

Joel Kotkin

The Looming Extinction of the Working Class



PROVOCATIONS #3

**CLAREMONT INSTITUTE
CENTER FOR THE AMERICAN WAY OF LIFE**



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The Claremont Institute's CENTER FOR THE AMERICAN WAY OF LIFE

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THE LOOMING EXTINCTION OF THE WORKING CLASS

No bourgeois, no democracy.

—BARRINGTON MOORE¹

INTRODUCTION

You can't have a democracy—at least outside of a one-party “people's” version—without a middle class. Much of the last half millennia is the story of the bumpy rise of an expanding middle class, which successfully replaced ancient aristocratic structures, creating a remarkably innovative economic culture and a vital democratic society. But over the last four decades, this class—which includes artisans, small businesspeople, and skilled workers—has been declining, largely as the result of economic forces but also because of political decisions to adopt policies inimical to those groups' needs.

One sees this process unfolding in the wealth gap between the global rich and the middle class: it has grown to levels not seen since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution.² In many countries, the income gap between the top 1 percent of the population and the remaining 99 percent is at an all-time high.³ This reality has been particularly marked in the United States. As one conservative economist put it succinctly in 2018, “The economic legacy of the last decade is excessive corporate consolidation, a massive transfer of wealth to the top 1 percent from the middle class.”⁴ In the United States, an affluent class of roughly 1.35 million—the top 1 percent—is doing fine, but wealth gains have been especially concentrated among the top 0.1 percent, roughly one hundred and fifty thousand people.⁵ Since the mid-1980s, the share of national wealth held by those below the top 10 percent has fallen by twelve percentage points, the same proportion that the top 0.1 percent gained.⁶

Unless there are significant changes, the modern-day equivalent of the medieval aristocracy seems likely to grow. A recent British parliamentary study projects that by 2030, the top 1 percent will expand their share to two-thirds of the world’s wealth, with the biggest gains overwhelmingly concentrated at the top 0.01 percent.⁷

The key here is not a disproportion of wealth as a singular moral issue. It is not simply that *some* people are now wealthier than ever. Rather, it is that the wealthy are not only considerably more wealthy *and* more powerful, and that even (historically) comfortable and independent

groups—the middle class and the upper end of the working classes—are being undermined and turned into serf-like dependents.

If these trends hold, we may witness the middle class and the aspirational working class being overwhelmed by the rise of a ruling coalition of oligarchs and a modern clerisy, with implications well beyond economic considerations. The rise of the middle class rested on a value structure built around religious faith, family, the rule of law, and respect for property rights. As this middle class, the yeomanry, fades, along with its value structure, we seem to be heading to an era of autocracy, intolerance, stagnation and control—a reversion, in some ways, to a new kind of feudalism.

PROPERTY DISPERSION AND DEMOCRACY

The rise of the middle class tracks the emergence of capitalism in early modern Europe. With the collapse of the western Roman Empire in the fifth century AD, there was no state capable of sustaining a sophisticated economy, and society shifted to a hierarchical and largely agrarian feudalism. Most people were illiterate serfs, laboring in fields they did not own. The idea of self-government for the masses would have seemed absurd, even sacrilegious, and was barely even considered.⁸ As historian Pierre Riche noted, the prevailing model of society consisted of three kinds of people: “those who prayed, those who fought and those who labored.”⁹

The revival of commerce during the Italian Renaissance saw the emergence of a middle class that sought and sometimes even achieved considerable say in government affairs.¹⁰ By the thirteenth century, serfdom was waning in much of Western Europe. Though some manumitted serfs suffered from the loss of basic protections afforded in the feudal system, others were able to acquire land for their own farms or start enterprises in the reinvigorated cities.¹¹ Across Europe, the old medieval order was undermined by a diminishing threat of invasion, more efficient agricultural practices, a demographic rebound, and the revival of commerce and urban culture, particularly around the Mediterranean and the Baltic.¹²

