

The Leisure Class Disease

A Self-review of Teoria della classe disagiata (Minimum Fax, 2017)

Raffaele Alberto Ventura

Freelance researcher and journalist

Introduction

Precarious millennials, scholars of Islamic Law in 14th Century Egypt, Anton Chekhov's and William Shakespeare's characters. What do they all have in common? They all suffer from some sort of "class dysphoria", being too poor to achieve their aspirations and too rich to renounce to them. This is a recurring condition, depending on cycles of accumulation and consumption. Today, Western Middle Class is chained to the bourgeois habits and needs created by the spectacular economic growth of the post-war years, but can no longer afford them. Standing at the gates of an adult age that seems it will never come, millennials are wasting a huge amount of resources in order to participate in a winner-takes-all competition for fewer and fewer job opportunities. In this way, they are providing the aggregate demand Late Capitalism desperately needs in order to sustain its productive system: but this non-cooperative game among the heirs of the Middle Class is also leading to what I called a "Mutual Assured Declassing". A terrible source of *anomie* and resentment accelerating the collapse of the social order we live in.

Switching between economics and literature, from Veblen to Kafka, my book *Teoria della classe disagiata* ("The Theory of Leisure Class Disease") formulates a merciless self-critical analysis of this social class, deconstructing along the way many myths about school, University, cultural industry, and the social web. After becoming a cult book in its first self-published edition in 2015, the new version published by Minimum Fax in September 2017 is having a considerable echo in Italian media and society. I modeled the concept of Leisure Class Disease in 2014 according to the *Theory of the Leisure Class* published by Thorstein Veblen in 1899. The reason for using this model is easily said: by observing unrest in the social class I belong to—I was born in 1983 and I work in the cultural industry—I deemed it more worthwhile to insist on its analogies with the bourgeoisie rather than on the poorer classes engaged in the primary and secondary sectors. Veblen's theories about positional consumption are now back in style thanks to

Corresponding author's e-mail: raffaele.ventura@gmail.com

Citation: Ventura, Raffaele Alberto. 2017. The Leisure Class Disease. A Self-review of Teoria della classe disagiata (Minimum Fax, 2017). Clodynamics 8: 240–245.

Elizabeth Currid-Halkett's book *The Sum of Small Things*, but my point is far less optimistic than hers: Leisure Class Disease means that for many of the sons of western Middle Class (the "Aspirational Class" as she calls it) there is literally *no more room*.

Checking Our Privilege

My purpose is to understand an unquestionably dramatic situation without indulging in the usual identification of our middle class with an "oppressed" class. By the way, who is the real oppressor here? It seemed to me that the most profitable model was to examine what happens to the (relatively) wealthy middle-income class when facing a crisis.

This is why it is interesting to start with the analogies with the class Veblen described more than a century ago, engaged in the "conspicuous consumption" of luxury and culture to ensure its social position. Just like the young lords and ladies in seventeenth century theatre, that lay out their money in the hope of putting their hands on a rich gambling win or on an advantageous marriage. However, cultural consumption is not an economically neutral activity: it is the indirect result of a huge amount of accumulated labour. It applies to cultural products, provided by machinery manufactured on the other side of the world in an ever-increasing number of factories in China. But it also applies to the consumer, the result of years of unproductive education and training financed by surplus wealth. Hosea Jaffe, a South-African historian of colonial rule, went so far as to say that the entire western population benefits from global surplus-value; and this must be remembered not so much to foster the well-known western "guilt of the white man", but rather to make him understand on whom and on what depends that prosperity which he seems no longer to be aware of.

Of all our privileges, culture is the one we struggle most to deal with: perhaps because cultural consumption defines our identity and from the moment it made us what we are it becomes impossible to picture ourselves in a different way—a little like Don Quixote, who first believes he is a Knight-errant and then becomes one. Nowadays, the web can connect us to a very convincing virtual world of satisfaction, capable of making this identity credible. In the user generated content and prosuming universe, we are all famous for fifteen minutes (or fifteen people) and we consume the chance to express our talent. New technologies provide new weapons for a positional competition that, as in Veblen's times, should serve the purpose of determining our place in the social hierarchy.

