

# **Williams, Joan (2017) *White Working Class: Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America*, Harvard Business Review Press, Boston, Ma.**

**Review by Allison L. Hurst**

By now we are all thoroughly tired of hearing that the ‘white working class’ is to blame for Trump’s election. Last year, I thought we would finally have a national conversation about class. This year, it seems that conversation has been stuck between classist putdowns and liberal lament, neither of which advances our understanding or our politics very much. Two days after the election, law professor Joan Williams wrote what I thought was one of the most intelligent essays of its kind, published in the *Harvard Business Review*. The essay was called ‘What So Many People Don’t Get About the US Working Class’ and it included nuggets such as ‘Avoid the Temptation to Write Off Blue-Collar Resentment as Racism.’ You might have read it – it circulated widely on social media. She quickly took the themes of the essay and expanded them into a book, published four months later, surely a record of sorts, and a testament to the timeliness of the subject. It’s a great book, but it is also a rushed one, and imperfect.

The first thing to say about Williams’ book is that it is best understood as written for educated elites, the kind who voted for Hilary, and who are absolutely confused that she lost. At times, she writes as if she is describing an alien species, one that apparently makes up the majority of the American electorate, so one it behooves us to better understand. She never questions the ‘us’ behind her presentation, although she does spend some time telling us her father-in-law is one of these strange folk, so she has some inside perspective.

Let me get all of my crankiness up front here, before going on to describe what makes this a great book to read. As a sociologist, I cannot forgive her for the way she defines working class. As a working-class academic (what she calls a ‘class migrant’), I appreciate that she probably doesn’t understand what she did wrong. So here goes a description of her method of classification. Take all the White Americans (ignore all others for this investigation into class) and divide them by income. Those in the bottom thirty percent? Those are poor Whites, and we’ll ignore them from now on. Take those in the top twenty percent and, if they have a college degree or more, like Dr. Williams and her intended audience, call those the affluent and set aside. What you have remaining is, *voilà*, the White Working Class. Note who is included here – the self-made millionaire as well as public school teachers, social workers with advanced degrees but middling income, and, of course, your stereotypical plumbers and hardhats. Who is not

included? Well, working-class people of color, obviously, but also the working poor, our Wal-Mart greeters, janitors, nurse's aides, hotel cleaners. You kind of get the feeling that Williams assumes these are people of color so the 'poor vs. working class' line is one primarily of race. Need I remind you this is not true?

I spend so much time on Williams' definition because I think it is her one big flaw, and one related to her own elite class position. The book would be more accurately titled, *The White Middle Class: Yes, There Are White People Outside My Gated Community and They Think Differently Than I.*

There are important consequences to her flawed definition of the working class. For one, it reinforces stereotypes the highly educated have about the racial distinctions within the working class. This works against one of Williams' primary arguments, that the 'white working class' support of Trump was not founded on racism. At the same time she is telling her readers this, she has artificially severed the working class into two opposing racial groups. In reality, the (occupationally-based) working class is full of people living and working and loving across racial lines. Her definition also obscures important distinctions between the wealthy and the poor and, given that the former is included in her definition but not the latter, muddies her discussion of economic inequality and how economic anxiety fuels politics. Most of all, the definition sort of proves the point of many on the right, that highly-educated liberals see everyone else as beneath them, here to be pitied and explained rather than denigrated as deplorables, but still operating as the other group.

Despite this, however, the book is well worth reading. Here's why:

Williams argues that affluent, highly educated people are clueless about class, and sometimes downright callous about the economic anxieties felt by most Americans. Instead of taking these anxieties seriously, elites attribute voiced concerns to racism, sexism, and nativism. We all remember last year, right? She then spends most of the book schooling elites on how the 'working class' really thinks, with catchy chapter titles such as 'Is the Working Class Just Racist?' (Not necessarily!), 'Is the Working Class Just Sexist?' (Yeah, but so is the UMC). As a working-class academic, I found the chapter 'Why Doesn't the Working Class Get with It and Go to College' mostly right-on target, if a little simplistic. 'Educational levels do not just reflect social class, they are *constitutive* of it. Graduating from college is a class act that both enacts class status and reproduces it' (43). You get the point. Throughout these chapters, and in a penultimate chapter that is overtly about political strategy, she gives clear and cogent examples of strategies that can help rebuild democratic coalitions. All good stuff.

Behind almost every chapter lurks the specter of Trump and Williams' view that class cluelessness was directly attributable to his election. By being smirky and condescending, educated elites pushed the 'white working class' into the arms of the enemy. There are serious problems with this analysis, not least of which is that Trump won a majority of votes at all income levels, and that *most* white working-class people either did not vote for him or did not vote at all. Still, if Williams can persuade more people like herself to stop being clueless and callous about class, we probably will be much better off as a nation. In the conclusion, Williams describes her project as one of describing a 'relationship gone bad' between elites and the white

working class. She wryly writes, ‘If you like what that dynamic is doing to the country, by all means continue business as usual’ (131). As the class divide widens, as income inequality grows, as we become a nation of luxurious gated communities for the few and austerity politics for the many, there will be more, not less, chance of class cluelessness morphing into class callousness. We will need writers like Williams to raise the cry among the few to attend to the needs and cries of the many if we have any chance of remaining in it together.

### **Reviewer Bio**

Allison L. Hurst is an Associate Professor of Sociology at Oregon State University, where she teaches courses on the sociology of education, theory, and qualitative research methods. She has written two books on the experiences and identity reformations of working-class college students, *The Burden of Academic Success: Loyalists, Renegades, and Double Agents* (2010) and *College and the Working Class* (2012). Her current research focuses on the outcomes of college graduates, specifically the role of class and the impact of student debt. She was one of the founders of the Association of Working-Class Academics, an organization composed of college faculty and staff who were the first in their families to graduate from college, for which she also served as president from 2008 to 2014.