

MAKING POVERTY MORE BEARABLE

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The humanities have always played one important role in income inequality: They can make being poor more bearable. Unfortunately, I have lived long enough to see, or have gone through, a number of changes in how poverty is viewed, and what roles poverty plays in our culture.

I am not quite a Baby Boomer, since that category officially starts on January 1, 1946. I was born in December of 1945.

Let me enumerate a quick list of generational name tags I've seen applied as I have aged. The first, as a late teenager—in fact, the word “teenager” is a label that was also an invention, coming into use in the early twentieth century; its emergence had to do with the growth of high school education, the prevalence of automobiles, changes in social mores, etc.—in any case, the generation ahead of me were so-called Beatniks; that subculture morphed into Hippies; then, by the time of the 1980s, the term Yuppies was coined. More recently there has been Generation X and, popular today, the less interestingly named Millennials. Hipsters are a subset, though they mainly live in Brooklyn.

OK. What's in a name? Here's my point concerning these labels: The first three, beatniks and hippies, even yuppies, denote a class, or, at least, a sociological orientation. For the first two groups, though, poverty was not shameful, not entirely crushing, or feared.

Indeed, both categories at heart had traditions supporting them and at their centers sat the humanities. If beatniks and hippies have any meanings, associations, for college-age students today, it may well be, for the first, Chi-anti bottles with melted candles, perhaps poetry, for the second, communes, Woodstock.

Beatniks were continuing the older nineteenth century heritage of bohemians. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first use of the word “bohemian” turned up in 1848 and described the manner of living of so-called impoverished writers, journalists, artists, musicians, and actors living in major European cities.

The American beatnik period was also the era of folk songs, from decidedly down-scale guitar plunkers, up to even stars like Joan Baez, Pete Seeger, and a few others who appeared just above the commercial horizon. But very

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few of their recordings went, as we would say today, viral—just vinyl. Poetry and guitar playing, then, were certainly technology-light.

The bohemian tradition shared one thing with hippies, in so far as bohemians set out to make poverty fun. Both beatniks and bohemians were urban phenomena, since you needed some excess capital around to make being poor fun; it required a few rich friends, acquaintances, and/or patrons to sometime feed you and buy drinks. That the arts are being cut from grammar and high school curriculums is further proof of the situation at hand.

I've spent my entire adult life writing about the intersection of politics and literature and I want to point out that a number of things happened in this country because of the bohemian tradition. The Sixties happened. Protest happened. The Civil Rights Movement happened. The anti-Vietnam War protests happened. Universities were temporarily shut down, people were in the streets. Change happened.

And a good bit of this was the result of the bohemian tradition and what it wrought. The young, college students in the Sixties didn't find poverty crippling. There was enough surplus capital around in the Sixties and early Seventies that allowed students in the north to travel down to the south, and students from the west to start free speech movements and, in the Midwest, to organize the Students for Democratic Society (SDS).

Jack Kerouac had published *On the Road* in the late 1950s and students took to the road in the 1960s. During the '60s, the number of people experiencing higher education tripled. I have been pointing out that statistic for years. It had never doubled in the decades previous. That demographic change, it can be argued, is responsible for what we call the '60s. A meaningful percentage of these students began to protest an unpopular and useless war, partly out of self interest, since so many of them, the men that is, were vulnerable to the war because of the draft, but also because their educations—teach-ins that took place on campuses—which made them question what the government was doing.

College campuses in the '60s-'70s had become bohemian redoubts; they were their own examples of a new sort of urbanity, where educated people could coalesce and, in most cases, get by on very little income. For four years a lot of the population became bohemians. Not all, of course. There was always the fraternity/sorority side. But, thanks to Sputnik in 1957, the federal government started dumping money into land-grant universities across the country. The whole '60s generation profited from that. Again, recall the tripling of that population. For a few years ingrained American anti-intellectualism was put aside. And during the years that followed,

though short-lived, anti-materialism prospered.

Eventually, all that more or less ended. Hippies suffered self-immolation; communes were saddled with the bad image of the Charlie Manson murders, publicized most vividly in 1971. The modern women's movement percolated out of the chauvinist protest world and all the contradictions experimentation with communal living and protesting had highlighted.

But what really altered this trajectory was the alarm experienced by the powers that be. They saw what happened when you began to educate the non-elite in state universities with low cost to the students. An important document that was privately circulated back then was the so-called "Powell Memo," written by the future Supreme Court justice, Lewis F. Powell, Jr., in 1971. A call to action for corporate America, spurred by what Powell saw as an attack on the free-enterprise system, the memo spelled out the counter movement to the counter culture that was then arising.

