

Book Review

Vance, J.D. (2016). *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Review by Paul Theobald

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On the opening page of *Hillbilly Elegy*, author J. D. Vance confesses that he finds the idea of publishing his memoir, at age 31, “somewhat absurd.” Humbly, he shares, “I’ll be the first to admit that I have accomplished nothing great in my life, certainly nothing that would justify a complete stranger paying money to read about it.... I wrote this book because I’ve achieved something quite ordinary, which doesn’t happen to most kids who grew up like me” (p. 1). The book is the story of one kid’s rise from poverty, one kid’s victory over long odds; in short, it is a success story. Americans have always demonstrated an appetite for success stories—particularly when the main character is White. Still, the popularity of this title, especially on college campuses, is nothing short extraordinary. A quick perusal came up with a number of universities that have designated the book as a common read on campus, including the University of Wisconsin, Middle Tennessee State University, Miami University of Ohio, the University of Denver, and many others that have brought J. D. Vance to campus to speak. Evidence even suggests that a Ron Howard-directed movie is in the works.

What explains this book’s level of popularity? It’s an intriguing question. My assessment is that it represents a clear example of the distance that this country, and particular its universities, have moved from earlier connections to the U.S. rural experience. In short, we are losing critical intellectual leverage over what life is like in the rural United States, due largely to scholarly inattention and the slow, ceaseless demographic shift to suburbanization. In the wake of these developments, a happy rural story—an easy read—emerges, and its popularity goes through the roof.

Of course, the book’s timing was fortuitous. Published in the year Americans elected a completely unqualified

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individual as president, a man with nothing in common with the White working class, many bought the book believing Vance would provide some answers. He doesn’t. His self-proclaimed contribution is to suggest that White working-class poverty is not so much a structural issue created by deliberate policy choices, but a cultural issue created by a propensity to neglect personal responsibility. Near the end of the book, Vance confesses his conservative leanings, although the confession was hardly needed. Throughout the book Vance shared the usual conservative laments—the unemployed individual eating steak Vance paid for with taxes, the unemployed kid walking around with a cell phone that Vance could not afford, the unemployed father of eight children with several different women, the co-worker with a pregnant girlfriend whose attendance at a \$13-an-hour job was erratic to the point that he was fired. Numerous anecdotes, to be sure, the kind one frequently hears when tuned into Fox News.

Vance grew up in the Ohio rust belt city of Middletown, although his roots are Appalachian—a descendant of a long line of Scots-Irish rural dwellers. Hillbillies, he calls them. A derogatory term, to be sure, but as Vance notes, since he is one of them, he can use it (we hear the same argument by Blacks who use the n-word). His parents split up when he was very young, and his mother was still struggling with drug addiction at the time the book was published. His grandparents, who raised Vance and while doing so eventually achieved something like a middle-class lifestyle, had quirks of their own. His grandfather (papaw) was a raging alcoholic, and his grandmother (mamaw) was prone to violence. They were, nevertheless, very loving guardians and carefully protective of their grandson.

The subtitle to *Hillbilly Elegy* is “A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis.” The book is centrally concerned with Vance’s family, and it was and is a troubled one. What is curious about the subtitle, however, is his clear attempt to extend the analysis beyond his family to the culture of White rural dwellers, generally. He explains:

Nobel-winning economists worry about the decline of the industrial Midwest and the hollowing

out of the economic core of working whites. What they mean is that manufacturing jobs have gone overseas and middle-class jobs are harder to come by for people without college degrees. Fair enough—I worry about these things, too. But this book is about something else: what goes on in the lives of real people when the industrial economy goes south. It's about reacting to bad circumstances in the worst way possible. It's about a culture that increasingly encourages social decay instead of counteracting it. (p. 7)

That is quite a pronouncement from someone who offers no academic argument to support it. But it is a pronouncement that will undoubtedly warm the heart of every industrialist who benefits from the status quo. It renders Vance what I have called in the past a “fast track scholar”—an individual who finds a way to publish a message that those with power want to hear, messages like the media are liberal; or there is no such thing as global warming; or, as in the case of Bill Cosby, Black people have only themselves to blame for their circumstances. A Yale law degree notwithstanding, Vance is not an academic. Neither was Bill Cosby when his book, *Come on, People* (2007), made it to the New York Times best sellers list. Cosby condemned Black culture as something that encourages social decay—an eerily similar message with a very similar embrace from those who profit from the status quo.

The stock answer for the ascendancy of Donald Trump is the large schism between “coastal elites” and the White working class. While coastal elites were concerned about “identity politics,” the White working class was worried about jobs. Vance tries to feed this simplistic narrative, but he is tripped up by his argument that the problem is not primarily the availability of jobs; it is a lack of personal responsibility. There are many contradictions in *Hillbilly Elegy*. For example, at times Vance seems quite proud of his rural heritage, but he cannot take it too far without impugning his argument.

The end result is a book that will feed already-prevalent stereotypes about the shortcomings of rural dwellers—their backward ways, their uneducated politics, their willingness to live in poverty because they lack the wherewithal to do anything about it. For rural people everywhere, not just those in Appalachia, the success of *Hillbilly Elegy* is a most unfortunate development. The fact that a significant number of colleges and universities are giving legitimacy to the work may be even more unfortunate.

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