7 The Consequences of Post-Industrial Peonage

Exploitation without rebellion seems to me far more ordinary state of affairs than revolutionary war.

—James C. Scott

Don't talk about the majority of bums who live in tin huts. They shouldn't even vote. . . . Anyone who goes on welfare should lose their right to vote. They are parasites.

—Michael Savage, AM Talk Show Host, April 18, 2002

Well, what if you said something like, "If this happens in the United States and we determine that it is the result of extremist, fundamentalist Muslims, you know, you could take out their holy sites"?

—Rep. Tom Tancredo (Colorado) on a Florida Radio Talk Show

A religious war is like children fighting over who has the strongest imaginary friend.

—Vegard Skjefstad

Our analysis thus far has highlighted the plight of the middle class and the creation of the post-industrial peasant—a class of people whose indebtedness and economic instability at the hands of elites has rendered them politically powerless, living from one paycheck to the next, one misstep away from economic disaster.

The deterioration of the middle class has not affected only its own members; changes in the economic standing and plight of the middle class have had broad implications for the overall coarsening of American life. The middle class was the bedrock on which an advanced consumer economy was built. The rules of the middle-class game defined not only how to economically get ahead, but in a broader sense what many people defined as right and wrong.

Several authors have analyzed the sociological impact of changes to the middle class.[1] We focus on four important economic and social consequences.

1. The record number of bankruptcies and overall tightness of the middle-class budget leave most consumers with little to fall back on when job losses, health crises, divorces, or general misfortunes strike.
2. The cultural contradictions of American politics have become increasingly visible as the unbridled commitment to free market capitalism tugs at the fabric of the social order that most members of the middle class rely on.
3. The result of these problems and contradictions is declining confidence in public institutions and the fraying of community ties that were once major components of middle-class life.
4. A hardening of public discourse and a general politics of displacement encourage an "us vs. them" mentality, combined with a form of identity politics that divides Americans.

These trends make it unlikely that middle-class Americans will recognize important economic commonalities and act on them.

To contextualize our discussion of these four consequences, we build this chapter around ideas raised by James Scott in his groundbreaking 1976 book *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*[2] and explore how issues of subsistence and reciprocity may be applicable to the plight of the post-industrial peasant. Scott's analysis raises important questions about the possibility of maintaining strong communities and reciprocity norms for the indebted middle class. Understanding these factors sheds light on why the middle class has not yet collectively fought to break free of the system that is controlling them.

Subsistence, Reciprocity, and Community

In *The Moral Economy of the Peasant,* James Scott attempts to explain the seemingly strange and irrational practices of subsistence peasants in modern Southeast Asia. Obviously, many aspects of this society are not comparable to twenty-first century middle-class America, but Scott's analysis presents some key aspects of peasant life relevant for our topic.

The peasant world, both in our feudal past and in some modern societies, is ordered around subsistence and securing subsistence, with all other concerns subordinate to these. As a result, peasants prefer arrangements with landlords that guarantee subsistence over those that provide a potential for higher profit but that put subsistence at risk. The village exists as a form of communal insurance that guarantees a minimal level of subsistence. Yet subsistence is far from "communal equality," and rights to subsistence come at considerable social penalties and costs. Because subsistence is a fundamental social right, social relationships are evaluated on their conformity to the *norm of reciprocity*: people should help those who help them, and the help provided should be in rough proportion to the favors received.

That there is a norm of reciprocity within the community does not mean that all is cheerful as a result of it. Instead, it means that some minimal level of subsistence can be expected from the village community. Scott says of these norms:

> They imply only that all are entitled to a *living* out of the resources within the village, and that living is attained often at the cost of a loss of status and autonomy. They work, moreover, in large measure through the abrasive force of gossip and envy and the knowledge that the abandoned poor are likely to be a real and present danger to better-off villagers.[3]

Land tenure arrangements are evaluated based on the evaluation of the subsistence needs of the peasant as primary. Very exploitative arrangements that guarantee subsistence are often preferred to systems that on the surface appear less exploitative. Thus systems that extract rents or crops in proportion to peasants' income are often viewed as more acceptable than "fixed" payments that do not vary with peasant income. As Scott states further, "claims on peasant incomes by landlords, moneylenders, or the state were never legitimate when they infringed on what was judged to be the *minimal culturally defined subsistence level* . . . the appeal in almost every case to the past—to traditional practices—and the revolts . . . are best seen as defensive reactions."[4]

Does this sound familiar? Do the defensive reactions (including appeals to tradition) by peasants whose subsistence is threatened allude to the political alienation and anger expressed by the American middle class struggling to get by? Are there signs that the post-industrial peasants are responding in similar ways as they find the old middle-class rules becoming increasingly irrelevant?