But it was in the Netherlands where the bourgeois class flourished most. At a time when property ownership was limited to a few, Netherlanders expanded their territory by draining swamps and building dikes, establishing new farms and businesses. Improvements in agricultural methods led to an early commercialization of the countryside and fueled a wider economic boom. As the economic historian Jan de Vries observed, “capitalism grew out of the soil in Holland.”¹³

After expelling their Spanish Habsburg rulers in the seventeenth century, the Dutch built the world’s most powerful maritime empire, with a fleet larger than all the rest of Europe’s combined. Amsterdam’s large port bustled with a rich trade in foodstuffs, hemp, hops, and dye plants. The opportunistic Dutch expanded their commercial

activity in part by pioneering technological changes decades ahead of their competitors.¹⁴

But arguably their greatest achievement lay in creating a republic free from aristocratic or clerical domination.¹⁵ The growing ranks of proprietors set down “the geographical roots of republican liberty,” notes historian Simon Schama.¹⁶ Dutch culture was family-centered, inventive, sober, frugal, and tolerant.¹⁷ Although it was majority Calvinist, the country boasted large colonies of Catholics, Jews, and other outsiders, including Muslims; indeed, roughly one-third of Amsterdam’s population in 1650 was foreign-born, though European. Acquiring citizenship was difficult for this group of people, although it could be granted as a gift or through marriage. But even if these outsiders were not citizens, life was better for them. Some immigrants came as merchants or artisans, but even the poorest, observed one Dutchman in 1692, “cannot die of hunger if he works hard.”¹⁸

THE EPOCH OF THE MIDDLE CLASS

The rise of the Netherlands was just one part of the middle class’s modern emergence. Medieval economies depended on rentiers and inheritors, but changing conditions elevated the innovative, aggressive, and risk-taking entrepreneurs. New technology, expanding trade, and institutions of self-government transformed feudal society.¹⁹ The entrepreneurs who chipped away at the feudal order did not generally come from the nobility, who in some cases were prohibited or socially discouraged from

engaging in commerce.²⁰ Aristocratic elites sometimes gave valuable funding and sponsorship to entrepreneurs, many of whom were from groups that had long been persecuted, groups that included itinerant workers and dissenting Protestants, as well as Jews.²¹

To a great degree, these commercial risk takers initiated our modern world, pacing the remarkable rise of Europe over older, and traditionally wealthier, civilizations in Asia and the Middle East.²² The rise in economic growth recast expectations for what the common person could attain in life on earth, something rare in feudal times.²³ For many centuries, or even millennia—despite advances in agriculture and the growth of commerce—average incomes remained nearly the same and material conditions changed little. It was only during the seventeenth century that sustained economic growth appeared to be possible, at which point average incomes began to rise dramatically, beginning in Britain and the Netherlands.²⁴

THE RISE OF INDIVIDUALISM AND PROPERTY RIGHTS

The yeomanry's rise rested on a specific set of values about family, religion, respect for privacy, and enterprise. This was not merely a conservative position, but one also adopted by reformers and social democrats, not only in the United States, but in Europe, particularly Sweden. The ideal was to create an economic order where one income-earner could support a household without requiring massive financial assistance from the state.²⁵ The key here

is not so much how societies preserve the middle orders, but that they represent the essence of democracy in an economic sense in ways that the Clerisy and aristocrats never could.

At the root of this change was a shift from aristocratic and ecclesiastical domination of landownership to a more “individualistic” concept of property rights.²⁶ A substantial class of independent smallholders demanded a constitutional order that would protect their holdings.²⁷ Artisans and merchants had laid the groundwork for self-governance within their guilds and in some places seized power from the aristocracy and even the clergy. As the radical social theorist Barrington Moore said a half century ago, “no bourgeois, no democracy.”²⁸ Or, to alter Aristotle a little, no middle class, no political liberty.²⁹

As students of classical history, the founders of the American republic believed the dispersion of property was critical to democracy. Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and John Adams all considered the overconcentration of property in few hands a basic threat to republican institutions, a view also embraced by thinkers like Edmund Burke, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Adam Smith.³⁰ When the Industrial Revolution was proceeding apace, Karl Marx declared the rising bourgeoisie to be “the first to show what man’s activity can bring about” by exchanging the veneer of religiosity and chivalry with “naked, shameless, direct brutal exploitation.”³¹ But capitalism did not produce the dystopia that Marx predicted; instead it lifted up a large portion of the masses

and created a solid middle class (a designation first used in Britain in 1812).³²

