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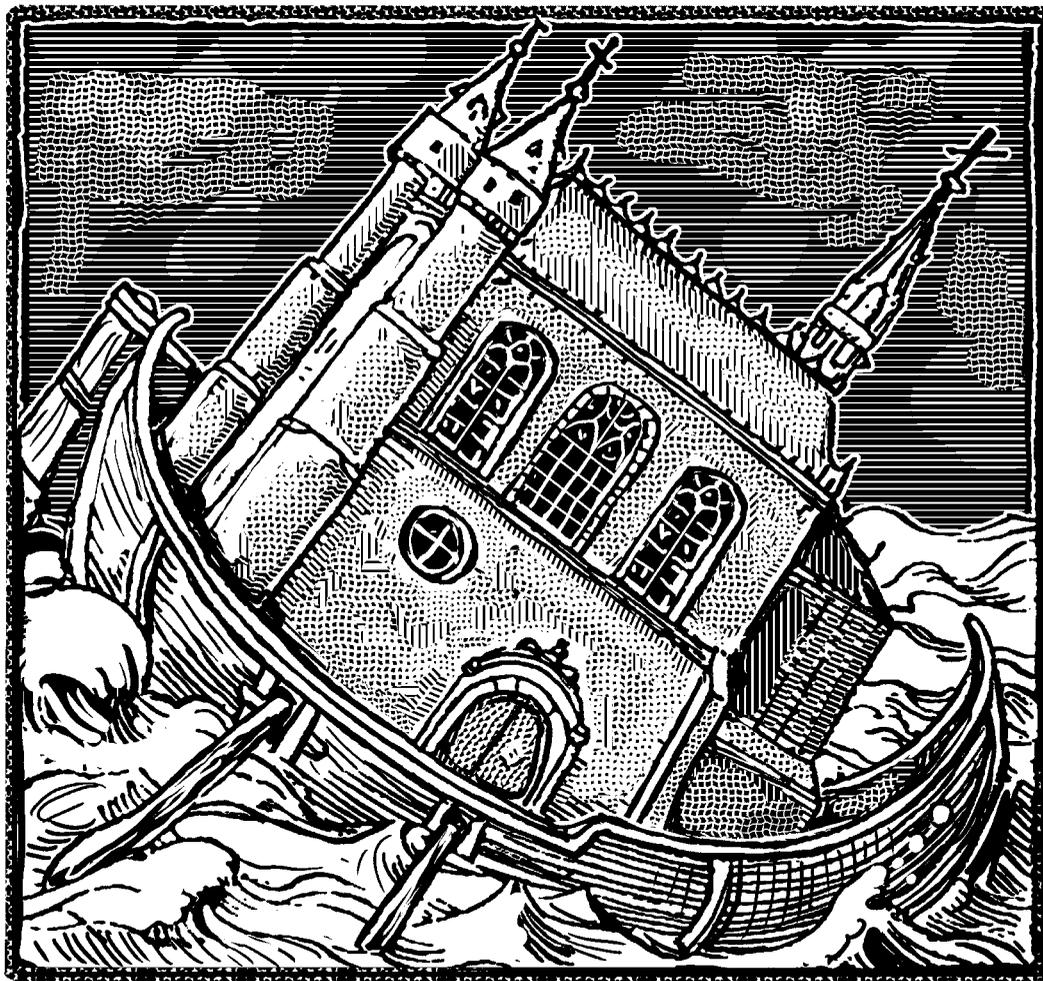
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Book Review by Henry Olsen

BLUE-COLLAR BLUES

White Working Class: Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America, by Joan C. Williams.
Harvard Business Review Press, 192 pages, \$22.99



IN HER NEW BOOK, *WHITE WORKING CLASS*, which expands the notable *Harvard Business Review* article she wrote two days after the 2016 election, Joan Williams attempts: 1) to explain to political, media, and business elites the white working class's composition, concerns, and desires; and more importantly for her, 2) to persuade her fellow progressives that white working-class voters can be won back only if Democrats focus more on class and less on race, gender, and other themes.

