White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America Study Guide

White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America by Nancy Isenberg

BOOKRAGS

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Summary

Isenberg begins her journey into the origins of American class hierarchy by providing the reader with an aptly named introduction section, "Fables We Forget By," which serves as a gateway to her forthcoming arguments. The fables spun by the Founding Fathers, which have come to be accepted as historical fact, consistently ignored the existence of an unequal class hierarchy in America. This study aims to highlight the blatant existence and perpetuation of America's class system throughout its detailed examination.

The first section of Isenberg's study, "To Begin the World Anew," focuses on America's infant years, from English colonization to Independence and westward expansion. The colonial system imposed a class hierarchy based on wealth, pedigree, and land ownership, which never seem to truly leave American soil. Isenberg tracks the different usages of slang terms over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries that come to notoriously denote poor rural whites, such as "crackers," "hillbillies," and of course, "white trash." Examples of white trash were prevalent in political discourse and popular culture alike, yet Americans continued to deny the existence of a skewed class hierarchy.

The second section of this study, "The Degeneration of the American Breed," focuses on how white trash continued to change throughout America's youth. Images of poor whites, regardless of what they were called, were in a constant state of flux from the antebellum period to the verge of the twenty-first century. Politicians such as the mudsill president Abraham Lincoln and good ole' boy Lyndon Johnson helped thrust the poor white man out of the persistent trap of restricted social mobility. Yet, Isenberg highlights that these examples were a minute representation of the whole of the poor white population. Class structure remained rigid and inescapable for most of the impoverished population, while false images of class mobility were being celebrated by the lucky few who attained upward mobility.

The end of the twentieth-century ushered in a new era of class identity, which prompted a resurgence among those with redneck roots. Thus, Isenberg titles her concluding section "The White Trash Makeover." This section takes an extensive look at the continuously changing definition of white trash. Popular icons such as Elvis, Dolly Parton, and oddly, Bill Clinton created a class of redneck chic never seen before.

Isenberg brings her study to present day, where much is left unchanged. We continue to celebrate face-value attempts at redneck humor while insisting on the inherent greatness of a classless America. Isenberg's meticulous historical endeavor is a precautionary tale to modern society; refusing to acknowledge our class structure will only result in the widening of class rifts.

Chapter 1: Taking out the Trash: Waste People in the New World

Summary

Isenberg begins her study in the sixteenth-century alongside the beginning of English exploration to the New World. The rhetoric surrounding the new territory was rooted in less of a practical standpoint, and more of a propagandist one. Isenberg first calls on the writings of English intellectuals and cousins, Richard Hakluyt the elder and the younger. Isenberg combines the work of the younger Hakluyt as well as other popular writers to demonstrate the intellectual landscape of England.

The general English sentiment of the time was that idle or unused land equated to wasted land. Hakluyt attached the term "empty" to the newly discovered land of America, implying the continent was lying in wait for the English to commercialize it. In his carefully constructed model for a working colony, he recognized the need for people to fertilize the wasted land in the new continent. These people were ex-soldiers, convicts, the homeless poor, and poor children. Hakluyt's plan was, to him, beneficial to all parties involved. England could deport her convicts and poor population, while also gaining commercial benefits from the new territory. Isenberg highlights the widespread English notion that the poor are the "dregs of society" and must be filtered out for a more productive use (46).

Isenberg then turns to Jamestown, England's second attempt at a colonial territory. Jamestown suffered in its infant stages. It was not until John Rolfe introduced tobacco that the fledgling colony began to see economic growth. However, Isenberg is quick to point out that tobacco, while saving the colony, also created a skewed class system between owners and laborers. Laborers became commodities. Bringing indentured servants to the colonies was rewarded with land, and almost all debts were paid in labor. However, the prison-like focus on labor made colonists reluctant to work and thus they were labeled idle. In 1620, higher-class women were transported to the colonies in a similar fashion to cattle. This effort was thought to tie the laborers to the land via the bonds of family and children. The wealth that came from tobacco farms created a large economic gap between landowners and laborers, laying the foundation for a large class gap.

Moving north, Isenberg begins to examine the origins of the New England colonies. Isenberg immediately pokes a hole in the popular idea that Massachusetts was founded solely based on religious freedom; "For every religious dissenter in the exodus of the 1630s, there was one commercially driven emigrant from London or other areas of England" (57). She also begins to draw connections between different societies, noting that the Puritan elites depended on a menial labor force to build their colony much as Hakluyt suggested. The arrival of African slaves in 1638 was a pivotal point in America's future. Afterward, the Puritans and the educated elite worked to ingrain the definition of

a servant into the public mindset. Isenberg makes it clear that the Puritans were obsessed with class rank. They granted privileges to landowners and religious elites, and passed down rank and land hereditarily. This language and train of thought recognizes stations or classes as distinct breeds.

Isenberg asserts that the plight of the poor rests on the fact they possess nothing to leave their heirs. She draws on popular art to demonstrate the propagandist dialogue of the time which equated women to breeding stock. Isenberg uses the recollection of Bacon's Rebellion to highlight the beginning of class tensions which would not be removed from the conversation anytime soon: much of the population of Virginia was unable to provide for their families due to what little they had. The growing gap in economic opportunity led to tension and eventually conflict between classes. Women who took part in the rebellion faced little punishment, a testament to the ruling powers' notion that women were valuable breeding stock. Per the thinking of the time, land is powerful because of its potential to produce, like a woman's potential to reproduce. Thus, women and land alike were a commodity to benefit man's world.

Analysis

Isenberg uses this chapter to explore two central contributors to the formation of the American class system: land and labor. Relying on Hakluyt's reference that Native Americans were "empty vessels" waiting to be commercialized, Isenberg argues that calling a land and its inhabitants empty allowed the English to justify their colonial endeavors (42). Sixteenth century English intellectuals believed land was not truly owned unless it was being used for commercial enterprises; this thinking automatically equates the value of land to the potential profit it can produce.

Isenberg asserts that the meaning of land was both powerful and essentially English. Hakluyt wrote of America as a waste firm; the land and her natural resources were valuable, yet they were being wasted by inefficient tillers. Isenberg argues that one of the most important aspects of Hakluyt's plan was the need for waste people to do the dirty work of clearing the land. He envisioned this labor force to consist of convicts, beggars and their children, vagabonds, and debtors. Exporting the idle masses to the colonies would benefit England economically while also clearing the streets of the growing homeless and poor population. This is a clear example of the concept of land being essentially English: the benefiters were wealthy investors back home and the English economy overall, while no mention of the inhabitants of America – whether colonists or natives – is made. Hakluyt's labor force, despite being the majority population in the colonies, was expendable. The contempt felt for these waste people was the basis on which the class system began in America.

Throughout her study, Isenberg meticulously analyzes the notions of wasteland and waste people, which she dates to sixteenth century colonial rhetoric. Poverty was a contagious disease in the sense that it bred unemployment in the eyes of English intellectuals. Shipping waste people to the colonies would thus purge England of her idle and shiftless population. Wasteland and waste people alike produce nothing of

value for the English economy; thus, Isenberg contends that the goal of colonization was to turn waste people into productive members of society and turn wastelands into profitable commodities. Isenberg seems to have a distinct sympathy for poor children who were treated with the same contempt as their parents. By forcing children to pay their late parents' debts, sending them to work, and breeding them to be soldiers, poor children are virtually trapped in their station. The exploitation of the many at the hands of the few will be a recurring theme throughout Isenberg's study of class formation.

Isenberg uses first-hand accounts to paint a picture of life in England's infant colony of Jamestown. Social mores were backwards, harsh punishments were imposed for petty crimes, and idleness continued to plague the population. She blames "impracticality, bad decisions, and failed recruitment strategies" for the lack of a productive working class in Jamestown (52). Many laborers hoped to find gold, which was a far cry from the grueling manual labor they were tasked with upon arrival. The introduction of tobacco virtually saved Jamestown's economy, but Isenberg argues that it created a permanently skewed class system. A small group of wealthy planters became society's elite class, while the need for indentured servants and convict laborers grew exponentially. Again, Isenberg focuses on the effect on poor children. Laborers became the most precious commodity, and the ruling elite reached as far as possible to gather a subservient labor force. Often, this meant orphans and the children of debtors were forced into indentured servitude. This is a powerful concept because it promotes a rigid class structure in which upward social mobility is impossible.

Isenberg compares the colonies in Virginia to the colonies of New England in its infant stages. The Puritan elite, like the planter elite, created a class structure reliant on a menial labor force of servants and debtors. A cornerstone of this labor force is again, poor children. The importance placed on inheritance, in Isenberg's words, "muddied the distinction between son and servant," suggesting not only orphaned children were now at risk. The class structure in New England essentially made children a commodity that could be used to increase the productiveness of one's estate.

Isenberg introduces another theme in this chapter that will be repeated throughout her study: the powerful language of breeding used to discuss the formation of classes. Women who were deemed fit by the English government were shipped to the colonies in hopes that laying family foundations down would attach idle farmers to their land. Isenberg claims husbanding fertile women was one of the main facets of colonizers' concepts of class. Her example is a law passed in 1662 which defined a slave as someone born to a slave woman. Thus, class is a hereditary and permanent trait.

Isenberg concludes this chapter again analyzing the intimate relationship between land and labor. She asserts that land held power because of the profit it could someday produce. Class structure hinged on one's ability to properly cultivate the land he owned. However, ownership was not possible for most the population because of high rates and government restrictions. Thus, the expendable labor force virtually fertilized the land for English profit with no hope of gaining social mobility. Before America was even born, class disparities were being built and enforced by government officials.

Vocabulary

fecundity, chattel, copulative

Chapter 2: John Locke's Lubberland: The Settlements of Carolina and Georgia

Summary

Isenberg begins this chapter by describing the birth of the English settlement of Carolina in 1663. Eight proprietors were given rights to the territory. Enlightenment intellectual John Locke along with the help of these proprietors drafted a plan for the territory called “Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina” in 1669. In Locke’s Carolina, land is passed hereditarily and is reserved for titled elites. The eight founding proprietors controlled not only one-fifth of the land in each county, but were also given absolute authority of the law. Isenberg credits Locke with creating a new class in his plan, the servant class. The Leet-men, as he called them, would be contributing members to a productive society despite being of a lower class. They were inherently tied to the land and their lord, and their condition was hereditary. The term Leet-men in England meant unemployed men entitled to government relief, which implies a contempt for the poor. Perched above slaves but below freemen, the servant class represents Locke’s “awkward solution to rural poverty” (80).

In Locke’s construction of the colonies, the rural poor who fell outside of the Leet-men class represent the elites’ biggest fear: social leveling. The tensions between the rural poor and planter elite led to the spilt of North and South Carolina in 1712. South Carolina maintained a highly aristocratic society, while North Carolina became what Isenberg calls “the heart of our white trash story” (82).

North Carolina was plagued by what Isenberg calls the Dismal Swamp, the wetlands forging the border between North Carolina and Virginia. Isenberg draws attention to popular writers who have attributed the same swampy characteristics used to describe the colony’s geography to their dirty, slothful people. In addition, North Carolina’s coastline was inviting to pirates and smugglers. Settlers did not pay their taxes, cared little for their health and appearance, and produced children of the same breed. Rebellions and corrupt leaders defined North Carolina’s rural population in the eyes of the educated elite. Isenberg cites various writers and their colorful language used to convince their audiences of the dangerous poor living in the swamps. As intellectuals contemplated the source of idleness, they suggested that proximity to the swamp may have deformed the blood of poor rural whites. William Byrd wrote that rural whites had a “cadaverous complexion,” and they were “slothful in everything but getting children” (93). The poor of colonial America were now more dangerous than simply society’s waste people - they were reproducing their own kind, resulting in the formation of an entirely new breed. This breed happened to resemble the land it inhabited, inferior and ungovernable.

Isenberg introduces Georgia as an unusual experiment in colonialization. Unlike the other colonies, Georgia was founded as a charitable venture to uplift poor whites.

Georgia's purpose was twofold: first, to "carve out a middle ground between the extremes of wealth" seen in Carolina (96). The second purpose was to serve as a buffer between the colonies and Spanish Florida. A free-labor economy in Georgia perpetuated by James Oglethorpe was meant to save the poor white man from idleness. Land grants were given to poor colonists in the hopes they would cultivate it, and slavery would be outlawed. Isenberg credits Oglethorpe with connecting with the common people of Georgia, though his attempts to create a free-labor society safe from the dangers of slavery were contested. Oglethorpe detested slavery for the detriment it caused to white laborers, not on any moral convictions. A mere ten years after Oglethorpe left the colony, slavery was legalized in Georgia and a class of elite planters shortly followed. Disgust for idleness carried on, as the poor white class had fewer opportunities in a slave-driven, plantation-dominated economy. The value of land was still directly connected to one's class status.

Analysis

To describe the atmosphere of the colony of Carolina in 1669, Isenberg draws heavily from John Locke's "Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina," a pro-slavery manifesto which she claims has feudalistic and aristocratic undertones. Isenberg uses Locke's platform to exemplify the clear relationship between land and class. Locke's plan suggested land allocation based on a fixed class hierarchy, which benefitted the already privileged planter elite. Isenberg calls "Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina" a declaration of war on poor settlers because of its harsh language and systematic dehumanization of the rural poor. She interprets William Byrd's theory that proximity to swamps has deformed poor whites as class identity taking hereditary form. Intellectuals conclude "that inferior or mismanaged lands bred inferior, ungovernable people" (95). Isenberg uses this to reinforce her theory that class boundaries in colonial America were rooted in the soil.

Isenberg uses James Oglethorpe's model of an all-white free labor colony in Georgia to further demonstrate the intricate relationship between land, labor, and class status. Isenberg focuses most importantly on Oglethorpe's attitude towards slavery and land ownership; his hatred of slavery as an economic institution was matched with aggressive land ownership policies which included granting new settlers their own land grants. Isenberg credits Oglethorpe with connecting free labor with the idea of economic stability, asserting that poor whites cannot escape from underneath slaveholding plantation owners.

Isenberg summarizes class landscape in Carolina and Georgia in terms of land; "land was the principal source of wealth, and remained the true measure of liberty and civic worth" (105). The rural poor population becomes a permanent fixture in American society during this period, and the deeply ingrained contempt for idleness becomes synonymous with the lower class.

