In the age of unembarrassed narcissistic statesmanship and pervasive entrepreneurial self-promotion, bombastic assertions have become the norm. The book's title, under this respect, is no exception.

First of all, in a commonplace and probably unaware feat of nationalistic navel-gazing that Uruguay-born Eduardo Galeano taught scholars to keep in check, the book does not deal with America, but with the United States of America (US) alone. Secondly, the book does not deal with class in general, but rather with the economically impoverished and socially immobile working class of Anglo-Saxon (or -British) descent inhabiting that vast country. Thirdly, as the book's own extensive endnotes reveal, their history has been told repeatedly, studied conscientiously and, whenever possible, quantified, measured and dissected in all sorts of ways. The myth of boundless opportunity and the recurrent edifying rags-to-riches tales may well constitute the backbone of the so-called "American dream", but US journalism, scholarship, religious and party life, music, literature, drama and cinema have also paid attention to the inopportune yet indubitable rags-to-rags experiences of many poor white US citizens of Anglo-British descent.

As to the seemingly most inflammatory and contentious words in the title, i.e. "white trash", they are actually apt and accurate, for this particular section of the US population have been identified as such for a very long time, as well as by additional hosts of no less unsavoury expressions: "Waste people. Offscourings. Lubbers. Bogtrotters. Rascals. Rubbish. Squatters. Crackers. Clay-eaters. Tackies. Mudsills. Scalawags. Briar hoppers. Hillbillies. Low-downers. White niggers. Degenerates… Rednecks. Trailer trash. Swamp people." (320) Following chronologically an unending streak of debasing and insulting terms that the debased and insulted cannot but internalise from childhood, the book offers a compelling history of poor, ignorant, brutalised and brutal white US citizens, from the first English colonies on the east coast to today's "hundreds of thousands of faceless employees who work at a Wal-Mart" for pitiful wages all over the nation (321). They are the people living in bad homes in bad places, who have bad diets and bad teeth, who suffer from bad health and smell bad, who speak bad English and display bad manners. They are those who start badly, fare badly and end badly–unless they get out of this bad rap, which may mean sometimes doing very bad things (i.e. things that middle-class morality and/or the legislator disapprove of).

Isenberg's compelling history is enlivened by a most competent combination of fluid descriptive prose and many well-chosen, intelligent quotations, typically though not exclusively from unsympathetic observers. Given the standard conditions of illiteracy and misery of "white trash" communities, hardly any testimony has reached us from their past that was not recorded by members of the superior classes, who seldom looked upon such "offscourings" with a kind eye and rarely empathised with their plight, or tried to do much to change or alleviate it. More often than not, the miserable condition of miserable people was accepted as part of God's order or, later on, as a natural condition, whether cast in the scientific hence unassailable language of agronomy, animal husbandry, Darwinian evolution, genetics or economics. Poverty, according to these accounts, is not only inevitable socially and economically; also, it is deserved, whether morally or biologically.

If anything, fear and loathing have been the regular attitudes of the members of the upper classes, who have habitually had no qualms whatsoever about making calculated use of their inferiors *qua* cheap labour (e.g. indentured workers and rural tenants), co-oppressors of other poor people (e.g. native Americans and black slaves), perennial debtors, forcible inhabitants and slapdash improvers of the most inhospitable parts of the country (e.g. swamps and natives' contested territories), cannon fodder, objects of ridicule and sexual ab/use, subjects for social and medical experimentation (e.g. eugenic programmes), users of addictive and unhealthy consumer goods (e.g. tobacco and junk food), sheep-like followers of dubious evangelical preachers, unenriched protagonists of commercially succesful fads (e.g. comic strips and TV shows), and pliable voters in skewed electoral systems allowing for *de facto* oligarchy and demagoguery under *de iure* equality and democracy. Latin America's *peones* and *campesinos* could recount similar stories, their *haciendas* and *fazendas* showing the same forms of deprivation as the US plantations, their bidonvilles and favelas recalling eerily the Hoovervilles and trailer parks of the North, and inequitable grinding class structures replicating themselves analogously across much of the American continent.

