RICH PEOPLE THINGS

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

American class privilege is very much like the idea of sex in a Catholic school—it's not supposed to exist in the first place, but once it presents itself in your mind's eye, you realize that it's everywhere. And as with the upholders of adolescent propriety for the Mother Church, the forces of repression in our political economy are well armed with orthodox articles of faith. Social critics and academicians have expended heroic amounts of ink to explain America's "exceptionalist" indifference to the distinctions of class—from the absence of a feudal tradition to the frontier thesis to the convulsions o upward social mobility across the generations. Scholars appealing to these forces have all preached, i one way or another, that the condition of wage earning in the New World is but a passing way station on the path to real wealth and entitlement. Why, after all, should anyone militate on behalf of the interests of an American working class when no one intends to remain within its ranks for very long? And, conversely, why should anyone insist there's anything amiss with a society that lavishly coddle those who are fabulously well-to-do when we all long to be borne aloft in their company?

These are, to be sure, compelling explanations of our country's curiously complacent outlook on the politics of wealth and privilege—but they also seem more than a little pat. Canada, after all, had a western frontier and no strong attachment to feudal tradition, and has nonetheless spawned a robust labor-led politics, a single-payer health-care system, and a rather hale welfare state securing basic income supports and social equality. Social mobility has of late been higher in the allegedly fusty Ol World social orders of Britain, Denmark, and Sweden—places that can lay a far more legitimate clai to the conservative epithet "socialist" than the business-friendly centrism of the Obama Democratic policy elite—than in the deindustrializing, debt-ridden United States.

If we're to understand the stubborn resistance to the idea of social class—especially in the wake o the Great Recession of 2008, which all too plainly elevated the fortunes of the financial elite over the notional prosperity of America's declining middle orders—we'd do well to relax our fealty to the ironclad determinism of past explanations. In the spirit of the suggestible Catholic student, we shoul recur instead to the piecemeal psychology of the absent presence—to look more closely at the freestanding institutions that reinforce and strategically update the coordinates of the reigning social consensus on economic reward and punishment.

From this vantage, the lionization of wealth becomes less a fixed catechism in the American cree than a contingent set of post hoc rationalizations—attached here to the idea of undeviatingly gargantuan executive compensation for the financial elite, and there to the business press's delusiona romance with the ever-mythical free market. This outlook has the advantage of making our state of chronic class denial much less forbidding than it would be as a destiny-shaping verdict handed down from our colonial past. But neither is that to say that its social power is diluted by virtue of its comparative rootlessness. Quite the contrary, in fact—the paper-thin and amnesiac way that we continue to reckon with questions of wealth and social privilege accounts in large part for its staying power. Writing in 1956 of the formative consensus that took shape on these issues during the Cold War, C. Wright Mills observed that it hinged on a PR vision of overclass achievement, whereby liberals and conservatives alike found the power elite "to be diversified to the point of powerlessness

So far as power is concerned, nobody really makes decisions; let us fall back upon official and forma images of representative government. So far as wealth or high income is concerned, that is without decisive consequence, although it does perhaps affect the tone of society at large. Besides, everybody in America is rich nowadays. This unserious liberalism is the nerve-center of the present-day conservative mood."[1]

That statement serves as a letter-perfect diagnosis of our socioeconomic plight more than half a century later—save that it's now a tad harder for consensus thinkers to insist that every American is rich. Nonetheless, it's been striking to observe just how little the present crisis has altered the basic terms of political engagement on all sides. When the US economy veered toward cataclysm in the 1890s and the 1930s, mass political movements registered a new national distemper. The People's Party of the late nineteenth century went so far as to advocate an alternate production-based system c currency and exchange, known as the Subtreasury, a reform that eventually got watered down into the Free Silverite attack on the gold standard when the party fused with the Democrats in 1896. And the thirties, of course, witnessed the enactment of many of the core reforms first advanced during the populist and Progressive eras—public ownership of utilities, federally funded income support and retirement plans, enormous national public works projects, and the like.

One might reasonably ask what it would take for the basic truths of class division to sink in on today's American scene, after the reckless expansion of our paper economy has consigned entire productive sectors of business enterprise into the dustbin of history; after the bailed-out financier class continues to rack up obscene performance bonuses on the government dime; after the securitization of debt has left millions of American homes foreclosed, and millions more underwater Instead, we remain in thrall to an unserious liberalism that continues to entrust most major economic policy decisions to career investment bankers, and to a conservative movement rhetoric that equates "populism" with heartland-approved consumption habits and evangelical culture-wars posturing.

In this deeply incoherent state of affairs, it's little wonder that conservatives were able to oppose stimulus plan that actually lowered taxes for the vast majority of Americans by characterizing it as a feckless big-government tax increase. Or that the anemic final version of health-care reform—larded with massive giveaways to the insurance and pharmaceutical lobbies—can be widely depicted as a "government takeover" of American medicine or, indeed, as full-blown "socialism." We appear to have descended to the point where political economy, formerly the central organizing force in our national politics, has become a floating signifier, intended to say more about the demographic profile of individual political actors than anything about the collective cast of our productive lives, and how the rewards for our labor can be distributed more fairly and equitably.