Vocabulary

illiberal, heraldry, anachronistic, coterie, sedition, apostasy, bucolic, sordid, anomalous, surreptitiously

Chapter 3: Benjamin Franklin's American Breed: The Demographics of Mediocrity

Summary

Isenberg begins this chapter by describing both the distinguished background and class identity of Benjamin Franklin. Born in the middle class and lifted upward by his contributions to writing, Franklin was in the best position to argue class politics. Franklin would attempt to approach class dynamics as a science. Isenberg captures Franklin's ideology that human behavior is rooted in pleasure and pain; in other words, the desire to seek pleasure and the parallel instinct to avoid pain. He boasted of a "happy mediocrity" model of America in which extreme economic inequalities would be alleviated and farmers would be both self-sufficient and consumers of English goods. If small farmers were to produce goods, they would also have to produce – or breed – children. Children, Franklin argued, are the foundation for a successful society; they must be hard working and strong. He admitted that class structure would form in America, but it would be a natural phenomenon and citizens would be too content to notice. Franklin was an idealist, foreseeing America as a land of opportunity filled with happy and hard working families.

Isenberg then brings Franklin's plans back to reality, asserting that humans are not as mechanical and easy to predict as Franklin wrote. The reality of Franklin's world was far from the happy mediocrity he desired: poverty was widespread, families with children suffered immensely, and food was scarce. Isenberg categorizes Franklin's model for America as rhetoric rather than fact. She combines Franklin's rhetoric with the political atmosphere of his home, Pennsylvania, to identify a clear class structure. Landowning proprietors and Quaker elites were in control of not only laws, but land allocation as well. Pennsylvania's class structure revolved around this small group of elites who valued wealth and pedigree. Those who fell outside of this class were categorized into the new merchant class or the servant class, which included slaves, indentured servants, and apprentices. Isenberg draws parallels between the rhetoric surrounding quality commercial goods of the time and the rhetoric used to describe people. Outward appearance becomes one of the key identifiers of class status in Pennsylvania. Franklin, like many intellectuals of the time, had no sympathy for the poor. He also expressed a "natural discomfort with unrestrained social mobility" despite having risen through the social ranks himself (123).

Isenberg reinforces Franklin's ideology by stating "it was built upon the prevalent English thinking of his time" (125).

A similar propagandist, Thomas Paine, is Isenberg's next focus in her study of class dynamics. Paine captured the spirit of the American Revolution through his writing. Though class was prevalent in American society, he dismissed it as a natural phenomenon outside the realm of political concern. Instead, he focused on breeding.

He insisted monarchies are damaging to national advancement and suggested that European-Americans are a distinct breed well equipped for free trade. He was careful to instruct people to break from the crown, and not question existing rulers in America. Isenberg notes that Paine's goal was not to disrupt the existing social order. Ignoring convict laborers, slaves, and indentured servants, he painted a class-free picture of America. He also asserted that independence would quell idleness, ultimately eradicating poverty. Paine's American breed was productive and hard working, and most importantly to his rhetoric, free from class divisions.

Analysis

Isenberg is drawn to Franklin's scientific approach to class structure. She focuses on his theory that humans are driven by the same basic principles that guide animals: the instincts to eat, procreate, and move. Though seemingly supportive of Franklin, Isenberg acknowledges the naïve nature of this thought process. She asks, "was colonization, migration, and peopling more messy and less certain than his grand theory promised?"; in other words there are undoubtedly more complexities involved in human nature (115).

Like other intellectuals attempting to define and change existing class politics in the colonies, Franklin's focus was the importance of children and proper breeding. Isenberg uses Franklin's own satirical writing to exemplify the importance he placed on breeding. "The Speech of Miss Polly Baker" depicted a woman on trial for bearing her fifth illegitimate child. Though Baker's actions are looked down on by the church and the courts, Franklin praised her as a dutiful and patriotic citizen. Isenberg pinpoints a startling truth in the history of class development: a woman is a commodity whose best potential can only be reached if she breeds a valuable and profitable stock.

Isenberg identifies breeding as Franklin's key to a more stable society. Expanding territory westward while promoting free labor and good breeding practices would lead to the less divided class structure Franklin envisioned. Isenberg interprets Franklin's theory on breeding as a natural occurrence. If colonists were left alone to populate the vast territories, a natural class structure embodying Franklin's happy mediocrity would follow suit. Isenberg is highly critical of Franklin's claim to a naturally peaceful class structure. She argues that his writing blatantly ignores the political and cultural forces at work that perpetually oppress the lower class. She asserts that the hard-working, self-made man Franklin envisioned populating the colonies was a myth. In fact, she implies that any notion of social mobility in Pennsylvania was more rhetoric than fact.

Isenberg's criticism of Franklin is met with some praise as well. He wrote that people were naturally wired for a class hierarchy, which Isenberg argues is a rhetorical device used to ease tensions between the classes. She credits Franklin for recognizing the appeal of man's desire to lord over subordinate classes, a concept that had been ingrained in British mentality for centuries. Isenberg uses an uncensored analysis of Benjamin Franklin to depict the sentiment among elites at the time: the poor were expendable.

Isenberg interprets Thomas Paine in a similarly critical fashion. Paine concealed the reality of the existing class structure by dismissing it as a natural phenomenon far from current political focus. However, Isenberg asserts that his dismissal of class proves his preference for discussing breeds as opposed to classes. Paine placed a strong importance on free trade and commercial alliances. He employed a language of fear to invoke a unified revolutionary effort. Isenberg points out, however, that this move was strategic -- he wanted to turn colonists against the crown without sparking up enough anti-government sentiment to put the existing class structure at risk. To do this Paine focused on the American breed.

Per Isenberg, Paine's American breed is "bent on productivity and expansion," and is capable of ridding America of idleness. She again criticizes Paine for failing to realize the full scope of the landscape. Presumably for rhetorical purposes, Paine makes no mention of convict laborers, servants, or indentured debtors in his writing. Isenberg suggests that ignoring the existence of the lower class translates back to the idea of class being a force of nature that, if left alone, would regulate itself.

Vocabulary

oeconomy, fulminated, rapacious, replete, extolled, utilitarian, overawing, desacralizing

Chapter 4: Thomas Jefferson's Rubbish: A Curious Topography of Class

Summary

Isenberg begins this chapter by introducing the background of founding father Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson was part of the Virginia gentry and a gentleman farmer. Through extensive reading and research, Jefferson concluded that the ideal American society was one of farmers large and small. He advocated for the education and freehold status for the lower class to level Virginia's large class disparities. His reform efforts were halted, however, by a powerful Virginia gentry that did not share in his interest of raising up the poor. Isenberg is quick to note an interesting irony behind Jefferson's story: his privileged upbringing firmly separated him from the common farmer he claimed to advocate for. Jefferson saw human behavior as adaptable, supporting his theory that productive land owners over time would increase the general human stock of America. He believed class was defined by the "intimate relationship between land and labor" (140), or the landowners' ability to run an efficient farm. In this respect, he regarded classes as natural extrusions of properly cultivated land.

Throughout his tenure in the political realm of Virginia, Jefferson worked to shift the balance of class power in the state. His biggest step forward was a reform effort which gave individuals privately owned land grants. Isenberg notes that his naïve ideology did not account for the wealth and power of large plantation owners. Many small farmers sold their land grants to larger farmers who had more resources to properly till the land. The freehold system Jefferson envisioned would ultimately benefit the wealthy Virginia elite, not the common farmer. Jefferson was also active in education reform at the time; he advocated for a basic education for boys and girls, and secondary education for boys of a higher merit paid for by the state. Ultimately, Jefferson failed at persuading the Virginia gentry to subsidize education, because they saw no immediate benefit for themselves. Jefferson used the phrase "raked from the rubbish" (145) to describe the selection process of those suitable for secondary education. The association of the poor population with rubbish, Isenberg notes, signifies a general contempt for the poor shared among elites. Jefferson's beliefs were less rooted in equality, and more rooted in moderating the extremes of class disparity.

Next, Isenberg draws attention to the only book Thomas Jefferson ever wrote, Notes on the State of Virginia, which captures Jefferson's own interpretation of the American breed. He claimed Americans were cultivators of the earth, drawing on his philosophical view of the cultivator as one who produces not only crops, but a virtuous offspring. "Notes" was largely a defensive piece that Jefferson hoped would curve the European image of the barbarous and swampy America. Jefferson transferred his ideas to his role in Congress as well; he believed through the correct rhetoric and conditioning, "manners could be cultivated" (149). One of his main goals was promoting an agrarian society and defending against the growth of the manufacturing industry. His "agrarian perfection"

(150) would produce a love of the land, as well as a love of ones' heirs. Education was crucial to his plan, but not on a large scale; fathers would pass farming expertise to their peers and children, and so on. Jefferson actively saw himself as a defender of the American image, which explains why he wrote of a class and poverty free society. His goal in this writing was to convince Europeans and elite Americans alike that America truly was a land of immeasurable opportunity. Isenberg insists that Jefferson was painfully aware of class disparity in Virginia, and he wrote with the knowledge that the illiterate lower class could not debate him. Ultimately, Isenberg categorizes Jefferson as a member of the elite and wealthy gentry, and a main component of his political plan was keeping the existing class structure intact.

Using natural law as his guide, Jefferson asserted that humans could be literally bred for success the same way animals are bred. Jefferson went as far as suggesting that the black population could be bred out of America through selective breeding with whites, effectively blanching them. Isenberg notes that Jefferson took his breeding theories home, fathering several children with one of his slaves. Jefferson regularly wrote of slaves as commodities, female slaves having greater potential for children or "increase," a term typically associated with the breeding of cattle (158). Isenberg uses a series of letters between Jefferson and John Adams to define Jefferson's model of human breeding. He believed Americans were endowed with the instinct to properly choose a mate. Eventually, America would be filled with a new breed of virtuous citizens. Isenberg uses Jefferson's own logic to retort: rubbish would beget more rubbish, and the poorer classes would remain a permanent fixture in American society.

Jefferson devised a class structure that placed the overseers of slaves at the bottom rung of the social ladder. His class structure left the slaves out entirely, suggesting an ignorance to the true class structure of Virginia. Isenberg defines the Virginian elites as a "creation of marrying for money, name, and station" (162), a striking parallel to the detested English aristocracy.

Analysis

Isenberg acknowledges that Thomas Jefferson was one of her more difficult research subjects. His views on class are not entirely clear, which Isenberg implies may have been intentional on Jefferson's part. The "seductiveness of his prose" (137) allowed him to reach an audience he had no concrete connection with. Isenberg challenges the historical association of Jefferson with agrarian democracy or the working class; despite what he advocated for, he was inseparable from his station in the Virginia gentry.

Jefferson subscribed to the theory that human behavior was conditional and would adapt to changes in the physical and social environment. Isenberg recognizes this as Jefferson's class ideology; class structure was thus formed "by the bond forged between producers and the soil" (140), or the relationship between land and labor. What Jefferson failed to mention in his prose, however, was the rural poor who did not respond to changes in their environment.

Isenberg uses Jefferson's education reform attempts to define his attitude toward the rural poor. She criticizes his use of the term "raked from the rubbish" (144) to describe the few worthy scholars who would be selected for government assistance. Isenberg claims Jefferson's usage of the word rubbish is synonymous with Hakluyt's waste people. Though his education reform initiative did not pass, the language he used to describe it symbolizes a contempt for the poor felt by the elite ruling class.

Jefferson frequently used the language of breeding when discussing class distinctions, like previous intellectuals the author has referenced. Isenberg uses a friendly debate between Jefferson and John Adams to exemplify how breeding was infused into political discourse. Jefferson contended that humans instinctively choose a mate based on positive breeding attributes such as wide hips on females, health, and virtue. Isenberg again identifies a hole in Jefferson's breeding argument: if good breeders produced good people, "rubbish produced more rubbish" (160), a notion that Jefferson left untouched.

Vocabulary

obfuscation, paragon, slovenly, mollify, miasmas, enfeebled, progenitors

Chapter 5: Andrew Jackson's Cracker Country: The Squatter as Common Man

Summary

Isenberg begins this chapter by describing the mounting uncertainty that surrounded westward expansion in the late 1700 and early 1800s. A vast quantity of land was up for grabs, and it was attracting a new type of poor white- the squatter. While the definition of the squatter varied from region to region, the underlying principles of the squatter mirrored those that have been present in poor vagrants since the beginning of colonization. The term squatter and its counterpart, cracker, became slang for landless migrants. These groups were openly referred to as lazy, dangerous, and expendable.

The newly acquired western and southern territories were prone to large class disparities like those seen in Virginia. Wealthy landowners and lawmakers were one in the same. The infamous squatter was granted no room for upward social mobility, as the new economy favored large farmers and merchants. Isenberg identifies five widespread traits of all squatters: crude habits, boastful vocabulary, a distrust of civilizations, an instinctive love of liberty, and degenerate patterns of breeding. However, the squatter also came to symbolize the common man, a symbol of Jacksonian politics. Andrew Jackson was ideal as the representation of the frontier's backwoodsman. He was loud, argumentative, and possessed the sunken face most recognizable of the backwoods. Isenberg calls Jackson a representation of "cracker country" (167).

Isenberg identifies the squatter's physical surroundings as their most defining characteristic. The rough woods, dangerous proximity to Native Americans, and primitive huts were a foreign concept to wealthy city-dwellers and large farming families. In addition to a foreign environment, squatters and crackers possessed a unique gait, many of them with protruding jaws and lanky limbs. Cracker women were almost universally seen as unruly prostitutes, while their children were labeled degenerate and dirty. Whatever regional term was used to describe the poor squatter population, "it was their dirty feet and slipshod ways that defined them" (181).

Isenberg then turns her attention to David Crockett, a boastful Congressman who was gaining clout in the national spotlight. A backwoodsman from Tennessee, Crockett championed for squatters' rights. By way of his exaggerative speeches, however, he accidentally turned his legitimate political platform into a joke. He is most widely known in historical memory for the biographies published without his approval, depicting him as a wild, grisly-looking "cracker." He continued to advocate for squatters, which eventually led to a brutal clash of words between Crockett and Andrew Jackson.

