The Lives of Poor White People

By Joshua Rothman

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J. D. Vance’s home town of Middletown, Ohio, is one of the once flourishing Rust Belt towns that feature in his memoir, “Hillbilly Elegy.”

“I grew up poor, in the Rust Belt, in an Ohio steel town that has been hemorrhaging jobs and hope for as long as I can remember.” That’s how J. D. Vance begins one of this campaign season’s saddest and most fascinating books, “Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis” (Harper). Vance was born in Kentucky and raised by his grandparents, as a self-described “hillbilly,” in Middletown, Ohio, home of the once-mighty Armco Steel. His family struggled with poverty and domestic violence, of which he was a victim. His mother was addicted to drugs—first to painkillers, then to heroin. Many of his neighbors were jobless and on
welfare. Vance escaped their fate by joining the Marines and serving in Iraq. Afterward, he attended Ohio State and Yale Law School, where he was mentored by Amy Chua, the law professor and tiger mom. He now lives in San Francisco, where he works at Mithril Capital Management, the investment firm helmed by Peter Thiel. It seems safe to say that Vance, who is now in his early thirties, has seen a wider swath of America than most people.

Had “Hillbilly Elegy” been published last year, or the year before, it still would have found readers: it’s a detailed and moving account of American struggle. This year, though, the book has been adopted by an unusually large and passionate audience. The name Trump never appears in the book, which was written, presumably, before his capture of the Republican Party. Still, anti-Trump conservatives have responded to its largely empathetic portrait of poor, white Americans, which they see as an alternative to the less sympathetic theories about Trump’s least affluent supporters—“They’re all racist,” essentially—that have become popular on the left. Earlier this summer, Rod Dreher, the intellectually restless American Conservative columnist, wrote that “Hillbilly Elegy” “does for poor white people what Ta-Nehisi Coates’s book did for poor black people: give them voice and presence in the public square.” Liberal readers may bristle at the comparison—Vance, to be clear, is a white conservative—but Dreher has a point. Just as the death of Michael Brown, in Ferguson, persuaded many non-black people to read “Between the World and Me,” so the success of Donald Trump has persuaded many people who have never visited the wrecked towns of the Rust Belt to read “Hillbilly Elegy.” Dreher’s interview with Vance—“Trump: Tribune of Poor White People”—was so popular that it crashed The American Conservative’s servers. “Hillbilly Elegy” is now in second place on the Times _nonfiction_best-seller list.

In many ways, “Hillbilly Elegy” tells a familiar story. It’s a regional memoir about Vance’s Scots-Irish family, one of many who have lived and worked in Appalachia for generations. For perhaps a century, Vance explains, the region was on an upward trajectory. Family men worked as sharecroppers, then as coal miners, then as steelworkers; families inched their way toward prosperity, often moving north in pursuit of work. (Vance’s family moved about a hundred miles, from Kentucky to Ohio; like many families, they are “hillbilly transplants.”) In mid-century Middletown, where Armco Steel built schools and parks along the Great Miami River, Vance’s grandparents were able to live a middle-class life, driving back to the hollers of Kentucky every weekend to visit relatives and friends.

Middletown’s industrial jobs began to disappear in the seventies and eighties. Today, its main street is full of shuttered storefronts, and is a haven for drug dealers at night. Vance reports that, in 2014, more people died from drug overdoses than from natural causes in Butler County, where Middletown is located. Families are disintegrating: neighbors listen as kitchen-table squabbles escalate and come to blows, and single mothers raise the majority of children (Vance himself had fifteen “stepdads” while growing up). Although many people identify as religious, church attendance is at historic lows. High-school graduation rates are sinking, and few students go on to college. Columbus, Ohio, one of the fastest-growing cities in America, is just ninety minutes’ drive from Middletown, but the distance feels unbridgeable. Vance uses the psychological term “learned helplessness” to describe the resignation of his peers, many of whom have given up on the idea of upward mobility in a region that they see as permanently left behind. Writing in a
higher register, he says that there is something “almost spiritual about the cynicism” in his hometown.

