

UNDERSTANDING SUICIDAL AMERICANS

Posts in this series

I've always had a sneaking admiration for people who vote on principle rather than self-interest. Lots of people vote against their economic self-interest because they believe that some religious doctrine is more important. Some vote for the Republicans who have rigged the economy to protect the interests of the filthy rich because the Republicans promised to end abortion. I think that's stupid. But at another level, it's easy to forgive. After all, I vote for Democrats like Liz Warren who want to raise my taxes. This would be expensive for me, but I think it's crucial for a decent society to work to reduce wealth inequality.

But even I can't understand the rationale for refusing masks and vaccinations. That's just suicidal, as we see over and over among the genuinely stupid. For example in the last few weeks, at least seven conservative talk radio hosts and anti-vax anti-mask shouters have died of Covid-19. Their reasons vary, but all ignore the actual facts, including the safety record of the vaccines and the protection they give us. As an example, Phil Valentine said in a blog post that his chances of contracting Covid were "pretty low", and his chances of death were less than 1%. In point of fact, at least 13% of us have caught Covid, and 1.6% of cases have resulted in death so far. But Valentine thought he could evaluate his own immune system and do his own calculations.

Innumeracy isn't new in the US; most of us aren't good at really big numbers. That's why we don't do research ourselves but rely on experts to help us make smart decisions. And therein lies the problem. These suicidal people reject traditional expertise.

Again, at one level, so do I. The elites who

started the War On Terror are incompetent monsters. Elites decided to deregulate the financial sector. They were wrong and caused enormous damage around the world. The capitalists who fought regulation designed to prevent climate change are elites. They are still busy wrecking the planet. The intellectually dishonest hacks on SCOTUS who have beat back our efforts to govern ourselves are elites. The list of failed elites is long and dismal. And none of them are ever held accountable. Not a single one of them is even shamed. And that's before we get to Trump and his crowd of intentional wreckers. So yes, our elites are failures.

But that's not what the suicide class cares about. They're mad because smart people hurt their feelings. That's the explanation offered by David Brooks in his article *How The Bobos Broke America*. Brooks read several recent books about stuff, and he explains that the "creative class", of which he is a member, is a bunch of self-centered, self-righteous, not-nice people who are insufficiently sensitive to the feelings of the rest of America.

Brooks' creative class consists of "... the same scientists, engineers, architects, financiers, lawyers, professors, doctors, executives, and other professionals who make up the bobos ..." the group Brooks discussed in his book *Bobos In Paradise*. They came to dominate culture. This makes the other groups sad, or angry, or both, and so naturally they reject the class and its values. In that process, they reject the expertise that gave rise to cultural dominance. That includes the science and technology that we need to solve our actual problems. Here are some quotes to flesh that out:

1. The working class today vehemently rejects not just the creative class but the epistemic regime [defined earlier in the text as "the massive network of academics and analysts who determine what is true"] that it controls.

2. A third rebellion is led by people who are doing well financially but who feel culturally humiliated—the boubour rebellion. These are Mark and Patricia McCloskey, the rich St. Louis couple who waved their guns at passing Black protesters last year.

3. What causes psychic crisis are the whiffs of “smarter than” and “more enlightened than” and “more tolerant than” that the creative class gives off. People who feel that they have been rendered invisible will do anything to make themselves visible; people who feel humiliated will avenge their humiliation.

4. The reaction to the bobos has turned politics into a struggle for status and respect—over whose sensibility is dominant, over which groups are favored and which are denigrated. Political attitudes have displaced consumption patterns as the principal way that people signal class sensibility.

Like everything Brooks writes, this is slanted to produce a result Brooks likes. But there are a couple of germs of reality here. There is no doubt that the value systems of various classes of society are different. And there are in fact epistemic regimes. We saw a lot of this in reading about the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu.

Consider this post. Bourdieu talks about symbolic violence, meaning “...the capacity to impose the means for comprehending and adapting to the social world by representing economic and political power in disguised, taken-for-granted forms.” In this phrasing, someone has power to enforce an epistemic regime related to economic and political power. I used neoliberalism as an example in the post.

Epistemic regimes govern most of our ways of understanding parts of our lives, including our

social lives, and our spiritual lives, and the way we understand academic disciplines. There is, for example, an entire epistemic regime around our understanding of literature. There is an epistemic regime that governs scientific fields, as Kuhn shows. These epistemic regimes are regularly contested, as by deconstruction, or string theory. But there are entire systems devoted to managing and deciding those contests.

Brooks pretends that a “massive network of academics and analysts” controls the epistemic regime around political and economic power. As a statement of cause and effect, that is absurd. It would be equally absurd to argue that literary theory is governed by a massive network of billionaires and centi-millionaires.

To put it another way, there is no plausible political science theory that says that the interests of the filthy rich are entitled to dominance in a democracy or that any particular pig rich person is entitled to make decisions for the rest of us. Nor is there a plausible economic theory that says that oligopoly is a good way to run a market. True, there are economists and lawyers who tie themselves in intellectually silly knots trying to justify the current state of concentrated corporate power in the US. The oligarchy funds this network of grifters and PR hacks and supports their efforts to distort and mislead.

That takes us to the next step. The suicidal class operates under its own epistemic regime, one created by right-wing media and social media, right-wing pundits, Fox News and its competitors, right-wing talk radio, and a massive infrastructure of support from right-wing Oligarchs. This epistemic regime is totally divorced from reality. It says to its adherents: you can't trust main stream media, government workers, scientists, doctors, the health establishment, or any one other than us, because only we know the truth. Covid is just like the flu. Vaccines cause sterility. Hydrochloroquine and Ivermectin are great treatments for Covid.

The people who create and operate this epistemic regime are not Brooks' creative class. They are a motley group of ghouls, amplified and encouraged by tools of the Oligarchy. And their epistemic regime is killing people.