

Lumpen Leisure

Bread and circuses ... and jet-skis.

By James Howard Kunstler

AMONG THE MANY wonders and marvels of American life in the 20th century, especially after World War II, when our country ruled much of the world economically, was the astounding rise in standards of living among social classes that had hardly known leisure or had a dollar to spare on its accoutrements from time immemorial. The subject of class in America has been so sore that we can barely acknowledge its existence, despite the workings of whole industries devoted to exploiting the envy of the lower orders. The very term—lower orders—would be considered grounds for sacking if I had the misfortune of teaching at a college and will certainly be seized on by critics as evidence of my intellectual unfittedness. In short, any discourse on class consciousness is regarded in America these days as an obscenity far worse than stealing \$100 million from the shareholders of a telecom corporation.

I write this as someone who does not have a Marxist bone in his body—I am devoid of the impulse to reform the social class system *per se* precisely because I regard it as an implacable fact of life. The universe is organized hierarchically, and that's all there is to it. All of the subcategories of things in it tend to be organized hierarchically, too, especially the social life of animals, including human beings. It might be argued that the hunter-gatherers of prehistory enjoyed more pure equality in their little bands and tribes, but that was only because they possessed next to nothing in material wealth. The rest, literally, is

history. Once civilization got up and running, the story was nothing but class, since our complex societies required many layers of organization in the making, moving, and caretaking of things, and some persons enjoyed more favorable roles than others.

Industrial civilization enlarged the middle class without necessarily relieving the misery of the lower classes, which also grew, shifting their labors from the farm to the factory. Marxism was, of course, an effort to reform industrial society by inciting the lower orders to make war on all the orders above them. It failed because it eliminated the necessary incentives for producing industrial wealth—namely, the legal right of persons to accumulate it—while it additionally failed to abolish privilege among the politically connected. So privileged persons in places like the Soviet Union simply worked around the artificial impediments to a superior lifestyle, while the masses toiled in squalid and resigned futility.

Now, the high tide of industrial society, the 20th century, also happened to be an era of tremendously destructive industrial warfare. By mid-century, after two World Wars, the industrial nations of Europe had exhausted and bankrupted themselves and lay physically shattered. The same was true of Asia's only industrial power, Japan. The situation in the United States, on the other hand, was favorable to the extreme. The U.S. continental homeland went unscathed in both World Wars, and at the end of the second, our factories,

mines, oil fields, harbors, and railroads stood completely intact while everyone else's were devastated. We set out immediately to supply the rest of the shattered world with the necessary manufactured goods to resume civilized life and lent them money to buy our stuff. Once this program got underway in earnest, one of the side effects was a fabulous enrichment of America's laboring classes.

These classes—the assembly-line workers, the road-builders, the houseframers, masons, auto mechanics, truck drivers, et cetera—entered this miraculous new age straight from the lengthy sequential traumas of the Great Depression and the Second World War. Their expectations following the war were modest. Many were glad to have simply made it home alive from the canebrakes of the Solomon Islands and the beaches of Normandy. There was widespread anxiety that without the artificial stimulus of war production, America would sink into economic depression again. This worked out otherwise. The factories easily converted back to car-making from tank-building; William Levitt figured out how to mass produce the suburban house, starting a boom; and the American oil industry got the world's motors up and running again to get the big cleanup of Europe and Asia underway. As an added benefit, the American managing classes had returned from their stints as officers in the armed forces with equally modest expectations for the rewards of being in charge of things in civilian life. The Army had conditioned them into a subculture assembled

by rank but careful in the allocation of privilege, so as to keep up morale through the ranks for the greater good of winning the war. The officers-turned-executives brought these values into postwar corporate life for the greater good of winning a durable prosperity. By the same token, the lower ranks came out of the war with a fund of respect for the authority that had engineered their victory.