A college education wasn't free in the '60s, but costs were low, mostly from so-called fees. An important date to reckon with is 1973, when Nixon signed Sallie Mae legislation, guaranteeing all sorts of student loans with federal money. That, more or less, was the birth of the modern history of for-profit colleges. Changes had begun earlier in the 1960s under Lyndon Johnson, when he signed the Higher Education Act of 1965.

That law's purpose was "to strengthen the educational resources of our colleges and universities and to provide financial assistance for students in postsecondary and higher education."

Amended over the years, the law strengthened banks far more than student interests.

But it was during the Reagan years when prevailing cultural attitudes about poverty were completely upended. Beatniks, hippies, college students be damned. The bohemian tradition went into permanent eclipse. Being poor was no longer fun.

Ronald Reagan is often held up as being a great leader and one bit of film is offered as evidence and, during this 2016 election year, it is being re-shown now and then: Reagan objecting to having a microphone shut off. "I paid for this microphone," he says sternly in grumpy-old-man objection. It's a curious bit of proof to hold up as an example of Reagan's leadership qualities: I bought it, I own it, money talks, everyone else walks.

Reverence for the rich came in with Reagan in spades. It's no coincidence that the word yuppies originated in the early '80s, so much so it became a cliché in that decade.

Again, this chain of events was not a coincidence. The point was, is, to burden the educated young with debt: To take away their free time and

mobility.

Debt is an odd concept: to go into debt requires, usually, resources. To be in debt signifies a certain sort of economic status. The poor are robbed even of debt. There is a difference between loans and debt. Not that the near poor aren't eventually saddled with permanent poverty, via rising rents, so-called payday loans, which imply their customers have a job. Those storefront enterprises are backed up by the largest banks, which provide the necessary credit. Like so much else, how things work in this country remain behind closed doors, or at least obscured, quite deliberately. There are no Chase logos, or any other big banks' signs, on those gaudy storefronts.

We've gone from Michael Harrington's 1962 *The Other America*, to the current hot poverty book, *Evicted*, by Matthew Desmond. Though Michael Moore's hit 1989 documentary, "Roger & Me," featured a number of evictions during the 1980s in Flint, Michigan.

Even Michael Moore's career can be seen as indicative of the larger cultural problem. His presentation of the poor in that film, formerly working-class individuals, both white and black, of Flint, highlights, at the end of the Reagan era when it was released, the grotesque aspects. It's the working-class post work, meaning the individuals involved really never had secure working-class jobs. The film doesn't show poverty out of the bohemian tradition. "Roger & Me" is poverty in all senses, of education, income, spirit. Moore himself, early on and currently, was costumed as a bohemian; he might have been out of the educated arts tradition, but not his subjects.

Reverence for the rich by 1989 was everywhere. The baseball-cap beheaded, overweight, disheveled Moore may have been the bull in the wealthy's china shop, yet, he had become one of the first modern branders. His look was a uniform, a persona, as much, in the same period, as the dandy Tom Wolfe's white suit. And Wolfe was, is, foremost a chronicler of the rich and status-conscious.

Another popular figure, one first out of the folk tradition, was Bob Dylan, but in 1965 he came on stage with an electric guitar. What was perceived, but not necessarily articulated, was his abandonment of the folk tradition, its humble ambitions, and his embrace of popular music, desiring mainstream acceptance and sales. Recall the Beatles hit our shores big time in 1963.

Popular arts strive to be popular. However scruffy the bands back then, most all wanted to be rich. Music is the humanities and its history tells its own tale. Rap and hip-hop started their rise in the 1980s, during the Reagan years. It may seem counterintuitive, but what held the Beatles and Bob Dylan and rap artists together was their love of contracts, rights,

ownership, capitalism. The Beatles were big suers. Grunge, at its start, was a label in music meant to point out a contrast to the prevailing money grubbers.

Tom Wolfe is credited with popularizing the label “the Me Generation,” which meant to brand the post-Vietnam war remnants of the Baby Boomers as individualistic cultural narcissists. A variety of cultural figures were reorienting an entire generation away from its bohemian roots and attempting to put them back on the materialist fast track. The larger culture moved away from the bohemian model with relief.

Republicans and libertarians during this period set out to privatize whatever they could. They've largely succeeded. They're all for private wealth, not public wealth, and public wealth allowed for bohemian culture.

It's a large subject, privatization, but it tracks with all the economic trends of the last three decades. The military is now largely privatized; NASA, the space program, is getting there. Privatization, in the main, makes a few people very rich, and leaves most everyone else anxious and dependent. Wonder how Russian oligarches were made? The former state-owned industries were captured by the Russian well-connected.

