

Global Issues

The Perils of “the White Working Class”: Analysing the New Discussion on Class¹

Mark Bergfeld, UNI Global Union – Europa, Belgium

Introduction

As the conservative promise of law, order and economic stability remains just as unfulfilled as the social-democratic promises of peace and social justice, we are experiencing what the philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1975) has labelled a “crisis of authority”. This is defined as a situation in which the ruling class is no longer able to rule in the same way as before. At the same time, low levels of unionisation in the Global North, the decline of social democratic parties (apart from Corbyn’s Labour Party in the United Kingdom) and the decimation of communist parties are symptoms of a crisis of the working class. Arguably, this amounts to a twin crisis in which the ruling class can no longer “lead” and the working class is unable to advance an alternative vision for society. This ultimately raises the question of how these crises reconfigure working-class politics.

In this article I seek to address this question by discussing “popular books” on the working class. In doing so, I investigate how these books seek to explain the twin crises, how and where they locate “class”, how working-class families are portrayed, how the relationship between class, gender and immigration is conceptualised, and lastly how the role of working-class organisation features in these accounts.

These twin crises have created a market for popular books on working-class life and politics, and eventually spurred a new discussion on class in the Global North. Unlike the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s when discussions on class focused on the “new middle classes” (Meiksins, 1986) or “creative class” (Florida, 2002) or “the precariat” (Raunig, 2007; Standing, 2011), the topic of debate in Britain and the United States has shifted to the so-called “white working class”. In other countries, such as Germany and France, the discussion is less about “whiteness” but rather deals with why working-class people support the far right.

In the following, I seek to analyse and draw out some key aspects of the following popular books: Joe Bageant’s (2007) *Deer Hunting with Jesus: Dispatches from America’s Class War*; Owen Jones’s (2011) *Chavs – The Demonization of the Working-class*; George Packer’s (2013) *The Unwinding: Thirty Years of American Decline*; Lisa McKenzie’s (2015) *Getting By: Estates, Class and Culture in Austerity Britain*; Justin Gest’s (2016) *The New Minority: White Working-class Politics in an Age of Immigration and Inequality*; J.D. Vance’s (2016) *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*; Arlie Russell Hochschild’s (2016) *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*; the German translation of Didier Eribon’s (2016) *Returning to Reims*; Amy Goldstein’s (2017) *Janesville: An American Story*; Nancy Isenberg’s (2017) *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*; Darren McGarvey’s (2017) *Poverty Safari: Understanding the Anger of Britain’s Underclass*;

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Steven Stoll's (2017) *Ramp Hollow: The Ordeal of Appalachia*; and Jessica Bruder's (2018) *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-first Century*. One reason why these books were selected was that large media outlets and politicians from left and right alike have referenced these books, thus creating a conversation with a larger audience in these countries. In effect, this will shape how class will be discussed for the foreseeable future.

According to these books, understanding the life and politics of the “white working class” allows one to come to terms with rising levels of inequality, Donald Trump's popularity and electoral victory, the British EU referendum and most recently the Yellow Vests protests across France. For some sections of the commentariat, members of the “white working class” are the harbingers of nationalist agendas which threaten the economic recovery from the financial crisis of 2007–2008. Meanwhile others seek to latch on to these people's anger against “the globalists”, “identity politics” and “refugees”. In both cases, political dividing lines have become fluid, epitomising the ideological flux and crisis of authority.

Before we come to the discussion contained in these books, it is necessary to clarify the way the term “white working class” is approached in this article. These British and US American accounts equate the “white working class” with a status group of people without tertiary education, situated in a certain income bracket, and above all with a strong identity as “white”. In Germany, for example, the concept of whiteness is not used. Instead, *deutsch* [German], *abendländisch* [occidental] or even European are terms that are deployed to draw a line of demarcation between oneself and refugees, migrants and their children, highlighting what Etienne Balibar has called “racism without race” (Balibar and Wallerstein, 1991: 23). Similar to the Anglophone accounts, recent research from Germany states that German workers who support the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) perceive themselves to be in the middle of society rather than at the bottom (Dörre, 2018). In some way workers' self-perceptions and the Anglophone explanations correspond to simplistic empiricist sociological notions of class, in which class is posited as an “individual attribute” or “opportunity hoarding” rather than a social relation of exploitation and domination (Wright, 2015). Moreover, the term “white working class” ignores the way in which class continuously composes and re-composes itself through technological and political changes. On the one hand, this can occur through automation, digitalisation or the introduction of new machinery in the production process. On the other hand, the concrete examples of the integration of Silesian workers in early twentieth-century Germany, Jewish and Irish workers in the US, and even Polish workers in Britain into “whiteness” epitomise how the working class is recomposed politically. Lastly, the term “white working class” enmeshes sociological status-group models and some workers' embrace of a “white” identity. Consequently, the term “white working class” cannot serve as the basis for a progressive political agenda. As W.E.B. DuBois pointed out in *Black Reconstruction* the white worker is a subject incapable of acting in their class interest if they define those interests as “white”. Hence, organising on the basis of “whiteness” stands in “contradiction of all sound labor policy” (DuBois, 1935: 357–8). It is worth turning to the question how the twin crises reconfigure working-class politics today.

