

Welcome to
middle-class
lockdown.

Now shut up
and buy
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Joe Bageant is a writer and magazine editor living in Winchester, Virginia. Random House Crown is publishing his forthcoming book:

**DRINK, PRAY, FIGHT AND FUCK:
Dispatches from America's Class Wars**

due out this year.

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Take away America's Wal-Mart junk and cheap electronics and what you have left is a mindless primitive tribe and a gaggle of bullshit artists pretending to lead them.

– James “Mad Dog” Howard

When I was a boy on my grandparents' farm in the 1950s the neighbors always banded together to make lard and apple butter, put up feed corn, bale hay, thresh wheat, pick apples, plow snow off roads... One neighbor cut hair, another mended shoes and welded. With so little money available in those days in rural America, there was no way to get by without neighbors. And besides, all the money in the world would not get the lard cooked down and the peaches put up for the winter. You needed neighbors and they needed you. From birth to the grave. I was very lucky to have seen that culture which showed me that a real community of shared labor is possible – or at least was at one time in this country. And if I ever doubt it I can go up to those hill farms and look into the clouded old eyes and wrinkled visages of the people who once babysat me as a child and with whom I shot my first rabbit and quail. They are passing quickly now and I drive by more than a few of their graves in the old Greenwood Cemetery when I visit to that place where there are still old men who know how to plow with horses and the women who can chop a live copperhead snake in half with a hoe then go right on weeding the garden. “*Yew*

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kids stay 'way from that damned dead snake, ya hear me?"

Fifty years later nobody cans peaches any more, or depends upon a neighbor to cut their hair or get in the hay crop. And fifty years later I found myself in the middle class and softening like an overripe cheese. Given my background, I never guessed I'd see the day when I would be bitching because I could not get Hendricks gin or fresh salmon delivered to my door. (But when you're too drunk to drive or even walk to the supermarket...) Such is the level of self-insufficiency to which some of us weaker souls devolved.

Whatever the case, we no longer depend upon community and other people around us. When we live in houses, idiotically-sited vinyl "Tudor-esque" fuck-boxes with brick facades (sorry Neddie, I just had to steal that lick) which grow bigger each year in order to accommodate our massive asses, egos and collection of goods, and we "order out." Or go shopping for it at the mall. Beyond the need to get laid, there is little real reason to be together with other thinking, feeling adults. We do not need each other to do anything important in our lives, because all those things are performed by strangers, often as not thousands of miles away. Including the sex, if your are an internet porn fan. Which leaves us strangers to the natural human community. After all, what can we really do together? Consume. Drink. Consume. Talk. Consume tickets to entertainment. Consume. There is little else to do with other human beings in America than consume. So most of our primary life activity is solitary. We drive, do housework, pay bills, watch television... When we do "get together with friends," there is little to talk about, other than one form or another of consumption, consuming music, or movies or whatever. We can not tell each other anything new because we all get the same news and information from the same monolithic sources. At the same time we try to fill the loneliness for a real human community that we have never

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experienced by calling any group of people who come together in any way a “community.” Online community. Planned community... As writer Charles Eisenstein, says in *The Ascent of Humanity*:

“...It is a mistake to think that we live ultra-specialized lives and somehow add another ingredient called “community” on top of it all. What is there really to share? Not much that matters, to the extent that we are independent of neighbors and dependent on faceless institutions and distant strangers. Real communities are interdependent.” Never in all history has there been such a lonely, inauthentic civilization.

This leaves those few fleetingly-concerned Americans alone to momentarily stew over the condition of the world, fester upon national moral issues like squishing brown desert people under tanks ... or building offshore gulags so the sight of naked prisoners being tortured in wire cages will not dampen the consumer confidence index. But ultimately somewhere between the seven o'clock showing of “Law and Order” and the third cocktail, or perhaps after that bracing evening trot around the block in your Land’s End shorts with the dogs, the mind settles down to the more relevant issues such as “Do I need a Blackberry, and if so, should I wait for the next generation of technology?”

Still, what about those cages in Gitmo? Or global warming? You and I may presently be yammering our asses off in cyberspace (talk about inauthentic!) about such topics, but most Americans, if they dialogue about those things at all, conduct the dialogue with that voices inside our heads, the one that says: *Things cannot be as bad as the alarmists say. They cannot be as bad as I often suspect they are. If there really were such a thing as global warming they would be starting to do something about it. And besides, even if it were true, science will find a way to fix it.*

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If there really were genocide going on in so many places far more people would be concerned. At the same time, every commercial and piece of sports hoopla, every celebrity news item leaves us with the impression that, if we have time and money for such things, then matters cannot be all that bad, can they? If the earth were heating up we would surely notice it. If our soldiers and government agencies were torturing people around the world it would make the news. If millions were being exterminated, it would be more obvious, would it not? Look around. Nobody seems worried. Look how normal everything is every day. Look at your wife and your own family. No one is worried. Things cannot be that bad.

