

“Class Cluelessness”

The powerful resentments shaping American politics today

by ANDREA LOUISE CAMPBELL

DONALD J. TRUMP’S VICTORY in the 2016 presidential election spawned a maelstrom of finger-pointing and soul-searching within the Democratic Party. How could the party of FDR, LBJ, and, for that matter, Bill Clinton, have lost touch so thoroughly with the white working class that had been central to its coalition for years? Which way should the party go in its identity and future strategy? Should it veer left, in the Bernie Sanders direction, or stay centrist? Should it continue to piece together an electoral coalition of racial and ethnic minorities, single women, and coastal

elites? Or does the logic of the Electoral College require a cross-racial, geographically diverse coalition of the non-elite centered on economic issues? The analyses and recommendations intended to prevent another 2016 for the Democrats are just beginning.

Pre-election warnings weren’t lacking. A host of books detailed the growing discontents of lower-income white workers. Harvard political scientists Vanessa Williamson and Theda Skocpol wrote of the frustration of Tea Party members in *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (2012), while Katherine J. Cramer uncovered

the resentment of rural voters toward the “liberal elite” in *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (2016). J.D. Vance described

his own family’s predilections in *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016) and sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild reported that right-leaning folks in Louisiana bayou country felt they were *Strangers in Their Own Land*. Economist Robert J. Gordon ’62 revealed why they might be so upset in *The Rise and Fall of American Growth* (reviewed in the May-June 2016 issue, page 68).

If Democratic Party elites (and Hillary Clinton’s campaign officials) missed the warning signs, Joan C. Williams, J.D. ’80, of the University of California’s Hastings College of the Law, offers an early post-election analysis in *White Working Class*. Expanding

White Working Class: Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America, by Joan C. Williams (Harvard Business Review Press, \$22.99)

Off the Shelf

Recent books with Harvard connections

For some serious beach reading: Maile Meloy ’94 returns to writing fiction for adults with **Do Not Become Alarmed** (Riverhead Books, \$27.00). Rapid and absorbing, if sometimes schematic, it follows a family cruise vacation gone wrong, and charts the waters of misfortune and privilege. Pair with the aloofly lyrical debut of Jesse Ruddock ’04, **Shot-Blue** (Coach House Books, \$19.95), about a single mother and her son squatting in a cabin by a remote Canadian lake.



Children’s grotto cave at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, Austin, Texas

Heading West? Because It Is So Beautiful, by Robert Leonard Reid ’65 (Counterpoint, \$26), collects essays from decades of infatuated wandering from Santa Fe through the Yukon. For context, pack **Cattle**

Kingdom: The Hidden History of the Cowboy West (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, \$29), by Christopher Knowlton ’78. His account of the capacious open-range era explains developments like the shaping of Teddy Roosevelt, and the near annihilation of the bison herd.

The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America, by Richard Rothstein ’63 (Liveright, \$27.95), is a searching examination of the *de jure* segregation of American cities.

Geyser University Professor William Julius Wilson calls it “the most forceful argument ever published” on the legal creation of neighborhood segregation. **Chokehold: Policing Black Men**, by Paul Butler, J.D. ’86 (New Press, \$26.95), is a passion-

ate account, by a former federal prosecutor, now law professor, of the harsh reality that “There has never, not for one minute in American history, been peace between black people and the police.”

The Magic of Children’s Gardens: Inspiring through Creative Design, by Lolly Tai, M.L.A. ’79 (Temple University Press, \$75). A copiously illustrated survey of enchantments that can be made real—through commitment and savvy design—in public parks. The author is professor of landscape architecture at Temple.

The Idea of the Muslim World: An Intellectual History, by Cemil Aydin, Ph.D. ’02 (Harvard, \$29.95). An associate professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill deconstructs the prevalent misunderstanding that the world’s 1.5 billion Muslims are a homogeneous community, or religious or political entity—a fiction arising from the fact that Muslims are not Christians. Useful reading for policymakers and the public alike.

