

## Featured Review

### Hillbilly Exile

ALISON COLLIS GREEN

*Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis.* By J. D. Vance. New York: HarperCollins, 2016. 272 pp., \$27.99, hardback, ISBN 978-0-06-230054-6.

It's not easy to be a hillbilly exile. I have been lonely for the mountains for years now, and I expect I will remain so for years more. In my deepest nostalgia, I recall the North Carolina Appalachians where I grew up as a place of wild, wooded freedom. Barbed-wire fences were merely decorations to clamber over or walk past in my long wanderings, sometimes solitary, sometimes with my father as guide and companion. I knew all my neighbors. I was minutes from most of my extended family, and if at no other time saw my cousins each year on cemetery Decoration Days.

I have been separated from the mountains for twenty years now; J. D. Vance has been separated from them for two generations. Yet still he calls Breathitt County, Kentucky, home. Vance grew up in southwestern Ohio, where his maternal grandparents moved in the 1940s, but he traces his roots to his maternal grandparents' Kentucky coal country hometown of Jackson, where much of his extended family still lives, and where he spent childhood weekends and summers. Vance recalls his great-grandmother's three-bedroom "mountain homestead" as "the backdrop for the fondest memories of my childhood," a place where he, too, ran wild in the woods, sometimes alone and sometimes alongside a crew of cousins (11). For Vance, the mountains were also a refuge from a mercurial, unreliable, and addicted mother, who rarely joined her parents and her children on their sojourns home.

But, as Vance puts it, "we hill people aren't doing very well," and this book is after all titled *Hillbilly Elegy* and not *Hillbilly Nostalgia*. It is not a book about the mountains but instead about a particular subset of mountain people—about, as the subtitle puts it, "a family and culture in crisis."

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And, really, the book might best be titled something more like *Hillbilly Exile*, both because of Vance's childhood distant from the mountains and because of his fascination with the notion of a Scots-Irish ethnic and geographic identity that persists long after the mountains have receded into the rearview. Often empathetic with individual poverty and suffering, Vance indicts "a culture that increasingly encourages social decay instead of counteracting it" and a concomitant individual sense that "you have little control over your life and a willingness to blame everyone but yourself" (7). He has little patience with structural critiques, emphasizing instead the individual and cultural circumstances of poverty.

A self-professed conservative critic of Donald Trump, Vance has become a popular explainer of poor white culture, his book rocketing past popular and critically acclaimed academic new releases like Carol Anderson's *White Rage* (Bloomsbury, 2016), Katherine Cramer's *Politics of Resentment* (Chicago, 2016), Arlie Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land* (New Press, 2016), and Nancy Isenberg's *White Trash* (Viking, 2016). At thirty-two, Vance has just announced his intent to move from a cushy post in a Silicon Valley investment firm to Columbus, Ohio, where he will join with John Kasich advisor Jai Chabria to start a nonprofit called Our Ohio Renewal, focused on the opioid epidemic, family stability, and class mobility. When asked about running for office, Vance disassembles.<sup>1</sup> This book, then, is not just Vance's memoir but also his introduction to the voting public and a preview of his approach to policies that would presumably focus on rural and working-class Americans.

Vance's outlook is rooted not in broader Appalachian, rural, or working-class history, but in his own experiences and his observations about the people around him. Vance declares in his introduction that as an adolescent, he "very desperately wanted to believe" that "If only [working-class whites] had better access to jobs, other parts of their lives would improve as well." But "experience can be a difficult teacher," and this was neither Vance's own experience nor his observation of those around him, people he served and worked alongside in jobs as a grocery store clerk and in a tile store (5).

Vance's story begins with his grandparents, who married and left Jackson for Middletown when they were just seventeen and fourteen.

