



“A Welcome Wake-Up Call”  
a review by Dick Burkhart of  
**White Working Class:**  
**Overcoming Class Cluelessness in**  
**America**

By Joan Williams (2020)

This straight-to-the-point little book really lays it on the line. Williams admonishes us in the “professional managerial elite” to show a lot more respect for the working class of the USA (roughly, those without college degrees), especially the “white” working class. We certainly don’t need to be like them, just as they don’t want to be like us. Yet without mutual respect, they vote for Trump out of desperation, and we’re all worse off.

As Williams puts it, “Deriding ‘political correctness’ becomes a way for less-privilege whites to express their fury at the snobbery of the more-privileged whites”. And the bottom line is “the hidden injuries of class have now become visible in politics so polarized that our democracy is now threatened” (p 4).

Then she takes on the tough questions, such as “Why does the working class resent the poor and professionals but admire the rich?” “Why don’t they just move to where the jobs are or go to college?” “Why are they sexist and racist?” “Why don’t they appreciate government programs?”

The differences are not something arcane or mysterious. In fact, they are hidden in plain sight. To be successful in today’s working class requires, well, hard, nose-to-the-grindstone kind of work. This is not the meaningful work of the “cultural creatives”. Working people admire values like honesty, responsibility, integrity, stability, self-discipline, solidarity, and being industrious, caring, clean, and orderly.

Their self-worth comes from their sense of morality and being part of a tight-knit community, not from the merit of their professional accomplishments. A typical big mistake at a class reunion is to ask, “What do you do?”, instead of asking about their family (p 31). They despise those who are perceived as dishonest, irresponsible, lazy, or into “hard-living”. They tend to view the “self-actualization” of the elites as irresponsible self-indulgence, their “flexibility” as risky, and their “conflict avoidance” as weakness.

Today their fundamental anxiety is that “opportunities for a settled life are slipping away” (p 19). This is the phenomenon that not long ago was billed as the “shrinking middle class” because the “settled life” sought by the working class was simply a modest version of the American dream. Of course, this dream has now faded even for many with college degrees, supposedly in the middle class, but often earning less than plumbers and other in-demand workers. For the working class sticking with their birth community provides a safety net when they need a helping hand, especially given the stigma and bureaucracy of many government programs.

Williams also points out that working class disdain for government programs is complicated. For example, they accept unemployment or disability benefits because those are obviously work related and job losses or injuries are typically outside worker control. But “welfare” programs like food stamps and TANF are viewed as propping up moral failures (laziness, broken families) rather than compensating for the scarcity of good jobs. Meanwhile they don’t see the massive subsidies for the rich which are channeled through tax expenditures, like tax credits and deductions (out-

of-sight: out-of-mind). So she suggests a variety of ways to make these hidden subsidies far more visible.

Still the working class attitudes portrayed by Williams assume that they are like serfs in a system they have no control over. This, of course, is exactly what big money wants. But it also means that there is a huge potential for organizing for systemic change, instead of the rightwing diversions they are fed, like abortion or guns or scapegoating immigrants or blacks. Williams herself compared working whites to working blacks and discovered that blacks are not so judgmental about the poor, with an attitude of “there but for the grace of God go I” (p 23), thus more accepting of government programs. In addition, working class blacks vote with the liberal elites despite being more socially conservative because, as a minority, they know they need allies.

This suggests a big opening for progressive elites: (1) Acknowledge that working class whites have been hit harder than any other group by 40 years of escalating inequality. (2) Support programs with tangible benefits that rebuild the old alliance with the white working class. In fact this is exactly what Bernie Sanders wants to do, and what the Green New Deal would do. Williams’ point is that classism and cluelessness is standing in the way, fomenting the cultural wars and workers’ perception of condescending elitism . A perfect example is elite language like “white privilege” and “white supremacy”, which routinely contradicts the lived experience of today’s white working class. In any case, it’s really mostly about class, not race, with “whiteness” playing a decreasing role as diversification and assimilation continue apace.

Yet Williams is less forthright about the self-interest that is also standing in the way: That elites will have to give up a significant portion of their material privileges so that resources can be shifted to the needs of working people. Fortunately there is a vast amount of waste to tap into: (1) humongous bailouts of Wall Street, (2) massive tax expenditures on the affluent, (3) an extravagant health care system, (4) outlandish military spending, for starters.