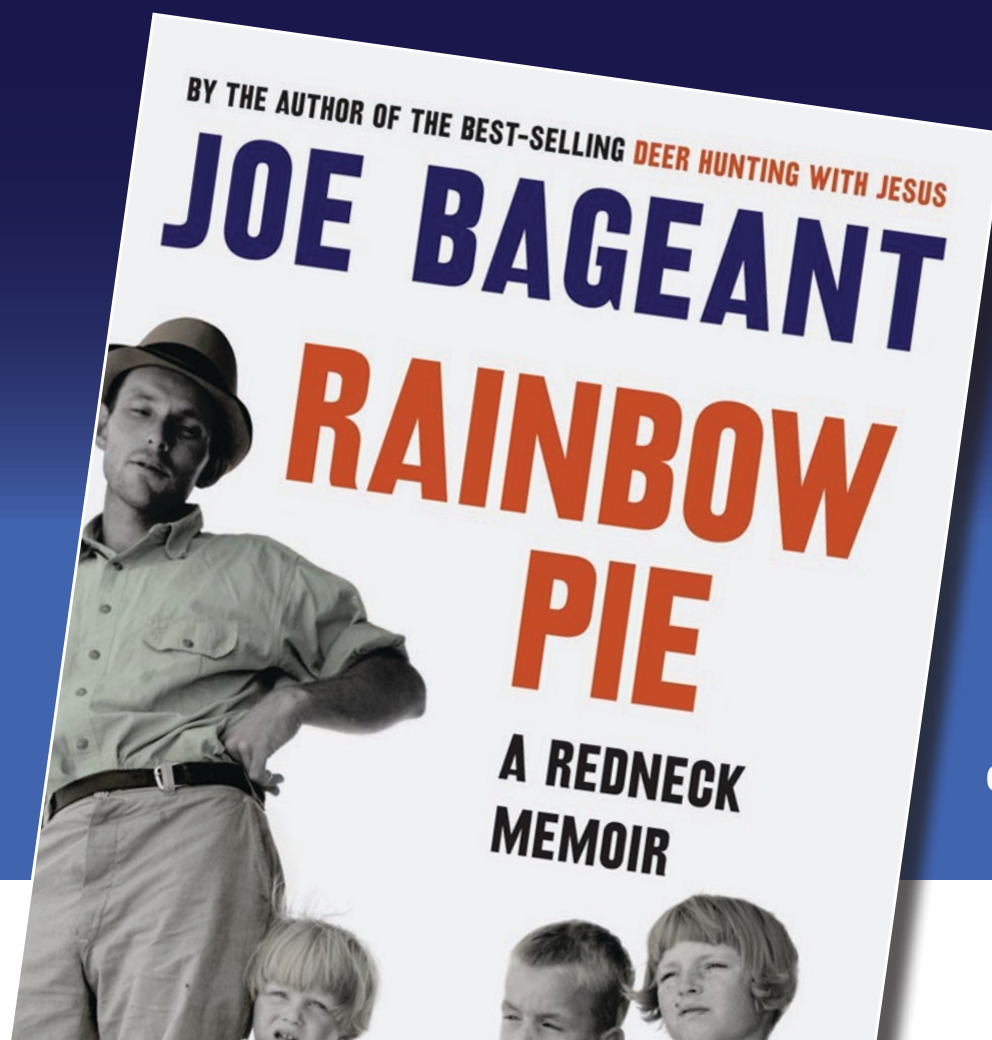
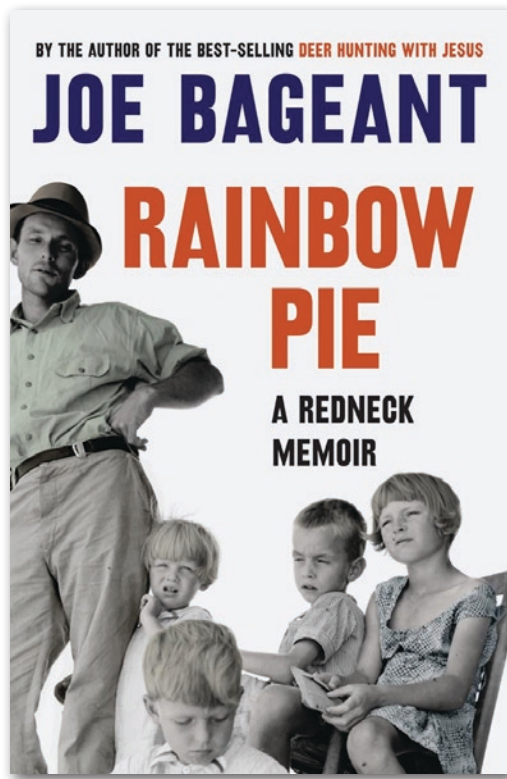