And so, by 1956, say, the president of a toaster company might be paid several multiples more than the guy on the assembly line but not obscenely more. In 1956, both would certainly be owners of American cars—a Cadillac versus a Ford Fairlane—and might well have owned their own homes in greater or lesser suburbs. But their standards of living would seem, from today's standpoint, startlingly similar. Both families would have had TV, perhaps one versus several, but both families also went to the movies at the Loews Theater and democratically took their seats first-come-first-served. Ditto the ballparks and football stadiums in the days before luxury boxes. Both upper and working class families ate the standard supermarket victuals of the day because the gourmet stratification of America had not yet happened. Both families might well have sent their children to public schools. Both fathers may have been Sunday golfers, though on different public and private courses. By the early 1960s, with America at the height of its manufacturing dominance, General Motors assembly-line workers made as much money as tenured college professors.

Now, politically, the situation I describe would seem to be very desirable, perhaps ideal, considering all the unjust systems that had existed before and elsewhere. The American system in those years was fairly equitable and appeared to be stable. But like all good things deriving from industrial civilization, this social-leveling process had

some strange diminishing returns. One was that the lower ranks of American society became so affluent by historical terms that they were able to impose their tastes on everybody else, if only because there were so many of them, with so much money to spend. They began to occupy and modify the terrain of America in a way that lower classes never had been able to before—using the prime artifact of industrial civilization to accomplish that takeover, the car. They bought homes in the new subdivisions that were obliterating the rural hinterlands of the cities, and before long all the commercial accessories followed: the strip malls, the department stores, the fried-food huts, the cinemaplexes, the office parks, the Big Box store—an entire alternate infrastructure to the tired, bleak downtowns of the industrial cities, which had begun to sicken in the Great Depression and with a very few special exceptions would never return to health again. The new stuff built all over America in the late 20th century was analogous to the content of the television programming to which the lower classes insidiously became addicted—a cartoon simulacrum of a real world that was systematically being obliterated. Instead of a real countryside outside the hated cities, we now had suburbia, a cartoon of country living. Instead of towns, shopping malls. Eventually the theme park became both the embodiment of the destruction wreaked across the land and paradoxically the last refuge from it. Americans would flock to Walt Disney World in Orlando to put themselves in a saccharine replica of the authentic Main Street environments that they had thoroughly trashed in their own home places.

Another diminishing return of the American postwar industrial fiesta was that thanks to our exertions, our salesmanship, and our generosity, the other industrial nations were back on their feet

making things again, and before too long they were making things better than we were and less expensively, too. Thus, beginning in the 1970s and coincident with our all-time peak in oil production, America began to hemorrhage blue-collar factory jobs. Families that had grown comfortable in high-paying assembly-line jobs, who had motor boats and second homes on little lakes and took vacations at the Disneyplexes and expected life to get ever better, were clobbered by the stagflation and other economic disorders of the day. Meanwhile, the labor unions that had guarded their interests for decades rapidly lost their power to negotiate for workers whose jobs increasingly no longer even existed.

At this point, a new economy began to replace the old smokestack economy. But the new one was not the one that was advertised in politics or the news media. It was not the information economy based on the spread of computers. Neither information nor computer-aided efficiency had net social value when jobs and standards of living were being destroyed. Nor was this new economy the vaunted service economy, a perpetual-motion fantasy akin to the proverbial village whose denizens supported themselves by taking in each other's laundry. No, all that was mendacious balderdash. The real new economy was the final blowout of the cheap-oil era: the hypertrophic build-out of suburban sprawl and the furnishing and final accessorizing of it. In other words, our living arrangement essentially became the remaining basis of our economy, in the absence of any other purposeful creation of value or wealth, such as manufacturing things. And because it was a racket devoted to a way of life with no future, it spawned enormous cynicism. Just as the immersive ugliness of the suburban highway strip was economic entropy made visible, so the cynicism of the public was entropy applied to

human values, a force propelling things into disorder. When nothing was sacred, everything became profane.

The demoralization of the American public, and especially of the economic lower orders, proceeded remorselessly from the 1980s on and became focused on two very pernicious ideas: first, the belief that it was possible to get something for nothing, and second, the belief that when you wish upon a star, your dreams come true.