Paolo Veronese and the Practice of Painting in Late Renaissance Venice, by Diana Gisolfi ’62 (Yale, \$75). A comprehensive examination of the sixteenth-century painter, whose lush work for the Venetian elite may be to your taste or not—but

IMAGES FROM THE MAGIC OF CHILDREN’S GARDENS. INSPIRING THROUGH CREATIVE DESIGN, BY LOLLY TAI, USED BY PERMISSION OF TEMPLE UNIVERSITY PRESS. ©2017 BY TEMPLE UNIVERSITY.

upon her much-read November 2016 *Harvard Business Review* article, Williams serves as tour guide and translator in explaining the worldviews, anxieties, and political choices of economically precarious white voters. Although cynicism comes easily about yet another member of the coastal elite class—splaining for the rest of us, the book is full of pithy observations and plausible theories. Her basic message is that white liberal elites and the progressive lawmakers who represent them have abandoned the white working class, scorning their lifestyles and beliefs while failing to offer policy solutions that would truly help them. No surprise then when that group returns the favor by abandoning Democrats in the electoral arena.

Williams defines the working class as Americans with incomes above the bottom one-third and below the top one-fifth (\$41,000 to \$132,000 in 2015, with median income around \$75,000). She also includes

an additional 6 percent who have higher incomes but no college degree. We might term such folks the middle class, but since Americans try to elide class differences by calling everyone “middle class,” she settles on calling this middle 53 percent “the working class.” Below the working class on the income spectrum are “the poor” and above are “the professional-managerial elite,” who in addition to having incomes in the top 20 percent also have at least one college graduate per household. This “PME” group has a median income of \$173,000.

WILLIAMS ASSERTS that the professional-managerial elite have a bad case of “class cluelessness.” We (if you’re reading this review, you’re probably in the PME) think the working class consists of racist, sexist, homophobic, and anti-immigrant “deplorables.” We can’t understand why all those people in fly-over country refuse to move where the jobs

are. Don’t they understand that manufacturing jobs aren’t coming back? Why won’t they take the pink-collar jobs that are growing? Why do they refuse to get the training they need to better their lot—and why don’t they send their kids to college? Why do they cling to their guns and their religion? Above all, why do such people vote Republican and vote Trump? Don’t they want health insurance and a higher minimum wage? And how dare they criticize the poor when so many of them are on government disability or unemployment.

Williams spends most of this short, trenchant book explaining the worldview of the working class: why they believe and behave as they do. And her message for the professional-managerial class is blunt: just as elites ascribe structural reasons for poverty, so too should they recognize the structural factors behind the attitudes and behaviors of the working class.

She walks through the sources of finan-

the scale and technique are astonishing. By a professor of art and design at the Pratt Institute.

Stuck in the Shallow End: Education, Race, and Computing (updated edition), by Jane Margolis, Ed.D. ’90, and colleagues (MIT, \$25 paper). A close study of Los Angeles schools documents the “virtual segregation” that discourages African-American and Latino students from progressing in computer science. The author’s work was covered in “Computing in the Classroom,” this magazine’s March-April 2015 cover story.

Let Us Watch Richard Wilbur, by Robert Bagg, G ’60, and Mary Bagg (University of Massachusetts, \$32.95 paper). A “biographical study” of the poet, A.M. ’47, J.F. ’50, who was the subject of “Poetic Patriarch” (November-December 2008, page 36). **The Songs We Know Best**, by Karin Roffman (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$30), examines the “early life” of John Ashbery ’49, Litt.D. ’01, and traces the influence of his youth on his poems.

Reading with Patrick, by Michelle Kuo ’03, J.D. ’09 (Random House, \$27), is a personal account of a Teach for America corps member’s engagement with a student in Arkansas—and her return to mentoring him,

after she attends law school, when he is in jail for murder.

The Ruler’s Guide, by Chinghua Tang, M.B.A. ’85 (Scribner, \$22). The wisdom of the great Chinese emperor Tang Taizong, made accessible for leaders today. At a time of fraught relations between the People’s Republic and the United States, 1,300 years later, perhaps one might make fresh use of the ancient leader and archer’s discovery upon learning that he had been using flawed bows: “I really don’t know their secret. I must know even less about governing a country.”

