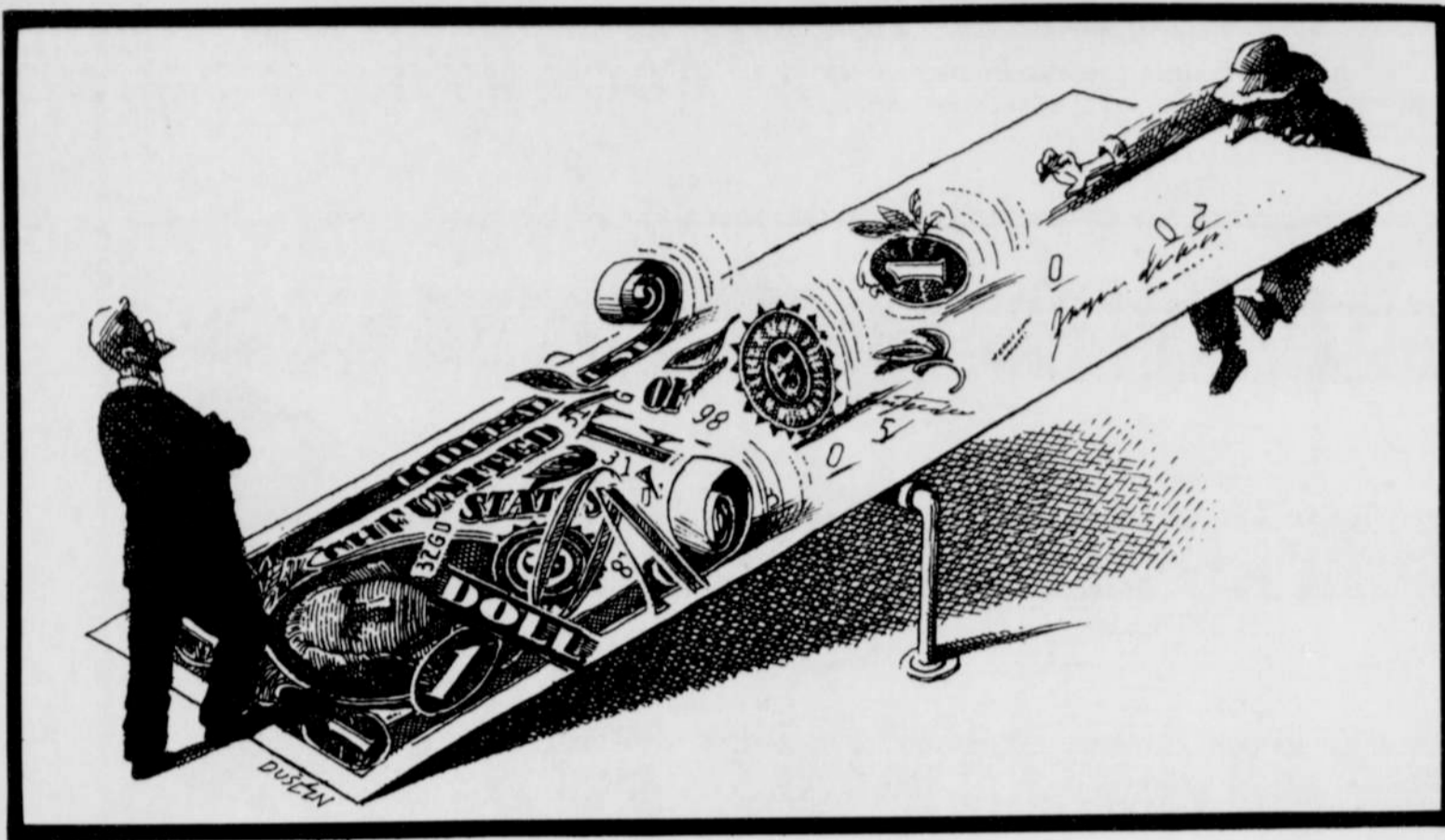


BUT DON'T CALL IT CLASS WARFARE



DUSAN PETRICIC

BY NANCY HOFFMAN

I am continually amazed at the lack of political interest in so many of my fellow citizens. I realize that getting a job, finding good daycare, having dependable transportation, feeling safe, and other daily issues consume their lives. But they never seem to question why these things are so difficult, why they take up so much of our time. Our roads have pot holes, our schools are cutting back on teaching days and new textbooks, our airports are overcrowded, our food kitchens are running low on meals, and American workers frequently cannot afford reasonable medical care. Yet we all know that we live in a wealthy nation. The United States has the highest GNP in the world. What's going on?

I've lived in a wealthy neighborhood. I've seen people buy new cars every year, upgrading from the Ford to the Volvo to the Mercedes to the Ferrari or exotic Lotus Europa sports car. I've seen them struggle to choose between a month long ski vacation in Switzerland or a delightful two week cruise of the Caribbean and then choose both. I've seen people hire and fire nannies, housekeepers and gardeners because they didn't perform satisfactorily although paid less than minimum wage. I've seen walls go up around neighborhoods and gates with guards to keep out the unwanted and help reduce crime. I've seen private Lear Jets for travel to the Super Bowl helping the owners avoid the crowded masses in the airports.

