Hillbillies and the American Dream

BOOK REVIEW | By Caleb Crosby

Hillbilly Elegy
By J. D. Vance
(Harper, 264 pages, $27.99)

T he life of J. D. Vance is the stuff of a bestseller. His is a real-world “rags to riches” success story, an exemplification of the American Dream, the type of tale that we Americans never tire of hearing—that continues to speak to us nearly two and half decades after the Declaration of Independence articulated our national ideal. Vance has written a book about his life and the American Dream, and it indeed has become a bestseller; but not for the inspirational reason one might expect. That book, Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis, is part autobiography and part sociology, less a story of Vance’s success than an unblinking attempt to explain how he escaped poverty and to examine why others like him—“hillbillies,” a label he uses to endeearingly describe the white-working-class inhabitants of the areas of Appalachia like the one he once called home—remain ensnared in poverty.

Vance was born to an overadventurous mother in rural Kentucky, and reared by his grandparents in the Rust Belt city of Middletown, Ohio. Surrounded by joblessness, idleness, and hopelessness, Vance’s future seemed certain to be bleak. There were two likely outcomes for a young man in his situation: if “lucky,” he would “manage to avoid welfare”; if “unlucky,” he would “die of a heroin overdose.”

The way out—and up—from Middletown started when Vance joined the United States Marine Corps, where he received a rigorous, and desperately needed, education in self-discipline, self-management, and character. After four years in the military, with the G.I. Bill helping him afford the cost, Vance enrolled in Ohio State University, where—with a full-time course load and two jobs—he excelled. “By the time I started at Ohio State,” Vance wrote, “the Marine Corps had instilled in me an incredible sense of invincibility.” And so it had. Vance would go on to be accepted by, and graduate from, Yale Law School, the most selective law school in the country. He is now thirty-one years old and a principal at a leading Silicon Valley investment firm, far from the strife and struggles of Middletown.

But this is not a feel-good story about the American Dream; nor, however, is it a feel-good story. Vance recognizes that our national ideal is still readily attainable—he is living proof of this—and struggles with the fact that it is increasingly unattained by his family, friends, and neighbors. Is this a personal failing of their making? Is this a systematic failing not of their making? These are not always yes-or-no questions. Vance suggests, even if conservatives and liberals often answer them that way (conservatives tend to answer the former in the affirmative, liberals tend to answer the latter in the affirmative, and both tend to ignore the other), that this is not to imply that Vance paints with gray all of the problems plaguing “hillbillies”—certainly not. For example, an acquaintance of Vance’s once explained to him that he quit his job because he did not like waking up early, and then took to Facebook to complain about the effect of the “Obama economy” on his livelihood. Vance is unsympathetic to this blame-everything-on-society-or-government mentality. “His status in life,” Vance says about the man, “is directly attributable to the choices he’s made, and his life will improve only through better decisions.” While not lessening the blame owed to the man himself, Vance notes that other factors should not be overlooked. There is, after all, both correlation and causation between the strength of families and the values of the men they produce.

Vance is brutally honest in his account and assessments, whether he is discussing himself, the problems of the white working class, or the failures of our political parties. He is a conservative who can be extremely critical of modern conservatism, such as when it comes to an unfortunate trend in our rhetoric: “Instead of encouraging engagement, conservatives increasingly foment the kind of detachment that has sapped the ambition of so many of my friends, and neighbors. Is this a personal failing of their making? Is this a systematic failing not of their making? These are not always yes-or-no questions. Vance suggests, even if conservatives and liberals often answer them that way (conservatives tend to answer the former in the affirmative, liberals tend to answer the latter in the affirmative, and both tend to ignore the other). That book, Hillbilly Elegy—a phrase that I loved, even after reading it. Though I loved it, I was still left with a feeling of unease, a feeling of confusion, a feeling of uncertainty. Vance’s book is a reminder that even in the face of uncertainty, we must continue to strive for a better future for ourselves and for those around us. It is a book that challenges us to think critically about our own role in shaping the future, and to work towards a better society for all.”

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