A Description of the New York Central Park, by Clarence C. Cook, A.B. 1849 (New York University, \$25). A new facsimile edition, with introduction by Maureen Meister, of the 1869 book by the art critic that provided crucial support for the famous, but embattled, Olmsted-Vaux design for New York’s brilliant park.

The Imprint of Congress, by David R. Mayhew, Ph.D. ’64 (Yale, \$35). The author, Sterling Professor of political science emeritus at Yale, the dean of congressional scholars, takes a sweeping view of the political role of the country’s unloved legislature, from the eighteenth century to to-



Detail from *The Banishment of Vashti*, 1556, by Paolo Veronese.

day. About greater delegation of powers to the executive, he notes, “Unlimited, take-all-the-marbles power at the top seems a bad idea for a heterogeneous society like today’s United States.” Hear that, senators and representatives?

A Rendezvous with Death: Alan Seeger in Poetry, at War, by Chris Dickson (New Street, \$24.99), is the first modern life of Seeger, A.B. 1910, the subject of the magazine’s *Vita* (November-December 2016, page 54), published during the centennial year of his death in battle in World War I.



Where the coastal “professional-managerial elite” are not: view of a closed coal facility from Green Mount Cemetery, Waynesburg, Pennsylvania

but rather the professional-managerial elite at whose hands they suffer daily affronts (“the doctor who unthinkingly patronizes the medical technician, the harried office worker who treats the security guard as invisible”). Unions help only a few people, and public unions representing teachers and bureaucrats take money from working people’s pockets. Support for Republican candidates whose policies

cial insecurity and hopelessness among that group. Jobs have vanished, job retraining is useless. Higher education is no sure step up for their children. Many working-class kids live in “education deserts,” miles from any college or university. The return on education can be low, and the resultant debt crippling high. The workplace has vastly different meanings as well: as Williams sardonically notes, for elites, “disruption” means founding a successful start-up. Disruption, in working-class jobs, just gets you fired.”

These structural constraints help explain worldviews and lifestyles. Above all, the working class wants to *work*. Sure, they may be on unemployment and disability now, but they qualify for those programs only because they were workers in the past—unlike the poor, who violate cherished norms of hard work and self-discipline. They resent Democrats for providing social assistance to these “shiftless” poor—handouts that the white working class wouldn’t stoop to accept (and for which their incomes are probably too high to qualify anyway, despite their financial insecurity). And they resent progressives for mandating sympathy for the poor, for women, and for minorities, while heaping scorn on them.

Elites may scoff at religion, but for the working class it is an institution far more

significant than elites’ ludicrous “mindfulness” and pursuit of self-actualization. It provides crucial structure, hopefulness, status, and a financial safety net in times of need, when government often falls short. In a world of structural inequality and lack of opportunity, the family, too, is paramount. Lacking financial resources, members of the working class rely on friends and relatives

Religion and family provide crucial structure, hopefulness, childcare, and a financial safety net when government often falls short.

to provide the childcare, elder care, and help with home and car repairs that elites simply purchase. Moving would mean the loss of these irreplaceable networks.

WHAT ARE the political implications of these patterns of belief? Here, too, Williams is good at explaining what seem to progressives and elites perverse patterns: the working class’s embrace of tax cuts for the rich, resentment of unions, and support for Republican candidates. Tax cuts for the rich could create jobs; less government revenue could result in benefit cuts for the resented poor. Plus, the working class doesn’t resent the rich, with whom they have no contact,

reflect these attitudes is perfectly logical, as is rejection of Democrats’ policies, which may help the poor, but not the working class (a \$15 minimum wage does little when a \$30 wage is what’s needed for a modest living standard in most parts of the country).

