HOW THE BOBOS BROKE AMERICA

The creative class was supposed to foster progressive values and economic growth. Instead we got resentment, alienation, and endless political dysfunction.

By David Brooks

THE DISPOSSESSED set out early in the mornings. They were the outsiders, the scorned, the voiceless. But weekend after weekend—unbowed and undeterred—they rallied together. They didn't have much going for them in their great battle against the privileged elite, but they did have one thing—their yachts.

During the summer and fall of 2020, a series of boat parades—Trumptillas—cruised American waters in support of Donald Trump. The participants gathered rowdily in great clusters. They festooned their boats with flags—American flags, but also message flags: DON'T TREAD ON ME, NO MORE BULLSHIT, images of Trump as Rambo.

The women stood on the foredecks in their red, white, and blue bikinis, raising their Pabst Blue Ribbon tallboys to salute the patriots in nearby boats. The men stood on the control decks projecting the sort of manly toughness you associate with steelworkers, even though these men were more likely to be real-estate agents. They represent a new social phenomenon: the populist regatta. They are doing pretty well but see themselves as the common people, the regular Joes, the overlooked. They didn't go to fancy colleges, and they detest the mainstream media. "It's so encouraging to see so many people just coming together in a

spontaneous parade of patriotism," Bobi Kreumberg, who attended a Trumptilla in Palm Beach, Florida, told a reporter from WPTV.

You can see this phenomenon outside the United States too. In France, the anthropologist Nicolas Chemla calls this social type the "boubours," the boorish bourgeoisie. If the elite bourgeois bohemians—the bobos—tend to have progressive values and metropolitan tastes, the boubours go out of their way to shock them with nativism, nationalism, and a willful lack of tact. Boubour leaders span the Western world: Trump in the U.S., Boris Johnson in the United Kingdom, Marine Le Pen in France, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Matteo Salvini in Italy.

How could people with high-end powerboats possibly think of themselves as the downtrodden? The truth is, they are not totally crazy. The class structure of Western society has gotten scrambled over the past few decades. It used to be straightforward: You had the rich, who joined country clubs and voted Republican; the working class, who toiled in the factories and voted Democratic; and, in between, the mass suburban middle class. We had a clear idea of what class conflict, when it came, would look like—members of the working classes would align with progressive intellectuals to take on the capitalist elite.

But somehow when the class conflict came, in 2015 and 2016, it didn't look anything like that. Suddenly, conservative parties across the West—the former champions of the landed aristocracy—portrayed themselves as the warriors for the working class. And left-wing parties—once vehicles for proletarian revolt—were attacked as captives of the super-educated urban elite. These days, your education level and political values are as important in defining your class status as your income is. Because of this, the U.S. has polarized into two separate class hierarchies—one red and one blue. Classes struggle not only up and down, against the richer and poorer groups on their own ladder, but against their partisan opposite across the ideological divide.

In June of last year, a Trump regatta was held in Ferrysburg, Michigan. A reporter from WOOD spoke with one of the boaters, a guy in a white T-shirt, a MAGA hat, and a modest fishing boat. "We are always labeled as racists and bigots," he said. "There's a lot of Americans that love Donald Trump, but we don't have the platforms that the Democrats do, including Big Tech. So we have to do this."

On a bridge overlooking the parade stood an anti-Trump protester, a young man in a black T-shirt carrying an ABOLISH ICE sign. "They use inductive reasoning rather than deduction," he told the reporter, looking out at the pro-Trump boaters. "They only seek information that gives evidence to their presuppositions." So who's of a higher social class? The guy in the boat, or the kid with the fancy words?

The Rise of a Countercultural Elite

IN 1983, a literary historian named Paul Fussell wrote a book called *Class: A Guide Through the American Status System*. Most of the book is a caustic and extravagantly snobby tour through the class markers prevalent at the time. After ridiculing every other class, Fussell describes what he called "X people." These were people just like Fussell: highly educated, curious, ironic, wittily countercultural. X people tend to underdress for social occasions, Fussell wrote. They know the best wine stores and delis. They have risen above the muck of mainstream culture to a higher, hipper sensibility. The chapter about X people was insufferably self-regarding, but Fussell was onto something. Every once in a while, in times of transformation, a revolutionary class comes along and disrupts old structures, introduces new values, opens up economic and cultural chasms. In the 19th century, it was the bourgeoisie, the capitalist merchant class. In the latter part of the 20th century, as the information economy revved up and the industrial middle class hollowed out, it was X people.

