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# A Society of Us and Them



(Daniel Lee/Unsplash.com)



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## Commentary

Dottering around in a large clothing store, I sat down for a few moments near the changing rooms. An employee came by and started collecting leftovers from a huge bin. She was putting them in a cart and heading out to get all these rejected items back on the rack from whence they came.

This used to be my job when I was about 16 years old—an improvement over being a busboy and a well-digger, which I also did—so I engaged her immediately about the task, how often she has to do this, and the odd way in which people can never be trusted to put their clothing back in the proper place.

We laughed together about how the same seemingly attractive dress always ends up back on the rack. We smiled and I wished her the best and off she went. I like these conversations because I'm genuinely curious. Commerce and work delight me. I like to hear tales from the front lines.

There was something magical about that moment. I almost hesitate to admit what it was. I was dressed to the nines in my fanciest suit because I had come from church. I speak in a slightly odd way and cannot help it but it seems “high.” She was in jeans, just doing her drudgery job at a likely low salary, probably behind on her bills.

But there we were sharing anecdotes about the same position, with knowing insider information about what it means to keep a clothing store stocked. I adore her job, and the place where she works. This is because doing something along these lines was my first authentic “adult-like” job I had, following years of dishwashing, well-digging, fence-moving, roofing repair, busing tables, and crawling around organ pipe racks and moving pianos.

The point was that we had a connection. She was likely startled by this. Again, this is an uncomfortable topic these days, but it is highly likely that she would not imagine there would be any shared experience between a “person like me” and a “person like her.”

That's because we inhabit today a world of extreme class distinctions. More now than ever. There are fences everywhere: the servers and the served, the upwardly mobile and the downcast, the real workers and the professional class, the essential and nonessential.

I find all of this nonsense disgusting, even immoral, not the fact that there are a variety of positions and working vocations in society but that there seems to be ever less mobility between them. This is a massive problem in today's world. One class cannot come close to identifying with the other. They are them and we are us.

This all came to a head in 2020 when the government itself demarcated the population according to class and rank. It all happened in one day. Suddenly everyone was aware of who we all were whereas in the past this was mostly invisible. Suddenly there were those who deserved to be virus-free and those who needed to face the virus and serve the privileged.

A cook during those times said to me: “You are one of those people who works on a computer.” That amazed me. I had never thought of myself as one of those anythings at all. But the government had divided us, and then it became very obvious who was who and what was what.

We had been good friends—I had been a cook too—and then suddenly there was a barrier between us. I had never thought of social class this way, because most Americans never think about social class at all.

Americans are a temperamentally egalitarian people: democracy in America and all that. Class mobility has made us forget about this topic. We believe that we have no upper class because we got rid of titles of nobility. Everyone in America, we believe, is middle class, so we invented a series of qualifiers: lower, middle, and upper-middle middle class. This is a way of flattering ourselves that we have so long left the caste system of feudalism that we don’t even talk about it.

But have we really left feudalism? It has been forced upon us during the period just a few years ago when government itself constrained the range of our freedom based on our profession. Suddenly we found ourselves divided into classes: laptop vs. physical workers vs. unessential people who do things like cut hair or perform manicures or serve in religious services. It was a barbaric policy but its remnants have profoundly affected the culture in which we inhabit.

My encounter today with the clothing store employee charged with hanging things back on racks once they were tried on prompted a reflection on an even more fundamental problem.

Generations now have been raised without having to work at all. They go to school, then more school, then more school—which amounts to sitting at desks and absorbing what authorities tell you to

think—and then graduate with what we call a credential, even though none of these people can actually do anything at all.

Then we as a society shuffle these credentialed people into exalted positions, provided they are from the right institutions, whereas if they are from the wrong institutions, they are discarded to suffer in lowly jobs earning only enough to pay off their student loans. This is all extremely cruel and pointless.

Do we really have enough knowledge remaining in the culture so that we can identify with each other up and down the ladder of the social strata? Sadly I think not. There are ever fewer people around with professional-style jobs who have any experience at all doing the “dirty work” of cooking, cleaning, repairing, driving, or otherwise doing what it takes to get by. And there are ever fewer “working-class” people who ever imagine an escape.

This has created strange chasms. The social classes no longer understand each other. Lacking understanding and empathy, a dismissive disdain is just around the corner. This is dangerous for freedom and the good society.

There is no getting around the whole issue of social strata. Perfect equality is a myth and unattainable. But equality in freedom itself is something modern societies rightly sought to attain. That’s what has been under attack, particularly in the last few years. These days, freedom is something you buy, not earn by virtue of your very humanity. That’s a huge tragedy, and a highly dangerous cultural condition.

What can be done about the lack of empathy between professional pursuits? Something needs to be done about the problem of whole generations of people never having worked in real jobs but instead being ensconced in classrooms until the age of 24 and older. This is ridiculous and dangerous.

To my mind, the real problem began in 1936 when FDR and the Congress banned what they called “child labor,” which was really a ban on teen labor in order to make the unemployment problem appear statistically less significant. It was not heavily enforced. The main point was to take millions off the labor rolls for statistical appearances.

But decades later, the enforcement became quite strict. If you have ever tried to get your teen a job, you know this. Their idleness is enforced by law, so instead they turn to pursuits both goofy and dangerous.

Gradually over the decades, youth jobs became associated with less social status. Fewer and fewer young people have ever done things like cut trees, repair roofs, install floors, cook and serve meals, work in retail, or anything else meaningful. These are the people protected from any discomfort at all.

If I had my way, I would repeal this ridiculous law and every law ever since, and then massively raise the status of youth work.

When I was young, I got away with finding great jobs from the age of 12 and onward. I loved every bit of it. I liked experiencing new things, having a boss that was not my mom or dad or teacher. Earning money for me was a mark of dignity and achievement.

Working a huge range of professions as a young person—I cleaned a department store, crushed boxes, washed dishes, delivered cosmetics as a runner, worked crazy contraptions like waxers, cement mixers, and slaved on my hands and knees digging stick pins out of carpets—infuses us with a sense of identity and connection to others. All work is worthy and wonderful and everyone should experience as much of it as possible.

I personally got around “child labor laws” by lying about my age. These days that is no longer possible. As a result, people are somehow protected from reality until they are well on their way to adulthood, and then stay that way the rest of their lives. This way lies disaster. It needs immediate fixing.

In other words, the kids really need to be put to work: mowing lawns, cleaning gutters, serving food, building houses, paving streets, shining shoes, or whatever. The details don't matter. What matters is that we find a path toward universal cultural and social empathy that is the bulwark of freedom. That will help the next generation but it does not address the problems we have right now, which are very real.

The idea of “us versus them” really must end. We are all human beings, and we are all working to assemble the best possible contribution to making life better for ourselves and for others.

If we don’t fix this problem, we will forever be vulnerable to manipulation by elites and their vision of a society of castes. This is not what freedom is and not what America is. Let’s work to find a path back toward mutual understanding toward each other, and come to recognize that the real enemy is not people with different vocations or even different religions and ideologies but the elites and masters in Washington who see a path toward a victorious hegemony that is endlessly dividing the rest of us against each other.

*Views expressed in this article are opinions of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Epoch Times.*

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