

Mitchell’s Musings 12-21-15: Exactly Who Are We Talking About?

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I went to a play entitled “Straight White Men” at the Kirk Douglas Theater in Culver City, California recently. The play, written by an Asian female, tells the story of a retired father and his three adult sons who are home for Christmas. Mom has died earlier and there are no wives or other women in the cast. It wasn’t exactly clear what Dad had done for a living in the past but all appeared to be middle class, college educated men. One son was a banker (divorced). Another was some kind of academic or teacher who was in therapy. The third, around whom the play revolves, is a Harvard grad who seems to be clinically depressed. He bursts out crying at one point without an obvious cause, to the dismay of the other characters.

The Harvard son was apparently expected to do great things in the world of do-good nonprofits, but he has apparently drifted from job to job taking on only menial roles. At present, he seems to be running a copying machine for some nonprofit organization. He has moved back in with Dad due to his monetary problems: low earnings and unpaid college debt. Dad offers to pay off the debt, academic son recommends therapy, and banker son and Dad try to teach the Harvard son how to interview for better jobs (look the interviewer in the eye, etc.). However, the depressed son won’t cooperate and, at the end, Dad gives him some money and tells him to leave the house. Interspersed in the play were occasional references to white privilege.

I can’t tell you what this drama was supposed to mean. After the play ended, there was an organized session of audience discussion which wasn’t very enlightening. But there is an interesting question, apart from the family drama. Assuming the characters in the play were supposed to represent straight white men, how representative were they? Again, forget the “social significance” element. I am just talking demographics.

The characters come from what appears to be a well off middle class family with college educations. (Harvard, no less, for the depressed son!) What fraction of the group they are supposed to represent fit that model? Let’s look at Census data on educational attainment by race for men. What percent of various racial groups had a BA (or more) in 2014? The table below gives the numbers.¹ I list the results for all men 25 years old and older, 45-49 years (maybe the sons’ age group), and 65-69 (maybe Dad’s age).

	Non-Hispanic White	Asian	Black	Hispanic*
All 25+	35.9%	54.7%	20.4%	14.2%
45-49	37.7	56.4	20.9	16.2
65-69	37.2	50.9	19.3	20.3

*Any race

Now the Census does not give a further breakdown by sexual orientation. But as best we can determine, well over 60% of adult white non-Hispanics of whatever orientation don’t have a college degree.

¹Source: <http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/education/data/cps/2014/tables.html>

Ironically for a play written by an Asian female, the only demographic group where at least a majority of adult men have a college degree is Asians. The biggest contrasts in college degree attainment are Asian vs. black and Asian vs. Hispanic.

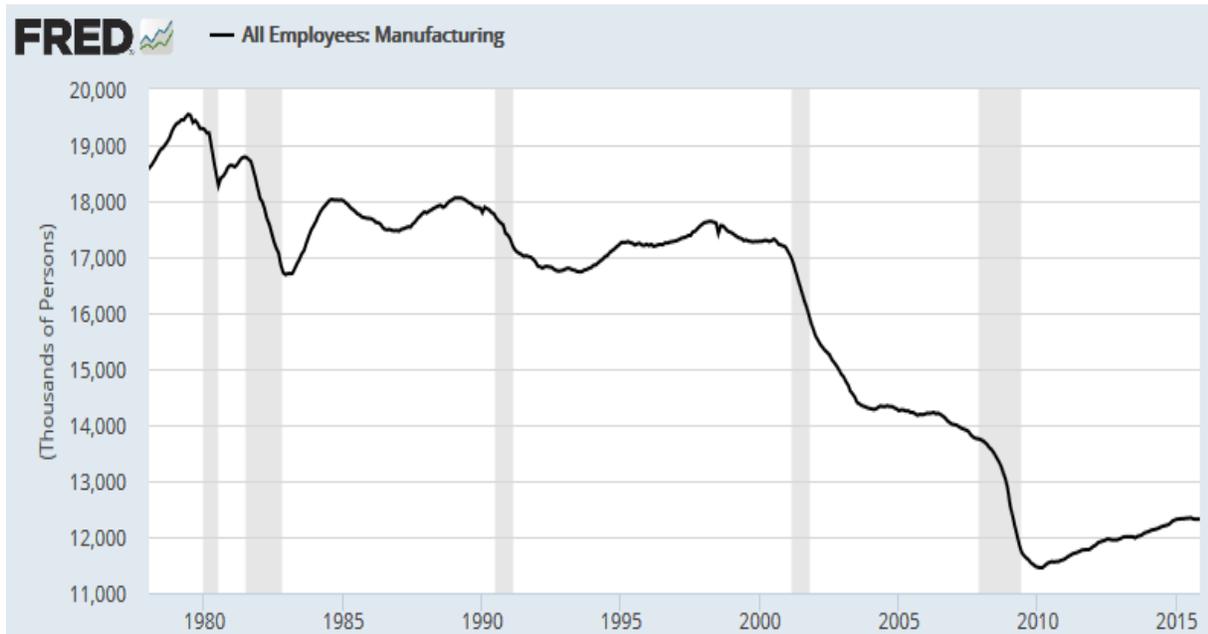
It's unlikely that the 60-plus percent of non-college degree white males are having conversations about white privilege. (For that matter, it's unlikely that they are the typical of patrons of the Kirk Douglas Theater.) Again, numbers tell the story.

