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Essay (Übung)

In “Hillbilly Elegy”, J.D. Vance walks us through his personal background of growing up in an impoverished white family in an Appalachian town, alongside an analysis of the class and culture of which he was a part. Many critics and journalists, such as David Brooks, from the *New York Times*, have reviewed this book as “essential reading for this moment in history”, or as “the most important book of 2016” as described by Rod Dreher, from *The American Conservative*, also adding “You cannot understand what’s happening now without first reading J.D. Vance”. Which brings up the question: Is J.D. Vance’s memoir well suited as required reading on a school and university level in order to understand the current political situation in the United States? To a certain point, yes.

Although this book is a great portrayal of his own Appalachian life, it is still an intensely personal point of view. Vance defends that the American working-class is to blame for their poverty status, due to their own poor choices and attitudes and that this is a social and cultural matter rather than political. However, as stated by Betsy Rader, a lawyer who too grew up in an Appalachian family and eventually grew out of poverty, “Yes, I worked hard, but I didn’t just pull myself up by my bootstraps. And neither did Vance. The truth is that people helped us out: My public school’s guidance counselor encouraged me to go to college. The government helped us out: I received scholarships and subsidized federal loans to help pay my educational expenses”, advocating that, while it is important to work on the social aspect of this community, contrary to what Vance stands by, it is also crucial that favorable policies are made in order to help the white poor come out of poverty. Furthermore, this book is being used to picture the whole community of Trump voters. As defended by Larry Summers, economist and professor at Harvard University, “anyone who wants to understand Trump’s rise or American inequality should read it”. Nonetheless, it is a dangerous generalization, for it is not accurate to assume every Trump supporter voted for him for the same reason, as well as to assume that the Hillbillies represent the whole working-class and poor whites in the entire country, rather than extending the concept to the other poor communities.

On the other hand, Vance’s memoir does provide a good insight of what it is like to live in a state of poverty in the Appalachian region, the poor whites’ difficulty in achieving upward mobility and the loss of the American dream, portraying the reality of one of the American poor communities. As reported by a Brookings Institution “[Hillbilly Elegy] is a raw, emotional portrait of growing up in and eventually out of a poor rural community riddled by drug addiction and instability”.

To conclude, I believe that J.D. Vance’s memoir is well suited to be used as required reading on a school and university level although not as a main resource or main

argument for this question, considering that the current political landscape can only be understood by debating various points of view, and Hillbilly Elegy contains a good yet one sided story of the subject matter.