Williams’s analysis is most original when skewering elites’ assumptions. As she notes, elites who look down their noses at work-

ing-class folkways do so from the perspective of their *own* folkways. Elites may think they hold more liberal racial attitudes, but in fact we’re “all a little bit racist,” according to the musical *Avenue Q* and the inexorable results of the Implicit Association Test. Elites may think they hold superior gender attitudes, and deem working-class men sexist because they prefer their wives to stay at home when they can. But how about those elite male M.B.A.s who, surveys show, expect their future wives to stay at home, too? Turns out the average working-class father spends more time with his children than the average elite man. Elites may think moving (away from friends and family) for a higher-status

job is the ultimate professional achievement. But the working class sees work devotion as narcissism, and change as loss. Elite women may look down on working-class housewives, but job-applicant studies show that non-elite women get more callbacks than elite women, who are perceived as flight risks who will leave their own jobs, once they have children, to engage in the intensive mothering and “concerted cultivation” now expected in affluent circles.

IF THE BOOK is strong, albeit rather sweeping, on diagnosis, it is weaker on solutions. Williams calls for better civic education, which many have fruitlessly called for in the past. Perhaps her ideas about videos in which citizens extol what government has done for them could help. She’s on firmer ground in calling for elites to realize the folly of their, well, elitist ways and to offer policies that would actually help the working class, not just the poor (such as effective industrial policy and job credentialing). She also advocates new coalitions embracing common interests, observing that immigrants and the white working class share the same values of hard work and family, that progressives and the working class share an interest in marshaling government to fight against overreaching corporate interests.

More queries from the archives:

“Nothing is more likely to propel us headlong down the path to barbarism than a single-minded obsession with the concept of spiritual purity” and “Feigning deafness may be forgivable, but taken to extremes, it may cost one’s life”—two remarks cited by Japanese author Jun Ishikawa without precise attribution.

“When the action gets heavy, keep the rhetoric cool.”

“the boredom of living versus the suffering of being”

“When you see the word ‘primitive,’ always substitute ‘complicated’”

“The dew...In down-soft slippers...the dew has seemed like teardrops ever since...”

Send inquiries and answers to “Chapter and Verse,” *Harvard Magazine*, 7 Ware Street, Cambridge 02138 or via email to chapterandverse@harvardmag.com.

In sum, Williams offers an effective tour of working-class resentments arising from structural forces and the snobbery of the elite. She draws widely on research in sociology and psychology (relegated to footnotes to maintain readability) and throughout shares amusingly telling examples of class cluelessness that she received in reaction to her HBR piece. The account might have been further enriched with the relevant political-science research as well (such as the extensive literature on the “hidden welfare state” of social policies implemented through the

tax code, such as the home-mortgage interest deduction, that are costly, invisible, and disproportionately benefit the affluent). But in the end, Williams offers a concise, witty, and thought-provoking account of the powerful resentments underlying contemporary American politics. ▢

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ALUMNI

Widening the College Pipeline

The Posse Foundation aims to develop a “new national leadership network.”

by NELL PORTER BROWN

SOON AFTER Jwahir Sundai started at Cambridge Rindge and Latin School, she began searching for “any resources I could get that would help me get into a good college.” A visiting admissions recruiter told her about The Posse Foundation, an unusual college-access and leadership program through which high-achieving students attend top-tier institutions within supportive groups—posses—of like-minded peers. The selection process is rigorous (typically fewer than 5 percent of

the applicants are chosen) and uses a “dynamic assessment” process to measure qualities like boldness, resilience, creativity, and ability to work in a team, rather than relying on the traditional standardized test scores, class rankings, and GPAs.

Sundai’s guidance counselor nominated her as a candidate, and she soon found herself “acting like a chicken,” along with all the other Boston-area applicants. “During the first round, we did different activities that took us out of our comfort zones,” she

recalls, laughing. In another task, she helped build a LEGO robot and run a discussion lab “to test how we were in a group, and how we would work as a posse.”

Each year, the foundation takes students from 10 metropolitan areas across the country (the others are Atlanta, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, Miami, New Orleans, New York City, San Francisco, and Washington D.C.) and places them at 57 partner educational institutions. The year Sundai applied, she got one of the 10 spots allotted to Boston-area