Universities, both private and public, now have independent contractors during much of the grunt work. So, these lower-paid workers can't blame bastions of higher learning for their lack of benefits and low salaries.

The first personal computers appeared in the late '70s, early '80s, too. The counter-culture began to turn into the cyber-culture. It's not too large a claim to point out that the heroes of Silicon Valley were, are, new versions of late nineteenth, early twentieth, century robber barons, all capitalists par excellence.

Who are the heroes of educated Millennials? Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg, Bill Gates. Recall the early years of Microsoft. Stories back then about the firm concerned the legions of lawyers employed securing Gates's rights and patents. These days business school enrollments are up, English majors down. Lately, everyone wants to run a hedge fund, or be at a private equity firm. The Get-Rich-Quick-Dream of American hustlers everywhere by the 1980s had real-life counterparts; the new technologies created a handful of the stupendously wealthy—J. D. Rockefeller and Henry Ford would have been impressed.

Even philanthropy is privatized, a paradox of sorts. “60 Minutes” used to be a news show, but recently the program had a group of billionaires on air to congratulate themselves on giving away, supposedly, half of their fortunes. The “60 Minutes” interlocutor, hardly a journalist, never bothered to ask them if they would be willing to pay more taxes.

Here, for your contemplation, are the tax rates at the end of Bill Clinton's two terms: 31% applied to all income over \$51,900. The Omnibus Reconciliation Act of 1993 created a new bracket of 36% for income above \$115,000, and 39.6% for income above \$250,000.

Those were the rates Obama wouldn't revert to by letting Bush's tax cuts expire. Clinton's rates weren't onerous. Remember, Bush pushed through his tax cuts and didn't pay for the Medicare part D drug bill that had passed, nor the wars he started. He cut elsewhere. Those rates were sunset-ed, made to retire, because even bought-and-paid-for Republican economists couldn't hide their deleterious effects on the deficit.

The anti-tax crowd, a mixed bag, but mainly Republicans, succeeded beyond their dreams, but their dreams (flat tax! Banish corporate taxes! Abolish the IRS!) never die. Obama's biggest mistake, I hold, is that he didn't let all the Bush tax cuts expire. It was the most powerful card he held at the beginning of his presidency and he didn't play it.

A March 7, 2016, *Quick Take* Bloomberg article points out that Wall Street "[b]onuses began their climb in the 1980s, when deregulation allowed commercial banks to expand into more stock and bond trading and boost profits by buying and selling with the bank's own money. Eat-what-you-kill traditions meant professionals reaped bonuses in line with the profit they generated. Top bankers argued that their skills made them as valuable as professional athletes."

A graph published in the *New York Times* in 2011 shows that the average "securities industry" NYC salary in 1981 was less than \$50,000 a year; though that was about double of all other private-sector jobs there, on average. By 2008, the figure was nearly \$400,000; everyone else's average yearly pay in NYC that year was slightly above \$55,000.

What I contend, and Bloomberg doesn't point out, is that this rapid rise, this rate of growth, going from double to six times the size in less than 30 years, just didn't affect the securities industry. Other company CEOs, top executives across industries, including academia, saw the bonuses and salaries of those young Wall Street-ers rise in the 1980s, '90s, and felt, deep in their souls, they were all being underpaid.

In the 1970s the ratio of CEO pay to the company's workers was around 20 to 1. In 2012, the *Los Angeles Times* reported, the average CEO-to-worker pay ratio was about 350 to 1. Some companies were higher. The 300-plus figure is the average.

It was during the Reagan years that income inequality everywhere began to take off. No wonder Occupy Wall Street happened in 2011; the question is: Why did it take so long? Occupy was largely a feckless movement that

had one lasting effect: it brought publicity to income inequality. Occupy more or less made the mantra “the 1 percent, 99 percent” ubiquitous.

Again, what I'm trying to point out is that this cultural shift didn't happen by accident.

Various commentators, as I wrote this past April in the *Huffington Post*, claim the Powell Memo of 1971 “influenced or inspired the creation of the Heritage Foundation, the Manhattan Institute, the Cato Institute, Citizens for a Sound Economy, Accuracy in Academe, and other powerful organizations. Their long-term focus began paying off handsomely in the 1980s, in coordination with the Reagan Administration's ‘hands-off business’ philosophy.”

The Powell Memo is a remarkable document, prescient and alarming, though it was not in general circulation till the 1990s.