However, if I talk about a *Disease* it is because today our privilege is threatened by the intrusion of economic reality. At a first level of analysis, we can talk about a class dysphoria just like we talk about gender dysphoria for transexuals: there is a discrepancy between the identity imposed on the

Aspirational Class from the outside and the identity it claims for itself, or more precisely (as Guy Standing observed in his research on precarious work) a discrepancy between its economic condition and its social and cultural profile. Thus this class cannot ensure the material conditions which are essential to its own self-achievement.

This tragedy is clearly visible in the labour market, where the Aspirational Class has fewer (and therefore more poorly paid) jobs. But the failed bourgeois cannot accept to go under a certain level, for his education and training prepared him for something entirely different. In the same way the characters of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* helplessly watch the end of the old feudal world, unable to adjust their hearts to the mechanisms of the economy. And this is why we can say that culture, besides being a privilege, is also a condemnation. For, as Veblen already noticed, it teaches us to consume more and more new products and more and more refined ones. Jean Baudrillard, the theorist of the "Ideological Genesis of Needs", had understood since the 1960s that this mechanism was fundamental for the functioning of the consumer society.

But why today are jobs few and badly paid? Where does the disease come from? Proceeding to a second level of analysis, we must admit that the problem of this class is not actually its lack of wealth, but on the contrary its relative abundance. The Aspirational Class gets poorer because it is too wealthy: its crisis is one of over-accumulation, like the ones studied by Giovanni Arrighi along the history of global capitalism. The same happened in medieval Egypt, if we believe Ibn Khaldun, who describes the competition within the consumer class exacerbated by the excess of accumulated wealth. And this can happen now according to biologist and historian Peter Turchin, who described a similar mechanism in *War and Peace and War: The Rise and Fall of Empires*. Although counterintuitive, this paradox is essential to understand the mechanism in which we are stuck. And in order to do that we must trace the origin of this consumer class named the 'middle class', burdened by an exceptional historical duty: to sustain the economic growth of the Western World with its enormous demand.

Over-accumulation and Overproduction of Human Capital

We owe to Hegel the most effective summary of the contradictions of capitalism: "Despite an excess of wealth, civil society is not wealthy enough". What is the German philosopher, a reader of Sismondi and Ricardo, referring to in paragraph 245 of the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*? He is talking about the feature of the industrial economy that drives towards a continuous increase in productivity, and therefore clashes with the limits of the market, causing cyclical crisis. A big deal indeed: through mechanization the mass of products to sell grows because facilities are lucrative, but no one can buy them. Then, in the 20th century came

the middle class as a messiah, the chosen class of John Maynard Keynes' doctrine which had the task of consuming this surplus.

The capitalist structural trend of overproduction forced the state to collect a growing share of profit to reallocate for consumption. However, in the last half-century a part of this share, instead of being spent directly, has been accumulated by the middle class as savings or real estate, to serve at a later stage as investment in social reproduction (education and employability of the heirs). Hence this consumer class, by now identical to Veblen's Leisure Class in habits and ambition, finds itself facing a *crisis of overaccumulation*: that is to say it has more capital than opportunities for investment. Besides, in the meantime western economic growth has decreased, pushed towards its "Pillars of Hercules" by the constant increase in productivity and competition which, as Marx announced, consumed profit margins.

The lack of career opportunities causes fierce competition within social reproduction, education and training investment, and positional consumption, which in turn leads to an overproduction of qualified human capital. To put it in a simpler way: a part of the Aspirational Class spends more time studying and lowers its salary demands, in the hope of kicking its rivals out of competition, inside a "generalized prisoner's dilemma" that damages everyone. It's the Cold War Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), or rather Mutual Assured Declassing, which nowadays only an unpopular competition regulation policy might temporarily fix. The same happens in situations where the propensity to save is lower but the access to credit is easier, like in the USA, where the banks (hence pension funds, hence always the accumulated stock of wealth) are the ones who finance this same competition and foster a huge financial bubble. In the present situation of slow growth, labour market reorganization, and renegotiation of the global value chain, it will not be possible to collocate all the members of this "failed" class.

