

Once When We All Were White

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The election of Donald Trump as president in 2016 sent shock waves through this country and around the world. As I write this article, his presidency is still unfolding, and it is indeed scary. Many reasons have been given for his victory—one is the refusal to elect a woman, Hilary Clinton, as president. A second reason given is the long and continuing history of the power of race in American culture and history. After 8 years of an African-American president, white folks were eager and ready to take the country back and “make America great again.” A third reason is the lingering but significant pockets of unemployment in the Rust Belt states of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Wisconsin, and Michigan. While much has been made of Trump’s winning these Rust Belt states, he also had the solid white vote in the South. In the former Confederacy, only the state of Virginia went for Clinton.

Three recent books have sought to address a fourth reason: the alienation of the white working class. All three were written prior to the 2016 election, but they each catch a dimension of this often overlooked reason: the feeling of marginalization among white working class people in America. Two books in the early 1990s are also helpful on this: David Roediger’s *Wages of Whiteness* and Thomas Edsall’s *Chain Reaction*. These three recent books approach this subject from different perspectives. *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* by Nancy Isenberg does just as the title implies—it is a sweeping history of working class and poor whites in America. *Hillbilly Elegy* by J.D. Vance is a story of Appalachian mountain culture as seen through the lens of one person and his family. *The New Minority: White Working Class Politics in an Age of Immigration and Inequality* by Justin Gest is a sociological study of white workers in Youngstown, Ohio, and in a district in London, England. I’ll be looking at the contributions of these authors and their implications for preaching in these dangerous times.

First, in regard to preaching, it must be noted that the church is rarely mentioned in any of these books. Vance addresses it a bit in *Hillbilly*, but by far these authors see the church as unimportant in these various stories. That absence and silence shouts out to us about preaching in our mainstream and maybe even in our tributary churches. The church has often sold our birthright for a bowl of porridge, especially in regard to working class people classified as “white.” We are not seen as relevant by or for a group of people who are angry and feeling marginalized. As we shall see, this has profound class and racial implications for all of us.

Isenberg’s history of “White Trash” begins with the dilemma that has been at the heart of American life since our European beginnings: trying to balance the ideology of equality with the reality of race and class in our midst. Isenberg makes a strong case through history, story, and statistics that this ideology of equality has prevented us from seeing and acknowledging that we have always created what the English called “waste people,” people who came to be known as “white trash.” Isenberg indicates that we have been screened from this knowledge for two primary reasons. First, English society in the 1500s and 1600s wanted to rid itself of those it called “waste people,”

people who were being displaced because of the Industrial Revolution. Since decent housing or imprisonment or even execution were not viable options, when America opened up, it became a place to send these marginalized folk.

The second and more important reason was that the new American landscape needed such “waste people” to cut down the trees, dig the ditches and canals, plant and work the crops, fight the natives, and generally supply the cheap labor so that the entrepreneurs and adventurers could make more money. This idea of waste people and cheap labor would obviously have profound implications for the development of America’s peculiar institution of slavery. In this early period, the colonies would become “one giant workhouse,” a place where the poor of England could be turned into economic assets.

Isenberg takes us through the rest of American history and makes a strong case that these original perceptions have held sway throughout our story, including the present day. She notes especially the post-Civil War era in which working class whites in the South were convinced that their interests were better served by claiming their “whiteness” over the economic benefits of joining with former slaves to develop a free labor economy in the South. Though she does not mention this, it is based on WEB Dubois’s insight of what has come to be known as the “wages of whiteness.”¹

She also points out the shameful episode of eugenics in our history, which was used by both conservatives and liberals to sterilize poor white people and black people. It was the result of the continuing struggle over the ideology of equality and the reality of inequality—those who were poor were variously seen as inept, lazy, and subhuman. What came to be questioned was not the fabric of greed in American culture, but rather the humanity of those who received inequitable treatment. She also notes the harsh reactions that have come when attempts are made to improve the conditions of the poor in America: “Whether it is New Deal policies or LBJ’s welfare programs or Obama-era health care reform, along with any effort to address inequality and poverty comes a harsh and seemingly inevitable reaction.”²

