The idealized view of early American history is one in which class does not exist. It is a fertile land of opportunity, where anyone can succeed, providing they work hard enough. In this version of the story, America threw off the fetters of class hierarchy long ago, and the current possibility of upward mobility is the outcome of our founders' revolutionary actions. Consistent with the myth of a classless America, the “poor” are believed to exist due to lack of their effort, rather than resulting from a historically persistent systematic oppression by the wealthy and politically powerful. In *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*, Nancy Isenberg refutes the view that America is, or ever was, a classless society through a chronological analysis of both the classist thinking of political and popular figures as well as the portrayals of “white trash” in the media from precolonial America until now. She traces this analysis through three parts: (1) Part 1 (Chapters 1–5) focuses on our colonial past and the (false) idea that America was starting anew as a classless society, (2) Part 2 (Chapters 6–10) describes the beginnings (and solidification) of seeing poor Whites as a different breed, and (3) Part 3 (Chapters 11–12) describes how poor White folks came to embrace their cultural identity with pride, despite its roots in insults.

Isenberg illuminates both America’s rural past, as well as the long history of class hierarchy in American society, which is deeply rooted in land and property ownership. She argues that only through understanding our class history are we able to understand the current contradictions in American society, particularly how we understand consistently marginalized people in the land of opportunity. Her analysis makes clear that not only was the founding of the United States strongly influenced by the English social class system (including the infamous “poor laws”), but America was (repeatedly and consistently) seen as a “wasteland” where the “trash” of Europe could be sent. Rather than rebel against this colonial thinking, the powerful (inside and outside America) reified these distinctions through a variety of policies, like bestowing land on the wealthy and withholding it from the less powerful. As a result, she argues that “not only did Americans not abandon their desire for class distinctions, they repeatedly reinvented class distinctions” (p. 310).
In sum, Isenberg provides well-researched, historical evidence to support the reality that the structural inequality between the rich and the poor in America has existed since its founding and that this inequality persists today. Each chapter has interlocking pieces of evidence from political thinkers, public policy, literature, and popular media to support her arguments. For those who have not spent time pondering class in America, this level of attention to detail, illustrating the myth of classlessness across 400 years, is likely to convince even the most skeptical, ardent individualists.

For those who have considered either the long history of social class distinctions in the United States or who are aware of the current levels of economic inequality, the book is likely to seem somewhat repetitive. The problem of preaching to the choir is that they need less evidence to convince them. As such, readers of previous histories of class in America (e.g., Piven & Cloward, 1971) may find the volume redundant. Nevertheless, because of the multitude of specific examples from historical documents Isenberg provides, even scholars of the literature are likely to find a few new examples to support their general understanding of America’s classist past.

Yet, two main aspects of this book make it important for all psychologists to read. Although some divisions of psychology have been studying poverty for more than 80 years (e.g., Division 9; Bullock, Lott, & Truong, 2011), as a whole, psychologists have devoted less time to studying social class than other stigmatized identity groups (e.g., Williams, 2009). Consequently, this book is an important primer in the history of social class in America. Given the impact that social class has on a variety of psychological and interpersonal outcomes (e.g., Fiske & Markus, 2012; Lott, 2012), more psychologists need to know the history of class in America in order to understand how to destigmatize lower socioeconomic standing and to help alleviate its pernicious effects. This is particularly true for psychologists who work directly with low-income or working-class clients or who wish to engage in scholarship about socioeconomic status.

At the same time, psychologists are not very good at making the knowledge we do have about social class widely known. This volume provides an opportunity to educate both our students and our nonpsychology peers about what psychology has to offer to discussions of social class. For teachers, pairing Isenberg’s book with hands-on activities like those available through the APA’s Public Interest Directorate (e.g., “Resources for the Inclusion of Social Class in Psychology Curricula”) can allow teachers of psychology an opportunity to contextualize the impact of social class on human experience, on par with how they handle the topics of race/ethnicity and gender in their classrooms. Among our nonpsychology peers, a knowledge of Isenberg’s book paired with knowledge of publications from the APA’s Committee on Socioeconomic Status (http://www.apa.org/pi/ses/resources/publications/index.aspx) provides an opportunity to engage in conversations about the pitfalls of “make America great again” type of thinking (most recently touted in the 2016 presidential campaign), as well as the specific kinds of existing or new policies that can directly address systemic economic inequality.

As we round out this political season, it seems pertinent to juxtapose Isenberg’s conclusion that “pretending that America has grown rich as a largely classless society is bad history, to say the least” (p. 320) with George Santayana’s (1905) infamous musing on what happens to those who cannot remember the past. As psychologists, we have an important role in helping to contextualize our classist history with scientific knowledge about the effect of
class on human experience. Much like Isenberg’s volume, we hope that psychology’s contributions to understanding America’s social class experience will not remain untold.

References