Isenberg calls the career of President Jackson one "built on sheer will and utter impulse" (184). Jackson lacked the typical education and finesse associated with the presidency, and he was constantly criticized for his volatile temper. His explosive

movements in Florida during the Spanish-American War would warrant even more criticism. Jackson is the opposite of a somber statesman. To clean his appearance, a more neutral dialogue of Jackson's natural grit began to emerge. His position as a political outsider made him the perfect candidate to clean up the corruption in Washington. His supporters hailed him as an example of a strong-willed, sacrificing, hard-working man's man. Jackson's criticizers continued to harp on the negative characteristics associated with lowly squatters: a lack of respect for social mores, an unkempt appearance, and a lack of knowledge about sensible breeding.

The rhetoric surrounding Jackson's politics would eventually change the colloquial definition of the squatter. The squatter had become a romanticized figure of popular and political culture. However, Isenberg notes that the slight elevation of the term squatter did nothing to improve the lives of the rural poor. One politician is referenced in his justification of Jackson's boastful squatter politics as saying it is a small price to pay "to ensure that real social leveling did not erode set-in-stone class divisions" (203). As has happened in previous chapters, the rhetoric masking the real class climate was known by the elite to be false.

Analysis

Isenberg goes in depth to describe the significance of the term "squatter." Despite being poor and having no rights to land, the squatter on the new western frontier was, as Isenberg describes, a "folksy" character (165). He had a boisterous and rowdy personality, but could also show compassion and civility. Isenberg claims the squatter "embodied the best and worst of the American character," suggesting the formation of a distinct class of people (166). This new class consisted primarily of landless migrants, echoing Isenberg's idea that class station is directly tied to class status.

Continuing to delve into the term "squatter," Isenberg offers a purely physical argument about the obviously inferior stature of a man squatting. The term symbolized "squashing, flattening out, or beating down," according to Isenberg (170). She suggests that by the time the term squatter entered mainstream vocabulary, rural poor had been present for decades on the western frontier. Over this time, the term came to mirror the vagrants in old English society.

Isenberg also analyzes the term "cracker" and its rise into mainstream discourse. Its definition is identical to that of the squatter; they are a "lazy, licentious, drunken, and whoring" (171) breed of people. Isenberg suggests the origin of the term cracker lie most importantly in the English adjective "crack brained" (172), which was used to insult a crazy person. Isenberg does note a general difference in the two terms, however; squatters were typically northern rural poor, while crackers were southern rural poor.

Isenberg asserts that the persistence of squatters and crackers in political and social discourse prove how restricted social mobility was on the frontier. Social status continued to hinge on land ownership, which in the new territories was not available to most of the population due to high prices. The value one provided to society was

directly equivalent to the land he resided on. Therefore, Isenberg suggests that the squatters came to symbolize a breed of people as disfigured and worthless as the scraps of land they resided on.

Isenberg focuses on the first westerner elected president and a clear representation of the cracker, Andrew Jackson. Jackson was inseparable from his volatile emotions and a wild backcountry landscape. An “instinct of masculine liberty” (187) became characteristic of the landless migrant because of Jackson’s aggressive political style. Isenberg credits Jackson’s influence and the election of 1840 with morphing the squatter into the “colloquial common man of democratic lore” (198). Though this romanticized reimagining of poor rural whites suggests an elevation in social status, Isenberg clarifies: political equality did not come during the nineteenth century, but class distinctions were made more clear and more restrictive by politicians' use of the cracker and squatter as a figure of popular caricature.

Vocabulary

dirk, tincture, fungible, chagrin, derided, slipshod, patois

Chapter 6: Pedigree and Poor White Trash: Bad Blood,Half-Breeds, and Clay-Eaters

Summary

In the years leading up to the American Civil War, the class demographic of the nation was in a state of flux. The term squatter was still prevalent in common dialogue, but now he was strictly a “creature” (206) of the southern states. The terms cracker and squatter were replaced with clay-eaters, sandhillers, and white trash. Regardless of what they were called, they embodied the same distinct breed of poor rural whites. The idea that whites constituted their own breed or race was prevalent in pre-Civil War society. Isenberg points out clear differences in the way the North and South each view and categorize the nation’s large poor white populations. The North viewed poor white southerners as proof of “the debilitating effects of slavery on free labor” (208). In contrast, the South retained the ideology that class station was a natural aspect of biology, and poor whites suffered from a degenerate pedigree that ultimately crushed any hope of social mobility. These extreme views contributed to an already tense social climate leading up to the Civil War.

Intellectuals adhered to the idea that Americans were of a superior stock, and the missing piece in creating an ideal society was to “outbreed all other races” (211). Alongside this new wave of thinking was the idea that greatness was passed through bloodlines. Rhetoric of the time attempted to persuade southern citizens to select a mate based on superior characteristics such as healthy teeth, strong bodies, and sound minds. Isenberg draws on the eerily similar rhetoric surrounding animal breeding of the time as well. Race was intertwined throughout this rhetoric; mixed children were “faulty stock” (213) again using similar language to animal breeding. There was an overwhelming contempt for the lower class evident in this language. Isenberg notes that, while arrogantly nationalistic, these views were widely accepted.

Isenberg turns her attention to the vast areas of Texas and California, which played a crucial role in forming American class ideology. Sam Houston boasted of the vigor and strength of Texas natives, while California was home to criminals, greedy gold-diggers, and prostitutes. One of the most prevalent discriminations in Anglo-Texan society was against Mexicans and mixed races. These classes as well as blacks and Native Americans were commonly referred to as mongrels, or another term for half-breed. One of the main benefits of Texas annexation was the promise of a strong buffer between America and the barbarous countries of South America. Drawing heavily on this idea, politicians believed they could siphon off the mongrel race into South America, where they could not infect the American bloodline. California, on the other hand, had a more commercial appeal to America. The gold rush initially appealed to American profiteers, but one writer soon realized that “economies dependent on one source of wealth

created extreme class conditions” (221). In the same fashion that tobacco mitigated social mobility for the lower classes in Virginia, gold had the same effect in California.

Isenberg next focuses on the formation of the Free Soil Party in the progression of class dynamics. The Free Soil platform preached that the spread of slavery could only cause further detriment to the white man. The party argued that slavery and large, wealthy plantation owners were causing the common man to flee to more unsettled areas. They were thrust outside the realm of civilized society and thus, at a perpetual economic disadvantage. The elite planter class in the South remained in control of land allocation as well as suffrage rights, making it almost impossible for poor whites to attain any form of social mobility. Most importantly, poor whites only occupied poor land.

This historical background provides Isenberg with an opportunity to delve into the roots of the term "poor white trash." For the most part, poor whites in the South were seen as descendants of the criminal population of England. They were loathed by the upper class for their association, whether by choice or by circumstance, with freed and runaway slaves. Their appearance, behavior, and lineage were enough to confidentially categorize these people as "trash." Lawmakers and intellectuals began to view poor whites not as people, but as a problem. This ideology expands to the suggestion that slavery was not based on color or race, but based on lineage and habits. The squatter was yet again redrawn, this time as white trash; but the underlying principles of biologic inferiority remained intact. Now, the white trash were permanent fixtures in American society.

Analysis

Isenberg claims that “poor white trash” would prove to be the “most enduring insult of all” (206) to poor rural whites. She argues that the white trash populations’ most defining trait was ingrained physical defects such as tallow skin, deformed faces, and prematurely aged bodies. The most threatening part of the growing lower class was its ability to reproduce feeble children, thus spreading their contagion further. Isenberg uses writers of the time such as Daniel Hundley to define the hard class lines that separate white trash from society. Hundley referred to poor rural whites as a “notorious race” (209), which Isenberg interprets to signify a permanent state of being.

Isenberg blames westward expansion for inspiring intellectuals of the time with theories of transcontinentalism, or the idea that America’s “imperial destiny [was] grounded in biological determinism” (211). She uses the sociopolitical landscape in the new territories of Texas and California as well as the politics of the Free Soil Party to make her case. The early histories of these two territories were overwhelmed with discussions of race, slavery, and wealth, all to prevent the degenerate breed of white trash from populating the West.

Isenberg credits the Free Soil Party with planting the seeds for emancipation, but not on any moral standing. Instead, many abolitionists advocated not for equality, but for the protection of the white race. Keeping western territories out of the hands of greedy

slaveholders was supposed to give lower-class whites more economic opportunity. The Free Soil ideal of access to homesteads was unattainable for poor whites due to the grip of the planter elite, and thus they found themselves on the outliers of society. Isenberg relies on a recurring theme for a solution: poor whites occupied poor land; class is directly related to land.

Isenberg calls on the “unlikely duo” (227) of writers Daniel Hundley and Harriet Beecher Stowe to further break down the class of poor white trash. While previously Isenberg has focused on writers who blatantly ignore or alter the existence of class structure, Hundley and Stowe both acknowledge a distinct bottom tier of the social hierarchy reserved for poor rural whites. Isenberg notes that while poor whites began to receive recognition, respect did not follow suit. Poor white trash were abnormalities on the American class system; they remain detested while societal elites pose no practical solutions to rural poverty.

Vocabulary

nomenclature, antebellum, adroitly, gelding, subaltern, averred

Chapter 7: Cowards, Poltroons, and Mudsills: Civil War as Class Warfare

Summary

As the South seceded from the Union, the idea of an American breed was crucial in Confederate rhetoric. The southern gentlemen class aspired to the American – and southern – ideal that its men were comprised of the blood, pedigree, and valor of the founding fathers. On the contrary, Union soldiers represented something much different; they were “vagabond stock and swamp people” (235). Isenberg argues this rhetoric was used to unite the Confederacy while simultaneously dehumanizing Union soldiers.

The Confederates’ goal was to convince their people they were fighting to preserve a truly American identity that northerners had corrupted. Confederate leaders were aware of the economic tensions between the more diverse border states and the plantation dominated southern states, thus they worked to devise a rhetoric that could mask these deep divisions. Claims to homogeneity in the South, Isenberg points out, were more imagined than real. Common rhetoric employed the term "greasy mechanics" to define northern whites who lowered themselves to manual labor. Jefferson Davis contended that while classes were ever-present in modern societies, the South enjoyed greater class stability due to slavery. The South drew class lines based on race, whereas the North drew class lines based on wealth.

Leading proslavery intellectuals invented the term "mudsill" to describe the Union army and government. Southerners argued that mudsills were a natural occurrence in every society, but the plight of the North lies in the fact they allowed their fellow whites to become their mudsills. The Union mudsill army encompassed everything the South fought against: class mixing, race mixing, and the redistribution of wealth. The South effectively created a strong rhetoric that turned an economically driven war into a class war. Across enemy lines, the Union was creating a similar rhetoric. Union intellectuals argued that ending slavery would not only emancipate enslaved blacks, but also poor whites trapped in the unforgiving economy.

One of the fundamental differences between the North and South were their theories on education. The Confederates criticized the North for allowing social leveling to take place through their education system, in which one might muddy the clear lines between the rich and the poor. Southern ideologues believed a “half-education” should be universal to provide as little political liberty and desire for upward social mobility as possible. Exhaustive efforts in the South took place to convince their lower classes that slavery was beneficial to all. Most of the facts presented in this rhetoric were false, but it did not quell efforts to insulate the government from the people. The planter elite was gripping onto their prized aristocracy for dear life, knowing full well the dangers of an angry and growing poor white class.

An unfair draft policy in the Confederacy only served to exacerbate class tensions. Exemptions from the draft were granted for politicians, ministers, the educated elites, and planters with 20 or more slaves. These laws pampered the already privileged elites, while causing a disconnect between the lower-class soldiers and the war effort. A large number of deserters also contributed to the fear and contempt the elites expressed for the poor. Food shortages run rampant through the South, as farmers refused to forego their cotton profits to plant food for the war effort. However, southern elites hoarded food and scarce supplies for themselves and their families, and showed little concern for the starving poor.

Isenberg now turns her attention to Abraham Lincoln, the so-called president of the mudsills. Critics of Lincoln frequently brought up his white trash background and prairie mudsill home in Illinois. As they did with the greasy mechanic, supporters of Lincoln came to spin the term mudsill in a positive light. Union officials condemned the South for creating a government of “money men,” while praising the North for allowing social mobility and boasting a genuine respect for the workingman. It is believed that the demise of the Confederacy would bring about an increase in opportunity for poor white trash. Isenberg contests that the term mudsill was one of the most dynamic terms of the time, used by both sides in dramatically different rhetoric. Regardless of the context it was used in, the term represents the same class of poor whites that has been identified since colonization.

Analysis

In order to paint a picture of the class-charged rhetoric that accompanied the Civil War, Isenberg relies on the provocative discourse of Confederate President Jefferson Davis. Davis employed an us vs. them mentality in what Isenberg classifies as an attempt to quell the South’s own class disparities. He boasted of the South’s deep roots to the founding fathers, while simultaneously dismissing the North’s claim to any such roots. Isenberg implies that Davis dehumanized Union troops with his rhetoric to fuel the fledgling Confederate war effort.

Davis’ mentality toward slavery was that it had definitively elevated whites, rich and poor, over blacks. Isenberg is clear in stating he was wrong: slavery in the South created a strict hierarchy and a permanent lower class of whites. In choosing instead to focus on the problems in the North, southern elites employed the term "mudsill," which essentially represent a parallel to the poor white trash at the subject of Isenberg’s study. Every society had its mudsills, Confederates contended, to do the dredge work of physically clearing land and building infrastructure. She argues that Confederate class language changed the Civil War into a class war, pitting the south against a Union mudsill army.

The South’s biggest obstacle was concealing its own class divisions between the planter elite and poor whites. Isenberg credits Union officials and Republican politicians’ strategy toward the war with exploiting these class disparities. Confederates were thought of as aristocratic slaveholders who had no qualms achieving wealth at the

expense of fellow whites. Isenberg states that through this brutal war of words, each side saw the other as “an alien culture doomed to extinction” (242) two species who could not possibly coexist. She argues this mentality lies at the heart of the American Civil War. Each side saw the other’s class disparities as their main weakness, and Isenberg asserts they may both have been correct. Northern mudsills and southern trash alike were thrust into the national spotlight for political puppetry, but they did not gain any semblance of a concrete political presence.