Let's further compare the situation of peasants in these systems and our post-industrial peasant:

1. For peasants in feudal and postwar Southern economies, the central concern was *access to land* to grow food; for post-industrial peasants, it is *access to income* to secure the American dream.
2. Agrarian peasants were guided by a *subsistence ethic*; post-industrial peasants are struggling to make sense of an ethic that runs counter to the principles presumed to guide American society, an ethic that idealizes the get-rich-quick schemes of the few in place of the hard work of the many (see Table 2.1).

Further, the new economic arrangements of the post-industrial economy have replaced rising earned income with rising borrowed income, increasing the dependency of the post-industrial peasant on a landlord class of employers and creditors. The political responses to the post-industrial peasant's plight reflect responses to violations of the "norms of middle class subsistence." For the post-industrial peasant, "subsistence" includes some necessities that "were luxuries only yesterday. A second car, and child care, for example, are now necessities for millions of households with two earners commuting to jobs."[5]

Most members of the middle class remember the old rules for getting ahead, which can be summarized by one simple idea: *If I work hard, things will work out fine*. The middle-class ethic was built on the concept of self-sufficiency: good, responsible people take care of themselves. They work. They marry and stay together. They raise children. They contribute to the economy as workers and consumers. They pay their bills.

Granted, there were exceptions to this ethic. For example, one of the biggest tax breaks in the federal tax code is the mortgage interest deduction. While this allows millions of Americans to buy houses that they might not otherwise be able to afford, it is a subsidy to the housing industry and a substantial benefit for homeowners. Until very recently, the Social Security system was paying out far more money in benefits to recipients than they and their employers ever contributed. Likewise, the interest payments for most of the student loans that so many rely on to pay for college expenses are subsidized by the Federal government. Adding up the costs of these "benefits," it is difficult to say that most members of the middle class were standing *completely* on their own; still, the perception is important and generally true.

The standard set of middle-class rules is substantively different in many important ways from the rules governing the workings of subsistence peasants living in villages. But Scott's analysis and the similarities between the systems raise intriguing questions relevant to the current plight of the post-industrial peasant. First, is there a set of reciprocity norms for middle class

life that have been violated by elites? Second, are there signs of activities of the backward-looking, frayed communities that seek safety first and accept exploitation in exchange for subsistence? And if so, what does this herald for the future of the American middle class?

As far as norms are concerned, it is clear that the middle-class understanding of how life works has changed. The job instability of the past twenty years flies in the face of the idea that good, steady work is rewarded with long-term commitments from employers. Moreover, wages from average jobs have not increased, but the expenses and taxes the middle class pay have either stayed the same or risen. Such middle-class markers as home and car ownership have become much more difficult to attain, and consumption is fueled by debt—the same mechanism that fueled dependency in the feudal and sharecropping systems of a prior age.

From the standpoint of control and independence, the middle class has surrendered much of its independence, or had its independence expropriated, by elites who have replaced earned income from jobs with credit and debt. This credit and debt allows employers to dictate the terms and conditions of employment to employees who must work harder, and who are in poor bargaining positions because of looming insolvency and bankruptcy. Further, this new landlord class now dominates political life through political action committees and privileged access to politicians who skew the tax system and government regulation to serve their interests. Post-industrial peasants, like their predecessors, suspect that something is wrong and that the system is rigged against them, but coherent political action to combat these trends seems to be beyond their reach.

"A Pox on Both Their Houses": Examples of Middle-Class Alienation from Politics and Community

Scott Clark and Robert Boyer, two harried members of the middle class recently interviewed by the *Washington Post*,[6] provide real-life examples of this political alienation. Scott, fifty-one, worked for the Viasystems Inc. circuit board factory in suburban Richmond, Virginia, from the mid-1970s until Lucent Technologies bought the company in 2001, closing the plant. Viasystems Inc., the only domestic producer of circuit boards in the United States, employed 2,350 people. After his plant closed, Scott started doing

deliveries as a driver-for-hire, working thirteen-hour days delivering office mail for four different companies with no vacation or benefits. Scott doesn't have much patience for politicians:

> When Sen. John F. Kerry (Mass.), the Democratic presidential nominee, comes on the radio to talk about the economy, proclaiming, "I believe in building up our great middle class," Clark sneers, "Yeah, right." When President Bush's voice echoes through the cab a little later, Clark dubs him "a liar."

He's not the only one angry with politicians and pundits. Robert Boyer, one of Scott's ex-coworkers, fumes, "When these guys get on the boob tube and say there's jobs out there, you just gotta go out there and get them, it makes me want to go out there and grab them by the throat and say, 'Where? Where are the jobs at?'"

The cynicism that Scott and Robert have toward politics is understandable,[7] but beyond expressing their displeasure by grumbling, they may not have the time to muster the energy for civic engagement in other venues. The ever increasing efforts they need to engage in to simply maintain the lifestyle that the middle class has expected in the United States has taken a serious toll on their ability to engage in the activities that maintain communities.

