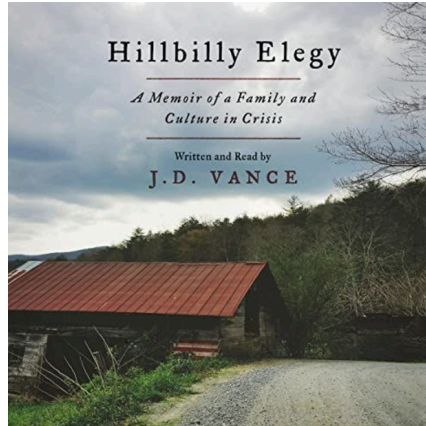


HILLBILLY ELEGY: A Memoir Of A Family And Culture in Crisis

J.D. Vance

London: William Collins, 2016, 2017
ISBN 9780008220563

Book reviewer: Sevket AKYILDIZ¹



United States Vice President James David Vance published *Hillbilly Elegy* in 2016 to explain the plight of the White working-class in the United States, particularly in the Appalachian and Midwestern regions. The book is a memoir about Vance's family, notably his grandmother, mother, and sister—and traces Vance's journey from school to the Marines to Yale Law School and his marriage (in 2014). Though the study is not overtly political or, for that matter, contains any profound political philosophy, it nevertheless touches upon social and economic themes of deprivation and alienation. Additionally, the book's content is comparable with the lived reality of

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This book review is dedicated to Mr. Nadir Akyildiz (BA, CELTA), England, for his kind support, discussions about life, and sharing over five decades his generous nature, anecdotes and sense of humour.

the White working-class in other English-speaking countries, including the United Kingdom.

Vance is a journalist, attorney, and Marine veteran and represented Ohio in the U.S. Senate between 2023 and 2025. *Hillbilly Elegy* investigates why the U.S. White working-class is stagnating socially and economically in the context of the neo-liberal capitalist world. Indeed, this is one theme of the book. Central to understanding the White working-class is Vance's explanation of their culture; this includes his observations about drink, drugs, attitudes to employment and retaining employment, education, child upbringing, family breakdowns, labour migration, and masculinity. Conversely, while the U.S. Black, Asian and Latin working-class communities have their share of social problems, they generally do better in the social progress indices than their fellow White working-class citizens.

The second theme of the book is Vance's family. As to be expected, this is central to his memoir, and he details his family roots and the colourful characters who helped shape his sense of Self, values, attitudes and norms in a very honest and frank way. Originating from the Appalachian region and growing up in Middletown, Ohio, Vance was immersed in the White working-class culture, both the good and the bad sides. His grandmother, mother, and sister are strong and influential characters in his life. He was raised somewhat by his grandmother (Mamaw) and elder sister, Lindsay, because, sadly, his mother became addicted to drink and drugs. Noted are his grandparent's values of hard work and self-reliance, while his mother's generation was '*consumerist, isolated, angry, distrustful*' (p. 148). Both generations love their country, but the latter are sceptical of the political elites and the media (p. 189). He writes that he should have turned out, like many of his fellow working-class counterparts, with social problems. Still, with the support of family members (his grandparents and elder sister), teachers and mentors, he navigated, despite setbacks, life's challenges to become a middle-class, white-collar citizen very much embedded in the American Dream.

The third element of the book picks up on the above point and discusses Vance's realisation that he would need to rethink and re-strategise his identity politics to move on from the problematic side of his origins. Somewhat against the odds, this he achieves through education, the Marines, and Yale Law School. The final chapters (12 to 15) address his long struggle as a young man to overcome his past and discuss the impact of trauma and childhood emotional wounds on the Self. Due to past trauma and a working-class fight or flight mentality, Vance says, '*I realized that those wounds never truly heal, even for me*' (p. 237).

Also expressed is the need to be open to change and opportunities. Vance chooses to move mentally and geographically to seek education, employment and one's interpretation of the 'good life' or the American Dream. This is admirable when we consider he 'succeeded' without the middle-class safety net of 'the bank of mum and dad', private tutors, financial inheritance, networking skills, and bourgeois values. Altogether, it is labelled the social capital that eases many middle-class

young people through institutions and society. Vance requests the working-class to be proactive: *'This is why, whenever people ask me what I'd most like to change about the white working class, I say "The feeling that our choices don't matter"'* (p. 177).

The book's strengths focus on the debate about working-class identity politics in the face of social transformation brought about by neoliberal capitalism. The crises of the working-class are evident in the U.S., the UK and Europe, and Vance's observations are comparable across borders. This point makes the work relevant to our comprehension of President Trump's two election victories, the United Kingdom's Brexit (2016), and the rise of the far right in the U.S. and Europe. Equally significant are Vance's positive comments about his grandmother and her support for his education and for him to move on from the post-industrial working-class culture she had been born into, which had, in many ways, held her back. Interestingly, Vance appears to connect with the world beyond his social and cultural environment only during his time in the Marines and studying at Ohio State University and Yale. Before then, his self-memoir does not reveal or discuss much exposure to cultural pluralism and diversity.

Looking at the book critically, Vance neither mentions the Cherokee people of the Appalachians nor other First Nations peoples of the Midwest U.S. Due to European settlers, America's First Nations experienced loss, disempowerment, and cultural crises. (Indeed, for a study about belonging, Vance fails to mention the Appalachian folklore or flora and fauna.) His starting point and focus are the Scots-Irish colonial settlers of Appalachia who arrived from the 1600s onwards.

Vance's book is clearly argued, well-written and suitable for all readers. Finally, in consideration of Vance's deep experience of poverty and disadvantage, it is indeed reasonable to ask: will he use his position as an elite political actor in the world's most prosperous country to help young people from all backgrounds and ethnicities in the U.S. to access the American Dream or some version of the good life based on study, hard work, and meritocracy? Likewise, will he assist young people globally in progressing educationally and socially? Time will tell.

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