Seventeen years later, I wrote a book about that same class, *Bobos in Paradise*. The bobos didn't necessarily come from money, and they were proud of that; they'd secured their places in selective universities and in the job market through drive and intelligence exhibited from an early age, they believed. X types defined themselves as rebels against the staid elite. They were—as the classic Apple commercial had it—"the crazy ones, the misfits, the rebels, the troublemakers." But by 2000, the information economy and the tech boom were showering the highly educated with cash. They had to find ways of spending their gobs of money while showing they didn't care for material things. So they developed an elaborate code of financial correctness to display their superior sensibility. Spending lots of money on any room formerly used by the servants was socially defensible: A $7,000 crystal chandelier in the living room was vulgar, but a $10,000, 59-inch AGA stove in the kitchen was acceptable, a sign of your foodie expertise. When it came to aesthetics, smoothness was artificial, but texture was authentic. The new elite distressed their furniture, used refurbished factory floorboards in their great rooms, and wore nubby sweaters made by formerly oppressed peoples from Peru.

The bobos have coalesced into an insular, intermarrying brahmin elite that dominates culture, media, education, and tech.

Two years later, Richard Florida published *The Rise of the Creative Class*, which lauded the economic and social benefits that the creative class—by which he meant, more or less, the same scientists, engineers, architects, financiers, lawyers, professors, doctors, executives, and other professionals who make up the bobos—produced. Enormous wealth was being generated by these highly educated people, who could turn new ideas into software, entertainment, retail concepts, and more. If you wanted your city to flourish, he argued, you had to attract these people by stocking the streets with art galleries, restaurant rows, and cultural amenities. Florida used a "Gay Index," based on the supposition that neighborhoods with a lot of gay men are the sort of tolerant, diverse places to which members of the creative class flock.

From the October 2013 issue: Richard Florida on the boom towns of the post-Great Recession economy

Florida was a champion of this class. I looked on them pretty benignly myself. "The educated class is in no danger of becoming a self-contained caste," I wrote in 2000. "Anybody with the right degree, job, and cultural competencies can join." That turned out to be one of the most naive sentences I have ever written.

The New Elite Consolidates

OVER THE PAST TWO DECADES, the rapidly growing economic, cultural, and social power of the bobos has generated a global backlash that is growing more and more vicious, deranged, and apocalyptic. And yet this backlash is not without basis. The bobos—or X people, or the creative class, or whatever you want to call them—have coalesced into an insular, intermarrying Brahmin elite that dominates culture, media, education, and tech. Worse, those of us in this class have had a hard time admitting our power, much less using it responsibly.

First, we've come to hoard spots in the competitive meritocracy that produced us. As Elizabeth Currid-Halkett reported in her 2017 book, *The Sum of Small Things*, affluent parents have increased their share of educational spending by nearly 300 percent since 1996. Partly as a result, the test-score gap between high- and low-income students has grown by 40 to 50 percent. The children of well-off, well-educated meritocrats are thus perfectly situated to predominate at the elite colleges that produced their parents' social standing in the first place. Roughly 72 percent of students at these colleges come from the richest quarter of families, whereas only 3 percent come from the poorest quarter. A 2017 study found that 38 schools—including Princeton, Yale, Penn, Dartmouth, Colgate, and Middlebury—draw more students from the top 1 percent than from the bottom 60 percent.

From the September 2019 issue: Daniel Markovits on how meritocracy harms everyone

Second, we've migrated to just a few great wealth-generating metropolises. Fifteen years after *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Florida published a reconsideration, *The New Urban Crisis*. Young creative types were indeed clustering in a few zip codes, which produced enormous innovation and wealth along with soaring home values. As Florida noted in that book, from 2007 to 2017, "the population of college-educated young people between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-four grew three times faster in downtown areas than in the suburbs of America's fifty largest metro areas."

But this concentration of talent, Florida now argued, meant that a few superstar cities have economically blossomed while everywhere else has languished. The 50 largest metro areas around the world house 7 percent of the world's population but generate 40 percent of global wealth. Just six metro areas—the San Francisco Bay Area; New York; Boston; Washington, D.C.; San Diego; and London—attract nearly half the high-tech venture capital in the world.

