

Elegy of the basket of deplorables

book review:

**J. D. Vance (2016), *Hillbilly Elegy. A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*,
London: William Collins, 272 pages**

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The best-selling 2016 book "Hillbilly Elegy. A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis" by J. D. Vance is promoted as "the political book of the year", "a great insight into Trump and Brexit", and the triumphs of right wing populism. However, it does not offer this insight. While cementing class stereotypes, it simply tells another Disney story of American Dream.

Still, it is a story worth reading, as it gives voice and subjectivity to the inaudible share of our populations, thus filling in the gaps in our understanding of the social landscapes across the globe. After all, hillbillies live – and vote – not only in the US, but also in the UK, France, Poland, and other countries. Admittedly, for them, life has never been the bed of roses.

The author of "Hillbilly Elegy" is the epitome of a contemporary American Dream, having risen from what might be viewed as pathology to sufficient riches and – thanks to the book and Ivy League education at Yale – intellectual avowal. In "Hillbilly Elegy" he tells the story of his 30+ life and recounts the wider narrative of one particular social group within the American socio-demographic pot, one that is anything but melting. "Americans call them hillbillies, rednecks, or white trash", Vance recounts, but for the author, these people are above all "neighbors, friends, and family".

Vance's hillbillies are descendants of Scots-Irish immigrants that arrived in the New World in the 18th century and inhabited mostly the Appalachia mountains region. "To these folks, poverty is the family tradition". But not only poverty – also entanglement in the broader vicious circle of household violence, divorce, addiction, inferiority complex and "learned helplessness", as the author diagnoses.

The history starts with his grandparents – the most important figures in his life – whom he calls tenderly Papaw and Mamaw. They did not graduate from high school themselves, however, similarly to many other hillbillies they found another shortcut to escape poverty. They were transplanted from Jackson, Kentucky, to Middletown, Ohio where thanks to the local employer Armco Steel, "an economic savior", they rose "from the hills of Kentucky into America's middle class" (p. 55). Armco allowed them to live their

version of American Dream of upward economic mobility that guaranteed economic security, also to their children and grandchildren.

They needed it, since Vance's mother was not as lucky. She capitulated to a living of the hardest of hillbilly biographies – that of drug addiction, depression with suicidal attempts, physical and verbal violence, financial problems, and a parade of fleeting husbands and boyfriends that never fulfilled the promise of becoming real father figures to J.D. and his sister.

In these circumstances, the spirited grandparents' couple of the Papaw – a "*violent drunk*" and Mamaw – a socially self-isolated "*violent non-drunk*" offered to their grandkids much more than financial sustenance. They served as actual parents and offered a backdrop of sustainable love and care, nurturing – in their own rough ways – their self-confidence, while underlining the pre-eminence of education and work.

Therefore, it is the grandparents that most of all deserve credit for the self-fulfilling prophecy of J.D.'s Mamaw to spare him. And this one goes: "you can take the boy out of Kentucky, but you can't take Kentucky out of the boy". But you can take Kentucky out of your grandchildren, if you are fortunate.

Escaping from this vicious circle is rare but the author – due to a string of good choices aided by his grandmother's guidance – has managed to achieve it. Despite the situation of steel blue collar industry was not yet dire when he was growing up, it was obvious that the American Dream does not mean perpetuating the status quo. "To move up was to move on. That required college" (p. 56).

Still there was no pressure to take this path – neither from the families, nor from teachers, nor peers. The author was lucky enough to be pushed towards education by his grandparents, while most of his likes have not. In the end, some 1/5 of Middletown teens don't make it to the end of high school and virtually no one will make it to the college graduation, as J.D. Vance indicates.

At the same time, the situation of "Armco's of the world" has utterly changed – they have been going out of business, along with their employees who lack skills fitting the modern economy. And so, since 1980s, the heart of American industry situated in the Midwest and the Great Lakes region – including J.D. Vance's hometown of Middletown, Ohio – experienced deindustrialization, followed by unemployment, population impoverishment and loss, as well as the urban decay. Since then these areas have been symbolically referred to as the Rust Belt.

So, J.D. Vance's peers have no Armco Steel to save them, as it was the case with previous generations. J.D.'s grandparents had jobs and money to spend as well as places where to spend this money; today, none of the aforementioned is left. What remains is a hopeless vicious circle.