Explaining the Twin Crises

Investigating the new discussion on class revealed that both in Britain and the USA, the discussion on “the return of class” preceded the election of Donald Trump and EU referendum in Britain. In the United States the debate appears to run in tandem with the nation's electoral cycle. Meanwhile, in Britain the end of the New Labour era can be identified as a point of departure for the on-going debate.

In the USA, the popular discussion on class stretches as far back as Thomas Frank's (2004) *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* which explores the rise of populist anti-elitist conservatism. According to Frank, the US Democrats' shift to a conservative economic agenda alongside their prioritising of cultural issues such as LGBTQ rights and abortion rights meant that the right could brand liberals as elitist. Arguably, this hastened the crisis of working-class politics. One election later, the publication of Joe Bageant's *Deer Hunting with Jesus* sought to tell a story of debt and inequality through his encounter with old friends and family in his Appalachian hometown of Winchester, West Virginia. Written to explain the crisis of working-class politics at the onset of the financial crisis in which millions of Americans lost their homes, Bageant illuminates the contradictions that conflict white poor people in the United States.

In Britain, the discussion can be traced back to the election of the Conservative–Liberal government in 2010 and the continuous dominance of New Labour politics within the British Labour Party for thirteen years. Initially, the likes of Maurice Glasman and “Blue Labour” argued that the Labour Party betrayed its working-class supporters. To address this, Glasman called for a dialogue with supporters of the Islamophobic and racist English Defence League. However, there were also more sustained and eloquent responses to the crisis of the working class in Britain. Four years before Jeremy Corbyn's ascent in the Labour Party, Owen Jones (2011) told the story of stigmatised working-class communities and those responsible for their immiseration. As Jones's book became a bestseller, he became the attraction of every left-wing meeting, rally and demonstration in the country. Drawing on examples from popular culture, Jones traces how Britain's working class went from having one of the strongest labour movements in Europe to becoming a demonised subject without agency, engulfed in crisis. He shows that former Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher did not only economically destroy mining communities but, more significantly, laid the foundation for lasting cultural changes affecting working-class pride, organisation and the popular conception of the working class – epitomised in Tony Blair's proclamation, “We're all middle-class now”. While Jones does not explicitly mention the twin crises of authority and working-class politics, his book still provides an antidote to Thatcherism, New Labour ideology and the belief that Britain has become a classless society. The difference between Bageant's and Frank's books and that of Owen Jones lies in how the former seek to understand why working people ended up voting against their interests while the latter seeks to pinpoint to why they are being demonised. In doing so, their different approaches seek to come to terms with how class is made and re-made politically and culturally in contemporary capitalism.

An in-depth analysis of Jones's (2011: 142–3) book reveals that he advances a culturalist reading of class in which place, community and housing create the conditions for the emergence of a place-based working-class identity. This working-class identity, however, finds itself undermined and uprooted through factories moving to the other side of the planet while workers from across the planet become one's neighbours. Thus, the crisis of the working class approximates an identity crisis. There are two issues with Jones's account. Firstly, place and industry are often treated synonymously, conflating occupational class identities and place-based class identities in an unhelpful way. In doing so, he reflects the everyday usage of class rather than advancing a relational concept of class based on domination and exploitation. Secondly, Jones does not analyse British workers' role in the international division of labour, their working conditions and their relation to capital anywhere at length. Accordingly, class remains an individual attribute rather than a dynamic social relation which is continuously being made, un-made and re-made. Thus, it is questionable whether Jones's reading of class can contribute to rebuilding a class identity fit for the twenty-first century.

Anarchist ethnographer Lisa McKenzie (2015) provides a unique perspective on the crisis of the working class. In her book, she describes life on St. Ann's – a Nottingham council estate – where she grew up and later raised a mixed-race child by herself. By detailing the lives of working-class people in a granular fashion, her book seemingly reasserts working-class people's agency in their everyday praxes. Similar to Jones, McKenzie (2015: 6) advances a culturalist reading of class when she writes: "It is the 'cultural dimension' which feeds into stigma (what you wear, how you speak, your accent, your tastes)". This results in what McKenzie calls "symbolic violence" which results in working-class people feeling ashamed of their situation. Thus, the crisis of the working class runs deeper than the demise of political and economic organisation.

Unlike Jones, McKenzie (2015: 24) extends her portrait to "the labour of the residents within New Town/St. Ann's [which] was vital to the wealth and economy of Nottingham". Yet, their work did not lift them out of poverty; instead they are trapped in a vicious cycle of low-paying jobs with no chance of being upskilled, moving up in pay or moving away (McKenzie, 2015: 30). This observation counters the widely held stereotype that council estate inhabitants are work-shy or lack a work ethic. It is rather the case that the benchmark for who a "good worker" is has been moved. It no longer suffices to (be willing to) work in order to live a dignified life and be deemed a good worker, but it is rather one's willingness to move elsewhere, to engage in lifelong learning, and one's flexibility which deems one a good worker. These cultural changes contribute to working people's immiseration and the crisis of the working class in general.