Never before had so much prosperity and relative economic security been so widely enjoyed.³³ Between 1940 and 1950, the incomes of the bottom 40 percent of American workers surged by roughly 40 percent, while the gains in the top quintile were a modest 8 percent and the top 5 percent saw their incomes drop slightly.³⁴ Between 2005 and 2014, the percentage of families with flat or decreasing real incomes rose to over 60 percent in the twenty-five most advanced economies.

Of course, Western progress did not guarantee rights to all—far from it—within their societies and particularly outside them. The wealth that lifted up the Dutch and British middle classes rested in part on the exploitation of indigenous peoples.³⁵ Elements of American success were built in part on the destruction of indigenous cultures and the abhorrent practice of slavery. But democratic countries were not unique in this. The Russians, the Ch'ing Chinese, and the Japanese were also colonial expansionists whose rule was generally far from gentle.³⁶ And, unlike middle-class democracy, authoritarian imperialism generally failed to generate long-term, broad-based growth.

In the past fifty years, entrepreneur-led, democratic capitalism brought widely shared prosperity to a large part of the world. Many places once colonized by Western nations have been among the prime beneficiaries. In Singapore, Malaysia, and India, as well as Oceania—all

once under British tutelage—the rule of law remains in force and democratic structures remain more or less intact. Countries shaped by the United States, such as Japan, as well as South Korea, and Taiwan, all saw rapid economic growth and, as their populations became more educated and politically aware, evolved into vital democracies. The key here may well be in the strong ties to the West, and particularly America. The United States essentially pushed the development of capitalism and, over time, encouraged democracy as well. Of course, countries can participate in the capitalist system to get rich without self-government, and without being dominated by the West politically: countries such as China, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates have managed to become rich without recourse to rule of law or civil rights, often via the exploitation of abundant natural resources.

WHY THE MIDDLE CLASS DECLINED

These remarkable achievements of liberal capitalism are now distinctly threatened. This is likely not a “conspiracy” but the collective result of private actions driven by rational decision-making.

Until the 1990s, fields that were growing and promised higher profits invited newcomers, as one would expect.³⁷ Since then, there has been a marked decrease in the percentage of all small firms in both the United States and Europe as larger firms continue to increase their share of the pie.³⁸ Technology has played a critical role by facilitating global commerce and, increasingly, driving

business from the Main Streets and local companies to massive firms with the ability to adjust to changing conditions.³⁹

This was particularly evident during the pandemic—made worse by the response to Covid and the Russo-Ukrainian War—stoking inflation to the highest level in forty years. Roughly one hundred and ten thousand restaurants have shut down during the lockdowns, and some two hundred thousand more businesses overall have simply shut down. It is no surprise that barely 16 percent of small business owners, according to one recent survey, think the federal government is performing well for them.⁴⁰ As executive compensation reached the stratosphere at the big tech and finance firms, the *Harvard Business Review* notes, small businesses—the bulwark of the yeoman class—face “an existential threat” to their existence.⁴¹ The pandemic shift clearly favored big companies, who could deploy far greater resources, make the necessary transition to the new reality. Big Pharma companies have reined in lucrative profits with vaccine revenue.⁴² CEO compensation reached record levels this year; investment bankers on Wall Street enjoyed record bonuses; and the giant tech firms now boast a market capitalization greater than the bloated federal budget.⁴³ The biggest tech firms achieved new record valuations and ever-increasing domination. As millions struggle to fill their gas tanks and pay their rent, sales of business jets to the rising ranks of billionaires have soared to new heights.⁴⁴