This has also created gaping inequalities within cities, as high housing prices push middle- and lower-class people out. "Over the past decade and a half," Florida wrote, "nine in ten US metropolitan areas have seen their middle classes shrink. As the middle has been hollowed out, neighborhoods across America are dividing into large areas of concentrated disadvantage and much smaller areas of concentrated affluence." The large American metro areas most segregated by occupation, he found, are San Jose, San Francisco, Washington, Austin, L.A., and New York.

From the August 2019 issue: Raj Chetty, the economist who would fix the American dream

Third, we've come to dominate left-wing parties around the world that were formerly vehicles for the working class. We've pulled these parties further left on cultural issues (prizing cosmopolitanism and questions of identity) while watering down or reversing traditional Democratic positions on trade and unions. As creative-class people enter left-leaning parties, working-class people tend to leave. Around 1990, nearly a third of Labour members of the British Parliament were from working-class backgrounds; from 2010 to 2015, the proportion wasn't even one in 10. In 2016, Hillary Clinton won the 50 most-educated counties in America by an average of 26 points—while losing the 50 least-educated counties by an average of 31 points.

These partisan differences overlay economic differences. In 2020, Joe Biden won just 500 or so counties—but together they account for 71 percent of American economic activity, according to the Brookings Institution. Donald Trump won more than 2,500 counties that together generate only 29 percent of that activity. An analysis by Brookings and *The Wall Street Journal* found that just 13 years ago, Democratic and Republican areas were at near parity on prosperity and income measures. Now they are divergent and getting more so. If Republicans and Democrats talk as though they are living in different realities, it's because they are.

The creative class has converted cultural attainment into economic privilege and vice versa. It controls what Jonathan Rauch describes in his new book, *The Constitution of Knowledge*, as the epistemic regime—the massive network of academics and analysts who determine what is true. Most of all, it possesses the power of consecration; it determines what gets recognized and esteemed, and what gets disdained and dismissed. The web, of course, has democratized tastemaking, giving more people access to megaphones. But the setters of elite taste still tend to be graduates of selective universities living in creative-class enclaves. If you feel seen in society, that's because the creative class sees you; if you feel unseen, that's because this class does not.

Like any class, the bobos are a collection of varied individuals who tend to share certain taken-for-granted assumptions, schemas, and cultural rules. Members of our class find it natural to leave their hometown to go to college and get a job, whereas people in other classes do not. In study after study, members of our class display more individualistic values, and a more autonomous sense of self, than other classes. Members of the creative class see their career as the defining feature of their identity, and place a high value on intelligence. Usage of the word *smart* increased fourfold in *The New York Times* from 1980 to 2000, according to Michael Sandel's recent book, *The Tyranny of Merit*—and by 2018 usage had nearly doubled again.

Without even thinking about it, we in the creative class consolidate our class standing through an ingenious code of "openness." We tend to like open floor plans, casual dress, and eclectic "localist" tastes that are willfully unpretentious. This seems radically egalitarian, because there are no formal hierarchies of taste or social position. But only the most culturally privileged person knows how to navigate a space in which the social rules are mysterious and hidden.

Shamus Rahman Khan is a sociologist who attended and then taught at St. Paul, an elite New England prep school. As the meritocratic creative class displaces the old WASPs, he observes, what the school primarily teaches is no longer upper-crust polish or social etiquette, but "ease"—the knowledge of how to act in open environments where the rules are disguised.

A student who possesses ease can walk into any room and be confident that she can handle whatever situation she finds. She knows how to structure relationships with teachers and other professional superiors so that they are treated both as authority figures and as confidants. A student in possession of ease can comfortably engage the cafeteria workers with a distant friendliness that at once respects social hierarchy and pretends it doesn't exist. A student with ease knows when irony is

appropriate, what historical quotations are overused, how to be unselfconscious in a crowd. These practices, as Khan writes in *Privilege*, his book about St. Paul, can be absorbed only through long experience within elite social circles and institutions.