CLASS RULES

AN EXCERPT FROM **RAINBOW PIE:
A REDNECK MEMOIR** –the new book by
JOE BAGEANT



ColdType



JOE BAGEANT'S newest book, to be released in September in Australia and October in the United Kingdom, **Rainbow Pie: A Redneck Memoir**, deals with America's permanent white underclass, and how it was intentionally created. **Rainbow Pie** is available for preorder from Amazon-UK and Amazon-Canada. In Australia, the book may be ordered at www.scribepublications.com.au

This excerpt is **Chapter Seven – Class Rules** – of **Rainbow Pie**, with a special introduction by Joe Bageant, who is also author of the international best-seller **Deer Hunting with Jesus: Dispatches from America's Class War**.

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INTRODUCTION: JOE BAGEANT

The United States has always maintained a white underclass — citizens whose role in the greater scheme of things has been to cushion national economic shocks through the disposability of their labour, with occasional time off to serve as bullet magnets in defence of the empire. For most of American history, class was openly acknowledged.

Today, almost nobody in the social sciences seems willing to touch the subject of America's large white underclass; or, being firmly placed in the true middle class themselves, can even agree that such a thing exists. Yet, economic, political, and social culture in America is staggering under the sheer weight of its white underclass, which now numbers some sixty million. Generally unable to read at a functional level, they are easily manipulated by corporate-political interests to vote against advances in health and education, and even more easily mustered in support of any proposed military conflict, aggressive or otherwise. One-third of their children are born out of wedlock — not a good thing, given that they are unemployed by any contemporary industrialised world standard. Meanwhile, the underclass, 'America's flexible labour force' (one must be pretty flexible to get screwed in some of the positions we are asked to), or whatever you choose to call the unwashed throngs mucking around down here at the bottom of the national labour tier, are nevertheless politically potent, if sufficiently taunted and fed enough bullshit. The newest example is the artificially created Teabagger movement as the plutocrats harness the frustration and rage of the abandoned.

Seldom are such developments sudden, of course. It is only the realisation that they exist that happens overnight. The foundation of today's white underclass was laid down in the years following World War II. I was there, I grew up during its construction, and spent half my life trapped in it.

When World War II began, 44 per cent of Americans were rural and over half of them farmed for a living. By 1970, only 5 per cent were on farms. Altogether, more than twenty-two million migrated to urban areas during the post-war period, due to conscious government and corporate planning to create a more money based consumer society that would enrich corporate America and preserve wartime level profits.

In the great swim upstream toward what was being heralded through propaganda as a new American prosperity, most of these twenty-two million never made it to the first fish ladder. Stuck socially, economically, and educationally (on the average they had a fifth or sixth grade education) at or near the bottom of the dam, they raised children and grandchildren who added another forty million to the swarm.

These uneducated rural whites became the foundation of our permanent white underclass. Their children and grandchildren have added to the numbers of this underclass, probably in the neighbourhood of 50 or 60 million people now. They outnumber all other poor and working-poor groups — black, Hispanics, immigrants.