In *Hillbilly Elegy*, J.D. Vance boils Isenberg’s history down to his own story and the story of his family. He was born in Appalachian mountain culture in eastern Kentucky, but then transplanted to Ohio. Here the focus becomes the dissolution of his family and his culture, and his finding redemption through the loving dedication of his maternal grandparents and dedicated teachers in his life. His story makes clear the ties between the voting blocs that gave Donald Trump the presidency: southern white culture and transplanted Appalachian whites who tipped the scales in Ohio, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. Vance’s story is a powerful one of internalized oppression in which we see a multigenerational accumulation of a desperate situation turned inward and then acted out. In this book, Vance shares a narrative of complex people trying to find their way through the maze of economic exploitation and oppression. In the midst of being targeted as a ripe market for drug use to anesthetize the pain, in the midst of a culture whose values center on a proclamation of self-reliance and independence, he notes the need to be vulnerable and to find a loving community.

Because of the exploitation of white labor in the mines of Appalachia, many fled to the cities of Ohio and Michigan and Pennsylvania where economic circumstances were better, especially in the steel mills. As these industries began to collapse in the 1980s and 1990s, the same patterns deepened. There is a sense of being pushed out to the margins; there is deep anger; and there is despair. Rather than taking on the

systems that cause this, Vance's family and culture internalize the oppression and turn on themselves in a litany of violence, drugs, and dissolution. It is a personalized version of the history that Nancy Isenberg gave us in *White Trash*.

Vance is in his early 30s, so we do not know how his story will continue to unfold, but his "Hillbilly Elegy" could actually be "Hillbilly Redemption" in terms of his own journey. Through his own will and through the love of complex members of his family, especially his grandmother, he is able to hear a different definition of himself and his possibilities. Rather than being white boy trapped in poverty and oppression, he is able to hear that he is the child of love and equity. Through love, through education, through hard work, through the Marines, through college at Ohio State and grad school at Yale Law School, he is able to hear that there are other narratives of himself and of life, narratives that offer a path to life rather than to the ravages of internalized oppression.

His story is impressive, but he falls into the trap in which many who believe in independence and self-reliance find themselves in seeking to explain the disconnect between systemic oppression and personal responsibility. Although he acknowledges the powerful economic forces that have pounded on white working class people and others, his main explanation for the marginalized status of Appalachian whites is their lack of personal responsibility. Like Clarence Thomas before him, Vance experienced the struggles of an oppressed people and has heard a different definition of himself. Like Thomas, he lays most of the ills of his cultural crisis at the feet of the welfare state, which he claims has created personal irresponsibility. Here his ideology seems to take over his analysis. While there are undoubtedly people who are personally irresponsible, he would do well to have used Isenberg's analysis of the marginalization of working class white people from the beginning of our history. The truth is that the source of the cultural crisis of working class white people and other cultures in our midst is a combination of economic and capitalistic forces, of the longstanding indifference of our society to those in need, and of the diminishment of the individual human spirit that so often occurs in response to these factors.

Vance also fails to understand the depths of the "wages of whiteness" in himself and in his culture. DuBois's insight on this is profound. Part of the internalized oppression of white Appalachian culture is that they have failed as "white" people. They are able to receive the psychological boost in our society from being classified as "white," but that boost seems to have fizzled for them because they too feel marginalized and oppressed. As Vance puts it so well, when he read William Julius Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged*, about black people trapped in inner cities, he felt that it was written about hillbilly transplants from Appalachia. Yet, like Wilson and later Charles Murray, Vance attributes this marginalization to the failure of individual Appalachian transplants. He does not address their sense of failure as "white people," or the long, grinding, and deliberate history of setting up this system that is now crushing his culture.