1. Dave Ghose, "The *Hillbilly Elegy* Author Will Make German Village His New Home," *Our Columbus Monthly*, January 18, 2017. <http://www.columbusmonthly.com/lifestyle/20170118/jd-vance-will-move-to-columbus> (Accessed March 12, 2017); Henry J. Gomez, "Hillbilly *Elegy* Author J. D. Vance Talks about the Donald Trump Wave and His New Ohio Venture," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, December 2, 2016. [http://www.cleveland.com/politics/index.ssf/2016/12/hillbilly\\_elegy\\_author\\_jd\\_vanc.html](http://www.cleveland.com/politics/index.ssf/2016/12/hillbilly_elegy_author_jd_vanc.html) (Accessed March 12, 2017).

Vance's grandfather found a good job at Armco Steel (now AK Steel) and made enough money to buy a nice house and a succession of new cars. If his grandparents were not wealthy, neither were they poor. Their son and their youngest daughter likewise found relative success, but Vance's mother, a nurse, struggled with addictions to alcohol and then prescription drugs. She was unstable during his childhood and an occasionally violent addict as he grew older. Vance and his older sister bounced with her through a succession of partners, except when he lived briefly with his biological father, with whom he reconnected as a middle schooler. Finally, Vance's grandmother intervened, and he lived with her through his last two and a half years of high school, where he turned a failing performance into a passable one. Then, on a recruiter's promise that "They'll teach you about leadership, and they'll turn you into a disciplined young man," Vance chose the Marines over college (156). He returned from a stint in Iraq to college at Ohio State University, and from there launched himself to Yale Law School, where he found coursework relatively easy and the social world of the elite utterly baffling.

*Hillbilly Elegy* is in part an earnest attempt to make sense of those two worlds and the disconnect between them—in Vance's words, to explain "what happens in the lives of the poor and the psychological impact that spiritual and material poverty has on their children" (2). The phrasing here is important, and the echoes of Michael Harrington's *The Other America* (Macmillan, 1962) clear: poverty is not just an economic problem in Vance's estimation, but also—indeed, primarily—a cultural one, and even a spiritual one. Like Harrington's work, Vance's is aimed not at its subjects but at middle-class and elite readers, and at policymakers. Vance's personal attitude toward the poor vacillates between disgust and empathy, responses on display throughout the book but most telling in its opening and closing anecdotes.

At the outset, Vance describes a teenaged couple that worked with him at a tile store. The young woman, pregnant, "missed about every third day of work and never gave advance notice." She "lasted no more than a few months." The young man, failing to recognize how lucky he was to have a rare \$13.00 per hour job, lashed out when he was fired for absenteeism and long breaks: "How could you do this to me? Don't you know I've got a pregnant girlfriend?" he whined (6). Vance's disdain gives way to empathy and sorrow in his closing vignette, about fifteen-year-old Brian. Brian is an adolescent Kentucky boy much like Vance's younger self, with a drug-addicted (and now deceased) mother but without the economic support of grandparents like Vance's. And this boy—unlike

Vance's younger self—is hungry. Yet the conclusions are the same. “You can't ignore stories like this when you talk about equal opportunity,” Vance writes of the pregnant teenage couple (7). And of Brian, after expressing hope that the boy finds a supportive church and community empowerment: “Public policy can help, but there is no government that can fix these problems for us” (255).

In his introduction, Vance characterizes the Appalachian poor—often but not always a stand-in for poor whites more generally in the book—as culturally distinct. Indeed, he declares, “the Scots-Irish are one of the most distinctive subgroups in America.” Their loyalty to family and country, their suspicion of outsiders, and their notorious tempers separate them from other whites and minorities even within Appalachia. Those traits also travel with Appalachians in exile. Apparently borrowing from long-standing mountain stereotypes, as well as from David Hackett Fischer's *Albion's Seed* (Oxford, 1989) and Colin Woodard's odd and controversial *American Nations* (Viking, 2011), Vance describes “greater Appalachia” as both the mountains and the broader region from which its migrants traveled for jobs in the Great Migration, where “hillbilly values spread widely along with hillbilly people” (21).