There are various kinds of consequences of this over-accumulation and overproduction crisis, and almost all of them are negative: the increase in the production cost of social reproduction makes the access to positions less egalitarian; many participants in the competition do not recover their education and training investment; the gap between expectations and achievements generates social unrest and resentment. Meanwhile—and this is the only bitterly positive aspect—the fierce competition "keeps the economy going"... until it doesn't. While we wait for this cycle of accumulation to run out definitively and for the beating heart of the world economy to migrate somewhere else, our relative excess of wealth will keep making us poorer and our relative excess of culture will keep tormenting us for our shortcomings.

***Teoria della classe disagiata* Table of Contents**

Chapter One: "The Aspirational Trap". Contemporary Middle Class is described as an impoverished Leisure Class chained to positional consumption in order to prevent social bankruptcy, hence eroding its stock of savings.

Chapter Two: "The Center Cannot Hold". This chapter describes the slow collapse of postwar economy and goes back to the medieval insights of Ibn Khaldun on the cycles of growth and stagnation. Every crisis produces some kind of Leisure Class Disease, a confusion between social imprinting and social destination.

Chapter Three: "The Comedy of Debt". This chapter offers an account of the collapse of keynesianism as a system where unproductive consumption has been elected as the main regulator of overproduction: the Leisure Class, trained to consume, is the human product of this regulatory need.

Chapter Four: "User Generated Culture". This chapter describes the great phases of the history of Cultural Industry, from Gutemberg to prosuming: the prosumer incarnates the ideological confusion between consumption and production and the Leisure Class delusion of being productive even when consuming.

Chapter Five: "Mutual Assured Declassing". This is the perverse effect of equality politics, opening to a fratricidal competition between the members of the Leisure Class.

Chapter Six: "Extinction". This last chapter lists the social, political and demographic consequences of the Leisure Class Disease, when the tragic conflict between reality and expectations produces the poison of resentment.

References

- Amin, Samir. 1976. *Unequal Development: Social Formations at the Periphery of the Capitalist System*. London: Branch Line.
- Anderson, Chris. 2008. *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More*. New York: Hachette Books.
- Arrighi, Giovanni. 1994. *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of Our Times*. London: Verso.
- Barbagli, Marzio. 1974. *Disoccupazione intellettuale e sistema scolastico in Italia, 1859-1973*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Bataille, Georges. 1991. *The Accursed Share: an Essay on General Economy, Vol. 1: Consumption*. New York: Zone Books.
- Baudrillard, Jean. 1980. *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. St. Louis: Telos Press.

- Baudrillard, Jean. 2016. *The Consumer Society*. London: Sage Publications. doi: 10.4135/9781526401502.
- Celentano, Denise. 2012. "A. Honneth, *Riconoscimento e conflitto di classe. Scritti 1979-1989*." *ReF – Recensioni Filosofiche* 73.
- Currid-Halkett, Elizabeth. 2017. *The Sum of Small Things*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. doi: 10.1515/9781400884698.
- Durkheim, Emile. *On Suicide*. 2007 [1897]. New York: Penguin Classics.
- Frank, Robert H. and Philip J. Cook. 1996. *The Winner-Take-All Society: Why the Few at the Top Get So Much More Than the Rest of Us*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Girard, René. 1976. *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Gordon, Robert J. 2016. *The Rise and Fall of American Growth: The U.S. Standard of Living since the Civil War*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. doi: 10.1515/9781400873302.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Fredrich. 1991. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hirsch, Fred. 1978. *Social Limits to Growth*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. doi: 10.4159/harvard.9780674497900.
- Ibn Khaldûn. 2015 [1377]. *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Jacquet, Chantal. 2014. *Les transclasses ou la non-réproduction*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Jaffe, Hosea. 1986. *A History of Africa*. London: Zed Books.
- Keynes, John Maynard. 1965. *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*. New York: Harcourt.
- Mandel, Ernest. 1999. *Late Capitalism*. New York: Verso.
- Mattick, Paul. 1981. *Economic Crisis and Crisis Theory*. London: The Merlin Press.
- Mattick, Paul. 1969. *Marx and Keynes: The limits of the mixed economy*. Boston: Porter Sargent.
- Schumpeter, Joseph. 2008. *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics. doi: 10.4324/9780203202050.
- Standing, Guy. 2011. *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Turchin, Peter. 2007. *War and Peace and War: The Rise and Fall of Empires*. New York: Penguin.
- Veblen, Thorstein. 2009. *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.