Upward mobility, the engine of democratic capitalism, has also faded across the world, even in East Asia, which had enjoyed the most dramatic growth in prosperity of any region in the world.⁴⁵ China's Gini index—a measure of inequality—has gone from highly egalitarian in 1978 to more stratified than Mexico, Brazil, or Kenya. The income of the ultrawealthy expanded by more than twice the national average rate.⁴⁶ Middle-class Chinese people now find it difficult to buy property or get ahead. In avowedly socialist China, the top 1 percent of the population holds about one-third of the country's wealth, and roughly 1,300 individuals hold about 20 percent.⁴⁷

This crushing of the middle orders is also taking place in sub-Saharan Africa and Russia, as well as in Latin America and India.⁴⁸ Even with their robust social welfare provisions, over two-thirds of European Union countries, including Sweden, have seen social mobility decline in recent decades.⁴⁹ Germany is significantly less equal than its EU peers, with richer households controlling a bigger share of assets than in most other Western European states. The bottom 40 percent of German adults hold almost no assets at all; barely 45 percent own homes.⁵⁰ In Great Britain, a decline in the numbers of middle-income jobs has depressed wages and, more broadly, brought a halt to social mobility.⁵¹ “We are facing a new set of problems,” said Frances O’Grady, general secretary of the once powerful Trades Union Congress. “We have people with degrees doing Mickey Mouse jobs and young people who

will have no occupational pension and no house to sell to see them through old age.”⁵²

This trend is also occurring in the United States, the historic heartland of middle-class aspiration. According to one study, the chances of middle-class earners moving up to the top rungs of the income ladder has declined by approximately 20 percent since the early 1980s.⁵³ Data from the census bureau show that the share of national income going to the middle 60 percent of households has fallen to a record low.⁵⁴ Wealth gains in recent decades have gone overwhelmingly to the top 1 percent of households, and especially the top 0.5 percent, as wage and salary income, starting in the early 1970s, have dropped as a percentage of wealth.⁵⁵

Banking and finance, treated amiably by Washington during the financial crisis, have become increasingly concentrated, while many smaller regional institutions have either been acquired or driven out of business.⁵⁶ Growing corporate concentration has now seeped into the once dynamic tech economy in both the United States and Europe.⁵⁷ In Silicon Valley now, the renowned garage culture has morphed into a Gargantua of giant firms with market power unprecedented in modern times, controlling in some cases 80 to 90 percent of their markets.⁵⁸

Similarly, property ownership has become more concentrated across the Western world. We see declining homeownership, particularly among the young, notably in the United States, Canada, and Australia.⁵⁹ In Great Britain, where land prices have risen dramatically over the

past decade, less than one percent of the population owns half of all the land. Overall, on the Continent, farmland increasingly is concentrated while urban real estate inexorably flows into the hands of a small cadre of corporate owners and the megawealthy.⁶⁰ Even in the United States, a country that never experienced feudalism, property ownership now increasingly depends on inheritance; the offspring of property-owning parents are far better situated to own a house eventually (often with parental help) and enter what one writer calls “the funnel of privilege.”⁶¹ In America, millennials are three times as likely as boomers to count on inheritance for their retirement. Among the youngest cohort, those ages—eighteen to twenty-two—over 60 percent see inheritance as their primary source of sustenance as they age.⁶²

The coming years will likely see further consolidation of wealth and property ownership, with a continued shift to large chains and online platforms like Amazon, which now uses its power to coerce small businesses to give up their data. At the same time, many small landlords, reeling from rent holidays, seem destined to follow suit. Enjoying record profits, some large banks, like England’s Lloyd’s Bank, are now in an ideal position to gobble up and dominate the emerging market in distressed properties, apartments, and even single-family homes.

This trend to buy up single family homes, further raising their cost, and then rent them out, particularly to priced-out millennials, has reached record proportions. Rather than help middle-class families, this approach

supports the rentier class—which Piketty calls the “enemy of democracy”—assuring them of steady profits by collecting rents while the middle class loses its independence.⁶³ One analyst predicted that most middle-class people will soon be “priced out” of ownership in a “rentership society” where Wall Street firms turn homes, furniture, and other necessities into rental products.⁶⁴

THE CLERISY AND THE EMERGING CLASS ORDER

Many of these forces have been taking place, as it were, naturally, forming what appears to be a natural, if somewhat unfortunate, evolution of monopoly capitalism in ways that many—Marx, Schumpeter, and even Adam Smith—would recognize. But the assault on the economic foundation of the middle class also diminishes its influence on political policy.

