews. At the golf course, the public schools, and the community college, as a substitute or a temporary worker, fellow employees rarely talked to me about the problems of the job. But through daily interactions with working class

people, I repeatedly heard complaints about not getting paid enough, about conditions at work, and about the difficulties of keeping up with the rising cost of living. Sometimes I heard about low pay when I asked, “is the pay decent?” or when an informant had to look for another job because his or her job was not enough to live on. I heard about workers being promised a raise after so many years of work and never receiving it. I heard stories about the workload increasing without pay increasing—as when a man told me about his company pushing the employees at his branch of a saw mill extra hard after the company closed its second branch. Retail workers and wait staff often complained about not being given enough hours to make the money they needed, while some coworkers seemed to get more hours. Several people in health services described being required to take courses or obtain certificates that had no impact on their pay rate. In many industries, workers complained that their employers wanted “to squeeze every last drop out” of their employees.

Beyond pay, workers sometimes objected to how they were treated or to the conditions of work. Several call center employees complained about being over-monitored and about the stress that the point system for sales and call duration added to their job. I heard stories about demeaning managers and supervisors who “talk to us like we’re stupid” and about factory workers being required to complete a task despite equipment breakdowns or improper tools. Laborers who had been working for many years complained that their bodies were falling apart and that people should not have to do such taxing, “backbreaking work.” Similarly, while some wageworkers argued that they did not get enough hours to make money, others claimed that they were working too many hours, feeling forced to take overtime else their jobs might be threatened. Several

nursing home aides and cooks felt their employers did not have the best interest of the patients in mind, saying that owners only care about their bottom line, not the patients. They felt that they did not have enough time to do their jobs well because nursing homes were understaffed.

Finally, I often heard the many stresses of trying to work, raise a family, and keep up with expenses. Those working two jobs or balancing school with family and work sometimes seemed bitter about having to push so hard, and wondered how long they could keep up the pace. Some working parents felt guilty about bringing their children to childcare, seeing very little of their partner, or coming home from work after the children were in bed. The expense of basic needs like childcare, rent, and groceries seemed to be increasing rapidly and when I was doing research, gas prices reached more than three dollars a gallon. In a rural area without public transportation, a working car is essential. Gas prices were a common topic of conversation; many marveled about the cost of commuting and questioned whether they were making enough money at their job to warrant the commute. Those with little money were often driving cars that broke down and threatened a high, unplanned additional expense. When people talked about their grievances at work, I heard them alongside their struggles with family and home: my husband found a girlfriend; the divorce went through; my daughter tried to commit suicide; I think my teenager is pregnant; I found cocaine in my sons pocket. Family struggles and social struggles impact finances, and problems do not wait for workers to find a better job.

These grievances do not go unnoticed. Some coworkers, employers and supervisors complained about the complainers, saying they should quit their job or go

back to school if they are not happy. Other workers agreed with the complainers but saw their negativity as futile grumbling among coworkers. They begrudged their fellow employees for complaining but not sharing their problems with management. Those who tried to report problems to their supervisors also admitted that if it helped, the change was usually short lived. Informants sometimes followed the description of a difficult situation at work with, “but, what are you going to do?” or “but the pay and benefits are better than most places in this area, so I can’t complain.” Or as Vicki (Don and Betsy’s daughter) explained when talking about her coworkers at the grocery store, “there was a lot of that [talking about work problems] but they didn’t do anything. They didn’t really bother. I mean, what could you do anyway, nothing would really come out of it.” As Karen Brodtkin Sacks found, coworkers talking with each other about common struggles can help to form a bond among workers while bringing problems to the boss risks betraying the coworkers confidence (Sacks 1987).

Bosses and managers often see complaints as insignificant quibbling and less often as valid grievances, supporting individualistic and populist notion that people should expect to struggle at work. The following informant allows a degree of legitimacy to the complaints of the handful of people he supervises, but he believes that workers, in general, should be accustomed to having problems and challenges at work. That is, struggle is an ordinary component of any job:

So a lot of time you’re having to “be careful with this, because it might break but we need you to make this good product.” I think, pressure wise, they don’t have all the tools all the time in front of them, to make the [product]. If they did, I think we could focus on that it’s just the person, complaining. I think it’s a little bit of both. Some people have a bad day, don’t sleep at night, come in, and this person says something to them, that’s all it takes [for a worker to start complaining]. But, to me, you don’t find too many people that are going to be happy, with work. If I could retire today I would. I wouldn’t work. I mean I could

stay busy but I wouldn't work full time if I didn't have to. But, it's a *job*, nobody ever said you're going to love it, I guess.

Alongside faith that individual hard work and sacrifice will inevitably lead to prosperity, then, there is a common, if vague, proclamation that *something* about working people's daily struggle is unfair. The blame is sometimes directed at employers, sometimes at the government, and sometimes at the wealthy, and is rarely articulated as a battle cry against capitalists. A sense of inequity and unfairness can even be found within the individualist claim that "anyone can make it if they work hard enough." Though this is an articulation of the faith that everyone, regardless of economic status, has potential to be economically successful, it does not suggest that everyone has *equal* potential. Many working class people, in particular, supported this claim while also believing that they struggle while wealthy people do not. This sentiment is represented in a second popular expression, "the deck is stacked against the little guy." Though 50 percent of low-wage workers surveyed believe "anyone can make it," 41 percent agreed that the deck is unfairly stacked against the little guy, that people without money have to work harder to "make it." Also, a significant 24 percent of low-wage workers agreed that, "in general, people's class doesn't change. Kids of wealthy parents are wealthy and kids of poor parents are poor."

Matt was insistent that anyone could make it, but also believed that some people have it easy while others (who were not born wealthy) have to work twice as hard to make it. He acknowledged that good jobs are not easy to find and do not come automatically, but the struggle of finding good work is part of the game: "You've got to work hard to work your way up to a good job." He was also convinced that "the little guy" had it rough, saying that anyone can make it if they work hard enough but, "you

might have to work harder than somebody that got it handed to them, or, ya, had the money already.” He had a consciousness that there are groups of people who are forced to work harder because they do not have the resources or luck and that wealthy people are unfairly given an advantage. He accepts this injustice, though, as part of life, not something that should be challenged.

Still, the idea that the deck is stacked against the little guy, presumes that there is a little guy. It indicates a belief that there is a group of men and women who have little power and little money, a sort of group consciousness, and, in some cases, a recognition that one belongs to this group of powerless people. This group consciousness, however weak, was articulated through expressions of anger and mistrust directed toward wealthy people and corporations as well as recognition of a social distance between working class people and middle class or wealthy people. The mistrust of the wealthy was supported by the idea that wealth connotes immorality and that one should not have more money than needed supported. It was also commonly believed that most wealthy people, corporations, and business owners only look out for themselves and do not care about “the little guy.” Many people expressed anger, for example, that gas companies were getting richer and richer while escalating prices were, at best, forcing “the people” to change their practices or, at worse, forcing them into poverty. Also, when asked in the survey how people become poor, the most popular answer (chosen by 50.5 percent of people) was “jobs and what they pay haven’t keep pace with the cost of living.”³⁶ Several people described it as unjust that families should live on such meager earnings.

³⁶ How do people become poor?

35.9% They have made bad choices with their money.

22.3% They have a disability or something that prevents them from working.

