books & ideas.net

Deplorable, yourself

Isaac William MARTIN

Most analysts have portrayed Trump as the candidate of economically insecure white Americans. Sociologist Isaac Martin discards this "economic anxiety thesis" as inaccurate: most poor white people won't vote on Tuesday. This explanation has much less to do with the data than with a long American tradition of blaming racism on the white poor.

Reviewed:
Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide*, Bloomsbury, May 2016.
Arlie Hochschild, Rile *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*, New Press, September 2016.
Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*, Viking Press, June 2016.
J. D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, Harper, June 2016.

Who exactly supports Donald Trump? If the polls are the measure of support, then the answer at this late date is: almost half of the American public. But Trump did not always have this much support, and some commentators attempting to explain his rise to prominence have argued that he won the Republican nomination as the candidate of poor and economically insecure white Americans. This theory has proponents across the political spectrum. Some liberals and socialists, most prominently Senator Bernie Sanders, have argued that Trump appeals especially to working class people who are anxious about their economic position (Team Fix 2015); some conservatives have even called Trump "The tribune of poor white people" (Dreher 2016). Let us call this the economic anxiety thesis. It is not a very accurate description of Trump's social base. But a consideration of several recent books will help to illuminate why the economic anxiety thesis has seemed so plausible to so many Americans.

The audacity of hopelessness

A popular version of the thesis appears in *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, by J. D. Vance. This memoir describes the author's experience growing up poor in a Rust Belt town. It does not mention Trump by name. But it couples the author's experiences with an argument about "how Appalachia and the South went from staunchly Democratic to staunchly Republican in less than a generation" (p. 140),

and in particular why so many white working-class people believe that President Barack Obama "has ties to Islamic extremists, or is a traitor, or was born in some far-flung corner of the world" (p. 190). Trump came to political prominence by promoting just these conspiratorial slanders. The book was published three weeks before he won the Republican Party nomination. Maybe that is why many commentators have concluded that this book was a key to understanding Trump country.

It is best appreciated as a story of one young man's triumph over childhood adversity. Vance's father left when he was six years old. His mother began to cycle through often violent and abusive relationships (Bob, Steve, Chip, Matt, Ken) and addictions (alcohol, prescription painkillers, heroin). Once, when she was driving her car and in the grip of a suicidal depression, she threatened to kill Vance by crashing the car with him in it (p. 76). He escaped and found refuge with his grandmother and grandfather, whom he called Mamaw and Papaw. Throughout the turbulent years of his adolescence, he found stability in their way of life, which he remembers as "old fashioned, quietly faithful, self-reliant, hard-working" (p. 148). Eventually he learned self-discipline in the military, graduated from college, and attended Yale Law School.

This is an unusual life story. Vance, however, presents himself as a kind of white working class Everyman, and his memoir as a generic study of cultural dysfunction among the poor. "It's about reacting to bad circumstances in the worst way possible," he writes. "It's about a culture that increasingly encourages social decay instead of counteracting it" (p. 7). Vance's argument recapitulates more or less exactly a theory that the anthropologist Oscar Lewis propounded fifty years ago in a series of classic biographical studies of what he called the "culture of poverty." According to Vance, and Lewis, some indeterminate fraction of poor people who are trapped in economically depressed surroundings cope with their poverty by lowering their expectations. They spend money on extravagant luxury goods rather than saving for the future. They give up on permanent familial attachments and pursue immediate sexual gratification instead. They work as little as they can and get drunk a lot. They fight. All of these behaviors are passed down in families, and children who are raised in this way of life find themselves unable to seize economic opportunity when it presents itself. They may not even recognize it as opportunity.

This is, to put it charitably, a defunct theory. Oscar Lewis's scholarly reputation did not survive the quantitative revolution that transformed the field of poverty research after the 1960s. So far, reviewers have gone easy on Vance, maybe because he presents himself as a member of the group whose lifeways he disparages. "This was *my* world: a world of truly irrational behavior," he writes. "*We* spend our way into the poorhouse.... Thrift is inimical to *our* being." (p. 146, my emphasis). And: "*We* choose not to work when we should be looking for jobs" (p. 147, my emphasis). It is hard to dispute Vance's account of the culture of poverty without appearing also to dispute his right to describe his own experiences and confess his own sins. Vance, however, is also eager to report on the sins of other people, and it is surely fair to wonder exactly who else he intends to include in that "we."