The '80s, '90s, definitely saw a concerted reaction against the '60s/'70s. No more of that: Time to reduce the number of idealistic young who didn't seem to care that much about money. The cultural landscape was now filled with one percenters, all heroes of the new generation: musicians, athletes, money managers, Silicon Valley barons.

The growth of for-profit colleges is just one of the hallmarks of the last 20 some years; they were helped along by the parallel decrease in state support for college and universities. Again, public education was being privatized. The debt that students began to accrue they were not able to shed, since laws made it exempt from bankruptcy protection.

Add to that our country's condition of permanent war, predicted long ago by one of the greatest humanists, George Orwell, that we have been enduring since the end of last century, the twentieth, that is. Orwell's essay, “Politics and the English Language,” is still seminal, but, evidently, completely ignored. Rhetoric and anti-government propaganda from the right has been almost completely successful; nonetheless, the most startling growth of for-profit colleges has been the last ten years or so. They tapped into the GI Bill population of veterans minted by our Middle East wars, primarily the Afghanistan war onward.

Speaking of language and labels, words or phrases that drop out of common speech are also significant. Beatniks, hippies, even yuppies, since that word always had some derision in it, are long gone, more or less. Way back in the early twentieth century, there was a certain group written about, and that label has dropped out of the vernacular, too. It was “capitalists”; you can look up, say, the *New York Times* pre-WWI, and see headlines such as “Capitalists Meet.” After the First World War the use of the word, designating a localized subgroup, a class apart, decreased and then disappeared.

Capitalists wanted their title and presence to be mainstreamed and it was. Another common phrase that disappeared just before the Vietnam War was “war profiteer.”

Kevin Phillips’s two books on the Bush family (*American Dynasty*, *American Theocracy*) show quite clearly that both branches of the Bush family have been war profiteers for generations. Bring in a Bush, bring on a war.

What was the Iraq war about? It made the upperclass millions and the lower classes dead and maimed. This isn’t Marxism, it’s just facts. History is the humanities. An old remark by Randolph Bourne, made around the turn of the century, the nineteenth to the twentieth, “War is the health of the state,” is still on target. What American industries continue to manufacture are the machines necessary for war: planes and bombs, armaments generally. These businesses employ a lot of people. And the government isn’t eager to outsource arms sales to China.

I’ve had a secure job since 1978 when I began teaching at private colleges and universities. Before then I had manual labor jobs. But, I began teaching full time in 1975 at a public university, Rutgers-Newark. Public universities aren’t quite as safe as private ones. I take the South Shore into Chicago now and then, and the train travels by Chicago State University where all the teachers have been fired recently because of Illinois Republican governor Bruce Rauner; Rauner cut state funding and continues to quarrel over Illinois’s education budget. Rauner was, what else?, the Chairman of R8 Capital Partners and Chairman of the private equity firm GTCR. And now, as governor of Illinois, Rauner retains his mad focus on privatization, doing his best to ruin higher public education in the state. He, more or less, bought his governorship (he reportedly spent 26 million of his own money on his campaign), though the Democrats did help by putting three of their former modern governors in prison.

One might ask, how do these people get elected to high offices and why do so many Midwestern states have Republican-controlled state legislatures (though not yet Illinois’s), along with school boards, city councils, all the smaller bodies that control so much of people’s lives? One reason is that, in many ways, Republicans change a vice into a virtue. Conservatives tend to be parochial, thinking not very much beyond their noses, but just that sort of parochial self interest lets them get more deeply involved in local politics.

Whereas liberals, bless them, have longer horizons, see the world as interconnected, are more macro than micro, and, alas, do not get involved as intensely in the nitty gritty of small-time politics and civic positions.

If you want to save the whales, you’re thinking of oceans; if you want to combat climate change, you’re thinking of the planet. You can see the prob-

lem. If you want to prevent evolution from being taught in the school down the street, you attempt to get on the state board of education; you become Mary Lou Bruner, the Texas woman who believes President Obama was a gay prostitute to pay for his drug habit back in his college days.

One, I suppose, could write a book called *How the One Percent Became the One Percent*, tracing the history of laws and deregulations that took place, often enacted below most people's radar. Remember, everyone wanted to be a lawyer back in the 1980s; now, not so much. But what sort of legislation is currently in the news? It's all voter-suppression laws.

If the general population might finally begin to catch on—Feel the Bern—make it harder for them to vote is the answer. The disruptions (i.e. Trump) that are going on in both parties show something at long last has gotten through to the disgruntled.

