Q & A: Born and Bred – US history, Clinton, Trump & the "the disinherited."

Saturday 12 November 2016, by [CARROLL Emily](#), [ISENBERG Nancy](#) (Date first published: 7 November 2016).

This election cycle has been rife with punditry on the anger of the white working class, supposedly fueling Donald Trump's rise to prominence. But like many of the overblown narratives rounding out the cable news cycle in this bizarre election, it's not quite true.

In White Trash: The 400 Year Untold History of Class in America (2016) [1], Nancy Isenberg attacks the myth of America as a nation without class, carefully reviving the history of America's "waste people"—the white working poor—from the earliest period of colonization to contemporary politics. We talked with Isenberg, a professor of history at Lousiana State University, by phone on October 21. Below is an excerpt from our conversation, which has been condensed and lightly edited.

Emily Carroll: Something seems to be missing from a lot of the journalism around class throughout this election cycle.

Nancy Isenberg: It's really odd, because I do think journalists, white journalists, have become very perceptive of racial bias that they might have, and how that gets re-encoded by the way media repeats stories and doesn't question the assumptions when they repeat information. But I don't think they apply that same critique when they're describing, categorizing, or talking about people from the lower class, and I think that's part of the problem. And I'd also add that Trump supporters are not all working class people. I've written that many times, and I think that Nate Silver has proven that [2]. During the primaries, many of the people voting for Trump came from wealthier backgrounds than those people supporting Bernie Sanders or Hillary Clinton. So that's the other problem.

From the very beginning, it was sort of easy to dismiss all of Trump's supporters and throw them into one voting block: they're all working-class, and of course, they're all white men. And they're all ignorant, and therefore caught up in Trump's racist rhetoric. Now, that doesn't mean that Trump isn't racist—he is. Definitely, he's a racist, he's a sexist. But the problem is that the people supporting him don't fall into just that one class. And I think it's easy to dismiss that class, because of the history that I'm writing about, because of the way in which in the past—particularly in the south—poor whites were pitted against poor blacks. This was the way the political system worked in the Jim Crow era, and it was exploited by politicians like James Vardaman in the Little Rock Arkansas controversy. It's very easy to target the poor white working class and say they're the embodiment of racism, and I think racism is pretty well-dispersed across the class system.

EC: Given the data proving that the majority of Trump supporters are middle class or wealthier voters, why is it that the pundits cannot give up this narrative, that the anger of the white working class is what's fueling Trump's rise?

NI: Most journalists are middle-class. So it's easy for them to look at this group historically and to see them as the group that's most likely to be racist. And I think the other thing that's fueled this has

been the portrait of Trump's rallies. We all remember the incident where the white man with the ponytail and the trucker's cap sucker punched one of the African American protestors at a Trump rally. So it's almost like that image has come to document or symbolizes who's supporting Trump. And I think that's a real misunderstanding. A recent survey described the people who make up the Trump camp as coming from a group called "the disinherited." And I thought that was a really accurate description. Because they're not necessarily literally the poorest, but they're people who see themselves as losing ground, and they resent social elites, elites in the media, liberal elites. They resent them not only because they feel they don't have anything in common with them, but because they feel these elites look down on them. And they also resent them because they think that social elites are the ones that are elevating certain disadvantaged groups, and here's where the racism comes into play, that the elites are elevating African Americans and helping to propel African Americans in front of them. So they really view the class system as a zero sum game. They view themselves as losing ground because they can't compete against the social elites, and the social elites are changing the rules of the game. They believe that they're hard-working Americans, they play by the rules, and they want to move up the social ladder, but that the game's been rigged. That's why when Trump starts talking about the "rigged" elections, it fits into the way these people already look at the class system.

EC: We're often presented with a choice between class politics and identity politics. Do you feel like that's a false dichotomy?

