




11-8-2017

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

Laina Farhat-Holzman
lfarhat102@aol.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr>

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Farhat-Holzman, Laina (2017) "J. D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*. HarperCollins, 2016.," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 77 : No. 77 , Article 16.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol77/iss77/16>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Comparative Civilizations Review* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

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

Reviewed by Laina Farhat-Holzman

The growing gap in the traditional trajectory from poverty to middle class may have less to do with color than with culture. We can see during this present election process the anger and distress of poor white men, flocking to the rallies of candidate Donald Trump. These men, who were once doing well during the post-WWII era, when our country was a manufacturing giant, are now victims of a changing economy.

Their fathers, working in these factories, supported families and sent children to college, thanks to strong unions and good industry profits. But as the US helped the rest of the world to recover from their wartime disasters and helped open up China, some of our industries couldn't compete.

Lesser-educated white men found themselves competing with black men for jobs in the diminishing industries. Even more insulting to many of them was competition from women. Add to this a flood of immigrants, some taking agricultural work that nobody else wanted, and others arriving with skills that were welcomed by the newer industries.

J. D. Vance admits in his Introduction that it is absurd for a 31-year-old to write a memoir, usually the fruit of a distinguished long life. However, his memoir tracks an anomaly: a child from a dysfunctional "hillbilly" family growing up poor in a rust-belt Ohio town whose steel industry had gone to China, a child who managed not only to go to college, but to get a law degree from Yale University. His memoir, however, is less about his achievement than about the culture of failure and violence that darkened his childhood.

Although his focus is on the Scots-Irish who people West Virginia and Kentucky (greater Appalachia) who then migrated to the mid-west industrial towns, his observations apply similarly to other groups living in poverty: Blacks in inner cities or as sharecroppers in the South, and second-generation Hispanics living in gang-poisoned urban enclaves.

All of these communities have good and bad traits. The Scots-Irish maintain an old-fashioned adherence to family, religion, and politics. They believe in loyalty and dedication to family and country. But on the negative side, they dislike and suspect those who differ from themselves in color, behavior, or how they talk.

Greater Appalachia has changed from Democrat to Republican since Reagan. Also, from the optimism of the working-class people achieving middle class, they have descended into low social mobility and poverty, divorce, and drug addiction. The entire region is in misery.

He notes that his people are more pessimistic about their futures than blacks and Latinos, many of whom suffer from poverty too. Social isolation that derived from Appalachia has been passed down to their children. Their religion has changed from the earlier Methodism that offered mutual aid to highly emotional churches that offer no support. Many have dropped out of the labor force as coal mining and factories declined, choosing not to relocate for better opportunities.

He notes: “Our men suffer from a peculiar crisis of masculinity in which some of the very traits that our culture inculcates make it difficult to succeed in a changing world.” Is this not the same crisis in masculinity suffered by inner-city Blacks and Hispanics? This crisis is leading to a rise in divorces, one-parent families, and a plague of irresponsibility among men. The Protestant Ethic seems to have flown over this region leaving many without a future. The consequence is dysfunction, violence (quick fists, knives, and guns), and drugs now joining alcohol abuse as a killer of stability.

We, as participants in our governance, need to understand the nature of this “White Men’s Rage,” as well as its counterpart in the “Black Lives” movement. As I read this book, I see that much of this rage is misdirected, but these angry men (and it is mostly men) are not seeing this.

The patriotism that used to characterize this population has declined and been replaced by distrust of government. Vance notes, for example, that trust of the media that used to unite us (newspapers, journals, radio, and television) has been replaced by a culture of internet conspiracy theories instead. The widespread belief that our president is not America born or is a Muslim is more a reflection of envy than racism.

None of Vance’s high school classmates attended an Ivy League school. “Barack Obama attended two of them and excelled at both. He is brilliant, wealthy, and speaks like a constitutional law professor — which, of course he is. Nothing about him bears any resemblance to the people I admired growing up: His accent — clean, perfect, neutral — is foreign; his credentials are so impressive that they’re frightening; he made his life in Chicago, a dense metropolis; and he conducts himself with a confidence that comes from knowing that the modern American meritocracy was built for him. Of course, Obama overcame adversity in his own right — adversity familiar to many of us — but that was long before any of us knew him.”

This subculture does not believe that the modern American meritocracy is for them. And yet this one young man, J. D. Vance, through sheer luck, was able to survive his family's dysfunction. He was able to do this thanks to a pair of fiercely principled grandparents who pushed him to excel at school, attain a work ethic through part-time jobs and to serve in the Marine Corps. He argues that there is far too little mentoring of the young in working-class or inner city populations — mentoring concerning the management of time, appearance, and money that is natural in Middle Class families.

Vance's book makes it possible to see the virtues and failings of people who might otherwise be known to us only when they hoot and holler at a Trump rally. Of course, some of their troubles are external: changes in technology, social norms, and global issues beyond their control. But Vance urges that the qualities that have shown themselves to be the best for us: loyalty, family love, responsibility, and industriousness, can go far to make a better future.