

The best books of the week

Non-Fiction

The rich, the ultra-rich and America's shifting political landscape

Two wonderfully detailed books explore the widening gap between the super-elites and everyone else



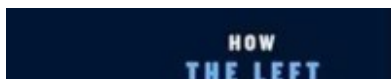
Visitors at the Fort Lauderdale International Boat Show last October © Carline Jean/SF Sun Sentinel/Polaris/Eyevine

Rana Foroohar

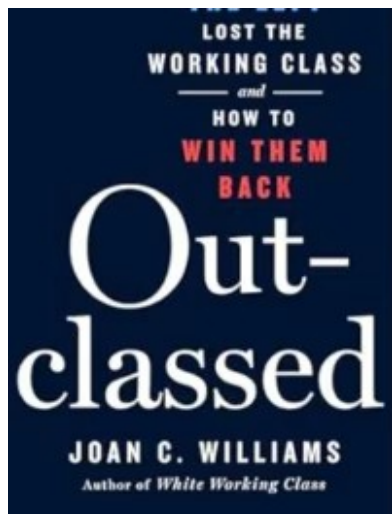
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Evan Osnos inherited “two very different philosophies on money”. His mother, a Midwestern WASP Brahmin, was suspicious of showiness and warned him against filling his house with junk. “All you need are a few fine things,” she advised. His grandfather, a Polish Jew and the only one of seven siblings to survive the second world war, rebuilt the family fortunes and couldn’t fill their New York apartment fast enough with books, furniture, carpets and artwork. “Money, to them, meant arrival, grace, and cosmic revenge.”

The psychology of class is at the heart of both Osnos’s *The Haves and Have-Yachts*, which updates and builds on a collection of New Yorker essays about America’s new oligarchy, as well as inequity scholar Joan C Williams’s book *Outclassed*. Both tell us much about how wealth creation, wealth inequality and the growing economic and emotional gap between elites, super-elites and the precariat in America are shifting the political and cultural landscape.



“Class,” Williams writes, “shapes everything from how you define a good cup of coffee to what you see as the purpose of life.” An affluent



...good cup of coffee to what you see as the purpose of life. An affluent progressive from San Francisco, she leads with an anecdote about her rustbelt in-laws who, to her surprise, chose to stay with Williams and her husband rather than in a hotel during a visit (“who even does that?” she wonders). They want to cook at home instead of eating out (“that weirded me out, too”). When her husband’s mother asks where Williams keeps the butter and she responds, jokingly, “under the bed”, her mother-in-law heads to the bedroom as instructed. “Then it hit me,” Williams writes. “She thinks I’m as weird as I think she is weird.”

Indeed. The book is filled with wonderful details about the things elites simply don’t understand about working people, like the fact that hunting might well be about keeping the fridge full rather than toxic masculinity, or that patriotism is attached to the fact that the military is one of the few ways up the socio-economic ladder for working-class Americans.

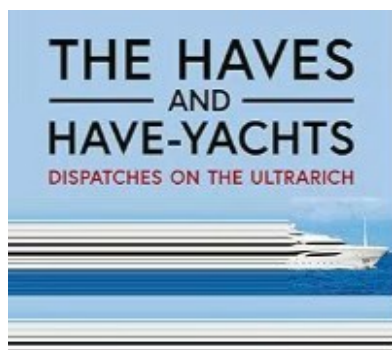
While liberal elites tend to congratulate themselves on their “enlightened” political views and hyper-individualism, working people often see them as selfish, entitled and overprotective of their children. As a former rural Midwesterner constantly dodging helicopter parents and SUV-sized strollers in my overly progressive Brooklyn neighbourhood, I tend to agree.

The super-rich not only are different from us, but they also want to be more different from each other

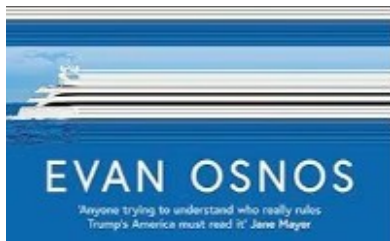
Class certainly shapes politics in America, something that the Democratic party has, in recent years, ignored. Williams, like me, believes that progressives have focused far too much on race as opposed to class, leading to a fatal loss of “middle-status” voters to Donald Trump. While some of Trump’s base is racist, or at least xenophobic, there is, according to research

cited by Williams, a good 19 per cent that are simply anti-elite. Democrats, she believes, should be “laser-focused” on recapturing this group by better understanding them.