Some of the middle-class Americans interviewed by sociologist Alan Wolfe as part of the Middle Class Morality Project echoed these concerns.[8] One respondent described community life by saying: "It's almost as if we set up our own islands. It's a street full of islands. And, you know, we would love to have a great relationship and great neighbors and that sort of thing, but it has just never evolved." Another said: "We don't know who those people are or how they spend their time. We pass them on the street. We talk across the fence, but socially we don't do things with our neighbors to speak of." Rachel Benjamin, a dentist from Brookline, Massachusetts, provides a concise explanation for why middle-class Americans feel so disconnected from one another: "People just have less time. . . . When you look at the number of hours people spend at work now, the whole issue of living in the suburbs has cut time off people's days. Having dual-career families cuts time out of the day."[9]

In addition to finding it extremely difficult to build and maintain supportive communities, members of the middle class see little support from politicians and other elites, believing that they don't understand the realities of everyday life. The economy may be humming along, but that means little to Scott Clark, who is forced to work long hours with little job security to make ends meet. If he or any of our protagonists found time to read the newspaper, they would have found fresh evidence of just how out of touch some of our elected officials are. Take the following examples,[10] starting with this one from 1997:

> "I'm not a wealthy man," said House Speaker Newt Gingrich . . . explaining why, despite his $171,500 salary, he needed a loan from former Sen. Bob Dole to pay an Ethics Committee fine. "I'm a middle-class guy."

Gingrich's salary alone was a mere four times the median income in the United States.

The prior year, Fred Heineman, former Republican Congressman from North Carolina, said that

> his combined congressional salary and police pension (as an officer in New York City and the chief in Raleigh) of $183,500 made him lower middle class. "When I see someone who is making anywhere from $300,000 to $750,000," Heineman was quoted as saying, "that's middle class."

What would Bill and Sheryl or David and Monica have to say about that?

Of course, not all politicians have such outlandish views on what middle-class Americans make. Still, each high-profile quote just confirms what many middle-class Americans already suspect: the decision makers are out of touch with the realities of middle-class life. This disconnect can and does lead to alienation and pent-up anger for many middle-class Americans. But before turning to these political and cultural outcomes, let's first look at an important economic consequence of the middle class squeeze.

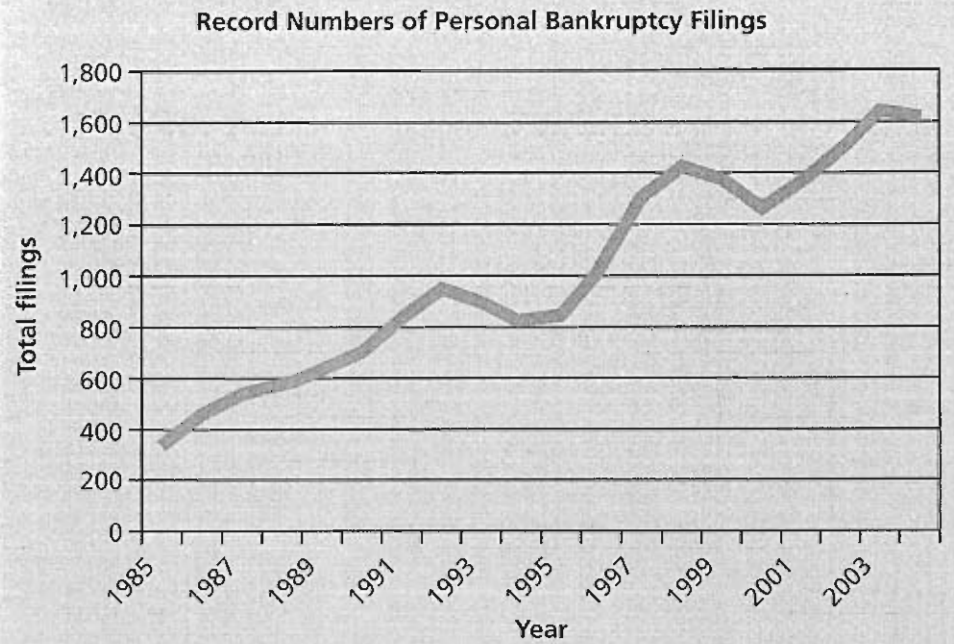
Record Numbers of Bankruptcies

Elizabeth Warren Sullivan and Jay L. Westbrook's *The Fragile Middle Class: Americans in Debt* (2000) and Elizabeth Warren and Amelia Warrent Tyagi's *The Two-Income Trap: Why Middle Class Mothers and Fathers Are Going Broke* (2003) document how the middle-class family is more likely to end up in bankruptcy court now than at any other time in American history (see Figure 7.1).[11]

The Fragile Middle Class analyzes the myriad reasons why Americans have been filing up to 1 million bankruptcy claims per year, including job and income loss, sickness and injury, divorce, home ownership (mortgage payments that are too high), and too much credit. Of these, the effects of credit and home ownership are (or appear to be) voluntary, while the effects of job loss, sickness, and divorce are less so. The book concludes that the cause of this epidemic of bankruptcies is the lack of a viable back-up plan for people who suffer misfortunes. There is little financial "slack" in most late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century middle-class budgets, so slight changes in economic circumstances often lead to financial disaster.

