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THE SUBTLE ART OF KEEPING POOR PEOPLE POOR

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As the majority of all workers come from working class families, you would assume they are the ones creating the workplace environment. However, after the recent shift to addressing the discrimination of minorities, it seems like the world forgot the root cause of all these issues: classism; specifically, how the real minority – the high-class elite – is using it to keep the working-class poor and working. The way modern economy works creates a world where workers slave under unfair work conditions to keep their families fed. Thus, working class employees are perceived as less than and are being disproportionately exploited within the corporate hierarchy.

Among the many definitions of classism, the one most commonly found across dictionaries is “[p]rejudice and discrimination based on socioeconomic level or class” (Pincus & Sokoloff, 2008). Like with any other -isms, classism’s broad definition encompasses different types of bigotry; however, in order to understand all the nuances associated with the term, we need to define the usual target of this particular bias: the working class.

The lines between differences among classes and their categorization are blurred. We have the division based on income level: lower, middle and upper class, but most people identify with the division based on their type of labor: capitalists or the working class. In recent years, with the development of capitalism, the working class became synonymous with the lower class, denoting those that work blue- or pink-collar jobs, while those in positions of “higher value” belong to the middle or higher class depending on their annual salary (Lott, 2012). This sudden rise in class consciousness and active flight from being associated with the underclass was one of the first signs of our modern understanding of classism.

Throughout history, the working class has never really been represented in fiction and media; those that make the world go round were either completely ignored or represented as objects of pity or comedy. Instead, the focus of all these stories were usually the royalists or any wealthy people of influence in general. After World War II, this focus shifted. Suddenly, movies and literature centered regular people with regular jobs living their regular lives. Moreso, these characters were not presented in a negative light, they were patronized, and perhaps even romanticized to a certain degree due to the fact that the people fighting on the front lines were of this background. So, this sudden jump to their contempt felt unnatural and politically charged (Jones, 2011).

Corporate America and the rise of Thatcherism in the UK is what propelled the ideal of meritocracy and hard work as the means to amassing wealth. According to Plato (2003),

meritocracy is a political system in which power lies in the hands of individuals with the most merit, meaning those that contribute most value to society. Western forces then started pushing this concept and blaming the poor for their inability to rise in society. Although meritocracy is a flawed notion in and of itself, the current economy does not reflect it even its most basic terms. In today's world, those with the most "merit" are the ones born in positions that allow them to develop faster which creates a society in which the wealthy already have a major advantage and thus, society lies in the hands of those with the most money rather than anything else.

Pertaining to contemporary perceptions of lower-class individuals, Jones (2011) discusses the rapid spread of the idea that is used to sustain their hatred by perpetuating the omnipresent belief that the decent working class died out with the previous generation and was replaced by "stupid, idle, racist, sexually promiscuous, dirty" people. By characterizing them in this way and creating an idea that all they do is "pump out" children into this world so they can beg for higher unemployment checks, people in positions of power are able to justify continuously ruling out legislation that goes directly against the large majority and still win subsequent elections because nobody wants to be associated with the impoverished. Whether through mass implementation of technology in industrial sectors that led to millions of lost jobs or policies pertaining to reduction of council housing that led to millions of lost homes, these decisions were massively supported by the general public until they started negatively affecting their country's economy.

Discrimination is a concept referring to actions taken that deny equal treatment to individuals that subscribe to or are perceived as subscribing to a certain social category. Pincus and Sokoloff (2008) differentiate between the following types of discrimination: individual, institutional, and structural. Class based oppression can and does fall under all three types based on whether this oppression is done by individuals' behavior, dominant institutions' intentional policies or their accidental results. As shown, working class people are not just occasional targets of harassment - their discrimination is in the systemic core root of capitalism that plagues every aspect of humans' lives even outside of the workplace environment: from military and prison industrial complexes to healthcare and education systems, and more (Lott, 2012).

Exploitation, on the other hand, takes the concept of discrimination and drives it to its full potential. Whilst thinking about this, the image that comes to mind is usually the one of faraway lands where children slave for pennies; and although that is definitely a part of it, it is only the tip of the iceberg. Capitalistic exploitation, at its most fundamental level, is the sale of labor for less than the full monetary value of commodities it produces. Since the working class are the ones selling their labor for the lowest wage return on their work, they are disproportionately exploited in comparison to their colleagues on higher levels of the corporate hierarchy and are unfairly compensated in comparison to executives that take most of this so-called surplus value as the source of their own profit (Marx, 1993).

Unfortunately, albeit the aforementioned practices are the only types of exploitation that are explicitly legal in the western world, mass corporations have historically always found ways of eluding these laws on illicit exploitation by either taking their production overseas or simply hiding under policymakers' noses as they turn a blind eye in order to expand the sphere of business. Forced labor is a version of modern slavery that encompasses a wide

variety of abusive and exploitative actions such as child labor or criminally underpaying workers with the goal of extracting the largest portion of profit and leaving the actual laborer with next to nothing. This type of enslavement is most commonly utilized by corporations with production facilities in African and South Asian countries where wages are low and levels of corruption are high; however, it would be naïve to assume that these firms are not committing the same crimes domestically too – conditions such as those in Californian illegal sweatshops are frequent even in the west (Caruana, et al., 2021).

