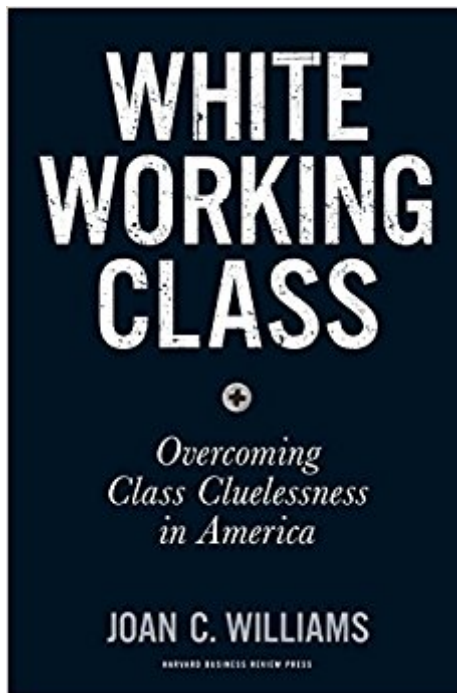




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White Working Class: Overcoming Class Cluelessness In America



Synopsis

Around the world, populist movements are gaining traction among the white working class. Meanwhile, members of the professional elite—journalists, managers, and establishment politicians—are on the outside looking in, left to argue over the reasons. In *White Working Class*, Joan C. Williams, described as having “something approaching rock star status” by the *New York Times*, explains why so much of the elite’s analysis of the white working class is misguided, rooted in class cluelessness. Williams explains that many people have conflated “working class” with “poor”—but the working class is, in fact, the elusive, purportedly disappearing middle class. They often resent the poor and the professionals alike. But they don’t resent the truly rich, nor are they particularly bothered by income inequality. Their dream is not to join the upper middle class, with its different culture, but to stay true to their own values in their own communities—just with more money. While white working-class motivations are often dismissed as racist or xenophobic, Williams shows that they have their own class consciousness. *White Working Class* is a blunt, bracing narrative that sketches a nuanced portrait of millions of people who have proven to be a potent political force. For anyone stunned by the rise of populist, nationalist movements, wondering why so many would seemingly vote against their own economic interests, or simply feeling like a stranger in their own country, *White Working Class* will be a convincing primer on how to connect with a crucial set of workers and voters.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"American law professor Joan Williams has just written a powerful book dissecting these discontents, *The White Working Class*. Among her searing insights is that class consciousness on the left has been replaced by class cluelessness, even callousness. *The Toronto Star* "The people Joan Williams describes are my people, for better or for worse...buy her book, *White Working Class*. It's very practical. *Rod Dreher, The American Conservative* "Recommended reading: At least a dozen good books have come out on why the white working class turned so powerfully against Democrats. The most insightful of these include Joan Williams' *White Working Class: Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America* ... *Robert Kuttner for NPR* "Making an admirable and research-driven effort to see things from the point of view of her subject, author Williams unpacks exactly how the white working class (WWC) viewed the election, and how their history-making choice made a lot of sense given their concerns. *New York Post* "will undoubtedly be another best-selling book *New York Magazine* "Joan C. Williams is on a post-Trump mission to explore the broken relationship between America's liberal elite and the white working class *The Financial Times* Advance Praise for *White Working Class*: Anne-Marie Slaughter, President and CEO, New America "Joan C. Williams has an uncanny knack for striking at the core of complicated issues, first gender and now class. No one should have an excuse for class cluelessness after reading this book and everyone should read it. *Arlie Russell Hochschild, Author, Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* "Joan C. Williams has written an urgently needed *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* for the professional elite and the white working class, only better. Each chapter illuminates a core source of misunderstanding, and together they chart a way to bring the country together without abandoning the values of the minorities in the coalition. Read this highly important book and let's get to it. *Tony Schwartz, Author, The Way We're Working Isn't Working*; CEO, The Energy Project "In this blunt, compelling, tightly argued manifesto, Joan C. Williams sets out to truly understand the white working class, whose raw anger was so evident during the recent presidential race. Williams provides deep insight into why the working class resents the nonworking poor, and often admires the very rich; feels treated unfairly by the government despite the services it provides; can't easily move to cities where there are more jobs; and feels increasingly demonized, displaced, and devalued by what she calls the

“I felt shame and gratitude reading this book, and a new appreciation for the complexity of people’s lives.”

Joan C. Williams is Distinguished Professor of Law and Hastings Foundation Chair at the University of California, Hastings College of the Law. Williams’s work includes *What Works for Women at Work*, coauthored with Rachel Dempsey (New York University Press, 2014); *Unbending Gender: Why Family and Work Conflict and What To Do About It* (Oxford University Press, 2000); and such widely read reports as “The Three Faces of Work-Family Conflict,” coauthored with Heather Boushey. Williams is frequently featured as an expert on social class. For more information, visit JoanCWilliams.com.