Williams, a professor at the U.C. Hastings College of the Law, succeeds in her first task, though she says little that will be new to anyone who has studied this group closely. She overlooks, too, a key segment of the white working class, those above the poverty level but earning less than \$41,000 annually. As a result, her book underestimates the economic desperation that shapes these voters' views and actions.

But Williams fails completely in her second goal. She seems oblivious to the ways progressive ideology is simply anathema to many white working-class voters. "Green" and multicultural ideologies are essential to the modern Left, and impossible to discard. The resulting policies are simply contrary to the economic interests of the white working class, especially the more downscale segment that Williams exempts from her analysis.

It does not follow, however, that the future is therefore rosy for the GOP. Republican politicians and leaders, especially "movement" conservatives, have failed for decades to un-

derstand these voters. Just because working-class whites do not like the Left does not mean that they are the Right's natural constituency, especially a Right with a doctrinal commitment to free markets and minimal government. Any attempt to make these voters a permanent part of a center-right coalition must start with a thorough, candid assessment of conservative ideology's capacity to repel the working class as much as progressive ideology does.

WILLIAMS IS AT HER BEST WHEN she describes this class's outlook. These voters, as I have often contended, want three main things: comfort (meaning a relatively secure, basic modern standard of living), respect (the honor society pays to someone who contributes to it), and dignity (the internal sense of doing something worthy of honor and self-supporting or self-nurturing). So it was refreshing to see her turn to these same words in her description, especially the concepts of dignity and respect. As she correctly notes, these people do the hard work that sustains modern life: "they keep our power lines repaired, our sewers functioning, our trains running." It's simply basic human psychology that people who do hard work want to know their contributions are valued, in ways both tangible and intangible.

These simple requests are especially poignant in light of what those jobs do to the soul. As Williams puts it:

Their rigid, highly supervised jobs are often boring, repetitive, or both, which makes them psychologically challenging: think of medical technicians, factory workers, bus drivers. Men's jobs, and some women's, are physically demanding: consider construction workers, long-haul truck drivers, physicians' assistants. Women's jobs—in nursing, customer service, managing small stores—can be emotionally demanding too.

Each of these jobs, like much humbler professions such as store cashier or stock boy, renders a service. The employee performs tasks laid out by others, and is judged by how well he executes someone else's plans.

When the served withhold the appreciation from the server that would affirm their shared humanity, the server is naturally resentful. This tendency is exacerbated when the service performed is mentally or physically onerous. Because the demands for comfort, dignity, and respect stem from this need, when those reasonable expectations are not met, working-class Americans' demands become political.

Williams skillfully uses this basic insight to explain why working-class people resent the non-working poor. Inhabiting a precarious status that depends on following rules and working hard, they expect others to do the same. The failure or refusal to buckle down draws their contempt, and when pub-



lic benefits are provided to the non-working poor—often benefits for which the working class is ineligible—they feel cheated and disrespected. What is often called racism by liberals is merely, for many working-class whites, moral condemnation of anyone, of any background, who fails to exhibit the traits they associate with valid moral claims for comfort, respect, and dignity.

CONSERVATIVES TOO OFTEN LOOK AT these claims with barely concealed disdain. If you want comfort, dignity, or respect in our eyes, they imply (and sometimes say), you need to earn it according to our values: if you don't like serving me, become a leader yourself. Start a business. Become more entrepreneurial. Embrace risk, and reap the psychological and material rewards that only sustained, self-directed work can bring. If you can't earn your own success, they argue, you have no moral right to use politics to get what you desire.

This view flies in the face of white working-class values, which emphasize family and community over work. Working-class Americans reject what Williams calls the professional class's "work devotion." Professional elites, she argues, place great emphasis on work as a source of happiness and accord high priority to it. They readily uproot—and in the worst cases, abandon—their families in pursuit of better work opportunities. Working-class whites see work as a means to life, but professional classes see it as "a vocation, a calling, a *métier*," as David Brooks wrote in *Bobos in Paradise* (2000).