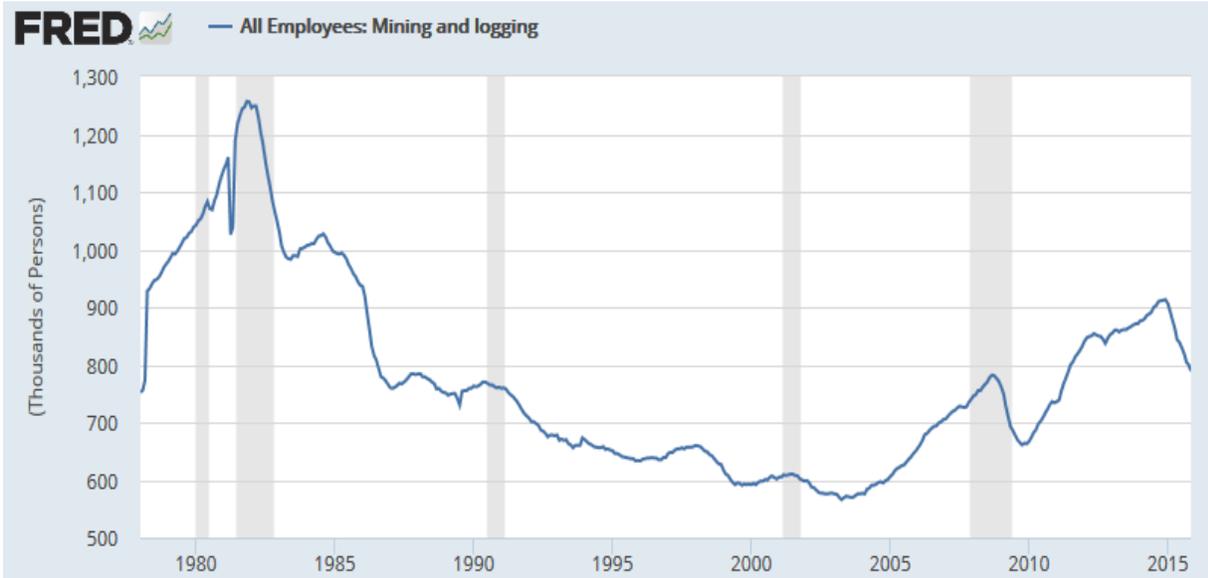
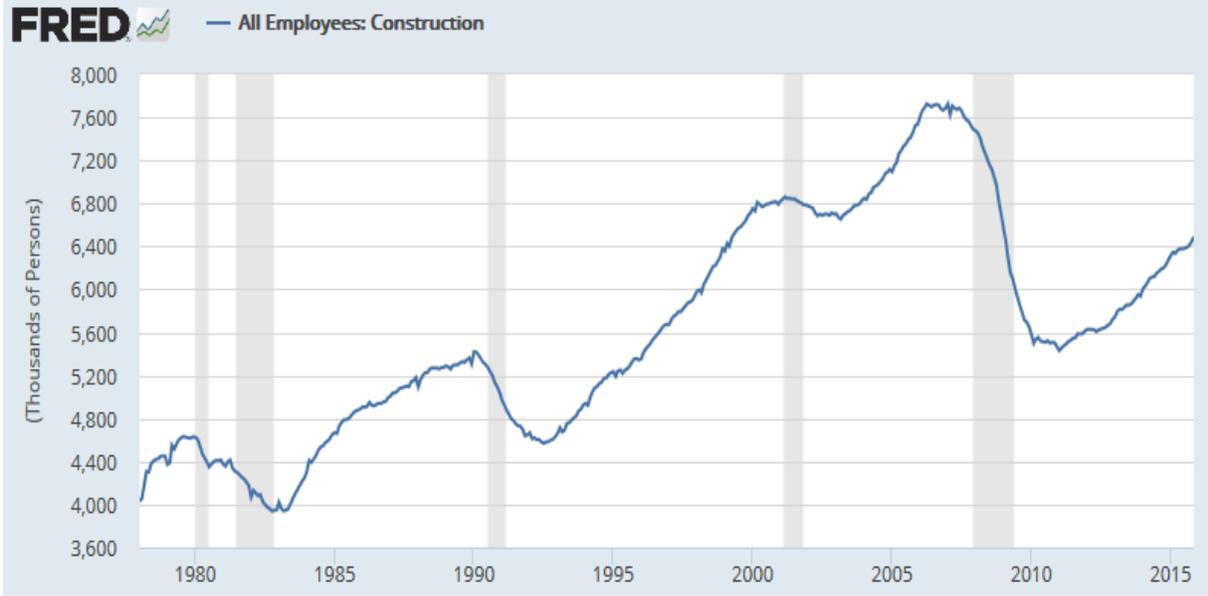
The Appendix to this musing has some data on trends of three sectors of the economy that are heavily male in employment and heavily using of folks with less than a college degree. I also pulled some recent data together that suggest that the three sectors would collectively have a workforce that would be well over half non-Hispanic white male. Manufacturing, the biggest, has been in a long term decline since the 1980s. In contrast, construction was doing OK until the Great Recession. But, while it's now improving since the bottom of that recession, construction employment is still at the absolute levels of the late 1990s. The smallest of the three sectors, mining and logging, is heavily affected by the ups and downs of oil prices (oil extraction is classified as "mining"), but that sector is essentially trendless over the long period shown. Moreover, the recent decline in oil prices has now adversely affected this sector.

In short, the job market doesn't look so hot for those non-college degree white males, straight or otherwise. And those males comprise the core of the disaffected group that some recent opinion polls suggest is behind the Trump phenomena in the Republican presidential race. So perhaps thinking about the job prospects for this group was what was depressing the play's socially-minded Harvard son. Perhaps the Harvard son, unlike the playwright apparently, had cared to look up the numbers.

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Appendix





Source: FRED database of the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis