Divided by meaning

We are a divided country, split along race and class. We are also divided by education. Front row kids, many with post graduate degrees, versus the rest.
The front row kids and minorities overwhelmingly support Hillary Clinton. A large percentage of everyone else supports Trump. The front row kids can’t understand why anyone would support Trump, often saying anyone who does is just dumb.

Many back row kids can’t understand why anyone would support Hillary Clinton, often saying anyone who does is just corrupt.
The divide between the two is huge. It is beyond just living in different places, and voting for different people. The divide is at its core about having different concepts of value and personal meaning.

The front row kids (who live in big cities and university towns) primarily find meaning through their careers, and hence through their education. It defines who they are. Their community, and their neighborhoods, are global. They moved towns often for their careers.
The back row primarily finds meaning through their local community, and its institutions like church and sports. They live in places they have long lived in, and their families have lived in. They didn't leave for education, didn't leave for jobs.

This is often by choice, many want to stay close to family, but it also because some have had to. Many had to stay to care for sick family, or because they fell behind early. Some had difficult childhoods. Grew up in a place that offered little chances at an elite education.

Here is the big thing, the big change. The front row kids have won. Won really big. They now control the economic, social, political, and cultural agenda. They set the rules for everyone and have made some big changes.
Many of the changes are great: They have demanded, and gotten, legal equality for genders/races. This is an amazing change long long overdue. It is why minorities, who often unfairly start in the back row from birth, who still face structural racism, support them and Hillary Clinton politically.

But the front row has also pushed for and gotten some huge changes that have restructured the world in some bad ways. Like winners
winning a lot more and losers losing a lot more than they used to. A real lot. The result is our economic divide is now huge.

Equally important, and equally disruptive, they have pushed through policies that have destroyed local communities, which is the primary source of value to the back row. Those policies, like NAFTA, work for the front row based on their concept of meaning. It has made many very rich.

For the back row kids it has destroyed a lot of their communities. Hollowed them out of jobs and institutions. Replaced local stores with global ones. Redefined the nature of their work. Entirely changed their lives without a clear benefit.
This has all been humiliating to many in the back row, who are now searching to regain their pride. This humiliation, this sense of being left behind, is partly why these places are filling with drugs, which is an attempt to deal with the pain that accompanies humiliation.

Trump is offering another cheap and destructive way of finding pride:
A scapegoat. In Trump’s case it blaming minorities and immigrants.

For Trump this isn’t surprising. He is just doing what he has done all his life: Selling cheap meaning and cheap status to people who are desperate. White identity politics is just his latest scam.

But his racism, his anti-globalism, isn’t just a salve for the angry. It is a one two punch. He is also mocking the front row kids. His
crudeness is throwing spitballs at the front row kids.

Here is the thing I want to hammer on. When the front row (me, you, pundits, politicians) call Trump’s voters, the back row, stupid. Or dumb. Or idiots. When we scold them for supporting such an awful man (he is!). That plays right into everything they have been told all of their lives.
Being called stupid, being told they can’t keep up, is why many of them feel and are stuck in their towns. Why many of them are humiliated and angry. Why many want revenge. Why many are ripe to follow a racist like Trump.

Nobody wants a life that feels meaningless. Everybody wants to feel a valuable member of something bigger than themselves. Calling Trump voters deplorable (some are!) will only make them angrier, and only increase their humiliation. That will just make all of this stuff worse.

My overview on the election here: Why Trump voters are not “complete idiots”

Yell at me on twitter here: Chris_Arnade

This piece lack nuance? Too oversimplified? Here are my longer pieces: Chris Arnade at Guardian