In this the oligarchs are certainly players, ever-increasing in political influence and contributions.⁶⁵ But their agenda regarding issues like climate, in which they generally in agreement with the Left, and antitrust, in which they are generally in agreement with the Right, needs its champions outside their own ranks. They need to have their hegemony justified by either the appearance of virtue or by worship of the market. In this, they recruit both liberals and conservatives, funding their foundations, university centers, and, increasingly, the media.⁶⁶

The driver in the policy world comes from the Clerisy, a term coined by Samuel Coleridge in the 1830s to refer to a class of people charged, like the medieval clergy, with

instructing and directing the masses. Expanding during the Industrial Revolution, the Clerisy gradually replaced the religious clergy as what the great German sociologist Max Weber called society's "new legitimizers."⁶⁷ Together with the oligarchs, the upper echelons of the Clerisy now constitute a new national elite tied together by education, lifestyle, and remarkably similar, party-line, progressive political beliefs.⁶⁸

In the United States, the Clerisy are concentrated in professions whose numbers have waxed in recent decades, such as teaching, consultancy, law, government bureaucracy, and health care work. In contrast, the traditional middle class—small business owners, workers in basic industries, and construction—have seen their share of the job market decline.⁶⁹ Some professions once more tied to the private economy, such as doctors, have become subsumed by bureaucratic structures and shifted from having a dependably conservative to an increasingly progressive stance.⁷⁰

This power rests on the Clerisy's domination over most of culture, the media, the education systems, and the bureaucracy.⁷¹ Many in the elected legislature, notes Harvard University's Yascha Mounk, share "less and less" in common with their constituents, even as they allow power to drift to the courts, the bureaucracy, the central banks, and nonprofits staffed and controlled by the Clerisy.⁷²

Like the old Catholic first estate, the contemporary Clerisy generally see themselves motivated to work not for

self-interest but the good of society. They constitute “the privileged stratum,” in the words of the French leftist author Christophe Guilluy, operating from an assumption of “moral superiority” that justifies their right to instruct others.⁷³ Some work in the public sector, then head to Wall Street or Silicon Valley, returning to Washington much wealthier for the bother while their families leverage their elite ties.⁷⁴

Although certainly not unanimous, the Clerisy generally favors ever-increased central control and regulation. French economist Thomas Piketty calls them “the Brahmin Left,” pointing out that their priority is not greater affluence or democracy, but a society shaped by their own largely progressive beliefs; on the so-called Right, on the other hand, similar sorts of people seem motivated by an almost religious faith in the untrammelled rights of big capital and monopolies.⁷⁵

The potential power of the Clerisy became highly evident during the pandemic. The health emergency required a strong response, but this continued for years and expressed itself largely through executive diktats, both at the national and local level. It has also supercharged the seemingly relentless rise of a centralized administrative state generally. It lay out rules—for example, regarding small business—that clearly benefited larger, better capitalized firms over smaller ones. Executive power may prove difficult to restrain as the pandemic fades. It is likely to be used postpandemic to “fight” climate change by purposely slowing economic growth and repressing

opportunities for most middle-class and working-class people.

As in the case of the oligarchs, it is doubtful most members of the dominant, largely progressive Clerisy wish ill to small business or to oppose the middle class. But in practice executive power—not only in America, but also in Australia, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Canada, and much of the European Union—tends to be more sensitive to elite concerns, much as the bishops of the medieval Catholic Church identified and sought the resources of the aristocratic class.