Our culture values persistence and Bernie Sanders has been persistent, as I have pointed out elsewhere in print. Bernie has two or three things to say and he's been saying them since he began to run for office in Vermont during the 1970s. What is amazing to me is that it has taken nearly five decades for his message to be heard. Bernie is the Revenge of the Sixties, a piper who has captured the young, with the distilled elixir of his (and my) youth. He has stepped out intact from a Sixties's time capsule. Though he doesn't look like a hippie, a beatnik—no serape or beads, no candles in Chianti bottles.

Bernie Sanders wears suits, but the excesses of the right and the one percent over the same time span have become so egregious, brazen, and successful, that no one, even the least sophisticated (i.e. Trump supporters), can miss or deny it, especially college students who are footing a lot of the bill—alas, just to be educated. They may not be under the gun of the draft, but the draft for this generation has been replaced by debt.

After winning the Indiana Democratic primary, Sanders said, "I'll tell you what is extremely exciting for me, and that is that in primary after primary, caucus after caucus, we end up winning the vote of people 45 years of age and younger. And that is important because it tells me that ideas that we are fighting for are the ideas for the future of America and the future of the Democratic Party." He didn't point out that they were also the ideas of the past.

Even the Supreme Court chimed-in in 2013 on voter suppression, gutting the Civil Rights-era voting-rights legislation. Do you think the current Republican-controlled congress will fix that? But, one trouble with voter suppression is that the voters themselves are so good at it, given that only about 50 percent of the eligible bother to vote. Democrats seem to forget

about elections unless a presidency is at stake. Mid-terms have been fertile harvests for Republicans, especially in fly-over country.

At Rutgers-Newark way back when, my first full-time teaching job, it was like teaching night school during the day, insofar as a majority of the first generation students enrolled seemed to have full-time jobs that they worked their daytime classes around.

But now even the faculties at public colleges and universities can be poor, if they are adjuncts, a growing trend over the last twenty years.

How can the humanities affect poverty? As I started with, it can make poverty more bearable. But the important thing is fundamental and two-fold. Knowing how to read, of course, is the first requirement. My students at Rutgers had some problems with that, yet even a handful at the private schools where I've taught did, too. We have been an aural-visual culture for some time now, especially so, since the flourishing of the internet and so-called smart phones.

A picture is worth a thousand words, certainly, but now a lot of people lack those thousand words.

I have tried to point out one thing to my students: words are free if you can get a hold of a dictionary somewhere. It used to be in America that a couple of material things were free: ballpoint pens and t-shirts. You could usually find one or the other being given away somewhere. Now, unfortunately, there is a third free thing: books. It's easy these days to find a free book, if you're not too picky.

But words have always been free. What you would frequently find in the bohemian world was the so-called autodidact. Someone self-educated, meaning the person read a lot, often across a wide, and fairly crazy, spectrum.

IQ tests of yore were largely built on the size of a person's vocabulary. I guess the old SATs still pushed that. I would tell my students that one answer supplied to that old game of "What two books would you want if stranded on a desert island?" was given by Emily Dickinson. Her two books were the Bible and a dictionary.

Culture largely comes from one great book; all literate cultures have one. The Bible, the Talmud, the Koran. I had a few religious fundamentalist students at Rutgers who, though lacking a lot of ideas, had interesting prose styles, since all they ever read was the King James Bible. But this theory can also produce unfortunate examples, since a lot of destruction has come about by people who swear by one book, doing God knows what in its name. Beyond the religious texts noted above, there is, for example, Mao's *Little Red Book*, *Mein Kampf*.

Certainly, you could get an argument that culture comes out of technology. Creating fire doubtless was a matter of primitive technology. Making a tool. The silicon chip, and the devices that have resulted, has created its own culture, one that is still in formation. Indeed, regarding language, we are going backwards. Emoticons are proliferating. We're back to drawing pictures on the walls of our flat-screen individual caves. Literacy allegedly triumphed over the oral by the middle of the twentieth century, but since then orality has come storming back.

There is nothing sadder than the statistical studies of how many words children of poverty hear, are exposed to, and how infrequently adults, if they happen to be around, read to such children.

Even the young I encountered in classrooms are, on average, no longer as well read as those I dealt with twenty, thirty years ago. Of course, there are exceptions. There are always exceptions.

The culture, because of technology, has replaced knowing with Googling, often on small machines made by the largely poor in China. I use a computer, write on one, so I can't complain that people would rather read off a screen than hold a book in their hands, since I, too, type words on a screen.

It is easier to think if you have a lot of words in your head and have many words from which to choose. Even though they are free for the taking, they deserve your respect and attention. Nonetheless, I've told my students for years if words were expensive, more people might want them. If words were sold, that is, they would be valued.