Joe Bageant's little inner voice is like everyone else's. Whenever I shudder at the condition of the republic, whenever I feel its utter absence of community, it scolds me and tells me I am crazy: *Nothing is wrong. This is merely the way things are. It has always been this way. You cannot change that. You expect too much. Look at your wife. She's not upset. She wonders why you cannot just go ahead and be happy. What you see around you is normalcy. Take care of your own family. Relax. Buy something.* And I do too. Which is why I own nine guitars, though I can only play one at a time, and even then not very well. The voice made me do it. I was bored.

Bored plus anxious. Hell, I could lose my job. I could lose everything. And if I lost my job I would indeed lose everything. Social status, family, the accumulated net worth of a lifetime. Which, believe me, ain't much after two divorces and a run-in with cocaine.

Adding to the anxiety is the lack of evidence that the world needs you or me at all. In this totally commoditized life we are dispensable. Everything is standardized. It really doesn't matter who grows our food or makes our clothing. If we

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don't make it, it someone else will. If we don't buy it, someone else will. Some other faceless person will step forward to fill in our place. The same goes for the engineers who created this computer and the same goes for your own job. The machine rolls on. With us or without us. Naturally, we have our loved ones and our friends. But increasingly even these relationships are monetized for all classes. Family and leisure activity has become intensely commoditized. Never has there been such a lonely and inauthentic civilization as the American middle class.

Now it took me one helluva long time to claw my redneck self into the middle class and it took me even longer to figure all this out about its inauthenticity. Always one to fuck up right in front of the whole damned world, I loudly declared American middle class life to be a crock of shit and vowed to kiss it off. Go someplace simpler. Run nekkid in the surf in Saint Kitts or smoke pot in Belize. Catch my own damned salmon on the Galician Coast. But whoaaa hoss! This bad news just in: *Not only do you have to buy your way into the American middle class through forceful consumption of the lifestyle, but you have to buy your way out of it.* I'm serious. Buy your right to live in poverty. Let's say you've managed to get your kids through college one way or another, usually via a second mortgage and loans, and you decide like I did to say: Fuck this. I've done right by my family. Now I've got high blood pressure, a bad back, and a million other stress ailments. I'm overweight and have terrible lungs. Now I want to escape the ever rising cost and stress of playing the game, the grinding chase after enough net worth to feel safe about such things as health care and a safe place to shit. Spend a few years in some warm place blinking at blue, unpolluted sky before I go tits up. To my mind, these are completely understandable sentiments for any reasonable person. But, alas dear hearts, the American middle class is a lockdown facility. One that takes

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a lot of cash bribes and blackmail payoffs to break out of.

Now making complicated plans just to croak has always seemed rather excessive to me. Millions manage to do it without much planning or the need for highly paid experts. I don't care about financial planners or plans for elder care and such crap in my old age. I'm willing to die wretchedly and maybe even unnecessarily, if doing it the right way means blowing a couple hundred thousand dollars I do not have to buy few extra months drooling and talking out of one side of my mouth following that stroke I so richly deserve, given my debauched life. To hell with health care as we know it in America, which is to say as a tool used to blackmail every working person in this country. Better to work less, own less and escape the plague of blackmailers.

You would think owning jack shit and expecting nothing would allow a guy slightly more freedom from toil, would you not? Yet, even though I never wish to own a car again, or ever own another house, don't care about clothes, could easily live on grains, fruits and vegetables, and am willing to work maybe 20 hours a week at some mindless occupation so long as it does not contribute to the world's misery and doesn't require heavy lifting or good memory, and willing to live in the tiniest of rooms, it's *still* impossible to do so inside this nation, once you've signed the middle class blood oath. Even if I managed to talk my wife into such a life, this is the one thing I am not free to do in the good old land of the free. In this country buster, you keep paying the going rate, even if you don't care about going. Like the Cajuns say, you will know when you are dead because the bills will quit coming in.

And so about a year or so ago I swore in print and on the net that I was going to buy a cottage in some warm and simpler place abroad. Somewhere VERY cheap that I can go and write and make music with these hands and this tired but will-

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ing voice. And I am getting closer to that goal, despite the blackmailers. For starters, I have gotten over the American fetish of ownership – I can rent a place from some deserving poor native family that needs the income. Maybe build an addition onto their house for them for free. Maybe we can go into business together, a small bodega on a dusty street, mango stand, take in laundry or whatever. I will be the old white guy who lives in the back room, plays banjo and guitar and writes. This is the one promise I intended to keep to myself. I still do.