Figure 7.1

U.S. Personal Bankruptcy Filings, 1985–2004 (in Thousands of Dollars)



Source: Manning, *Credit Card Nation.*

The Two-Income Trap makes a similar argument, claiming that one reason the American middle class is having so much trouble is because two incomes are now needed to cover what one income used to pay for, and that unregulated credit markets have allowed Americans to pile up huge amounts of debt. As our Chapter 3 shows, debt now equals 100 percent of most family income, if not more.

The Two-Income Trap also suggests that there is now no reliable public or private "safety net" for members of the middle class. While the public safety net that exists for the middle class, unemployment insurance and Social Security, can offer modest protection for some, the majority of middle-class families don't qualify for these limited public programs. Whom can these people call on for assistance as they struggle to stay afloat? Historically, housewives and stay-at-home moms have provided a private safety net; because the financial situation of the household was not predicated on their paid labor, in hard times they could enter the workforce and bring in extra income. This private safety net is disappearing because more and more families are now two-earner families to begin with; there is no "reserve worker" to step up when things get tight.

Warren and Tyagi argue that most of the money that the second earner is bringing in goes toward buying suburban houses in neighborhoods with good schools, and that the premium on these houses drives the costs of home ownership upward. They also rail against changed provisions in bankruptcy laws that claim bankruptcy is an "automatic way out for irresponsible spenders" and other "freeloaders" who are abusing the financial system.

Of course, as Warren and Tyagi point out, the problem is further exacerbated by the high divorce rate and the growing presence of single-parent families in the United States. These families have few prospects in an economic poker game that requires two incomes just to ante up. And many of the problems associated with time, money, and affordability of the lifestyle of the middle class are unreachable by single parents, let alone married and cohabiting parents attempting to get by on two incomes that don't grow and jobs that don't last.

Thus, post-industrial peonage often ends in financial insolvency and bankruptcy. Granted, much of the spending associated with accumulating debt is voluntary, but the banking industry and others have spent millions of dollars peddling their wares—money available through credit and the "good life" it brings—to virtually anyone who will listen, and some of this plight is caused by unstable jobs and healthcare expenses that aren't covered. Is this really the best we can do?

Box 7.1

Recent Changes in Federal Bankruptcy Law

In 2005, after eight years of trying and three failed attempts the credit card industry finally got the bankruptcy changes they'd been lobbying for. The new bankruptcy law, which took effect on October 17, 2005, prohibits some people from filing for bankruptcy at all, makes it more difficult for consumers to arrange manageable payment plans, and has fewer protections from collection efforts than the bankruptcy laws in effect since 1978.[12]

One change the new bankruptcy law puts into effect bars those with above-average income from filing for Chapter 7 bankruptcy, in which debts can be wiped out entirely. Those who pass a "means test" that suggests they have at least $100 a month left after paying certain debts and expenses will have to file a five-year repayment plan under more restrictive Chapter 13 bankruptcy laws. People who file for Chapter 7 will also be required to get professional credit counseling. These changes will make it more difficult for the middle class to file for bankruptcy when faced with unexpected job losses or medical expenses.

The Cultural Contradictions of American Politics

In a perceptive but often overlooked book, *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics* (1994),[13] Anthony Giddens persuasively argues that the conservative movement (or "neoliberal" movement, in his terminology) is driven by a fundamental contradiction. The movement's support of unbridled free markets and global capitalism is supposed to be founded on a bedrock of traditional family values, but these same traditional family values, and the cultural and community traditions they foster, are the very things that unbridled free markets attack. Markets and their activities are radically de-traditionalizing influences on the social fabric.

Giddens's solution to this problem is to recognize that the choice of some traditions is conscious and that dimensions of the traditional social order must be preserved. This is the "radical" conception of traditionalism that attempts to shield some of what we value in terms of families and communities from the unbridled influence of markets.

The present neoconservative movement in the United States pays lip service to traditional family values, but only as long as they don't cost anyone money or productivity. Many champion traditional family values—usually the values of the 1950s, complete with subordinate women in nuclear families, neighborhood segregated schools, and one-earner households—as the ideal that will lead society to happiness once and for all. Yet the conservative movement does precious little to make their dreams a reality. The very trends we discuss are (in part) the product of changes the conservative movement has championed, regardless of whether specific political decisions or policies were responsible for bringing them about.

In a speech for the American Enterprise Institute, Charles Kessler offers a sympathetic critique of the conservative movement:[14]

> American conservatives have always been more confident of what they were against than what they were *for*. Sparked by their opposition to President Clinton's health care plan, for example, right-wing Republicans won an enormous electoral victory, capturing the House of Representatives and the Senate in 1994. Hopeful that American liberalism, like Soviet Communism, was historically doomed and needed only a final shove to topple it into the grave, Republicans led by Newt Gingrich (the first Republican Speaker of the House in forty years) tried to convert the public's rejection of ClintonCare into approval of the Contract With America, the initial installment of what they promised would be a positive agenda for conservative governance.