From the June 2018 issue: The birth of the new American aristocracy

Openness in manners is matched by openness in cultural tastes. Once upon a time, high culture—the opera, the ballet—had more social status than popular culture. Now social prestige goes to the no-brow—the person with so much cultural capital that he moves between genres and styles, highbrow and lowbrow, with ease.

"Culture is a resource used by elites to recognize one another and distribute opportunities on the basis of the display of appropriate attributes," Kahn argues. Today's elite culture, he concludes, "is even more insidious than it had been in the past because today, unlike years ago, the standards are argued not to advantage anyone. The winners don't have the odds stacked in their favor. They simply have what it takes."

I wrote *Bobos in Paradise* in the late Clinton era. The end of history had allegedly arrived; the American model had been vindicated by the resolution of the Cold War. Somehow, we imagined, our class would be different from all the other elites in world history. In fact, we have many of the same vices as those who came before us.

From the June 2000 issue: An interview with David Brooks about *Bobos in Paradise*

I got a lot wrong about the bobos. I didn't anticipate how aggressively we would move to assert our cultural dominance, the way we would seek

to impose elite values through speech and thought codes. I underestimated the way the creative class would successfully raise barriers around itself to protect its economic privilege—not just through schooling, but through zoning regulations that keep home values high, professional-certification structures that keep doctors' and lawyers' incomes high while blocking competition from nurses and paralegals, and more. And I underestimated our intolerance of ideological diversity. Over the past five decades, the number of working-class and conservative voices in universities, the mainstream media, and other institutions of elite culture has shrunk to a sprinkling.

When you tell a large chunk of the country that their voices are not worth hearing, they are going to react badly—and they have.

The Reaction

IF OUR OLD CLASS STRUCTURE was like a layer cake—rich, middle, and poor—the creative class is like a bowling ball that was dropped from a great height onto that cake. Chunks splattered everywhere. In *The Great Class Shift*, Thibault Muzergues argues that the creative class has disrupted politics across the Western world. In nation after nation, the rise of the educated metro elite has led the working class to rebel against them. Trump voters listed the media—the epitome of creative-class production—as the biggest threat to America. "The more than 150-year-old alliance between the industrial working class and what one might call the intellectual-cultural Left is over," observes the Swedish political scientist Bo Rothstein. The working class today vehemently rejects not just the creative class but the epistemic regime that it controls. In revolt, populist Trump voters sometimes create their own reality, inventing absurd conspiracy theories and alternative facts about pedophile rings among the elites who they believe disdain them.

The dominance of the bobos has also engendered a rebellion among its own offspring. The members of the creative class have labored to get

their children into good colleges. But they've also jacked up college costs and urban housing prices so high that their children struggle under crushing financial burdens. This revolt has boosted Bernie Sanders in the U.S., Jeremy Corbyn in Britain, Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France, and so on. Part of the youth revolt is driven by economics, but part is driven by moral contempt. Younger people look at the generations above them and see people who talk about equality but drive inequality. Members of the younger generation see the Clinton-to-Obama era—the formative years for the creative class's sensibility—as the peak of neoliberal bankruptcy.

A third rebellion is led by people who are doing well financially but who feel culturally humiliated—the boubour rebellion. These are Mark and Patricia McCloskey, the rich St. Louis couple who waved their guns at passing Black protesters last year. These are the people who elected as mayor of Toronto the crude, brash-talking Rob Ford, who attempted to put a very non-bobo shopping mall, a suburban Disneyland, right in the center of the city. These are people who rebel against codes of political correctness.

As these rebellions arose, pundits from the creative class settled upon certain narratives to explain why there was suddenly so much conflict across society. Our first was the open/closed narrative. Society, we argued, is dividing between those who like open trade, open immigration, and open mores, on the one hand, and those who would like to close these things down, on the other. Second, and related, was the diversity narrative. Western nations are transitioning from being white-dominated to being diverse, multiracial societies. Some people welcome these changes whereas others would like to go back to the past.

Both these narratives have a lot of truth to them—racism still divides and stains America—but they ignore the role that the creative class has played in increasing inequality and social conflict.

For all its talk of openness, the creative class is remarkably insular. In *Social Class in the 21st Century*, the sociologist Mike Savage found that the educated elite tended to be the most socially parochial group, as measured by contact with people in occupational clusters different from their own. In a study for *The Atlantic*, Amanda Ripley found that the most politically intolerant Americans "tend to be whiter, more highly educated, older, more urban, and more partisan themselves." The most politically intolerant county in the country, Ripley found, is liberal Suffolk County, Massachusetts, which includes Boston.