Though informants downplayed the significance of a class divide, they often also identified with a class-inflected group in so much as they recognized groups to which they did *not* belong. This other group was often the wealthy, whether wealthy meant working class with a big house or a doctor making several hundred thousand dollars a year, or even the general “those who think they’re better” (Doukas 2003). Recognizing the stereotype, informants were often hesitant to reveal that they associated wealth with snobbery. I asked Matt to explain his belief that people with money have a sense of superiority:

Matt: I don’t want to say snobby. But they’re that way. They’re better than other people ‘cause they’ve got money. They really feel that that they’re better and they look down on people that haven’t done as much or done as well as they have. ...

Claudine: And how can you tell if someone has money?

Matt: Well, maybe it’s what they’re driving. The way they present themselves. Um, their arrogance—they really are, a lot of them are. But there’s a lot of people that are well off in the area that are really genuine good people, that aren’t like that. And there’s a lot in this town, really. There are people that have done very well.

This perception of wealthy people reflects remnants of producerism, the valuing of the culture and livelihood of working men and women and devaluing of that of the wealthy, particularly those whose wealth was not gained from “making something.” Producerism both reinforces individualism—by placing moral value on hard work regardless of the reward—and creates space for class organization by defining a group of workers against nonworkers. Just as being a straightforward working man or woman is seen as a sign of morality, wealth is seen as leading to immorality. There is an emphasis

50.5% Jobs and what they pay haven’t keep pace with the cost of living (gas, rent, food, etc.).

30.1% They learn this way of life from their parents and others around them.

42.2% They did not get the education or skills they need.

9.7% Somebody’s got to take the low-paying jobs.

on practicality and doing work yourself, for example, rather than hiring a mechanic, carpenter, or plumber. Thomas Dunk describes this valuing of simplicity and “common sense knowledge” as part of a working class “culture” (Dunk 2003).

Some residents also blame local blue collar and white-collar middle class for making and spending too much money. Though well-paid workers may have worked hard and worked their way up to these positions, the argument goes, they were greedy. It is said that with the help of the union, paper mill workers have asked for and received too much money and too many benefits. And with this money, they buy too much—big houses and big cars that nobody needs. One former shoe shop worker fears that paper mill workers’ over-consumption could put the whole community in danger when the paper mill finally closes:

I don’t know what will ever happen to us if Sappi goes out. ‘Cause those people have new homes, new cars, boats, the whole works. And you know they can’t pay for all that up front. I don’t know what will happen. If that goes out we’re going to be in *one big bind*.

David Halle found that working class men with good family wage jobs saw themselves as “working men” at work and middle class at home. This distinction divided them from those who have not been able to buy their way into the middle class. Again, this reflects a division between well-paid “skilled” workers and low-paid “unskilled” workers. The criticism that people “mismanage” their money and buy unnecessary luxuries is thus not only made toward poor people or welfare recipients, but is also directed at middle class and wealthy people. Some look down on wealthy people as lazy, not having to work hard because everything was handed to them. The wealthy residents who do not flaunt their wealth with big houses, fancy cars and attitudes of superiority, but look and act “like everybody else” garner more respect. Those who have not endured

hard work or struggle are prone to allegations of laziness and immorality. Roger, the employer described above, when talking about how important it is for young people to work to develop character and a strong work ethic said,

You know what my father told me as a little bit philosophy. He says, you know, Roger, what happened to me—I would have the greatest folks, with my mother and father, there, high respect—he says, “I didn’t have nothing to give you. That was the best thing life could give me.” He says, “if I was rich,” he says, “you’d be a bum.”

He respected his parents, valued how hard they worked, and attributed his success to these values and his own hard work. Now that he has worked his way up, he talks tough, dresses in t-shirts, encourages his children to work, and seeks to prevent wealth from corrupting his family.

In early 2008, before the economy hit the depths of the recession, but when conversations about how economic decline was affecting the middle class became common, the pages of commentary that followed a series of articles in the local paper on “Mainers Falling Behind,” overwhelmingly blamed the individual, this time for overspending. Commentators put the onus on the individual to make it through this tough time by saving money and cutting spending (Bell 2008, Turkel 2008). One of the articles in the paper about the struggling middle class described a family that had to give up their weekly pizza and morning Dunkin Donuts coffee in order to put gas in their Jeep. The responses that followed blamed the middle class for overspending, but they also revealed the (angry) perception that they were not struggling but wealthy:

“Any idiots that have two incomes and can’t buy a pizza are obviously gluttonous morons who don’t know how to form a budget. This story would have a bit more credibility had they chosen say a one income household with one party going to college or something. buffy and skip cant take little katie and stewart and mildred up to sunday river [to go skiing] EVERY weekend because the Toyota sequoia gets 10 mpg? Spare me”

The family featured in the article was not named Buffy and Skip. She was a housekeeping supervisor at a hospital and he was a building contractor. The comments reframe the article's subjects from a struggling middle class family to privileged whiners. People reacted to the article with a sense that, as one woman put it, "these people are rich compared to me."

Reaffirming Individualism

Economic individualism assumes that any hard working individual can find a job and advance in his or her career, that hard work will be rewarded. Though hard work does not pay off for everyone, when it does, middle and working class individuals often attribute their success to their individual skills and drive. "Making it" or feeling rewarded for work (however small the reward), not only affirms belief in individualism for the successful worker, it also often leads him or her to encourage others to have faith in individualism.

The rewards given to those with middle-income jobs serve a double function, affirming individualism for the jobholder but also for those who aspire to have such jobs. Having "made it," well-paid workers can convince low-wage workers that they too can follow their example. Several middle class informants who worked low-wage jobs while in high school and college attributed their success, in part, to a willingness to work such jobs. They believed accordingly that workers who avoid minimum wage jobs were compromising their futures. One teacher explained, for example, that some workers do not take low-prestige jobs because they believe such jobs are beneath them. He used his own experience to illustrate the importance of low-wage jobs for individual success:

If [people] don't have a job, then somehow they're going to get on public assistance. Wouldn't it be better for them to actually work? ... I mean the way I

look at it is that it's the steppingstone up the ladder. I mean I look at some of the jobs I had, weeding strawberries for a dollar an hour, mowing cemetery lawns, cleaning bathrooms, emptying trashcans at an insurance company. Yea, those all were minimum wage jobs, but they were my steppingstone on my way to getting a masters. And I think there's a certain attitude today that, now there are certain jobs that are beneath me. I'm not going to empty trash. I'm not going to weed strawberries.

Those who grew up in working class or poor families and now operate successful businesses or have middle or upper-income jobs also use their life stories to convince others of the power of the individual to determine his or her prosperity. The owner of a manufacturing company in the Skowhegan area explained how his hard work and persistence as an employee eventually enabled him to start his own company. He contrasted this to the attitude of one of his employees who worked slowly because he felt he was not being paid enough:

And I always felt, when I worked for somebody, when I got my paycheck, I appreciated it...I did a good job for what I got. [I thought] maybe someday that will come around. I'll be recognized. And as it happened, when I went to get out of the military, I went to work for somebody, it took me ten years, but I was plant manager in ten years. I proved my worth. I proved that I could make money for the company and be a good manager for the employees. That's how you get rewarded. You don't get rewarded by saying, "you pay me more, I'll do more."

