The Trump Voter’s Quest for Respect

A conversation about the election with Chris Arnade, a former Wall Street trader who now chronicles life in working-class American cities and towns
Like so many, Chris Arnade didn’t think Donald Trump’s election-night triumph would happen. But he had a clue it might. Four years ago, Arnade traded in a Wall Street job for a life of semi-transience, photographing addiction and poverty in the South Bronx. After a few years, he decided to take his project national. “I wanted to see if what I saw there was true across the rest of America,” he told me on the phone this week.

Over the past two years, Arnade put over 100,000 miles on his car traveling through “overlooked” American towns with names that sound nearly fictional: Kingsport, Tennessee; Natchitoches, Louisiana; Mingo, West Virginia. He photographs and tweets about the people he meets, begetting a mosaic of a divided and frustrated country during the rise of Trump. “It was almost accidental that I got into the Donald Trump thing,” he says with a laugh.

In recent days, Arnade has set about to explain (and hector certain journalists over) what so many people, particularly in the media, missed (and still miss) in their election diagnoses. He’s been especially eager to correct what he sees as some negative characterizations of Trump voters and highlight what may be at the heart of the issues roiling millions of people in American communities. Our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

**Adam Chandler:** How did you go from working on Wall Street to becoming a sojourner and a writer. What brought you to that?
Chris Arnade: I came to writing after growing tired of Wall Street and trying to find a different perspective of looking at things. My path is of having only looked at things from only the top down, like I think most people do these days—data-heavy, kind of a macro look—and I think that way of looking at things is wrong and that’s why I shifted to doing what I’m doing now, which is very first-person: Meeting people and talking to them and learning from them and getting going at the very micro level.

Chandler: With the election still fresh in mind, how do those two views clash?

Arnade: Given my past and given what I do now, I have two very different perspectives on how things played out. I see my old self, which I think is a lot of the media and the way they look at things—heavy data, big-picture—versus what I do now, which is getting into the nitty-gritty and talking to people. I feel like I can see the problems that my old way of doing things, which is the way most people do things, might have caused. You just miss things. You look at economic numbers and say “Everything’s great!” and you go beneath the numbers and things aren’t great.

Chandler: Were there any specific cities or towns you visited that made you think that the rise of Trump was more predictable than most people thought?

Arnade: There are so many stories. I think it was during the week of the GOP Convention when I went down to Cleveland. I didn’t go to the convention at all—I spent half my time in a poor, working-class black neighborhood and half my time in a poor, working-class white neighborhood. There was a working-class, white bar I spent two days in
and that’s where it really struck me: This man is really resonating. This message is really taking hold and really hitting people. What sociologists and others have long talked about when you go to a poor, working-class black neighborhood is that there is this code of honor, this demand for respect. That same thing was taking place in the white bar I was seeing. And Trump was fulfilling that respect. It was all about respect, regaining respect.

I think that was something I wasn’t seeing in the press at the time. I think the general story was, “Well, these are just racists.” And the people I was talking to, they didn’t strike me as racist. They might be supporting someone whose policies a lot of people find as racist, but on an individual level, that wasn’t what was motivating them. And then I started paying more and more attention wherever I went.

It was the morning breakfast groups I wrote about at McDonald’s. How many times can you sit at a morning breakfast group and find yourself defending TARP [the $700-billion bank bailout signed by President Bush in 2008] and realize that maybe you’re the one who’s wrong?

**Chandler:** Some have talked about the idea of a cultural pulling of the lever for Trump—how media and pop culture that are seen as mainstream have put forth liberal-seeming ideas with a sort of certainty, a style and cachet, that turned support of Trump into something countercultural, a revolutionary act. Does that make any sense to you?

**Arnade:** Sociologists call that “valid social capital.” The elites control the valid social capital—what’s cool and what’s not cool, the in club and the out club. Oh hell yeah! Part of Trump’s appeal is the fact that he isn’t supposed to be appealing. I met people who were voting for him
because it wasn’t acceptable to vote for him. It was insiders versus the outsiders and it made them feel much more like, “Hey, I’m an outsider, [now] I’m part of a group. Now let’s go take this over.”

**Chandler:** Did you find yourself arguing back, “But Trump’s the ultimate insider! This is a guy who got a $14 million loan from his dad to start his first company.”

**Arnade:** You can’t do that because Hillary Clinton was also that person. And anything you said to point out that Trump was part of the establishment, they will rightfully point out that Hillary is more so. My God, she was the most insider there is. The only thing that kept her from being a complete insider is she was female, but otherwise, the Clintons have been in power since ’92.

**Chandler:** If the DNC asked you how to bring people like this back into the fold, what would you tell them?

**Arnade:** They’ve got to be a party of the working class again. All the working class. They’re a party of the black working class and that’s great. They’ve got to be a party of the working class and not bankers. Clinton’s convention was all about appealing to Republicans, bankers. They’ve got to step away from Wall Street and back to Main Street. I know it’s a cliche. They’ve got to remember their roots. They used to be about helping working-class people fight monopolies, fight corporate interests. Help them build unions, help them get pricing power from employment—that’s gone. I don’t know what Trump stands for, but also the Democrats...they’re the party of bankers and war. Hillary ran on a neoconservative platform that was more aggressive than George W. Bush’s. What do they offer working-class people?
Chandler: Did you have any particular conversation that typifies that line of thinking?

Arnade: There was this kid named Paul in Prestonsburg, Kentucky. He was sitting in his truck and his truck had a Confederate flag, a big Confederate flag. Paul had only one leg. He had a titanium prosthetic leg. We started talking. He lost his leg to cancer when he was 8, he was placed in special ed, and he was like, “I spent all my life being called a retard and a cripple and I learned to fight.”

I was like, “What about the Confederate flag?” He says “That’s what I’m proud of. I’m proud of Southern heritage. I’m proud of hunting and fishing.” For him, that’s what he escaped into. He had been beat up and felt like a nobody and he found a community. That community was this sense of identity through the Confederacy, through racial identity. That flag represented to him some pride. It gave him a sense of place. Does that make sense?

When I posted the picture of Paul, people were like, “He’s racist!” A lot more complicated than that, man. A lot more complicated. I don’t want to come off as someone who believes racism is alright, I’m looking to find a more holistic solution to the problem than simply screaming “racist.” I think it’s helpful to understand context because it provides us the chance to find a more holistic solution to people who find an attraction to racist organizations. We need to find alternative ways to provide people with meaning, humiliated, white, working men with meaning, rather than racial identity politics.
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