Vocabulary

expositors, odious, viscerally, decry, clodhoppers

Chapter 8: Thoroughbreds and Scalawags: Bloodlines and Bastard Stock in the Age of Eugenics

Summary

Isenberg begins this chapter by introducing two of the leading schools of thought in the beginning of the 1900s: social Darwinism and the eugenics movement. Scholar W.E.B. DuBois understood both themes were responsible for creating class structure in America. These ideas gained mainstream hold in the early twentieth century, but their origins lie in the Reconstruction period. The North wanted to rebuild the South in its own image, and the South wanted to restore elite white rule. Darwin's "survival of the fittest" model was used widely by politicians of the time attempting to redefine class lines. Paired with the pseudoscience of eugenics, intellectuals used identical language to animal husbandry when debating how to breed good human stock. Isenberg notes that the arguments used by politicians to employ these themes often pitted poor whites against blacks.

President Andrew Johnson envisioned a new social order in the reconstruction states, which Isenberg titles a white trash republic. Johnson's plan disenfranchised the elite planters who once retained rule, while giving the vote to the once repressed lower class of poor whites. Though his plan never came to fruition, it symbolized the ideology surrounding reconstruction. The creation of public initiatives to subsidize the worthy poor, such as the Freedmen's Bureau, were the first of their kind. It was the first acknowledgement of the poor being able to rise from their stations.

Despite the Bureau's founders' optimism in finding productive, worthy poor whites, the reality was a stark contrast; many officials claimed that poor whites were simply living off government handouts with no desire to change their station. Some go as far to say the few freed blacks who received government assistance made better use of it than their poor white counterparts. Journalists and novelists wrote of the poor southern whites as a dangerous and diseased class. The poor white trash were below freed blacks on many social scales, despite intellectuals' argument that freed blacks possessed more commercial qualities than the lazy poor whites. The distinctive white trash breed served as a measure of whites' backward evolutionary progress.

To combat the rhetoric of a degenerative breed of whites, southern Democrats chose not to praise the freed slave, but instead to lament the loss of a white man's government. Common in their dialogue was reference to the carpetbagger and the scalawag. The carpetbagger represented a "rapacious adventurer" (273), like the mudsill and the Yankee. The scalawag was a betrayer, a southern white Republican who represented the Republican stronghold over the South. The passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments terrified southern Democrats, who felt the

erosion of “social exclusiveness” (274) would lead to their downfall. White women became prized breeders meant to preserve what Democrats perceived to be a superior race. In a win for Democrats, an 1869 Supreme Court decision effectively gave breeding regulation rights to the state in saying it had the authority to dissolve interracial marriages.

Isenberg asserts that Democrats and Republicans alike could not decouple race from class. In this respect, the scalawag was the biggest threat of them all, for his knowledge of southern class structure and his willingness to regard freed blacks with respect pitted him directly against the interests of southern Democrats. Isenberg states that the scalawag was synonymous with white trash, and although these symbols were merely propagandist slurs, they were important in southern politics.

James Vardaman, a writer-turned-politician, considered himself the true representative of the poor white class. He drew on white supremacist themes, claiming it was useless to educate blacks. By embracing his white trash identity, Vardaman intentionally stirred up class tensions. President Roosevelt was not shy in his belief that blacks were naturally subordinate to whites; however he did believe blacks could attain economic self-sufficiency. In this light, he also accepted the idea that class was carried in bloodlines. He called on Americans to not lose their roots to their “inner squatter,” the masculine, Washington-like breed of freemen. His approach to those who did not possess these greater American ideals was a recurring theme in Isenberg’s study of class: breeding. Roosevelt used the eugenics movement as a basis for his thinking and law-making. He eventually suggested an Amendment placing marriage and divorce in federal jurisdiction; ill-bred children were more likely to become vagrants and criminals, making them a societal problem worthy of federal regulation. Along the same line of thinking, reformers also suggested tax incentives for children, and federal subsidies for widowed mothers. Isenberg notes that Roosevelt was not alone in his adherence to the pseudoscience of eugenics, calling the craze “eugenic mania” (288).

Isenberg calls on the ideas of leading eugenicist Charles Davenport to capture the ideology of the eugenics movement in relation to poor white trash. Most eugenicists referred exclusively to the South when speaking of degenerate whites. Davenport focused on the hovels and poorhouses of poor rural whites as indiscriminate breeding grounds for white trash. To address his point further, he equated Darwin’s survival of the fittest model to a sensible person’s desire to migrate to cities; the rural poor who remain content in their hovels were the weaker, unevolved breed. Eugenic rhetoric regularly referred to human breeding in the same terms as animal breeding, convinced that sensible mating could create a nation of thoroughbreds. Just as important as preserving good blood was keeping bad blood out of the population. This idea inspired eugenic lawmakers, and by 1931, 27 states had sterilization laws in effect.

Women were crucial in the eugenicists’ plan for a hearty stock of Americans. Education efforts were directly aimed at young women, calling on them to perform their civic duty by selecting husbands based on pedigree and desirable physical characteristics. Isenberg categorizes educated women as the “guardians of the eugenic movement,” symbolizing the power they held in their ability to select a mate. Poor women held an

equal, but dangerous power in that their lack of education and overindulgence in sexual activity was likely to produce “feebleminded” children (292). Davenport asserted that harlotry and poverty are inherited traits. He eventually suggests housing poor white women during their fertile years to prevent them from infecting the population with their bad blood. Politicians and reformers alike concluded sterilization is ultimately the more cost effective solution, allowing women to return to the work force without the danger of them reproducing. Isenberg notes that sexual segregation was applied in World War I as well; prostitutes and poor women were placed in detention centers and jails to keep them from American soldiers. Inspired by the eugenics movement, the Army conducted intelligence tests among northern and southern soldiers. Inevitably, due to a lack of education funding, the southern soldiers scored lower than northern soldiers, with IQ levels ranging among the average 13-year-old boy. These results paired with common eugenic rhetoric painted the South as a place of “social and eugenic backwardness” (298).

Isenberg calls on the historic Supreme Court ruling in Buck v. Bell to reinforce how deeply eugenic thinking was intertwined in society. The ruling ultimately gave the state the power to regulate breeding among its citizens. More importantly, he ruled that sterilization was the “appropriate recourse” (300) to curb the breeding of degenerate rural whites and any non-whites. The plaintiff in the Buck v. Bell case, Carrie Buck, was sterilized because of the “degeneracy and sexual deviance” (301)evident in her pedigree.

Eugenics thinking ranked social classes based on inheritable potential. The top class was a new breed, a professional class of those who inherited intelligence from both parents. This class was also physically fit, prompting the coinage of a new term, “aristogenic.” Isenberg defines this as a genetic leadership class, similar to an aristocracy but based on inborn qualities as opposed to family name. This rising generation was obsessed with money and education, and believed the key to a successful future was rearing children capable of advancing technology and bureaucracy.

Analysis

Isenberg interprets the reconstruction period, as it was approached by both the North and South, as an evolutionary struggle rooted in class dynamics. She identifies the different approaches: the North wanted to rebuild the South in its own image, while the South was eager to restore elite white rule. At the center of these arguments, Isenberg concludes, was the struggle that pitted poor rural whites against blacks.

Isenberg uses the Freedman’s Bureau and various media outlets circulated at the time to depict how poor whites were seen by Republicans. Bureau administrators were highly critical of poor whites, claiming they did not effectively take advantage of government initiatives as their black counterparts did. Isenberg applies this thinking to the larger societal scale; poor whites were so plagued by idleness that some fell behind blacks on

the class scale. Republican media reflected this idea as well; literature dubbed white trash a dangerous and perpetually degenerate class.

Isenberg focuses on the racial arguments laid out by Democrats to decipher their attitude toward poor whites. She contends Democrats were obsessively focused on the "unhealthy combination of distinct races" (272) or breeding. Isenberg uses President Andrew Johnson's veto of the Civil Rights Act of 1866 as an example of Democrats mentality. His supporters wrote to him expressing their fear of a "mongrel" (273) nation, signifying a contempt for not only the lower class, but inferior races as well.

Isenberg has a clear affinity for discussing the origin of slang terms, and her analysis of the scalawag is no different. She relies on "a brilliant piece of Democratic propaganda," titled "The Autobiography of a Scalawag," a story defining the scalawag as a "gross materialist…who lacked foresight" (276). Isenberg interprets this as the educated elites' continued contempt for the lower class. Scalawags are, thus, a variation of white trash; more importantly, they are white trash to the bone, meaning no increase in wealth or political experience they may achieve can change their core.

Isenberg focuses on the transformations of popular terms during the Reconstruction period. The cracker is now a hardworking farmer, and the mountaineer is a sturdy creature of sound mind. The term redneck is also beginning to enter the common rhetoric; he is a common man, unabashedly boisterous, and most importantly a permanent member of the lower class. Isenberg takes the time to dissect the origin of this term as well, suggesting it has roots in a South African/British conflict. Isenberg also highlights Teddy Roosevelt's belief that American men had to stay in touch with their "inner squatter" (284) suggesting a shift in the meaning of this term as well.

The eugenics movement "suffused the culture of the twenties" (301), leading Isenberg to assert that it was also a driving factor in the formation of class structure. Isenberg concludes eugenicists wanted to organize class structure based on breeding capacity. At the top of this structure, Isenberg identifies a new professional class comprised of intelligent and physically fit individuals; a genetic leadership class. Poor white trash remains at the bottom of this social structure.

Hope for the future, in the words of Isenberg, lies "with a cadre of men in white lab coats and bureaucrats in tailored suits" (306). She contends that class consciousness sank deep roots in the 1920s because of the inclination to treat social exclusiveness as a science. Eugenics helped to create a clear, legal distinction between white and black; the white trash population was grouped in with the latter, seen as unclean or unfit for mainstream society. In essence, white trash is off-white.

Vocabulary

plebian, innocuous, prognosticate, prostrate, valise, lucre, admixtures, apostasy, dregs, miscegenationist, ilk, excoriating, amalgam, jingoistic, invective

Chapter 9: Forgotten Men and Poor Folk: Downward Mobility and the Great Depression

Summary

Politicians deemed the South America's principal economic concern, condemning its reliance on tenant farmers and convict laborers. Reformers focused on education and psychological reconditioning of society's depiction of white trash. Popular culture and politicians alike endorsed the idea that American manhood rested on manual labor. The raising of the Empire State Building inspired engineers, contractors, and rail workers all the same to continue to industrialize the nation. The South, however, remained reluctant to embrace the carefully constructed version of the American dream.

The Depression represented the terrifying idea that downward mobility was unpredictable and unpreventable. Traditional marks of poverty were rampant throughout the nation, which served as a reminder to the population that class distinctions were not so clear. Mass migrations of the poor came to symbolize economic disaster. Isenberg focuses on a specific New Deal program used to combat poverty, the Subsistence Homestead Division. The goal was to give tenant farmers and sharecroppers the education and resources necessary to climb out of the cycle of poverty. The program gave long-term loans to low income families to buy homes, hoping ownership of property would enhance farmers' commitment and conservation of the land. This program was the first to incorporate a psychological element; poor whites must feel they were more than trash, and that they were capable of class mobility. Intellectuals of the time challenged the theories of the eugenics movement by asserting that inferior traits were not hereditary, and could be changed through education and environment. Above all, the Depression revealed stark differences between the upper and lower classes in physical terms. It poked a hole in the traditional American dream by exposing the inevitable danger of an unregulated economy: class instability.

Experimental communities were a large part of the New Deal under the Resettlement Administration. These communities extended loans to farmers in a desperate attempt to teach poor rural whites how to play the part of middle class subsistence farmers. Unfortunately, many of these communities in the South failed to accept the poor who needed assistance, instead favoring families more prone to succeed. Southern planned communities were also severely underfunded compared to their northern counterparts, creating stark differences in quality of life between these communities. The goal of converting the poor into the middle class failed; behavior was not as easily taught as administrators hoped.

Isenberg turns her attention to a man who "more than anyone else…worked to change the meaning of the South and the character of 'poor folk,'" - Howard Odum (332). Odum

compiled hundreds of pages of data proving the South's long-standing backwardness. His chief criticisms of the South were that they have eroded millions of acres of soil, they have perpetuated illiteracy and poverty, and they ignored human potential by failing to provide basic educational services to its people. To analyze cultural prejudices that exist in America, Odum sent out a questionnaire to academics around the nation asking them to define what "poor whites" meant to them. Most respondents listed as many negative attributes of poor white trash as possible, the most common adjective being "shiftless" (335). Social and physical proximity to blacks was another seemingly definitive characteristic of poor whites. Odum concluded through this questionnaire that the prejudice surrounding poor whites needed to be reconfigured. While elites were quick to blame the poor for their own stations, Odum asserted that a restructuring of the South's resource management would naturally create more opportunity and room for mobility for the rural poor. If the South managed to "develop a more diverse and technologically advanced economy and agricultural system," a more highly skilled population would emerge out of necessity (337).

Isenberg credits James Agee as being the first to meaningfully probe the meaning of "poor white." Agee admits that objective writing on poor whites does not exist, as it is the writers' natural inclination to look on the poor as objects of pity or disgust. He chooses to write about the supposed thoughts of the poor based on what their social superiors say about them and their station. As opposed to blaming the poor, he suggests a more personal narrative, where the reader is forced to confront feelings of shame, hopelessness, and fear. Subsequent writers assert that all reform efforts in the South must start at the bottom if they are to be effective. Isenberg concludes that although the Forgotten Man of the depression is now in the foreground of common political discourse, no viable solutions have yet been presented.

Analysis

Isenberg begins her introduction to social status during the Great Depression by analyzing a popular film of the time, "I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang." The film depicts a World War I veteran's transformation from hero to burden of society, a comparison to the 20% of Americans who lost their jobs and social status during the Depression. The film focuses a crucial lens on the southern economy. To Isenberg, the film's message is clear: the South's economic problems lie in the exclusion of black men from the free market economy. Isenberg calls on the tragic image of the Bonus Army begging for their pensions being shot at and rejected to build the image of the Depression's "Forgotten Man" (308). To this point, class has been defined by dignity which was once rigid and given at birth. Due to the Depression, class was increasingly insecure.