The book is insistent that he exemplifies some larger group (the "hillbillies" of the title). It is unclear, however, precisely who that group is. On p. 3, the book is said to be a story of "the millions of white working-class Americans of Scots-Irish descent with no college degree." On p. 4, it is "working-class whites." On p. 7, it is "working-class whites

with ties to Appalachia." On p. 138, it is "poor people." And on p. 143, it is "not just me and my family but our neighborhood and our town and everyone from Middletown to Jacksonville and beyond." Everyone? The effect of this vagueness is to make the general truth or falsehood of his account impossible to decide.

It is also fair to doubt whether his account of cultural dysfunction applies even to the particular people he observed firsthand. His exhibit A is his mother, who had trouble holding onto a job or a relationship. Then there is Pattie, the neighbor who flooded her rented house because she was stoned out of her mind on painkillers and forgot that she had left the bath running (p. 145). And there is another "drug-addict neighbor" who bought expensive steak more often than Vance thought justifiable (p. 139). Grant for the sake of argument that spending too much on steak is unwise. Vance presents these people's bad choices as symptoms of failed mores. It seems worth pointing out that they might instead be symptoms of drug addiction.

Maybe the truth of the theory isn't the point. Vance prizes even untrue stories as long as they convey valuable moral lessons. He recounts a childhood argument he had with his mother, in which she told him that her drug addiction was a mental illness, and he told her that it was just an excuse for her bad decisions. "Oddly enough," he writes with the benefit of hindsight, "it's probably both: Research does reveal a genetic disposition to substance abuse, but those who believe their addiction is a disease show less of an inclination to resist it" (p. 116). Poverty, he argues, is something like addiction in this respect. "You can do anything," he recalls his Mamaw telling him; "don't be like those fuckers who think the deck is stacked against them" (p. 176). Vance's book leaves little doubt that the deck *was* stacked against him and that Mamaw knew it. Her point was that it is bad to think it so, not because it is untrue, but because thinking it erodes one's motivation. The belief in certain useful falsehoods can strengthen the will.

This view is also the key to his theory of white working-class conservatism. Vance presents conservatism as a way of shoring up the will in the face of hopelessness. Believe that poverty is structural, and you will give up. Convince yourself that individual virtue and thrift and hard work are sufficient to overcome all obstacles, and you might find the courage to continue. The argument is illustrated vividly by the contrast between Vance's downwardly-mobile mother, who relapsed repeatedly into addiction and justified herself with therapeutic happy-talk, and his upwardly-mobile grandfather, who "quit drinking in 1983, a decision accompanied by no medical intervention and not much fanfare" (p. 46). The next year, Papaw voted Republican for the first time.

Empathy and explanation

Around the time that Vance went to law school, the Berkeley sociology professor Arlie Hochschild moved to rural Louisiana in order to study the right-wing populists of the Tea Party. By the time she concluded her fieldwork last year, several of her right-wing interview subjects had joined the Trump campaign. Her study of their worldviews is *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*.

Hochschild reports that their support for Trump indeed has something to do with economic anxiety. "Since 1980," Hochschild writes, "virtually all those I talked with felt on shaky economic ground, a fact that made them brace at the very idea of 'redstribution'" (p. 221). The forty Tea Party supporters whom she interviewed are

working in, or retired from, "middle, lower-middle, and working-class" occupations (p. 249). There is the accountant Janice Areno, who grew up "poor but happy" in rural Louisiana (p. 155), takes pride in her lifetime of hard work, and has no sympathy for people who don't work ("we should let them starve," she says on p. 160). There is Donny McCorquodale, a retired man who worked some risky jobs—"he has logged forests, worked the Alaska pipelines, handled electrical wires atop telephone poles" (p. 183)—and has voted Republican at least since 2000. There is Mike Schaff, a retired oil company employee who preferred Ted Cruz, but supported Donald Trump as his second choice (p. 229). Their economic anxiety prepared the way for the rise of Donald Trump "like kindling before a match is lit" (p. 221).