The first derived from the fact that Americans still appeared to generate wealth without really producing anything of value. This was achieved through the accumulation of debt represented by the false collateral of suburban real estate—the infrastructure of a living arrangement with no future. Meanwhile, this debt, or credit—hallucinated surplus wealth—was cleverly converted into huge batches of tradable financial instruments and used to drive both bond and derivatives markets. Since finance is ultimately predicated on the expectation that the wealth of societies will ever increase, this economy was the greatest shuck and jive the world had ever seen.

The second idea, that when you wish upon a star your dreams come true, was its perfect accompaniment. It derived from the mental bombardments of advertising and Hollywood movies, and it provoked the American masses to believe that sooner or later the time would come when their individual big payoff would arrive, their ship would come in, their lottery number would hit the jackpot, they would break the house at the blackjack table of the Mirage Hotel.

Now, the trouble with this kind of demoralizing belief system is that most adult human beings realize at some level that it is at odds with the way the universe works, that it is an edifice of lies—just as a maxed-out collection of credit cards

was a lie about one's personal finances. Their sensed moral failures aroused in Americans a welter of negative emotion including guilt, shame, unworthiness, powerlessness, terror, and ultimately anger over having to feel these unpleasant emotions, and they expressed their anger by striking out against nature, employing the very machines that defined the terms of their existence, the automobile and its spawn: monster trucks, motorcycles, dune buggies, snowmobiles, all-terrain vehicles, and gigantic motorboats whose chief attractions were their power to negate the scale of the average freshwater lake while making enormous amounts of noise. These were people who no longer felt comfortable or even ontologically present in the world unless engines of some kind were ringing in their ears. Their assault on the landscape of America completed the destruction that suburbia

classroom. You could smoke in the doctor's waiting room. You could smoke in your seat on an airplane—a little ash-tray was provided right there in the arm-rest—and nobody was allowed to complain. In those days, smoking was more central to socializing than sharing food. TV broadcasting was largely supported by tobacco advertising. Smoking defined the character of movie stars: Humphrey Bogart expressed the entire range of human emotion in the way he handled his beloved Chesterfields, and eventually it killed him. In the middle of Times Square, a mechanized billboard with a hole in it blew "smoke rings" of steam out over the masses on the sidewalk. The adult population had plumes of smoke coming out of its collective mouths and nostrils the way that our society had smoke coming out of its cities and mill valleys. Notice how cigarette smoking

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had left unfinished. And as the cheap oil, which made the whole exercise possible, fades into history with the global oil-production peak upon us, America was reduced to a nation of tattooed, overfed clowns in paramilitary drag, pretending to be powerful.

The tendency for symbolic behavior in human beings is impressive. We are naturally and unselfconsciously metaphorical beings. By the 1960s, when America's industrial smokestack economy was at its zenith, cigarette smoking was at its peak, too. Forty percent of the adult population smoked, each smoker behaving like a little factory, expelling the by-products of combustion at all hours of the day and night. It was practically required as a mark of adulthood. It was at least an entitlement. You could smoke on the job and in the college

has waned in lockstep with the decline of American smokestack industry.

Along similar lines today, it's compelling to see how NASCAR auto racing has risen to the level of a mania in early 21st-century America as the nation has reached its absolute zenith of automobile use. Even as the world approached the all-time global oil-production peak, Americans rallied obliviously to the weekend proving grounds of the stock-car gods. NASCAR eclipsed baseball, football, and basketball in popularity among spectator sports. Of course, in real life, driving automobiles had come to occupy a huge amount of the public's time. Many adults were spending a good two hours a day commuting to work and back. They were spending more time alone in their cars than with their spouses and children. NASCAR was the

apotheosis of the same kind of cars that Americans drove to work. The competition vehicles were called stock cars, after all, because they were, theoretically, just souped-up versions of the same models that anyone could find in stock at an ordinary car dealership—unlike the Formula One racecars favored in Europe. What's more, the American economy was now mostly based on creating and maintaining the enormous infrastructures of motoring, i.e., suburbia, just as it had previously been centered on the infrastructures of industrial production. So the masses had merely shifted their symbolic behavior focus from an emphasis on expelling smoke to an emphasis on watching souped-up ordinary cars move symbolically around in circles.

