

HILLBILLY ELEGY: AS A REALITY¹

Nathalie López Del Valle

Departamento de Sociología y Antropología (Sociología)

Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, UPR RP

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Abstract:

Hillbilly Elegy is an autobiographical book in which conservative writer, J.D. Vance, retells and reexamines his life since childhood. He analyzes which factors determined his childhood and which factors allowed him to break away from the devastating path his life was on. Utilizing the testimony Vance gives in his book and social class analysis tools from prominent sociologists in the academic world, this article analyzes the rural White community as a class: how to define them as a class, what roles it fulfills in society, which factors have determined its notoriety, under what conditions they live in, and which factors keep them trapped in said conditions, amongst other things. This article also seeks to explain, through the previously described analysis, how this community's situation influences most of its members into becoming people that would naturally become staunch Donald Trump supporters that made all the difference during election time and thus, secured his victory.

Keywords: social class, underclass, hillbilly

Resumen:

Hillbilly Elegy es un libro autobiográfico en el que el escritor conservador, J.D. Vance, recuenta y reexamina su vida desde la niñez. Él analiza cuales factores determinaron su niñez y cuales factores le permitieron romper con el camino al cual su vida se dirigía. Utilizando el testimonio que Vance da en su libro y herramientas para el análisis de clases sociales desarrolladas por sociólogos prominentes en el mundo académico, este artículo analiza a la comunidad blanca pobre como una clase: como definirla como una clase, que roles cumplen en la sociedad, cuales factores han determinado su notoriedad, bajo que condiciones viven, y que factores los mantienen en estas condiciones, entre otras cosas.

También, este artículo busca explicar, a través del análisis previamente explicado, como la situación de esta comunidad ha influenciado a la mayoría de sus miembros en convertirse en gente que naturalmente se convertirían en seguidores firmes de Donald Trump que harían toda la diferencia en el momento de las elecciones, asegurando su victoria.

Palabras claves: clases sociales, subclase, hillbilly

This past November 2016, Donald Trump won the presidency of the United States. Many people were left perplexed, even horrified. How could a man "...who gives outright, unapologetic voice to racism, sexism, contempt for 'losers' and so on" (Krugman, 2017: 1), and with only an economics *bachelor's* degree from Wharton, admittedly a prestigious business college, win the presidency of one of the most influential countries in the world? How can anyone decide to vote for him? This is where James Donald Vance's book *Hillbilly Elegy* (Vance, 2016) comes in. After the election, this book's sales skyrocketed. It describes, in lucid detail, hillbilly (rural) community life. The central states (also known as "Middle America") of the United States were the most supportive of Trump's electoral campaign. These states also showcase a demographic and sociological profile of poor White families. After the election many sought to understand why these people felt this way. *Hillbilly Elegy* provided answers.

America's infamous hillbilly community does not have an important and elaborated space in the orthodox classic Marxist class-based theoretical model as elaborated by Karl Marx himself. The Marxist model revolves around the working class, primarily blue-collar industrial workers' relationship with the means of production. Any type of class action is rational and centered around economics. Marx died before he could finish and refine his work but many others took over and continued it in his stead. Relatively recently, an extremely broad concept was developed to refer to those who had no stable relationship with the means of production: the underclass, a term created by American sociologist William Wilson. (2012: 8-12) The underclass is the space where the poorest communities "fit". The underclass is like the closet of Marxist theory: everything that does not fit into the clearly defined classes of bourgeois, working class, petty bourgeois, as

such, is thrown into this “closet of terms” because it is way too complicated to sort; it is a mess. (2012: 18-23) I think the poor White community has spilled out of the closet. They are breathing contradictions that demand explanation.

In the 1970’s renown sociologist, Edward Palmer Thompson (1979: 21-27; 295-302), argued that a class defines itself through history; it is a never-ending process. There are no boxes because every day brings change. However, the poor White community does not entirely fit here either. It can be argued that a sort of hillbilly community live, for example, in the narrative of *La Charca* (2013) a historical novel written by Puerto Rican writer and medicine doctor, Manuel Zeno Gandía, at the turn of the century in 1894. The tale takes us into the social harshness of life in and around the coffee estates in the mountainous interior of Puerto Rico. Like so, most poor White families share similar depressed trajectories like for example, very unstable or nonexistent incomes, serial divorces, physical and/or verbal abuse between family members, low levels of education, substance abuse by one or more family members, frequent incarcerations, teenage pregnancies, lack of mother or father figures for children, among other social factors. The statistics show it all. These rural White communities in the United States for example, have become a sort of social quicksand. Most members are stuck and sinking ever so slow. Few could make it out, and to do so they need help. They need someone to extend a branch for them to hold on to or to stand on the shoulders of someone who already sunk in too far and is doing everything in their power so that the same will not happen to those who still have at least a slim chance of making it out, like Vance’s grandparents did for him. They need to be “saved”; “...they saw from a family friend, an uncle, or a work mentor- what was available and what was possible”. (Vance, 2016: 241)