There was other kindling, too. Their economic anxieties were compounded by resentment of their cultural marginalization. Many also expressed worry about the demographic decline of "white Christians like us" (p. 221). Some enjoyed fishing and hunting, and mourned for a lost time before their waterways were polluted by the oil industry—but also took pride in their independence, and worried that government regulation would make things worse. Their worries about the economy, nature, culture, race, and religion were all reinforced by their social worlds at church and by the right-wing news media they viewed at home. This was the brew that made them ready when Trump promised to make America great again.

Instead of attempting to analyze what part of whose motivations can be attributed to which cause in particular, Hochschild weaves all of these anxieties together in a parable—she calls it a "deep story"—that is meant to summarize how Tea Party adherents see the world. She narrates this story in the second person: "You are patiently standing in a long line leading up a hill.... Just over the brow of the hill is the American Dream, the goal of everyone waiting in line" (p. 136). The line is at a standstill. Then you notice others—"Blacks, women, immigrants, refugees, brown pelicans" (p. 139)—cutting in line, and you watch with increasing resentment as Barack Obama abets their cheating. The end. This parable occupies a central chapter of the book. It is unusual to plunk a work of short fiction into the middle of an otherwise sober work of social science, but this story is not supposed to be literally true. A deep story, Hochschild says, is "a story that *feels as if* it were true" (p. 16). Its virtue is that it helps you make sense of feelings that would otherwise seem unreasonable to you—it "permits those on both sides of the political spectrum to stand back and explore the *subjective prism* through which the party on the other side sees the world" (p. 135). Democracy, if it is not to degenerate into civil war, requires empathy with opponents. Hochschild thinks we should learn to tell each other's deep stories as a way to cultivate empathy with each other.

Making up fantasy stories strikes me as a creative method for generating empathy, but probably not a reliable method for sociological inquiry. Hochschild ultimately pushes this technique well beyond its limits. At first, she presents the deep story as a kind of spiritual exercise to cultivate empathy: "I *constructed* this deep story to represent—in metaphorical form—the hopes, fears, pride, shame, resentment, and anxiety in the lives of those I talked with" (p. 135, emphasis mine). But the book slips gradually into treating the deep story as a methodological device for divining the truth of others' motives, and then, finally, into claiming that the story itself is a real, underlying, durable psychological structure that generated those motives. In the end, Hochschild seems to assert that the deep story in which "strangers step ahead of you in line, making you anxious, resentful,

and afraid"—the very story that she previously claimed to have constructed—was already present to the minds of her interviewees, preparing them to welcome Donald Trump, before she ever met them. "So this—the deep story—was in place before the match was struck" (p. 222), she writes.

Here the book comes too close to ventriloquism for my comfort. It can, in fact, be difficult to tell which of the quotations that appear in *Strangers in Their Own Land* are to be taken literally as transcriptions of recorded speech, and which merely represent Hochschild's imaginative reconstructions of what she thinks others would have felt, or said. (At some points, she obviously intends quotation marks to be taken figuratively; at others, her intentions are less clear. I worried about this more than most readers have, because I noticed that at one point in the book, Hochschild attributes a phrase that is apparently of her own invention, in quotation marks, to me. I am the scholar who is quoted on pp. 13 and 267 characterizing conservative activists as an "astro-turf grassroots following," even though I never wrote those words, and the book of mine that she cites as her source for the quotation argues for what I hoped to have understood as the opposite of that characterization.)

In any case, we may doubt whether deep stories—whether quoted, or paraphrased, or retrospectively reconstructed with some degree of literary license—are truly the wellsprings of action. The part of the deep story that concerns economic insecurity, for example, may have felt true to many of the Trump supporters she interviewed, but that does not mean that it explains why they support Trump, much less why any other Americans do. One reason that Hochschild heard many Trump supporters express economic insecurity may be simply that plenty of Americans, on the right and the left alike, feel economically insecure. Another reason that she found economic insecurity among the right-wing populists she interviewed may be that she went looking for right-wing populists in a community where economic insecurity was particularly common. That was part of her rationale for studying rural Louisiana, a state where white people "are worse off than whites... anywhere else outside Mississippi" (p. 9). The state's combination of poverty and conservatism piqued Hochschild's curiosity because it exemplifies what she calls the Great Paradox: poor states that depend disproportionately on federal assistance are the very states whose voters tend to vote disproportionately *against* federal assistance (p. 8, 58). The Great Paradox is a genuinely interesting intellectual puzzle. But look for right-wing populists in a place where economic insecurity is widespread, and, it turns out, you will find some right-wing populists who can tell you a story about how their views relate to their economic insecurity. The presence of economic insecurity on the populist right was a premise of the project, not a finding.