Or more precisely, ovals, which, from the grandstand, was sort of like sitting on a freeway overpass for five hours watching traffic. The NASCAR race-tracks had evolved from county-fair dirt tracks with a few rickety bleachers to gargantuan stadiums accommodating more than 100,000 spectators. It was significant, too, that the NASCAR subculture arose in the South, the old Dixie states, where the automobile had tremendous social transformative power in the previous half century. Prior to the Second World War, Dixie had been an agricultural backwater with few cities of consequence, peopled by, among other groups, a dominant Caucasian peasantry, called "rednecks" because of the effects of the sun on exposed pale skin in the dusty crop rows.

States like Georgia, North Carolina, and Alabama were huge. You could fit 11 Connecticut in Alabama and have room for Rhode Island and Delaware. Unless they lived right along the railroad line, the folks down on the farm were pretty much stuck in place. The automobile liberated the rednecks from the oppression of geography as emancipation had liberated

blacks from the legalities of chattel ownership. In fact, the effect of the car was arguably much greater, since blacks continued to exist in economic quasi-serfdom despite the putative change in their legal status. The car and all its manifold benefits hoisted poor rednecks into a middle-class existence that had seemed like a distant fairy tale previously, something only seen in the magazine pages they had used to wallpaper the rooms of their cracker cottages—their own typological term for such a dwelling. They became truckers and car dealers and car repairmen and the owners of fried-food franchises out on the highway. They made good wages, and some became rich. Once a broad money base was established, they excelled at suburban development because rural land was so cheap and there was so much of it. They worshipped the car more than they worshipped Jesus.

The economy of the South was utterly transformed after the Second World War and the new economy was mostly about the car. Cheap gasoline along with cheap air-conditioning made the South livable for people who had a choice about where to make their homes. Cheap air-conditioning in particular made city life possible in a region that had lagged hopelessly behind the states of the Old Union—to the degree that Dixie had not a single city substantial enough for a major league baseball team prior to the 1960s. But the cities that arose in Dixie after the war were not like cities elsewhere in physical form. Orlando, Houston, Charlotte, and places like them had gone from being smaller than Buffalo to becoming immense crypto-urbations of ring freeways, radial commercial highway strips, and far-flung housing subdivisions around tiny withered peanuts of pre-war traditional downtown cores. Houston by the year 2000 was not a city in the traditional sense of being composed of neighborhoods and districts; rather it was an assemblage of

single-use-zoning wastelands: the shopping wasteland, the medical-services wasteland, the university wasteland, the cul-de-sac house wasteland, and so on, dominated by massive overlays of automobile infrastructure.

The economy of the New South, as it liked to call itself in the late 20th century, was more about the making of suburban sprawl than of the corporations that were lured down from the north to the Carolinas, Tennessee, and Georgia for their cheap labor. After all, the factories themselves eventually closed up shop as globalism made even cheaper labor in distant nations more attractive to corporate enterprise—but the sprawl remained, along with the office parks where obscenely paid top executives now ran things, while the once mighty working classes slid into a new kind of trailer-trash penury. And that is where things stand today, with the region, and the nation it is still attached to, sleepwalking into the early years of a permanent global fossil-fuel crises that will once again transform the nation in ways we can only sketchily imagine.

Into the first decade of the new century, the New South was viewed as being so successful compared to failing regions like the Midwest rust belt that the behavior emanating from Dixie became paradigmatic for the nation as a whole. It was infectious. These days, the working and sub-working classes from Maine to Minnesota follow country music as avidly as the homefolks down in Spartanburg, South Carolina.

