



**Adam Theron-Lee Rensch.** *No Home for You Here: A Memoir of Class and Culture.* Field Notes Series. London: Reaktion Books, 2020. 208 pp. \$20.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-78914-200-6.

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## Class and Culture

This is the most recent addition to the Reaktion Books series Field Notes published in association with the journal *Brooklyn Rail*. Indeed, segments of the book appeared in *Brooklyn Rail* prior to the publication of *No Home for You Here: A Memoir of Class and Culture*. We are informed that books in the series deal with current economic, political, and cultural conditions. Adam Theron-Lee Rensch weaves a portrait of his life and that of his family and friends in rural northwest Ohio into the picture of late capitalism and its accompanying neoliberalism—hence, the term “memoir” in the subtitle. For Rensch, the memoir is not unique to the persons he writes about, rather, “I tell this story—my story, and the story of those around me—precisely because it is not unique, and because the history in which it unfolds is a history that weighs upon the present” (p. 24). Rensch is only partially successful in achieving all of this in 170 pages. The book works better in presenting a narrative of the experience of Rensch and his social circle in rural Ohio than it does in making the connection between late capitalism and those experiences. His work reminds me of C. Wright Mills’s call for the use of the sociological imagination through which one is able “to grasp history and bi-

ography and the relations between the two within society.”[1]

Whether it is or is not accurate, the perception that “white trash,” rural white working classes, hillbillies, rednecks, or what Hillary Clinton referred to as “deplorables” contributed to the election and continuing support of Donald Trump has brought attention to the alienation of the Americans Rensch portrays. In addition, the recent discovery of high rates of alcoholism and drug and opioid addiction in rural America supports Rensch’s view that the story he tells is not unique. Increases in medical care and college costs, home and mortgage payments, job instability, etc. affect Americans beyond the rural poor. And “the political process has become futile, exhausting, and alienating to most Americans” (p. 15).

A goal of *No Home for You Here* “is to offer a different picture of what it means to be working-class..., one that has nothing to do with how we look or act, or how we might identify ourselves culturally.” In place of this cultural approach, Rensch proposes a class approach “that is material, centered around how work comes to define and guide our lives in a myriad of ways—the ‘work’ of the working class” (p. 20). Rather than defining class in terms of indicators such as income or education,

from the material Marxist tradition “class division is primarily between those who control and allocate resources ... and those who must sell their labor power in exchange for a living. The former belong to the capitalist class, while the latter constitutes the working class” (pp. 20-21). This framework enables one to begin to see that members of the working class must come to realize that what they have in common is more important than the cultural, sexual, gender, and racial identities they may have. They must move from a class-in-itself to a class-for-itself. Unfortunately, Rensch is not much help in proposing how a more humane society can be built out of the capitalist system in which we live. For instance, how exactly do working-class Americans move from constituting a class-in-itself to becoming a class-for-itself? In addition, he never resolves the issue of where the vast middle class fits into this dichotomy.

As indicated above, Rensch uses the experiences of family and close friends to describe what it means for working-class, rural Americans to live under what he sees as a class system. He was born in 1984, a few months before Ronald Reagan declared it was “morning again in America.” This reminds one of president Trump’s call to “Make America Great Again.” The problems and dissatisfaction with the present will require significant changes. And, “as with all nostalgia, this remembrance is at once hopeful and melancholic: we can never actually recapture that past” (p. 14).

The Reagan years, much like the Trump years, witnessed the downsizing of government programs and regulations, dominance of supply-side economics, decreases in taxes, and attacks on unions, among other policies. Rensch’s father worked in a factory and his mother was a waitress. With social support and a loan from family members, the family was able to move to a trailer park and then “into something that looked like a real house” (p. 32). Based on the hope of getting a better job, his father returned to college. For me, his father is the most interesting person in the memoir.

It is too bad that Rensch abandoned his original goal of writing a biography of his father. Regardless of his job, his father wrote short stories and letters to newspapers. The letters reflected his critical, socialist views. For instance, one titled “An Elite Class Makes America’s Decisions” criticizes “the authoritarian state” and asks, “isn’t it wrong that less than 1 percent of the population owns over 80 percent of the corporate wealth” (p. 32)?