Going to poor states that vote Republican is a fine way to begin an exploratory investigation into the Great Paradox. But it is a bad way to learn about Trump supporters in general, because most Trump supporters do not exemplify the Great Paradox.

Don't blame the rednecks

Democracy requires empathy, but it also requires counting heads, and counting the economically anxious white Trump voters can put things in perspective. Start with the

poor. Most poor white people won't vote for Trump; for the most part, they won't vote.[1] Nor have they donated much time or money to his campaign. American politics even at its most participatory tends to be disproportionately a rich person's game. For the poor it is mainly a spectator sport, and few of the white poor people who are paying attention this year are Trump fans. In March 2016—right around the time that Donald Trump won the Louisiana primary election—the National Suburban Poll from Hofstra University asked a representative sample of American adults a series of questions about economic insecurity, and another set of questions about their opinions of the presidential candidates. I analyzed the data to see if I could find any evidence that economic anxiety motivated Trump supporters. Suppose we define "poor" as income under $20,000 a year. By this definition, the percentage of poor people with favorable opinions of Trump was 28%. The percentage of poor *white* people with favorable opinions of Trump was 36%. And the percentage of *non-poor* white people with favorable opinions of Trump was 41%. Trump had a substantial edge among white people—but no particular edge among the white poor.

What of economically insecure white people? Among those white people reporting in the Hofstra poll that they "always live paycheck to paycheck," the percentage with a favorable opinion of Trump was 43%. Among those reporting that their personal finances were in "poor shape," it was 49%. These numbers suggest that support for Trump ran relatively high among economically insecure white people, but that is not because economic insecurity causes support for Trump. It is because education inoculates against both economic insecurity and Trumpism. College graduates, who generally reported less economic insecurity than other Americans, also generally reported that they disliked Trump. Supporters and opponents of Trump who were at the same level of education generally expressed about the same level of economic insecurity.

Add up every economically insecure white person in the South—everyone who says they live paycheck to paycheck, or says their finances are in poor shape, or reports an income under $20,000 a year—and you will get to about 11% of the American adults who had a favorable opinion of Trump. You will only get to 8% of the people who expressed the intention to vote for him in a contest with Hillary Clinton. These percentages represent millions of real people, of course, and their stories are just as interesting and important as anyone else's. But empathizing with them is not the secret key to understanding this election.

Class condescension and accusations of racism

Trump is not the tribune of white poor people. If you want to think about the role of class in the election of 2016 it its better to begin with these facts. Donald Trump is a rich man who was born into wealth. His domestic policy proposals, insofar as he has provided any specifics, would harm the poor and benefit the rich most of all. Most of his supporters are relatively affluent. The attempt of some commentators, and some Trump supporters, to pin the social origins of the Trump campaign on poor people may have less

[1] According to the *Current Population Survey*, fewer than half of adults with family incomes below $30,000 voted in the November 2012 presidential election. See *United States Census Bureau*, "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2012," Report number P20-568, Table 7, accessed on October 21, 2016 from http://www.census.gov/data/tables/2012/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-568.html

to do with the data than with a long American cultural tradition of blaming racism on poor, rural, southern white people. Whenever white America votes for a racist demagogue, some rich person blames the rednecks.

The history of blaming the white poor in particular for sins that they share with the white rich is illuminated by Nancy Isenberg's *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*. Isenberg is a historian at Louisiana State University. Her book shows that the association of poor whites with racism can be traced to the Reconstruction era in the South. "Redneck," a regional term of disparagement for poor white farmers and farm laborers, gained currency in this period as a term for "the rowdy and racist followers of the New South's high-profile Democratic demagogues of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (p. 187). Throughout the South, demagogic politicians competed for the votes of poor white people by fulminating against the taxes that went to pay for the education of black people (p. 189). Commentators of that era stereotyped poor whites as more viciously racist than their civilized, middle-class and upper-class betters. Isenberg quotes one middle-class white man, who, observing a 1903 campaign rally of Mississippi's gubernatorial candidate James Vardaman, said of the crowd that "They were the sort of people that lynch Negroes, that mistake hoodlumism for wit, and cunning for intelligence, that attend revivals and fight and fornicate in the bushes afterwards" (p. 190).