But, as Kessler points out, a clear assertion of conservative principles was not forthcoming.

The neoconservative movement has been successful in promulgating the idea that people who play by the rules should be rewarded for doing so, and that those who don't play by the rules deserve no rewards. Their policies thus fuel resentment while making the goals of the old rules unattainable; they've shown almost no inclination to act on their broad portrayals except through the politics of cultural resentment. Their policies imply that if only more repression was directed at those who don't follow the rules, such as minorities, the poor, gays and lesbians, and the urban underclass, then those who do play by the rules would succeed. At the same time, those bigwigs who don't play by the rules at all—who stuff their pockets full of stolen Monopoly money—are completely ignored in the neoconservative mindset.[15]

So a significant portion of the middle class believes that if they vote for the right people, they will benefit from tax cuts and those who don't play by the rules will be punished. But with each round of elections, the tax cuts benefit instead those already well off, more taxes are excised from the middle class, wages remain flat, and the values the neoconservative movement claims to champion become more untenable:

> On the one hand, neoliberalism is hostile to tradition—and is indeed one of the main forces sweeping away tradition everywhere, as a result of the promotion of market forces and an aggressive individualism. On the other, it depends upon the persistence of tradition for its legitimacy and its attachment to conservatism—in the areas of the nation, religion, gender, and the family. Having no proper theoretical rationale, its defense of tradition in these areas takes the form of fundamentalism. . . . [In the arena of family values,] the expansion of market society . . . is a prime force promoting those very disintegrative forces affecting family life which neoliberalism, wearing its fundamentalist hat, diagnoses and so vigorously opposes. This is an unstable mix indeed.[16]

This may be a transient formula for electoral victory, or a formula for fomenting cultural resentment and hatred. But it is certainly *not* a formula for reinvigorating the middle class.

Of course, conservatives and neoliberals are not exclusively to blame for the plight of the middle class. The American left has shown little or no connection to the values of the middle class and in some cases openly despises them. Worse still, the Democratic Party, as the world's second most enthusiastic capitalist party,[17] has ignored the economic interests and cultural concerns of the middle class. In their 2000 study of "America's forgotten majority"—the white working class Americans who make up about 55 percent of the voting population, the majority of whom face

the same economic realities as those we label middle class—Ruy Teixeira and Joel Rogers write:

> the changes that these voters really want—and that aren't being offered in sufficient quantities by either of the major parties at present—are improvements in basic aspects of their lives. They have a multitude of difficulties and concerns that the "new economy" . . . is highly unlikely to solve on its own. The health insurance situation is becoming more, not less, precarious. Providing for a secure retirement is becoming more, not less, difficult. Getting the right education and training is becoming more challenging, even as it becomes more important. Resolving the tensions between work and family life is becoming more daunting with every passing year. Competing in a global economy is making it harder, not easier, to ensure one's family a decent standard of living.[18]

Thus is the post-industrial peasant resentful of both political parties and their records of the past twenty-five years. In this context, it's no wonder that Scott Clark and Robert Boyer are mad.

The Fraying of Community

The plight of the post-industrial peasant has consequences for the fraying of community life. In 1985, Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton's *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* was a bellwether of the fraying of community that resulted from the precarious state of the middle class. This research project involved focus groups and surveys among representative samples of Americans, all of whom were asked to discuss their aspirations for life and their conceptions of goodness. What came through in their interviews was that most aspirations were individual and intimate; national life and community life were rarely if ever mentioned:

> In our interviews it became clear that for most of those to whom we spoke, the touchstones of truth and goodness lie in individual experience and intimate relationships. Both the social situations of middle-class life and the vocabularies of everyday language predispose toward private sources of meaning. We also found strong identification with the United States as a national community. Yet, though the nation was viewed as good, "government" and "politics" often had negative connotations. Americans, it would seem, are genuinely ambivalent about public life, and this ambivalence makes it difficult to address the problems confronting us as a whole.[19]

Using National Election Studies data, Teixeira and Rogers show the dramatic decrease in the public's trust of government from 1964 through the mid-1990s. In 1964, nearly 80 percent of respondents said they trusted the government in Washington to do the right thing "most or all of the

time"; by 1980, just above 25 percent agreed; and in 1996, slightly less than 30 percent.

Our discussions have suggested some good reasons for this decline, both before and after 1985. The deindustrialization of the 1980s and corporate downsizing of the 1990s tore the fabric of the middle class, and little evidence suggests that government at any level has done much to stop these activities; indeed, the government has not indicated that it intends to do anything about the current crisis of exporting white-collar service jobs to India and other English-speaking parts of the developing world (see Box 1.5). Small wonder the middle class doesn't trust governments and public life; what has it done for them lately?