An administrator at a local manufacturer believed that opportunities contribute to success, but stressed that individuals *create* opportunities. He had been talking about the stories he hears from employees about their friends and families who work two or three jobs to pay the bills. When I asked him what he suggests for someone who is working hard but struggling to make it, "let's say working between Dunkin Donuts and Wal-Mart":

Well, somebody told me something once, made a comment about how, personally, lucky I was that I went to school and got a good job. But I don't necessarily—some of it was luck, but a lot of it was, I think, my own personal willingness [and] drive to, help me be the best that I wanted to be and take advantage of certain

opportunities as they come along—even though they might not be...an immediate benefit. But it is a benefit that's going to help you build yourself and your character and your experience. And so I think my advice would be, don't leave any rocks unturned, look for opportunities, look for any way that you can improve yourself, your experience, your exposure and prove yourself. Even if you're working at Dunkin Donuts or Wal-Mart or somewhere else, those are big organizations, even though they're service industries. If you're able to prove yourself through your own work ethic and your own quality of work and your willingness to go above and beyond and get involved, you're going to create opportunities for yourself.

Those who did not get the opportunities, according to his explanation, were either not paying attention (he advises that workers “look for” opportunities) or were not working hard enough to warrant opportunities (workers need to “create” opportunities). Unlike Matt, who believes that hard working people that cannot seem to get ahead may not get the “breaks” or opportunities that others get, the administrator turned the blame back to the individual. Though employers and middle-class families can praise individualism and proclaim that their lives prove its effectiveness, poor and working class people, though they may not own a house or have a high-paying job, can still speak of their lives as proof of the importance of individualism. I address this point further below. Those who are rewarded for their work (however small the rewards) help to maintain faith in individualism by expecting poor working people to keep working without questioning their conditions.

Individualism and Masculinity

Race, class, gender, and other social categories are intertwined and work to support and create each other (Brewer 1993; Mullings 1997). A hegemonic masculinity that promotes toughness and rebellion might contribute to a greater worker resistance but it conflicts with the husband-as-provider ethic and the pressure on men to endure tough,

physical labor. The masculinity that advocates challenging authority and that unites union “brothers” against employers fights against class structure (Brown 2006; Klubock 1996). A masculine ethic not to cower to all of the workplace demands but to stand up to the boss and support fellow workers led, for example, to the resistance of some skilled craftsmen during the transition to wage work in the United States (Montgomery 1979).

But working in difficult or dangerous conditions is also a sign of masculinity. As I described in Chapter Two, masculine pride in the logging industry is tied to working in dangerous situations or enduring cold temperatures or pain for the sake of employment. In defining manliness as working hard, men gain pride and respect despite being under the control and power of their employers. Working outside of the home and providing for the family has been imbued in men’s sense of self. Pressures to “provide” for children, a masculine sense of dignity and integrity is deeply tied, not only to employment but also to sacrifice through work (Connell 1995; Townsend 2002). In addition, in laboring together (particularly in physical labor jobs), men can develop a sense of togetherness that then influences masculinity outside of work, (McDowell 1999). Scholars have thus point to a “crisis in masculinity” when job loss, manufacturing decline and the feminization of labor threatens this work-based identity. As Carrie Lane argues, though, with more women in the workforce, the men’s construction of a sense of self through work should not be overstated (Lane 2009). She contends that for middle-class technology workers, the tie between masculinity and work is also changing: “middle-class men who have lost their jobs now have alternative standards of masculinity, and alternative models of professional success, toward which they can turn” (Lane 2009, 687). As a result of the neoliberal emphasis on the individual as her or his

own career manager, they understand job loss to be part of their career). Middle class women who have lost their jobs also feel the guilt and pressure over not contributing to the family income, a guilt formerly associated only with out-of-work men.

The white male has been the most prominent national image of the working class (Roediger 2002). This is also true in Maine, despite women's participation in the workforce at the shoe shops and woolen mills responsible for the region's prosperity. The masculinity of work was subtle but present in central Maine. Tom, for example, a social worker and political leader, described the Maine work ethic as rising from a tradition of long hard work in both farming and the mills of central Maine:

I think it's mostly historic. For years, there's a migration that took place from here to Connecticut to Pratt Whitney and stuff and they would come up here to recruit because there was still a rural basis and people were still working in the farms and working in the mills, you know. And they came up here to find those good workers who were used to working. They *were* used to working 10,12 hour days. You know, 365 days a year, you want those guys.

As with most discussions of work ethic, Tom does not say that men are stronger or better workers. But the "guys" being recruited to Pratt Whitney (an airplane engine manufacturer) were mostly men. The farmers and mill workers whom he describes as working long hours were mostly men. Despite the large amount of farm work that women did (and do today), a "farmer" is still often presumed to be a man (Sachs 1983).

Neoliberalism and the New Individualism

The 1970s, the decade that marks the shift to the "new economy," also marks a growth in business leaders and corporations organizing to convince the public of the importance of free market individualism. Many scholars have argued that white working class racism, resistance to the civil rights movement, and rejection of liberal social and

moral issues won working class support for neoliberal economic policies and ideologies, including individualism (Frank 2004; Rieder 1985; Rieder 1989). Democrats touted white working class support by avoiding race-specific politics like affirmative action (Roediger 2002). But in addition to efforts to win over working class votes by appealing to racism, religion and anti-abortion policies, business leaders sought to convince working and middle class Americans that they shared interests with capitalists, that free-market competition strengthens the economy, increases jobs, and is the foundational belief of “traditional Americans.”

After a decade of anti-establishment revolt and Great Society anti-poverty programs, business leaders sought to change Americans’ perceptions of business and affirm faith in individualism and the free market. In the 1970s, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, for example, sent local business leaders into 12,000 public schools with “Economics for Young Americans” kits in support of the organization’s new mission to “advance human progress through an economic, political and social system based on individual freedom, incentive, initiative, opportunity and responsibility” (Phillips-Fein 2009, 202). The Chamber increased its number of Congressional Action Committees (used to lobby local representatives) from 1,400 to 2,700 in six years.

Business leaders targeted youth at college campuses, instituting economics programs that they hoped would change students’ views of the business world and introduce more young people to the benefits of individualism and free-market competition (Moreton 2008). Business and vocational training grew while liberal arts training declined. By the end of the 1970s, twenty-one states required high school students to take economics courses that were often explicitly put in place to endorse free-

market individualism and to counter the ideas of teachers who are “collectivists or socialists” (Moreton 2008, 56).

Alongside the grassroots approach, individualism has been buttressed through the birth and growth of conservative think-tanks like the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Cato Institute and through foundations such as the Olin Foundation and the Smith Richardson Foundation (O'Connor 2000; O'Connor 2008). Philanthropies like the Volker Foundation and the Institute for Educational Affairs explicitly sought to increase the support and standing of conservative intellectuals (like Milton Friedman, Richard Posner and Richard Epstein) and their university departments. Though the major television news networks (ABC, NBC, CBS) sometimes report on findings from these conservative foundations, the growing role of cable news, talk radio, internet blogs as viable mainstream media has provided new means for conservative think-tank research to reach the public (McPherson 2008). In Skowhegan, leaders who emphasized individual responsibility and government as a mechanism to advance business promoted their policies not as explicitly conservative politics, but as the best decisions for state and local development. As mentioned in Chapter Five, at community meetings several local business leaders handed out articles by neoliberals like Thomas Friedman or documentation from Forbes Magazine of Maine's hostile business climate.