The author portrays the resulting Rust Belt's prevalence of "welfare queens" who are however neither black nor de facto even female. That's what the culture of hard work distorted into. He admits that the "welfare queen" has become an unfair label for "the lazy black mom living on the dole", while this existential paradigm of living is nothing reserved for this sociological category. Still "[p]eople talk about hard work all the time.

You can walk through a town where 30 percent of the young men work fewer than twenty hours a week and find not a single person aware of his own laziness", still harbouring resentment against the world.

The author was giving away similarly pessimistic potential, however, thanks to a good grandparental guidance he managed to transcend his hillbilly predestination and to graduate from Yale Law School, and then to become a successful Silicon Valley venture capitalist with a good loving marriage and two dogs.

All's well that ends well. Why then for him only?

The author does not attempt to provide rationalisation to most of his and statistical observations. Therefore, it is difficult to call the book anything close to a great insight into the successes of the right-wing populism. Still, it constitutes an important raw material that a perceptive reader might attempt at synthesizing. It is the book's disadvantage, even if the author forewarns the reader already in his introduction that "This book is not an academic study" (p. 8). Why a disadvantage? As the book provides a description of a very narrow segment of the society and despite it is portrayed with sympathy and kind understanding, now its class label is stamped. As not only "the limits of my *language* mean the limits of my *world*" to quote Ludwig Wittgenstein, but also labels limit perception, and also self-perception.

Provided bits and pieces of the "Hillbilly Elegy", we see the story of a tribe of people that learned that everything comes from the outside, like the aforementioned Armco-like companies that "built this fucking town" – to quote the author's Papaw. And its clone-firms have built so many other manufacturing cities of America in the golden ages of 20th century industrialization. Then, the opposite process of deindustrialization deprived manufacturers of their jobs leaving them empty-handed. Having been used to externalization of origins of their fortunes (God, America) and misfortunes (others), they willingly appropriated the scapegoating narrative of Donald Trump who searched for ones responsible for their misfortunes in anyone but themselves – i.e. in his predecessor, political opponents, (other than his) elites, and so on...

It is difficult to speak about Hillbillies' responsibility, indeed. The US has never been bed of roses to them, and lacking effective policies to offer them soft-landing and vocational training at the times of deindustrialization, they have been indeed orphaned by the state. Then sneered at by compatriots, with everyone telling them how they should live. No one likes being patronized, even if it is by Michele Obama (instructing the obvious, i.e. that junk food is unhealthy – which the author promptly reproaches her for).

Vance also does not offer guidance but more or less vaguely suggests few insider's policy solutions. In his view, social services system should not separate kids from their families (even if it separates them from parents), even if they were by most means dysfunctional. Such a move should be always a last-resort solution.

He also speaks against educational ghettoization, where children from impoverished neighbourhoods go to classes together separated from kids from better homes, while mixing them together might motivate some of them to rise up".

Still, in his view "Public policy can help, but there is no government that can fix these problems for us". That opinion would relieve authorities from responsibility for its most vulnerable people. Still, it is just an opinion of one lucky guy that managed to make it to the American Dream. Little surprise, taking the United States have always been about self-made individual attainment.

However, this approach has left behind too many of American people so far, giving excuses for socially-blind policies. Even the author admits that "the opportunity was not spread evenly over the whole country. [...] It was in the South, the Rust Belt, and Appalachia where poor kids really struggled" (p. 242). Consequently, no institution is more endowed to coordinate nation-wide policies disseminating upward mobility than central government?

Finally, the formal value of the book. As was already mentioned, the book – despite its deficiencies – offers a good raw material to work on. However, this raw material is not raw enough as it has been channelled mostly by a round, characterless non-language¹ of a corporate white collar. The page turner moments were juicy quotes from Vance's Mamaw who did not beat around the bush. On the other hand, there was too much moaning and going in circles of the author, who aptly mentions at the beginning, that what he has accomplished is "nothing that would justify a complete stranger paying money to read about it". As a reader I expected much more, starting from better editing that would spare me constant repetitions. Still, this book is worth reading, as Hillbilly is a worldwide universal category of people stuck in a negative spiral of bad or absent policies and misfortune, who however deserve our attention. So far, they have been voiceless, but they speak with their feet in elections, and they could really be heard thanks to Vance's book. Now, it is time to take them into account.

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¹ I refer to the Marc Augé concept of "non-places" which are anthropological spaces where people remain anonymous and anyone can feel "at home" there, regardless of their actual background. (see: Augé M. (1995), *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, New-York - London).