If creative-class types just worked hard and made more money than other people, that might not cause such acute political conflict. What causes psychic crisis are the whiffs of "smarter than" and "more enlightened than" and "more tolerant than" that the creative class gives off. People who feel that they have been rendered invisible will do anything to make themselves visible; people who feel humiliated will avenge their humiliation. Donald Trump didn't win in 2016 because he had a fantastic health-care plan. He won because he made the white working class feel heard.

The New Class Hierarchies

THE REACTION TO THE BOBOS has turned politics into a struggle for status and respect—over whose sensibility is dominant, over which groups are favored and which are denigrated. Political attitudes have displaced consumption patterns as the principal way that people signal class sensibility.

The new map of status competition is worth pausing over, because it helps explain the state of our politics today. Let's look first at the blue hierarchy.

Atop the Democratic-leaning class ladder sits the blue oligarchy: tech and media executives, university presidents, foundation heads, banking CEOs, highly successful doctors and lawyers. The blue oligarchy leads the key Information Age institutions, and its members live in the biggest cities. They work hard; as Daniel Markovits reported in *The Meritocracy Trap*, the share of high-income workers who averaged more than 50 hours of work a week almost doubled from 1979 to 2006, while the share of the lowest earners working long hours dropped by almost a third. They are, in many respects, solid progressives; for instance, a 2017 Stanford survey found that Big Tech executives are in favor of higher taxes, redistributive welfare policies, universal health care, green environmental programs. Yet they tend to oppose anything that would make their perch less secure: unionization, government regulation that might affect their own businesses, antitrust or anti-credentialist policies.

With their amazing financial and convening power, blue oligarchs move to absorb any group that threatens their interests, co-opting their symbols, recruiting key leaders, hollowing out their messages. "Woke capitalism" may seem like corporations gravitating to the left, but it's also corporations watering down the left. Members of the blue oligarchy sit atop systems that produce inequality—and on balance their actions suggest a commitment to sustaining them.

One step down from the blue oligarchy is the creative class itself, a broader leadership class of tenured faculty, established members of the mainstream media, urban and suburban lawyers, senior nonprofit and cultural-institution employees, and corporate managers, whose attitudes largely mirror the blue oligarchs above them, notwithstanding the petty resentments of the former toward the latter.

The bobos believe in human dignity and classical liberalism—free speech, open inquiry, tolerance of different viewpoints, personal autonomy, and pluralism—but our class has not delivered for the people outside it. On our watch, government and other public institutions have

deteriorated. Part of the problem is that, steeped in an outsider, pseudo-rebel ethos, we never accepted the fact that we were a leadership class, never took on the institutional responsibilities that go with that acceptance, never got to know or work with people not in our class, and so never earned the legitimacy and trust that is required if any group is going to effectively lead. According to the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, 65 percent of Americans believe that "the most educated and successful people in America are more interested in serving themselves than in serving the common good."

One economic rung below are the younger versions of the educated elite, many of whom live in the newly gentrifying areas of urban America, such as Bedford-Stuyvesant in New York or Shaw in Washington, D.C. More diverse than the elites of earlier generations, they work in the lower rungs of media, education, technology, and the nonprofit sector. Disgusted with how their elders have screwed up the world, they are leading a revolution in moral sentiments. From 1965 to 2000, for instance, about 10 percent of white liberals favored increased immigration. By 2018, according to Zach Goldberg, a researcher at the Center for the Study of Partisanship and Ideology, it was more than 50 percent, thanks to the influence of a rising generation on the multicultural left.

Yet wokeness is not just a social philosophy, but an elite status marker, a strategy for personal advancement. You have to possess copious amounts of cultural capital to feel comfortable using words like *intersectionality*, *heteronormativity*, *cisgender*, *problematize*, *triggering*, and *Latinx*. By navigating a fluid progressive cultural frontier more skillfully than their hapless Boomer bosses and by calling out the privilege and moral failings of those above them, young, educated elites seek power within elite institutions. Wokeness becomes a way to intimidate Boomer administrators and wrest power from them.