The stereotype gained new force in the 1950s, whenever poor white people were caught on camera resisting the integration of African Americans into their schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods. Isenberg tells the story of Hazel Bryan, a white girl who grew up extremely poor in rural Arkansas and moved to a white working-class neighborhood in the state capital of Little Rock when she was ten years old. When she was seventeen, the Supreme Court ordered the desegregation of her high school, and the head of the local Citizens' Council announced that the "only race-mixing that is going to be done is in the districts where the so-called rednecks live" (p. 249). Bryan seems to have believed that her precarious social status among white people would be jeopardized further if she had to go to school with black students. So she fought to preserve segregation the only way a seventeen-year-old poor white girl could: by showing up and screaming at black students to stay away. She was captured in a dramatic (and famous) photograph of Elizabeth Eckford, a fifteen-year-old black girl who braved the hatred of white students to enroll at Central High School in 1957. Never mind the generations of well-to-do white men in the Arkansas state house who had created the segregated schools. It was Hazel Bryan's image—her fists clenched and face twisted in a snarl, as she stood behind Eckford, shouting curses—that became the picture of white resistance to desegregation. If Bryan had been, say, a middle-aged mortgage banker instead of a poor white teenager, maybe she could have promoted segregation more effectively, without ever standing close enough to Eckford to get her picture in the paper as the face of racism.

This is a subtle and complicated story about the intersection of racism and class resentment. Isenberg, however, brushes past the subtleties in order to argue that disparaging portrayals of Hazel Bryan were just another expression of class condescension. "Class had its own singular and powerful dynamic, apart from its intersection with race," she writes (p. 2). And the singular dynamic of class in America is the continuous reproduction of snobbery over more than 400 years. Isenberg purports to

find the antecedents of the idea of "white trash," for example, in the writings of the English clergyman Richard Hakluyt the younger, who argued in 1584 for the colonization of the New World by "waste people" from the British Isles (p. 20). Hakluyt seems to have meant people engaged in extractive labor, such as farmers, foresters, and miners. Isenberg, however, goes on to use Hakluyt's term "waste people" anachronistically to refer to *any* group of white people who were ever disparaged for their poverty or their poor manners. The people she describes as having been treated as "waste people" by their contemporaries include, among others, the urban paupers of 18th-century New York and Philadelphia (p. 73), the rural poor of the early 19th century (p. 269), the postindustrial working poor of the late 20th century (p. 309), and even the scalawags—those southern white people who were loathed by white supremacists for siding with Congressional Republicans during Reconstruction, and who, regardless of their wealth or poverty, were, Isenberg says, "assumed to be white trash on the inside" (p. 186). Here she goes rather beyond her evidence.

American presidents loom large in this history. That is because *White Trash*, its subtitle notwithstanding, is not really a history of class in America, nor even a history of the white poor, so much as it is a history of insults directed *against* the white poor—and presidents were often on both the giving and the receiving end of these insults. Instead of learning about the lives of landless tenant farmers in 18th century Virginia, for example, we learn what Thomas Jefferson said about them. Instead of learning about the lives of the poor in the Great Depression, we learn about how they were perceived by top officials in the Roosevelt administration. Instead of learning about the lives of poor rural people in the 1960s, we learn about how Lyndon Baines Johnson flirted with his own media portrayal as a redneck, and what the Republican candidate Barry Goldwater did to portray him as white trash (p. 264). The narrative arc of the book ends with Sarah Palin, the 2008 Republican Party vice presidential candidate from Wasilla, Alaska, who was depicted by journalists and even by some operatives of her own party as an ignorant hillbilly—and who seemed to enjoy twitting her critics by defiantly playing to type (p. 304). Presidential elections are moments when white Americans assert themselves, and insult each other, with the rhetoric and symbolism of class.

The election of 2016 illustrates that the symbolism of class in American political discourse sometimes can be effective even when it has little relationship to any real class analysis. "I consider myself in a certain way to be a blue-collar worker," Donald Trump told a campaign rally on October 10 (Miller 2016). Taken literally, this is ridiculous. Taken figuratively, it positions him in symbolic opposition to snobs. Trump's rhetorical posture of defiance in the face of class condescension seems to appeal to many of his supporters—maybe especially those who have never personally been on the receiving end of any class condescension. The rich can revel in the impropriety of their candidate and pretend to be populists, because rudeness is thought to signify membership in the common people.