So the point is that we have different classes in our society, most of us — the wage earners, the working poor and the working middle and upper middle class — on one side, and the very, very rich on the other. And yet few people ever question the fairness of this distribution of wealth and luxury. One commentator recently stated that people in America believe they are all 'pre-rich', about to join the ranks of the upper class, and this explains their passivity in the face of inequity. But even so, do the ultra wealthy and comfortable contribute so much more to the well being of our nation that they deserve to have so many additional benefits?

Examine the occupations for a moment. The middle class includes owners of small businesses, farmers, government workers, teachers, loggers, soldiers, roofers, hair dressers, firefighters, waitresses, store clerks — in short, the people we encounter as we go about surviving each day. Some of the wealthier among us are doctors, lawyers, business consultants and salesmen. But none of these people represent the top levels of wealth in our society.

Who are the multi-millionaires? We know about the athletes and actors, of course. They are an easy target for an essay like this. But what do the others do? They may have inherited their wealth, but in most cases what they do is manipulate our capitalist economy for their own benefit. They handle the money, they manage the corporations, they receive profits from the exploitation of natural resources, they buy low and sell high. The products of their labor are insubstantial when measured by what they contribute to the betterment of America.

So then we might ask who truly serves the greater society in the Boy Scout definition of the word 'serve'. Imagine for a moment that we give honor points to people who make our nation better or make our individual lives easier by their labor. The refuse collector, the doctor, the postal worker, the small business owner — all of these would receive major allotments. The investment broker, the Wall Street tycoon and the old money would receive none unless they happened to contribute to charity, but this would be unrelated to their source of income. Then imagine that we rewarded people, at least partially, based on their accumulation of points. The fabulously rich would earn less and many of the lower and middle class workers would earn more. I know this treads dangerously close to socialism, but as at least one columnist recently argued, can our democracy survive the current huge imbalance in the distribution of wealth?

The problem goes back to my opening. Why are the lives of so many of our citizens so difficult in this wealthiest of nations? It is because our nation is investing less and less in the infrastructure that sustains the working classes. Day care, health care, retirement security, transportation systems and job security have all suffered in the last thirty years. During the time that the wealth of this nation shifted dramatically upwards into the hands of the very few, the willingness of the ultrarich group to pay taxes and contribute to a healthy infrastructure has continued to decline, and they have found ways to insert their reluctance into the laws of the land.

While so many citizens are apathetic and apolitical, the very rich are the opposite. They have taken the reins of power in this country, buying political capital through huge campaign contributions and paying close attention to any attempt to restore fairness through progressive taxation. They have created a plutocracy, a country ruled by the wealthy. Simply look at the personal incomes of our President and his cabinet to confirm this claim. They are so culturally and socially distant from the wage earner that they need advisers to explain our concerns to them. When the very rich take steps to secure their place in society at the cost of the infrastructure, they talk in terms of "sound economic policy." But when working people suggest that this polarization in the distribution of wealth is harmful, they are subjected to cries of "class warfare" immediately stifling any kind of informed discussion. Not only is there class warfare, but the wage earner is rocking back on his/her heels in the last minute of the 15th round.

Of course there is an opposition to my argument: Here are some widely accepted "truths":

1. The wealthy will invest and create jobs, raising everyone up with them.
2. The wealthy take huge risks thus deserving huge rewards.
3. Everyone has the opportunity to be wealthy, so suggestions that something is not right in the distribution of wealth are just "sour grapes."

Okay. First, if the wealthy use their wealth to create jobs and raise everyone, why do we continue to have unemployment and grinding poverty after over twenty years of this "voodoo economics"? Second, firefighters take risks, soldiers take risks, miners take risks, fishermen take risks. Risking venture capital pales in comparison, yet those who risk their lives do not receive huge monetary rewards. Finally, it is not being a bad sport or "sour grapes" to point out that the game is fixed when the game is fixed.

Consider another approach to this same issue. As our global population swells, recently passing 6 billion inhabitants, we might explore Wendell Barry's famous question, "What are people for?" To justify the doubling of the population, and to argue against genocide, we need to understand what meaningful purpose teeming populations serve on this earth. Certainly if the number of whales suddenly doubled we would find a purpose for them. But if the number of rats and mosquitoes doubled, things which have no useful purpose (to us), we would find ways to exterminate them. So if we are not going to promote family planning and population control, and if we are going to resist genocide, we need to have a purpose for all of these new billions of people.

One answer to the question is people exist to govern themselves and promote the greater good. This response, of course, is circular and does not actually address the question, but it is the basis for much of our social and religious structure. For example, arguing that our country is first and foremost a democratic nation is the mythology perpetuated by well meaning 4th grade teachers throughout the land. The 'Democratic Myth' supposes that each individual is valuable and that we all participate in our own government, we exist to share in the world's bounty, we have dominion over our natural resources, and we help each other enjoy a peaceful and joyful life.