Joan Williams wants to “Overcome Class Cluelessness in America.” This is an admirable goal, and in many ways this is an admirable book (or brochure—it’s very short). But reading “White Working Class” (which, despite its title, gives equal time to both the white and black working class) makes the reader squirm. The reader appreciates the author, Joan Williams, attempts to objectively examine her class, that of the “professional-management elite” or “PME,” but winces at her frequent inability to actually understand the working class, or to view the working class other than primarily as potential foot soldiers in the march of progressive politics. I have, I think, more personal familiarity than most people with the class structures outlined in this book. I grew up in the 1970s and 1980s, so really prior to the dominance of what Williams today aptly calls the PME. My father was a professor and my mother a housewife, so we were part of the professional class, but my father was poorly paid and worked at a large Midwestern state university, and I attended a different large Midwestern state university for my undergraduate degree. So at best I was on the fringes of the PME—college educated, but with zero financial resources, and no connection to the coastal elites. However, I bootstrapped myself into the PME, attending one of the top law schools in the country and working for a decade as a corporate lawyer for one of the country’s top law firms, and later attending a top business school. So I am, or was, a fully-fledged member of the PME. But then I became a tradesman (finish carpentry) for some years (odd change, I know), which didn’t exactly make me working class, but gave me working class wages and caused me to be often treated as working class, by both other members of the working class and by

the PME (who probably often would have been astounded by my background, almost as much as by my law school roommate who for a time, for kicks, drove a bus at the Atlanta airport). From there, though, I didn't return to the PME, but rather, after some years of grueling work, joined the third of Williams's four social classes, the "rich." I am now the sole owner of a manufacturing business, and wholly a self-made man, in that none of my earlier jobs or contacts made my current business successful. I employ more than a hundred people and am personally rich by any reasonable measure. So the only class relevant to this book I have not personally experienced is what Williams calls the "poor," although it's a stretch to say that I've ever really been working class but I've had a lot more personal contact with being working class, and working class people, on a face-to-face basis of near equality, than the vast majority of people in the PME. Enough about me (even though it's my favorite topic). Williams starts by pointing out that most politicians use "working class" as a euphemism for "poor," when the correct synonym is "middle class." (Throughout the book Williams talks just as much about the black working class as the white working class, noting where their views are different and where they are the same, so as I say the title is misleading.) These are people "with household incomes above the bottom 30% but below the top 20%, [along with] families with higher incomes but no college graduate. This is the middle 53% of American families, with a median income of \$75,000. Williams correctly identifies that in recent decades not only has this group suffered economically, but their dignity has been stripped by the elite response to their unhappiness, which is to characterize them as racist, sexist, homophobic knuckle-draggers, from Archie Bunker to Obama "clinging to their guns and religion" to Hillary Clinton "deplorables" (though the latter two are not mentioned by Williams, an admitted Clinton dead-ender). And what they really want is dignity and respect, just like all of us. But America today is set up to ensure that they don't have that, and the behavior of the PME is the worst aspect of this setup which leads to the "populist, anti-establishment anger that welled up in the 2016 election." Williams wrote the article on which this book is based (in the "Harvard Business Review") immediately after the election, and this is the basic frame through which she views the working class "holders of legitimate grievances, wielders of righteous anger, who need to be

corralled so they will support progressive policies while regaining perceived dignity and respect. In addition to her own (often insightful) analysis, as well as comments from people made in response to her original article, Williams leans heavily on two sources. The first is the famous 2016 J.D. Vance memoir, *Hillbilly Elegy*, which describes the working class through the prism of a member who mostly escaped to the PME via Yale Law School, yet who could not fully escape. The second is Arlie Hochschild's study of conservative Louisianans, *Strangers in Their Own Land*. Supplementing these are various citations to books and periodicals, all liberal (and, oddly given current concerns about the media, including several citations to altnet, a far left-wing purveyor of "fake news"). The rest of the book is organized around questions, which are the titles to short chapters answering each question—in essence, reacting to responses made to the arguments in Williams's original article. "Why Does The Working Class Resent The Poor?" The short answer is that the working class thinks the poor are freeloaders, and that freeloading is immoral. Williams notes that the working class views hard work, responsibility, and provision for one's family, especially by men, as moral virtues. By "hard work," they don't mean making life all about work, but rather not slacking and accepting risk and drudgery (including hardships like out-of-phase working schedules for couples, or physical danger for men) as the price to be paid for a decent living with dignity. Moreover, the working class values being straightforward and sincere, morally upright, and having high personal integrity. The poor are perceived as not having these virtues—and, because of means-tested benefit programs, they often avoid having to work, by taking the money of others. The poor get free Obamacare; the working class can no longer afford any insurance at all. For the working class, receiving welfare themselves erodes their dignity, their self-respect, and the respect of others for them. Whether working class people live up to these moral virtues as much as they would like, and whether other benefit programs such as Social Security disability are just as much welfare, are not relevant to the perception by working class that the poor are parasites. Similarly, Williams points out that policies like sick leave and minimum wage increases can help the poor, but they don't help the working class nearly as much as what they really want: "jobs that sustain them in their vision of a middle-class life, providing self-generated, not government-generated (which is an oxymoron), dignity and respect." "Why Does the Working Class Resent Professionals but Admire the Rich?" To me, this is the most interesting chapter, because I've been both professional and rich. The answer is