Let us examine the obstacles those born under the disadvantageous panopticon of incessant prejudice and mistreatment coming from families of working-class backgrounds have to face while trying to prosper. One of the primary mechanisms that shapes the lives and minds of these children is the cycle of poverty – a tenacious trap that causes poverty which persists across generations due to a lack of resources and opportunities available. In simpler words: people born in poverty are most likely to die in poverty and have children who will follow the same pattern unless an outside force breaks through. In worst cases, malnutrition, lack of sanitation, inadequate healthcare, etc. run rampant; however, even in lower-class families that are considered as being in better social standing, insufficient education prohibits further development. Furthermore, many children have to neglect school altogether in order to help their parents put food on the table (Azariadis & Stachurski, 2005).

Speaking of the inherent elitism of academia and its perpetuation of class-based privilege, special attention has to be drawn to private schooling. Tax paid public schools and universities rely on annual budgets that are among the first to be cut once there is a deficit, whilst private institutions get most of their funding through high tuitions, endowments, and donations. This imbalance of accessible capital between the two creates an unequal playing field within the pool of graduates since the resources that are available to private schools build students that are well prepared for their future careers. Additionally, private tutoring allows wealthier students to obtain better grades and test scores further needed for enrolling in top universities which have a name in the professional environment. Circling back to the futile lie of meritocracy, this serves as a prime example of its inexistence – the world is not ruled by those with most merit, it is ruled by those with money that allows them to build their merit (Hughes, 2021).

The inbuilt tendency of capitalism to breed nepotism and cronyism constructed a social apparatus that is self-destructive in nature and poses as another structure that discriminates against the working class. Although it may seem unproductive to hire purely based on familial or friendly ties regardless of any potential or credentials, it is observable all around. The west is moving away from nepotism as it slowly realizes how inefficient it is; however, the more you climb up the corporate ladder and the more money is involved, the more prevalent it is. Even if we disregard actual nepotism or cronyism, it is difficult to ascend without any connections or, what the business world wants you to think it is, networking. Due to a lack of relationships with influential people within spheres of interest, working-class people will always lag behind their wealthier peers (Hodgson, 2019).

The ability for an individual to progress through promotions at the workplace is constricted by all the barriers mentioned throughout this paper, but in spite of all that, is not impossible. The gate at these enterprise stairs to which working-class individuals have

historically been denied the key to has been letting people of this background through its cracks. Whether luck or talent recognition is at play, a plethora of new faces is ever-present in corporate offices as of late which creates a new problem: workplace classism and bigotry. The appeal of advancement is usually just a front CEOs hide behind to justify treating their workers as less than human even in corporate cubicles. Not only do they have to suffer smaller wages and benefits, but also the ceaseless harassment and mistreatment from their colleagues. This is especially present the higher one climbs up the ladder and surround yourself with people whose jobs have been guaranteed since childhood (Rice, 2021).

With the understanding that the world is owned and operated by the richest 1% of the population, the failures of capitalism are obvious; however, cheating a system built with such favoritism at heart is still attainable, thus enter: working-class billionaires. The conundrum behind the discussion whether becoming a billionaire without exploitation is possible is questionable in and of itself; however, becoming a billionaire with no generational wealth without exploitation is out of the question. Once at that level, low taxing and poor governmental policies allow further wealth hoarding. This cycle of abuse of previously working-class individuals exploiting other working-class individuals is present even at levels lower than those of billionaire status, but in a system that promotes the “either kill or be killed” mindset and the uncertainty of having a roof over one’s head, the ethics behind one’s actions are sadly not a priority (Manjoo, 2019).

Opposing views of classism are hard to discuss since nobody really denies that classism exists, rather, they believe that classism is one of the justifiable “isms” of current society. Unlike racism or sexism which is frowned upon to openly support, classist individuals paint their discrimination as necessary for capitalism to flourish. They believe that vast differences between classes are reasonable since it is imperative to keep the poor poor because somebody needs to do the physical labor needed for production of commodities. Furthermore, they are of the opinion that the higher class is expanding all thanks to the constant creation of jobs capitalism allows for (Forbes, 2019). Yes, more people are getting rich, but this is a faulty argument as it is true only because the middle class is shrinking, and more people are falling into poverty (Gornick & Johnson, 2020). Considering the intricacies of intersectionality between all these terms, classism embeds all other forms of prejudice and creates a socially correct way of being a bigot.

Summarizing all the information presented in the paper, it is clear that the capitalistic ideal of democracy, hard work, and fair compensation is futile. A working-class individual bound by the shackles of poverty has to surmount many discriminatory hurdles just to be presented with opportunities gifted to their wealthier peers seemingly from when they were born. If lucky enough to escape, they still have to face harassment due to their background and the only way of fully breaking out is the perpetuation of exploitation of the class that raised them. This unjust system disproportionately affects the working class by purposefully keeping the vast majority of the population impoverished as a source of cheap labor power and to prevent possible revolutions that would be bound to happen if only they had enough influence and wealth to tip the scales against the bourgeoisie.



Image 1. Economic inequality. Taken from <https://medium.com/neoliberal-implications-on-american-inequality/how-neoliberalism-created-american-income-inequality-a9ebda0626c3>

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