The posture of vicarious populism may also help to make sense of an otherwise perplexing dispute over racism that has riven white America this campaign season. As much as Trump's most fervent supporters seem to despise Muslims, immigrants from Mexico, Black Lives Matter protesters, China, and Jews, many of them also, very vocally, express resentment when other white people call them "deplorable" for espousing those views. Lots of white Americans have been saying racist things this

election season and then getting angry at other white Americans for having the effrontery to despise them for it. If their expressions of indignation can be mistaken for populism, it may be because ostentatious and disingenuous claims to deplore racism have long been a marker of upper-class status among white people, whereas accusations of racism historically have been traded among white people as a class insult.

Deplorable, deniable

Dr. Carol Anderson's *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* may help to explain why this insult sometimes stings. Her book is a history of racist actions done by elite people with plausible deniability under cover of law. The argument of the book is that every large step in the progress of African Americans toward full citizenship has inspired a backlash among white people. This is not, however, the familiar history of competition between poor whites and poor blacks for jobs or housing. Instead, the white rage of the title describes a political backlash that "works its way through the courts, the legislatures, and a range of government bureaucracies" (p. 3). White political elites have used the power of law to attempt to preserve a racial order that advantages them. The perpetrators include many white people who might look down on rednecks.

The book is structured as a series of historical case studies, each following the same pattern: a step towards full citizenship for African Americans was followed by changes in law that partly restored the status quo ante. The Reconstruction amendments to the Constitution affirmed that black people had the rights of citizens and black men had the right to vote; southern states passed laws to restrict access to the suffrage and reduce black citizens to the status of peons (p. 19). More than a million black Americans left the South during the First World War in search of economic and political freedom; southern officials passed laws to criminalize labor recruitment, stopped the railroads, and forced black people to labor on plantations under cover of the military draft (pp. 47, 51, 53). The Supreme Court mandated an end to the *de jure* segregation of public schools; southern states responded with a wave of laws to limit black voting rights and in some cases shut down their public schools for years rather than educate a single black child (p. 86). Congress passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965; politicians responded with calls for law and order, culminating in policies that encouraged the incarceration of young black people at record rates. In 2008, American voters elected the first black president in an election with record black turnout; state legislatures responded with laws to make it more difficult to vote (p. 148). The connection between stimulus and response is more convincingly documented in some of these cases than others. I found Anderson's account of mass incarceration in particular to vastly overstate the role of Ronald Reagan, who is depicted as implausibly foresighted and central to shifts in criminal justice policy that mostly took place at the state level. The existence of a general pattern, however, is hard to miss.

Why are white law-makers threatened by black success? There are many possible explanations, but Anderson's preferred theory is cultural. A symbolic investment in black failure is crucial to white identity—and in particular to the belief of successful white people that their success was earned fairly. This assumption that the relevant dynamics of symbolic helps to explain Anderson's selection of episodes. Constitutional amendments granting formal citizenship, a mass migration, a court decision, the enactment of several

statues, and the election of a president: one might doubt whether these are even cases of the same kind of thing. They certainly do not all seem to present the same sort of economic or political threat to white interests. Anderson argues that they belong together because they present the same kind of *symbolic* threat. "The whole culture of the white South was erected on the presumption of black inability," she argues (p. 54)—and maybe not just the South. Black achievement presented white elites with evidence that their own elite status was not earned.

Central to white rage as Anderson defines it is plausible deniability: white elites insist on "not only the upper hand, but also, apparently, the moral high ground" (p. 4). Anderson recounts popular violence against black Americans, sometimes in excruciating detail. But her eye is not trained on the Hazel Bryans of the world. Instead, she reserves her greatest opprobrium for the people in power who gave moral cover to the lynch mob. In 1873, for example, it was rural white Democrats who executed a bloody coup against the newly elected government in the Louisiana town of Colfax. Anderson reports the estimates of 105 to 280 African American people slain. But she does so only in order to observe that it was the Supreme Court—under the patrician Chief Justice Morrison Waite, Yale class of 1837—that contrived a constitutional rationale to invalidate federal prosecution of the killers and "let mass murderers go free" (p. 34).