Much of the personal story Vance tells in “Hillbilly Elegy” revolves around his slow and painful divorce from “hillbilly culture.” Hillbillies, he writes, are proud of their “loyalty, honor, and toughness”; of their fierce, unpretentious patriotism; of their work ethic, their tight-knit families, and the decisiveness with which they administer “hillbilly justice.” (“I earned my first bloody nose at five and my first black eye at six,” Vance recalls, of two times someone insulted his mother.) Vance, too, is proud to be a hillbilly: he uses the term in a dignified and respectful way throughout his book. All the same, he comes to believe that his community suffers from “cognitive dissonance”; there is, he writes, “a broken connection between the world we see and the values we preach.” If family is all-important, then why are alcoholism and domestic abuse so common? If hillbillies are so hardworking, then why do so few people in Middletown work? Plenty of people, of course, work hard, often struggling to assemble a livelihood out of part-time jobs. But they live alongside able-bodied neighbors who are lifetime welfare recipients (and experts at gaming the welfare system). One friend quits a good job because he’s “sick of waking up early,” then takes to Facebook to bemoan the “Obama economy.”

In Vance’s view, the depredations of globalization have been sharpened by poorly implemented social programs, which, though well-intentioned, allow “a large minority . . . to live off the dole,” while breeding resentment and rage among everyone else. But “hillbilly culture,” which allows “the white working class to blame its problems on society or the government,” is part of the problem, too. Vance criticizes its violence, its stubbornness, its pride, its incuriosity, and its “bizarre sexism,” which, he thinks, all encourage “reacting to bad circumstances in the worst way possible.” While communities elsewhere in America are enthralled by the prosperity gospel, Vance’s friends and family recite a disengaged catechism: “We can’t trust the evening news. We can’t trust our politicians. Our universities, the gateway to a better life, are rigged against us. We can’t get jobs. You can’t believe these things and participate meaningfully in society.” He concludes, “There is a lack of agency here—a feeling that you have little control over your life and a willingness to blame everyone but yourself. This is distinct from the larger economic landscape of modern America.”

Why is hillbilly culture so defensive, insular, and frozen in time? Vance argues that—because no culture exists in a vacuum—hillbillies are only partially to blame. In the course of his journey from Middletown to the Marines to Yale, Vance finds that hillbilly pessimism is, in its toxicity, equaled by the disdain that metropolitan people feel for those they call “rednecks” or “white trash.” The Marine Corps is a genuine American melting pot and, for Vance, a transformative experience. But, at Yale, Vance learns that he’s better off hiding the details of his upbringing. He elides the fact that he was raised mainly by his grandparents (a normal circumstance where he comes from), and begins talking about his “grandmother” and “grandfather” even though, at home, he calls them “Mamaw” and “Papaw.” He braves Whole Foods, learns to make cocktail-party chitchat, and endeavors to keep his voice down in public (restaurant screaming matches are unexceptional among Middletown couples). He is shocked by the extreme and near-universal affluence of his classmates.
White poverty, Vance comes to feel, is a source of special shame: no one at Yale sees dignity in it. Instead, they define themselves in opposition to people like him. One professor says that, in his opinion, Yale Law shouldn’t bother accepting students from non-Ivy League schools, since it’s not in the business of “remedial education.” Vance takes a new friend to Cracker Barrel, one of his family’s favorite restaurants, but the friend can’t enjoy it—to him, it’s just “a greasy public health crisis.” There’s nothing Vance is prouder of than his service in the Marines, and yet his fellow-students routinely express contempt for the military—it never occurs to them that there’s a veteran in their midst. Vance often feels like a class traitor who’s grown “too big for his britches.” At the same time, he’s tempted to give up on the project of socioeconomic ascent. “It’s not just our own communities that reinforce the outsider attitude,” he concludes. “It’s the places and people that upward mobility connects us with.”