In *The New Minority*, Justin Gest's sociological study of failing white districts in Youngstown, Ohio, and in the London, England area, Gest does begin to name this complex of factors that drove the working class whites into the arms of Donald Trump. He bases his thesis on economic crisis—both places have lost thousands and thousands of manufacturing jobs. The original white populations have lost their jobs and their livelihoods and now their majority status. Their tacit agreement to partici-

pate in the wages of whiteness worked well until the jobs left, and now they face the unpleasant news of American history—their cheap labor and being a buffer between middle and upper class whites and African-Americans below them, no longer brings them the benefits that it once did. With this loss has come a sense of marginality, of moral and race failure, and of being overwhelmed by immigrant laborers who are willing to do the jobs previously reserved for working class whites.

Gest calls these areas, of which there are many, “post-traumatic cities (PTC),” meaning that they are exurbs and urban communities that lost signature industries in the mid to late 20th century and have never recovered. These PTC are often nostalgic and backward looking. Rather than adapting to the post-traumatic future, they seek to reinstate the pre-traumatic past. As white people, they were not supposed to end up this way. This sense of deprivation drives white working class people to see African-Americans, and especially recent immigrants, as their primary antagonists. Rather than building coalitions with the “other” to engage the corporations and upper classes who have used their labor and deserted them, they chose to ally themselves with the upper class whites, maintaining their race loyalty.

Despite this loyalty, Gest makes it clear from his studies that white working class people are now feeling cleavage from “white, elite, co-ethnics, who exploit working class people in the market.”³ Yet they also feel caught, because they continue to long for solidarity with the behavior of the wealthy. At the same time, they double down hard on welfare recipients, whom they identify as African-Americans and immigrants. For them, “welfare” is framed as “cash assistance,” not unemployment, Medicaid, disability, or food stamps, all of which some of them receive. The narrative now is a “litany of stories about heartbreak, desperation, disappointment and betrayal—recounting the tragic steps leading to a world where white working class people have been displaced to their society’s periphery.”⁴ Like Isenberg in *White Trash*, Gest notes that this narrative that white working class people were once closer to the center is a false historic construction, and therein lies the tale.

In a section in which he is talking about developments in Britain, he notes the reality that a global, capitalist meritocracy that features even greater inequality now drives Western economies. This model shifts production to cheaper overseas venues and then recruits immigrants to fill the skilled positions that nationals are unqualified to take, while also recruiting (or encouraging) immigrants to take the unskilled positions that nationals are unwilling to take. This certainly seems to be the case in the American context. He notes that in the American context, we are permeated by a repertoire of individualism, self-sufficiency, and mobility. These factors enhance the decision by white working class Americans to see more solidarity with white upper classes than with the working class ethnics who are in their same situation economically and class-wise.

Thus enters Donald Trump, a wealthy white man whose corporate policies have been part of the displacement of working class whites. As a master manipulator, he was able to speak to the acute sense of loss for working class whites, and while being part of the establishment, he was able to get these folk who now feel marginalized and now “racialized” to support him and to give the finger to the establishment. As Gest points out, Trump’s call to “make America great again” was a call to reinstate the pre-traumatic past, when jobs permitting upward mobility seemed plentiful for white unskilled workers, and when those of other racial categories, who would threaten to

permeate that mobility, were safely where they should be—both geographically and sociologically—at the back of the bus and at the bottom of the ladder.

There are at least five implications for preaching that flow out of these three insightful books. All of these implications must be understood in light of my earlier comment that none of these three authors sees the church or its ministry as a significant factor in these issues. That should give all of us preachers and ecclesiastical types a major pause, and it should cause us to re-consider our outreach to working class white folks. Few mainline denominations now consider working class white people as a goal for their membership recruiting.

I assume that most readers of this article are middle and upper middle class white folks, and because of that assumption, these five implications are addressed to preachers and churches in this context. The first implication is based on the idea that we have access to the movers and shakers of society, or at least that part who still participate in church life. The inequities addressed in these books have been developed and are maintained by our church members. We are called to be prophets and pastors to those who rule and shape our culture. I often tend to think of white working class people as ignorant and mean, and these books remind me that while they may be the spearhead of the resurgence of racism and meanness, they are not the cause of it. The pastoral dimension of our preaching should remind us of the connection to all people, and the prophetic dimension should remind us that whether we affirm those connections or not, God does and expects those of us who claim Jesus Christ as Lord to live our lives in authentic and life-giving connection to one another.