The discussion in the US is like the one in Britain as deindustrialisation, globalisation and rising levels of inequality provide the context for this long-overdue discussion. This is evidenced in political scientist Justin Gest's (2016: 10) book *The New Minority*, in which he implicitly deciphers Jones's conflation of place and industry by labelling Youngstown (Ohio) and Dagenham (Essex) as "post-traumatic cities". These post-traumatic cities used to be wholly dependent on one company, industry or employer, such as General Motors or Parker Pens in Goldstein's *Janesville* (2017). In co-operation, companies and the state provided workers with a certain economic stability during the three decades following World War II. As they off-shored production, cities' social, cultural, economic and political infrastructure started to disintegrate, and a power vacuum emerged (Gest, 2016), resulting in the twin crises. Here, capital's supposed ability to move anywhere in the world is contrasted with workers' inability to move due to their deep community ties. It is these deep ties and their reconfiguration which will be addressed in the following section.

A Transnational Discussion on Class, Land and Mobility

Companies off-shoring their production and creating post-traumatic cities are not the only commonality between Britain and the United States. Historian Nancy Isenberg (2017) shows how the discussion on class has been a transnational conversation ever since the Americas were part of the British Empire. These historical linkages can account for how class is discussed today.

Her book, which became the primer for liberals grappling with Trump's popularity among working-class voters, draws out how the class dynamics of Victorian England were transplanted to the American colonies (Isenberg, 2017: 46–7). Tracing these historical linkages forces us to "acknowledge the ongoing influence of older English definitions of poverty and class" (Isenberg, 2017: 4). The different slurs used to denigrate the white underclass in the American colonies – such as crackers (still used by African-Americans to insult white people today), offscourings (synonymous with faecal matter), useless lubbers and idle squatters – have their origin in British class relations and Britain's hereditary title system based on land ownership. Writing about the concept of class in the US, Isenberg (2017: 4) states that "our relentless class system evolved out

of recurring agrarian notions regarding the character and potential of the land, the value of labor, and critical concepts of breeding”. In other words, those who own land or work the land are deemed to be of value to society. Meanwhile, Steven Stoll (2017) places primacy on the enclosure of the Commons in sixteenth-century England in creating a template for the industrious use of land in the colonies, and who was regarded as a good worker. As this ran opposite to indigenous conceptions of land, settlers in the colonies made it their destiny to tame the land and not be a “lubber”. Isenberg and Stoll thus evidence how British definitions of social class have shaped and continue to shape US politics of class today. It is unfortunate that Gest does not account for these historical linkages in his comparative study.

While continuities and similarities in the discussion on class in Britain and the US need to be acknowledged, the analysis finds that the contemporary British discussion ties class to place and culture while US authors operationalise class along the lines of industry and land. In order to wholly appreciate this point, it is necessary to turn to the books’ titles and imagery, as these reveal some significant differences in the way that class is discussed in Britain and the US respectively. The book covers of Jones’s *Chavs* and McKenzie’s *Getting By* depict two stereotypical cultural signifiers of British working-class life: a Burberry baseball cap and a necklace nameplate showing the book title instead of a woman’s name. These stereotypical cultural signifiers reinforce the above-detailed culturalist reading of class. This imagery differs from George Packer’s, Arlie Russell Hochschild’s and J.D. Vance’s books to which I will return below in more detail. In contrast, their book covers depict landscapes reminiscent of industrial decline, poverty and environmental degradation. In doing so, the books’ marketing posits class as intertwined with the land that people live on, confirming Isenberg’s historical evidence.

The focus on land reveals how the urban–rural divide and workers’ fraught relationship to the land continues to shape class experience in the US. Given Isenberg’s and Stoll’s historical evidence on land and class in the US, it is surprising that Hochschild’s (2016) book does not touch upon how white settlers in the US – the forefathers of her research subjects – destroyed the intimate link that indigenous people had with their land by driving them off the so-called idle land and turning it into a place of recreation in the best of cases and a source of profit in the worst of cases. This would provide necessary historical background of the “great paradox” of workers supporting Big Oil and concurrently caring for the land they live on (Hochschild, 2016: 21). It is the omission of these historical truths that make the title *Strangers in Their Own Land* problematic, to say the least. But as Steven Stoll’s (2017) economic history of Appalachia exemplifies, it would not have to be so. Despite his book’s focus on white Appalachians getting kicked off their land, he also investigates the plight of black and Native Americans in the region. This methodological approach allows him to comprehend how, through stripping the forests of all their trees and then by coal mining, public land became real estate, and ultimately led to the economic under-development of all Appalachians.

With one’s status in the American colonies being tied to land ownership, the rural–urban divide continuing to express itself economically and politically today, and the books presenting rural life as increasingly impoverished, class and land remain inextricably linked in the United States. It is in this context that Bruder (2018) makes a succinct intervention into the debate on class, land and workers’ mobility. In her book, she trails individuals who live in their recreational vehicles (RVs) and work in Amazon.com’s warehouse “CamperForce” programme – a seasonal work programme designed for people living in RVs. She finds that US working people’s relationship to the land has been altered for the worse. The lack of public land on which they can park their RVs means that they are routinely subject to police harassment. At the same time, their nomad status renders them dependent on the goodwill of multinational companies. On the one hand, WalMart allows them to

park on its parking lots because the company realises that these nomads are a target consumer group. On the other hand, Amazon.com's CamperForce work programme offers them a steady place to park in return for working in one of their warehouses.