At Yale, Vance meets Usha, his future wife, a California girl from a South Asian family. Usha understands his feelings of dislocation, which makes sense: Vance’s story is, in many respects, an immigrant story. Earlier this year, in a controversial essay, the National Review correspondent Kevin D. Williamson argued that emigration, not amelioration, was the solution to Rust Belt poverty. “The truth about these dysfunctional, downscale communities is that they deserve to die,” Williamson wrote. “Economically, they are negative assets. Morally, they are indefensible”:

Forget all your cheap theatrical Bruce Springsteen crap. Forget your sanctimony about struggling Rust Belt factory towns and your conspiracy theories about the wily Orientals stealing our jobs. . . . The white American underclass is in thrall to a vicious, selfish culture whose main products are misery and used heroin needles. Donald Trump’s speeches make them feel good. So does OxyContin. What they need isn’t analgesics, literal or political. They need real opportunity, which means that they need real change, which means that they need U-Haul.

Vance and Williamson agree that struggling working-class whites may need to get out of Middletown. But Vance focusses on the obstacles to their migration. Some of those barriers are economic or educational. But Vance also catalogues the cultural barriers that keep poor, small-town whites isolated, and points out that many of them are erected by élite people who simultaneously take pride in being progressive and enlightened. Their snobbery, Vance believes, has escalating social and economic costs. Economically, it makes migrating from a depressed area to a growing one both harder and less desirable. Socially, it creates a feedback loop of mutual contempt and increasing division. If being élite means not being a hillbilly, then hillbillies will be less likely to try to become élites—or, for that matter, to elect them.

It’s one thing to criticize a culture. It’s another to see that the culture being criticized is formed partly in response to other cultures, and that those cultures are, in turn, worth criticizing. This is why explaining human behavior is so difficult: the buck never stops. The explanations don’t come to an obvious, final resting place. Because it’s honest about this problem, “Hillbilly Elegy” is only partially polemical. At its best, it is memoiristic, sad, plangent, and puzzled. Vance recalls a day when he was twelve: he and his mother went out for a drive and got into an argument, which escalated. In a rage, she threatened to crash their car and kill them both. Eventually, after a terrified Vance hid in the back seat, she pulled over. He ran to a house by the side of the road; she followed, and was arrested and charged with domestic violence. “I
remember sitting in that busy courtroom, with half a dozen other families all around,” Vance writes, “and thinking that they looked just like us”:

The moms and dads and grandparents didn’t wear suits like the lawyers and judge. They wore sweatpants and stretchy pants and T-shirts. Their hair was a bit frizzy. And it was the first time I noticed “TV accents”—the neutral accent that so many news anchors had. The social workers and the judge and the lawyer all had TV accents. None of us did. The people who ran the courthouse were different from us. The people subjected to it were not.

Vance is describing a moment known to many kids from troubled families. For a long time, your family’s pain seems to make it unique. Then, one day, you discover that it makes you part of a group. Now your family is doubly mysterious. You can see it from both the inside and the outside, as unfathomable flesh and blood but also as a social phenomenon in need of an explanation.

In search of that explanation, Vance haunted the library in high school. He “consumed books about social policy and the working poor.” At sixteen, he stumbled upon William Julius Wilson’s “The Truly Disadvantaged”:

Though I didn’t fully understand it all, I grasped the core thesis. As millions migrated north to factory jobs, the communities that sprouted up around those factories were vibrant but fragile. When the factories shut their doors, the people left behind were trapped in towns and cities that could no longer support such large populations with high-quality work. Those who could—generally the well educated, wealthy, or well connected—left, leaving behind communities of poor people. These remaining folks were the “truly disadvantaged”—unable to find good jobs on their own and surrounded by communities that offered little in the way of connections or social support.