really the same as why the working class resents the poor — because PMEs are viewed as lacking moral virtues. They may work hard — but they do it at the expense of family, and they are two-faced, climbers who value “flexibility” over grinding it out, and believe in the primacy of “self-actualization.” Moreover, professionals are perceived as arrogant parasites, but the rich are perceived as having “made it” on their own in a way a working class person can admire, or even dream he might accomplish as well. This resentment against PMEs is ongoing and constantly reinforced. PMEs mark themselves by where and what they eat, what they read, what meaningless “spiritual but not religious” belief system they supposedly follow — in short, by actively and deliberately demonstrating their “sophistication” relative to the working class, including in their personal interactions with the working class. Not being stupid, the working class notices, and concludes that PMEs lack essential virtues, just like the poor. Most of all, for PMEs (of all political stripes) “a key way they show sophistication is to signal comfort with avant-garde sexuality, self-presentation, and family dynamics.” The working class approves of this least of all; it undercuts everything they think is important. On the other hand, the rich, who are perceived by the working class as being honest, hard-working, and sincere, are largely immune from this opprobrium. The working class wants to hold to their values — but have more money, just like the rich. Williams notes that the working class support tax cuts for the rich because they “hold the promise of jobs” (and, I would say, because the rich are mostly perceived as having earned that money), and simultaneously support benefit cuts for the poor, because they are freeloaders. All this resonates with me as correct from my own experience, and my own perception of PMEs is pretty much the same as what Williams describes as the working class view. Other chapters reject common criticisms of the working class, including demanding to know why they don’t move to where the jobs are (because work is not everything to life, because their local and familial networks are more critical to them than for PMEs, who rely on growing their own networks and are rootless) or go to college (Williams several times quotes the statistic that 2/3 of Americans lack college degrees, and the answer is that college is expensive and therefore risky, does not necessarily deliver a return, and the working class often lacks the support systems necessary to even apply to elite colleges, something Vance covers in detail). Williams also examines if the working class is “just racist” or “just sexist” and concludes that sure they are, but so is everybody else, even if the manifestations within each class are different, and for PMEs to dismiss the working

class contemptuously on that basis increases divisions for no good reason and leads to Trump. Williams then turns to solutions for working class problems. Her primary call is for more vocational training and a de-emphasis on college—in a sense, a return to the 1970s, or to the world as Mike Rowe (whom Williams does not mention, but should) would have it, where men and women learn real skills with real value with which they can get good jobs, for while many manufacturing jobs may have disappeared forever, there are still many good jobs available, which often go begging. This call doesn't even rate its own chapter, though. It's mostly window dressing for her real "solution" and focus—how to co-opt the working class into voting for progressive politics they either don't care about or actively despise. Thus, Williams quickly pivots to focusing on getting the working class to understand that they too receive a lot of federal benefits, in order to soften them up to the joys of federal overlordship. It is certainly true that the working class gets more benefits from the federal government than it likes to admit. But Williams is tone-deaf and does not understand the working class attitude toward the government, which, like jobs, is largely about dignity and respect. Thus, Williams repeatedly uses un-ironically phrases like "bounty coming from the government" and calls for an advertising campaign where "Americans make short videos of their daily lives, thanking the government for some service or benefit that makes those lives possible—highways, the Internet, sewer systems, schools, etc., and ending with the phrase "Thank you, Uncle Sam!" This misapprehends both reality and working class pride. Of course, Uncle Sam doesn't make those things possible—taxpayer dollars do, as working class people know very well (hence their resentment toward welfare for the non-working poor), yet they are lorded over constantly by government employees who are, or at least view themselves by virtue of their employer, as PMEs. (Not to mention that at least two of Williams's four examples are purely local government functions having nothing to do with Uncle Sam.) And that Williams thinks that it's government services that "make lives possible" shows that despite her lip service to the jobs, family and religion that give working class people dignity, she really thinks that we are all just servants of the government, dependent on it for our very lives. Similarly, Williams is totally blind to the critical role of non-governmental intermediary institutions, largely destroyed by the government over the past five or six decades, in the lives of the working class, because PMEs don't rely on intermediary institutions at all. In any case, Williams only focuses on hidden working class reliance on welfare because the working