Some lumpen motoring activities obviously have regional characteristics that don't migrate well. Snowmobile culture arose in the northern states around 1970, when the take-home pay of people performing low-skill jobs reached its all-time high, and a machine formerly used as a rescue vehicle at ski areas and a maintenance tool on ranches was marketed as a winter toy for grown-ups. This was clearly

something that was not going to be as popular in Arkansas as in Minnesota. In fact, as this relatively new snowmobile subculture evolved, it became less about the machines themselves and more about drinking with friends in the outdoors—an unfortunate combination as anyone who reads the newspaper in what's left of small-town America can see in the Monday police blotters when snowmobilers with six Budweisers under their belts decapitate themselves running through fence lines at 50 miles an hour.

All-terrain vehicles, those clumsy three- and four-wheeled motorbikes, were most popular proportionately in the American West, where hunters were able to extend their range to the vast backcountry of federal lands and get their meat home with the assistance of a gasoline engine. Likewise, the dune-buggy originated in California for the simple reason that desert terrain was

in essence a boat with hardly any storage capacity on which one can do little else besides move at great speed over water while soaking wet. Fishing from such craft is awkward. Even drinking on them presents problems, especially where the bulky favored beverage of the sporting masses, beer, is concerned.

The abuse of public lands during this long fiesta of off-roading has led to a crisis of ethics and law. Of the 262 million acres under the federal Bureau of Land Management, 93 percent is open to off-road riding machines. Of 155 national forests, only two are off limits to off-roaders. Regulation of snowmobiles, ATVs, and dirt bikes on public lands has consistently failed in the face of lobbying by corporations who make these toys and of the peremptory claims of rights by those who use them. In a nation of outsourced blue-collar jobs, shrinking incomes, vanishing medical insurance,

In this new era, coming soon to a 21st-century region near you, the formerly industrial nations will have a great deal of trouble keeping the lights on, getting around, and feeding their people. Vocational niches by the hundreds will vanish, while the need to make up for a failing industrial agriculture, with all its oil-and-gas inputs, will require a revived agricultural working class in substantial numbers. This is in effect a peasantry, and the word itself obviously carries unappetizing overtones, especially among those who used to be certain that the perfection of both human nature and human society was at hand. It all seemed that way, I suppose, in the early 1960s, when the United Auto Workers union was setting up vacation camps along the Michigan lakes, and President Kennedy promised to put a man on the moon before the decade ended, and the doctrine of mutually assured destruction kept a sort of peace among the great military powers, and dad drove home from the Pontiac showroom with a new GTO, which his son, Buddy, used to cruise the strip on Friday nights while “Born to Be Wild” rang out of the radio and out into the warm, soporific San Fernando night.

All over but the keening for our soon-to-be-lost machine world. We'll have to find new satisfactions now looking inward and reaching out with our limbs to those around us to discover what they are finding inward and outward about themselves. We'll certainly find music there, and dancing, and perhaps some fighting, and we will still have the means to make bases and balls and sticks for hitting them and gloves for catching them and twilight evenings in the meadow to play in. Amid a great stillness. With the moon rising. ■

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THE WILL TO POWER ITSELF WILL PROBABLY BE SUBDUED BY SOMETHING MORE ELEMENTAL: A WILL TO STAY WARM, CLEAN, AND WELL NOURISHED.

adjacent to the populous Los Angeles basin. While it has persisted in its limited milieu, dune-buggy culture never quite recovered socially from its association with the murderous doings of Charles Manson and his “family.” The dirt-bike phenomenon also came out of California, but evolved quickly from an off-road work and play vehicle to the dirt-bike tracks of competitive racing, where it gave young men a way to channel surplus testosterone by winning trophies and cash. Ironically, wilderness-trail areas around the suburbs have lately been taken over by non-motorized mountain bikes, which are causing plenty of destruction in their own right.

The jet-ski is perhaps the most baroque and arguably the last in the line of such dedicated leisure vehicles, being

rising fuel and heating costs, and net-zero personal savings, the anxiety level of the struggling classes has to be appeased politically, and one way to minimize the current cost of that is to charge it off to posterity and the public interest.