Vance recalls wanting to write Wilson a letter telling him “that he had described my home perfectly.” He didn’t, of course, because Wilson was “writing about black people in the inner cities,” not whites in Appalachia or the Rust Belt. Moreover, Wilson’s book had left him dissatisfied. The same questions still hounded him: “Why didn’t our neighbor leave that abusive man? Why did she spend her money on drugs? Why couldn’t she see that her behavior was destroying her daughter?” Most mysteriously, “Why were all of these things happening not just to our neighbor but to my mom?” It’s easy to read about socioeconomic trends; it’s harder to square them with the people you know and love, who stand out as individuals with souls.

As a grown man, Vance talks to some of the high-school teachers in his home town. “They want us to be shepherds to these kids,” one teacher says, “but no one wants to talk about the fact that many of them are raised by wolves.” Conservative reviewers have quoted this sentence, using it to encapsulate, accurately, Vance’s conviction that public institutions can only do so much for kids from broken homes. And yet, when Vance thinks about his own mother, father, and grandparents, he doesn’t think of them as “wolves” but as human beings with free wills and noble intentions, struggling to overcome their own upbringings. He recalls stories about his mother’s life in her parents’ household:
Their constant fighting and alcoholism must have taken its toll on her. Even when they were children, the fighting seemed to affect my aunt and mother differently. While [my aunt] would plead with her parents to calm down, or provoke her father in order to take the heat off her mother, Mom would hide, or run away, or collapse on the floor with her hands over her ears. She didn’t handle it as well as her brother and sister.

“An important question for hillbillies like me,” Vance writes, is “How much is Mom’s life her own fault? Where does blame stop and sympathy begin?” His conclusions are equivocal. “Mom is no villain,” he thinks. “She tried desperately to be a good mother. . . . She tried to find happiness in love and work, but she listened too much to the wrong voices in her head.” At the same time, he continues, “Mom deserves much of the blame. No person’s childhood gives him or her a perpetual moral get-out-of-jail-free card.” In adulthood, he discovers, “There is room . . . for both anger at Mom for the life she chooses and sympathy for the childhood she didn’t.”

Since “Hillbilly Elegy” was published, in June, Vance has given many television interviews about the book, during which he speaks, as an unofficial spokesman for the white working class, about Donald Trump. (Many of Trump’s supporters, of course, are relatively affluent.) In one interview, Michael Smerconish, of CNN, pointed out the similarities between the ideas in “Hillbilly Elegy” and Barack Obama’s poorly received 2008 remarks about poor white voters. (“You go into these small towns in Pennsylvania and, like a lot of small towns in the Midwest, the jobs have been gone now for twenty-five years and nothing’s replaced them. . . . It’s not surprising then they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations.”) Hadn’t Obama been right, Smerconish asked—perhaps even “ahead of his time”?

Vance conceded that Obama’s comments had been “well-intentioned” and that he had named “legitimate” problems. Nonetheless, he said, Obama’s comments had lacked “sympathy.” Reading “Hillbilly Elegy,” you see what Vance means. Vance is after a certain kind of sympathy: sympathy among equals that doesn’t demean or condescend. Such sympathy can’t be deterministic and categorical. In fact, it must be a little judgmental; it must see the people to whom it’s extended as dignified individuals who retain their moral obligations. For Vance, it’s “anger at Mom for the life she chooses”—recognition of her present-day freedom—that makes “sympathy for the childhood she didn’t” meaningful and humane. That’s because sympathy that fails to recognize culpability also fails to recognize potentiality. It becomes a form of giving up. If you’re a politician representing a troubled community from afar, as many élite politicians must be, then it’s easy to fall into this sympathy trap. At best, you can be a well-intentioned but nonjudgmental—and, therefore, condescending—outsider. Only an insider can speak about his community with honest anguish. “Hillbilly Elegy” is especially compelling because Vance writes with the sorrowful judgment of a betrayed yet loyal son.