Anti-elites hold “moderate views on immigration, gay marriage and the environment” but are typically non-college grads. They are mostly but not solely white and see their future economic prospects as worse than their past. They sit outside the country’s white-collar meritocracy and are more interested in community and traditional institutions (church, unions, the military) than individualism and achievement.



Many elites who wouldn’t dream of putting down an immigrant or an LGBT+ person are happy to speak about these people in punitive ways (which says something about the psychology of entitlement). But their condescension has come at a great electoral cost. Much of the latter half of Williams’s book is about helping Democrats — now the party of rich liberals — to understand that privilege isn’t necessarily merit, and condescension is the enemy of successful coalition building. The big



question is whether progressives are “willing to cede some of their power to set priorities without regard to the priorities of non-elites”.

One of the challenges to this is the hyper-class consciousness of elites.

While it takes only about \$130,545 a year to fall into the top 20 per cent of the household income spectrum in the US, there has been so

much wealth creation in recent decades that huge gulfs have emerged between the comfortable middle class, the rich and the ultra-rich. The ultra-rich are the subject of Osnos's book, which is a beautifully written and often amusing climb to the very top of Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

The big takeaway is that the super-rich are as anxious as anyone else, if not more so. Osnos builds on his infamous 2017 essay “Survival of the Richest”, in which he examined the luxury end of the world of bunkers being built in places like New Zealand by wealthy dotcom survivalists. “How did a preoccupation with the apocalypse come to flourish in Silicon Valley, a place known, to the point of cliché, for unstinting confidence in its ability to change the world for the better?” he asks. One reason is that technology “rewards the ability to imagine wildly different futures”, be they utopian or dystopian.

The super-rich not only are different from us, but they also want to be more different from each other. Hence the rise of one-off luxury services such as \$300,000 private concerts given by rap stars like Flo Rida to a bunch of screaming 13-year-olds at a bar mitzvah outside Chicago. The birthday boy eventually gets pulled up on stage to sing along with Flo — “From the top of the pole, I watch her go down/She got me throwing my money around!” — as his guests do a middle-schoolers' Dionysian frolic around him. For another \$700,000, you can apparently get Duran Duran. Yes, reader, this is how American class privilege today is celebrated.

Osnos covers everything from the wilful blindness of billionaires like Mark Zuckerberg, who still doesn't believe Facebook was used for election meddling, to how the country club Republicans of Greenwich, Connecticut came to embrace Donald Trump (who has said out loud what many of them actually think about taxes, immigration and cutting federal support for the poor).

But my favourite chapter is “The Floating World”, in which Osnos sets sail aboard a half-billion-dollar superyacht docked in Monte Carlo harbour.

“Inside my cabin, I quickly came to understand that I would never be fully satisfied anywhere else again,” he writes. The silence, the scent, the light and the sweeping views of the water from the yacht club designed by Lord Norman Foster to evoke the indulgence of the Queen Mary is only the beginning. There are private submarines, eel-skin leather banquettes and staffs of dozens who can accommodate last-minute requests. These include swapping out dresses, family photos, bathroom supplies and favoured drinks should they get the call from the incoming helicopter dropping guests that the mistress rather than the wife will be joining today (in code, of course: “Helicopter launched, no dog, I repeat, no dog today”).

By the end of the trip, Osnos is beginning to feel what it's like to be the biggest fish in the sea. One day, while enjoying “an airy French omelet and a glass of preternaturally fresh orange juice”, the

author is distracted by a man on a middling superyacht below. “There he was . . . juiceless, on a greige banquette, staring up at my perfect terrace. A surprising sensation started in my chest and moved outward like a warm glow: the unmistakable pang of superiority.” As behavioural economics tells us, happiness is relative, even for the 0.1 per cent.

The Haves and Have-Yachts: Dispatches on the Ultrarich by Evan Osnos, *Simon & Schuster* £22/*Scribner* \$30, 304 pages

Outclassed: How the Left Lost the Working Class and How to Win Them Back by Joan C Williams, *St Martin's Press* \$30, 386 pages

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