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America's white backlash

Edward Luce

It has been almost two centuries since the term "white trash" first appeared in print. The epithet remains very much in currency, part of a rich lexicon that stretches back to America's earliest settlement in Jamestown. In those days the indentured servants, congenital vagrants and assorted convicts whom England had offloaded to the New World were known as "rubbish". Surprisingly little, except the wealth of vocabulary, has changed in 400 years. Variously, poor whites have been called "lubbers", "offscourings", "crackers", "hillbillies", "clay-eaters", "low-downers", "degenerates", "red necks", "white niggers" and "trailer trash". Nowadays "Trump voter" might also serve. For a country that abhors class identity, America's white underclass is remarkably well classified.

The real story, as depicted by historian Nancy Isenberg, author of *White Trash* , is that America was founded amid highly conscious class distinctions. African slaves were not the only group to be disenfranchised. Many states did not extend the vote to non-propertied citizens until two or three generations after the revolution. Benjamin Franklin, the ultimate self-made American, referred to Pennsylvania's 18th-century backwoodsman as "the refuse of America". George Washington and Thomas Jefferson agreed that the "lower class of people" were fit only to be foot soldiers in the war of independence. Much as the English shipped undesirables across the Atlantic, so America's early presidents urged them to head west. Those who went south became known as crackers - a term that may have originated from slang for breaking wind, or from their "noisy braggart" tendency to crack jokes. Either way, they were unwelcome.

It was only with the rise of Andrew Jackson that they began to press their weight at the ballot box. Many date the true birth of American democracy to the presidential victory in 1828 of that Tennessee slave owner and former war hero. Jackson's opponent, John Quincy Adams, the Harvard-tenured son of America's second president, made fun of his semi-literate rants. Jackson turned that critique to his electoral advantage by describing himself as "self-taught" and "home-bred". The echoes of today's battle between Ivy Leaguers and anti-establishment populists are hard to miss. To America's lettered elites, Jackson was the antithesis of the sober gentility meant to define republican virtues. Jefferson saw in Jackson a "man of savage instincts",

according to Isenberg, and was horrified to observe him speechless with anger, "the classic signifier of primitive man".

It was not just the General Society of Mayflower Descendants who looked down on uncouth whites. Africans did too. Indeed, many believe that the term "po' white trash" originated with slaves. "Red neck" was certainly of slave coinage, as shown in the song quoted by Isenberg: "I'd druther be a Nigger, an' plow ole Beck, Dan a white Hill Billy wid his long red neck."

During the civil war, Jefferson Davis, the Confederate president, devoted as much rhetoric to attacking the class pedigree of his Yankee opponents as he did to defending slavery. The southern plantation owners saw themselves as the descendants of England's royalist Cavaliers. The ranks of the Union army, on the other hand, was filled with "vagabonds", "mudsill" and "bootblacks". Just 5 per cent of southern whites owned slaves. It was the rest - nearly 400,000 - who sacrificed their lives in the system's defence.

It would be difficult to read America's history - or decode the 2016 presidential election - without reference to the struggle between poor whites and the descendants of former slaves. Lyndon Baines Johnson, who became president a century after the civil war, vividly captured its political effects. "If you can convince the lowest white man he's better than the best coloured man, he won't notice you're picking his pockets," said LBJ. "Hell, give him somebody to look down on, and he'll empty his pockets for you." In the year following Barack Obama's election, the volume of death threats against the US president rose 400 per cent. It is hard to grasp why without reference to LBJ's insight.

Carol Anderson, a professor of African-American studies, was motivated to write her book *White Rage* following the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown, a young black man, by police in Ferguson, Missouri. She had been asked to explain black rage amid the riots that followed Brown's death. That was the wrong way of seeing it, she believed. The burning crosses and white sheets may have disappeared but the spirit of the Ku Klux Klan lived on in other forms. "With so much attention focused on the flames, everyone had ignored the logs, the kindling," she writes. "The trigger for white rage, inevitably, is black advancement."

Her story begins with the southern backlash that began as soon as the civil war ended in 1865. She sets out to "blow graphite onto that hidden fingerprint" of white anger that stretches back more than 150 years. Her book is all the more powerful for its controlled passion. For almost a century, what freed slaves had won on paper was denied to them in practice. Successive Supreme Courts stripped the 13th, 14th and 15th constitutional amendments (those that abolished slavery and gave freedmen normal rights of citizenship) of real content.