Working and poor people have also been directly targeted through the increase of self-help teachings and requirements of government and private social services. The efforts to respond to changing work structures described in Chapter Three—training workers for bad jobs (including workfare and soft skills training), deriding welfare recipients as lazy, and praising disciplined low-wage workers as hard working Mainers—

affirms faith in individualism in addition to reaffirming the work ethic. With the dismantling of the welfare program, decreasing regulation of financial markets, and increasing privatization of health, social, and educational services, individuals have had to take on more responsibility to maintain themselves and the country (Goode and Maskovsky 2001). The declining role of government has demanded increasing responsibility of private organizations and individuals. Alongside these political changes is an increasing ideological emphasis on the individual as responsible for his or her well-being and on private markets as responsible for regulating individuals. Full citizens of the United States are expected to support themselves and their families with wages. Government and social service agencies, particularly those that serve poor people, instill in the recipients of their services the importance of individualism. Acting as technologies of the state, they discipline individuals to take responsibility for themselves. In so doing, they deter blame and liability from failing companies, changing economic structure, and government response.

Any democracy requires that its citizens regulate and govern themselves—pull themselves up from poverty, heal their dependency on alcohol so that the government does not have to (Cruikshank 1993). Micro enterprise training programs respond to poverty by teaching participants that they have the power to create their own business and their own success, if they only believe in themselves (Goldstein 2001). Homeless shelter staff work with shelter guests to find and heal the social, psychological, or behavioral problem of a homeless with little or no attention to the decline in wages or shortage of affordable housing (Lyon-Callo 2004, 200). Homeless people are not only taught the ideology of individualism, but are forced to act as individuals, separating themselves

from the support of a community of poor people, in order to find housing or receive state support and social services (Wagner 1993). Financially struggling hospitals shift workload to the lowest paid and undervalued frontline workers and then invest in soft-skills training for these workers, teaching them to solve their work problems by managing their time and controlling their attitudes (Ducey 2009). Former industrial workers, laid off when the factories they worked in closed, are retrained and counseled to forget about the stable jobs they lost and focus on making themselves competitive, flexible workers for the new economy (Dunk 2002). Lawyers, welfare workers, social workers, and doctors act as “socializing agents of the state” indoctrinating refugees into “American values” such as individualism and self-reliance (Ong 2003).

Welfare-to-work programs, retraining for those who have lost their jobs, treatment for alcohol and drug abuse, all teach participants that the way to success is through a strong self-esteem. Though Maine’s post-PRWA welfare programs are more generous than in other states (allowing, for example, recipients to attend college) public funding for social services was drastically decreased under Democratic governor, John Baldacci (Quinn 2004). With fewer public social services, individuals and families must fend for themselves.

Self-governing, as Barabara Cruikshank demonstrates, has increasingly used the rhetoric of self-help and self-esteem. While described as a means to “empower” individuals with the emotional and cultural tools to succeed, the self-help movement is also a process of subjectivity and citizen-making, a way of being and acting produced by government (Cruikshank 1993). In the bestselling book, *The Secret*, author Rhonda Byrne teaches readers that with positive thinking, they can become happy, wealthy, and

successful people (Byrne 2006). The implication is that individuals can control their future; if they want to become rich, they only have to believe in it and it will happen. I first heard of the bestselling book when talking with a real estate agent in Skowhegan who had just come from watching the DVD version of the book at work. Larry Winget's self-help books also seek to direct people to a more financially successful life. But with titles like, *It's Called Work for a Reason!: Your Success Is Your Own Damn Fault*, and *You're Broke Because You Want to Be: How to Stop Getting By and Start Getting Ahead*, the pressure he places on individual success and blame for individual failure is more clearly central to his message (Winget 2007; Winget 2008).

New titles for government programs make evident the intent to increase privatization and the focus on the self. Whereas the title of the former public assistance program (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) does not emphasize individualism, the title of both the 1996 act to create the new program (the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act) and of the program itself (Temporary Aid for Needy Families—TANF) reveal their intent to encourage individual responsibility and self-sufficiency. The name of the Maine TANF program, ASPIRE (Additional Support for People in Retraining and Employment), also emphasizes the program's goal of motivating participants out of welfare by encouraging training and self-help. Out-of-work residents of Somerset County used to go to state agencies nicknamed unemployment offices to file for unemployment insurance or to search for jobs. But as in many states around the country, the same and additional services are now offered at a one-stop Career Center, a title that replaces a focus on lost jobs with an individual's ability to empower him or herself with a career.

Working Class Individualism

As described above, the neoliberal strategies of government, media, education, and nonprofit organizations, affirms and re-creates new forms of individualism. But individualism also holds sway because the ideology has benefits for many working class people, beyond the rewards offered by employers and others who enforce neoliberalism. A strong belief that any individual can overcome economic odds does not work to eliminate poverty, to increase class mobility, or to change class structure; in fact, it deters people from questioning the systems that create inequality. But, in addition to keeping people down, the ideology of individualism keeps people going. It provides a sense of control over one's life. It allows workers to have pride in what they have accomplished and hope that things will get better. In more sociological language, "perceiving that one has control over one's outcomes seems to have good consequences across a wide range of variables" (Kluegel and Smith 1986).

Individualism holds a prominent place in Skowhegan not only because it is promoted by national political and social movements and not only because it serves capital, but also because it speaks to working class experience. These positive qualities of individualism support the continued faith in the American dream. Though it may keep people going under false pretense or for the benefit or welfare of others, the American dream, as Hoschild puts it, inspires great acts and creates great despair (Hoschild 1995).

The dream needs those great acts for others to believe in it:

the ideology of the American dream has always relied on previously poor Americans not only achieving upward mobility, but also recognizing that they had done so, feeling gratified, and consequently deepening their commitment to the dream and the nation behind it (Hoschild 1995, 87).

The “great acts,” though, need not be drastic shifts in status. Modest accomplishments—getting a job (even if it does not pay much), a ten-cent wage increase, or renting a bigger apartment—can be seen as proof that individual hard work is paying off. In fact, having pride in these accomplishments may make the daily struggle more tolerable. This seemed to be the case with Bob, a worker at a small manufacturing plant that has been downsizing and was just barely making it. Bob believed that if a person wants to work, he or she could work. He knew that a lot of the businesses that have moved into town in the last ten years have been fast-food restaurants and dollar stores and that much of what is available is low-wage work. He suggested that if someone could not get a job at one of these new companies, he or she could shovel driveways, believing that with hard work even these low-paying jobs would lead to relative success. The problem, according to Bob, is that people are not willing to take these and other low-paying jobs. Anyone should be willing to “start out at the bottom” or move out of the area to find a better job.

Bob had a quiet rough voice from years of smoking and despite living through tough times he smiled a lot. As a young man in Massachusetts he had lived in and out of different foster care, carrying grocery bags for extra cash until he went into the military. His low point, it seemed, came more than 30 years ago, when he moved to Maine. He and his son were living almost ten miles out of town in a chicken coop with a wood stove. He described this time with fleeting details: “I didn’t even own a car. Or, maybe I did. I don’t remember. Maybe I did have a car, but it broke down.”; “I gave my son my coat because he didn’t have a coat. And I would tell him, I’d say, ‘John, you’re warm, you’re warm, you’re warm.’” When his boss at a factory in Skowhegan learned of his

living situation, he gave him a room at work to stay in until he was able to fix up the place where he had been living. It was seven years, though, before he had electricity or running water. During that time, he carried jugs of water home from work. When I interviewed him, Bob did not focus on this low point. Now, he was happy. He loved his wife, whom he credited with helping him quit smoking and drinking, and he loved where he lived. Besides being out in the country, as he put it, “right now, the house I live in, compared to the chicken coop...is a mansion.” Though he was still just scraping by and was worried about retirement, his life had taught him that it’s up to every individual to work hard and believe in him or herself. When I asked him if he believed that anybody could make it if they work hard enough, his answer was both rational and personal:

Bob: Oh, yea. I know that for a fact, because like I said, I didn’t have something given to me. Not that I have a lot, I didn’t have a lot. And not that I have a great education or anything like that there. But I think that’s a fact. If you work hard for something, you can get it. If you set your mind to something, you can get it. Anything. You can do anything. I try to teach any young person that will listen. You can do it. All you have to do is want it and get it.