The second implication is the intersectionality in American history of race and class. One of the sources of the deep anger of working class white people is that they are feeling excluded from the benefits of being “white.” These books are a reminder that part of the longing for the “pre-traumatic” past is a desire to receive some of the goodies of being classified as “white” in American culture. There is a longing for a time when once we all were white, meaning that the “wages of whiteness” no longer seem relevant to those white folk suffering deep economic inequity.

The third implication is that because we have allowed capitalism to run amok since the fall of communism, we call forth people like Donald Trump. The horrid tax cuts bill passed last year are a vivid reminder that we have not heard the wisdom of our Christian tradition or of history that when materialism rivals God or even supersedes God in our hearts, the results are simply horrific. The voices of Martin Luther King, Jr., Reinhold Niebuhr, Letty Russell, and others all cry out to us to find some balance in relation to materialism in our lives, if not to put materialism back in its rightful place as subservient to God. In the Exodus version of the Ten Commandments, we hear the harsh words for those like us who willfully disobey the first two commandments: “I the Lord your God am a jealous God...” (20:5). Jesus adds the dimension of our captivity in the Sermon on the Mount: “You cannot serve God and wealth” (Matthew 6:24).

The fourth implication is that we must enable our congregations to hear the call for a commitment to economic resources for all. The real threat to working class whites (and the rest of us) is not jobs going to China, but robotics coming to America. We are only at the beginning of a stunning robotic revolution in the workplace, similar to the Industrial Revolution, a change that will displace hundreds of thousands of workers. Where will they go? From whence will come their income? These three books ham-

mer home the theme of a collection of wealth among the few while the many are left displaced and inappropriately blaming themselves or others for the displacement. Our current ideology of independence and self-reliance must be replaced by a sense of connection and community, lest we all perish. This implication calls on us to renew the 1970s conversations about guaranteed annual incomes for all citizens.

In an article in *Journal for Preachers* in 1992 entitled “Preaching on Covenant in an Age of Individualism,” I indicated that because of our emphasis on independence and individualism in America, we were in great danger of falling into tribalism.⁵ That slide into tribalism seems to have come true as we now experience the huge divide in our national and political lives. This is the fifth implication of these books: we are falling apart as a community, and individuals are simply not able to bear the weight of the human dilemma without bonding with others. Our preaching should focus not just on the “oughtness” of these connections, but also on the absolute certainty of them, like gravity or the roundness of the earth. This bonding should be an authentic community that acknowledges human frailty while also affirming our connections to one another. Most often, and even now, that bonding becomes a destructive tribalism which sees the other as the enemy who must be excluded or even destroyed. Our Christian tradition is clear on this, and our preaching must re-affirm that clarity. Jesus summed up all the law and prophets in this insight: “Love the Lord your God and your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:34-40). Jesus also reminded us in the story of the Good Samaritan that by “neighbor,” he means not the ones whom we choose, but the ones whom God chooses (Luke 10:25-37).

These three books remind us that the Trump phenomenon is not an aberration of American history, but rather a consequence of it. The factors that called forth Donald Trump are viable and powerful in our life together in America: racism, exploitation of the working class, the collapse of the power of authentic community, and the power of materialism and greed in all of our hearts. It is to these areas that our preaching should be turning, if we are not already there.

Notes

1 W. E. B. Dubois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880* (New York: Macmillan, 1935), p. 700.

2 Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash: The 400 Year Untold History of Class in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), p. 312.

3 Justin Gest, *The New Minority: White Working Class Politics in an Age of Immigration and Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press), 135.

4 Gest, p. 150.

5 Gibson Stroupe, “Preaching on Covenant in an Age of Individualism,” *Journal for Preachers* 15 (1992) 23-26.