Among other things, this state of affairs leaves leaders and policy makers unable to offer coheren accounts of who is meant to benefit from efforts to revive and revamp our financial sector, our rights to form unions, or our system of health care delivery. If such incremental reforms come across in much of political discourse as perverse and sweeping expressions of an undifferentiated liberal lust for power, then prospects for meaningful change—truly nationalized health care, finance overhauls that reward productive industry ahead of speculation in the paper economy, dismantling of the savag inequalities that still govern housing markets, and education funding—seem like nothing more than utopian fantasy.

* * * *

When I began writing *Rich People Things*, I had nothing quite so sweeping—or so dispiriting—in mind. Indeed, the whole thing came about by accident. In early 2009, a couple of old laid-off editor friends

e-mailed me about a Web site they were launching (called the Awl, for some reason) and invited me contribute. At the time, I filed the idea pretty far back in my memory bank—especially since, as my friends explained in their pitch letter, they'd be unable to pay their writers. But a few weeks after the project launched, another friend directed me to a cover story that ran in my former workplace, *New Yo* magazine, itemizing the widespread sense of grievance and entitlement among the city's lords of finance in the wake of public outrage over the Troubled Asset Relief Program's no-strings giveaways to the financial sector.

Since I knew all too well the inside-the-bubble mindset behind this quisling dispatch from the money wars—the celebration of the money culture being the de facto mission statement for Adam Moss's *New York* magazine—I knew I couldn't stay quiet. And I also knew, the deferential politics of the publishing world being what they are, that whatever I wrote could only see the light of day at a place like the Awl. So I wrote my friends, duly submitted a piece, and just as it was about to go live, coeditor Alex Balk wrote to explain that his colleague, Choire Sicha, "designed a graphic for this wit the rubric, 'Rich People Things.' Does that work for you?" To which I replied, 'um, sure?' " It was a fait accompli in any event, Alex replied, since Choire had "gallivanted off to lunch"—though they could easily just erase the rubric when he got back.

I don't know when Choire returned, but by that time, we'd all moved on to other things, and in th next week or so, I didn't give "Rich People Things" much thought, either as a column title or an ongoing writing project. Thanks to another friend, though, I came across another dispatch that showcased unthinking press fealty to economic privilege—this time, a *Washington Post* front page piece about how the Obama administration's spending priorities would unduly punish taxpayers earning more than $250,000 a year. This prospect, as the *Post* correspondents saw it, could well place small-business owners and upward-striving professionals—two plum political constituencies that broke for Obama in 2008—at odds with the allegedly ambitious social agenda of the fledgling Obama administration. As both tax analysis and political kibitzing, the article reeked of horseshit—especiall since a number of the items on Obama's ambitious social agenda, such as federally backed health insurance, would significantly aid the bottom lines for small-business entrepreneurs.

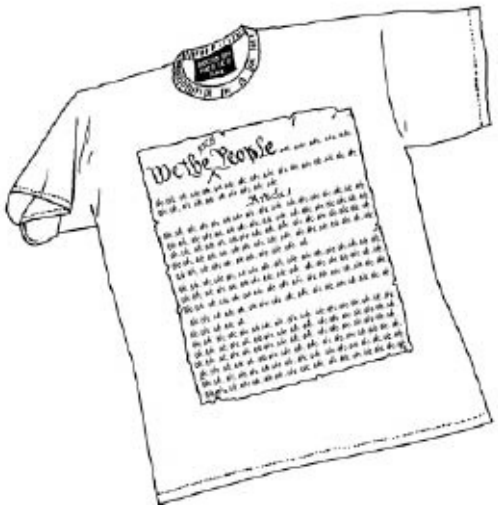
Once my eye had grown sufficiently jaundiced, I started to see material for the column everywhe —in lunatic manifestos from Steve Forbes on corporate leadership and entire cover packages in majo newsweeklies addressing the future of work without containing so much as a single passing mention of labor unions. Even though the United States was enduring its worst economic crisis since the Grea Depression, our major organs of opinion, most of the leadership in Congress and the regulatory worl and nearly all the major organs of the business press were carrying on serenely as though American society remained more a study in moneyed abandon than abandoned money.

I fancy myself a fairly practiced cynic, but it struck me that my randomly acquired beat was profoundly out of sync with the state of the real economy, so much so that the familiar run of busine coverage and economic commentary started to strike my ear as exceedingly strange. It all seemed no so much a hard-nosed appraisal of the way the world really works as a species of magical incantation worthy of the witches in the opening scene of *Macbeth*. From the point of view of my own journalistic production, this was a great boon; finding suitable column fare was generally not much more arduous than taking in a *Money* magazine feature on, say, the damage the downturn had wrought on exclusive golf clubs, letting the outrage sink in, and opening up a fresh Word document on the computer.