Claudine: So what prevents people from getting it sometimes?

B: Well, probably, probably they don’t have a good attitude. Probably that wasn’t instilled in them. Sometimes people give up. Sometimes people make mistakes, too. And because of their mistakes and stuff, they don’t realize, “well, I messed up. I guess I can’t get there.” And they just give up. If someone has a goal and they want it bad enough. They can do it. ... Sometimes you can set your goals a little too high and you get knocked down. But if you gradually set them up a little at a time or something, you’ll find that you’ll be able to accomplish the things that you want to accomplish. And don’t let a little setback knock you down so that you’re not going to try to get back up again.

C: Does that happen a lot?

B: Oh, I think so. It happens. It happened to me, that I got knocked down a few times but I get back up on the horse. When you’re on the horse and you fall off, I get back on that horse and ride again. And you’ve got to.

He applied this philosophy to his own future. He was sure, if the factory closed, he would do whatever it took, and he would get another job: “I would be going door to door, door to door, door to door, until somebody is so tired of seeing me that they say, “Come here, please I need you. I’ll be glad to see you come here.” And he would learn how to get by on less by canning meat and vegetables.

Bob is following the neoliberal doctrine that good self-esteem can bring one out of poverty (Cruikshank 1993; Goldstein 2001) and poverty itself can be caused by the wrong attitude. Regardless of how much Bob may have been influenced by a neoliberal self-help movement, he sees his belief in hard work and determination as a knowledge that came from his life experience, as something he gained from living in a chicken coop and making it out. Rather than seeing Bob (and others’) individualism as a false-consciousness, as only the knowledge and ideology of capitalists transmitted to the working class, individualism also emanates from working class experience. The practice of surviving on low wages informs the ideology of individualism just as it is informed by national political and institutional emphasis on self-help described above.

Toward the end of my interview with Bob, his boss walked in to say good night. He was wearing a “Common Ground Fair” t-shirt (a fair organized by the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association). He asked more about my research and then offered his theory about how the key to global economic success was the education of women. He talked about the problems with the political leaders and organized religion and believed some economic development efforts were “too Republican in their thinking.” Locally, he stressed the importance of the hospital, of education, and of the willingness of the children of Skowhegan to move away to find education and jobs. He suggested a

couple other business owners I should interview, looked up their numbers, and said good night to us both. As soon as his boss was out the door, Bob said, “See, he’s educated. More than I ever was, you know? He has a different outlook. But he’s right.” Bob seemed to think I would place more value on his boss’s knowledge because of his education and because of his many complex solutions to the problem of economic restructuring. I watched as the ideas and intellectualism of his boss overpowered Bob’s analysis, a scene I took as a warning against my own inclination to oversimplify individualism as a false consciousness that denies worker agency and intellectualism.

Working class peoples’ ideas and theories about economic development are rarely given the same weight as that of business leaders and those with college degrees. Their ideas are either viewed as ignorance or not as their own but as the ideas of the ruling elite. As discussed in the previous chapter, this exclusion of working class knowledge from the mainstream influenced American anti-intellectualism (Dunk 2003). Individualism is both an ideology manipulated from above and a clearly articulated means for explaining joblessness, welfare, and economic struggle based on lived experience.

Despite loss of jobs or decline in pay or benefits, many residents of central Maine consistently assert that success can be obtained through hard work and admonish those who scrape by in low-wage jobs for not having drive or a work ethic. But frustration and anger with low wages, lack of health care, and rising costs of living exists alongside this faith in American individualism. Some working class people believe that the deck is stacked against them and have a consciousness that there are groups of people who are

forced to work harder because they do not have the resources or luck, and that wealthy people are unfairly given an advantage.

Class Consciousness Organizing

Many anthropologists have written about active class resistance to global economic restructuring, including transnational and cross-class organizing against corporate giants like Coca-Cola (Brodkin 2007; Collins 2002; Gill 2009) and the revitalization of labor and community organizations to fight low wages of the service industry (Collins 2002; Brodkin 2007). In central Maine, though, there are few popular efforts to mobilize workers to fight class inequality. Historically, particularly in the United States, business and industry representatives have orchestrated intensive anti-union campaigns (Fantasia 1988; Fantasia and Voss 2004) (Montgomery 1979; Nilson 1981; Vanneman and Cannon 1987). Economic change also contributed to the decreased power of unions: company relocation in search of cheaper labor; the loss of unionized manufacturing jobs; and increased contracting and corporate buy-outs which minimized the connection between workers and employers and complicated worker solidarity (Collins 2002).

Federal and state level legislation also decreased the power of unions. The Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, for example, made it easier for employers to avoid unionization by deeming sympathy strikes and secondary boycotts illegal (destroying an important component of union solidarity); making it more difficult for workers to establish a union (by, for example, allowing employer-driven efforts to stop the union during the election process); and enabling states to pass further restrictions (20 states have passed “right-to-

work” laws) (Fantasia and Voss 2004). President Carter’s firing of postal workers after the 1978 wildcat strike and Reagan’s 1981 firing of more than 11,000 striking air-traffic control workers again decreased the legitimacy and power of the strike as a weapon for battling employers. Businesses also launched a multi-billion dollar anti-union offensive, which includes the pro-business marketing described above. They hired legal advisors and anti-union consultants to teach managers about the problems that unions bring and about how to prevent them from infiltrating the workforce (Fantasia and Voss 2004). Employers have also played-up existing divisions among workers by rewarding one ethnic group over another or dominated social space to prevent worker solidarity (Brodkin and Strathmann 2004).

Skowhegan has had a strong presence of unionized workers, yet the national decline in the number and power of unions has also impacted central Maine. Unionized manufacturing companies have reduced labor costs by packing up and moving to another part of the country or the globe where they will not have to pay union wages. Maine companies have been moving to escape union wages since textile mills left and are still willing to move to reduce labor costs. The following mill manager described such a move in the 1990s, ultimately blaming unions for increasing labor costs and driving jobs out of town:

The machine shop I was running was a part of the mill and so the machinists were in the union and so the company decided for a number of factors, that this was one consideration, the cost of labor. And it was much cheaper to employ the machinists out in Kansas than it was to have them here in [small town], Maine... Yea, the cost of labor got so high that it became affordable to ship all the equipment out there and we just did away with those jobs.

In central Maine, unions support some of the highest paid workers in the region while low-wage workers are not organized, creating a divide between workers with well-

paying unionized jobs and low-wage workers and contributing to the perspective that unions are no longer needed; that they help only those who do not need their help. Ken is a middle-aged manager at a mill outside of Skowhegan. He spent more than 25 years working in upper-level positions in various mills. He and his wife had three children in their late teens and early twenties, one of whom (Jake) was temporarily working in the mill with his father. Ken believed unions may be able to help low-wage workers in retail industries, but as far as manufacturing, “the unions have really over-played their time:”

Ken: So many laws, so many things that are required of businesses and the way they treat their employees that the add cost—we have a union president and a vice president and a secretary and they do nothing in production in their jobs, that’s all they do is walk around and talk to people. It’s like, you just can’t afford that kind of activity any more.