In his rendering, these values at their best can create people like Vance and his grandmother, determinedly independent and successful through sheer stubbornness. At their worst, they can create people like his mother, isolated from those around her, pessimistic, and prone to addiction. Indeed, pessimism and isolation are two themes that Vance returns to throughout the book, the pillars of the culture of poverty. He cites studies on concentrated poverty to show the increased isolation of the white working class from the middle class, and he speaks anecdotally of their isolation from one another, which he attributes to animosity to outsiders, weak churches, and broken families. He writes repeatedly of students who do not aspire to graduate from high school or college, of employees who do not work to keep their jobs, of poor people like the pregnant teen couple who blame others for their suffering. Though he does not use the term, Vance attributes this attitude to a sense of fatalism that has long been a stereotype of Appalachian identity. Near the close of the book, Vance writes, “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’” (177).

Vance is by turns frustrated with the people he loves and sensitive about the challenges they face. It is a reasonable response to his childhood, and certainly one that resonates with many of us who long for a

hometown where we have chosen not to make a life—Appalachian or otherwise. Yet the problems Vance locates in personality and ethnicity have clear historical and structural explanations, ones that readers and contributors to this journal have done as much to examine as about anyone. Indeed, Vance cites several historians in the book's twenty-one brief footnotes, among them Jack Temple Kirby and Carl Feather on migration from the Appalachians.

Vance does not appear interested in Appalachian history apart from Scots-Irish psychology. The vibrant field of Appalachian studies gets one nod, in a footnote to the edited volume *Appalachian Odyssey* by Phillip J. Obermiller, Thomas E. Wagner, and E. Bruce Tucker (Praeger, 2000). But foundational work by scholars such as Ronald Eller, Henry Shapiro, and David Whisnant on Appalachian culture and its grounding in the long history of extraction, labor violence, and class antagonism does not make an appearance. Nor does deeply relevant recent work like Eller's *Uneven Ground* (Kentucky, 2008) or Bob Hutton's *Bloody Breathitt* (Kentucky, 2013)—about Vance's home county! Vance emphasizes the spiritual uniformity and poverty of Appalachia, a notion challenged by work like Bill Leonard's classic *Christianity in Appalachia* (Tennessee, 1999) and Joseph Witt's new *Religion and Resistance in Appalachia* (Kentucky, 2016). As a result, the Appalachians appear monochromatic, both in their ethnic heritage and in their culture and economics.

Yet, as historians Connie Park Rice, Marie Tedesco, John Inscoc, and many others have shown, the Appalachians were never singularly Scots-Irish, and certainly are not so now, even as most parts of the Central Appalachians remain majority white. This is not merely an accidental condition: it is one steeped in a history of racial violence in the region, fostered by coal companies and other extractive and manufacturing enterprises that benefit from a divided workforce, and enacted by local whites. There is no singular Scots-Irish identity, and there is no racial innocence even in the whitest parts of the mountains. I knew even as a child that my all-white home county was steeped in racism, though I learned only as an adult of its history of racial cleansing.

Vance does not wish to talk about race, though. As he writes in the opening, "I do hope that readers of this book will be able to take from it an appreciation of how class and family affect the poor without filtering their views through a racial prism" (8). Although his hometown of Middletown, Ohio, is home to "lots of white and black people" (it was just over 10 percent African American in 2000, when Vance was in high school), Vance insists that Barack Obama "feels like an alien to many

Middletonians for reasons that have nothing to do with skin color” but instead with his “clean, perfect, neutral” accent. Obama also asserted “a confidence that comes from knowing that the modern American meritocracy was built for him,” while working-class and poor whites “began to believe that the modern American meritocracy was not built for them” (191).