Our politics has become sharper-edged and more reactionary, in part because politics is the one arena in which the bobos cannot dominate—there aren't enough of us.

On the lowest rung of the blue ladder is the caring class, the largest in America (nearly half of all workers, by some measures), and one that in most respects sits quite far from the three above it. It consists of low-paid members of the service sector: manicurists, home health-care workers, restaurant servers, sales clerks, hotel employees. Members of this class are disadvantaged in every way. The gap in life expectancy between those in the top 40 percent and those in the bottom 40 percent widened from 1980 to 2010—from five to 12 years for men and from four to 13 years for women. Only one in 100 of the children raised in the poorest fifth of households will become rich enough to join the top 5 percent.

This hardship requires a different set of traits and values than are found in more upscale classes. Researchers report that people who feel a weaker sense of personal control are quick to form mutual-support networks; their sense of community clashes with the creative class's valorization of individualism. Other research has found that members of this class are less likely to behave unethically than the creative class when put in tempting situations.

Surveys suggest that members of this class stay at some remove from the culture wars—they are much less likely to share political content on social media than other groups, and more likely to say they "avoid arguments." Many are centrists or detached from politics altogether, but as a whole they sit to the right of the bobos on abortion and LGBTQ issues and to the left of the bobos on issues like union power and workers' rights.

ATOP THE RED HIERARCHY is the GOP's slice of the one-percenters. Most rich places are blue, but a lot of the richest people are red. A 2012 study of the richest 4 percent of earners found that 44 percent voted Democrat that year while 41 percent voted Republican. Some are corporate executives or entrepreneurs, but many are top-tier doctors, lawyers, and other professionals who aspire to low taxes and other

libertarian ideals. This is the core of the GOP donor class, men and women who feel that they worked hard for their money, that the American dream is real, and that those who built wealth in this country shouldn't have to apologize for it.

Members of this class are in many ways similar to the conservative elite of the Reagan years. Yet they too have been reshaped by the creative class's cultural dominance. When I interview members of the GOP donor class, they tell me they often feel they cannot share their true opinions without being scorned. Few of them supported Donald Trump in the 2016 GOP primaries, but by 2020 most of the red one-percenters I know had swung enthusiastically pro-Trump, because at least he's scorned by those who scorn them. It turns out that having a large investment account is no protection against self-pity.

One step down are the large property-owning families, scattered among small cities and towns like Wichita, Kansas, and Grand Rapids, Michigan—what we might call the GOP gentry. (I've adapted the coinage from what the historian Patrick Wyman has written about the local elite in his hometown of Yakima, Washington.) This gentry class derives its wealth not from salary but from the ownership of assets—furniture companies, ranches, a bunch of McDonald's franchises. This wealth is held in families and passed down through the generations. Members of this elite stay rooted where their properties are and form the leadership class in their regions, chairing a community foundation or the local chamber of commerce.

Below them is the proletarian aristocracy, the people of the populist regatta: contractors, plumbers, electricians, middle managers, and small-business owners. People in this class have succeeded in America, but not through the channels of the university-based meritocracy, from which they feel alienated.

In other circumstances, the GOP gentry would be the natural enemies of the proletarian aristocracy, but now they are aligned. Both embrace the symbolic class markers of the sociologically low—pickup trucks, guns, country music, Christian nationalism. Both fear that their children may not be able to compete in the creative-class-controlled meritocracy. Both dislike sending their kids to schools that disdain their values, yet understand that their children will have to adopt creative-class values if they are going to be accepted in the new elite. As Thibault Muzergues writes, "The boubours and the provincial bourgeois thus have a common agenda: to unmake the Creative Class's societal transformation of the late 2000s and early 2010s."

A level below the people of the populist regatta, you find the rural working class. Members of this class have highly supervised jobs in manufacturing, transportation, construction. Their jobs tend to be repetitive and may involve some physical danger. As the Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow notes, many people in this class have an identity rooted in loyalty to their small town. They are supported by networks of extended family and friends, who have grown up with one another. Like the poorer members of the blue hierarchy, they value interdependence and are less individualistic.