Jake: That’s something the management can do. Like the people who are already in place.

In this case, unions are seen as an unnecessary financial burden on corporations. Though Ken acknowledged the historical necessity of unions, his son did not view workers and management as representing separate class interests. Statewide, several nonprofit organizations (like the Maine People’s Alliance) work to organize people on the basis of class, but they cannot replace the demise of the power of unions.

Though residents maintain faith in the American Dream this does not mean that individualism is a conservative static belief of small town residents. Despite the continuous promulgation of neoliberal ideologies of the self at varying levels of society and despite residents’ ability to use individualism to maintain power over their own lives, they are also skeptical of the wealthy, of corporations, and of government. Believing that any individual can overcome adversity and achieve economic success or stability does not prohibit class conscious organizing. Rather, powerful efforts to re-affirm

individualism far outnumber political, social, and governmental effort to organize toward a class-conscious politics.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Conclusion

A great deal has changed since I completed my fieldwork in August of 2007. The country experienced a major economic recession in late 2008 and in less than two years, the national unemployment rate had reached 10 percent. In the midst of the economic collapse, the country elected Barack Obama, its first African American president. And, of course, the Tea Party, the loosely organized group of reactionary “ordinary folks,” garnered tremendous media attention and worked its way into mainstream politics. Rallied by Fox News host Glenn Beck and rising political figures like Sarah Palin, the Tea Party called on supporters to “take back our country” from moral and political decay.

Those in search of explanations for this uprising turn to the culture wars and the right wing’s use of welfare, abortion, religion, and guns to galvanize support against Democrats and moderate Republicans. Others point to Tea Party racism and connect its popularity to a reaction to the first black president. I would add to these explanations that the new populists are organizing as a classless political constituency of “taxpayers” and “Average Americans” after decades of being appealed to according to these mainstream identities. And that after years of neoliberal policies and discourses reminding them of the importance of self-sufficiency and individual success, they are, as journalist Mark Lilla put it, “convinced that they can do everything themselves if they are only left alone, and that others are conspiring to keep them from doing just that” (Lilla 2010, 139). Especially since the 1960s, conservative political leaders have addressed and

organized white working and middle class constituents as average hardworking Americans, seeking to gain the support of white workers without alienating long time middle and upper class conservatives. And finally, if the reaction of Skowhegan residents to local revitalization plans speaks to national trends, urban and small town redevelopment's focus on the interests of the elite and white collar middle class contributes to the creation of a group of "ordinary folks" that is left out of official response to economic decline. When economic crisis threatens the stability of well-paid paper mill workers, of small business owners, and of call center operators, resistance is thereby organized through an identity and claim to being "ordinary folks."

I was living in New York in the fall of 2008, when we learned that lending companies, banks and the auto industry were failing. Some companies scurried to secure government funding to make it through the next few months while others were just disappearing. The local and national news broadcast images of Wall Street employees walking away from their former jobs and empty high-end restaurants in lower Manhattan. Almost every day there was word that the country had lost thousands of jobs or that another company might close. Now, it seemed, when corporate executives were losing their jobs and middle class investors were losing their retirement funds, the country was paying attention to job loss and economic decline. While elites who lost funds may have believed that, as a friend told me, "we're all on an equal playing field now," the popular media expression, "making it through these tough economic times" became code for shopping at discount stores or deciding not to build that addition to the house this year—hardly signs of suffering when compared to that of poor and working class people. It is true that since the economic downturn thousands of people have lost their middle class

homes, their jobs, or fallen deeper into debt (Kneebone and Garr 2009). But for many Americans, job loss and economic decline has been a consistent story in the lives of their families and communities. When I went back to Skowhegan, I asked a few people how the area was being affected. The answer repeatedly was, “we’re used to this.” Certainly the global economic crisis is of new proportion and like other areas in the county, central Maine is coping with increased housing foreclosures, fewer new jobs, and higher unemployment. But such struggles are also not new.

Since 2008, the unemployment rate in Skowhegan has fluctuated between 9 and nearly 13 percent (several percentage points higher than in 2006 and 2007). Even with the help of Main Street working to revitalize the downtown, some businesses have not been able to survive and have since closed their doors. The Empire Grill, the restaurant created by HBO as part of the set for its movie, *Empire Falls*, has been empty for months (after closing and reopening under new ownership several times). The people of Skowhegan also have much to be hopeful about. New Balance and Sappi still employ hundreds of workers. Many residents continue to be dedicated to the town and its future. Town leaders have successfully lured nationally known musicians to play in town and established an annual grain and bread-making conference that attracts people from around the world. Skowhegan and its surrounding communities have become an important center for organizing around health, wellness and “eating local.”

Maine has also contributed to the national story of the rising conservative populism. In November 2010, the state, which has a history of electing moderate Independents, Democrats and Republicans, elected a right-wing governor. Paul LePage, the Republican most closely associated with the Tea Party before the primaries, was

elected with 38 percent of the vote, narrowly defeating Independent Elliot Cutler (who garnered 37 percent). In Skowhegan his victory margin was much higher. Sixty-three percent of voters chose LePage and only 6 percent chose Cutler. LePage used his rags-to-riches story, his “straight talking” persona, along with populist rhetoric (“the government should be working for the people”) to connect with voters (Bell 2010). He grew up in a poor French Canadian family of 18 children in Lewiston, Maine. Physically abused by his father, he ran away from home at age 11. LePage’s campaign website featured a video of him holding a coin while telling this story. His father, according to the campaign video, gave him this coin when he was in the hospital to deter him from telling staff about the abuse. At the end of September, LePage’s sizable lead in the polls shrunk when he made angry remarks about his opponents and the press. When speaking to a group of lobstermen, for example, he calmly said, “...As your governor, you are going to be seeing a lot of me on the front page saying, 'Governor LePage tells Obama to go to hell.'" To defend these unorthodox comments, LePage described himself as a man of the streets and an ordinary guy who had not yet learned how to talk like a politician: “if you were on your own from 11 years old on, there’s a little bit of that that stays” (Sharon 2010). He thus diffused potentially embarrassing incidents by aligning himself with “the people.”

In the months after I left Skowhegan, when listening to the presidential election debates and the post-election debacles, I began to feel that the people who I talked to, the data I collected, and the stories of this small economically struggling town in Maine revealed a precedence to the recession-era frustration with government. Despite the many changes that spurred the populist reaction of the Tea Party and the success of Paul

LePage, the sentiment behind it is not new. It is the product of neoliberalism, of ongoing economic decline and debt, of defining struggle as ordinary (as long as it leads to redemption), and of following the myth of the white worker. In this dissertation, I have argued that the populist identities and beliefs of “ordinary folks” have influenced local response to economic and political restructuring. As a result, the explanatory power of class is weakened, though not completely absent. Before I return to the implication of this finding on the current national resurgence of right-wing populism, I will summarize the role of these populist identities in the obfuscation of class and reiterate the interactive means by which populist identities are formed; that is, through the balance between resistance and accommodation.