class's failure to admit dependence on government interferes with their willingness to board the progressive train. So in her last two chapters, Williams drops the mask and comes out as an aggressive left-wing partisan, complaining that "class cluelessness has brought us Jeff Sessions, and Trump, a president who was endorsed by the official newspaper of the KKK" (a fact she mentions twice in the book), who is also allegedly a racist, misogynist, sexual assaulter, etc. Williams complains that 29% of Latinos voted for Trump nonetheless, because they are "values voters, offended by the shock-the-bourgeois avant-garde element of the elite culture." Not that she suggests any change to that element, or any part of the left-wing agenda, from abortion to gay rights. Instead, she calls for hiding that agenda, by "reframing American liberal politics, while pretending to make compromises. She recommends using different slogans for abortion, by (bizarrely) claiming abortion is "pro-family." She says liberals should cast immigration reform (i.e., allowing more immigration, legal and illegal, along with amnesty) as a benefit to people who employ "hardworking bussers and dishwashers, while ignoring it costs the working class millions of jobs. As to civil liberties, apparently the only problem there is the (mythical) "registry of Muslims, which liberals can supposedly use to rally the working class, since it's a privacy issue that allegedly will resonate with the working class (pro tip: she's wrong). We should view climate change through the words of farmers, not scientists (even though only a small fraction of farmers believe in AGW, not that Williams notes that). And so on. There's nothing wrong with being partisan, although a little more truth in advertising would help. But this is clueless partisanship. You know what word is missing here, and throughout the book? Guns. This is the emblematic issue. The working class is extremely attached to their guns, which they (correctly) regard as necessary to defend themselves against predatory criminals as well as the government itself, and which provide them the dignity of self-sufficiency and freedom. Williams avoids the topic, presumably because she does not understand guns, which I am sure she thinks are icky, and cannot see any way to "reframe" the liberal obsession with confiscating all the guns in America in any way that would not result in a violent reaction by the working class against liberal politics. But her failure to engage with this critical issue makes a mockery of her entire analysis, because if you can't address this question, you don't understand the working class at all. Williams keeps muttering the word "compromise" but she gives not a single example of

where any moral view of the working class that opposes progressive politics should actually become enshrined in law. Instead, "compromise" means fooling the working class into voting for Democratic social engineering, while throwing them some job retraining grants. If Williams really wanted compromise, she would suggest supporting a candidate with many of Trump's views but without his baggage. Or even Bernie Sanders. Instead, she suggests (obliquely) that Hillary Clinton could have been the champion of the working class. I'm pretty sure that's what's known as Peak Clueless. The reality is the working class voted for Trump because he promised to give them jobs and restore their dignity. He may well fail at that, but the working class is not going to be fooled that a traditional Democrat (or Republican) will solve their very real problems. The working class will not be mocked, and if Trump fails, the response is not going to be to join hands with PMEs to implement progressive policies, but probably something even less palatable to the PMEs than Trump.

Interesting book that makes clear statements about the white working class and their motivations for voting for Trump. Helpful for understanding the basis for what seems to be a crazy decision. Helped me find a middle ground for discussing issues I had previously overlooked and narrowed the rift that has opened in a few of my friendships after the election.

This was a surprisingly easy-to-read book. I am no economist, but I found myself understanding a clearer, broader picture of the reasons for the divide that surprised the Democrats in the most recent election. It provides real people stories (and statistics - imagine that) as opposed to the shrill pontification of both ends of the political spectrum. Since we have politicians and not statesmen anymore, I'm afraid that no one really wants to roll up their sleeves. Better to just blame the other liberals/conservatives who have taken their positions and don't care about the facts.

Everyone who wants to understand how Donald Trump became President ought to read this book. Joan C. Williams, a professor of law at the University of California's Hastings School of Law, discusses the beliefs of the non-elites whom upper-class liberals tend to disdain, and tells their story and why they think as they do. Extremely well-written.

This book is short and easy to read. It makes points that are very important in understanding the current political situation in the country. Many liberals will learn a lot by reading it. I did.

Real insight into why the last Presidential election went the way it did. Certainly expanded my views.

Received sooner than expected. Interesting book. A bit of an eye opener. One phrase that stuck with me: "Born on third base, thinks he hit a triple". Classic.

The author gives amazing insights into American society that you rarely get to hear elsewhere! Definitely a must read for socially conscious people.

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