The Resettlement Administration (RA) and the Farm Security Administration (FSA) were the first government programs founded on a clear mandate to improve the lives of the rural poor. Isenberg uses the head of the RA Rexford Tugwell to personify the New Deal's initial approach to poverty. Tugwell wanted his agency to give the rural poor a political voice, which Isenberg interprets as an understanding that the south had to

redistribute its balance of power. Tugwell shares a goal with Isenberg; both seem focused on dispelling the myth of class mobility in the US. Tugwell's (and the New Deal's) goal was "freeing the many from their virtual imprisonment at the hands of the few" (328). He believed the federal government had the power to intervene to prevent the hardening of class lines. Isenberg credits his ideology with planting the framework for the growth of suburbia in post-WWII America.

Isenberg focuses on photojournalism throughout this chapter and the way it commanded control over the image of the Depression. Images are circulated through magazines depicting the wasted land, wasted homes, and wasted people that come to be associated with the Depression. The main goal of this style of journalism was to disprove the myths of upward social mobility and the absence of a class structure in America. Homes of the rich minority were placed alongside the shacks occupied by the poor population of the same area, a symbol of the economic disparities still evident throughout this time. Isenberg asserts that photojournalists were successful in the Depression era because of their ability to capture the physical conditions of poor rural whites.

Isenberg concludes this chapter with a lengthy comparison of three popular Depression-era writers: Howard Odum, James Agee, and Jonathan Daniels, all who shared the same goal of wanting to see the South "rescued from its ideological trap" (341). While the problem used to be a blindness to the existence of a lower class, the problem has changed; Isenberg suggests the root of class conflict toward the end of the Depression was American's inability to accept poor whites as one of their own.

Vocabulary

disquieting, garish, pernicious, eke, erudite, daguerreotype

Chapter 10: The Cult of the Country Boy: Elvis Presley, Andy Griffith, and LBJ's Great Soceity

Summary

Isenberg begins this chapter by comparing the similarities between an unlikely duo, Elvis Presley and Lyndon B. Johnson. Both southerners challenged and disrupted the "historically toxic characterization of poor whites" (344). While the king of rock sexualized the country boy, Lyndon B. Johnson's unexpected rise to the presidency transformed the hillbilly into a seemingly civilized and poised politician. Johnson's track record as a modern progressive paled in comparison to his image as a southern boy. Although he strongly emphasized the importance of education and social equality, Isenberg notes that the "old country boy image" would continue to haunt LBJ (346).

Americans during the fifties and sixties were extremely class-conscious, regardless of their attempts to deny it. Housing became the symbol of class identity, and zoning laws virtually guaranteed a strict adherence to the existing class structure; middle class areas were equipped with bowling alleys, while poorer rural areas were adorned with trailer parks. Vice President Richard Nixon boasted of a classless America full of proud homeowners, largely attributing the "wonder of America's achievement" to capitalism and free enterprise (352). The suburban middle class was the embodiment of the American dream, which the Nixon family claimed to represent. Cookie-cutter suburban housing developments became popular, such as Levittown outside of New York City. Alongside the homes in Levittown were the pinnacle of middle class signs of leisure: gardens, baseball fields, and shopping centers among other amenities. The founders of large housing developments believed in homogenous populations in both racial and class terms. Thus, they perpetuated the concept that land values were tied to the class status of its occupants. Critics of suburban housing developments saw the "uniform homes and neat lawns as hollow symbols" of a mythical absence of class disparities (355). Government incentives such as tax breaks for taking out mortgages and large Veterans' assistance grants began to make it cheaper for 'desirable' white men to own a home. However, suburbs continued to encourage buyers to live with their own kind, based on class, race, or other defining characteristics. The land (and its value) was still unavoidably attached to the class status of those who live there.

The symbol of the trailer in American cultural discourse was one of untethered freedom, but also of "slums built on town dumps," "liberating and suffocating" as Isenberg deems it (357). Trailer parks across the board contained retired folk, migrant workers, and the poor. World War II changed the image of the trailer when housing shortages forced the government to house its soldiers and defense workers in mobile homes. Washington Post reporter Agnes Meyer captured the essence of the wartime trailer camps through a detailed study of 27 camps nationwide. Her most disturbing descriptions were of war

centers in the South, which house the typical poor white she describes as “pitiful, ragged, illiterate, and undernourished” (359). Meyers concludes these people have refrained from moving to the suburbs out of fear of being members of a decent community. Post-war, the term “trailer trash” becomes a generic term similar to “squatters,” and synonymous with white trash (360).

Trailer manufacturers began to change their image by marketing to more up-scale clientele. However, the government did not support mortgages for motor homes until 1971, making it difficult for middle class families to purchase a high-end trailer. Trailer living still became increasingly popular despite attempts to rid towns of “trailer dwellers,” a class of people all their own (362). Trailer life provided people with freedom from the monotony of suburban life, while continuing to carry the stigma of white trash. Trailer retailers morphed their image again by creating luxury trailer resorts which served as a stark contrast to run down trailer parks. Luxury trailer resorts acted as mini-suburbs, carrying with them the same class consciousness present in the actual suburbs. Traditional trailer parks still highly outnumbered the resorts, however, and they had yet to scrub the image of white trash off their appearance. Isenberg notes that class was deeply imprinted onto landscapes through zoning, housing, and school funding. Trailer parks replaced the squatters hovel, but the inhabitant remained the same breed of poor white trash.

Isenberg personified white trash in 1957 through Hazel Bryan. Photographed yelling insults at a black student during a heated desegregation attempt in Little Rock, Bryan was a symbol of the “crude callousness of the recognized white trash type” (366). Bryan’s upbringing as a poor rural white conditioned her to an artificial racial superiority over blacks. Historically, blacks and poor whites were equals on the social scale, but whites maintained a small advantage because of their race. Hazel Bryan’s family was new to urban life, yet they enjoyed the privilege of living in an all-white working class neighborhood. The little power poor whites had, especially in urban areas, hinged on the false notion of racial superiority. Poor white trash became the face of resistance to desegregation.

Some say Elvis was part hillbilly due to his new musical style and oversexualized image, Isenberg asserts that he was less hillbilly and more redneck; he was born to a poor sharecropper in the wrong part of town. However, the convergence of Presley’s image, popular culture, and class-obsessed politics moved the poor white to the center of the national stage. The country politician came to rise: he was poised, his voice strong, his disposition honest, and his faith evident. Famed author John Steinbeck critiqued one country politicians’ beliefs by acknowledging the nature of the redneck appeal to some, but not all, voters. What was sensible and poetic in some regions may be conceived as a humorous parallel to the Beverly Hillbillies to those in other regions.

One politician who maintained his southern boy charm without becoming a stage show was Lyndon B. Johnson. Isenberg deems him a cross between a schoolteacher and a sheriff. During his unexpected inheritance of the presidency, LBJ’s down-home ways and ability to connect with his audience made country-boy traits valuable assets to a struggling nation.

Lyndon Johnson was known for his set of programs named the Great Society, a tribute to his willingness to tackle poverty. His programs focused on two groups of people: poor urban blacks and the mountain folk of Appalachia. The issues facing Appalachia were a high rate of unemployment, deteriorating housing, an uneducated workforce, and a ravaged landscape due to strip mining. Johnson made providing infrastructure, school, and hospitals one of the focal points of his strategy toward the Appalachian region. While his steps were huge in fighting rural poverty, they proved inadequate to manage the devastation of the southern economy. Isenberg also defines LBJ as a "modified, modernized southerner," meaning he resembled traits of the southern rural poor, while still making strides in advancing social mobility (390). LBJ was aware of the notion of false white pride that rural whites felt in relation to their black counterparts; thus, he knowingly exploited this notion to gain the support of rural whites.

LBJ's critics wasted no time in shedding the President's good-old-boy image in turn for a white trash image. Malcolm X labeled him "head of the Cracker Party," an insult to both Johnson and his supporters (390). Regardless of his stately appearance, he could not stray far from the white trash in his family bloodline. Critics contested that his dangerous redneck ways were evidence of class disorder. Drawing on the notion that citizens take examples from their leaders, those in the media feared if President Johnson's behavior became "too common, too coarse," he allows his nation to follow suit (392). New terms emerge to reinforce the idea of pedigree; "the culture of poverty" and the "poverty cycle" become attached to the idea of poor whites' degenerate bloodline and subsequent lower class status (392). Land was still closely associated to class structure as well. Concentrated areas of poor whites were now hidden from the safe enclosure of the suburbs, reinforcing the old English practice of expelling poor vagrants to the outskirts of society.

Lyndon Johnson challenged the idea that wastelands produced waste people. His rise from the unforgiving clay soil represented his rise to political power through education and hard work. One reporter calls Johnson a "dramatization of the American dream," referring to his image as the poor country boy at heart who yet leads with grace. No matter how reassuringly Johnson spoke of class mobility, he embraced the grim reality that the redneck's "place among the power elite was not really secured." Class identity was thus, stamped at birth and virtually inescapable (394).

Analysis

Isenberg compares the modern-progressive political shift to the adapting social climate by comparing President Lyndon Johnson and Elvis Presley. They had little in common aside from their southern roots, but Isenberg uses their combined influences to highlight the pervasiveness of the white trash identity in American society. Before discussing these two, however, Isenberg takes a long-winded road describing the first hillbilly sitcoms, the emergence of a class of trailer trash, and the impact of Hazel Brown during the Little Rock school desegregation attempt.

Drawing again on the influence of popular culture, Isenberg begins to analyze the growth of hillbilly sitcoms such as “The Beverly Hillbillies” and “The Andy Griffith Show.” Although Andy Griffith was portrayed as a good old boy bent on the values of small town democracy, he was a blaring reminder of a permanent lower class. Defenders of such shows contend that poor whites were depicted as wholesome and kind, ultimately suggesting this genre was doing the actual poor a public service. Isenberg asserts that this logic was misguided; silver screen depictions of hillbillies were objects of mockery, not admiration. The popularity of such shows, whether positive or negative for social discourse, prove that Americans were extremely class-conscious. The characters were entertainingly inferior, giving middle and upper class whites the ability to physically look down on another class. Isenberg recognizes American’s lingering fear, however, that the real-life hillbillies would spread into more urban areas, and their presence would not be so comedic.

Small distinctions between the terms hillbilly and redneck began to unfold during the 1960s and 1970s. Hillbillies hail from the hills, while rednecks come from the swamps. Both groups were violent and vindictive, but hillbillies focused most of their anger on neighbors, family members, and trespassers. Hillbilly characters became just as common as the redneck characters in popular culture. Though the actors portraying these characters were often from an established upbringing, the hillbilly act became one of the most profitable in Hollywood. The popularity of the hillbilly image extended into the political realm as well. The “sassy flourishes” of hillbilly political prose were the reason the constituency continues to reelect hillbilly politicians. An Australian observer notes that America’s fascination with the hillbilly was rooted in a taste for a “democracy of manners,” meaning Americans accept large economic disparities while also expecting their elected officials to cultivate the image of the common man (382). The hillbilly stands for more than the rowdy and wasteful loaf, he also represents a more isolated, primitive, and genuinely democratic man of pure Anglo-Saxon blood.

While news media continued their obsession with Little Rock, Isenberg focuses on the Hollywood adaptation of the redneck. Movies such as "A Face in the Crowd" and "o Kill a Mockingbird" captured audiences with their rowdy, volatile, oversexed white trash characters. "To Kill a Mockingbird" addresses the intermingling of race and class, and explores which one holds more value in society. Though poor whites cling to their whiteness, the mounting reality was that the poor white population remained a degenerate breed. Some intellectuals argue that not all poor whites were doomed, citing Andrew Johnson and Abraham Lincoln as southerners who rose out of their station through hard work and education. However, Isenberg notes that the two historical figures were continually plagued by their white trash images. The label of white trash, because of Hollywood’s influence, now included a violent breed raised on hate.

Vocabulary

megalmania, prurient, vaudeville, cudgeling, harangue, indelible

Chapter 11: Redneck Roots: Deliverance, Billy Beer, and Tammy Faye

Summary

An authentic picture of class politics can only be achieved leading into the last decades of the twentieth century by finally recognizing the concerns of marginalized Americans such as women, blacks, and poor whites. President Richard Nixon, as a representative of politicians of the time, claimed to represent the middle class American homeowners who worked hard and expected little from the federal government.

Poor whites who managed to climb the social ladder began to reconstruct their image. They no longer referred to themselves as a distinct breed of people, but instead as an ethnic identity to be celebrated. This notion asserts that the white trash identity does not permanently hinder one's ability to advance in society. However, the idea of sexual deviance was widely associated with this white trash identity. Isenberg calls on the violent thriller "Deliverance," released in 1970, to define popular culture's depiction of "white trash ugliness and backwoods debauchery" (398).

America in the seventies was becoming increasingly more ethnically conscious, leading to the equation of ethnicity with class. Thus, poor whites clung to their image as a distinct class of people. In the current model, social mobility in America required the assumption of a class disguise, usually a middle-class disguise. However, knowledge of the inauthenticity of this class was widely accepted. A TV depiction of a real middle class family was used to poke holes in the traditional American dream, painting suburban families as dull, stagnant, and bland.

In the seventies, class reconstruction was based on ethnicity. President Nixon referred to the white lower middle class as the "backbone of America-hardworking and true" (404). One intellectual claimed that ethnic Americans could better understand the traditional values of loyalty, love of the flag, and hard work. Most importantly, he claimed they did not take advantage of social welfare programs. The abuse of welfare was one of the most contested issues of time, and Richard Nixon's supporters were adamant that welfare "breeds weak people" (405). Hard work was praised as the key to social mobility, while welfare remained a constant symbol of questionable breeding practices and sloth. However, among the masses of poverty stricken welfare recipients, poor whites were far more prominent than intellectuals previously admitted. Ethnics and poor whites alike were seen as classes of people capable of a restricted degree of upward social mobility only if worked to clean the unappealing aspects of their heritage. This notion reinforced historical forgetting on an individual level.

The birth of NASCAR, Dolly Parton's popularity, and the inclusion of white trash and redneck into the daily vernacular attributed to a refashioning of the poor white's image. Regardless of the seemingly smooth transition, class hostilities persisted. The suburban

population had no sympathy for white trash unwilling to improve their station. The "upscale rednecks" who enjoy a slightly smaller level of social acceptability were the sons of the previous generation of poor white trash who properly used government assistance to gain economic security (414). Though only one generation removed, the upscale rednecks look down on the poor white trash of their communities. This new class was highly resentful of welfare programs and their recipients.