This is a book of the left. But there is an uncomfortable truth here for white liberals. Hillary Clinton's description of many of Donald Trump's supporters as a "basket of deplorables" can seem unfair when you reflect that she left so many white people out of the basket simply because they expressed themselves more politely. Plenty of Trump supporters have used racial slurs. Plenty of Ivy League-educated lawyers have done worse things with nicer words. Deplorable, yourself.

The Republican Party after Trumpism

Where will the Trumpists go after Trump leaves the stage? The reception of J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* provides an interesting test. The book was warmly reviewed by some of the reform conservatives who rejected Trump's race-baiting—from the *New York Times*'s David Brooks to the editors of the *National Review*. These are people who hoped to make the Republican Party competitive by making it more inclusive of voters of color. But *Hillbilly Elegy* was also blurbed by Peter Thiel—a prominent financial backer of Trump campaign, outspoken proponent of restricting the suffrage, and, perhaps not coincidentally, a partner in the venture capital firm that currently employs Vance. On the back cover of this book, two futures for the Republican Party coexist peacefully.

It is hard to tell from the book just where Vance himself stands. He does not go in for Trump-style vulgarity, and he mentions opposition to racism alongside a taste for healthy food as one of the cultural quirks he has picked up from his time in the educational elite. But he is also quick to excuse race-baiting in other white conservatives. Sure, many people in his home town think the president is illegitimate because he was secretly born in Africa, or something. But that's not necessarily racism, he says: "[T]he president feels like an alien to many Middletonians for reasons that have nothing to do with skin color. Recall that not a single one of my high school classmates attended an Ivy League school" (p. 191). I also recall that no one in Middletown or anywhere else accused George W. Bush (Yale class of 1968) of being a secret Muslim or an African

socialist. Pointing out that many white people mistrust Obama's Ivy League degree is not a convincing refutation of the charge that many of them hold racially bigoted views. It is, at best, a face-saving excuse.

Being coy about racism is not a Scots-Irish hillbilly tradition. It is a bipartisan tradition of American politics that seems to have started some time in the late twentieth century. Even Hillary Clinton played this game in her 2008 primary election campaign against Barack Obama (see Phillips 2008). It would be a mistake to read this refusal to condemn racism as a sign of secret racist intent: all it tells us is that someone hopes to get elected with the votes of racists.

At least, that is what I think it tells us about J.D. Vance. In addition to all of the other genres it belongs to—confessional memoir, pop sociology—*Hillbilly Elegy* is also, very obviously, a campaign autobiography. Even though Vance was born in Ohio, he opens the book in what he says is his real home, the Kentucky holler where his Mamaw was born: not quite the log cabin of American presidential myth, but not too far off, symbolically. Then he traces a narrative ark from Kentucky holler to Ivy League law school, along the way ticking every box on the checklist that American voters seem to demand. His emphasis on the pessimism of Appalachian white people reads as an implicit rebuttal of Barack Obama's memoir, *The Audacity of Hope*, whose narrative structure he otherwise follows closely: like Obama, Vance tells us a life story that includes an absent father, loving grandparents who exemplify American virtues, early experimentation with drugs, a discovery of meaning in service to others, and appointment to an Ivy League law review. By the end of the book, he has found new pride in his ethnic heritage, admitted his faults, and been redeemed by the Christian faith and the love of a good woman. The clichés of American politics are all here. J.D. Vance is running for something.

The question is what sort of party his Republican Party will be.

References

Dreher, Rod. 2016. "Trump: Tribune of Poor White People." *The American Conservative*, July 22. Retrieved November 1, 2016 from http://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/trump-us-politics-poor-whites/

Miller, Zeke. 2016. "Donald Trump Takes the 'Shackles Off'." *Time Magazine*, October 11. Retrieved on November 1, 2016 from http://time.com/4526316/donald-trump-takes-the-shackles-off/

Phillips, Kate. 2008. "Clinton Touts White Support." *New York Times*, May 8. Retrieved November 1, 2016 from http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/05/08/clinton-touts-white-support/

Team Fix. 2015. "3rd Democratic Debate Transcript, Annotated: Who Said What and What It Meant." *Washington Post*, December 19. Retrieved on November 1, 2016 from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/12/19/3rd-democratic-debate-transcript-annotated-who-said-what-and-what-it-meant/

Published in *Books&Ideas*, November 6th, 2016.