In addition to doing little to preserve the jobs that provide the earnings that make middle-class life possible, federal and state governments radically altered their fiscal and taxation policies in favor of the wealthy and those with unearned income (see Chapter 6). The real, and unresolved, issue for political sociologists and other observers is how helping the poor came to be defined as a social experiment that failed, while the massive government aided redistribution of wealth to the rich was labeled unleashing free market capitalism.

In 2000, Robert Putnam published his groundbreaking *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*,[20] which discusses what Putnam considers to be an alarming decline in *social* capital, the interactive activities that make communities and neighborhoods better places to live. Putnam documents declines in civic participation of all kinds from voting to church attendance to membership in local civic organizations. Along with this, he documents declines in mutual trust, honesty, and reciprocity across the twentieth century, trends that seem especially pronounced in the 1980s and 1990s.

Putnam blames television, increased working hours, and nonstandard working hours for these trends. But could they be due instead to changes in the economic life of the middle class? As Scott points out in *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, people who are barely getting by are generous only because they have to be. This stinginess results in less participation in the activities and groups that once formed the fabric of American community life.

People are more likely to volunteer, get involved in their communities, and make a difference in the lives of children, the elderly, the poor, and others if they have a stable economic base. Increasingly, post-industrial peasants do not have that base, so volunteerism and a sense of community suffer as Putnam describes. They spend more time commuting to work, more hours at work, and more hours as a family working, all for earnings that don't increase in value.

This situation is especially ironic considering the political messages of the past twenty years. In George H. W. Bush's 1988 presidential campaign, Americans were told to look toward a "thousand points of light," to develop a new public spirit, civic awareness, and sense of volunteerism and community. While Bush's appeal may have been sincere, the economic policies he embraced were eroding the soil from which such civic spirit must grow. Our "thousand points of light" requires electricity to work, and stable jobs with reasonable working hours, good wages, health care benefits, and some prospects for retirement are the power plant.

Political Alienation and Anger: Hardening of Public Discourse and the Politics of Displacement

Imagine that you are a new arrival in a strange land called the United States of America. You've been told that this is "the world's greatest democracy," a country where each person has the right to speak his or her own mind and to participate fully in the political process. This political process, in turn, creates the laws and policies that shape and govern the nation. You imagine that people all across this land must be continuously engaged in reflection and debate on important issues. Surely, in this land of democracy and opportunity people will be actively engaged in the political process; they will yearn for greater understanding of the problems they collectively face; they will revel in new knowledge and strive to share this knowledge with others with the hopes of creating a better society for all. So to learn more about this process you start by looking at the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution; clearly these are bedrock documents. But you decide that they are pretty old and stuffy and probably won't tell you a lot about what people here and now care about. To really get a sense of the political discourse, you turn to the mass media: cable television and the popular press.

Spend a few minutes watching MSNBC or FOXNews and the coarsening of American politics quickly becomes apparent. Political "debate" and "commentary" shows, like Crossfire, Hardball, Hannity and Colmes, and The O'Reilly Factor, provide simplistic, caustic, and often highly partisan glimpses of complex issues. This is not political discourse; it is simply a form of political theater. It is stylized name-calling that gives the illusion of reasoned debate. As comedian Jon Stewart said during an appearance on Crossfire, calling their show a "debate show" is "like saying pro wrestling is a show about athletic competition."[21]

In the realm of popular press, there seems to be no end to new non-fiction works about current events and politics. Unfortunately we once again find evidence of a polarized and coarse debate, pitting "us" against "them." Take for example, the opening lines of syndicated columnist and bestselling author Ann Coulter's book *Treason: Liberal Treachery from the Cold War to the War on Terrorism*:

> Liberals have a preternatural gift for striking a position on the side of treason. You could be talking about Scrabble and they would instantly leap to the anti-American position. Everyone says liberals love America, too. No they don't. Whenever the nation is under attack, from within or without, liberals side with the enemy. This is their essence.[22]

Clearly these are not the opening lines of a book that will attempt to find common ground.

Of course, controversial and antagonist writing is not limited to conservative authors. James Hightower begins his *Thieves in High Places: They've Stolen Our Country—and it's Time to Take it Back* with the following:

> **klep-to-crat na-tion** (klep'te krat ná' shen), *n.* **1.** a body of people ruled by thieves **2.** a government characterized by the practice of transferring money and power from the many to the few **3.** a ruling class of moneyed elites that usurps liberty, justice, sovereignty, and other democratic rights from the people **4.** the USA in 2003[23]

The quotes from Coulter and Hightower represent a tendency to use name-calling and boundary making to make a political point. This tendency is most prevalent on the AM dial: the most popular form of talk radio has been the vitriolic ranting of Rush Limbaugh and the series of Rush-like commentators who have joined his ranks. In 1980, there were about seventy-five commercial talk stations in the United States, and in 2003 there were about 1,300.

