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'White Trash' review: Nancy Isenberg on class inequality in American history

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Among our many failings, Americans are forever being taken to task for our willful blindness about social class — even though everybody seems perfectly aware of it, and the topic pervades our literature. Twain, Dreiser, Wharton, Cather, Lewis, Faulkner, Fitzgerald — the list of important American authors alert to class distinctions goes on and on.

Yet there's no denying that class inequities have been pushed off center stage in recent decades. During World War II the long struggle for progressive social change shifted from economic issues to civil rights, and since then the focus has been on achieving full citizenship for blacks, women and others who were traditionally marginalized. The rise of identity politics, driven in part by multiracial immigration, has further obscured the role of class and the claims of its victims.

In "White Trash," a provocatively titled cultural history of attitudes toward poor Southern whites, historian Nancy Isenberg argues that America has never been the egalitarian "city on a hill" we've been led to believe (no debate there), and that our hateful attitudes toward the people variously known as crackers, hillbillies and rednecks are as deeply rooted in our history as is our class anxiety.

The strength of "White Trash" is the author's prodigious research, by means of which she traces the concept (the term "white trash" was popularized in the 1850s) all the way back to the earliest days of European settlement in the New World, when frustration with the poor "waste people" of England helped drive colonization. The book is particularly good on the pre-Revolutionary and Civil War periods, but takes in Elvis Presley, Dolly Parton and Bill Clinton as well.

Yet this wealth of material ultimately proves a snare, entangling author and reader alike. One wishes Isenberg would look up now and then from her furious research (and it is furious, in every sense of the word) to take account of the massive changes going in the society she is writing about. There is no sense of the republican energies unleashed by the American Revolution, or the country's evolution from something like an aristocracy to a largely middle-class society, whatever the difficulties of the perennially tenuous middle in recent years. A century and a half of technological and social change are entirely missing in this chronicle of a static nation built on unchanging hatreds and delusions.

Even worse, this is a book concerned with poor white Southerners but says almost nothing about who they are, where they live or how many they number. "The theatrical performances of politicians who profess to speak for an 'American people' do nothing to highlight the history of poverty," Isenberg writes, yet the lives and voices of actual individuals in poverty are almost entirely absent from her account, which tells us almost

nothing about the traditions, religious practice, origins or culture of those who are its ostensible subject. During World War II, for example, poor Southerners — white as well as black — came north in large numbers to seize the well-paid jobs available at factories desperate for workers, yet the author skips over this historic migration.

Because Isenberg tells us so little about the “white trash” with whom (one imagines) she sympathizes, and because she has been so industrious in sifting every hideous caricature and slur from a historical record centuries long, the portrait of poor Southern whites we are left with is largely the one drawn by their many antagonists. The clear implication is that poor whites have been shafted for 300 years — but the author never grapples with the implications of this argument. Should we really be extending affirmative action to the children of black brain surgeons and not white sharecroppers? Is it time to reorient the focus of “social justice” away from its obsession with identity, gender and so forth back in the direction of economic fairness? What do we owe the nation’s disadvantaged citizens if they happen to be white?

“White Trash” is informative but strangely narrow for such a sprawling work, and readers may find themselves distracted by all the noise of axes being ground. If you really want to learn about poor Americans in the rural South (and, eventually, in the urban North), read Isenberg’s book with Harriette Simpson Arnow’s heartbreaking 1954 novel “The Dollmaker.” It has its failings — Appalachia before the war was a lot less like Eden than the writer would have us believe — but you’ll never think of human beings as “white trash” again.

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