Bruder's account of mobility thus differs substantially from McKenzie's, Jones's, Gest's and Goldstein's accounts, where capital's mobility is juxtaposed with workers' immobility. Here, a segment of the working class who can be considered hyper-mobile and de-classed creates new forms of sociality in the wake of the erosion of old industries and work. However, Bruder details the tenacity of the idea that land ownership is a hallmark of status, as she follows a woman nomad whose biggest dream is to own a plot of land in the Arizona desert. Again, this evidences the perseverance of traditional American notions of class even among those people who have been de-classed in the wake of the financial crisis and the Great Recession.

In contrast to British accounts of workers' immobility, the work of Bruder, Vance and Goldstein deals with how mobility is re-making the US working class. Journalist Amy Goldstein, for example, portrays families in which the men have become labour migrants – also known as “GM gypsies” – who split their time between their old hometown of Janesville and their new workplaces more than 400 miles away. In his personal memoir J.D. Vance details how his family left the Appalachians for the Midwest following the automation of the coal industry in the mid-1960s. Thus, it can be argued that ever-larger sections of the US working class are being recomposed through capital mobility and workers' experience with internal economic migration, effectively reconfiguring traditional relationships to industry and land.

As seen in this section, the transnational discussion on class reaches as far back as the enclosure of the Commons. At the time of writing, the twin crises are reconfiguring traditional notions of class. While these notions remain hegemonic, the financial crisis of 2007–2008 has called them into question, thus contributing to the crisis of authority and that of the working class. As will be seen in the following section, the twin crises do not only reconfigure working-class politics organisationally but also assume a very personal character, which is reflected in both the form and content of some publications.

“You have Nothing to Lose but your Chains” – Understanding the Working-class Family

It appears that the twin crises have revived the autobiography or personal memoir as the form with which to transmit insider knowledge and claim authenticity of writers' working-class experiences. In these memoirs and autobiographies, authors describe their upbringing in a working-class household and how they unshackled themselves from the stranglehold of their families and tight-knit communities.

With *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, J.D. Vance, an ex-marine and lawyer with a degree from Yale, offers an autobiographical account of his Scottish–Irish working-class family in the Appalachians. Vance's “Horatio Alger” story of growing up with an addict mother, an alcoholic grandfather and gun-waving grandmother makes for a gripping read. Unfortunately, his story of pulling himself up by his own bootstraps through hard work reinforces the negative image of working people from the Appalachians. As he draws on Charles Murray's (2012) *Coming Apart: The State of White America*, which promotes neo-eugenics, Vance's notion of class is not only tied to industry and place but also to white bodies. Echoes of this can even be found in Isenberg's discussion of class and their “bodily features” such as their yellowish skin, their racial ambiguity and their thinness. While class domination and exploitation are embodied experiences, the reader is confronted with notions of class which appear to be individual attributes.

At time of writing, it is no longer thinness but rather obesity which is a marker of one's position as a working-class person in the US or Britain. Drawing on the same theme, Eribon (2016: 91) states that as a child of working-class parents he experienced his working-class position in all of his body.

In his family story, Vance does not only offer a culturalist reading of class but also an inconsistent and ahistorical one, as he argues that the lack of work ethic is inherent in the Appalachian culture. Yet, elsewhere he writes how his ancestors were sharecroppers, coal miners, machinists and millworkers. In other words, they were part of the working class which became de-classed following the automation in the coal industry. However, Vance's book does not provide the space for such collective history, as he believes that there is only the collective story of the family which functions as an "ancient structure" (Vance, 2016: 32). Thus, his relatives' dependence on welfare and lack of social and upward mobility is posited as an inherent cultural trait rather than the product of treating workers and land as disposable commodities. In lieu of McKenzie's insight that stigmatisation produces the feeling of shame among working-class people, Vance wishes for nothing more than to escape the plight of his kin. Wrongly so, he believes that this is best done by kicking them while they are down, by advocating radical cuts in government spending and tax breaks for corporations.

A crucial puzzle piece to his story and his politics is the insistence that "problems were not created by government or corporations or anyone else. We created them, and only we can fix them" (Vance, 2016: 256). This exemplifies the twin crises insofar as such insistence on personal responsibility has been a right-wing dog whistle for the last few decades. Nevertheless, Scottish rapper and socialist activist Darren McGarvey (2017) argues that the language of personal responsibility cannot be left to the forces of the right alone. His observations on the socio-psychological mechanisms holding working-class people back lead him to conclude that the left should advocate both radical change and taking ownership of one's own personal life in order to rebuild agency in the poorest communities. Building on this, Peter Ikeler's (2018) recent article on the opioid epidemic suggests that the left ought to draw on narratives of "personal recovery" in order to rebuild unions. This discussion on personal responsibility implies that the crisis of the working class cannot simply be solved by having stronger social-democratic, communist or trade union organisation but that it rather requires new ways to think about the individual in capitalist society. As neo-liberalism has reconfigured the relationship between the individual and society, it arguably requires individuals with resilience and agency to rebuild collective working-class institutions. In my previous empirical research on Spanish nurses in the German care industry, for example, I evidenced how workers internalised and individualised collective problems and how in turn workers sought individual solutions such as leaving the job rather than building unions (Bergfeld, 2017). With unions and the left unable to assist "the individual", workers fall back on families, informal networks and deep community ties which are not always conducive to unionism and produce contradictory results. As evidenced in the books discussed in this article, some groups of workers will turn to the far right for answers.