Slowly, though, it dawned on me that the odd pleasure of putting the column together each week served as a footnote of sorts to the more-or-less permanent character of these United States. The omission of real economic conditions from the accounting of the republic's collective life was

something that ran very deep—if also very diffusely—in our history. Unbidden, long-dormant snatches of my graduate history education started to tug at me and worked their way into the margins of the column. It became starkly evident, for instance, that one couldn't snipe at *Newsweek*'s saucer-eyed speculations about whether the new generation of young workers would be unduly stingy about floating more of their incomes into the consumer economy in order to jump-start still-skittish deman without also noting that the last generation of deeply traumatized American savers—those who came of working age during the Great Depression—had the assurance of a robust public sector, a fairly militant labor movement, and the informal social contract binding together business, labor, and government in common aims of enterprise. All these factors helped ensure that the wages of Depression-era wageworkers at least kept pace with the inflationary pressures that came with economic growth, once it finally arrived. All today's young workers had, by contrast, were the rancid leavings of the Reagan-inspired war on New Deal social protections—together with the banker-friendly policy initiatives of a craven "New Democrat" leadership on the other side of the partisan aisle.

Rich People Things began life as an afterthought title for a column without any particular mission statement to push it forward; but I later realized that this pointedly dismissive phrase took in a good many more trends, movements, and institutions than I'd first assumed. What were the US Constitution, the perpetual campaign-and-election season, the civic religion of celebrity worship, urban development policies, and the cloistered state of high-literary debate, if not also Rich People Things in their own right? Why not, then, widen the aperture of my accidental column to take in mor of the long view of the American scene? This is not to advance, mind you, any overarching materialis explanation of our past—strict economic determinism isn't an especially persuasive vision of history and is anything but a lively one. Rather, the conceit of this book is something infinitely more modest —an effort to apply the roving one-hit methodology of an online column, typically composed with th phrase "Can you believe this shit?" ringing in my ears, to somewhat sturdier features of our common life. In the impressionistic tract that follows, I've occasionally cannibalized my other published work both in the Awl and elsewhere, as it pertains to the expanding Rich People Things waterfront, but mainly I've just sought to imagine how the writing persona I've developed in the post-meltdown aughts would be provoked, baffled, and generally trigger happy if the Doc's time machine plunked him back down in the US history colloquia that formed the backbone of his long-ago graduate instruction. It's been cathartic, if nothing else, and I trust that you, dear reader, might find a similar tonic effect in these wayward musings.


We the People
Article I

Rich People Thing No. 1:

THE US CONSTITUTION

It’s no exaggeration to say that the great confoundment of common sense that Americans bring to the class question is rooted in the very founding of the American republic. The ratification of the US Constitution has been accorded an exalted place in our civic mythology. Long before Glenn Beck began to heap his incoherent adoration on the Founding Fathers, early historians of the United States such as George Bancroft spoke of our Constitution in full seriousness as the fulfillment of God’s will “The movement of the divine power which gives unity to the universe, and order and connection to events.”[1]

In reality, the debate over the Constitution was nowhere near so orderly; rather, it exposed the many divisions of social rank then assailing the fledgling United States. In the prosperous agricultura valleys of the fertile American colonies, planters formed huge landed estates—and put themselves forward immodestly as the model citizens and legislators of the new American nation after they had won their independence from the British Crown. One of the central propagandists for the ratification of the Constitution, John Jay, characterized the new leadership class baldly enough in a letter to George Washington: “The better kind of people, by whom I mean the people who are orderly and industrious, who are content with their situation and not uneasy in their circumstances.”[2]

Inconveniently for these worldly theorists, however, the vast majority of eighteenth-century Americans were uneasy in their circumstances. Landholders not blessed with vast valley tracts scratched out subsistence livings in upland regions; sunk in debt and hostage to erratic growing seasons, they tended to support a smaller, more decentralized government and to oppose harsh credit protections such as debtor prisons. Merchants and laboring men were likewise prey to boom-and-bus cycles of commerce, the dumping of cheap European exports in their domestic markets, and the constriction of currency as the post-Revolutionary republic began settling its massive war debts. This economic unrest exploded on the western frontier of Massachusetts in the rebellion led by farmer Daniel Shays, who militated to circulate paper currency to alleviate the crushing debt of the agrarian producing classes.

