

Silva, Jennifer (2019) *We're Still Here: Pain and Politics in the Heart of America*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK.

Review by Jennifer Sherman

In *We're Still Here*, Jennifer Silva compellingly explores the personal pain and political understandings – including both engagement and disengagement – of working-class adults in the anthracite coal region of rural Pennsylvania. Her research utilizes in-depth interviews and life histories to reveal individuals' personal struggles and hardships, and then to link them to their political ideologies and voting behaviors. 'Working class' is defined broadly to include anyone without a 4-year college degree and with a history of work in unskilled or semiskilled jobs, although many of Silva's participants are not employed at the time of the interview. She describes social class as interactional and created through social relations that cross generations. The coal region and its industrial legacy is the identity category which comes closest to uniting her sample, although most of the non-white participants are more recent in-migrants to the area who do not share this history. Her research includes men and women of both white and nonwhite race, and the book treats gender and race separately in substantive chapters that focus on white men, white women, men of color, and women of color.

Silva's book is well written and easy to read, although dark, filled with stories of abuse, addiction, violence, incarceration, and physical and emotional pain. It goes beyond the recent spate of books that have attempted to explain the political conservatism of rural voters, providing what many others are lacking: an in-depth exploration of the emotional, physical, and economic devastation caused by deindustrialization and the loss of blue-collar jobs. Silva's strength is the amount of empathy that she shows for her participants, and the respect with which she treats their deeply troubled stories and lives. Throughout the book she allows the participants to narrate their own experiences, providing limited commentary and seldom challenging their understandings or worldviews. In this way her book is a shining star within its genre, which too often focuses instead on uncovering the rage, resentment, racism, and illogic of rural and working-class populations. Silva shows none of the tendency for condescension or judgment that is common in this subfield, and instead demonstrates deep compassion for her working-class participants while still gently illustrating through their own words the contradictions inherent in their political and personal choices and understandings. As she explains in her appendix, the author's own working-class roots inform much of her sympathetic approach to her participants.

The book focuses almost exclusively on the individual stories, which are presented from chapter to chapter, one after another, organized by the categories of race and gender. Silva's aim is mostly descriptive, examining 'how different groups within the working class narrate their suffering and imagine strategies for healing' (p. 41). Each of the first four substantive chapters follows the same format: brief introductions to the subgroups, and then back-to-back extended vignettes, each several pages long, which present an individual or family's story. At the end of each story is a

paragraph or two that addresses their political thoughts, which are often disjointed and inconsistent with their earlier statements, illustrating the complexity of political understandings and their interactions with personal beliefs and experiences. While this format allows the reader to really access the depth of adversity and pain faced by the participants, its weakness is that the descriptive content of Silva's book is not matched by theoretical analysis and insight, and thus it is a struggle throughout to grasp the larger take-away. Silva seems to get lost in presenting the harsh and intense life stories, without analyzing them sufficiently or clearly digesting their meanings for the reader. In part the lack of big-picture understanding is due to the inconsistency between the participants themselves. Pain is a theme throughout all of the narratives, but pain takes multiple forms, including emotional pain, interpersonal violence, and chronic physical pain. Similarly, healing takes multiple forms, including self-help, religious faith, anger, and even empowerment through belief in conspiracy theories. Political interests are also inconsistent throughout the book and throughout each sub-category, ranging from liberal to conservative to multiple forms of disinterest and apathy. Furthermore, most participants do not make a conscious connection between their pain and their politics, and Silva asserts this connection without truly demonstrating its existence, or more importantly, explaining how it operates. There is no process uncovered by which personal pain translates directly into specific political outcomes. None of the sub-groups speak with a common voice or to a common experience, suggesting either that something else (perhaps beyond pain and healing) is influencing political outcomes, or that the subcategories of race and gender are not the most salient sources of division or commonality for this population.

The book's sixth chapter focuses more closely on politics, and Silva finally begins to impose some order on the chaotic collection of lives and worldviews, arguing that what unites her participants is alienation and disenchantment. The theme of social isolation is one that underlies almost every story in the book, and this chapter is vital to highlighting and clarifying the pattern. As with the previous chapters, this chapter presents extended vignettes, which further illustrate the extent of individuals' alienation and loss of faith in social and government institutions. In the end, it's still unclear how or why alienation and apathy became this widespread or what the results of this trend will be, but the theme becomes evident as the underlying connection between most of the earlier stories.

The book's conclusion unfolds in a similar way, again presenting more data and new stories that focus on the participants' experiences. Here Silva also makes prescriptive suggestions for leveraging collective pain into political action, proposing that a coalition of community organizers 'could help working-class people tie the pain and inequalities that they experience... to the experiences of others' (p. 173). It is a hopeful ending after a long collection of disheartening stories, and ties the book's chapters together in a positive, if somewhat unconvincing way.

Overall, *We're Still Here* does the important work of describing in great depth the painful experiences and political (dis)engagement common amongst working-class adults in postindustrial rural Pennsylvania. It provides vital and compassionate insight into the types and depth of difficulties and challenges that plague working-class Pennsylvanians. Beyond these heart-wrenching descriptions and life stories, it also offers a brief glimpse of potential for transformative action to be built from the ruins of working-class lives.

Reviewer Bio

Jennifer Sherman is Associate Professor of Sociology at Washington State University. She is author of *Those Who Work, Those Who Don't: Poverty, Morality and Family in Rural America* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009) and the forthcoming *Dividing Paradise: Rural Inequality and the Diminishing American Dream* (University of California Press, 2021), as well as co-editor of *Rural Poverty in the United States* (Columbia University Press, 2017).