Workers' right-turn is the main theme of French sociologist and journalist Didier Eribon (2016). In his book, he offers an autobiographical explanation why working people who had once voted for communist and social-democratic parties now were voting for right-wing parties. It is also a biographical account of growing up in a working-class household and being plagued by shame. For Eribon, leftist parties no longer speak the language of working people and have adopted the standpoint and language of governance. In doing so, they have rejected workers with "verbal violence" (Eribon, 2016: 121).

In a similar vein to Vance, Eribon's memoir tells the story of how he escaped his working-class household and shed himself of his working-class roots and habitus upon moving to Paris as

a young, gay student. Unlike Vance, though, Eribon moves toward reconciliation with his working-class roots following his father's death rather than contributing to the stigmatisation of those he grew up with. In his narrative, Eribon identifies two problems regarding working-class people voting for right-wing parties. On the one hand, the dominant French Communist Party (PCF) never challenged the notion of the "Grande Nation" and adopted a reductionist politics around women's and LGBTQ issues. On the other hand, the French intellectual milieu looked down on the working class for not understanding "identity politics". In turn, the French intellectual milieu could no longer connect to the very base it sought to give a voice. Arguably, this created the conditions for workers to seamlessly move from the PCF to the Front National. For Eribon (2016: 124), workers' agreement with the Front National partially represents "political self-defence". The left needs to face up to this political reconfiguration of the working class, but Eribon does not just plead for a return to the discourse of class – as most German commentators have interpreted his work. He rather argues that the left needs to remove itself from all its mythologising around social class (Eribon, 2016: 142). After all, Eribon contends that the working class is a contradictory subject without "spontaneous knowledge" and without a stable political connection; this was shown when the same workers who joined the strikes in May 1968 voted for DeGaulle only a month later (Eribon, 2016: 126).

It is not only the content of these books that illuminate the present political moment but also their form. The personal memoir or autobiography encounters multiple issues when describing working-class life, as families are idiosyncratic social units. Concurrently, they offer relief and refuge from the pressures of the market as well as being conduits for the worst kind of social pressures that an individual might experience (domestic abuse, drug addiction, alcoholism and so on). For that reason, the focus on the family over-generalises very peculiar and particular social experiences. This is exemplified in Vance's story of the "Hillbilly Code of Silence", which implies that family matters cannot be discussed outside the family so as not to bring shame upon the family. However, the form also acknowledges that the family is the primary place for a person's socialisation. As such it can provide insights into how people experience the reality of class domination, how contemporary capitalism reconfigures the working-class family and even undermines its very basis. In Goldstein's *Janesville* (2017), for example, a survey reveals that two-thirds of family relationships had become strained after the General Motors plant closure and 50 per cent of respondents reported the loss of good friends. Arguably, the financial crisis has accelerated the crisis of the working class.

This section has thus evidenced that the personal memoir or autobiography reflects the way in which people experience class domination and the way in which contemporary capitalism is reconfiguring class. Family experiences might be unique but can provide further insights on class domination and the crisis of the working class. As shown, these books raise questions regarding the individual and collective dimensions of class which labour research would benefit from.

Class, Gender and Immigration

This section addresses how the books being reviewed deal with questions of gender and immigration.

The starting point for this discussion is book titles such as *Strangers in Their Own Land*, *The Unwinding* and *The New Minority* as these evoke the feeling of loss. Looking back, this sense of loss experienced in working-class communities is nothing new, as cultural theorist Richard Hoggart (1957) sought to understand in his work on the break-up of working-class cultures in England. He laments how close-knit community ties are being replaced by mass-manufactured culture such as

tabloids and Hollywood movies. According to Hoggart, these “alien” phenomena have colonised local communities, robbed them of their distinct features, and undermined the cohesiveness and identity of working-class communities. The only difference between Hoggart’s account and contemporary ones is that the alien objects have changed.

As women, LGBTQ folk and people of colour have claimed equal participation and recognition, the far-right has rallied against “identity politics”. The analysis suggests that all books either accept or seek to rationalise what can be labelled “white and male victimhood”. Hochschild (2016: 43), for example, compares the loss of local animal species to working men’s role in contemporary capitalism when she writes, “animals and fish are not all they have lost”. Some pages later, one of her interviewees states, “these days American men are an endangered species, too” (Hochschild, 2016: 61). Thus, the books contend that the twin crises affect white men disproportionately. This is contrary to all empirical evidence which suggests that women have been harder hit during the crisis and that black men are more likely to be unemployed.