> From the advent of Limbaugh in the late 1980s to today . . . nearly all of that talk radio programming has been of the right-wing variety. Limbaugh's success spawned an entire industry of Rush-wannabees and Rush clones, even shifting long-time non-political talk hosts into making right-wing proclamations in order to retain market share. The industry discovered right-wing talk radio, found it profitable, and thought that conservative talk was the only kind of talk that could work on the AM dial.[24]

Okay, you might say, these shows and books may be a bit caustic, but they're just entertainment. The tone is different within the hallowed halls of Congress, right? Unfortunately, we also witness this coarseness in public debate by our elected public officials.

Pointing out this changing tone of debate in Washington, Paul Krugman notes that Senator Phil Gramm "declared that a proposal to impose a one-time capital gains levy on people who renounce U.S. citizenship in order to avoid paying taxes was 'right out of Nazi Germany.'" This

Box 7.2

The Waxing and Waning of Militia Movements

The Anti-Defamation League, a leading monitor of militia and hate group activity, believes that there are currently active militias in twenty-eight states. The recent activity and growth of militia movements represent a growth in the expression of political alienation and fragmentation in the United States. The present incarnation of the militia movement, which arose in the mid-1990s in the wake of deadly standoffs at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, and Waco, Texas, increased in popularity because of the media exposure given to those tragedies. Militias also garnered great publicity following the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, though there is considerable debate about direct connections between militias and the perpetrators of that act.

Militia movements tend to develop around conspiracy theories suggesting that the United States is subordinating itself to a "one-world government," and that changes by the federal government, especially after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, are further evidence of a conspiracy to subordinate whites and Christians to others, especially immigrants, Jews, and African Americans. Like many on the political far right and far left, these militia members view the "Global War on Terrorism" as directed at themselves, not foreign terrorists like Osama bin Laden, and consider antiterrorism measures such as the Patriot Act merely prelude to mass gun confiscation and martial law.

One West Virginia militia member, upon learning of a scheduled Marine Corps urban training exercise in Morgantown, West Virginia, in the spring of 2004, posted to a militia message board: "This is training for door to door searches of civilian homes. I can't help but think this is training for gun confiscation. I am not too happy about it happening in my home town, but I have no control. If this is training for Iraq, then what is the war in Iraq training for? Large scale gun confiscation."

Such attitudes, especially a sense that time is running out, are common. Jack Keck of the South Carolina Minutemen wrote in February 2004 "the time is at hand for what can and must be done. Big brother is stripping us of our rights daily and we all know what is coming and what we must do."

Similarly, James Michael of New Hampshire announced in January 2004 that "my friends and I have formed a cell. After many months of working together on other causes, we have desided [*sic*] to begin our own group here in Wakefield, New Hampshire republic. We have searched our hearts and prayed, and have decided we can wait no more . . . We are small in number now, but I think others will join with a [*sic*] organized unit to join ranks with."[25]

Of course, while we're all worrying about our guns, we aren't paying attention to our money.

comparison was denounced by others, including the ranking Republican on the Senate Finance Committee, Charles Grassley. Yet, as Krugman notes, a few weeks prior Grassley had also used a Hitler analogy to get his political point across: "I am sure voters will get their fill of statistics claiming that the Bush tax cut hands out 40 percent of its benefits to

the top 1 percent of taxpayers. That is not merely misleading, it is outright false. Some folks must be under the impression that as long as something is repeated often enough, it will become true. That was how Adolf Hitler got to the top."[26]

The tone in Washington doesn't show signs of changing. The Bush administration's strident unilateralism after the attacks of September 11, 2001, and during the buildup to the war in Iraq told the world and Americans who disagreed with this course of action "You are either with us or against us." The message that this sends is once again clear: it is "us" vs. "them"—there is no middle ground.

Several commentators have discussed the growth of alienation and cynicism in the American electorate.[27] Kevin Phillips's *Boiling Point: Republicans, Democrats, and the End of Middle Class Prosperity* documents how during the 1980s Washington turned to a "soak the middle class" strategy to fuel the latest capitalist heyday, mirroring the capitalist heydays of the 1920s and 1890s. The combination of government debt, changed government funding priorities, and the growth of "one world" economic ideologies placed the middle class in a position in which prosperity was sacrificed for a "rentier class" of capitalists that don't make anything and don't employ anyone, and do little but look to Washington for additional tax and deregulation favors.

Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall's *Chain Reaction* (1992) highlights a process all too familiar in American politics: the association of government action with high taxes in the name of race and civil rights, and the ability of conservative politicians to exploit this association to garner votes and political power. The Edsalls blame the Democratic Party for abandoning, or appearing to abandon, their original working-class constituency to garner votes from minority groups. The resulting misgivings about trends in government programs and the economic instability of the 1970s provided a window of opportunity for the Republican Party to regain electoral stamina by drawing connections between high taxes and "social experiments" that did little for the average voter, or worse, provided minorities with superordinate sets of "rights" (through affirmative action and zealous civil rights enforcement) that could be used against whites in the workplace and public institutions.