“Ordinary Folks” and the Obfuscation of Class

Small towns are not exempt from poverty and class inequality. These are general American phenomena. Yet the populist identities of “middle America” disguise the operation of class in Skowhegan. As I discussed in Chapter One, national right-wing politics strongly influenced the meaning of “ordinary folks” in the United States (and in Skowhegan) by mobilizing white working and middle class Americans as “average taxpayers” and victims of feminists, welfare recipients, and the civil rights movement. “The people,” a construct that takes on meaning through populists movements and discourses (Laclau 2005a; Laclau 2005b), thus came to imply a segment of American white working and middle class voters. Though there was not a populist movement in Skowhegan while I was doing research, conservative populist tenets such as the denigration of welfare recipients, focus on individual self-sufficiency, and anti-

government, anti-intellectualism politics, clearly influenced local beliefs and identities. The right-wing influenced concepts of “Middle America” and “ordinary folks” blurs class distinctions by combining people as diverse as a short order cook and a successful business owner into the same category. In fact, in defining “the people,” most populisms inevitably homogenize difference. In the words of political scientist Margaret Canovan, “one of the main functions of appeals to ‘the people,’ indeed, is to conceal existing political divisions and to propose a realignment” (Canovan 1981, 262).

The small town imaginary, the vision of the small town as an ideal place where everyone knows each other obscured the significance of class in Skowhegan. Residents believed job loss and poverty existed in central Maine, but they less often referred to Skowhegan as a poor community or a town in decline. In fact any public descriptions of the town as struggling sparked resistance from some residents. Though economic restructuring occurred along the lines of existing class and status positions, residents more often analyzed class-inflected divisions over community development as between optimists and pessimists or insiders versus outsiders. Middle-class leaders primarily determined the direction of the town while working and middle class resistance to the new vision was seen as prohibiting progress and based on fear, rather than a legitimate claim to town identity. The elite plan for the town helped to establish “the people,” the ordinary townspeople against the changes to “their” town. The influence of class and the role of working people were seldom discussed. In addition, at the town meeting described in Chapter Six, though the people of Skowhegan understood that Richard Harvey had much more money than the ordinary folks in town, populist rhetoric helped

to unite him with working and middle class people in support of minimizing government spending and services.

Though the small population of people of color offered less opportunity to investigate how race or immigration influence central Maine residents' understanding of who qualifies as ordinary folks, race still influences the experience of class. The common perception in Skowhegan that poor and working class whites contribute to the town's problems does not prevent them from also being seen as or seeing themselves as "ordinary workers." Rather, whiteness and the myth of the white worker encourages low-wage workers, welfare recipients, and other poor people to identify as ordinary workers, rather than as poor or unjustly struggling, contributing to the populist obfuscation of class. Whiteness, though, does not completely eradicate class-based identities and, as demonstrated in Chapter Seven, many workers have a sense of class injustice.

Resistance and Accommodation

Populist identities are both influenced by and in turn affect global political and economic policy. Though recent media coverage of Tea Party populism focuses on its influence on elections, party politics and government spending, in this dissertation I focused on how the politics of neoliberalism affected the populist identities of the people of Skowhegan. I have argued that the components of populist identities—individualism, independence, the value of hard work, and small town and Maine imaginaries—are not prefigured American cultural ideals. Rather, cultural factors work alongside neoliberalism and the influences of local and national ideologically driven policies to

shape these identities. Chapters Three and Seven introduce two important tenets of American populisms: ideologies of hard work and of individualism. In Chapter Three, I described how government and nonprofit organizations as well as private businesses reassert the importance of working hard regardless of the conditions. They do so by requiring recipients of public assistance to work or volunteer and by teaching unemployed and low-wage workers “soft skills” (arriving to work on time, getting along with co-workers, and accepting the boss’s orders). In addition, the media and local politicians and economic development officials proclaim the value of the hard working Mainer, declaring that good workers will help bring new jobs and that nonworkers, welfare recipients, and those with bad work ethics are in fact an important *cause* of the area’s economic problems (Chapters Three and Five). At the same time, some workers refuse to conform to the demands of the new economy. They refuse work that does not pay a living wage, choosing family needs over work demands, or quitting when they do not like their boss or coworkers. An emphasis on working hard contributes to populist expressions of what it means to be an ordinary American, even as work becomes more unstable—demands grow, wages shrink, and workers balance family and work priorities. Again, this is not driven by a universal small town culture. Rather, Skowhegan workers contested, questioned, and supported the work ethic as it was reinforced by local and national neoliberal projects.

Individualism and the belief in the American dream persist alongside a sense of injustice. This feeling of injustice is based on a conviction that it is not right that some people have to work much harder than others, that the wealthy are somehow different from working class people, and that jobs do not pay enough. Thus, despite cultural

associations of masculinity and individualism and despite a reassertion of the importance of self-governing and self-sufficiency, the working people of Skowhegan have also developed a sort of counter-hegemonic ideology. I ultimately argue in Chapter Seven that because the hegemony of neoliberalism is not complete and workers do express a degree of class-consciousness, the means by which their ideas are organized is of primary importance.

The town debate over its future reveals resistance of working class people to the elite-vision of the town (a vision supported by outside capital's interests). But this divide does not strictly follow class lines. Certainly, some working class people support efforts for downtown revitalization and the growth of the arts and farming industries. And more importantly, those who oppose potential changes in the town are elite business owners with vested interests in current economic and political structures, as well as workers afraid of being squeezed out. Equally important, though less often discussed above, are moments when people neither accept nor resist hegemonic ideologies. Many people do not follow the politics of local town development, for example, or have little opinion about the value of hard work.

The Privileged Disadvantaged

In 2009, the home page of New Balance's website featured a large video of Skowhegan and its New Balance workers. While workers talked about the importance of New Balance to the people of Skowhegan, the screen flashed images of a little league baseball game, of young boys jumping into the river, of workers sitting on their front porches, and of an elderly man with a walker standing in front of a barn. Interspersed

with these idyllic scenes of the town were those of men and women painting shoe boxes red and white which they eventually assembled as an American flag, each worker holding a box above his or her head. This was a perfect sales pitch: small town, white, rustic American workers. It is a national ideal, in video form, to which marginalized poor residents strive and against which they are measured.

Much of the story of the working people in these pages is not particular to small towns. Nationally and internationally, workers are dealing with the new instability of work. Whether in urban neighborhoods or suburban developments, many communities have battles between the developers, new residents, and the “old guard” of a business association. Some readers may recognize the stereotypes about the middle class newcomers and “locals” as variations on neighborhood disputes around gentrification. The rowdy town meeting is not unlike spirited community meetings around the country. But it is my claim in this dissertation that the ideal of the white working class small town informs populism; that the New Balance video’s idyllic version of Skowhegan—symbolic of a more widespread race, place, gender, and class-informed trope—works alongside national and local neoliberal politics to inspire the class-evasive concept of ordinary folks.