NI: Yeah, I think that's definitely a false dichotomy, because class has always been connected to identity. One of the other things that I've written is that class is not just about your occupation or financial wealth. Historically, as I've shown, it's been connected to pedigree. It's been connected to breeding. We judge people, today as in the past, based on the way they talk, the way they dress, what neighborhood they live in, what car they drive, all those markers—and we're a very class-conscious society. Everyday Americans seem obsessed with defining themselves by their appearance, by their social status . . . and we've always used people's bodies as markers of class. And I think the other thing is that class identity has been shaped by identity politics. I think what's happened with the Trump supporters is that it's not only about class: it's about how they take their perceived class position and project it onto politics, where they see the democratic party being associated with liberal elites, social elites, who they feel are basically rigging the system against them.

"The most important variable today in determining whether you're going to be a success in this society is the wealth and privilege you inherit from your parents and ancestors."

EC: One of the most chilling moments in White Trash is your description of the position of working-class women: "poor women won state-funded abortions during the Carter years and today they are proscribed from using welfare funds to buy disposable diapers." Elsewhere in the book, you write that "women can't wear 'white trash' as a badge of honor." How do you think women voters are receiving this rhetoric around the white working class differently?

NI: Most people ignore gender. In part because the category that is getting attention right now is class, but gender is really important. It fits into what I was saying about how class is reproduced. The most important variable today in determining whether you're going to be a middle-class or upper-middle-class success in this society is the wealth and privilege you inherit from your parents and ancestors. So the idea of inheritance, pedigree, that is still so much a part of how class operates. And I think gender is really important, because from the very beginning, in the period of British colonization they were obsessed with breeding. And it shouldn't be surprising to anyone that even slavery itself was defined by breeding, because of the very important law passed in Virginia in 1652,

which said that you were a slave if your mother was a slave. It said that your identity was passed through your mother's line, and that's contrary to the whole English system, the American system, our system today, which is that identity is passed through the father's line. So when we think about women and poverty, it's a really complicated question, when it comes to Trump voters. The whole recent phenomenon of celebrating the redneck identity really celebrates a kind of rural masculinity.

I'm wondering what's going to happen to all those women who've been in the Republican camp who vote on one issue, the abortion issue. Are they just going to hold their noses and vote for Trump? Some of them will do that, because political scientists have shown again and again that often, unfortunately, Americans do just vote on one issue. It's a very dangerous pattern, but unfortunately that's what they do. But I think a lot of those women will just not vote. And the only women I've seen interviewed who are Trump supporters are elite women—women who hate Hillary so much. That reflects a certain pattern, a certain concern and perspective: it's easy to hate Hillary, because she is defying the traditional female role, the way in which women are always chastised for being more grasping for power than men.

So that's part of a problem, as we know, that's been hampering Hillary this whole election. It's not just that she's not a charismatic speaker, as if that should matter. It's also that in this country we have a large percentage of people—men and women—who feel very uncomfortable with the idea of a woman in power. It conjures a deep fear. Trump supporters, they want to preserve traditional boundaries. In the same way they want that border wall, they don't like global trade, they also want very clear boundaries between men and women, and in a sense this upsets the apple cart for them.

EC: The book traces a pretty unmitigated history of contempt for the poor, from the early colonists, through the founding fathers, to the great presidents who we often romanticize as heroes of the downtrodden. Where can we look for bright spots, either in the past, or in the future?

NI: The idea of this increasing class divide is dangerous for everyone. We actually can't have an effective democracy if we're going to have such a tremendous divide in terms of class. I'm a historian, not a politician. But looking at our history, we had a stable middle class in this country after World War II. And that's because of the federal government. The federal government started insuring mortgages for homes. It provided college education. I would like to see a policy aimed at saving cities that are suffering before they're allowed to become such unproductive and dangerous spaces. And I'd like to see us ask what we can do to help rural America? I haven't heard either candidate address that. Our economy will never provide enough jobs. So I think the best way is to use the European model. That would be my best advice. See what other countries do, and borrow what works, so we can slow down the class divide and actually reestablish a more stable middle class, but also help people face the greatest difficulties, people who are below the poverty line and who are among the working poor

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P.S.

Footnotes

[1] http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/313197/white-trash-by-nancy-isenberg/9780670785971/

[2] http://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-mythology-of-trumps-working-class-support/