Vance is right on that last count in two regards. As Carol Anderson and Ibram Kendi have most recently shown, whites who once benefited disproportionately from this notion of meritocracy and from the federal programs that undergirded it began to feel that loss in the wake of the civil rights movement and resulting (though incomplete) federal efforts to extend opportunity to African Americans and ethnic minorities, and they lament its loss. Furthermore—and Vance too makes this point—what remains of the American meritocracy is largely inaccessible to the poor of all races. Yet this is not because of a culture of poverty, a notion that Ronald Eller has shown was the basis for failed federal programs in the Appalachians. It is because of the increasing concentration of American wealth and privilege in the hands of the extraordinarily wealthy, a result at least in part of the latest phase in the long-standing elite tactic of fracturing emerging alliances between the nation’s poor across lines of race, ethnicity, and region.

Those tactics predate the New Deal, but as Kevin Kruse, Ira Katznelson, and Pete Daniel, among others, have shown, their modern iteration has its roots in the long-standing battle against the New Deal and the welfare state. The churches and voluntary societies that Vance and others expect to pick up the work of caring for members of their community failed altogether in that task by 1931, and they turned to the government for help. As Franklin Roosevelt’s administration extended a safety net beneath Americans, powerful southern Congressmen worked to ensure that those benefits adhered to southern white supremacy. They required local administration of federal aid and farm policies that prioritized planters over tenants, and they excluded agricultural and domestic workers from Social Security. Yet the New Deal nonetheless provided limited benefits to nonwhites and thus threatened to fracture Jim Crow.

White resistance to the civil rights movement and to the expansion and more equitable extension of federal benefits through the Great Society lent additional force to an alliance between corporate elites, religious conservatives, and white southerners, who saw their own power threatened. They blamed both the government and poor people whose access to welfare and food stamps represented a much smaller but more visible

portion of federal spending than the tax breaks and corporate subsidies they themselves enjoyed. Vance's complaint as a teenaged grocery store clerk that "I could never understand why our lives felt like a struggle while those living off of government largesse enjoyed trinkets that I only dreamed about" is a widespread sentiment (139). It is one that results in part from pervasive anti-welfare and anti-government rhetoric, and in part from the contraction of opportunity for the bottom half of Americans in the last several decades.

Vance's limited sense of the Appalachian and working-class past in America shapes his vision for its future. In an apparent attempt to play to the middle at the book's end, Vance describes the decline of his grandparents' neighborhood and the begging and petty theft they endured from neighbors. "These problems were not created by governments or corporations or anyone else," he concludes. "We created them, and only we can fix them" (256).

But this is not a middle way. It is on the one hand a useful recognition of individual agency and the limits of any corporate or social policy in controlling individual behavior. But it is also a denial of the many ways, for good and ill, that both corporate power and social policy have at various times expanded, limited, and redefined the choices individuals face—and of the ways those policies have constrained poor people and people of color so that they have created, in Vance's words, "The feeling that our choices don't matter."

Vance does not eschew social policy altogether, and we can surmise from his vague suggestions that he would advocate for conservative social policies that constrict welfare and food aid and means-test what remains, likely pushing further toward private and religious administration of social services. "The most important lesson of my life is not that society failed to provide me with opportunities," Vance writes, noting that he attended decent schools, made it through college on federal loans and the G. I. Bill, and always had food "thanks at least in part to the old-age benefits that Mamaw generously shared with me." Yet Vance chooses not to credit these programs (or the home loan programs that disproportionately benefited whites and likely helped fund his grandparents' home and his childhood refuge) for the opportunities he did have, instead concluding that his failures lay "almost entirely with factors outside the government's control" (244). The point he does not make is that without those social benefits—which still accrue disproportionately to whites, poor or not—J. D. Vance, smart and driven as he may be, would very likely not be where he is now. Yet conservative social policy would erase them all.

Nearly half a century into the nation's long rightward turn, the economic and social options many poor people face continue to contract, the income gap grows, and residential segregation by both race and income intensifies. That trajectory is unlikely to change unless the rural and urban poor and working classes recognize common cause across lines of race, ethnicity, and gender, and, together with the shrinking middle class, work to regain ground against the growing power of the nation's economic elites. Otherwise, what we face is not just a hillbilly elegy, but an elegy to the American Dream.