The uprising occurred in 1785–6, just prior to the calling of the Constitutional Convention. Even though it was put down in short order by state and federal forces, Shay’s Rebellion was assuredly never far from the inventive minds of Jay, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and the other propertied advocates of the new structure of the national government. Jay indeed wrote at the time th the uprising betokened “some revolution—something I cannot foresee or conjecture. I am uneasy and apprehensive; more so than during the war.”[3]

The whole question of indebtedness, currency, and the terms of credit runs like a hidden Guignol through much of American history, otherwise made to seem a calm procession of billowing abstract principles such as the extension of the franchise, the idea of popular sovereignty, and other pleasingl

Whiggish notions. The effect of reviewing the founding chapters of our history through the lens of clashing economic interests is, indeed, not unlike the grotesque war canvasses produced by Francisco Goya, pointing up the fraudulent cast of rationalist dogma and nationalist conflict current during the Enlightenment. The lead apologists for the Constitution—who appropriated for themselves the sonorous title of Federalists and, far more important, branded their socially inferior opponents with the epithet "Antifederalist"—took pains that the final document contained two critical protections fo the moneyed creditor class: a prohibition on the issuance of paper currency and a ban on state-level interference with contract obligations. The codicils of property, which had been subject to shifting jurisdictions under the old Articles of Confederation, acquired in the new document the aura of sacre writ; as Madison wrote in Federalist 44, the "sober people of America" had long suffered under the yoke of "the pestilential effects of paper money on the necessary confidence between man and man." It amounted, indeed, to "an accumulation of guilt which can be expiated no otherwise than by a voluntary sacrifice on the altar of justice"—i.e., the surrender of money-issuing powers to the centralized nation, so as to "inspire a general prudence and industry and give a regular course to the business of society."[4]

From these confident assertions of monetary right flowed most of the Constitution's other robust acknowledgments of property's social priority—including the infamous three-fifths clause, which counted the legal slave property of southern planters as fractional persons so as to artificially inflate the planter class's representation in Congress. While it would be hard to sell the practice of enslavement as a species of contract, the same basic outlook held: Relations of property naturally superseded the terms of the rational Enlightenment social compact, so much so that the Constitution' foundational doctrine of popular sovereignty (which goes by the familiar shorthand of "one man, one vote") in this instance was to be contorted out of all humane and sensible shape so as to accommodat a central property-holding interest. Thomas Jefferson, who'd already been prevailed upon by cooler mercantile heads to strike his ringing denunciation of the British slave trade in the early drafts of the Declaration of Independence, was schooled on this general principle in a 1788 letter from the fiercely antimajoritarian Madison: "In our Governments, the real power lies in the majority of the Communit and the invasion of private rights is chiefly to be apprehended, not from acts of government contrary to the sense of its constituents, but from acts in which Government is the mere instrument of a major number of the constituents."[5]

The Antifederalists—whose leaders included such Revolutionary-era luminaries as Patrick Henry Samuel Adams, and John Hancock (though these latter two prosperous merchants eventually came around to support ratification of the Constitution once the Antifederalist cause was plainly lost)—too a very different view of the social impact of the proposed system of government. In an address befor the Maryland Legislature, Samuel Chase announced that the system was a scheme to elevate the rich and wellborn to legislative influence.[6] Further down the social hierarchies, the sentiments against the document grew much more animated. A Massachusetts Antifederalist named Amos Singletary contended that all power under the new Constitution would accrue to "lawyers, and men of learning, and monied men." Having already locked up "all the power and the money," they would use the instruments of government to "swallow up all us little folks."[7] South Carolina Antifederalist Aedanu Burke reported that when news of ratification spread through the poor backcountry, "in some places the people had a Coffin painted black, which borne in funeral procession was solemnly buried as an emblem of the dissolution and internment of publick Liberty." Indeed, he continued, these opponents of the Federalist plan "think that having disputed and having gained the Laurel under the banners of Liberty, now, that they are likely to be robbed of the honour, and the fruits of it, by a Revolution

purposely contrived for it."[8] Pseudonymous Antifederalist writers cautioned that the Constitutional Convention was hatching a "monstrous aristocracy" that would "swallow up the democratic rights of the union and sacrifice the liberties of the people to the power and domination of a few."[9]

When progressive historian Charles Beard sought to put such claims to the test in his 1913 study, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States,* of 1965 he found that holders of landed estates, financial securities, and regional commercial empires within the union indeed made up the overwhelming majority of ratifiers at the Philadelphia Convention. Such worthies, he wrote, "knew through their personal experiences in economic affairs the precise results which the new government they were setting up was designed to attain."[10] Among those results, Beard concluded, was the exclusion of the nation's "large propertyless mass," either directly or through state representatives, from the Convention's deliberations, and a finished legal product that "was essentially an economic document based upon the concept that the fundamental private rights of property are anterior to government and morally beyond the reach of popular majorities."[11]

Beard was roundly eviscerated by most sober mainstream political-science types of his day for reaching such brute materialist conclusions about the document that occupies pride of place in the American civic religion. But most of the quantitative research that later scholars have conducted into the economic profile of the framers has borne out the Beard thesis and drawn long-overdue attention to the political battles pitched well behind the foreground of the Main Street USA diorama that most consensus historians have made out the Philadelphia Convention to be.