Conservative populism is influenced by the privileged position of the white small town worker. Tea Party supporters are more likely to be middle class, male, white and over 45 when compared to the general population (CNN Wire CNN Wire Staff 2010; Zernike and Thee-Brenan 2010). Following previous national populisms, they exclude racial “others” and immigrants from the definition of “the people.”³⁷ The means by

³⁷ The late 19th century populists were an exception to this in that they both included and excluded black farmers.

which they organize thus contributes to existing racial, gender and economic inequalities. Populist movements or political battles that use the language of resistance are, therefore, sometimes not fighting an oppressor but are vying to maintain their existing power. Yet populist movements tend to develop in contexts of economic or political crisis, changes in social or economic structure, or loss of political representation (Panizza 2005). Actors in populist movements also often explicitly name the elite or the wealthy as the opposition at the same time they seek to prevent immigrants or “others” from threatening their middle class status. Galvanizing people through opposition to the government and the elite has been one of “the vehicles by which wider disenfranchised populations try to make sense of their discontents with globalizing modernisms”—from right-wing anti-immigrant scapegoating in Western Europe and post-socialist Eastern Europe to the left-leaning populist politics of Latin America (Kalb 2009). This raises the question of whether this resurgence of right wing populist rhetoric is about neglected “rednecks” and workers wanting their economic, political, and cultural positions to be taken seriously (Darling 2009), or whether it is an attempt to regain privileged racial and economic positions. That is, are Tea Party activists reacting as white mainstream middle-class Americans losing their “rightful” place in the American center or as a “disenfranchised population” and victims of the economic decline? My research would suggest that the answer is both. The language of “the people” can serve a variety of class interests, including that of elites. In everyday life, class struggle, individualism and resistance, masculinity, small town imaginary are so entwined that it is difficult to distinguish the root actions and ideas that might reinforce class structure from those that would fight against it.

When I returned to Skowhegan in the summer of 2008, an incident at a working class bar and dance hall illustrated the complexity of resistance. One moment of fighting back against authority can symbolize the class-based resistance or the attempt to assert the power of white men. I had finished eating dinner at the pub with an old friend from high school and we were on our way to drop off a freshly baked cherry crisp at the lawyer's house down the street when we heard Jason talking with the bartender. I knew Jason from my years growing up in Skowhegan. He now had a great job, working as a manager at a well-respected local retailer, and he loved spending time with his children. Jason also partied a lot and he knew it. He kicked his heroin addiction months ago after spending all of his money to keep himself high for several years. He had been trying to stop drinking but recently gave up trying after a friend who had helped him get over heroin gave up on him and stopped returning his calls. Tonight, he was angry and sad. He was desperate for help but usually responded, "Fuck you" to anyone who gave it to him. We chatted for a minute and then told him we had to visit a family down the street but we would meet him later.

Though we hadn't planned when or where to meet Jason, when we walked back in a light rain from the lawyer's house, we knew we would probably find him at Bloomfields, the other bar downtown. Tonight, there were almost 50 people packed into this small bar, including a band that was playing classic rock, to which about half of the people in the bar were dancing. This also meant that when I saw someone I knew, I would have to lean in close and yell, getting the basics of their lives since I saw them last—working at the paper mill in Madison, divorced, no kids, etc. We found Jason and sat down and had a beer with him. He kept repeating the same stories, the same

questions, fluctuating between tears and rage. A thin young man wearing jeans and a tight T-shirt interrupted us, "Is that Jason?" When he got Jason's attention, Jason asked where he'd been and how his kid was doing. He explained that he hadn't been in the bar for four years. He stopped going out when he started raising his daughter. He sat down with us, we exchanged names (his was Derek) and we discovered that we had been to high school together. He had been working at a small manufacturing plant for most of his years since high school. The pay was decent but he worked up to 14-hour days and his body was taking a beating. His daughter's mother was a drinker and when she left for North Carolina with his daughter, he went there and got her back, raising her ever since. He noticed that Jason was really drunk and said to me, "Are you guys looking out for this guy? He's had my back so many times." Around the room, many people were glancing quickly, but trying not to stare at a young black man leaning up against the bar. Derek, though, leaned in and tried to crack a joke, "that's not something you see everyday, a black guy talking to a fat blond chick." Unsure if I had heard him right or what he meant, I asked, "What'd you say?" He quickly said, "never mind" and changed the topic.

Before long, my friend and I left Jason and Derek behind and walked to Rumors, the dance hall and bar that was known for its fights and rough crowds. Though I was a little older than most of the 20-somethings there and my middle classness was showing, no one seemed to care. There was a heavy metal band playing but most people were smoking and talking outside. A few people were sitting at the bar and or playing pool. I sat and watched the six or seven people listening to the music and talking, and then joined the dancers. Jason and Derek came in, drinks in hand. Jason started dancing and Derek stood back. Five or six men who had been standing around started forming a mini

mosh pit, pushing each other and throwing their bodies at each other as if they were moshing or slam dancing at a large rock concert. The young men quickly turned this release of aggression toward each other as their pushing and yelling got away from the beat of the music. Those of us who knew Jason stopped dancing. He had professed earlier in the night that he “felt like hurting someone,” so we knew he could easily be prompted to do so. Jason, it seemed, was not the only one who felt like hurting someone. One mosher in particular, took to hitting and grabbing people as he spun into them. When he pushed Jason, Jason pushed back and they, with their stares, both dared each other to make the first move. Jason’s friends stepped in to break the stare and distract him from a fight as the bar’s bouncers watched suspiciously. Both people went back to their respective group of friends until, in a few minutes, the band started playing “Killing in the Name Of,” a song by the alternative rock/metal band, *Rage Against the Machine*. The song brought the young men back together and their dancing took on a different form. They screamed the lyrics together, “Fuck you, I won’t do what you tell me,” looking at each other as they sang, but now they weren’t testing each other, but yelling together. The women stood on the margins of this small group of young men, some singing, others talking. The song, purportedly about police brutality and standing up to those who control, changed the tone from a fight against each other to a fight, together, against something else. It was not clear, though, who or what this “something else” was.

After another song, it was one in the morning and the lights came on and the bouncers quickly pushed the partiers outside. Everyone milled around in the parking lot, some people were waiting for taxis, and others were talking and flirting, deciding where to go, or just putting off going home. A young man, half joking, yelled, “I’ll give you

\$20 to punch the blond chick over there. C'mon. I can't do it, I don't want to go to jail.”

The woman continued to sit on the curb, talking without looking back. Derek was trying to convince Jason not to go home, that he should stay with him because he had a comfortable place to sleep and lots of video games. He said Jason should leave one way or another because there was a group of guys that wanted to come after him.

There was nothing particularly unusual about this evening. Jason's declaration that he wanted to hurt someone, the flaring tempers on the dance floor, and the lighthearted fights in the parking lot could have happened on any other night. The way in which anger that had been directed toward strangers or acquaintances was quickly redirected toward those in control, those who had the power to tell them what to do, could have been motivated by resistance, by a frustration with a lack of control over their lives. This incident is also about maintaining power, about a masculinity that demands control and refuses to be “told what to do” by the state or any authority. The underlying anger and frustration could be influenced by individual psychology. The influence of class on this anger is ambiguous and should not be equated with the anger, for example, of a worker toward an unfair employer. But neither should it be ignored. An action can resist (economic) oppression and at the same time reinforce (gendered) power. And, as with the case of the Tea Party and Chapter Six's town meeting populisms, the economic, class-based resistance of one person can be conflated with another person's attempt to maintain class power.

I have argued that in the context of economic decline in Skowhegan, it was against this identity—as hardworking Middle Americans—that resistance was formed. This dissertation explores the many sets of beliefs and ideologies that support this

identity. I hope, though, that by including beliefs, identities and actions that are counter to this new populism, I have also demonstrated that the politics of the right are not predetermined. Current support for conservative populism, indicated by the success of Paul LePage, is not an inevitable political reaction. “The people” have complex understandings of the economy and their place in the world. Working and middle class people’s sense of hope and pride in individual accomplishment, recognition of structural economic change, and belief in the injustice of low wages alongside corporate over-accumulation could also support a different set of class-conscious politics. Despite the structures in place to assure that workers keep working and look away from the politics and people that continue to deepen economic inequality, the people are still watching.

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