

What Does the White Working Class Want?

White Working Class: Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America,
by Joan C. Williams (Harvard Business Review Press, 2017)

Reviewed by Aditya Lodha

As this year's campaign season heats up, so inevitably will debate over what the shocking 2016 election results and the growing voter polarization since then mean for the rival parties' prospects. In the weeks immediately after Donald Trump was narrowly elected, the *Harvard Law Review* published an analysis of the results that quickly went viral. A University of California law professor, Joan Williams, wrote a harsh critique of the "class cluelessness" of so many of her fellow liberals that had alienated millions of their natural allies among blue-collar workers.

She has now much expanded those arguments in a book that may offer a healthy corrective to common, self-defeating ways of thinking about this country's current divisions. She aims to explore elite disregard towards the white working class and the ongoing repercussions of this perceived betrayal. Inspired by the examples of her white working class in-laws and drawing upon much sociological research, Williams makes her case in a simple, concise readable manner. The book tries to avoid gross simplifications and stereotypes to seriously tackle both sides of the issues covered. She discusses the notions held by most Americans about their financial standing, the erosion of the traditional middle class and the safety net, the value of higher education and of immigration. And she dives into the attitudes that these sectors hold towards each other and offers solutions, hopeful if often idealistic, in my opinion.

Full disclosure: I read this book as a non-immigrant alien whose sheer ability to afford an American education placed me amongst the top 5% of the population back home in India – or as Williams would term it - an "elite". Interestingly enough, however, my migration to the United States meant more than just a location change. Due to the value of the dollar here as compared to my homeland, I also migrated from the comforts of the urban upper class to a more modest, 20-hour part-time work-week life. Therefore, I feel like I read this book from one of the more unique perspectives; someone who can relate to both sectors of the population that Williams addresses: the elite as well as the working class. That made this book much more profound and enjoyable for me.

The book opens by addressing the blurring of lines between, first, elites' economic realities and their perception of themselves as part of the middle-class and, second, working class resentment of poor people. These two notions are, I believe, the crux of Williams' whole argument. The rich don't know how well-off they are, coming off as snobby and entitled, and the working class feel misunderstood as poor - a sharp dagger to their sense of pride. This is where the creation of a class culture comes from, and the division it causes is inevitable. Williams constantly asserts her opinion that most of the issues the U.S. faces today are in some form brought on by "class cluelessness" and "class callousness".

"Class is not just about money" she says, more than once. When I first read that statement, I was a bit confused, but it ultimately made complete sense to me. One's vocation and its perceived honor is far more important in most social situations and in defining class boundaries than the amount of money in their bank account. For example, a fireman or a police officer would be considered a far more respectable figure in society than someone who sold toilets for a living -

even though the latter may be earning a better wage. Furthermore, the relative power that the former has in society adds to their sense of belonging and pride. Their ability to influence, interact effectively and keep their head held high are all by-products of their self-perceived “honor”, and the class boundaries they live within are determined by society’s perception of their status and power.

Williams talks about the contempt that many in the white working class feel toward those “able-bodied poor” who rely on government safety net programs for their food, housing, health care and income supplements. Yet those just a notch above - consisting of the working class - are left out of these benefits. In most cases, they even live a poorer *quality* of life simply because they don’t qualify for certain benefits and this was sure to agitate anyone, especially considering their longer working hours and their tax burden for funding anti-poverty programs. For some, this deepens racial animosities – regardless of the fact that the majority of such programs’ recipients are white and that federal eligibility limits have stiffened markedly since the 1980s.

Among working class women, being a full-time housewife is often considered a luxury -- reminiscent of the old days and signifying a steady, honorable job for their spouse. And yet, “poor married mothers are more than twice as likely to be at home full-time.” These factors work in conjunction to deepen working class hostility against the poor. And insofar as they think that higher-income liberals look down upon them as little better than the poor, this fuels working class bitterness toward professionals who support safety net initiatives. At the same time however, the working class has also become more likely to reject government aid than the poor. Williams links this to traditional working class notions of honor, and their unwillingness to accept “hand-outs”. In a later chapter, Williams’ notes how this claimed independence from the public sector reflects the fact that most such people are unaware of government aid that they do take part in (Social Security, Medicare, unemployment benefits, etc.) and suggests that spreading awareness of the broad reach of government could play a corrective role in working class attitudes.

In one of my favorite sections of the book, Williams gives us her take on why the working class admires the super-rich but resents professionals -- and it makes total sense. One group is idolized on TV, and includes the likes of celebrities like Mark Cuban; a relatable, goofy, sports-loving “regular guy” billionaire, while the other includes your snarky boss who graduated from Harvard at the top of his class but struggles to get the printer working. The working class strive to be independent and not take orders, again a nod to the “honor” that Williams refers to. They view managers, doctors, lawyers and the rest of the professional elite as two-faced: putting on a front to meet some end. Even if professionals mostly support government programs and progressive taxation that disproportionately benefit average workers, most white workers suspect some ulterior motives, which the working class do not respect. They value “straight-talk,” something often stretched to its extremity by President Trump, but meriting their respect nonetheless.