There's a more fundamental sense, though, in which the inhabitants of Bailout America can confirm Beard's argument with their own eyes. Once again, the holders of massive, government-enabled debt have been functionally locked out of a series of procedurally iffy proceedings explicitly designed to benefit the nation's narrow creditor and speculative class. Once again, popular outcries over the upward redistribution of wealth, and the downward socialization of risk, have been dismisse as so much immature and dangerous rabble-rousing. And the long-term political health of the republi is regarded as all but synonymous with the interests of moneyed privilege, so much so that elemental reforms to curb the destructive securitization of debt in commodity trades have been stymied by industry-drafted loopholes dropped into last-minute committee revisions. The Constitution may not have been so reliable in observing the letter or spirit of its opening "We the People" clause, but viewed in the more dispassionate light of the real constituency it was drafted to serve, it truly is, as th well-born nineteenth-century poet-cum-diplomat James Russell Lowell put it, "a machine that would go of itself."


The New York Times
In BP's Record, a History
Of Boldness and Blunders

Rich People Thing No. 2:

THE NEW YORK TIMES

Yes, I know: The American right has long derided the paper of record as a bastion of all things libera godless, and proto-communistic. But it's hard to give much credence to that view if you dally much with the actual brunt of coverage in the *Times*, which skews ridiculously toward the overindulged Manhattan elite. If you graze through the archives of, say, the Sunday business section, you'll see adoring profiles of executives since exposed as all-purpose brigands, from Goldman Sachs chieftain Lloyd Blankfein to former Citigroup chairman Sandy Weil, the man who crowed loudly that the 1999 legislation enacting the repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act restrictions on the giddy fusion of consumer and investment banking should have been called "Gramm-Leach-Bliley-Weil." Indeed, in a time of ruinous contraction in the news industry at large, and at the *Times* in particular, the Gray Lady has actually announced plans to increase its online business coverage, which speaks volumes about the company's image of its ideal reader.[1]

In a sense, though, every section of the *Times* is its business section. In the Sunday Styles section, for instance, readers regularly encounter features explaining how best to indulge a Wall Street bonus backed shopping spree without provoking "populist" ire among the hoi polloi who might clog the sidewalks outside a Henri Bendel sale. Meanwhile, the unsightly high-end shopping magazine *T* at least cops more directly to pandering to a plutocratic demographic than does the regular *Times Magazine* which usually dresses up its penchant for privilege-osculating in mock-sonorous columns on "The Way We Live Now." (The front matter so dubbed in the Sunday magazine would likely be briskly rechristened if the publication's editors bothered to read the Anthony Trollope novel of the same name, which places a fraudulent US railway investment scheme squarely in the center of its vision of Victorian-era moral decay.) Even the one reliable economically liberal voice in the paper—op-ed columnist Paul Krugman—is a still, small presence compared to the outsized free-market delusions routinely minted in his section under the bylines of Thomas Friedman, David Brooks, and Ross Douthat.

As the industry leader in the news business, the *New York Times* showcases in greatly distilled form the economic and journalistic crisis roiling our media markets. As readerships fragment, thronging to online and nichified news sources, general-interest papers now go to great lengths to narrowcast content for their prized cohort of readers in elite demographics—to flatter the sensibilities and taste preferences of the consumer markets who present the most robust prospect for would-be advertisers. However, this marketing mandate creates a near-intolerable state of tension with the professed journalistic mission of the newspaper—to serve as a national news source of first resort. In competin papers such as the *Washington Post*, chasing a shrinking readership down an ever-narrowing news hole h produced embarrassing scandal—as when *Post* publisher Catherine Weymouth publicized a plan in 2009 to pimp reporters out to advertisers at off-the-record policy salons in her home. In the more

genteel sanctums of *Times* leadership, there's no talk of resorting to such coarse pay-to-play gambits—for the simple reason that the paper's class affinities are already on abundant display in its pages.

And as the *Times*ian dalliance with the money culture billows upward, so does its vision of the plight of working Americans grow evermore puzzled, voyeuristic, and patrician. It's true that the paper is one of the only remaining metropolitan dailies to still employ a labor correspondent, the trul accomplished and sharp-eyed Steven Greenhouse. But it's also quite distressingly plain that the general treatment of working Americans in Timesland is akin to the way that the *Weekly World News* handles the Bigfoot beat—a source of erratic goggle-eyed wonderment, but not in any way a constituency claiming a serious purchase on adult attention. Hence the Gray Lady's recent pattern of consigning coverage of the unfortunates who fall below the entry barrier of the respectable middle class to the most voyeuristic "color" hand available in the newsroom—the just-folks professional southerner Rick Bragg through much of the nineties, then the arch purveyor of crusty American oddities, Charlie LeDuff, who left the paper in 2006.