The father’s life from the 1980s on, with rare exceptions, can be defined a tragedy. Even with additional college education he was not able to achieve financial and employment stability, his wife asked him to leave the house, his second wife died a few years after their marriage, he drank heavily, and he lost his progressive ideals. Finally, at the age of forty-six he fell in his apartment, hit his head, and died. Rensch attributes his father’s insights not to his particular intelligence but rather to the recognition that people who struggle to survive (insiders) understand the nature of this system more quickly than those who have not experienced this struggle (outsiders). For Rensch, insiders are in a better position to understand how the system works and who benefits from the system. However, I would suggest that the insiders may be so involved in a component of the system that they have a difficult time in understanding the larger picture or the latent functions of the subsystems. Those who must struggle hard to survive may not have the time or energy to understand the functions of the system.

In addition to exposing his son to socialist and critical thinking, Rensch’s father nurtured his exposure to art, music, and literature. And, “not surprisingly, I was quick to realize that education was my way out.” In place of the low esteem of poor white workers, education “held the promise of being important, of becoming the kind of person you respect for having bright ideas and interesting insights” (p. 62). During high school, Rensch had little understanding of class in the Marxist conception and no idea about class struggle.

Rensch viewed college as an opportunity to become an art teacher and to enter the world of middle-class stability. He had no information about the relative merits of different colleges and enrolled in a BFA program at Bowling Green University in Ohio. After two semesters, he decided that he did not want to become a teacher and thought that the role of visual artist would expose him to a bohemian culture that would provide freedom and enable him to create a more critical understanding of the world around him, this coinciding with the reelection of G. W. Bush and the Iraq War. The closest he came to his “bohemian lifestyle” was to get a job at a record shop.

While in his BFA program, Rensch decided that he would become a writer and was accepted into the MFA in creative writing program at Sarah Lawrence College just north of New York City. This move enabled him to get away from rural Ohio, to attend a prestigious school, to visit New York City, and to make the right contacts. All of this was worth the loans he had to take to invest in his education. To make the leap to a meaningful life, he had to make choices that rich students did not have to make. In hindsight, he views the loans as the “worst decision I could have made” (p. 118). The anthropologist Caitlin Zaloom (*Indebted: How Families Make College Work at Any Cost* [2019]) has documented the extent to which middle-class families will go into debt to provide a college education for their children. Rensch’s resentment of the opportunities and things the wealthy had, including his New York University girlfriend and her family, clashed with his exposure to the little that the poor in New York had. At that point in his life, he saw no way to fix this reality. All that he could do was to criticize the culture of the poor and what he saw as their stupidity. While he had acquired the trappings of a cultured person, he was in serious debt and continued to feel inferior due to his background. He still failed to question the structures that made this possible.

Upon graduation, Rensch moved to Brooklyn, New York, and found jobs in “cool” bookstores and then as a personal assistant to a poet. Upon the conclusion of that job, he decided to return home to Ohio. He kept thinking of the title to Thomas Wolfe’s book, *You Can’t Go Home Again* (1988). He was soon aware of the devastating effects of the 2008 financial crisis on the housing and employment markets, banking institutions, and the psyche of the residents of rural America. This experience slowly led to a reassessment of his analysis. The cultural analysis that he and others had had involving beliefs and feelings about one another functioned to separate them from one another and prevented them from seeing that they all had the same struggle. That struggle involves a radical restructuring of the world beginning with a redistribution of material resources. The goal is to create a system in which individuals are free “to live without fear of destitution” (p. 139).

In his epilogue, Rensch concludes, “epiphanies and sentimentality make for great storying telling, but they don’t provide a foundation for political action” (p. 168). He does a great job of telling his story and that of his family and friends. *No Home for You Here* is recommended for those who wish to understand challenges faced by the rural poor in particular. However, when it comes to changing society, he suggests that “the first step—a small but important one—should be to get people to see, think, and talk about class” (p. 169). Given what Rensch refers to as the “astonishing resources” of the representatives of capital, and I would add the growth of identity politics at present, it is likely that it will be a long time before various groups of exploited Americans are able to bracket their differences. Perhaps a better first step is to take these groups and their grievances seriously.

#### Note

[1]. C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (1959; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 6.

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