

The Bitter American

Confronting the pain of unmet needs

A few years back I became frustrated with the word "fine" – as in "How are you?" "Fine." (I would cringe.) Few of us were really "fine" back in 2003 or 2005, unless inspired by war. Those were the years that gave us Operation Iraqi Liberation (OIL), WMDs and the lesser-known but equally offensive "bomblets."

During those darkest of years I invented my own nifty reply: "Wedged." As in, "I feel wedged between late industrial capitalism and early postmodern feudalism." Let me clarify that. But first I want to assert that feeling caught between shifting, historical forces is relevant to the controversy about bitterness in the American working class, regardless of race.

As part of the working class myself, I was not offended by Sen. Obama's comments. On the contrary, they open the door to discuss publicly what is happening to this country at the level of our social bonds. By social bonds I mean when we feel we belong to a place, as a full member of the community, and our essential needs are met. The kind of belonging that once led others to assert, "We the people ..." (Kind of like being a citizen versus a consumer.)

Why are some Americans bitter? Obama said, "They have been beaten down so long, and they feel betrayed by their government." For some, the good jobs went overseas years ago, and nothing has replaced them. For others, the health care crisis is creating innumerable tragedies and homelessness. For many, the random senseless violence at home and abroad leaves us feeling intensely vulnerable. For me, the Bush years of endless war and creeping fascism crushed dreams and trust. Some of us, but not all of us, are clinging to guns or God.

No, what I cling to in dark times is my need for a deeper understanding of what is happening to us and my desire to have a country again – not an empire. I return again and again to the library to check out books on history, politics, etc. (you should see my late fines). I am part of an invisible voting block: working class intellectuals.

We cling to our faith that if we can understand more clearly the forces that are squeezing the life out of our lives, we can solve our problems. We lean on the strength of ideas because we haven't got much else. We are not elitists – most of us don't have health insurance. But we believe that ideas can provide the power of a new perspective to help us see the world anew.

So, let's look at the bitter American from a different angle. Another term available to describe our condition is alienation. Alienation is said to be the flipside of belonging. If I am alienated, it means I feel that I don't belong anymore in ways that are meaningful to me. I could be sitting there, right next to you, but I've got a list of unmet needs that you can't see. The list is so long that I lost track of the beginning, so I say "fine" and be done with it, but the bitterness grows.

Inside we are angry about what's happened. But we're also yearning for something else we need: to reconnect, to belong again. Underneath the bitterness we have wounds, and underneath the wounds is a longing: the universal human longing to belong. Our bitterness reveals the painful gaps between living in an evolving capitalist society and the stubbornness of deep, unmet, human needs.

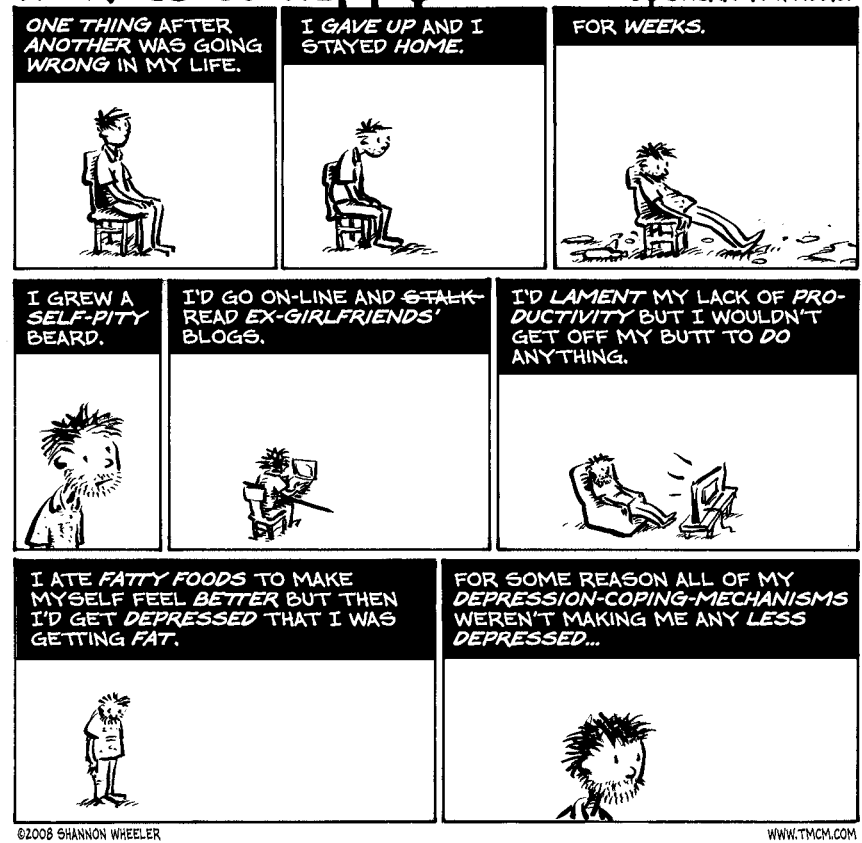
Which returns me to my claim that we are wedged between late industrial capitalism and early postmodern feudalism. What I mean is that 300 years of industrial revolution have taken a big bite out of the planet. To make matters worse, Bush and the corporations have accounting systems that bill us for the damages while they move operations to the remaining green pastures overseas. Meanwhile, some academics have decided that modernity is over and we are moving on to the next phase: postmodernism. I don't know about you, but the current levels of global violence and fundamentalism combined with the lack of health care and affordable housing feel more like a new kind of feudalism than anything else. Can't we do better?