Where does this leave us as we enter the post-cheap-oil world and eventually a world altogether without recoverable fossil fuels? You could say up a cul-de-sac in a rusted GMC Denali without a fill-up. Or in a society that will have to get its thrills and satisfactions in other ways, involving fewer prosthetic projections of our will to power. The will to power itself will probably be subdued by something more elemental: a will to stay warm, clean, and well nourished in the era of post-oil-and-gas hardship and turbulence we are entering.

The Fire Next Time

Neocons begin their march toward Tehran.

By Wayne Madsen

IRAN'S RECENT DECISION to break the security seals on its key uranium enrichment facility in Natanz has confirmed the worst fears of intelligence agencies, foreign ministries, military commands, and corporate risk-analysis shops around the globe. For months, intelligence officials have been scratching their heads about the intentions of the United States and Iran over the nuclear issue. The indications and warnings (I&W) were sketchy at best. Now they are becoming more sharply focused and worrisome.

During the Cold War, U.S. and allied analysts scanned every bit of intelligence data and every line in Soviet-bloc newspaper, magazine, and professional-journal articles looking for anything that might indicate the military intentions of the ultra-secretive Soviet leadership. Now the same takes place in countries around the world with regard to the objectives of the guarded Bush administration and the unpredictable Mahmoud Ahmedinejad regime in Iran.

As of this writing, there is some behind-the-scenes maneuvering by the European Union, Russia, China, and pragmatists in the Bush administration and Iran to defuse the crisis. Responsible parties are looking to the UN Security Council to weigh in with specific requirements for Iran concerning its nuclear program. But according to U.S. and Middle East diplomats, there is also a fierce debate within the Bush administration between those who want to work within the UN and European Union framework to impose sanctions

on Iran, those who want a limited strike to take out a few key Iranian nuclear sites to delay Iran's nuclear-weapons program, and those in the neocon camp who want to carpet bomb Iran with conventional and tactical nuclear weapons. In a limited strike, the Natanz uranium site, the heavy-water plant and radioisotope facility in Arak, and the Uranium Conversion Facility in Isfahan are likely targets.

President Ahmedinejad has decided to shore up his radical fundamentalist Islamist base against the reformists in the Iranian parliament and the more conservative pragmatists who surround former President Ayatollah Ali-Akbar Rafsanjani. His provocative rhetoric about denying the occurrence of the Holocaust in Europe, that Israel is a "tumor" that should be removed from the Middle East map and transferred to Europe, and wishing for the death of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon after his second stroke are all designed to play to the young and increasingly radicalized Iranian unemployed who helped propel the one-time university professor into office.

Supreme Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, himself no stranger to provocative statements intended to rile the West, is nonetheless alarmed about the Iranian president's statements in the midst of a showdown with the International Atomic Energy Agency, European Union, and United States over Iran's nuclear program. For that reason, Khamenei appointed Ahmedinejad's

rival, Rafsanjani, to chair the Expediency Council, an entity given greater powers by the Supreme Ayatollah to check the excesses of Ahmedinejad and his radical base.

But that may not be enough to prevent the brewing storm. The neoconservatives in Washington and Israel did not help the situation when, after Ahmedinejad's election, they flooded friendly media outlets with bogus "evidence" that the new Iranian president was one of the U.S. embassy hostage-takers in Tehran in 1979 and that he was a roving assassin who murdered an Iranian Kurdish leader in Vienna in 1989. To further aggravate the situation, the neocons persuaded the Bush administration to deny Ahmedinejad a visa to address the UN General Assembly last September.

Israeli actions are also worrying intelligence analysts. According to the *Times* of London, in mid-December Sharon ordered his elite Special Forces Unit 262 and his air force's strategic 69 Squadron to be prepared to strike Iranian uranium-enrichment facilities by the end of March 2006. Israel has first- and second-strike capabilities against key Iranian nuclear targets.

A few days after issuing his order, Sharon suffered a mild stroke followed by a more serious debilitating stroke a few weeks later. His centrist Kadima party colleague, Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, will now face pressure from the Likud party, the party that Sharon helped form but from which he bolted over the right-wing extremism of former Prime