Ron Howard's *Hillbilly Elegy*: Blaming the poor for their problems

Carlos Delgado
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Directed by Ron Howard, screenplay by Vanessa Taylor, based on the memoir by J.D. Vance

Ron Howard's *Hillbilly Elegy*, recently released on Netflix, is based on J.D. Vance's 2016 memoir *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*. It traces Vance's experiences growing up in Jackson, Kentucky, and Middletown, Ohio, in an atmosphere pervaded by poverty, addiction and personal and family dysfunction.

Despite Vance's troubled upbringing, he ultimately "makes it out" and goes on to attend Yale Law School. His family and friends are far less fortunate.

In our 2016 review, the WSWS characterized Vance's work as "right-wing propaganda in the guise of personal memoir." We wrote that "the book is decidedly hostile to the working class and the poor, and the intellectual foundation upon which it rests is rotten." We noted that Vance's attitude toward the poor was characterized by "upper-middle-class moralizing about the 'misbehavior' of those living in poverty," whom Vance accuses of "laziness." Ultimately, "[Vance's] analysis is impressionistic and self-serving, and most importantly, ignores the history of class struggle in Appalachia and the Rust Belt."

Changing what must be changed, these comments apply equally well to Howard's film adaptation.

The film follows two parallel storylines. One thread focuses on a teenage Vance (Owen Asztalos) growing up in Middletown with his sister Lindsay (Haley Bennett) and his volatile and drug-addicted mother Bev (Amy Adams). The other thread picks up 14 years later, as Vance—now a Yale Law student—returns to Middleton after hearing his mother has overdosed on heroin.

The older Vance is conflicted about helping his mother, who has been in and out of rehab with little success. We see incidents from Vance's youth, where his mother's hair-trigger temper and emotional insecurities led to violent and dangerous outbursts. The combined toll of emotional abuse and financial hardship nearly sets Vance on a self-destructive path of drug use and petty crime, until his grandmother "Mamaw" (Glenn Close) steps in to provide Vance guidance in the form of discipline and "tough love."

Vance receives an invitation to interview for a prestigious internship, which would boost his career prospects and also allow him to spend the summer with his girlfriend Usha (Freida Pinto). However, participating in the interview would mean returning to Connecticut and leaving his mother to face her problems without his help. The ending of the film proceeds as predictably, and sentimentally, as one would expect.

Publications ranging from the *National Review* to the *New York Times* showered Vance's book with praise, giving it high marks for its portrayal of the "white working class." A number of commentators claimed the book offered insight into the mindset of workers who voted for Donald Trump. Hillary Clinton herself claimed in *What Happened*, her self-serving account of the 2016 election , that Vance's book proved "a culture of grievance, victimhood, and scapegoating" in poor, rural communities fueled the anger that contributed to Trump's victory.

In truth, there was nothing new in Vance's tired libertarian arguments, which did little more than blame the poor for their problems—which result, in the final analysis, from their economic conditions. (German playwright Bertolt Brecht had a character in *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* respond to this sort of foul, self-serving argument years ago: "Not the wickedness of the poor have you shown me, but *the poverty of the poor*.")

In Vance's account, it was his own willingness to "work hard" and take "personal responsibility" for his actions that ultimately led to his "success," whereas those less fortunate had brought their problems upon themselves. In his view, workers who dared to buy cell phones while subsisting on food stamps or who committed such sins as taking long bathroom breaks at work were proof that the poor were lazy and deserved their lot.

While Vance's memoir was more explicitly political, Howard endeavors to focus the film adaptation on the central character's relationship with his family. The end result is a more restrained presentation of the same perspective. Mamaw's authoritarian discipline ultimately sets Vance on the right path (which includes a stint in the military). On the other hand, Vance's mother and his "loser" friends are all portrayed as having an aversion to work and a tendency to "blame others" for their predicaments.

The film has achieved a certain level of popularity on Netflix. No doubt the issues touched on in the story—addiction, poverty, unemployment, hunger, lack of access to health care, psychological dysfunction, behavioral problems of the young—resonate with layers of the population and are a welcome break from the cartoonish fantasies of most popular filmmaking at present.

These issues are not, however, individual problems rooted in one's willingness or unwillingness to take responsibility for one's actions. They are *social* problems generally rooted in the nature of class society, and concretely in the decades-long assault on workers' living conditions.

The social crisis in the Rust Belt is the result of deindustrialization carried out by the steel, auto and other manufacturing companies, who closed mills and plants throughout the region and rebuilt them overseas to take advantage of cheap, hyper-exploited labor. Hundreds of thousands of jobs were destroyed and entire communities gutted for the sake of corporate profits. This was accomplished with the complicity of the major trade unions, including the United Mine Workers union in the Appalachian region, which abandoned any pretense of working class struggle and integrated themselves into a corrupt partnership with corporate management.

Meanwhile, the Democratic and Republican parties worked hand in hand to shred whatever remained of the social safety net to fuel an ever-greater transfer of wealth to the rich.

Neither the original book nor the film version of *Hillbilly Elegy* shows any interest in these questions. An early shot in the film shows a young Mamaw driving past a bustling steel mill, only then to cut to a scene years later when the family drives by the same facility, now shuttered and overgrown with weeds.

How did this take place? Who was responsible for the shutting down of the mill? What social interests did the closing serve? What impact did it have on the community and the surrounding region? A viewer will ask these questions in vain.