This "work devotion" leads professionals to interact with other people in ways that working-class whites see as suspect. Professionals' status and success depends as much on whom they know as on what they actually do. Thus, they network and use their interactions with others for professional purposes, not solely or even primarily to form real relationships. "This peculiar combination of the personal and the strategic strikes the working class as insincere," Williams writes. This leads to a belief in plain speech as a moral virtue for the working class.

One can easily see how Mitt Romney, the heir of an auto executive and a kind of archetype of the networking professional, would

fail to connect with these voters. And why Donald Trump, a rich builder who extolled the worth of the working person and spoke plainly, would be a hero to them, too.

Williams's fine explanation of the white working-class mindset should persuade progressives to form a bigger, more powerful center-left coalition by reaching out to these voters. Instead, she betrays her own progressive mindset by focusing on the wrong things. The green agenda, for example, is one reason so many of these people suffer falling wages and disappearing jobs. Many make their living in areas peculiarly dependent upon fossil fuel production and consumption: people who drill for oil and gas, or mine coal, but also those who log trees, or drive gas-burning trucks, or make things in fossil fuel-burning factories. Anything that restricts energy production or drives up its cost will make the working class more economically precarious. Yet Williams never even mentions the green climate-change agenda as a potential barrier to making common cause with these workers.

TRADER IS ANOTHER STICKING POINT she unaccountably omits. Many working-class whites face strong competition from foreign labor who compete with them on price. This segment of America has been increasingly hostile to trade agreements like NAFTA, something Trump and Bernie Sanders recognized. Failure even to seriously discuss this suggests her understanding of her book's subject is severely limited.

Williams ignores the fact that Sanders offered a progressive agenda designed to attract working-class voters in 2016. In many states voters were free to cast ballots in either party's primary, which effectively meant that Sanders and Trump were competing for the same voters. Time and again, Trump's working-class agenda, unencumbered by progressive identity politics and ecological preoccupations, demolished Sanders's. When given a choice between leftist populism and vigorous centrist populism, working-class whites chose the latter in a landslide.

Nor can Williams account for the general election results. Recall that she excluded households earning below \$41,000 a year from her definition of "white working class,"

thereby leaving tens of millions outside her purview. Counties with large numbers of these people often show some of the largest gains for Trump compared with Romney. Consider Ohio's Ashtabula County, northeast of Cleveland: 93% white with a *median* household income below \$41,000 a year. It swung 32% in Trump's favor (versus Romney in 2012), making Trump the first Republican nominee since Ronald Reagan in 1984 to carry the depressed region, whose steel-based prosperity is a fading memory.

That said, white working-class voters, especially the least affluent among them, do not share every conservative value. They distrust big business and its captains. They highly value entitlement programs like Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid, which often keep them and their families from poverty or death. They like muscular, active government when it is deployed in their interest, as President Trump has promised to do in trade and immigration. These voters are not natural allies of the Left, but neither are they steadfast friends of the Right.

CONSERVATIVES WHO SEEK TO ATTRACT them should emulate our idol, Ronald Reagan. As I contend in my new biography of the Gipper, *The Working Class Republican*, Reagan's political success came about precisely because he shared working-class values. He extolled work and labor, took entitlements off the table when focusing on federal spending cuts, and wasn't afraid to protect the working man when unfair trading practices threatened his job. "He doesn't seem like a Republican," one Reagan enthusiast said in 1984. "He's more like an American, which is what we really need." Conservatives who, as Reagan did, understand and express the congruence of working-class mores and traditional conservative values can take advantage of progressive myopia. No other path leads to the Promised Land of long-term conservative rule.

Henry Olsen is a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, and the author, most recently, of The Working Class Republican: Ronald Reagan and the Return of Blue-Collar Conservatism (Broadside Books).

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