President Jimmy Carter prided himself on his honesty with the constituency. He identified compassionately with lower middle class whites, although his upbringing was far from poverty-stricken. Carter encompassed a tamer version of the stereotypical boisterous southern politician, which was a flaw per some of his critics. Carter lacked the extremist ideologies found in most redneck circles. Some even insisted he adopt some of the qualities of his "redneck doppelganger" brother, Billy Carter (415). While his lineage was disputed as privileged, Carter was a redneck-turned-politician who came to office with deep roots to his family, his country, and his character.

Isenberg now turns her attention to one of the biggest public scandals of the 180s, Reverend Jim Bakker and his wife Tammy Faye, and their televangelist empire which turned out to be a fraud. Jim and Tammy Faye's transcendence from a trailer park to an excessively extravagant mansion gripped the nation. Drug and sex scandals lined the story as well, making it a field day for tabloids. Though not natives of the South, the Bakkers personified white trash ideals; they dressed flashy and their boisterous nature easily conned a white trash audience. The media focused her inexpensive choice in clothing, fake eyelashes, and excessive makeup. Tammy Faye thus represented the opposite of middle-class society: emotional restraint, proper diction, subdued dress, and obvious refinement. The expansion of mass media in the eighties and nineties leads to a renegotiation of class identity; placing rednecks on center stage allowed the rest of the social classes to look on in obvious superiority.

Analysis

A new wave of what Isenberg calls "identity politics" was celebrated by both the left and the right (396). Isenberg argues that identity has always been a part of politics. While some could choose their identity, most Americans could not. Poor rural whites lacked the power or platform to shape political discourse in the way popular politicians such as Abraham Lincoln have; Lincoln and his supporters embraced the term mudsill to spin the insult in a positive light. Isenberg concludes that there was no positive spin, however, on poor white trash.

The instinct for a group of marginalized people to reach for a sense of community is called cultural longing. Isenberg argues that cultural longing is not a new phenomenon using Alex Haley's "Roots." Haley's widely popular narrative depicted his detailed family tree, which time eventually revealed was largely fabricated. He positioned his ancestors on a virtuous and proud pedestal, which was symbolic of how class status still hinged on pedigree.

Isenberg then turns to the presidency of liberal Democrat Jimmy Carter. She contributes Carter's success to his ability to wear the redneck hat to appeal to blue-collar and rural voters. He painted his opponent as a stuffy lawyer far removed from the common man, while boasting about his honest trade of peanut farming. Carter's critics accused him of manipulating his class identity to appeal to voters, which Isenberg notes was not far from the truth.

Isenberg asserts that the appeal of NASCAR and the movie Deliverance were one in the same: violence, risk-taking, and a lack of concern for consequences explain why the redneck could shine in popular culture. For many viewers, the redneck represents the uninhibited free-spirit who refuses to live a mundane suburban life. However, while fame has made a handful of rednecks successful, the majority of the rural poor population experiences no such social mobility.

Isenberg compares the media craze surrounding the Bakker scandal with that of modern day "white trashdom" Honey Boo Boo (421). Isenberg also describes Tammy Faye's appeal as the same oversexualized appeal of country star Dolly Parton. While combining these two women may produce a strange concoction, together Isenberg uses them to paint a complete picture of the popularized version of white trash.

Vocabulary

Indelible, staid, nonplussed, encumbrance, arriviste, teetotaler, comeuppance, fleeced, tawdry

Chapter 12: Outing Rednecks: Slumming, Slick Willie, and Sarah Palin

Summary

The term redneck continued to change throughout the 1990s. The so-called “stampede toward white trash and redneck chic” (427) is referred to as slumming. A growing number of Americans seek to scrub the term redneck of its negative qualities. Instead, rednecks are regarded by this bunch as agriculturalists. Ambiguity remained in the definition, however; rednecks saw themselves as hardworking, fun-loving, and independent. The middle and upper classes saw rednecks as loud, obnoxious, bigoted and shallow. Breeding remained paramount in considerations of identity. One could not simply claim to be a redneck; it was an ingrained part of one’s identity and heritage.

Redneck transformed into a mutated gender and class identity, and women played a prominent role in the term’s transformation. Isenberg focuses on two authors, Dorothy Allison and Carolyn Chute. Both women offered unsparing accounts of rural poverty from within class boundaries; they both wrote from the perspective of the poor white women they described. They wrote women could not possibly wear white trash or redneck as badges of honor. The people Chute describes were synonymous with the English notion of waste people; their only talents were shooting and procreating, and they lived in an old trailer. Because of her impoverished upbringing, her writing reflected her views on class and poverty. She rejected the notion of social mobility for the poor due to their tribal nature to stay close to their kin and land. By 2002, Chute recognized “redneck” as a symbol of working class populism. She wrote of a dangerous rift between the classes in America which was inevitably leading to a class war.

Dorothy Allison also displayed an interest in class politics. She focused her writing on difficult and sometimes violent domestic relationships. Allison recognized that emotionally backward white men often took everyday burdens out on their wives. These burdens included the compulsion to snub those below them, highlighting shame as a driving force in class structure. Both women echoed the lesson that the choices people make are both class- and gender-charged. They aimed to teach that many lower-class people, women especially, were trapped to the social station to which they were born.

Bill Clinton’s rise to the presidency in 1993 served to intensify the uneasy relationship between class identity and American democracy. Clinton embodied the Jeffersonian ideal of a worthy poor student being raked from the rubbish to realize his potential. He also embodied white trash stereotypes such as his poor dining habits, the stories of his wife-beating father, and allusions to the run-down shack he was raised in. His education and work ethic were not enough to distance Clinton from his class background; one intellectual dubbed Clinton the “hopelessly hillbilly” (437) President. While Clinton never claimed to be a redneck or a hillbilly, his presidency helped to turn crackers and white trash into a more socially acceptable group of people.

Slick Willie was a nickname attributed to Clinton that he tried to shake throughout his presidency. Regardless of his seemingly earnest smooth talk, he failed to convince the public that he was fully truthful. Clinton managed to salvage his good-old-boy image by reviving "the old southern political strategy…of singing and swinging his way into office" (439). His impersonations of Elvis Presley symbolized Clinton's fun-loving attitude, and they served to represent a way for him to connect to poor southern voters. His attempts at likeability were thwarted, however, by a Republican party heartbroken at the loss of Regan's White House. They attacked Clinton's pedigree, painting him as nothing more than his mother's son. He was bred from a lineage of white trash, and therefore his critics saw him as unfit to reside in the White House.

The famous Monica Lewinsky scandal helped to out President Clinton as pure white trash on the national stage. Critics compared this act of low-class lewdness to something that belongs in the trailer park. Miraculously, Clinton survived the impeachment process stronger and more popular, making him one of the most studied figures of the time. One journalist concluded that the "Elvis principle" (442) was responsible for the nation's support of Clinton. Acting as classic rags-to-riches narratives, both Clinton and Elvis appealed to American's natural desire for kings. America seemed to admire the touch of white trash Clinton brought to the stage; many preferred the redneck chic image to the traditional, polished politician. One author used Clinton as an example of "the tropes of blackness" (443). His poverty-stricken upbringing in a single parent home, his love of junk food, and his working-class background all caused this author to name Clinton the first black president. The seemingly permeable boundaries between blacks and whites were a stereotypical characteristic of the rural south. The image of Clinton as the first black president led many to ask, was he a symbol of blackness, or was he a symbol of white trash?

In 2008, the Republican Party launched a feeble attempt at their own white trash candidate, Sarah Palin. As early as the Republican National Convention, vice presidential candidate Palin's image plastered the front pages of the tabloids with headlines such as "Babies, Lies, and Scandal." The venerable John McCain admitted after his campaign that Palin was picked solely for image purposes; he had hoped to "package the roughish side of Palin alongside a comfortable, conventional female script," (446) suggesting he was as unprepared for her negative influence as she was unprepared for her interviews. Isenberg refers to her as a "white trash Barbie" (446), and notes that she was unable to rise to the same level of respect as her well-spoken, poised white trash political counterparts Bill Clinton, LBJ, and Jimmy Carter. McCain staffers chalk Palin's poor image up to a combination of "hillbilly" and "prima donna" characteristics that served as more of a joke to voters than a political identity. Former southern politicians suffer the same criticisms, yet they could spin slurs such as mudsill and cracker into positive images. Thus, Isenberg poses a difficult question: At what point does commonness cease to be an asset…and become a liability for a political actor? Her answer is simple: when turning an election into a circus where candidates become the performers, "there's always a chance that the dancing bear will win" (450).

By the time of the 2008 election, reality TV was the newest sensation. This medium of entertainment allowed the middle and upper classes to definitively look down on the

stars of these shows who “exhibit the worst of human qualities: vanity, lust, and greed” (450). As this genre evolved, shows drawing on the white trash stereotype also increase in popularity. Here Comes Honey Boo Boo and Duck Dynasty brought the circus of white trash reality conveniently into American living rooms, where the lower-class could be scrutinized from the comfort of one’s home. So-called white trash bashing became conservative’s go-to strategy. Conservatives continued to blame liberals for social disparities, suggesting that they had condoned the perpetuation of the welfare state. Charlotte Hays, a conservative writer, condemned society upon hearing Here Comes Honey Boo Boo raked in more viewers than the Republican National Convention. She suggests that American emphasis on manners and work ethic trump any notion of a class-based society. Isenberg criticizes Hays for naively assuming class identity could be hidden “under a veneer of false gentility” (455). The danger in her thinking lies in the denial of the nation’s class system. By refusing to acknowledge and analyze American class structure, the poor white population continues to suffer while their population simultaneously rises.

Isenberg caps her concluding chapter with the bold assertion that American intellectuals, through fear of the lower class, have conditioned a society with huge class disparities. Powerhouses of the historical U.S. economy such as slavery in the past and large banks today have perpetually oppressed society’s lower classes for economic benefit. American historians who subscribe to the same fear-based class system have carefully constructed a more pleasing narrative of America’s past and her future potential. They explicitly deny the existence of a long-standing class structure in America, and thus they deny history. Failing to analyze America’s class system honestly, Isenberg asserts, can only lead to the further oppression, mockery, and contempt for the lower classes.

Analysis

Isenberg frequently throughout her study has alluded to the relationship between class and democracy. The 1990s was a time of rapid social change at the hands of technology, progressive politics, and the not-so-progressive American attitude toward class structure. Isenberg’s America, the land of the free and the land of opportunity, is also a land built on false promises of a classless society.

Isenberg continues to track the changes in the common uses of the terms “white trash,” “hillbillies,” and “rednecks.” These terms still carry the same implications as "squatter" and "cracker," but they are now used in common discourse as compliments of a sort. The Presidency of Bill Clinton and the popularity of Here Comes Honey Boo Boo form an unlikely duo in thrusting the poor rural white into the public eye. The fact that the poor are no longer hidden along the outskirts of society suggests a form of economic mobility possible for poor whites never available to them in the past. However, this idea solidifies the hillbilly and the redneck as a distinct breed of people unable to change their social status and outward appearance regardless of economic achievements.

Isenberg grapples with the idea of blackness in this chapter when analyzing the claim that Bill Clinton is America's first black president. Her study of class structure has previously alluded to the idea that poor whites are socially equal with blacks, though some whites hold onto an artificial superiority over blacks. Analyzing Clinton's image has led intellectuals to debate whether he is a symbol of blackness or a symbol of white trash. While the label may be different, Isenberg's analysis suggests that blackness and white trash-ness are one in the same. Conservative intellectuals equated the "delinquency of urban black culture to redneck culture," not a new theme in Isenberg's study of class. Others asserted that negative traits such as laziness, promiscuity, violence, and poor speech were passed back and forth between neighboring black and poor white communities. Social conditions and the possibility for economic prosperity were a distant dream to these classes, permanently separating them from the idealized American dream.

Analyzing the popular figures of white trash in the modern era would not be complete without a discussion on Sarah Palin. Isenberg's writing shows a clear contempt for Palin; while other historical figures are often presented more objectively, Isenberg writes of no positive attributes of Palin or her candidacy. Isenberg compares Palin's failed attempt to capture the poor white audience to the more successful attempts at image-cleaning performed by Clinton and Lyndon Johnson. This comparison leads her to question what the correct level of "commonness" in political candidates is. In her answer, she criticizes the excessive showmanship of those "dancing bears" such as Palin who turned their own candidacy into a joke.

Vocabulary

benightedness, ignominious, vitriol, effusive, apoplectic, pastiche, abetted, screed

Important People

Richard Hakluyt

Richard Hakluyt was an Oxford fellow and clergyman who devoted his life to compiling the travel narratives of explorers. Isenberg refers to him as one of the chief promoters of American exploration, though never having stepped foot on the continent. His propaganda painted America as a “lovely woman waiting to be wooed and wed by the English” (18). Hakluyt saw America as a “waste firm,” suggesting her natural resources could be converted to English commodities at the hands of England’s “waste people” (21). The exploitation of the poor at the hands of the elite was a theme planted by Hakluyt that never truly left American political discourse.

Thomas Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson saw human behavior as conditional and adaptable; across generations, behavior would conform to shifts in the physical and social environment. Jefferson defined class as the intersection of land and labor, or the ability for people to conform to the social shift toward an agrarian society. Jefferson asserted that true cultivators of their land would produce hearty stocks of not only animals, but people as well. In his ideal rural society, he regarded class as a natural occurrence in a properly cultivated land, “flesh-and-blood manifestations of an agrarian topography” (88).

Jefferson suggested education and land reform initiatives under the veil of achieving equality, but many of his ideas were thwarted by the Virginia gentry. His “raked from the rubbish” scholars and new landowners, in his ideal plan, were a manifestation of social engineering. He aimed to forestall the growth of manufacturing while creating a “nation of farmers large and small” (85).