Why would the embattled middle class latch onto the "race, rights, and taxes" framework as a viable political action strategy? Our research provides several possible reasons:

1. The tax system is biased against the middle class and to some extent, the poor, and taxes have shifted from progressive sources (income taxes) to regressive sources (payroll taxes and state and local sales

taxes). The lion's share of the taxes that pay for the welfare state are extracted from the people just above welfare recipients—a formula for resentment and hatred.

2. Our embattled member of the middle class has no reason to choose another political course of action, given that the Democratic Party seems unable to articulate a coherent politics of the middle class that can compete with the right's focus on social pathology, high taxes, and "violating the rules."
3. The middle class is faced with two sets of "middle-class rule violators," one visible—the poor and minority groups, as portrayed by conservatives and media—and one that is beyond their control—the wealthy, who have paid themselves handsomely from the productivity gains the middle class have helped produce. It is far easier for the middle class to express their resentment over the workings of the system by insisting on control over the visible, subordinate group.

And Please! Let's Fight about *Anything* but Money . . .

Philosopher Jean Bethke Elshtain in her important book *Democracy on Trial* (1995) suggests that much of what we call public life and public discourse has been coarsened and hardened by identity politics—the belief that there is no public sphere and that all arguments come down to the affirmation of personal identities. She faults academics, activists, and others for turning the pursuit of individual rights into an unbridled war of "us vs. them," in which group boundaries are created through nonnegotiable and unchangeable personal identities that reflect the sum total of all that is necessary to wage war in the political arena.

In political life, battles over personal identities and ensuing culture wars eliminate common obligations and public spheres of political discourse about shared problems. Elshtain refers to this predicament as the "politics of displacement":

> The central characteristic of the politics of displacement is that private identity takes precedence over public ends or purposes; indeed one's private identity becomes who and what one is *in public*, and public life is about confirming that identity. The citizen gives way before the aggrieved member of a self-defined or contained group. Because the group is aggrieved—the word of choice in most polemics is enraged—the civility inherent in those rule-governed activities that allow a pluralist society to persist falters.[28]

Elshtain blames feminists, environmentalists, gays and lesbians, and representatives of racial minority groups for engaging in the "politics of displacement." But it is time to ask some other, harder questions about the "politics of displacement" as a consequence of the plight of the middle class. For example, what are we to make of the millions of listeners of hate radio and other talk radio media that do little except ridicule those who aren't like "the rest of us"? What are we to make of negative campaign ads and the growing obsession with the "other" that this form of communication implies? These forms of public discourse involve the same dynamic now pervading middle-class life in the United States. Post-industrial peasants, the people who play by the rules, are the "us," and those who don't play by the rules are "them." Our virtues are defined by their vices.

More insidiously, the politics of displacement is routinely played out in our legislative bodies any time proposals for tangible improvements to middle-class life reach the limelight. Want to talk about healthcare for all? Sidetrack the discussion by bringing up abortion and stem cell research that "they" want. Want to talk about family-friendly social policies like family leave and childcare subsidies? Rant instead about gay marriage, cohabiting partners, and how these benefits shouldn't apply to them. Want to discuss why American corporations export jobs overseas and hire illegal immigrants here at home? Sidetrack the discussion by mentioning how much unemployment an increase in the minimum wage would bring. Want to discuss improvements to the public schools? Propose that school prayer and vouchers that aren't large enough to pay for real school choice are the answer.

The list goes on, but the important point is that a politics of displacement operates at multiple levels of the American political system, diverting attention from the economic problems of the middle class. These diversionary tactics have become more pervasive as the problems of the middle class have worsened, and the media outlets that convey these messages portray the topics of these tactics as the real issues.

Of course, stem cell research, abortion, gay marriage, and school vouchers are important issues that deserve public debate, important both for those directly affected and for the country as a whole. But by allowing our political discourse to focus solely on these issues, politicians divert the collective attention of the middle class from the issues that can unite us. The rules of middle-class life have been violated, but the middle class has not yet found the political will to demand better. We might be the policy wonks that Robert Boyer complains about, but we are willing to bet our upper middle-class salaries that engaging in the politics of displacement will *not* create a better economic life for Robert and his compatriots.

The alienation and anger resulting from the violations of the norms of middle-class life is pervasive. Rising bankruptcies, the growing cultural contradictions of American politics, the fraying and straining of communities, and the growing politics of displacement are cultural manifestations of the economic plight of the post-industrial peasant. Identifying these manifestations helps explain why significant portions of the middle class have apparently resigned themselves to peonage.

Will this continue? Is there any hope for change in this situation? In our final chapter, we offer a manifesto for the middle class that provides some individual and collective possibilities for change.