Class Cluelessness

A book review by Henry Oliner

Politics is little more than a marketplace of ideas. Like the markets for products and services it is more complex and nuanced than it appears, and resistant to central control. Competition serves us well in both spheres. You may be able to market a poor-quality product briefly, but the quality and ability to satisfy individual consumers needs will inevitably reign.

In *White Working Class- Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America* author Joan Williams attempts to explain to her fellow progressives why they lost the white working-class vote. She gets to the heart of their alienation, but then falls far short in proposing a reconciliation. She focuses too much on the marketing and not enough on the product, the ideas.

The white working class are family and community centered as opposed to job and career centered and are thus less likely to relocate, she explains in Chapter 5, "Why Doesn't the Working Class Just Move to Where the Jobs Are?", she recommends that this difference be respected.

In the next chapter, "Why Doesn't the Working Class Get With It and Go to College?" she states the reality that attending the lower level colleges does not provide the same gateway to success that the elite Ivey League offers. A significant percentage make no more than the average high school graduate and ends up with stifling debt. If they fail and drop out they have no improved job outcome, but the debt remains. In other words, their decision reflects their reality, not their ignorance, and makes economic sense.

The rest of the book reflects on similar questions: "Why Does the Working Class Resent the Poor?", "Why Does the Working Class Resent Professionals but Admire the Rich?", "Why Don't

They Push Their Kids Harder to Succeed?" She offers a glimpse into reasonable answers to these questions, suggesting understanding to replace the contempt the left dispenses.

In Chapter 8 "Is the Working Class Just Racist?" she claims it is an issue with long roots, but Ms. Williams also acknowledges that it exits among the PME (Professional Manager Elite) as well. She does not explain why a significant subset of white working-class voters who supported Trump also voted for Obama. With the working class, in her judgment, racism is more blatant. It may be true, but I do not think it was a significant factor in Trump's victory. She falls victim to a common statistical fallacy: because 90% of racists supported Trump does not mean that 90% of Trump's supporters are racist.

Thomas Frank's *What The Matter With Kansas? (2005)* had the left pondering why the working class votes against their own self-interest, oblivious to the arrogance of their question. Ms. Williams writes that it is insulting to suggest they are duped by big money. "Big money has been effective only because working class whites have been persuaded."

Is there any difference between being duped by big money or slick talking? Does she not understand that supposing you know anyone else's self-interest is the insult? Suggesting that your values should be everybody's without any readiness to understand others' perspective is far more alienating than the means you choose to express it.

After revealing analysis to understand the reality of the white working class, Ms. Williams joins her fellow progressives to believe that the problem is only messaging. If only the white working class knew about all the government benefits that are available to them they would vote differently. They err in thinking that government benefits are only available to the poor. The only difference from Frank's *Kansas* is that she lays the blame on the Democrats for not telling their story more persuasively. Perhaps a feature

length film version of The Life of Julia in full color with real actors, and more celebrities lecturing them would clarify their benefits and make them realize how good their lives actually are.

Ms. Williams does not question her own party's ideology and thus does not consider that the working white class may have a problem with her progressive ideas. They may not think in terms of 'ideology', but they may wonder where the money is supposed to come from to provide so many benefits to so many people. Maybe it is not pride or ignorance that rejects such government largesse, but reason and practicality.

While they may take progressive successes such as civil rights for granted, they do not ignore progressivism's failures. After 100 years of the growth of central government power and union activism, their local factories are closed and the debt has skyrocketed. Government benefits or a $15 an hour minimum wage is no substitute for the kinds of jobs that used to sustain a healthy middle class.

Farmers understand innately that you must plant in the fall to reap in the spring. Wealth must be produced before it is distributed. These simple ideologies are still a part of their world even if they are not taught at elite universities.

The elites' failure is not the messaging they deliver, but the messaging they believe.