Yet, this pervasive sense of loss in status is closely connected to loss of manufacturing jobs and the concomitant collapse of the Fordist male-breadwinner model. This leads Jones to latch on to the “losers of globalisation” discourse. He states, “this sense of rootedness has been breaking down for a long time, partly because of the collapse of industry” (Jones, 2011: 142). For Joan Williams (2016), writing in the *Harvard Business Review*, this has resulted in white male workers’ loss of “manly dignity”. Unconventionally, Vance (2016: 54–6) also grounds this sense of loss in the shift from manual labour – which used to be a source of pride – to service work. Arguably, this pride is two-dimensional: On the one hand, it is an occupational pride of being a coal miner, an auto worker and so on. On the other hand, it is the pride of providing for one’s family and surpassing one’s father’s achievements. Most service jobs do not facilitate those forms of occupational identity nor do they provide the same level of stability and wages as unionised manufacturing jobs once did. Goldstein (2017) illuminates this by telling the story of two women who find jobs as prison guards following the closure of the GM plant and its adjacent car seat manufacturer. This offers an explanation of how the work ethic has been reconfigured to work qua negative, with those out of work being insulted as “benefit scroungers” or “leeches”. Like McKenzie (2015) identifying shame as workers’ response to class domination and exploitation, Goldstein finds that Janesville residents are ashamed to be out of work. The fact that nothing positive has replaced occupational pride and providing for one’s family can be regarded as a further manifestation of the twin crises. What other responses beside shame do working-class people develop in this situation?

Justin Gest (2016) suggests that workers draw on three types of narratives to explain their decline: economic, demographic and moral. The economic narrative contends that it was better in the 1950s and 1960s, while demographic narratives are oriented against newcomers to the labour market such as women and migrants. The moral narrative centers on dysfunctional families and drug use as the source of decline. Gest contributes to the debate insofar as he addresses immigration as a factor in undermining working men’s identity. He explicitly draws out how workers link their sense of loss to new waves of immigration. Among other things, he finds that white workers resent their new neighbours who have a different colour of skin or different religion than their own. Gest’s empiricism raises suspicions as to whether he agrees with their worldview. In an interview with the liberal media outlet Vox, Gest echoes Hochschild’s interviewee when he says, “they [white working-class men] feel outnumbered and they feel external from government and power-brokers, and they feel discriminated against” (Gest and Illing, 2016). However, he does not provide progressive policy solutions for these issues. His further findings suggest that two-thirds of his research subjects would vote for far-right parties such as the fascist British National

Party. Yet, Gest argues that these white workers are not necessarily racist but rather are alienated from a system that previously privileged them but now favours other groups. This explanation is unsatisfactory on two levels. Firstly, who these other groups are and how they are being privileged is never explicitly mentioned. Secondly, the problem with Gest's analysis – as evidenced in the quote – is that it is primarily based on workers' perception and feelings. While previously established embodied feelings can capture class domination and exploitation, Gest is not writing a memoir but a scientific treatise. As such the book lacks in in-depth analysis of observed phenomena. Based on Gest's findings, it can be argued that the twin crises then engender workers' right-wing radicalisation, apathy from the democratic process and nostalgia. This is also manifested in higher levels of drug addiction, suicide and psychic distress according to Goldstein.

It is not only immigrants that are the target of white workers' resentment; the analysis revealed that it also crystallised around the figure of the "professional" such as doctors, lawyers and journalists. According to Williams (2016), workers' animosity for professionals is based on the latter group's shallow social ties oriented toward advancing professionally and in the business world. Vance and Eribon both write about their experiences of being confronted with fellow students' "social capital" at university for the first time, which stands in contradistinction to the deep-rooted ties and dependencies experienced growing up in working-class communities. This produces both shame about one's upbringing as well as the feeling of being a fraud. This only offers a partial explanation of workers' animosity toward professionals. Another point to consider is professionals' exercise of control over workers in school, the labour process, administrations and bureaucracies. However, these books do not touch upon these factors. Further empirical research could help to disentangle some of the mechanisms of domination. As it is argued that workers no longer have a class-based view of society, the extent to which this resentment towards professionals amounts to an articulation of a class-based view of society needs to be addressed. However, answers to these questions will not be found in the pages of these books. From an interview with J.D. Vance in the *American Conservative*, however, it can be deduced that this resentment cuts both ways and reflects a dimension of the class divide in US society:

...and if you're an elite white professional, working-class whites are an easy target: you don't have to feel guilty for being a racist or a xenophobe. By looking down on the hillbilly, you can get that high of self-righteousness and superiority without violating any of the moral norms of your own tribe. So your own prejudice is never revealed for what it is (Vance and Dreher, 2016: n.p.).

In other words, white workers' racism that gives middle-class professionals permission to look down at them and to camouflage their specific racism manifested in the "unwilling[ness] to move towards either any full-scale reckoning with the structural character of racism or an embrace of racial resistance in the streets" (Bray, 2017: n.p.). As far-right and conservative parties have branded the political agendas of white-collar professionals and metropolitan elites as elitist, and progressive and leftist parties have moved to represent the "new middle classes", this has opened a new political cleavage. In the US, this cleavage is strongly connected to the rural–urban divide, in Britain to the divide between London and the North, and in Germany it remains the division between East and West.