The paper's blurry collective gaze downward on the class hierarchy conspired most unfortunately to produce an epic multipart 2005 series clumsily crafted as Pulitzer fodder, and later released as a book, called "Class Matters."[2] Here *Times* scribes heroically sought to reassure the paper's privileged readers that social class did not in fact matter all that much, at least so far as those Americans marooned in the wage-stagnant lower orders were concerned. No, "social diversity had erased many o the markers" of former divisions of caste and class, we learned in the opening installment of the series; indeed, it appeared that in these United States "merit had replaced the old system of inherited privilege."[3]

Such gentle cooing could only be music to the ears of Ivy League–educated Manhattanites, but unfortunately it bore no relation to the way the actual economy works. In 2005, the United States was in the midst of a five-year phase of economic expansion when wages actually declined—the first suc period in our history. Wealth was no more being apportioned on the basis of merit or social diversity than lollipops were growing on trees—yet the *Times* plunged serenely on, in misguided character studies that demonstrated little about actual working Americans beyond the way they confused and frightened *Times* correspondents. Writing on a food warehouse worker who stubbornly defied the meritocratic mandate of obtaining a college diploma, economics writer David Leonhardt described th poor sap as though he were a lab gerbil who had inexplicably seized up into paralysis midway throug his morning wheel-routine. "Many low-income teenagers know few people who have made it through college," Leonhardt marveled. "A majority of the non-graduates are young men, and some come from towns where the factory work ethic, to get working as soon as possible, remains strong, even if the factories themselves are vanishing. Whatever the reason, college just does not feel normal."[4]

Of course, college mainly tends not to feel normal if less privileged Americans have to rack up mountains of debt to meet tuition rates that rise at rates that are often more than double the rate of inflation. Even Leonhardt was forced to concede that a recent binge of social-spending cuts from the Bush White House produced the singularly perverse outcome in the university world that "high-income students, on average, actually get slightly more financial aid than low-income students."[5] Bu at the end of the day, the only explanation of stalled-out meritocratic advancement sufficiently comforting to *Times* readers had to be cultural—that these curious wage-earning life forms simply do not "feel normal" on the generously leafy grounds of their local university campuses. Imagine if, say Franklin D. Roosevelt had permitted such patrician fretting over the feelings of working-class kids to stay his hand from signing the GI Bill, which tore down forbidding class-based entry barriers at many elite universities.

I don't mean to dwell on Leonhardt's excesses here—in other respects, he's a very capable, and sometimes quite astute, writer on economic policy. But his arm's-length disquisition on working-clas mores typifies a glaring blind spot that's long assailed the nation's paper of record. Apart from occasional off-lead features about the impact of deindustrialization in the Rust Belt, the struggles of working Americans are virtually invisible in the paper's coverage. Indeed, in a little-noted breach of just about every notion of journalistic ethics, the *Times* had a former Sony studio executive, Michael Cieply, cover the 2008 Hollywood writer's strike—a conflict of interest that's roughly akin to handin the religion beat to, say, Christopher Hitchens.[6]

Meanwhile, in the aftermath of the devastating 2010 Haitian earthquake, *Times* correspondents Ma Lacey and Simon Romero filed a surreal dispatch that could readily be mistaken for a parody in the *Onion*."Quake Ignores Class Divisions of a Poor Land," the headline marveled in a tone of patrician dumbfoundment.[7] The accompanying text is no less wall-eyed in its astonishment at an impersonal a of God so risibly heedless of the hard-and-fast social distinctions that make up the *Times*ian social world. "Earthquakes do not respect social customs," Lacey and Romero write, as though they are desperately trying to pinch themselves awake. "They do not coddle the rich. They know nothing abou the invisible lines that in Haiti kept the poor masses packed together in crowded slums and the well-to-do high up in breezy places like Pétionville." Indeed, as our correspondents traipse those breezy streets, they depict a social world turned upside down, confounding the most elementary sense of a natural order: "The unsettling feeling of seeing one's home collapse, no matter the size, affected Haitians of all social strata. . . . Destruction. . .was on display up and down exclusive residential area like Pacot, near the old center, and Pétionville, in the hills above the city. Mansions were flattened ar monied families slept in the street in front of their destroyed residences, clinging to their possessions."

When the great Lisbon earthquake of 1755 devastated a European capital and claimed some 20,00 fatalities, the once-confident philosophes of the Enlightenment were shaken to their core and questioned the notion that such a devastating calamity could be the handiwork of a just, compassionate, and omnipotent God. Faced with a similar existential challenge, the *New York Times* was moved to reflect that here was the one instance where the carefully assembled trappings of privilege could not secure a safe and comfortable life.

Such oblivious patrician treatments of socioeconomic life are now routine fare in today's *Times*—a especially egregious state of affairs when one considers that the ruinous impact of the 2008 collapse on the ordinary American worker is, by any measure, one of the most significant stories of our age. Yet today, the *Times* economic beat is rendered as through the wrong end of a pair of binoculars, recording the heroic efforts of moneyed families trying to belatedly school their offspring in the travails of holding down an actual job, the regrettably downscaled real-estate ambitions of a Donald Trump or a Bruce Ratner, and the chastened business model of the hedge-fund world. It's a surpassingly glum statement on the class myopia of our paper of record that the most serious and in-depth treatment of the plight of working Americans in the actual productive economy comes from th broadsheet of the investor class itself, the *Wall Street Journal*.