This reached an apogee in the infamous Plessey versus Ferguson ruling of 1898, in which a black man was denied the legal right to contest the Jim Crow laws enforcing segregation. The court imposed the "separate but equal" interpretation that lasted until the 1950s. Black people exchanged steel chains for civil restraints. Any who dared approach the ballot box were roughed up or lynched. For decades, barely 1 per cent of African Americans in the former Confederate states were able to participate in elections. "The slave law of the South may have been dead," said one African-American writer, "but it ruled us from the grave."

Defenders of the southern way routinely deployed the states' rights defence against federal interference. That philosophy lives on. Since Obama took office, there has been a flurry of state legislation to tackle voter fraud - a problem that does not exist on any meaningful scale. A study carried out by George W Bush's campaign into the 197m votes cast for federal candidates between 2002 and 2005 found just 26 convictions or guilty pleas for voter fraud. Yet in the past few years, nine out of 12 of the former Confederate states have adopted or proposed two or more ID requirements that make it harder to vote. Liberals are supposed to be the ones who legislate for problems that do not

exist. In this case, however, tackling voter fraud is a conservative obsession. Some states have abolished early voting on the Sunday before the election - a popular time following the weekly church service when many black people vote. Obama's election appears to have been a catalyst for efforts to tighten "ballot box integrity".

It is widely held that Europe's politics is based on class, while America's is ethnic. In reality, race and class in the US are so entwined that they can be hard to disentangle. In her book *Sleeping Giant* , Tamara Draut, an executive at the left-leaning think-tank Demos, detects what she believes is the beginnings of a class-based movement across the US. Her definition of working class is simple - those who are paid hourly wage rates rather than annual salaries. This measure captures almost six in 10 US workers. A simpler test would be those who require permission from their bosses to take a bathroom break.

Forty-four per cent of Americans define themselves as working-class. Many of those, white and black alike, complain of being treated with a "lack of respect". Whether they work in logistics hubs or as domestic health workers, their self-descriptions are revealing. One female truck driver describes her job as a "sharecropper on wheels". A foreman at a Coca-Cola warehouse in Atlanta talks of a "modern-day plantation-style environment".

Draut, whose late father was a steel worker in Detroit, wants to win back the blue-collar security that existed during the heyday of manufacturing. Her optimism, fired by minimum wage campaigns and union drives across the US in the last few years, is irrepressible. Yet her optimism is often belied by her analysis. "Blaming people who struggle to get ahead for their predicament is something of an American tradition," she says. Her book offers a crisp guide to the largely invisible travails of America's working poor. Yet in the age of Trump, it is hard to believe that Draut's sleeping giant sees itself the same way she does.

Whether America's story is told through the eyes of poor whites, African Americans, or a mostly abstract working class, the effect is remarkably similar. It is impossible to understand what is happening today without reliving yesterday. As Isenberg shows in what is a seminal book, America's quest towards a more perfect union is chiefly about relitigating history's battles. To be sure, America's progress has been dramatic. But the glorious South's lost cause has never quite been abandoned. Andrew Jackson's coonskin-wearing, hard cider-drinking mob still don't feel at home with urban values. And the educated class's horror of how the other half live is matched only by their guilt for the original sin of slavery.

The celebrated abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* , wrote a lesser-known work about poor whites, *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* . In contrast to her compassion for slaves, Stowe depicted whites as a degenerate class, prone to crime, immorality and ignorance. Her sickly horror fascination lives on today in popular culture. Reality TV shows such as *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* , *Redneck Island* , *Hillbilly Handfishin'* and *Moonshiners* rake up huge ratings. Such shows are a long-running staple of television hits. In the 1960s, *The Beverley Hillbillies* depicted an Appalachian family that struck oil. But becoming millionaires did nothing to refine their habits. America laughed at their uncultured ways. It is laughing still. But its objects of derision, the "po white trash", have a way of getting their own back.

The idea that poor whites will forge an economic coalition with poor blacks and up-end US politics is as far from reality as ever. Too many whites want to take their country back - whatever that means. It is not a goal shared by African-Americans, or other minorities. Black Lives Matter, the protest movement, is all about realising the future. In the unlikely guise of Donald Trump, America's Jacksonian rebellion lives on. But it is ultimately doomed to fail. As Lindsey Graham, the South Carolina Republican senator puts it: "We are not generating enough angry white guys to stay in business for the long term."

White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in

America , by Nancy Isenberg, *Viking, RRP$28, 480 pages*

White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide , by Carol Anderson, *Bloomsbury, RRP£18.99/$26 256 pages*

Sleeping Giant: How the New Working Class Will Transform America , by Tamara Draut, *Doubleday, RRP$26.95, 272 pages*

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