Whitening Class and the Role of Working-class Organisation

The starting point of this article was the crisis of the working class which manifests itself in the decline of working-class institutions as much as the demise of working-class consciousness. As

already mentioned above, this opens the door to white male workers' sense of loss, expressing itself in resentment against foreigners, migrants and professionals. Thus, it is necessary to investigate how these books describe the role of working-class organisation and "whiteness".

Nancy Isenberg's (2017) book reveals that white workers are not and have never been a homogeneous group of social actors, or what Marx would label "a class for itself". This is evidenced by the continuous questioning of poor white people's racial identity through comparing them to Native Americans or runaway slaves. Nonetheless, her historical account demonstrates how American elites created an ethnically distinct caste of indentured workers among white settlers at the bottom rung of society. These would only have to be willing to act as a buffer between black slaves and their masters, or willing to remove indigenous peoples from their land in exchange for some acres of their own. The law in the American colonies facilitated this process: for every six black slaves, a slave owner was required to employ one white servant. Knowing these historical details, it is the more surprising that Isenberg (2017: 2) ends up arguing that "class has its own singular and powerful dynamic, apart from its intersection with race". Analytically, this appears to be simply false as the political question whether poor whites could really be considered white was and remains a key dividing line in the United States.

Other books discussed in this article are no better in explaining the relationship between race and class. This is evidenced in the use of the term "hillbilly" which arose during the Agrarian Revolt in 1890s Appalachia and is used to describe members of the "white working class". However, it has been pointed out that it was racially ambiguous (Kerl, 2017). In effect, Vance and others conveniently ignore black people's presence in the Appalachians (Turner, 2017). In the same vein, Jones's book title *Chavs* epitomises colour-blindness, as it assumes a racialised concept of a "white working-class" person. Elsewhere he writes:

'Chavs' are often treated as synonymous with the 'white working class'... The white working class had become another marginalized ethnic minority, and this meant that all their concerns were understood solely through the prism of race (Jones, 2011: 8).

Such a racialised concept of the "white worker" also emerged in the public discussion on the German translation of Eribon's (2016) *Returning to Reims*. Here, media commentators strategically omitted that Eribon quotes black writers at length to explain his denial of growing up in a working-class family and gay identity. Writing about Amazon.com CamperForce workers living in their RVs, Bruder (2018) offers a critical reflection on the issue of class and race, as she underlines that protagonists' "whiteness" helps them to survive life on the road. Further she argues that black nomads would be more likely to experience police brutality.

Too frequently the accounts in question implicitly equate being working-class with being white and male. In doing so, they adopt the sociological view of class as an "individual attribute" (Wright, 2015). Such a working class is not only a figment of the imagination but politically dangerous as well, as it portrays black and brown people as a separate and distinct social group from the working class. Hence, readers might come to believe that racialised people's interests are not aligned with the expansion of the welfare state and wage rises but solely focused on so-called identity issues. This neglects the wider point that people of colour frequently experience their class position in society through race and that historical evidence has confirmed that working-class and labour movements have always been shaped and even set in motion by people of colour and migrants (DuBois, 1935; Roediger, 2005; Brecher, 2014; Virdee, 2014). Thus, this conflation of whiteness and class contributes to some writers' inability to come to terms with working-class organisation and resistance in the early twenty-first century, which will be dealt with next.

Due to their rapid decline, labour unions can no longer help working people to articulate their problems (Gest, 2016: 133). According to Gest (2016: 137), working-class consciousness has been replaced with religion and nativism. The result is a complete lack of working-class organisation and solidarity. This is the cumulation of previously described socio-economic processes: companies moving abroad, anti-union legislation, elites demonising the poor and unemployed workers, dividing them into undeserving and deserving poor, and creating the effect of amnesia. Although Vance's (2016) book is set in the Appalachians, an area with a long history of working-class resistance, he only mentions labour movements in passing. Bruder (2018) does not touch upon the prospect of worker organisation and resistance, despite her book being a story about how community reconstitutes itself.

Exemplary of the silence on working-class resistance and organisation is Amy Goldstein's *Janesville*. Perhaps this explains why it won McKinsey Business Book of the Year 2017. Above all, it is a story of resilience and how workers reinvent themselves in the wake of the GM plant closure. In the vein of this spirit, the local union representative is portrayed as simply accepting the fate of GM moving away, which might warrant an historical explanation. Janesville autoworkers did not go on strike during the great sit-down strikes in the 1930s. In the book Janesville residents develop a bipartisan community to get jobs back into the town at any cost. They eventually succeed in getting a discount supermarket chain to open a warehouse in town, which creates jobs but workers' earnings have been halved. Interestingly, Nottingham – the site of McKenzie's *Getting By* – is also the place where a bosses' union was established during the General Strike of 1926 and miners remained divided during the great miners' strike of 1984–1985 (Gallas, 2015: 174ff). Thus, *Janesville* and *Getting By* implicitly posit resilience and survival as working-class virtues while resistance and collective action are treated as exogenous and foreign. As such, the two books relate to a wider trend in politics and the social sciences in which individual resilience takes primacy over resistance.