How big is the Clerisy? As Michael Lind estimates, the “overclass” is made up of some 15 percent of the American workforce, far larger than the membership of the old first estate, which was closer to 1 percent of the French population. Another estimate describes them more narrowly, with those at the top echelon in law, the best universities, and government composing roughly 2.4 million people out of a country of over 320 million.⁷⁶

THE CLERISY'S WAR ON THE YEOMANRY

Like the Catholic Church and the medieval aristocracy, the contemporary Clerisy enjoys a symbiotic relationship with the oligarchic elites. These are also the main financiers of the Clerisy and their prime employers within NGOs, the universities, the media, and culture industries. In contrast to the traditional yeomanry, who tend to oppose controls, they are often beneficiaries of the regulatory state, either directly as high-level government

employees or indirectly as consultants, attorneys, or through nonprofits.⁷⁷ If the oligarchs destroy the middle class as a function of their business interests, the Clerisy does so intentionally for ideological reasons.

The pandemic has amplified the power of the Clerisy, but we may be seeing just the rosy dawn of their ascendancy. The policies imposed during Covid—usually without legislative approval—could provide the role model for further intrusions on such things as speech, sex education, what is permissible in terms of addressing people, or whether certain groups should receive special benefits owing to their legacy of persecution.

Although this cultural agenda is offensive to many, it does not constitute the biggest threat to the middle orders. Already the media, the academic and nonprofit interests have started to identify the extreme Covid measures not as a temporary and arguably necessary measure but as a “test run” for how to impose their preferred climate change policies.⁷⁸ These approaches explicitly oppose upward mobility, thereby hurting the working and middle classes far more than either the professional Clerisy or the oligarchs.⁷⁹ Yet it would be an exaggeration to imply intent here, when most likely the elites’ priorities are simply the result of their theology and, to some extent, their insulation from the world of analogue commerce, factories, trucking, or farming.

In France and several other countries, climate change-driven policies and higher energy policies already have inspired mass demonstrations by the middle and working

class.⁸⁰ This is not because people want to ruin the planet but because they are less than enthusiastic about losing their jobs or seeing their communities fall into postindustrial malaise.⁸¹ In contrast, the super-wealthy, such as Jeff Bezos—who, in 2020, committed to giving \$10 billion to environmental groups—can demand strict policies to curb climate change without jeopardizing their ability to make unprecedented fortunes, shoot themselves into space, maintain mansions in the style of Hapsburg royalty, or fly in private jets even to climate change-related events.⁸² They also have been prominent in investing in renewable schemes, often subsidized by governments, and are primed to be major beneficiaries of new infrastructure spending.⁸³

The Clerisy hector everyone else, writes the progressive author Anand Giridharadas, but “have continued to hoard the overwhelming share of [economic] progress” while “the average American’s life has scarcely improved.”⁸⁴ Yet this is not just a case of economic self-interest. Well-educated managers of major companies and the credentialed Clerisy are naturally drawn to the idea of a society ruled by professional experts with “enlightened” values—that is, by people like themselves.⁸⁵ In contrast, people in occupations like construction, the energy sector, or agriculture tend to favor less intrusive economic and social policies. The Clerisy and their oligarchical allies can gain power and retain their privileges even under draconian climate rules; this is less the case for an oil rigger, a factory employee, or a construction worker who drives an old truck to work.⁸⁶

Perhaps the most perfidious Clerisy assault focuses on the value systems that underpinned the rise of the middle class. Many in these elites despise the traditions of country, religion, and family. Their hatred increases the conflict among cultural and racial identities. Once normal bourgeoisie success is defined as mere “privilege” for males and whites, the idea of merit and rewards for work are destroyed. But in a racially and ethnically diverse capitalist society, merit is among the very few ideals that can keep such a society together.⁸⁷

In some senses, liberal capitalism’s success has sown the seeds that could create its destruction.⁸⁸ Alvin Toffler predicted almost half a century ago that growing affluence would result in replacing the profit motive with more aesthetic goals, a quest for self-fulfillment, or unbridled hedonism. “Affluence serves as a base from which men begin to strive for post-economic goals,” he wrote.⁸⁹ Another perceptive observer, the sociologist Daniel Bell, identified the rise of an affluent “new class” embracing values profoundly divergent from bourgeois norms of self-control, industriousness, and personal responsibility. Instead, it favored a new type of individualism, unmoored from religion and family, which would dissolve the foundations of middle-class culture.⁹⁰

