

IDEAS

# The 'Melania' movie and the hollowed-out American dream

A glimpse into the first lady's world drives home how far away it is.

By **Arlie Russell Hochschild** Updated February 25, 2026, 4:00 a.m.



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*of the Right.”*

Recent reviews of “Melania” have appraised the movie on aesthetic terms and financial ones — asking whether Amazon produced the film to gain favor with President Trump. But they have missed what’s most important about it. The film invites us to imagine ourselves in a world of high living that Trump wants us to desire even as he makes it harder for us to attain.

From the start, the camera takes the audience by the hand and transports us on tip-top heels through protected corridors, into a chauffeured SUV, up a ramp into a grand airplane bound for regal Mar-a-Lago, into a Trump Tower penthouse, and into the White House to view a planned inaugural banquet table setting with a caviar-filled golden egg. We are seeing all this as if we are Melania’s personal guest and social equal. In the chauffeured black car, we hear Michael Jackson’s “Billie Jean.” We feel rich and we’re having fun.

“Melania” is more than a status display. It’s a form of symbolic redistribution, somewhat like a planter’s annual feast for his poor farmhands, a CEO’s champagne Christmas party for his workers who lack a fair contract, or a billionaire’s donation to a symphony, an art museum, a charity or cause. But those other forms of symbolic redistribution transfer something of actual value. In the film’s close-up view of grandeur, we aren’t given anything tangible; we’re invited to *feel like* we’re rich. We are offered a magical side-door passage to life at the top.

We observe the first lady arranging both external objects — the perfect dinner setting and Christmas tree — and herself. To her team of dressmakers and designers, she calls for a waist tuck here, a lifted neck scarf there. We see Melania as an icon of class arrival. She, a Yugoslav immigrant child of a factory worker and a chauffeur, is praised in Rotten Tomato reviews of the film as “elegance personified,” “a beautiful picture of American royalty,” and “a class act.”

If “Melania” opens a side-door view of the American Dream, Trump has offered various strategies for supposedly putting it more readily within our reach.

Since 2015, his voter base has been blue-collar whites. They’ve taken a big economic hit from offshoring and automation. According to the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, the share of total US income earned by white non-college-educated families fell from 45 percent in 1989 to 27 percent in 2016. In that time period, they also became less likely to marry, own a home, or enjoy good health. It is this economic decline that Trump has promised to reverse.

In response, Trump’s base has offered him unwavering support despite many actions that might give them pause: price hikes linked to his tariffs, cuts to VA hospitals, Medicaid, and safety regulations, the loss of science-based advice on health, the Epstein scandal, ICE killings, a new culture of fear. Trump’s base has recently cooled on him, but only a bit. According to a 2026 Quinnipiac poll, 55 percent of non-college whites approve of how Trump has been handling his job, compared with 38 percent of Americans as a whole.

What lies behind such tenacious support? It is, I believe, Trump’s ardent claim that he’s pushing hard for them. Trump’s vow to “bring home our factories” represents one such strategy. But since only 8 percent of all nonfarm workers actually work in manufacturing, this gesture is also more symbolic than real. There were 108,000 fewer manufacturing jobs in late 2025 than in 2024. One reason is that tariffs have driven up costs to manufacturers, [who have responded by slowing hiring](#). But the worrying long-term decline in blue-collar jobs is driven by something else: automation.

This leaves Trump’s other strategy to elevate blue-collar whites — expelling undocumented immigrants. They make up about [5 percent of the US workforce](#) and toil mainly in such jobs as harvesting crops, shucking oysters, weeding gardens, mending roofs, making hotel beds, and serving as caretakers for the elderly. Studies show that for the most part, undocumented immigrants are not taking jobs white Americans want.

[What job competition exists](#) seems to be between new immigrants and prior immigrants or nonwhites. So this strategy, too, promotes an illusion.

In the end, these strategies have done nothing to lift blue-collar whites closer to the American Dream. What they have done is magically disguise the giant transfer of wealth from bottom to top of the American class ladder. Over the last 40 years, blue-collar white men have seen no increase in [inflation-adjusted wages](#). Meanwhile, as a result of the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of Trump's first term, 83 percent of the permanent tax cuts [benefit America's richest 1 percent](#). All this is in addition to Trump's family's personal gain of [\\$1.4 billion](#) since January 2025.

Within Trump's base, many surely distinguish magical from real transfers and still hope for real help from this administration or a compelling offer from another. Added to this is a new challenge. Automation has long been hitting the factories of America, but now AI is beginning to hit its offices. A 2024 Brookings Institution [report](#) predicted that within the next five years, AI will be able to perform some half of the tasks now done by 30 percent of all workers. Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei warns that within the next five years, AI could [eliminate](#) up to half of all entry-level white-collar jobs.

The shock will be profound, and our answer will need to be bold. Trump has been tearing down the federal government, eliminating [one out of every 10 workers](#). To prepare for the AI revolution, we would be wise to choose a leader like the one who brought us the brilliant New Deal. We could also take a lesson from the Finnish government's popular "Talent Boost" upskilling program: flexible help for laid-off workers to transition to available jobs.

In the film, Melania Trump places herself in a lineage of first ladies, and the camera lingers on the photos of several of them, including Eleanor Roosevelt. No one could be a better model first lady than Roosevelt. Setting magic aside, she traveled to 150 Depression-ravished towns and cities across the nation, reaching out to the jobless and homeless. She advocated for refugees, called for universal health care, and brought

empathy and hope to a shattered nation. She did this not by being a symbol of the 1 percent but by democratizing dignity and breathing life into the American Dream itself.

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