My contemporaries of that rural out-migration, now in their late fifties and mid sixties, are still marked by the journey. Their children and grandchildren have inherited the same pathway. The class competition along that road is more brutal than ever. But the sell job goes on that we are a classless society with roughly equal opportunity for all. Given the terrible polarisation of wealth and power in this country (the top 1 per cent hold more wealth than the bottom 45 per cent combined, and their take is still rising), we can no longer even claim equal opportunity for a majority. Opportunity for the majority to do what? Pluck chickens and telemarket to the ever-dwindling middle class?

And so the intent of my new book, *Rainbow Pie* is to record the post-war creation of the white underclass through both memoir and social data from the period. Now all I can do is ask your forbearance and the forgiveness of the larches and Douglas firs, the loblolly and white pines, cut and pulped to make this book. ●

CLASS RULES

CHAPTER 7 OF **RAINBOW PIE: A REDNECK MEMOIR**

By **JOE BAGEANT**

*Home of the brave, land of the free,
But I get mistreated by the bourgeoisie.
Lord, it's a bourgeois town.
Uhm, a bourgeois town.
Got the bourgeois blues.
Gotta spread the word around.*

— *American folk blues singer,
Leadbelly, in 'Bourgeois Blues'*

After my father's heart attack cost him his small (one truck) trucking business, we bounced around the area from one rented house to house to another, before moving to town for good. The sixth-grade school year was half over, and already I'd been in two schools when my parents moved permanently to the old Shenandoah Valley town of Winchester, twenty some miles down the pike. Though we didn't know it then, Winchester was the ancestral home of all the Bageants in America. Our original ancestor, John William Bageant, arrived in Winchester in 1755 with the English general Edward Braddock's army, to keep the French and Indians at a safe distance. Consequently, we still had many kinfolk in town, people who we seldom saw because they were in a higher social class. One was a successful undertaker; one, a

We were about to join what the Department of Commerce's PR tracts called the post-war nation's 'burgeoning new and willing work force being deployed across the nation'

grocer; and another owned commercial orchards. They were business people in a mercantile town. Most were Masons and civic-minded joiners, whereas my father and mother, mountain and country people, had never joined anything in their lives. But we were about to join what the Department of Commerce's PR tracts called the post-war nation's 'burgeoning new and willing work force being deployed across the nation'.

And so they were deployed on such fronts as Martinsburg, West Virginia, and its Dow Corning plant, in Winchester, Virginia, where factories such as O'Sullivan Rubber Corporation, American Brakeblock ('The Breakshoe' we called it), or the numerous garment factories exploited cheap, non-union local labour. One executive speaking to the Winchester Chamber of Commerce at the time described these people as 'very hard working and docile', a phrase that can be often be found in slave advertisements of the pre-Civil War South. Having been well conditioned for uniform industrial behaviour by the all-consuming war effort, men and women alike went from the 'war defence plants' to the defence of corporate capitalism's hometown fronts, large and small. (There is not one

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damned word in the U.S. Constitution that designates capitalism as the nation's official economic regime, but somehow we always seem to find ourselves fighting for it under the banner of patriotism.)

Given the influx from farms to towns and their surrounding counties, many local merchants made modest fortunes. Even the little dogs in the Chamber of Commerce were pissing themselves for joy over the prospects for bourgeois capitalism, as the bumpkins-turned-plant workers and their families swarmed downtown on Fridays after payday. But it was the big dogs of crony capitalism that really cleaned up. Bank owners and large landholders, in particular, amassed what would become true fortunes in the tens of millions. A sociologist friend of mine aptly calls their dominance of these two vital resources — land space and the availability of money — ‘wolf leverage’.

Born of genteel planters who could never balance their books, and speculators who despised the notion of trade, southern capitalism is and always has been crony capitalism. It is still the only type known to the descendants, who constitute the new oligarchy — the people who finance political campaigns for city and state governments. They eventually created what came to be called ‘The New South’, in places such as Atlanta or Raleigh–Durham, North Carolina, and drove it to stratospheric heights thirty years later when they discovered the credit opportunities in Old Dixie. This was pretty much the Old South revisited, but with an added ingredient of ‘white niggers’ from the upland farms.

