

J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*: Right-wing propaganda in the guise of personal memoir

By Henry Seward
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Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis, J.D. Vance, Harper Collins, 2016.

Hillbilly Elegy, a memoir by J.D. Vance, a lawyer at a leading Silicon Valley investment firm, topped the *New York Times* Best Seller list in August 2016. It has been met with much praise by both liberal and conservative critics.

In a *New York Times* review, Jennifer Senior suggests the reader should “admire him [J.D. Vance] for his head-on confrontation with a taboo subject.” *Huffington Post* reviewer Lella Moshref-Danesh went further, writing July 11 that the book creates “a sense of a shared experience that crosses cultural, political and class lines. *Hillbilly Elegy*, at its core, is the story of a family and all the harsh, beautiful complexity that comes with it.”

The book deals with Vance's experiences growing up in Jackson, Kentucky, and Middletown, Ohio—and many of the passages evoke genuine sympathy. However, in the end, the book is decidedly hostile to the working class and the poor, and the intellectual foundation upon which it rests is rotten.

Vance, 31, narrates the conditions of not only his life, but his family's as well. The story begins before he was born, when his grandmother (“Mamaw”) and grandfather (“Papaw”) left Jackson to seek better opportunities. The couple relocated in Middletown, where his grandfather secured a job at Armco Steel (renamed AK Steel Holding in 1993). They had several children, his mother being the youngest.

Vance's childhood was tumultuous, violent, and insecure. His mother struggled with addiction and often beat and belittled him. Vance suggests that such conditions were common for a great many youth in Appalachia and the Rust Belt. Had it not been for the intervention of his grandmother, and in smaller doses, the love of his sister, he suggests he might not have been able to “make it out.”

While he acknowledges that poverty and drug addiction are rampant in Appalachia and the Rust Belt, these realities are never seriously examined in *Hillbilly Elegy*. He writes: “[F]air enough, I worry about those things [the social crisis] too. But this book is about something else: what goes on in the lives of real people when the industrial economy goes south. It's about reacting to bad circumstances in the worst way possible. It's about a culture that increasingly encourages social decay, instead of counter-acting it.”

The author cites data documenting skyrocketing poverty rates among working-class whites, and notes that many are stuck with homes worth less than they paid for them. He concedes that “the people who are trapped are usually those with the least cash.” He also cites a Pew Economic Mobility Project study which found that “There is no group of Americans more pessimistic than working-class whites,” with “only 44 percent” expecting their economic lives to improve.

Unfortunately, these crushing realities mean little to Vance. In essence, according to our author, laziness causes social misery. The author attempts to bolster this claim by referring to his experience working in a grocery store at age 17. His work as a checkout clerk convinced him that poor people “game” social assistance programs like food stamps, while daring to purchase items like red meat and cell phones.

His stupid and stale argument comes down to this sort of upper-middle-class moralizing about the “misbehavior” of those living in poverty: “We spend our way into the poor house. We buy giant TVs and iPads. Our children wear nice clothes thanks to the high-interest credit cards and payday loans. We purchase homes we don't need, refinance them for more spending money, and declare bankruptcy, often leaving them full of garbage in our wake. Thrift is inimical to our being. We spend to pretend that we're upper class. And when the

dust clears...there's nothing left over."

In addition to arguing that Appalachian and Rust Belt workers need to cure their laziness, he offers four other means by which one can improve one's lot in life: religion; the military; education; and "networking" to attain better employment prospects. Though continuing along the memoir path, the book begins to read like that tritest of American "literary" products, the self-help guide. This reviewer had to fight the urge to sleep.

The religious component of Vance's memoir, unsurprisingly, involves a God who rewards those who work hard. His grandmother was devout, and he writes that "the theology she taught was unsophisticated, but it provided a message I needed to hear. To coast through life was to squander my God-given talent, so I had to work hard. I had to take care of my family because Christian duty demanded it."

Escape is another component of the Vance method—and for him, it took the form of joining the US Marine Corps. Military service is presented as the antidote to "learned helplessness" rife among the poor.

After serving in the Marine Corps, studying as an undergraduate at Ohio State and graduating Yale Law, Vance began to wonder why none of his high school friends from Middletown "made it out." He concludes that "successful people...don't flood the job market with resumes. They network." In other words, they work with "social capital." Urging workers whose families and friends live in the same dire conditions they do to "network" is worse than useless advice.

His analysis is impressionistic and self-serving, and most importantly, ignores the history of class struggle in Appalachia and the Rust Belt. The word "history" appears only nine times in the book. Furthermore, one finds the word "strike" only four times. And only once is it related to working-class struggle, in this particular instance, to a documentary about Harlan County, Kentucky. Vance instead suggests that Appalachians are isolationist and xenophobic, as well as homogeneously made up of people of Scots-Irish ancestry.

The reality is quite different. One of the largest labor uprisings in American history took place in Logan County, West Virginia. The Battle of Blair Mountain in 1921 saw 10,000 mountaineers, black sharecroppers who fled the Deep South and immigrants (mostly Hungarian and Italian) battle 3,000 coal thugs, and eventually the US military, over the course of five days.

Vance also disregards the objective impact of social devastation on the consciousness of workers. What are

the consequences of the collapse of the coal industry and the shattering of entire communities? One-third of the 100 poorest counties in the United States are concentrated in the coalfields of Central Appalachia. Joblessness is rampant; home values have plummeted; public schools, clinics, and charity organizations have shuttered. Double-digit poverty rates are typical of counties in the region. Deep poverty is accompanied by an epidemic of ill health, addiction, environmental devastation caused in large measure by the profit drive of the coal companies, and poor prospects for youth.

The role of the trade unions, particularly the United Mine Workers, is central to any understanding of the economic and social decline of the region. Its abject, decades-long betrayal of the traditions of the miners is perhaps the single most important factor in the demoralization and degradation of the region's population. Vance says nothing about this.

In the conclusion of his memoir, Vance throws up his hands and implores Appalachians and Rust Belt workers to "wake the hell up." He rather mawkishly—and it must be said, lazily—argues that communities in these areas should "empower" members with a sense of control over one's "destiny" with "lessons of Christian love, family, and purpose" through the church. He finally asks if "we" ("hillbillies") are "tough enough" to do what needs to be done to save their communities.

"I don't know what the answer is," he admits, "but I know it starts when we stop blaming Obama or Bush or faceless companies and ask ourselves what we can do to make things better."

His solution would involve: joining the US imperialist military, getting a law degree from Yale, and publishing a memoir, perhaps as a possible prelude for a political career à la Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father* (1995). One is left to conclude that those looking for answers to the problems that plague Appalachian and Rust Belt workers—or any other section of the working class—will hardly find them in this book.

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