Ask any economist and he or she will not hesitate to answer the question, "What are people for?" The answer is obvious. People exist to buy goods and to make goods or offer services so that corporations can make profits. People are the fuel of the great machine that we call capitalism which is not to be confused with democracy. A corporation does not make

decisions based on the votes of its workers, and corporate leaders do not represent their employees. Decisions are made for the purpose of profit, and corporate leaders, following their own laws, must represent only their largest stock holders whose interest is also profits.

This is capitalism, not democracy, and we are a capitalist nation, rapidly becoming a capitalist world. Read newspaper headlines if you are not convinced that capitalism is the driving force in this new world order. Under the Clinton administration, the slogan was "It's the economy, stupid," and under the Bush administration the goal is to end the taxation that cuts into the profits of corporations, even at the expense of social programs and the needs of the individual worker. The health of our nation is measured by corporate health and economic categories such as the Dow, the gross national product, quarterly profit projections, inflation figures and unemployment rates. But pay close attention here. Good reports in these categories do not always equate to good news for the individual. For example, in the world of capitalism, zero unemployment is a "bad" thing.

Zero unemployment is a bad thing in the real world, not the fairytale, because people are resources — human resources. In fact, most large institutions no longer use the word 'personnel' when referring to their workforce. Personnel, often mistaken for 'personal', suggests an interest in the needs of the individual employee. The term "Human resources" more properly places the emphasis on the needs of the corporation or employer. Human resources are needed right along with physical resources — materials and supplies — so the organization can produce its product and make a profit. If all of the human resources are employed, they can demand more for their labor, just as prices go up when the supply of physical resources is less than the demand. Profits are made by the efficient use of cheap resources, and decisions are based on corporate needs, not quality of life. As in the Enron fiasco, when disaster strikes corporate leaders will preserve the profits while employees will suffer the disaster. Natural resources, in the real world, are assets that can become profits. They are not nature preserves for peace of mind, parks for solitude, or shared bounty of the earth.

Now assume you are the great corporate CEO in the White House. Would you support birth control or family planning? Of course not. More people mean lower wages. More people mean more human resources for the giant capitalistic machine.

But surely, if people are nothing more than fodder, they will protest and protest loudly. For humans, by the very nature of being human, have dignity, and dignity requires that our purpose be greater than being fuel for a machine. Our purpose must be noble and pure, not materialistic and mean. How do we keep people happy being human resources? The answer to this question is in the fairytale. We keep people happy by keeping them believing in the Democratic Myth and by believing that they are all "pre-rich". If the people run this country and this economy, as the myth maintains, they can't rationally complain when the people they elect make decisions that seem to harm them as individuals. Obviously our leaders can see the bigger picture. Only crazy cynics and people using the fighting words of "class warfare" would suggest that the money of corporate lobbyists has more sway than the constituent's vote.

And we keep people happy by amusing them with the drugs of television, computers, patriotism and consumerism. Let them watch sports or sitcoms and put lots of energy into caring about the fictional world of the Blazers or "Friends." Make them complacent, believing enormous quantities of information on the internet take the place of quality information and truth. Give them a war now and then so they can wave flags and give their lives for democracy. And most importantly, let them have just enough money to buy a new car every few years, stylish clothes, and new technology. Let them compete among themselves for who is most informed, most patriotic and most chic. Then our human resources will not complain and people will humbly and obediently serve their greater purpose — fueling the economy.

These, then, are the measures of a successful capitalist economy, one with burgeoning populations accepting of the unequal distribution of wealth and profits. That this is actually a very unhealthy measurement for a society is not a new concept. Consider the ideas of Michel de Montaigne, a French thinker during the Renaissance. Writing around 1571, Montaigne challenged the idea that a nation's wealth should be lavished on the rich and cited Aristotle's view that these goods would "vanish from memory as soon as the people are sated with them." Montaigne suggests that a healthy nation will spend its wealth on "ports, harbors, fortifications and walls, on sumptuous buildings, churches, hospitals, colleges, and the improvement of streets and roads." Consider the last time our government constructed a "sumptuous" building. I don't think it has in my lifetime.

A successful democratic society with a growing population, then, must have other measures of success besides the stock market and GNP. To evaluate a true democracy, by and for the people, we would want to know if the people, rather than the corporations and moneyed elites, are being served. Instead of GNP, we would examine access to health care, housing, public safety, education and literacy. We would demand growing and improved infrastructure including freeways, bridges, airports and mass transit systems. We would measure family support and food distribution systems. Decisions in our legislatures would be based on what is good for the citizens not the lobbyists. Our environment would exist for our pleasure and our health rather than as the source of corporate assets.

We must free our democracy from the web of capitalism. While we live in a capitalist society, preserving and protecting our economic system must be of lesser importance than safeguarding and nurturing our political system, our democracy. Unbridled capitalism will destroy our democracy. So we need to take steps to protect this "great experiment," a system dependent on an informed consensus of all of our citizens, even if it means that we have to put some constraints on capitalism and take back power from the plutocrats. We need to become more informed because that is the responsibility of citizens in a democracy. We need to examine what makes our lives difficult and what changes would alleviate these daily struggles. Then we need to elect people who will fight the battle with us.

Nancy Hoffman is head of the English Department at Clatsop Community College. She hosted a recent all day public conference about the USA Patriot Act at the college in January.