It’s through these back doors of memory and family history that “Hillbilly Elegy” arrives at its broadest subject: our hopelessly politicized approach to thinking about poverty. At least since the Moynihan Report, in 1965, Americans have tended to answer the question “Why are people poor?” by choosing one of two responses: they can either point to economic forces (globalization, immigration) or blame cultural factors (decaying families, lack of “grit”). These seem like two social-science theories about poverty—two hypotheses, which might be tested
empirically—but, in practice, they are more like political fairy tales. As Kelefa Sanneh wrote earlier this year, the choice between these two explanations has long been racialized. Working-class whites are said to be poor because of outsourcing; inner-city blacks are imagined to be holding themselves back with hip-hop. The implicit theory is that culture comes from within, and so can be controlled by individuals and communities, whereas economic structures exert pressures from without, and so are beyond the control of those they affect.

This theory is useful to politicians, because political ideologies function by identifying some people as powerless and others as powerful. The truth, though, is that the “culture vs. economics” dyad is largely a fantasy. We are neither prisoners of our economic circumstances nor lords of our cultures, able to reshape them at will. It would be more accurate to say that cultural and economic forces act, with entwined and equal power, on and through all of us—and that we all have an ability, limited but real, to harness or resist them. When we pursue education, we improve ourselves both “economically” and “culturally” (and in other ways); conversely, there’s nothing distinctly and intrinsically “economic” or “cultural” about the problems that afflict poor communities, such as widespread drug addiction or divorce. (If you lose your job, get divorced, and become an addict, is your addiction “economic” or “cultural” in nature?) When we debate whether such problems have a fundamentally “economic” or “cultural” cause, we aren’t saying anything meaningful about the problems. We’re just arguing—incoherently—about whether or not people who suffer from them deserve to be blamed for them. (We know, meanwhile, that the solutions—many, partial, and overlapping—aren’t going to be exclusively “economic” or “cultural” in nature, either.)

It’s odd, when you think about it, that a question a son might ask about his mother—“Where does blame stop and sympathy begin?”—is at the center of our collective political life. And yet, as American inequality has grown, that question has come to be increasingly important. When Rod Dreher asked Vance to explain the appeal of Trump to poor whites, Vance cited the fact that Trump “criticizes the factories shipping jobs overseas” while energetically defending white, working-class culture against “the condescenders” who hold it in contempt. Another way of putting this is that, for the past eight years, the mere existence of Barack Obama—a thriving African-American family man and a successful product of the urban meritocracy—has implied that the problems of poor white Americans are “cultural”; Trump has shifted their afflictions into the “economic” column. For his supporters, that is enough.

Vance is frustrated not just by this latest turn of the wheel but by the fact that the wheel keeps turning. It’s true that, by criticizing “hillbilly culture,” “Hillbilly Elegy” reverses the racial polarity in our debate about poverty; it’s also true that, by arguing that the problems of the white working class are partly “cultural,” the book strikes a blow against Trumpism. And yet it would be wrong to see Vance’s book as yet another entry in our endless argument about whether this or that group’s poverty is caused by “economic” or “cultural” factors. “Hillbilly Elegy” sees the “economics vs. culture” divide as a dead metaphor—a form of manipulation rather than explanation more likely to conceal the truth than to reveal it. The book is an understated howl of protest against the racialized blame game that has, for decades, powered American politics and confounded our attempts to talk about poverty.
Often, after a way of talking has obviously outlived its usefulness, a period of inarticulateness ensues; it's not yet clear how we should talk going forward. “Hillbilly Elegy” doesn't provide us with a new way of talking about poverty in post-globalization America. It does, however, suggest that it's our collective job to figure one out. As individuals, we must stop thinking about American poverty in an imaginary way; we must abandon the terms of the argument we’ve been having—terms designed to harness our feelings of blame and resentment for political ends, and to make us feel either falsely blameless or absurdly self-determining. “I don’t know what the answer is, precisely, but I know it starts when we stop blaming Obama or Bush or faceless companies and ask ourselves what we can do to make things better,” Vance writes. “We hillbillies need to wake the hell up.” As do the rest of us.