If white working class Americans are unhappy with their current job status and security, then why don’t they move somewhere with better, more steady jobs? Williams argues that their immobility reflects a tendency to value continuous family ties more than a job. Since they do not find much self-value in their occupations, they seek their sense of identity within the local community where their roots lie. So for them, a change in location is just about equivalent to a misplaced sense of belonging. Furthermore, family ties help financially and logistically when it comes to childcare, and in working class families, where both parents are often working long shifts, such help is priceless.

Likewise, professionals often ask why working class whites still mostly don’t go to college. Williams gives several answers. One is the rising cost of even public colleges and the associated long-term debt incurred, especially if a working family’s income is just above the threshold of eligibility for student grants. “Of 38 top colleges, there were more

students from the top 1% of the income pool than the entire bottom 60%.” The kids of elites have access to unpaid internships and opportunities afforded to them due to the “broad entrepreneurial networks” set up by their parents, that most colleges expect on their application sheets. By putting forth these statistics and arguments, Williams perfectly highlights the fact that the working class are not simply in their positions due to a lack of trying, but suffer from structural forces that disallows them from competing with their elite counterparts.

In this light, Hilary Clinton’s presidential campaign has been held an example of elite cluelessness and disrespect of the working class, notably when she called a large chunk of Trump supporters a “basket of deplorables.” Getting thrown into the mix with racists, sexists and xenophobes offended many working class voters. Williams manages to highlight a perspective that seems to have been completely overlooked by Clinton’s team. My take on the author’s thoughts is that she doesn’t believe that most of them are racist (to a malicious degree anyway, as she argues that most of us are in some form racist), but rather have other, more basic priorities that they need to tend to before worrying about whether or not they are hurting one’s feelings. Despite Trump’s harsh public comments on Latino immigrants, many Hispanic citizens voted for him in the hope he would deliver on promises to protect their blue-collar jobs. Working class women voted for Trump to protect their husbands’ jobs, even though they might be opposed to his horrific actions against their gender. To bundle all working class whites into the same negative category was not just foolish, she stresses, but a fatal mistake by the Clinton team.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Williams’ book was her take on the concept of “disruption”. To the liberal elite – from college activists to high tech entrepreneurs -- disruption is a part of progression and is welcomed wholeheartedly. To the cab drivers, mine workers, TV repairmen and others of the working class, disruption means the loss of their jobs. The more they associate disruptive companies with “liberal” politics, the more they may automatically oppose that.

An interesting fact that Williams chose to include was that most pro-choice women were college graduates, while most pro-life women were married to blue collar men. She contends that a slogan such as “my body, my choice” is too exclusive and would be better replaced by something along the lines of “pro-choice, pro-child, pro-family”. No woman can really be opposed to family, and a healthy one at that. Perhaps understanding that the pro-choice decision is best for the family would appeal more to pro-life women. While it may be strange here to comment on this section of her book, it sheds light on one of Williams’ recurring themes: the need to find common ground. The more we have in common with someone who sits on the other side of the partisan divide, the more likely we are willing to hear them out and understand their perspective.

While Williams’ does manage to tackle the issues in this book with nuance and tact, it often seems that her solutions come from a very logical train of thought, often neglecting the complexity of the emotions that the people on the other side of the coin face. People like sexually harassed women, the LGBTQ community, immigrants who flee their country due to crime, war or climate pressures and seek refuge here. They must feel that their Trump-voting neighbors betrayed their personal safety for individualistic motives like “pride” or “honor”. I wish she had taken more time to address these groups as well.

Another flaw I noticed in her writing was her heavy reliance on personal experiences to form general hypotheses. To her credit, it did make the reading more pleasurable, but I wish she had used a broader set of evidence, as well as historical references to support her claims. For example, her seeming dismissal of unions as a progressive force likely stems from her father-in-law, who she mentions at the very beginning of the book. But statistical research shows that

when unions were most powerful in the 1940s – 1960s, the middle class surged and income growth was much more broadly shared than in the years since. This suggests that more pro-union policies could stand to benefit most Americans, and especially the working class.

In conclusion, while Williams’ does offer a rather fresh take on the current state of our country, the ultimate boiled-down rebrand of “empathy” seems too simple to be true. I agree with her that we suffer from a “relationship gone bad”, but I would have liked to see her offer proposals for legislative changes as well. I fear that too many Americans may be too uninformed, undermotivated or uncritically swayed by charismatic politicians to back fundamental change. Sometimes, a subtle push is what we might need at first, and it would be great to see someone like Williams offering some creative ideas on how we might go about achieving that.

Aditya Lodha is a sophomore Music major at Hofstra University

REGIONAL LABOR REVIEW, vol. 22, no.2 (Spring/Summer 2020).

© 2020 Center for the Study of Labor and Democracy, Hofstra University