But things are ever thus, it seems, in the elite provinces of midtown Manhattan journalism. Following the business coverage of the *Times*, one can't help recalling Robert Warshow's famous characterization of the *New Yorker*'s editors' abrupt, and generally unbecoming, lurch into "seriousness in the wake of the atomic bomb's impact: "They never dreamed that the world's inelegance could become so dangerous."[8]


At least you tried.
Well done!

Rich People Thing No. 3:

MERITOCRACY

Few words in American public discourse are so routinely mishandled and deliberately misunderstood as "meritocracy." We are beguiled by the brisk, efficient ring of the term, its reassuring undertone of futurism and office-park cleanliness. And of course the idea behind it, that every individual is rewarded on a strict, measurably fair basis for his or her best effort in the hierarchies of work and academic achievement, all but doubles as a national mission statement. Who, after all, could be against a system so self-evidently impartial, open-ended, and technocratic?

The person who originally coined the term, that's who. Michael Young was a British sociologist who studied family relationships and community bonds in industrial England. As he chronicled the relentless postwar expansion of the storied British civil-service ethos of measuring performance and assessing worth via intelligence testing, the seeds of a mischievous work of satire began taking root i his imagination. So in 1958, he published his satirical novel, *The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870–2033.*

The book is packaged as a government white paper in a future time of political crisis—as a new coalition of redundant technicians who've joined forces with women conscripted into a domestic-service class are militating for the overthrow of the entire social order. The report's anonymous auth —who coyly finds time in its footnotes to cite the long-ago scholarship of one "Michael Young"— revisits the postwar rationale for adopting the meritocratic scheme of social reward. As he presses placidly on, the reader gradually realizes that this is the anatomy of a chilling dystopia. The British Labour movement, which technocrats used as a convenient bludgeon to dismantle inherited privilege is casually consigned to history's dustbin once the meritocrats have sucked it dry of all its intellectua talent and capable leaders. As our dispassionate narrator lays out the dilemma, Labour activists had merely failed to appraise the remorseless working out of the principles they endorsed. "They demand that equality be more than opportunity; they demand equality in power, education, and income; they demand that equality be made the ruling principle of the social order; they demand that the unequal b treated as though they are equal."[1]

This latter point, of course, becomes an intolerable contradiction in a society arranged around the idea of impartial reward of merit—inequality is the very calling card of the meritocracy. "Once all th geniuses are among the elite, and all the morons among the workers, what meaning can equality have?" our narrator coos complacently. "What ideal can be upheld except the principle of equal statu for equal intelligence? What is the purpose of abolishing inequalities in nurture except to reveal and make more pronounced the inescapable inequalities of Nature?"[2]

Working from such organizing dictums, the meritocracy keeps social order intact via the planned redundancy of older workers in favor of their younger, better credentialed social betters and ever-greater emollients for the educated managerial class—lavishly compensated in a top-heavy salary system known as "merit money." Meanwhile, the brutish lower orders are kept in line via physical

entertainments (known in official jargon as the “Mythos of Muscularity”) and a revived domestic service, converting former manual workers into valets of the knowledge elite. The ultimate rationale for this caste-based upward distribution of resources was global competition in a new knowledge-based economy—the kind of reasoning that has a sickeningly familiar ring to readers of Thomas Friedman or *Wired* magazine. “To better withstand international competition, the country had to make better use of its human material,” our writer observes. After all, while “the proportion of people with IQs over 130 could not be raised—the task was rather to prevent a fall—but the proportion of such people in work which called upon their full capacities was steadily raised. . . . The ranks of the scientists and technologists, the artists and the teachers, have been swelled, their education shaped to their high genetic destiny, their power for good increased. Progress is their triumph; the modern worl their monument.”[3]

But the greatest joke of Young’s satire is that the ideology of meritocracy has taken firm hold in the United States—not as Young intended, as a cautionary watchword for the social tyranny of the knowledge class, but rather as a virtual synonym for the hoary American myth of equal opportunity. (There is even, hilariously enough, an American publishing house that has reissued the book as part o its “Classics in Organization and Management Series,” marking, so far as I know, the first completel unironic endorsement of dystopian fiction as fodder for management guidance.)

Young’s fictional alter ego might well dub this willful misprision, had he set his sights toward th deeply confused social order across the Atlantic, the Mythos of Merit. Hence *New York* magazine write Gabriel Sherman could summarize the rationale for sky-high executive compensation on Wall Street by pointing out that financial traders subtend “the virtue of efficient markets distributing capital to where it is most needed justifies extreme salaries—these are the wages of the meritocracy,” i.e., an impartial and just reward for a socially useful service. Similarly *New York Times* scribes Janny Scott and David Leonhardt could offer this excursus on moneyed reward and social class in America: “Merit ha replaced the old system of inherited privilege. . . . But merit, it turns out, is at least partly class-based Parents with money, education, and connections cultivate in their children the habits the meritocracy rewards.”

