

Gorman, Thomas J. (2017) *Growing up Working Class: Hidden Injuries and the Development of Angry White Men and Women*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, Switzerland

Review by Alfred Lubrano

I came of age among mobbed-up goodfellas in the Brooklyn that existed before hipster Millennials invaded the county, piling into glossy Manhattan-peeping apartments hard by the damp foulness of the East River.

Rackets boys are often aggrandized in film, but the wise guys I knew sold drugs to junior high school students and ratted out life-long friends the second a prosecutor threatened them with lunch from a prison cafeteria. Still, for lots of guys like me with limited options growing up in working-class Bensonhurst, the Mafia was kind of a safety school: If you couldn't get into Columbia, you could always apprentice for Mikey Four Fingers. A few buddies signed up for the life.

Back in the day, old ladies and clueless blowhards would boast that the neighborhood was the safest place in the borough, thanks to those dark-haired go-getters with silk ties and shoulder holsters. Never mind that the butcher, baker, and pizza guy were being shaken down for protection money on a weekly basis, or that anyone unknown to the locals had their heads caved in for walking down the wrong street on the wrong day.

All this rugged nostalgia rolled back to me faster than the B-express train as I read Queens College sociologist Thomas J. Gorman's *Growing Up Working Class*. He lived in City Line, Brooklyn, as well as nearby Ozone Park, Queens, coming of age in the 1960s and 1970s. Gorman has a line in the book explaining how residents in that particular part of Queens thought it was made safe by Gambino crime boss John Gotti. (Interesting guy. Once, Gotti begged off an interview with me when I was working for the *New York Daily News* by saying, 'If you leave me alone now, I'll do somethin' nice for you one day.' Soon after, he was convicted of numerous crimes, then was banished to Colorado's Supermax prison, where the godfather of New York died owing me a favor.)

I'm a journalist, not a sociologist, so I'm not the best judge of Gorman's scholarship. What I can say, however, is that the book is erected around a compelling thesis: How the 'hidden injuries of class' (thank you, Sennett and Cobb) follow working-class kids into adulthood, making for the angry white men we hear so much about these day in the era of Trump.

I'm not sure Gorman really proves this. He recounts social media postings by former neighbors to take the temperature of later-life rage. And he (oddly, I thought) includes a paper he once wrote about aspects of how growing up working class can make you feel inadequate, envious of middle-class achievers, and sort of mean as you age. Perhaps the book could have benefited from up-to-date interviews of people his age who haunted the streets of the old neighborhood.

I should say that, at times, Gorman's writing confounds, swinging from the emotionally personal to the densely academic. The most poignant sentence of the piece is a simple declaration about Gorman's troubled father: 'He was a good man, underneath all the alcohol.' If you write like that, I'll stay with you all day. Unfortunately, Gorman also delivers sentences such as, '...no matter how much the focus of this auto-ethnography/socio-biography is on social class, the (macro) generational context must be put in the foreground to give social context to the micro, day-to-day interactions.' Also, it doesn't add to the narrative to declare with maddening lack of detail: 'There were, indeed, positive and negative aspects of growing up working class in the neighborhood.'

All that aside, what I admire most in Gorman's book are his astute autobiographical observations. He successfully evokes the claustrophobic, frustrating, exhilarating, painful, sometimes menacing, and just plain loud world of working-class New York. He brings forth the 'village-like atmosphere,' the sense that either a block party or a fistfight (or probably both) could break out during sweltering summer nights populated by slack and sullen corner boys, wild-ass youngsters, carping parents, and braying know-it-alls in Mets or Yankees caps holding forth on the weightier issues of the day.

In a sharp-eyed synthesis, Gorman explains, 'Many of us from the old neighborhood have fond memories of that time and place, but stress and strife were ever present. I watched my mom juggle the money, drag my drunken father out of the car in front of our apartment on a daily basis, and curse life as she knew it. I also witnessed painful moments for other families in the neighborhood....'

Gorman is smart to tell his story by focusing on important urban artifacts, the Brooklyn homeboys' equivalents of Proustian madeleines: egg creams, slices of pizza, pasta and peas. He spends time on stoops, which all of us did. And he perceptively lingers on the verbal oddities of the scene that offer insights into the teeming male multitude – the malapropisms like 'bunking [instead of bumping]' into someone; the rank outs, as 'friends' played the dozens with delectable cruelty, spitting elaborate insults into each other's faces, starting with their mothers.

And Gorman does a good job depicting the masculine working-class world of rough hands and rage. Blue-collar New York neighborhoods reproduced any number of whining, bitching, bigoted, poor-me young men with eerie Xeroxity. These discontented proles would become the angry men of today, Gorman theorizes.

Where I depart with the author is when he labels it 'a travesty that working-class kids lack the kind of support readily available to middle-class kids.'

It's tough luck, for sure. I lived with that lack and know it intimately. But a travesty? I write about poverty, and I once interviewed a Philadelphia woman who was raped at 5 and shot in the stomach at 13. That's a travesty. One of the risks of donning a head lamp and digging into the mine of working-class studies is sometimes forgetting there are deeper, darker caverns honeycombing the

dirt below us. We didn't have it so great. But people I know whose parents smoked the contents of Dristan tablets and forgot to make dinner in kitchens pockmarked with bullet holes have more profound wounds to display.

Still, that doesn't undermine the value of what Gorman (or any of the rest of us who've written about growing up working class) has to say. Like a lot of blue-collar boys who became educated, Gorman had a hard time connecting with his father. It was made worse by his dad's addiction. But I soared with Gorman when he talked about how his pop insulted Gorman's teaching job one day, then boasted to a buddy afterward, 'My son's a professor.' That's a win you store away.

And I finally realized I liked the guy after reading, 'It is very satisfying, and not a cliché at all, to try to give back to my community, to help my students believe in themselves, as a number of people in my life have done for me.' Whatever anger one transports like toxic cargo from childhood, if a man can remember his gifts and decide to share them, then, as we used to say back on the block, he's good people.

Reviewer Bio

Alfred Lubrano is the poverty reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and author of *Limbo: Blue-Collar Roots, White-Collar Dreams*.

Bibliography

Sennett, R. and Cobb, J. (1973) *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, New York, Vintage Books.