

Post Modern Class Warfare

We live in strange times. There's no good, no evil, no ethics or morals. Just this vast, post-modern idyll in which those from the right side of the tracks get to make up the rules as they go along. Their only goal – protect what little turf they've inherited from their parents. Some of them actually worked for it, but most didn't. They just mind the gates and make damn sure the filthy proletariat don't invade the country club or threaten the status quo.

And then they get bored. Or perhaps they feel the pressure building, as it does when the wealth of a nation becomes too concentrated. It's a vicious cycle: fewer and fewer people get a hold of more and more, until the mob turns ugly and takes some of them down. And then it starts all over again: greed, greed, and the big, violent cultural reset when it gets burned down and we start the whole farce all over again.

We like to pretend that there are some kind of rules in effect, that if you play the game, do your best and work hard, it will pay off. It's a very big lie. It doesn't happen, unless of course you want to become one of *them*. One of those "bounders" who will do anything, to anyone, and for any reason so long as it holds the promise of membership in that tiny segment of the culture where you get it all, and more than you can ever use. And then hand it over to *your* kids, who will do their best to hang onto it no matter what the human cost. Until another Nero or Caligula is crowned and the Visigoths tear it all down again.

They're scared right now: you can smell it in what's left of the newspapers, and out on the street. They know they've gone too far, and done over way too many of those little people. And they can't really hide it. That McMansion on the hill is now a little too obvious, not just gauche, but a little like a scarlet letter or a bulls-eye. And since it was paid for with a big, open con, there's no way to pretend that *their* hands are clean.

Social complicity is not so easy to shake: in 1946, there weren't any rich Germans who could really live with themselves. Or anyone else. They knew they had a hand in it, and so did everyone else. And they still haven't recovered – that was a dance no one can ever really leave. So they rot away. Oh, it looks pretty clean on the surface, with the shiny cars and the new construction covering the scars of the past. But just beneath the surface, the corruption rots away the soul, and it will never really be OK for them. They sell a lot of S&M gear in Berlin, and across what's left of Germany these days. It makes sense.

If you want to see what's happening on the front lines of the economic battlefield (or what's left of it these days), go to any college classroom and really watch what people are doing for their grades. The professors make some token effort to hide it, but it's all too obvious that the game is rigged from the get-go. The degree is the modern passport to the middle and upper class, and they are tasked to protect who gets one. Oh, they let enough of the climbers through to prevent a lawsuit (or worse, social embarrassment), but the majority get sent back to the kitchens and the mobile home parks regardless of their talent or potential. Can your parents afford the ride? That's the real litmus test. Anyone who functions at the 10th grade level can get the grades just by showing up and breathing. It comes down to who can pony up the dough every month. And buy the right clothes, talk the right game, and show their inherited membership in the right class by using those subtle cues.

After the short walk in the gown and mortar board, the real farce begins. We get a little glimpse of it when the cameras roll in the congressional hearing rooms after somebody gets caught choking at the trough, but most of the time, they keep the office doors closed pretty tight. They rig the game, from the moment they get access to the controls, and we are supposed to just let them do it. When someone

shows the bad taste to blow any kind of whistle, we instinctively know they will come to a bad end. It's not that hard, we can't really see where the tragic hero makes a difference. The game just goes on, and we know who is going to win in the end. And it's not us.

Faced with the prospect of becoming the next Willy Loman, we retreat into the comfort of denial. We renounce the material goals, escape into religion and whatever cable TV or Netflix is willing to send us. We don't really starve, and so long as we get enough of the synthetic manna to keep us busy, we let it go. We accept the idea that a lucky few should have way too much while the rest of us live for the next payday. To object to the big lie is to brand oneself as some kind of Marxist, or even worse, as an idealist who has lost touch with, ahem, *reality*.

So how do you recognize that tipping point, the moment when the unstable compound starts to flash over and burn everything around it? In our postmodern era, we are used to rejecting anything that sounds like an objective truth or a global cultural narrative. Or at least we try to. And then something happens. The last time, four officers were acquitted by a Los Angeles judge and jury who played along with the idea that they couldn't really believe their eyes when they watched that videotape. The clubs, however, really did come down on that man's head, and everybody outside the courtroom knew it. Imagine their surprise when they walked out after reading the verdict and found the city on fire. Twenty years later, will we be shocked if Wall Street meets the same fate? Sometimes, the truth does win out, and the big story manages to reach its audience.

It's pretty clear that they don't intend to change their ways, or share anything with anyone, ever. Which throws the ball into our side of the court. We need to decide what we want do about it. Should we let it go on, and accept the slow ride down the spiral they've built for us, or do we hit the street and take it back? Just how bad does it have to get before we decide that it's time to redraw the lines around what we can all live with and what we cannot stand? Can we really look our kids in the eye and tell them it's OK, that they will have a chance, if they work hard and play fair? And believe it? Be honest with yourself, and with them, and let our leaders know the time for real change is now.



Steven Peterson, 2011