Jefferson frequently dismissed the existence of a class structure in America. This rhetoric included praising America as a “land of unparalleled opportunity,” and “tranquil permanent felicity” (96). However, post-Revolutionary Virginia was not the pristine land Jefferson described. Isenberg notes that Jefferson saw himself as the defender of America’s reputation, which was evident in his flowery writings on the American class system. His ideas were highly propagandist; he fully acknowledged the growing class disparities in private, but continued to publicly boast that “poverty and class structure simply did not exist” (96). Though he was one of the most celebrated founding fathers, Jefferson’s efforts failed to reach most of the impoverished whites in America. The renowned title of cultivator, while fuel for an enchanting rhetoric, remained out of reach for most poor whites.

Benjamin Franklin

Benjamin Franklin's views on class dynamics were rooted in human's instinctual drive to seek pleasure and avoid pain. Too much pleasure in society caused idleness, while too much pain led to tyranny. Franklin's ideal class structure in America was a healthy medium between these two extremes, what he labeled a "happy mediocrity" (70). He contended that men were not creatures driven by morality, but rather by an innate desire to eat, procreate, and move.

Children were at the center of Franklin's plan for a prosperous America. He believed large families encouraged parents to be industrious, "spurred on by the will to survive" (66). Just as dangerous to the family dynamic, however, was slavery. Franklin preached that slavery taught white children idleness, one of the most damning plagues in American history. Franklin's idealized America was a free labor zone populated by those so content in their mediocrity they do not notice class disparities. Franklin provided three arguments to support his theory of breeding: first, he promised that western expansion would bring about class stability. Second, he argued the dispersal of people would encourage a wider distribution of wealth, thus lessening class disparities. Finally, Franklin believed in the growth of a middle class. Isenberg notes that Franklin had no plan for concretely easing class tensions; he believed that letting nature take its course would result in a nation of industrious peoples content in their class station.

Andrew Jackson

Andrew Jackson was the first westerner elected president, as well as the first president to campaign on his biography rather than his political experience. Both his supporters and critics focused on his volatile emotions as a defining characteristic of Old Hickory. Jackson was a classic example of the frontier's backwoodsman: a boisterous, lantern-faced, hot-headed cracker. Supporters used Jackson's backwoods nature as a positive, masculine trait; "the real men of America were Jacksonian" (125). Critics, on the other hand, deemed Jackson's "questionable breeding" means for disqualification from the executive office (126). The repeated references to Jackson's upbringing were proof of the heightened level of class consciousness of the time.

Despite the slight elevation of the terms "cracker" and "squatter," Isenberg points out that neither group of poor whites gained any concrete political voice during Jackson's presidency. The squatter and cracker remained characters of popular culture; he represented huge class disparities while never symbolizing respect for the lower class. Though Jackson held the highest office in the nation, he could not escape the label of poor white cracker branded on him by his birthplace, upbringing, and nature. Andrew Jackson was a symbolic reminder of the constraints one's class station put on one's future.

Jefferson Davis

Confederate President Jefferson Davis proved himself in the infancy of the Confederacy a powerful speaker. Isenberg calls on Davis' early speeches to encapsulate the ideology of Confederate soldiers toward their Union enemy. Davis called the Union army an army of miscreants, attempting to dehumanize the Union and make the strong statement that the two distinct breeds of northerners and southerners could never coexist. To Davis, Yankees were a "degenerate race, worse than hyenas," comparing them to a "ravenous, cowardly species" (155).

This rhetoric helped to make the Civil War a war of words, not just bullets. However, in order to act against a common enemy, the South had to conceal its own class divisions. The southern planter elites continued to dominate the economy and political realm, while poor white trash was becoming more and more visible. The South, in this case, was fighting against the Union, the degenerate "mudsills" who populated the North, and everything they stood for: class mixing, race mixing, and the redistribution of wealth. The carefully constructed rhetoric Davis used, while not a new strategy, aimed to unite the south in a class-fueled effort against the north. The reality of the Confederate war effort, however, was quite the contrast. Desertion was widespread, food shortages were leaving poor women and children to starve, the government-issued draft favored those who were already favored by society, and there was no overall sense of loyalty to the war effort. Despite Davis' attempts to conceal class disparity, history has proven that class structure was not so easily hidden.

Abraham Lincoln

Due to Abraham Lincoln's upbringing in Kentucky and his chosen residence in Illinois, Isenberg classifies him as both white trash and a prairie mudsill. Lincoln was successfully able to turn these insults around in favor of his image, ultimately reconstructing the definitions of the once slanderous terms. If the Confederacy was built on false ideals of money men and slaveholders, the mudsill was the beating heart of the Union. He was loyal, and he embraced the promise of class mobility denied to poor whites in the south. Though Isenberg focused mostly on Union generals and Lincoln's advisers to paint the picture of the north's class ideology, Lincoln's symbolic importance cannot be downplayed. Lincoln was heralded for emancipating slaves, yet his image was permanently plagued by his white trash roots. Though he was able to persuade the public of the advantages of his mudsill ways, the description of Honest Abe as "president of the mudsills" was a reminder of the contempt society held for poor rural whites (167).

W.E.B. DuBois

One of the leading intellectuals and social critics of the time, W.E.B. DuBois dually recognized the appeal of, and challenged the notions of social Darwinism. He asserted that if one subscribed to Darwin's theories of innate inequalities among the races, there

was no point in legislating to improve the lives of oppressed blacks. DuBois blamed white supremacy for distorting the natural order of class structure for both blacks and poor whites. White supremacists asserted that whites were a breed destined for global dominance, while DuBois countered with his assertion that white leaders were responsible for the degeneration and oppression of their own breed. His ideas challenged the existing rigid boundaries of class structure. DuBois also denounced the art of using pseudoscience to justify one's own prejudice and superiority.

Charles Davenport

Charles Davenport was the leading intellectual authority on eugenics, and he was used by Isenberg as a face of the eugenics movement. Like many of his peers, he supported Darwin's survival of the fittest model, interpreting it in terms of his antirural bias; the desire to move to the suburbs represented the fitter people in society, while the poor whites who remained in their rural dwellings were seen as unevolved. Eugenic language mirrored that of animal breeding, especially when discussing the role women played in the movement. Fear of the sexually uninhibited, lower-class poor white woman spread among eugenicists for the power she held in perpetuating a degenerate breed. Davenport suggested institutionalizing poor women during their fertile years. Isenberg notes that it was his thinking specifically that led to sterilization laws; it was seen as ultimately more cost effective to sterilize women rather than institutionalize them for decades at a time. His crude regard for women and the poor shaped the way eugenics influenced politics. Sterilization laws for those deemed unfit were a cruel manifestation of deeply-rooted class disparities.

Howard Odum

Isenberg credits Howard Odum with working to change the image of poor white trash more than any other. His comprehensive study, "Southern Regions of the United States," served as one of the cornerstones in New Deal planning. His meticulous review of the southern economy quantitatively proved the south's history of soil erosion, its acceptance and perpetuation of rural poverty, and its rejection of human potential by failing to provide basic services and professional training to its people.

Most notably in his study of the social and economic environment of the South, Odum asked leading intellectuals across the nation to define poor white trash. Isenberg admits that while the results were fuzzy, they prove a clear contempt for the poor among the educated elites. Through Odum's tireless efforts, Isenberg concluded that poor rural whites were at an inescapable disadvantage; socially, they were looked down on, while politically they were reduced to expendable pawns outside of mainstream society. In this light, legislation heavily supported class disparities.

Lyndon Baines Johnson

Isenberg praises President Lyndon Johnson for standing out among southerners in the spotlight of his era; he was able to maintain his southern boy charm while not becoming the punch line of a joke, as some southern politicians have been accused of. This was not accidental, Isenberg notes. Johnson's first obstacle as president was to shed the mannerisms America had come to expect from southern politicians. The stark differences between him and his predecessor, the east coast elite JFK, did not help Johnson's efforts. Johnson attempted to maintain his modern progressivist image while preserving his southern drawl; he ambitiously aimed to use his presidential powers to bring social equality to those stuck in the cycle of poverty. Despite his moderate approach to class identity, his country boy image haunted him throughout his presidency.

LBJ's Great Society involved programs targeted specifically at employment and education reforms. When addressing rural youth, he boasted of an America where previous class station did not determine one's future. Isenberg asserts that although he spoke of a society defined by class mobility, Johnson knew full-well the limitations of one's class station. He was subject to his own class background himself, with his critics stating that Johnson could be subject to an inevitable white trash outburst at any given moment.

James Earl Carter

President Jimmy Carter was one of the more interesting southern politicians, Isenberg concludes, because his approach to class largely revolved around his own image. To win the vote of rural whites, he had to play the redneck part. The "us versus them" mentality of rural whites against the government allowed Carter to paint himself as a common southern man capable of representing the people honestly. His opponents, however, claimed Carter was a fraud, and that he changed his identity based on whose vote he was trying to win. Critics also suggest that if he had a pinch more of his redneck doppelganger brother Billy's redneck blood, he could have been an honest southern candidate.

Objects/Places

The American Dream

Isenberg alludes to the notion of the American Dream throughout her study. The concept was invented over time by intellectuals and politicians who sought to defend America's reputation on the global stage. A nation founded on the concept of waste people needed obvious defending. Many of America's most renowned historical figures created the American Dream with knowingly false claims to economic equality, a class-free society, and immeasurable opportunity.

Waste Pepole

Waste People is one of the first terms Isenberg uses to address the subject of her study, poor rural whites. The concept dates to colonization, when waste people were needed to fertilize the wasteland of the colonies with their labor. Isenberg contests all societies have their waste people, but they all fall under different names. The deeply ingrained English contempt for waste was prevalent in the colonies' treatment of their waste people.

The South

Each chapter in Isenberg's analysis focuses a specific lens toward the South. The region quickly earned a reputation for social backwardness, as most its inhabitants were stuck in a cycle of poverty at the hands of a few wealthy farmers. The South produced a new strain of poverty, however, easily distinguishable by their physical deformities. Southern whites were thrown into one of two categories: rich or poor, creating a tense class structure in the region.

Colonial England

The birth of America's class system can be traced back to the colonial powers, who valued wealth above most anything else. If one could not purchase his own land, he was part of the subservient lower class destined to work the land for a wealthier class. Defining class status based on labor and land ownership was a colonial influence still present in America today.

Idleness

In English society, idleness was one of the most detested traits. In a society that placed significant importance on wealth, idleness meant a wasted potential to earn money. It was a term used to describe the rural poor in America throughout its entire history.

Slavery

As an institution, Isenberg credits slavery with oppressing just as many poor whites as it did enslaved blacks. In an economy dominated by wealthy slaveholders, poor whites were reduced to tenant farmers, indentured servants, or convict laborers. Slavery caused tensions between poor whites and enslaved blacks in terms of class dynamics; reduced to the same labor, those stationed above them barely distinguished between the two groups.

The Confederacy

The Confederacy hinged on the institution of slavery. Thus, class disparities in the budding nation were large. Isenberg argues it was class tensions from within that lost the war for the Confederates. It was difficult to exploit a common enemy when so many rifts were present within.

Backwoods/Frontier

At first, backwoods meant the thickly forested areas in the newly acquired Midwest, and frontier meant the western territories. The two terms came to mean the outskirts of any society, or, where the poor whites live.

Eugenics Movement

The eugenics movement signifies a cultural shift toward accepting the notions of animal husbandry as they apply to humans. The movement forced Americans to consider the future of the race when considering a mate, hoping to thwart out society's waste people through conscious breeding.

Slang

Isenberg's study is heavily reliant on colloquial slang to prove the prevalence of the rural poor in society. White trash, squatters, crackers, mudsills, hillbillies, and rednecks are all different dressings of the same poor white character, each with its own slightly different implications.

Reality TV

Isenberg is critical of reality TV, but also uses it as an example of the way society mocks poor white trash. Despite the supposed glamour of fame, Isenberg insists reality TV harms the image of poor rural whites more than it will ever help. Reality TV provides middle class Americans with an easy opportunity to look down on a comically inferior class, something Isenberg suggests is part of human nature.

Themes

The Relationship Between Land and Labor

Isenberg goes to exhaustive lengths to concretely show the intricate relationship between land and labor. Relying heavily on the writings and teachings of the Founding Fathers, she paints a picture of class in which one's social status directly relied on his ability to make his land profitable. Isenberg uses Jefferson's model of the virtuous cultivator to further this argument. Cultivators were those who reaped not only produce from the soil, but also planted strong communal and family ties. Success for the American breed meant quelling idleness without giving the poor too much liberty.

Benjamin Franklin as well boasted of a society in which individuals were rewarded for their hard work with an elevated class status. He believed letting settlers expand throughout the continent would naturally create a content middle class of subsistence farmers. Isenberg uses his ideas to highlight the popular idea that the value of land was directly related to how efficiently one made use of it.

Fast forwarding to post-WWII America, Isenberg asserts land was no more or less tied to class status. The sudden sprawl of suburbia became synonymous with the middle class, as the government persuaded people that was where they wanted to be. If the suburbs were the American dream, trailer parks were the exclusive home of white trash. Homeownership became a status symbol, of which motorhomes were a pale comparison. Trailer parks were formed on worthless plots of land, equating the quality of land with quality of its inhabitants. Thus, land, labor, and property were delicately intertwined to create the basis of the American class system.

The Power of Calculated Language

Throughout her study, Isenberg leans on the writings and speeches of some of history's most well-known actors. While their views regarding class structure were varied, they all shared in their use of calculated – and not always transparent – language. Beginning with the first course of intellectuals to write of American colonization, honesty was not the motive behind some of society's biggest influences. Isenberg dubs this phenomenon "the fables we forget by" (19).

Richard Hakluyt, whom Isenberg credits with extensive writing that inspired the crown to launch colonial expeditions, never set foot on American soil. And so began the history of class dynamics in America, written by a man without first-hand knowledge of any of his work. The Founding Fathers who Isenberg so often references were also guilty of using this calculated language. Thomas Jefferson wrote of a blissfully class-free society, which he knew would not be contested because of the lower classes' illiteracy.

This language was so powerful precisely because it could not be contested. Had the oppressed classes been able to read and refute false claims of hegemony, Isenberg's

study would be redundant. One of Isenberg's goals is to create a voice for the perpetually marginalized and mocked poor white population. Essentially, she is injecting reality into the rhetoric of so many of America's historical champions.