In the United States, many people have come to regard children as a luxury, since the costs associated with childrearing, including school and housing, have risen far faster than incomes.⁹¹ Worryingly, young Americans place

a much lower focus on having children than their parents.⁹² Many who have children, even the well-educated, do so alone, and single parenthood has grown from 10 percent in 1960 to more than 40 percent today.⁹³ Alvin Toffler envisioned a revolution in marriage that would result in a “streamlined family” relying on professional child raisers. The ideal of long-term marriage would give way, he expected, to more transient relationships and numerous partners at different stages of life.⁹⁴ But the big shift is toward childlessness. Some progressives suggest that babies are no longer even necessary to keep the country alive, as shortfalls in the workforce can be met by importing masses of immigrants from developing countries.⁹⁵

But increasingly people choose not to have children. The percentage of American women who are mothers is at its lowest point in over three decades and sexual activity appears to have declined.⁹⁶ The birthrate is now the lowest in generations, a trend accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic and allegedly reinforced by climate change concerns.⁹⁷ Postfamilial attitudes are, if anything, even more common in continental Europe.⁹⁸ By 2000, more than half of births in Sweden were to unmarried women (though most of them cohabiting). The rates in most Western countries are trending the same way.⁹⁹ In Britain, 8 percent of households in 1970 were headed by a single parent; now the rate is over 25 percent. The number of children born outside marriage has doubled over the past three decades; now 40 percent of British children are born out of wedlock.¹⁰⁰

Such attitudes about the family are increasingly common in the media. The rise of bohemianism in the twentieth century emphasized individual empowerment over family obligation and thus elevated the status of single households.¹⁰¹ These views are widely embraced by many feminists, as well as the leaders of Black Lives Matter.¹⁰² To even mention that having children may be good for society, as *Hillbilly Elegy* author JD Vance did, was enough to lead the ultra-woke Salon to spot “dog whistles for white nationalism and misogyny.”¹⁰³

THE NEW ROAD TO SERFDOM

As the economy moves toward oligarchy and bourgeois values fall apart, we are laying the foundation for a shift, particularly in the next generation, toward permanent serfdom. Rather than seeking ways to expand opportunities for ownership, both the planning Clerisy and the oligarchs often sneer at the family-friendly, affordable, suburban housing that has accommodated the middle class over the past half century, claiming such places are intrinsically racist as well as unsustainable.¹⁰⁴ Ultimately, the push for forced densification reflects, as architectural historian Robert Bruegmann observes, a “class-based” effort to revive the patterns of the premodern past, with defined hierarchies and limited opportunities for upward mobility outside the upper classes.¹⁰⁵

In the past, even working-class people, by pooling resources, were able to buy a house in industrializing America. But the shifts in the economy, particularly

during the pandemic, hit hard on poorly paid, and generally younger, service workers, and pushed many toward a more destitute state.¹⁰⁶ Rising property prices and low wages threaten to make homeownership more difficult, undermining the best chance for wealth creation for most families.¹⁰⁷

The once aspirational yeoman spirit is being replaced by growing dependence on government and a debilitating pattern of demoralization.¹⁰⁸ There is now evidence of deteriorating mental health—roughly one in three working class people admitted to considering suicide. Life expectancy has now dropped more than during any time since the Great Depression, particularly for working-class people and those without college degrees, in part owing to higher levels of drug overdoses.¹⁰⁹ Only the best-educated, wealthiest segments of society now enjoy improved living standards.¹¹⁰

CAN THE YEOMANRY FIGHT BACK?

Politicians and the media obsess over issues like race and gender, but they disdain speaking of the real divide, which is class.¹¹¹ As stated above, this gap is being caused both by essentially economic and technological forces, but it is exacerbated by policies, such as those having to do with Covid and climate change, imposed by the Clerisy and widely supported by the oligarchs.