In both of these entirely representative examples, “meritocracy” is the tacit measure for justice in matters of income and wealth distribution. Sure, bond traders or wealthy families might manipulate the rules of access to meritocratic reward, but that reward itself is an unimpeachably sound principle of apportioning social worth.

One could only imagine that Young, who died in 2002, regularly greeted such naïve Yank misappropriations of his satirical construct with bitter guffaws. After all, shortly after Tony Blair’s New Labour party came into power, bearing all the trademark Third Way celebrations of credentialed business privilege, Young editorialized that the newly installed prime minister should retire his promiscuous use of a term he plainly failed to understand. “If meritocrats believe, as more and more of them are encouraged to, that their advancement comes from their own merits,” Young warned in the UK *Guardian*, “they can feel they deserve whatever they can get. . . . So assured have the elite become that there is almost no block on the rewards they arrogate to themselves. The old restraints o the business world have been lifted and, as the book also predicted, all manner of new ways for peopl to feather their own nests have been invented and exploited. Salaries and fees have shot up. Generous share option schemes have proliferated. Top bonuses and golden handshakes have multiplied.”[4]

Young may as well have offered up a class anatomy of the United States in the Clinton era, a time when the ratio of CEO to average worker salaries exploded from 40:1 to 400:1, and the bottom tenth of wage earners lost ground from the tenuous livelihoods they were vouchsafed in the Reagan/Bush

years. Yet shortly after Clinton's election, he was hailed by commentator Nicholas Lemann—author of a celebratory "meritocratic" history of college admissions testing called "The Big Test"—as "the first product of the American meritocracy to reach the White House," a figure with a bona fide "log cabin quality" to stave off traditional critiques of elite liberal aloofness.[5] And unto this day, liberal commentators like Lemann and conservative ones like David Brooks hymn the meritocracy as a hard Yank solvent that leaches away the faintest whiff of an Old World upper crust on these shores. In one sense they're right—as products of elite private colleges, these pundits have been impressively insulated from the true import of this favored phrase via a basic lack of reading comprehension. Young's vision of a meritocratic educational hierarchy consciously designed to perpetuate gaping social inequality is, in other words, magisterially intact.


DO TREAD ON ME

Rich People Thing No. 4:

POPULISM

It may seem perverse, at best, to count the debased term “populism” among the notions contained in the overclass’s sprawling warehouse of institutional vanity. The historical Populists, after all, were th sworn foes of moneyed privilege—debt-ridden farmers, industrial workers, and middle-class social reformers. Indeed, the Farmer’s Alliance took such spirited issue with the depredations of the late nineteenth century’s financial barons that its leaders advocated an alternate system of national currency and exchange, known as the Subtreasury Plan, which sought to reward labor and circulate goods and services on the basis of actual productive activity, as opposed to land-based speculation or the formation of market cartels.

But the actual economic history of populism has virtually no bearing on how the word is used today. It usually comes across in media dispatches as a catch-all term for spasmodic fits of popular anger—as when diffuse outrage greeted the news in 2009 that government bailouts were footing the bill for some $80 million in performance bonuses for executives at AIG, a firm whose recent performance had greased the skids of the US economy for a toboggan ride to hell. But the spasms always pass, and the fabled pitchfork-and-torchlight threat of populist mayhem never materializes.

Despite repeated stalwart efforts to revive the Populist brand—behind harebrained third-party candidates such as Ross Perot, Ralph Nader, and Pat Buchanan, via various culture-minded appropriations of the idea, from the triumphalism of the cultural studies academy to the recording careers of John Mellencamp and Bruce Springsteen—no explicit movement or political formation attaches to the term. The killjoy former editor of the *Partisan Review*, Philip Rahv, stubbornly refused to believe in the New Left without first learning its mailing address; we might well say the same of the amorphous “Populist” mood afoot in the land. Mainly, it’s a lazy framing device, summoned by pundits as an all-purpose scare tactic as a deadline looms or a cable talking point beckons.

And that’s also, not surprisingly, how populism has quietly bulked into a Rich People Thing. Onc you’re able to separate it from any coherent economic affiliation or program, populism becomes a floating signifier—here an ill-defined reflex of downwardly mobile resentment, there a broad-brush characterization of a voguish movie. (Adjourn to your Google, and you will quickly see that just abou any vaguely demotic Hollywood production, from *Up in the Air* to *Avatar*, gets tagged as “populist,” provided it hangs around at the box office long enough—a singularly odd circumstance given the profoundly aristocratic, and punitively copyright-minded, cast of today’s entertainment industry.)

In this scheme of things, ordinary Americans who may or may not possess legibly populist political leanings get consigned to what might be called the reality TV version of Populism—or bette yet, the Populist Front. That is to say, today’s populism convulses fleetingly and anonymously throug the body politic, leaving virtually no visible trace—and certainly no clear policy imprint of any kind. Meanwhile—and here is where things get really strange—populism on the right is tricked out with a