The Language of Breeding

Language surrounding class structure in America has always mirrored the language of animal breeding. This idea again takes hold with the influence of the Founding Fathers. Isenberg credits Benjamin Franklin with developing the idea of a distinct American breed; it represented a happy mediocrity content to earn an honest living and raise a virtuous family. Isenberg interprets Franklin to equate sensible breeding with human's natural instincts. Thus, good breeding practices were Franklin's solution to class disparities in the colonies.

The language of breeding continues to evolve throughout Isenberg's 400-year-long study. She uses Charles Davenport and the eugenics movement to highlight a more sinister development in the nature of this language: the introduction of sterilization. Just as bulls were castrated to prevent bad bloodlines from continuing, the eugenics movement proposed sterilizing feebleminded women during their fertile years. Isenberg uses the Supreme Court's ruling in Buck v. Bell to illuminate the reality of this principle. Despite being a rape victim, Carrie Buck was sterilized due to her degenerate pedigree.

Although this seems like a medieval story, this ruling was made in 1927. Eugenic rhetoric may have lost its foothold, but the language of breeding remained ingrained in American society. The late twentieth-century saw a host of politicians pretending to have redneck roots to earn the poor rural populations' vote. Critics of this practice claimed that redneck roots meant more than tossing a blanket label over oneself; it was product of a distinct lineage, suggesting an entirely new breed.

The Relationship Between Class and Democracy

Isenberg strongly asserts that though America is touted as a wholly democratic land, American democracy has never given a meaningful voice to all its citizens. America has morphed democracy into an instrument used to conceal deep class divisions. Isenberg accuses Americans of accepting the use of democracy as stagecraft rather than confronting its checkered past. Disguising political leaders as everyday middle-class citizens disguises the underlying class structure at play. Leaders Isenberg pays specific attention to in this regard are Bill Clinton and Andrew Jackson; while these two American presidents were generations apart, they both constructed positive campaigns based on their lower-class roots. These rare examples of true social mobility do not represent the bottom rungs of society as a whole, however. America has historically used its leaders and its false exemplification of democracy to create a rose-colored view of her underlying class structure.

Isenberg's 500-page study of class is proof of her belief that every aspect of American history is important for constructing an honest representation of class development.

Thus, she criticizes those historians who intentionally excluded or brushed aside important class divisions. Isenberg interprets historians' failure to acknowledge the poverty-stricken masses in society as a sign of contempt for the lower-class. As far back as Thomas Jefferson, America was painted as a class-free society in which poverty simply did not exist. However, the picture painted for history's sake often does not match the reality of the situation. The lower classes are a permanent fixture in America. The denial of such classes by a seemingly democratic government virtually makes it impossible for conditions to improve. Democracy as it has been used in America, then, is used as a tool to keep the lower classes firmly in their station.

Ingrained British Influence vs. The American Breed

American exploration began under the British pretext of making a wasteland profitable. Wasteland and their accompanying waste people were the foundations on which America was built. Isenberg asserts that this and other British ideals were and still are ingrained in American discourse. Most significantly, Isenberg notes the remnants of the British affinity for lording over a subordinate class. She claims that Americans are ingrained with an us versus them mentality, evident through the replication of British hierarchical class systems throughout the nineteenth-century.

Isenberg's study pays specific attention to the English notion of land ownership as well. The English class system was based almost entirely on land; voting and the ability to hold office were reserved for landowners. Thus, the English acquisition of the colonies represented a vast new opportunity for wealthy land speculators. Throughout America's early history, land meant power. Isenberg mirrors this sentiment with the value placed on home ownership in the twentieth century, representing the continuous ingrained importance of land.

While certain aspects of British influence were still ingrained in American society, intellectuals were simultaneously crafting a definition of the American breed distinct from the English breed. Definitions of the American breed vary, but Isenberg repeats a few significant characteristics throughout her study. The American breed was hard-working, semi-educated, patriotic, humble, somewhat subservient, and destined for success in the eyes of propagandists. Isenberg identifies that the appeal for such a breed was that it served as a justification for class inequalities. Categorizing humans as breeds suggests no immediate possibility for change, thus the middle and upper class was not burdened with lifting the poor from their stations; they simply belonged there.

Styles

Structure

The structure of Isenberg's extensive history resembles that of most historical studies. There is no climax per se, but rather her study leads to a cyclical conclusion regarding the hidden reality of American class structure. Her study relies more on patterns and interpretations rather than reaching a solution or answering a single question. In fact, her study poses more questions than it answers.

To help categorize the vast quantity of information in Isenberg's study, she breaks her timeline down into three chronological sections. Each chapter itself is semi-chronological. She uses the first section of each chapter to describe the sociopolitical context of the time period under investigation. Isenberg spends less time going in depth with each example she provides, and more time laying out a plethora of examples. This is done to convey the entire scope of the political landscape. Though her chapters can get monotonous and it can be hard to follow her arguments, Isenberg offers a testimonial to her cyclical conclusion in her well-crafted epilogue.

Perspective

Per a historian’s goal to be objective, Isenberg mostly relies on perspectives other than her own to create her arguments. She draws from political influencers, well-read intellectuals, artists, photographers, journalists, and popular cultural in each chapter. Enlisting a wide array of sources sometimes muddies her argument, but it also provides a dynamic view of how all aspects of a society shape that society’s class structure.

Tone

The tone of Isenberg’s study is largely correlated with its perspective, as described above. Her writing takes the tone of stoic intellectuals when referencing their work, and a more flowery tone of artistic grandeur when referencing artists’ contribution to class structure. The arguments that are exclusively hers, however, are expressed in the form of a lesson to American society. She uses a more accurate depiction of historical memory to warn of the dangers of ignoring the existence of class structures in the future.

Quotes

Colonies ought to be Emunctories or Sinkes of States; to drayne away the filth.
-- John White (chapter 1 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote encapsulates British ideology toward the colonies. Emunctories are any organ on the body that excretes waste, effectively making the colonies a waste receptacle.

Surely there is no place in the World where the Inhabitants live with less Labour than in N[orth] Carolina. It approaches nearer to the Description of Lubberland than any other, by the great felicity of the Climate, the easiness of raising Provisions, and the Slothfulness of the People.
-- William Byrd II (chapter 2 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote describes the colony of North Carolina in a way that reinforces Isenberg's argument that this slothful and swampy colony lie at the heart of the white trash story.

Can it be a Crime (in the Nature of Things I mean) to add to the Number of the King's Subjects, in a new Country that really wants People?
-- Benjamin Franklin (chapter 3 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote was pulled from a satire written by Franklin. His goal through this work was to demonstrate a woman's civic duty to reproduce loyal patriots and hard working men of virtue. The woman speaking in the quote is on trial for bearing children out of wedlock; her response represents Franklin's belief that good breeding practices were to be regarded above all.

The circumstance of superior beauty is thought worthy of attention in the propagation of our horses, dogs, and other domestic animals; why not in that of man?
-- Thomas Jefferson (chapter 4 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote is an exemplification of how prevalent the language of breeding was in America's early stages. This language crudely equates human stock with animal stock.

By this means twenty of the best geniusses will be raked from the rubbish annually, and be instructed, at the public expence, so far as the grammar schools go...
-- Thomas Jefferson (chapter 4 paragraph 1)

Importance: Isenberg references this quote many times throughout her study. Jefferson's imagery of raking poor whites from the rubbish was highly symbolic in that it clearly proved a contempt for said rubbish.

Everywhere they are just alike, possess pretty much the same characteristics, the same vernacular, the same boorishness, and the same habits ... everywhere, Poor White Trash.
-- Daniel Hundley (chapter 6 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote is symbolic of a running theme throughout Isenberg's study: poor rural whites take on many names over the course of history, but their characteristics and habits stay the same, suggesting a permanence in their being.

You have shown yourselves in no respect to be the degenerate sons of our fathers ... it is true you have a cause which binds you together more firmly than your fathers. They fought to be free from the usurpations of the British Crown, but they fought against a manly foe. You fight against the offscourings of the earth.
-- Jefferson Davis (chapter 7 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote represents the brutal imagery in the Confederacy's approach to class warfare; Davis effectively dehumanized the Union army and again called on the correlation to excrement.

It is better for all the world if, instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind ... Three generations of imbeciles are enough.
-- Chief Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes (chapter 8 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote represents the Supreme Court's justification for the state's right to sterilize unfit breeders.

Shall then this man go hungry, here in lands/ Blest by his honor, builded by his hands?/ Do something for him: let him never be/ Forgotten: let him have his daily bread: He who has fed us, let him now be fed./ Let us remember his tragic lot-/ Remember, or else be ourselves forgot!
-- Edwin Markham (chapter 9 paragraph 1)

Importance: This poem is significant because it came to represent the overwhelming number of men who lost their jobs and their social status during the Great Depression.

I'm a self-confessed raw country boy and guitar-playing fool.
-- Elvis Presley (chapter 10 paragraph 1)

Importance: Isenberg references Elvis throughout her analysis of the twentieth-century because of his unique ability to transform his hillbilly roots into a popular persona. Perhaps most notable about Elvis, as shown through this quote, was his unabashed confidence in his country boy ways.

The first Cracker President should have been a mixture of Jimmy and Billy [Carter] ... Billy's hoo-Lord-what-the-hell-get-out-of-the-way attitude heaving up under Jimmy's prudent righteousness - or Jimmy's idealism heaving up under Billy's sense of human

limitations - and forming a nice-and-awful compound like life in Georgia.
-- Rot Blount Jr. (chapter 11 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote encapsulates the idea that southern politicians had a complicated landscape to face; they had to be a delicate mixture of white trash and humble upper-middle class.

A dangerous chasm in the classes is alive and well in the United States of America. Don't let anybody tell you it's not.
-- Carolyn Chute (chapter 12 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote reinforces one of Isenberg's main themes: the denial of large class disparities in the U.S. needed to be confronted head on.

Topics for Discussion

What are your initial reactions to the English descriptions of waste people? Are their descriptions and subsequent policies rooted in a sheer prejudice against the poor and homeless population? Or, are they at all justified?

It is easy for historical memory to distort the appearance of historical events. Thus, it is important for the reader to look at seemingly extreme policies (such as expelling your homeless to a new continent) as reactionary policies instead of ideas rooted in firmly entrenched belief systems.

Relate the split of the North and South Carolina colonies with the split between the Union and the Confederacy during the Civil War.

North and South Carolina came to represent two vastly different groups of people, who arguably did not travel far between the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. The class differences rooted in labor and land ownership were driving factors in both schisms.

Does the popularity of the luxury motor home in modern times make you question the stigma Isenberg attaches to motor homes and their accompanying lifestyle?

Isenberg asserts that many of the stereotypes associated with the first raggedy-looking motor homes are still applicable today, despite huge efforts from manufactures to improve their image.

Identify one term from the study that has changed over the course of American history. What were the driving factors behind the transformation (political, social, i.e.)?

Isenberg pays special attention to the dynamic properties of language throughout her study. Words not only have immense power, but their meanings change depending on

the social context of the time period of their usage. Squatter, mudsill, hillbilly, and redneck are all dynamic terms in America's history.

What do you think gave the cruel-sounding rhetoric of the eugenics movement a stronghold in America?

For a country that boasts of its love of democracy and equality for all, the eugenics movement took hold of social and political discourse in a sweeping fashion. Women were reduced to breeding stock, and children were seen as a potential economic increase. Though eugenic rhetoric seems crude at times, Isenberg notes that it served as justification for class disparities in America.

What is the implication of attaching physical characteristics to an entire class of people? Do you think attributing negative physical characteristics to poor whites was rooted in fact, or was there an underlying reason for the added discrimination?

Aside from the obvious negative aspects of calling people trash and waste, poor rural whites were attributed a host of negative physical characteristics - from tallow skin to lantern-shaped faces. The idea of seeing these as hereditary class defects is damaging because it suggests poor rural whites were born into their station, physically marked by their station, and thus could not escape their station.

Isenberg states that the Civil War was equally about class tensions as it was about the economic institution of slavery. Based on her arguments, do you believe this?

The Civil War is one of the most studied conflicts in American history, thus, readers will enter into Isenberg's discussion of the Civil War with preconceived notions of its origins. Isenberg attempts to weave the theme of class politics into what the reader presumably knows about the Civil War. Her argument is simple: class tensions exacerbate civil wars, and these tensions can be used as tools during conflict. Isenberg suggests that while class tensions may not have solely inspired the war, they were characteristic of how each side called their troops to arms and perpetuated wartime propaganda.

Identify an example of popular culture used in Isenberg's study, and dissect how the example is relevant to our discussion of class structure and class identity.

Isenberg's study highlights the effectiveness of pop culture in displaying the sociopolitical context of a given time period. She relies heavily on essays, poems, political cartoons, speeches, and television to capture popular culture's construction of class specifically. It is easy for consumers of popular culture to disregard mediums such as television and magazines as historical documents, but Isenberg highlights pop culture's representation of class quite comprehensively. Making sense of one seemingly obscure pop culture reference such as Duck Dynasty can help the reader make sense of Isenberg's other references to pop culture more effectively.

Compare Benjamin Franklin's American Breed to the American identity described in Chapter 11 (specifically, 397-399).

The description of society's ideal American citizen undoubtedly changes frequently. However, these are the two instances in her study where Isenberg relies on this concept quite heavily - in the discussion of Franklin's American Breed, and the formation of an American cultural identity during the so-called white trash makeover. Franklin's American breed was never realized, but ideally it would have comprised of a nation where the rural poor is transformed into a content and hard-working class of farmers. These farmers would serve the financial interests of the elites such as Franklin himself. The American identity formed later in Isenberg's study, however, differs substantially from Franklin's vision. The mid-twentieth-century meaning of an American identity carries with it a cultural implication. The main difference between these two concepts is their origin. Franklin's theory of a calm and subservient lower class was constructed by upper class elites, whereas the formation of an American cultural identity later in America's development was constructed by the majority of Americans on a community-based level.

Identify an example of the usage of animal breeding language in Isenberg's study. What are the implications of using such language?

Equating humans to animals most obviously degrades their humanity, but it also provides insights into elites' supposed solutions to rural poverty. This language encouraged political leaders to treat faulty human stock the same way faulty animal stocks were treated, leading to the implementation of sterilization laws.