

DISRUPTION

WILLIAM OPHULS

Since its origins, capitalism has been synonymous with Schumpeter's "gale of creative destruction." The gale has now morphed into a hurricane that is genuinely creative but also extremely destructive. Those responsible for generating the hurricane seem almost to delight in disruption for its own sake, an ethos epitomized by the motto of Facebook's founder: "Move fast and break things." But disruption is bound to create both winners who reap the gains and losers who pay the costs.

Joe and Mary Smith live in Akron, Ohio.¹ Joe once had a well-paid factory job that afforded the Smith family a solidly middle-class existence. Then the tire plant moved to Mexico, and Joe has not been able to find steady work ever since, much less work at comparable wages. And with his job Joe lost not only good wages but also his sense of self worth and even much of his social life, which revolved around his work mates. Mary was a stay-at-home mom who worked occasionally for pin money but no

¹ My apologies for making the particulars all about the American case, but I believe my general point about the impact of disruption applies more broadly to Europe and even to countries as far afield as India and Indonesia.

longer does so because recent migrants now do all the jobs that casual laborers used to do. Joe and Mary live on welfare.

Joe and Mary had two children. The son, seeing no future in Akron, joined the Army hoping to receive technical training that would qualify him for civilian work after he completed his service. He was channelled into the infantry instead and came home from Iraq in a body bag. The daughter, also seeing no future in Akron, started running with a bad crowd and became terminally addicted to opioids, but not before producing a brain-damaged child that Joe and Mary are raising on food stamps.

Joe's younger brother Pete is still making a go of it as a baker whose specialty is wedding cakes. Pete is a devout evangelical Christian who believes that the Bible is the literal word of God, so when he was approached by a gay couple wanting a cake for their impending wedding he politely declined. He is now being sued by the ACLU and condemned in the national media as a bigot for adhering to his sincere religious beliefs. Pete's daughters attend the local high school where two boys have recently decided to be girls and are demanding to use the bathrooms and changing rooms appropriate for their new "gender." The school is in turmoil and threatened with lawsuits no matter what it does.

Then the black community decided to make its grievances known by marching on city hall under the banners of "Black Lives Matter" and

“White Privilege,” slogans that seem to mock Joe, Mary, and indeed all those afflicted by disruption who feel that their lives don’t seem to matter much to anyone and that far from being privileged they have been thrown to the wolves by:

Wall Street, which sent Joe’s job to Mexico and has vastly enriched itself by fostering globalization, digitalization, automation, and a climate in which only the short-term bottom line matters, community be damned;

Silicon Valley, which inflicts enormous disruption on the society while ignoring the costs imposed on individuals and governments and creating a society that threatens to leave large numbers of people out in the cognitive cold;

The meritocrats who believe that they deserve their status and wealth because they have earned it, whereas (at least by implication) those who have not earned it are undeserving;

The corporate hirelings in Washington who have enabled the disruption by doing Wall Street and Silicon Valley’s bidding, thereby acquiescing in the steady impoverishment of the American heartland, the gradual marginalization of those who do not qualify to join the “cognitive elite,” and therefore the rapid and almost unprecedented growth of stark economic inequality;

The United States Congress, guilty of dereliction of duty for not doing something to control illegal immigration in the first place and then doing nothing to moderate its impact after the fact;

The medical-pharmaceutical complex for its complicity in fomenting a devastating opioid epidemic;

The politicians on the left who (with some honorable exceptions) mostly pander to narrow minority interests instead of standing up for the little guy, the traditional mission of the left;

The national media that mostly celebrates the doings, beliefs, and attitudes of the so-called coastal elites and either ignores what goes on in “flyover country” or condemns its doings, beliefs, and attitudes (however sincerely and deeply held) as backward if not bigoted;

The culture warriors who not only espouse libertarian, secular ideals and mores that are in conflict with traditional values, especially deeply held religious values, but who also demand that these same ideals and mores shall be imposed on all;

The practitioners of identity politics who, whatever their original intentions and motives, have created a climate in which personal identity, personal rights, and personal grievances are paramount, thus negating a

sense of common citizenship and provoking conflict among identity groups.²

So who unleashed the forces of reaction? Those who believed (with good cause) that their livelihoods and beliefs were under attack and therefore marked their ballot for President Trump? Or those who, all the while congratulating themselves on their enlightenment and compassion, failed to notice the sufferings of their fellow countrymen until the morning after the election?

