



## Understanding The Deplorables

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As chattering classes around the world recoil in horror at the rise of ‘right-wing populism’, *White Working Class* provides useful insights into its causes. In it, Joan Williams—a left-of-centre Harvard law professor—takes an honest look at why the American ‘mainstream’ put its faith in Donald Trump. In doing so, she moves beyond the usual glib explanations—such as latent racism, or economic decline—and concedes that decades of condescension and ‘class cluelessness’ by the political elite are to blame.

The first mistake made by the American elite is conflating the ‘working class’ with the poor. The latter—comprising those with incomes in the bottom 30 per cent—are not Williams’ focus here. As she notes, ‘[o]nly 12% of Trump voters have incomes below \$30,000 a year—and Republicans are relatively rare among this group.’

Rather, Williams is concerned with the middle 50 per cent of Americans who sit between the bottom 30 per cent (the poor) and the top 20 per cent (the elite). This is what Williams defines as the working class. It’s an important demarcation. Working class people are not down-and-out and

destitute. As Williams notes:

To focus on white working-class despair will lead well-meaning people to approach the white working class as they traditionally have approached the poor – as those ‘we have a moral and ethical obligation to help’... This attitude will infuriate them and only widen a societally unhealthy class divide... They don’t want the kind of pious solicitude the wealthy offer to the poor... They want respect for the lives they’ve built through unrelenting hard work. They want recognition for their contributions and their way of life... They demand dignity – and they deserve it.

The former approach has bred working class resentment of not only the condescension of the elite, but also the irresponsibility of the poor. Williams uses the image of a young JD Vance in his landmark memoir, *Hillbilly Elegy*, working in a grocery store while customers breeze through with food stamps and flashy mobile phones.

Williams argues that the working class puts a unique premium on self-reliance and personal responsibility. These are the values that inspire ‘the rigid self-discipline to do a menial job you hate for 40 years’. These values are more than mere ideals, they are a matter of survival. The government handouts heralded as icons of ‘social justice’ by the elite are the domain of the poor, not the American working class.

Nor do working class people have the luxury of ideals like ‘self-actualisation’ and experimentation with the novel and exotic. ‘Free spirits born working class can’t count on the second chances available to elites’, Williams writes. ‘That’s why blue-collar families are so big on stability and self-discipline, and they embrace institutions that support these traits.’ Among those institutions are religion, family and community.

Elites inspire fear and loathing among the working class by deriding things that are central to the working class way of life – religion in particular. It’s also grating when elites suggest that people should ‘move to where the jobs are’: Working class people are more likely to rely on support networks like family, friends, neighbours and community institutions like churches. They do not have the same option of mobility that elites do.

The premium placed by the working class on traditional values and civic institutions is particularly notable in light of other works lamenting their decline. One example is Charles Murray’s *Coming Apart*, which tracks the decline of what Murray describes as America’s ‘founding virtues’—industriousness, honesty, religiosity, civic participation—in its most disadvantaged areas.

But perhaps that is the point. The anxiety of working class America comes from the decline of these founding virtues. Without them, once-thriving communities are descending into the kind of ruined landscapes documented by Murray. Making America great again is shorthand for a return to the *values* that made America great.

Williams addresses the ‘big questions’: Are the working class racist? Are they sexist? In other words, why don’t all Americans share elites’ burning fixation with identity politics?

For one thing, white working class communities ravaged by hard economic times resent the ‘feeling rules’ imposed by elites: The ‘mandated sympathy for the poor, for people of colour, for women... for LGBTQ individuals’. Williams relates evidence from sociologist Arlie Hochschild:

The Tea Party members she befriended in Louisiana felt like people patiently waiting in line, living settled lives that required hard work and self-discipline, only to ‘see people *cutting in line ahead of you!* You’re following the rules. They aren’t... Some are black. Through affirmative action plans [they get] jobs, welfare payments and free lunches... Women, immigrants, refugees, public sector workers – where will it end?’

But disappointingly, rather than accept the folly of identity politics, Williams argues that the left should simply extend its reach, reverting to tired calls for better ‘coalition-building’. Compassionate elites should ‘stop insulting working-class people and try including them within our ambit of responsibility.’

Here, Williams verges on the kind of paternalistic condescension *White Working Class* purports to criticise. It’s almost as if she is missing her own point: Working class people want opportunity and the chance at prosperity; they do not want to be in anyone’s ‘ambit of responsibility’.

But we can only expect so much. Williams is, after all, writing from the left, to the left, trying to explain why middle America has deserted the left. Her cure may be misguided, but her diagnosis is largely astute.

The fact that books like *White Working Class* are being written at all is remarkable. After a generation of prioritising the needs of a slew of minority groups, the American elite is attempting to understand the so-called ‘deplorables’.

Whether they take any notice is another matter.