Many members of the red-hierarchy working class feel totally forgotten. In her book *White Working Class*, Joan C. Williams shares the account of a woman who says she raised three children on $40,000 a year but "didn't get any assistance because we did not qualify." Their towns are not diverse. As Wuthnow notes, two of the most common statements you hear in these towns are "Everybody knows everybody else" and "We're all pretty much the same." If educated urbanites go out of their way to enjoy diversity and display their superior cultural taste, one-upmanship is despised in this class. Christmas Tree Shop sincerity is prized over academic, art-house pretentiousness.

By and large, members of the rural working class admire rich people who earned their wealth. Their real hatred is for "Washington"—a concept that encompasses the entire ruling class. "Those people up there in Washington, they think they know more than we do," one of them told Wuthnow. "They treat us like second-class citizens, like we're dumb hicks."

How the Class War Ends

AS THE BOBOS ACHIEVED a sort of stranglehold on the economy, the culture, and even our understanding of what a good life is, no wonder society has begun to array itself against them, with the old three-part class structure breaking apart into a confusing welter of micro-groups competing for status and standing in any way they can. So, for instance, the bobos have abundant cultural, political, and economic power; the red one-percenters have economic power, but scant cultural power; the young, educated elites have tons of cultural power and growing political power, but still not much economic power; and the caring class and rural working class, unheard and unseen, have almost no power of any kind at all. Our politics, meanwhile, has become sharper-edged, more identity-based, and more reactionary, in part because politics is the one arena in which the bobos cannot dominate—there aren't enough of us.

Into this fraught, every-which-way class conflict walks Joe Biden. Weirdly, he stands outside it.

Biden is the first president since Ronald Reagan without a degree from an Ivy League university. His sensibility was formed not in the meritocracy but in the working-class neighborhoods of his youth. Condescension is alien to his nature. He has little interest in the culture-war issues that drive those at the top of the hierarchies, and spent his 2020 campaign studiously avoiding them. Biden gets prickly when he is surrounded by intellectual preening; he's most comfortable hanging around with union guys who don't pull that crap.

Biden's working-class version of progressivism is a relic from the pre-bobo era. His programs—his COVID-relief law, his infrastructure bill, his family-support proposal—represent efforts to funnel resources to those who have not graduated from college and who have been left behind by the creative-class economy. As Biden boasted in an April speech to a Joint Session of Congress, "Nearly 90 percent of the infrastructure jobs created in the American Jobs Plan do not require a college degree; 75 percent don't require an associate's degree." Those are his people.

If there is an economic solution to the class chasms that have opened up in America, the Biden legislative package is surely it. It would narrow the income gaps that breed much of today's class animosity.

But economic redistribution only gets you so far. The real problem is the sorting mechanism itself. It determines who gets included in the upper echelons of society and who gets excluded; who gets an escalator ride to premier status and worldly success and who faces a wall.

The modern meritocracy is a resentment-generating machine. But even leaving that aside, as a sorting device, it is batshit crazy. The ability to perform academic tasks during adolescence is nice to have, but organizing your society around it is absurd. That ability is not as important as the ability to work in teams; to sacrifice for the common good; to be honest, kind, and trustworthy; to be creative and self-motivated. A sensible society would reward such traits by conferring status on them. A sensible society would not celebrate the skills of a corporate consultant while slighting the skills of a home nurse.

Read: The false promise of meritocracy

Some 60 years after its birth, the meritocracy seems more and more morally vacuous. Does the ability to take tests when you're young make

you a better person than others? Does a society built on that ability become more just and caring?

This situation produces a world in which the populist right can afford to be intellectually bankrupt. Right-leaning parties don't need to have a policy agenda. They just need to stoke and harvest the resentment toward the creative class.

The only way to remedy this system is through institutional reform that widens the criteria by which people get sorted. For instance, we need more pathways to success, so those who are not academically inclined have routes to social leadership; programs like national service, so that people with and without college degrees have more direct contact with one another; and an end to policies like residential zoning rules that keep the affluent segregated on top. More broadly, changing this sorting mechanism requires transforming our whole moral ecology, such that possession of a Stanford degree is no longer seen as signifying a higher level of being.

The bobos didn't set out to be an elite, dominating class. We just fit ourselves into a system that rewarded a certain type of achievement, and then gave our children the resources that would allow them to prosper in that system too. But, blind to our own power, we have created enormous inequalities—financial inequalities and more painful inequalities of respect. The task before us is to dismantle the system that raised us.

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