To date neither party wants to address the key issues—the concentration of wealth and property, and the impact of government regulation on small businesses—

because to do so would interfere with their own political constituencies. For Republicans, the issue remains the sanctity of capital in all cases, which reflects the party's continued reliance on wealthy donors.¹¹² The Democrats, who rely on the predominant part of that class, may talk about inequality, but under the Clinton and Obama administrations they allowed monopolistic tech firms to merge and buy out competitors with impunity.¹¹³

The failure of the Democrats, unlike that of the Republicans, to address class issues reflects the power of the Clerisy as well. Democrats, as Thomas Frank notes in the *Guardian*, reject the very notion of “populism” and favor a “grand vision of how society should be directed” through the agency of “responsible professionals” like themselves.¹¹⁴ Rather than focus on the daily needs of working people, notes British trade unionist and firefighter Paul Embrey, the traditional left-wing parties like Labour, have “swallowed a poisonous brew” of “liberal wokedom” that disparages work, the traditional family, and national traditions.¹¹⁵ University of California Professor Joan C. Williams, author of *Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America*, notes that Democrats “once focused on good jobs for a very broad range of Americans that yielded their version of a solid, middle-class life,” but now, rather than boost the economic basis of social democracy, have “been offering them sympathy and social programs.”¹¹⁶

To survive, the middle class needs to stand up against both parties and to reaffirm again the values that sparked

its emergence. It will require a volte face on the prevailing cultural and educational trends, which increasingly advocate malignant racialist doctrines, “social justice,” and equity over competence. Even Big Business needs to realize that these doctrines undermine their own interests: woke education, for example, is not likely to produce the skilled workers they need.¹¹⁷

Most needed is a class consciousness, not in the Marxian sense, but in a demand for policies that promote the middle class along with working-class aspirations to join it. The new middle-class politics needs to be laser-focused on those things that help small property and business owners. These include such things as strong antitrust enforcement, removal of regulations that disproportionately hurt smaller firms, and an industrial strategy that seeks to reshore enterprise and reduce dependence on far-flung supply chains. Education and infrastructure improvements could expand the economy, providing new opportunities for entrepreneurs.¹¹⁸

Whether this can be fit into a conservative worldview is not for me to judge, as I am not a conservative. But it is the only way to slow, and perhaps reverse, the oligarchic and clerical domination of the economy that, if unchecked, opens the door to an increasingly autocratic system. Such a politics could find its home on the Right, where anticorporate sentiment is growing, or on the Left, where economic radicalism has traditionally resided.¹¹⁹

Ultimately, the party or ideologies that address inequality and the squeeze on the middle class will be able

to tap into a growing anti-establishment sentiment. Americans, including minorities, are not wedded to *laissez faire* religion, as was recently made clear by Florida's endorsement of a \$15 an hour wage.¹²⁰ Yet at the same time, notes one study, barely 8 percent of the population can be considered "woke," and this small group is mostly white, well-educated, and affluent.¹²¹ And less than one in four opt for socialism, according to a December 2020 survey.¹²² There's also growing distrust across the political spectrum of Big Tech, massive corporations, the news media, and the federal government.¹²³

This dissatisfaction is disruptive but also healthy. Americans, of all colors, do not want a new feudalism; they still seek the American dream, although they lack the conviction that they can achieve it. They want something different from the current consolidation of wealth and power, and greater opportunities for their children. The yeomanry may be down, but they are far from being buried permanently in the past. "Happy the nation whose people have not forgotten how to rebel," wrote the British historian R. H. Tawney.¹²⁴ What society needs now is not more domination by the oligarchs and their allies in the Clerisy, but a return to middle-class aspiration. A people recovering their hope can be humbled and even made to suffer, but ultimately, won't likely be defeated or denied.¹²⁵



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PROVOCATIONS #3

Joel Kotkin The Looming Extinction of the Working Class

An entrenched oligarchic class increasingly controls politics, the media, and big business in America. This oligarchy's interests and actions are more and more opposed to the prosperity of the working and middle classes: this oligarchy is making them poorer, weaker, and their lives less stable. And it is aligned with America's political class, which refuses to see that American democracy will collapse without a healthy working and middle class. America will not survive this emerging neo-feudal economic order of limited mobility and sky-high inequality.



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