The rural White community’s shared sociological reality, as narrated by Vance (himself of a White rural background) in his autobiographical book *Hillbilly Elegy*, is incredibly complex and perplexing. Rural White cultural norms defy the rest of American society. They strive for the “American Dream”, yet they are also partly responsible for sabotaging their chances. Some of them regularly work and earn a somewhat living yet precarious wage, however others are not so lucky and instead are left behind. A lot of those who work do not have a steady job. This is, according to Vance, usually the result of abysmal work ethics such as taking 30-minute long bathroom breaks or a ridiculous number of absences. Anyone will surely fire them. (Vance, 2016: 6-7) Yet, most country Whites do not blame themselves, at least outwardly. They blame their bosses, the system and the government for denying them chances to have a better life. This is undoubtedly at least partly true, but it is not the whole truth.

Their situation is made even more complex in post-industrial society, a society that stands in the exact opposite of Marx's prediction of a more equalitarian future, a vision permeating every expand of his works, most notably set in the *Communist Manifest*. (Marx, 2010) According to the theory (Olin Wright, 2000: 56), post-industrial society demands more and more expert workers as time passes by. There is less proletarianization because humans are being replaced by technology, particularly in the transformative, constantly changing manufacturing sector, which allows production to increase while curbing the costs of said production. More and more managerial positions are popping up instead. The economy has shifted its focus: from production to services.

What is happening to the country's Whites in this new economy? Simply argue, there is no space for them here. A good portion of them are high school dropouts while most of those who do finish high school rarely go to college. Only a small percentage of hillbillies are lucky enough to defy the odds, such is the case of *Hillbilly Elegy's* author. Like J.D. Vance, they do not come back because there is no work for them in their old communities. Rural Whites' space in the economy is increasingly irrelevant. Most of them only qualify for fewer manufacturing jobs now in a process of extinction in the United States. Their ties to capitalist production become weaker with each passing year, thus they are an underclass. They also do not fit well in service jobs even if they require little to no credentials/expertise, such as a position in local or chain fast food establishments all too few in the countryside. In addition, rural White communities are notoriously fraught with violence that infiltrates the personalities of their individuals. Country Whites are not patient and do not have a kindly manner. They are rude and defensive by nature to survive their circumstances; this combines with a severe lack of discipline. Their personalities and values clash strongly with customer service job ethics. Country Whites have not adapted to the new economy centered on the creation and provision of services ultimately, being left completely behind. (Vance, 2016: 57)

With this picture, an obvious question comes to mind: are there more poor Whites now than in the mid twentieth-century? Certainly, being a poor White is perceived harder now than it was in the past. What will the future hold for them? Thus bears the question, what could be learnt from J.D. Vance's book.

There is a stagnant air of defeat around the country's Whites. They are victims who are abused by their own. They are trapped by each other. Everyone around them appears just like them and clearly shared the same social problems.

They are not completely conscious of their own social or economic shortcomings, or socially aware of a fate somewhat better off out there. Social mobility, argues Vance, is almost impossible for most of them because no one show them how to achieve it. Despair and anger at their circumstances is common. America prides itself on being a country where anyone can be who they want to be; anyone can achieve upward class mobility because everyone has equally fair chances. This is the antiquated dogma worded in the classic *American Dream*. Rural Whites like J.D.'s grandparents believed it. They gave it their best shot, and it must be admitted that they were relatively better off than some of their neighbors or their extended family members, at least economically. But their lives did not look anything like what they hoped they would when they moved to Middletown, Ohio. Nowadays, Middletown is a swamp.

What defines the rural White underclass? Country Whites are fairly aware and conscious of their social reality; the severe breach in social capital between them and mostly, the middle urban class is so big that it dissuades them from trying to achieve a better and stable life. The gap feels too large to jump across. Not only that but "...to the average Middletonian, hard work doesn't matter as much as raw talent" (Vance, 2016: 56). They feel that "past [is] destiny". (Vance, 2017: 1) They just wait for things to happen naturally. In other words, they do not feel like paving a path for themselves. Because it is seemingly unattainable, they scorn those who are better off than them, as if it were overrated to have a stable job. Indeed, some unemployed rural Whites, Vance argues, could express a sense of approval and even esteem by not being employed.

The distribution of social power, or cultural capital, is highly concentrated at the top of the class edifice. Said social power determines opportunities that shape individual lifestyles and the wide differences in opportunities produces tensions that make the cross-class relationships, that country Whites need, even more unattainable. Social interactions with other classes are minimal and fraught with antagonism that is handed down through the generations. Their class conscious has almost completely cut off their cross-class relationships.