How the United States arrived at this juncture is complicated. The intrinsic and inexorable dynamic of capitalism that engenders creative destruction, the exceptional disruption caused by the computer and the internet, the implacable logic of liberal-democratic values that incite ever greater demands for “freedom” by ever smaller minorities feeling oppressed by society’s norms, and the ruthless way in which instrumental rationality corrodes every system of belief are some of the salient factors. However, one consequence of all of the above has been especially destructive: the loss of an establishment or, to give it its proper name, a patrician class.

²What is worse, the rise of identity politics has encouraged the revival of a white supremacy movement that was largely dormant during earlier times of shared prosperity. To say this is not to condone racism in any form—much less to create a false moral equivalence between, say, the NAACP and the KKK—only to point out the political hazard that accompanies a forceful assertion of identity.

The words *patrician* and *patriarchy* should not be confused or conflated. Despite their common derivation from the Latin and Greek words for *father*, only patriarchy specifically denotes male rule. Whereas there is no reason in principle that a patrician class could not be mixed gender or even matriarchal, and history provides examples of a female sovereign dominating a patrician class, with Elizabeth I of England and Catherine the Great of Russia being only the most noteworthy.

Patrician classes have taken many forms throughout history.³ Their function is,

First, to uphold civil society by observing its mores and modeling its norms (making all due allowance for the inevitable hypocrisy involved), thus giving the populace something to look up to and be guided by;

Second, to direct the affairs of the society for the general good even though this will inevitably further entrench their own wealth, status, and power.

What distinguishes a genuine patrician class from a mere oligarchy concerned only with feathering its own nest is a spirit of *noblesse oblige*—the duty of those in a privileged position to behave with responsibility and generosity toward those who are less privileged, if only out of a due regard for their own enlightened self-interest. *Noblesse oblige* constitutes the glue

³ The Wikipedia article “Patrician (Post-Roman Europe)” gives some idea of their variety.

that holds a well-functioning civil society together and causes a people to take their cues from above instead of below. When ordinary citizens are respected and well-treated instead of disregarded, they will be inclined to follow the lead of their so-called elders and betters. But when their dignity is injured or their vital interests are trampled by those above, they will withdraw their allegiance, causing the society to break down.

Until overthrown by the combination of an antinomian social revolution in the 60s and the blundering of the so-called best and brightest in Vietnam, the United States had a patrician class of long-standing. Its record was mixed, as is true of all such classes. It originally countenanced both slavery and genocide, failed to prevent a brutal civil war, allowed the excesses of the gilded age, and so forth. In addition, although not completely closed—for example, the second generation of robber barons soon became patricians—it practiced systematic exclusion and discrimination. Yet that same class produced reformers like the two Roosevelts as well as numerous others whose lives were spent in public service at all levels of the society. And whatever their faults and failings, the American patricians consistently set a standard that was followed by the rest of the society.

The current absence of a patrician class has produced precisely the anarchic vacuum presaged in William Butler Yeats's "The Second Coming":

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

.....

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity.

Without a patrician center, there are no standards, and so people increasingly go their own ways or take their cues from below, not above. And the society breaks down into fractions that passionately pursue their partial interest at the expense of the larger whole. Hence the moral confusion and political dysfunction that now afflicts the United States.

All of history testifies that in complex societies there must be a stable and experienced ruling class of some sort, for the alternative is chaos and anarchy, whether due to a lack of governance or to a takeover of society by ideological fanatics. The choice is between a relatively public-spirited establishment or a corrupt nomenklatura that regards only its own interests. Our current meritocratic elite is an unfortunate example of the latter, for it appears to have little sympathy or concern for those who have not "made it." Merit is, of course, essential to the operation of any complex society, but when merit overrides all other considerations it

entails oppression. As mentioned above, the problem with a mere meritocracy is that its members feel entitled without also feeling a countervailing sense of responsibility. Hence its members manifest privilege in the worst sense of the word, thinking that they owe nothing to the lesser beings who are simply getting their just deserts for not being driven enough or clever enough to join the meritorious elite. In the end, as described by Michael Young many years ago, a meritocracy tends toward a state of permanent privilege that over time solidifies into a quasi-genetic hereditary aristocracy.⁴

At this point, one can only hope that the American meritocrats soon come to understand that it is not enough to give away huge sums of money and that they must instead transform themselves into a genuine elite, into a patrician class capable of leading and governing for the benefit of all. If they fail in this regard, then we may anticipate some very rough beasts, their hour come round at last, slouching toward Washington.

⁴ *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, 1958