But I never in my life imagined it would be so hard to escape the various American forms of institutionalized extortion and blackmail. Becoming debt free was the least of it. And having everyone you know and love believe you have slipped your moorings is just the beginning. Meanwhile, you become a Kafkaesque character wondering if you've gone nuts, as you simmer in the ambient wrongness pervading American society and watch the futility of our vast life-consuming program of intense management and control of everything, the money, the bombs, the roads, the retirement fund, the communications, the propaganda, the entire buzzing tower of bullshit so massive as to make Babel look like a chicken coop. And you ask every passing stranger in the shopping mall "Is all this fucking necessary?" Only to discover that you are in an isolation chamber, a vacuum, a void in which no one can hear your voice at all. They are sleepwalking. They are shopping. Shhhh....

The loss of our human kinship identities has left us to define ourselves by what we own, where we live or what sports teams we support. But even more insidiously, our lost stories of community and kinship are replaced by the work of unseen professionals over the distant horizon. TV and movie producers, the news media and educational establishment... They provide the answer to the most important spiritual kinship and identity question we will ever ask ourselves: Who

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are my people? Some of the worst people on the planet are ready to answer that question for us in a way that serves their own ends. They stand ready to answer other questions too, such as, where did we come from? Why are we here? They are the cadre of empire's paid professionals who write the history and the news stories that fill the deep need for a "story of the people." The most horrific events of history have nearly always been set in motion by manipulation of this national story.

After a while, it does not matter that the story was manipulated. Deep need for a national story drives most to come to love and accept the story over time. It is the only one they have. And if the story is sufficiently intolerant and mean, we don't care about Iraqi deaths. And we come to love empire and capitalism. Beyond that, many would have become bullies anyway, without any help from the national storyline. They *don't* value democracy, or the ecology or liberty, but they do believe in authority and discipline. Aw cummon! It ain't just Dick Cheney and his pet president Sparky doing all this. At least half the country is loving the queer bashing and the bombing and the god rhetoric. We should quit pretending that a very large portion of Americans are not degraded human beings. They are. Skeptics are welcome to visit me here in the armed and inbred environs of Winchester, Virginia. It no longer matters what or who degraded them. Much time has passed and this is how many Americans have become. Fundamentalist cults abound, both religious and economic. Millions upon millions of Christians live in hermetic worlds of their own, with their own books stores, schools, media.... Millions of middle class Americans, both conservative and liberal, live in suburbs and condos and brownstone row houses completely surrounded by their own kind, all of them worshippers in the American value cult, commodity fetishists. They are differentiated mainly in their own minds and the narratives

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they have made up for themselves. And of course in their consumption.

After 35 years of inattention to these not-so-nice Americans among us (in another time they would have been called fascists, but now they are considered merely a political “base,” which is in itself a strange sort of national acceptance of cruelty as part of the national character) we are now watching them consolidate power. For the time being they control the Presidency, the Congress, the Media, the Supreme Court, the Federal Courts, most Governorships, and most State Legislatures. And if their manipulation of congressional districts stays put they could feasibly stay in power indefinitely.

Do these people, this half of our population which cheers on unprovoked wars abroad, spying on the citizenry and demonizing of the poor truly hate democracy? Fucked if I know. But after generations of brainwashing and psychological molding and exploitation of their fears, I suspect they never really knew what democracy was.

If anyone is going to turn the ship of the republic around, put us on a course more in the direction of liberty and openness, it will require the navigational help of those among us who can still remember what it was like before totalistic capitalism took such grip. People who can remember that genuine good will and intent was once alive in the hearts of most people even if it never has been in the halls of Congress. Remember when at least some human and social progress was evident around us, thereby giving reason to hope.

And these sorts of people are indeed still with us, though quiet, perhaps out of insecurity. Only last Saturday I saw them at the Jiffy Lube. Sitting in the waiting room with our little Jiffy Lube paper coffee cups, waiting for our cars to be finished, we were watching on CNN the placement of the casket of Coretta Scott

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King in the rotunda of the Georgia State Capitol. To my right there was the huge black lady with corn rows and two bright eyed children hanging on her ankles. There was the thin young 30-something half-black dude who had just got off his cell to his wife (Yeah honey, it's on CNN. Bye.) There was the very straight suburban blonde yuppie woman with her sculpted ponytail sticking through the back of her aubergene Eddie Bauer ball cap. And as those Georgia state troopers on CNN, looking so much like the very same kind who once struck fear into the Martins and the Medgars of the South, were climbing those marble stairs under the gray February Georgia sky, one step at a time, then a pause, then one more step... There was not a dry eye a dry eye in that Jiffy Lube waiting room. It was not just the cheap emotionalism of televised pandering. Everyone there remembered, by God! Remembered or found reason to believe in, an America that at one moment in history at least, rose from its stupor to struggle forward toward something higher. Something better. And yes, noble even.

And when I was finished blubbering inside, I thought to myself, "Well, that small room in St. Kitts, or the tarpon fishing in Belize, they can probably wait one more year."

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