Obama seems to think so. When he says some people are bitter and clinging, he is not demeaning them. He is asking us to look at their lives and try to understand. I think he is also asking us to dust off our capacity for empathy, solidarity and belonging despite the times.

Kara Steffensen of Springfield currently creates peace signs and cooks meals while participating in lefty talk radio — when she can find it.



How to Be Happy (OPERA ORIGIN) by Shannon Wheeler



Letters TO THE EDITOR

ORTIZ: THE VERY BEST

I am mystified by the *Weekly's* lukewarm endorsement of Andrea Ortiz for Ward 7 city councilor. While she may have "frustrated progressives with some votes," she has impressed this progressive with her vision, leadership and timely and effective response to constituent concerns. Ortiz is an independent thinker whose decisions reflect her ability to see issues on their own merits and in the context of a value set which I view as consistently progressive. The Eugene City Council has self-immolated in the past by refusing to allow one another the ability to disagree occasionally within a progressive framework. Statements like the one in the *Weekly* endorsement do little more than encourage that past to repeat itself.

Andrea Ortiz takes the time to be well-informed on the vast number of issues that come before the council despite the fact that she holds down a full-time job and volunteers her time elsewhere as well. In addition to her service on the City Council, Ortiz is a former member of the Bethel Budget Committee and Bethel School Board and has represented the council on the Eugene Police Commission and Eugene Human Rights Commission.

Please join me in financially supporting her campaign and vote for Andrea Ortiz for Ward 7 city councilor. She represents the very best in public service.

Ron Chase
Eugene

CHINA BASHING

I am hoping this letter can offer another perspective to China and related issues.

China bashing has been trendy in the media and among the public in Western countries. It is even more so with the recent Tibet riot and free Tibet demonstrations during torch relays. For Tibet issues, please do a little bit research about history of China and Tibet before you use the word "invasion." It is very complicated, and

both sides have evidence to support their claims. Also, if you look up the definition of "terrorist," what some Tibetans did during the riot fits in the definition. Apparently, these dictionary-referrals don't solve any problems.

I agree that there are many serious problems in China. However, before we make any conclusion, let's put everything into historical context. The real development of China started about 30 years ago. Astonishing economic growth is unfortunately accompanied by problems such social inequality and pollution. On the other hand, the U.S. has been developed for more than 200 years, and as recently as 50 years ago there was still serious race segregation.

I point this out not to justify what is happening in China but to illustrate that economic and social development just don't happen overnight. It is a good thing to keep some external pressure on China. At the same time, we need to critically think about what is good for China and the U.S. Finger-pointing and confrontation are definitely not the answer. We need to keep the communication going and develop mutual understanding for further collaboration.

Yongjun Wang
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WHICH MAFIA DID IT?

Even if I were not an Obama supporter (which I am), I would find Kenneth Elsbree's reasoning outrageous (5/1). His Clinton signs have disappeared, so it follows that the "Obama Mafia" has stolen them.

Maybe it was the McCain Mafia. Maybe the Chicago Mafia. Maybe no Mafia at all. Maybe just some kids with too much time on their hands.

Did he actually witness some shift-eyed gangsters wearing glow-in-the-dark Obama buttons creep up and scuttle off with his irreplaceable Hillary signs? Will the absence of these signs destroy her chance