While they have a strong class identity defined by the community, their class interests are harder to identify. For example, those who used to be blue-collar workers around the time after World War II were very proud of the Democratic Party, or "the workers' party" as they believed it to be. They were soon disenchanted. Democrats focused on creating public policies such as social welfare programs (ex; Section 8, food stamps) but this applied only for those without work. Working rural Whites detest what is worded by terms like "welfare queens" and

their families. Accordingly to them, it is unfair that those that are too lazy to work can afford cellphones, for example, while they do their best and work hard for the country but are worse off. Accordingly, Democrats did not help the White working poor, instead they just helped the jobless poor (made off of immigrants), and living mainly in the big cities. By only helping the jobless poor, the working White man who was left as the last rung of society. This did not go well with them. For this reason, most rural Whites are now staunch conservative Republicans. Hence why Trump received unparalleled support among these demographics. Democrats, most believed, failed to help those they initially promised to represent. Their policies only made things worse, "...our country's social services weren't made for hillbilly families, and they often make a bad problem worse". (Vance, 2016: 243)

In addition, with the globalization of commerce, neoliberalism and capitalism, the companies (specialized primarily in manufacturing) that used to employ entire poor White families, such as Armco, have either gone bankrupt in an increasingly monopolized economic system or emigrated in search of cheaper labor. Because of this situation, it is now less likely than before that a hillbilly will get a fairly good job.

One of J.D. Vance's most illuminating observations has a *Thompsonian* quality when he states that class is not determined by just economic relations; it is a complicated combination of factors: family life, community life, cultural values, etc. (Thompson, 1979: 38-9) "Social mobility isn't just about money and economics, it's about a lifestyle change." (Vance, 2016: 206) The government is not and cannot be in control of a lot of these factors. Hence, in the conclusion of his book, Vance basically says the only ones who can help this country people get out of the quicksand are themselves. Yes, cross-class relationships are important. Yes, emotional support is vital to motivate a child not to give up and succumb to the quicksand. But in the end, action by the class for the class is necessary. Following that line of thought, Olin Wright (2000: 191) argues that, "...[.] class formations are important above all because of the ways in which they shape class capacities and thus the balance of power within class struggles". They are the only ones capable of affecting all the factors that keep them in their hot mess. In his words:

"....[.] these problems were not created by governments or corporations or anyone else. We created them and we can fix them. [...] it starts when we stop blaming Obama or Bush or faceless companies and we ask ourselves what we can do to make things better". (Vance, 2016: 255-56)

They are a part of the underclass but they are not the whole of the underclass. The underclass can be divided into subgroups, just like the traditional petty bourgeoisie can be subdivided as well, as according to Poulantzas (Poulantzas, 1980: 265). I do not know enough about the rest of the subgroups, or perhaps a better term would be class locations (Olin Wright, 2000: 21), in the underclass to accurately identify them in this paper, but the poor White community is certainly an entity in itself and cannot be thrown in together with others in differing class locations such as Black and immigrant communities. E.P. Thompson was onto something. History sets us apart. White country peoples and Blacks (African Americans) in America do not have the same past, therefore they do not share the same present; consequently, they are not the same *class of peoples*. Their current existence, is thought, is not subjected by the same factors. They do not *live* in the same way and do not experience the same social relations with other classes. “The more a person’s life is bound up with a single, coherent set of class experiences, the more likely it is that this person’s consciousness will be imbued with a corresponding class content”. (Olin Wright, 2000: 204)

Directly answering the question posed in the beginning of this essay, in an interview J.D. Vance asserts:

“...[In] a lot of ways, what elites see as blunders people back home see as someone who-finally- conducts themselves in a relatable way. He shoots from the hip; he’s not constantly afraid of offending someone; he’ll get angry about politics; he’ll call someone a liar or a fraud. This is how a lot of people in the white working class actually talk about politics”. (Dreher, 2016: 1)

He also does not have a postgraduate college degree just like most hillbillies. This is what makes Donald Trump a relatable figure to the White working class. Being relatable made him relevant and earned him their unconditional support. Rural Whites think of Trump as someone who finally lent an accurate voice to their social and economic struggles. He is a relatable hero. In a US lead by Trump, rural Whites do not have to change in order to succeed. Their everyday-like behaviors, values, and politics is now more socially acceptable, even fitting and agreeable. Arguably, it is very probable that hillbillies will not change their way of life because they do not feel the same social or even political pressure as they did before. They no longer feel alone in this world. Instead Donald Trump is with them. They will more favorable adhere to their ways and thought values while stepping up support for Mr. Trump’s brand of politics. Even so, many of the social

and economic struggles will surely continue to factor into their current everyday life experiences. Sadly, such factors will probably remain unaddressed.

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Notes

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