Ultimately, this begs the question of where working-class agency might reconstitute itself. George Packer, for example, follows a black woman in Youngstown, Ohio (also the site of Justin Gest's study) who, after losing her job, decides to become a community and labour organiser. This story of working-class agency runs opposite to the other accounts in which white working people mostly pursue individual paths. These findings should concern labour sociologists and labour movement researchers in three ways. Firstly, it displays a lack of cross-contamination between our field and other related areas of study. Secondly, it becomes evident that findings from the field do not make their way into popular narratives about working people. Thirdly, our research needs to account for how the far right seeks to capture working-class voters.

Conclusion

This article has found that this new discussion on white workers and class has been part of an ongoing debate since the mid-2000s in the United States and the early 2010s in Britain. The discussions on the two sides of the Atlantic are not only similar but share the same origin story, which also affects how class is currently being reconfigured. Nonetheless, differences regarding the formation of class identity have been established. It is shown how British accounts of class are marked by a strong reading of place, while US ones emphasise land. Capital mobility in turn has forced workers to adapt or fall behind. The form of the autobiography, personal memoir or personalised style of these books which focus on families permits authors to establish insider knowledge and present class domination as an embodied experience. For those engaged in labour research, this raises the question of how the field can develop what Michael Burawoy (2005) has described as a “double conversation” which reaches a wider audience but does not sacrifice

complexity of thought. Above all, this on-going discussion forces labour researchers to pay attention if it wants to remain relevant to working people.

The context of de-industrialisation and globalisation have offered politicians and multinational companies a pretence to treat workers as disposable commodities. However, it must be borne in mind that this restructuring is not unique to the groups of workers in these books. There have been similar experiences in the former Eastern Bloc in the 1990s, the Global South following those nations' liberation from colonialism, black cities in the United States and workers in Southern European countries in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. The decline of social-democratic parties, left-wing organisations and above all trade union organisation has created an open space. Unlike in the 1960s and 1970s, when this was filled with alternative left-wing movements such as anarchism or other utopian currents, right-wing parties and organisations have now moved into that open space and filled it with nativism, moral conservatism and even outright racism. Furthermore, the right has dominated the left in questions of personal responsibility, shame and work ethic. The twin crises have resulted in the right's lack of fear toward these constituents, as well as workers' inability to develop a cohesive class-based view of society which might threaten the right. It is for that reason that a far-right political party such as the True Finns in Finland can attract workers by labelling itself a "workers' party without socialism". It also partially explains why former UK Independence Party leader and investment banker Nigel Farage and businessman-turned-President Trump can claim to be men of the people.

New realities require new approaches. During the Great Depression in the 1930s when communist and social-democratic parties were mass organisations, workers were deemed virtuous and hard-working. Today, low levels of unionisation, the decline of social-democratic organisations and the near disappearance of communist parties in the Global North means that the balance of forces is tilted in favour of the rich. The discussed books evidence that today's working class is being re-made through its very stigmatisation and internalisation of shame. It thus needs to be concluded that the way in which working-class people are portrayed is an expression of the balance of forces. While these books address pertinent questions to develop a class politics from below, the dominant readings of class in these books do not suffice to come to terms with the vast social, cultural, economic and political changes affecting the working class. Culturalist explanations of class can reveal how class is made and re-made along different axes. However, if class is conflated with whiteness and place rather than understood as a dynamic social relation, the new discussion on class does not amount to anything more than new wine in old bottles. Hence, it cannot offer solutions to the crisis of working-class politics.

Except for Eribon and McGarvey, the picture of working-class politics that these books advance sacrifices complexity and does not tease out the contradictions which are at work in contemporary capitalism. Judging by the books and their reception, it is questionable whether they will stand the test of time, as they do not touch upon the simultaneously occurring "left radicalisation" in Britain and the US. Despite the Bernie-phenomenon and the rise of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), the US accounts are plagued by blindness in their left eye. Vance's book might have provided a good snapshot in 2016 but has aged quite poorly. As teachers' strikes gripped Kentucky, Oklahoma and West Virginia in early 2018, a different light to that presented in Vance's account has been shed on the Appalachians and the Midwest. This reveals the limitations of the memoir form. Perhaps the combative multi-racial working-class movements in the public sector did not fit his idea(l) of a Hillbilly Revolt. Despite its political analysis, the same can be said for Gest's book, in which he claims that most of his research subjects in post-traumatic cities are willing to vote for far-right parties such as UKIP or the BNP. However, at the time of writing far-right politics in Britain is predominantly characterised by street mobilisations rather

than electoral gains, and the 2017 General Elections in Britain revealed that Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party could win seats in areas where UKIP had been strong.

As sections of the left adopt positions which place national interests above those of the global working class, progressives and the left need to develop class analyses that account for how class is continuously composed and recomposed through race and migration. Workers are not helpless in the face of globalisation (Munch, 2010, 2013; Bieler, 2014); however, these books reinforce neo-liberal ideology in that regard. The fact that far-right governments and the market threaten workers' organisations and seek to encroach on all spheres of life, makes the "double conversation" that this article called for at the beginning more necessary than ever.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

MARK BERGFELD is the European Director of Property Services and UNICARE at UNI Global Union in Brussels, Belgium. He holds a PhD from Queen Mary University of London, School of Business and Management, and has written articles on migration, work, employment and trade unions. He tweets about labour issues @mdbergfeld. [Email mark.bergfeld@uniglobalunion.org]