On a more cheerful note, religiously minded idealists and philanthropists (e.g. J.E. Oglethorpe in chapter two), progressive men of science and politicians (e.g. R.G. Tugwell in chapter nine), and the sporadic successful white-trash social climber (e.g. Davy Crockett in chapter five) are also recalled and accounted for. No clear-cut, straightforward recipe is offered to explain how, when and why upward social mobility may become likelier for members of the functional underclass–as the great Canadian-born economist J.K. Galbraith

characterised employable white-trash individuals and other members of the lower classes in the US. (Galbraith is cited in Isenberg's book in connection with the notion that pockets of utter destitution continued to exist in the affluent society emerging in the US after the second world war; 265.) Beneath them, one should not forget, there is also a dysfunctional underclass of variously named knaves, prostitutes, beggars, vagrants and addicts (Marx's controversial *Lumpenproletariat*), as well as impoverished old pensioners and/or ill people, whether physically or mentally or both. Such a vast group of US citizens, according to Isenberg, is also part and parcel of white trash, whose sensationally publicised record of crime and violence is a reminder of the shady roots of much English immigration in the 17th century.

Good farming practices, education, institutional aid or private patronage, diversified job opportunities, enlightened legal and fiscal systems, and the unmeasurable but essential phenomena of talent and luck are variously recalled at several different points in the book. Nevertheless, its author never commits to any clear synthesis or one-size-fits-all solution. More modestly, while displaying cases of upward social mobility, she acknowledges the conspicuous differences in relative poverty between slave-holding economies and free-labour ones (cf. chapters three and seven), as well as the considerable achievements of F.D. Roosevelt's and L.B. Johnson's social policies (cf. chapters nine and ten). Something can be done to reduce poverty and increase the chances for poor white US citizens to lead a better life; indeed, something has been done and proven workable in the nation's history. Yet history, whether tragically or farcically, is not inherently bound to repeat itself.

Under this respect, in the new preface included in the 2017 paperback edition (the original publication for Viking Press having been issued in 2016), trade unions are briefly acknowledged too, this time by quoting the famous media tycoon W.R. Hearst who, in 1904, asserted: "Wide and equitable distribution of wealth is essential to a nation's prosperous growth and intellectual development. And that distribution is brought about by the labor union more than any other agency of our civilization" (xvi). More or less revolutionary movements such as Protestant radicalism (e.g. diggers and levellers), "Jacobinism", anarchism and communism are only mentioned as derogatory terms in connection with the wealthy's condemnation of all rebels and threatening dissenters (166). Fear of them, somehow, is never openly presented as an effective incentive for the wealthy to grant concessions, or even temporary respite, to the underclass, even if the terror of major social

upheaval, especially *qua* slave rebellion in the South, is discussed as an important political factor in the context of the Civil War.

No charts and numbers are to be found in this book. The historical prose chosen by Isenberg has a far more literary quality and overall tone than the run-of-the-mill academic publications to which she refers in her lengthy and valuable endnotes. This stylistic choice might explain by itself the book's success in terms of sales. No clear-cut, explicit criteria for key-terms are presented either. "Class", "identity" and "race" resonate all over the book, but no specific definition or theoretical foundation is given, which might be a way not to antagonise the book's readers and therefore appeal to as many of them as possible. The same fuzziness colours the standards of poverty and deprivation or, conversely, of wealth and well-being, that should help us distinguish between and within classes. Thus, in the final chapters of the book, pathologically obese white-trash individuals appear all of a sudden, after an account of centuries of emaciated and starving white-trash ancestors, whom hunger forced into geophagy. (Not far from the US southern coastline, today's Haitians still consume large amounts of mud cakes, aka mud pies or dirt cookies.) Such shortcomings may displease exacting academics, but that should be no major concern for the book's author. Incisive, instructive and interesting, her book has already reached a large readership in the US.