I use the n-word here because some of ‘our betters’ used it privately about us, and because it fits the times and sentiments. Common practice in Winchester was for the well-heeled-area’s business people

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— plant managers’ wives and those of the local gentry — to shop downtown during the week so as to avoid the labouring white underclass they employed. A few stores, particularly men’s clothing stores and ladies hat and dress shops, were obviously more upscale, with even mundane items purposefully priced high to keep the ever-price-conscious riff-raff out. Their customers didn’t mind that they could have purchased, say, white cotton socks at half the price.

Stores like these held me in thrall. For me, peering into the window of Bell’s Men’s Clothing Store, with my hands cupped around my eyes, the display of smooth-flowing gabardine dress pants and seersucker suits, silk ties, and polished leather belts seemed to exist in a marvellous dimension of their own. I couldn’t resist going inside, where it smelled like leather and exotic after-shave, and of the Windex used on the glass display-cases.

Once through the front door, though, it was as if I had suddenly broken out in warts. My clothes and even my skin seemed dirty under the clean, fluorescent lights (and maybe they were, given that we had to stoke a coal stove in the middle of our living room to stay warm). I could smell myself polluting the air of this sartorial temple. And I could see the clerks eyeballing me as a potential shop-lifter.

Thirty seconds later, my father, who’d come down the street and seen me enter, appeared behind me. We’d come downtown to get a wrench set from Sears and so he could jaw with one of the salesmen, an old friend from the sticks.

‘Come on outta here! Did I say you could go wandering off?’ Daddy said, loud enough so the clerks could hear. Actually, he had, tacitly, when he’d said

to me, ‘Don’t go more than a couple of blocks. Be back in fifteen minutes.’

Outside Bell’s, he told me, ‘You don’t need to be going into places like that.’ I got the point.

Another instance of classism in practice involved Uncle Joe, a visiting uncle from my mother’s side, who had married one of my mother’s sisters and made good money working in the naval shipyard in Norfolk. We considered him rich; his daughter had a pony and a cowgirl outfit, for chrissakes! Uncle Joe asked to try on a pair of \$40 Florsheims at a shoe store in downtown Winchester. That was big bucks for a pair of shoes in late 1950s’ working-class Winchester — about a week’s pay, or close to it, in our household. (Uncle Joe looked like a redneck during the week, and was indeed one at heart, but he had good taste, and always dressed to kill on Saturday nights, and on Sunday mornings when he bothered to go to church.) ‘I had the damnedest time making that clerk let me try them on,’ he told us. ‘He went and got the manager, and I had to raise hell with both of them. You’d a thought I was a nigger.’ As a Southern white man of those times, he wouldn’t have wanted to try on shoes that had been on a black man’s foot.

That’s what I mean about being a white nigger in the eyes of the town’s ‘leading families’ we read so much about in the *Winchester Evening Star*, which published their every little move — such as having a visitor from a foreign country, or getting yet another award for business leadership or civic involvement.

Much later, as a middle-aged man, I came to know the shoe store’s owner, Bill Shendell. Bill turned out to be a very progressive man. A member of the city council at the time, he helped me immensely when, as a news reporter, I took

Uncle Joe looked like a redneck during the week, and was indeed one at heart, but he had good taste, and always dressed to kill on Saturday nights, and on Sunday mornings when he bothered to go to church

on a crooked city government. I can see now that his store’s clerks were as much a product of the same classist American culture as I was. This is not just a Southern thing; it’s an American thing. You can drop me in any American community, and I can show you a hundred examples of it in a day. We grow up with the stuff in our bones, and it just leaks out of our pores in one form or another for the rest of our lives, either as enforcers of classist culture or as victims of it. Or both. My father was certainly an enforcer of it when he made it clear that people like us were not to ogle, much less touch, the garments of the higher castes. I look back now and realise how much of the class system is enforced through the culture of shame. Shame about money.

Once class-system rules are in place, behavioural patterns become set, and roles are played out that create an ecology based upon unacknowledged, mostly unconscious, class recognition. Those pissing downhill and those at the bottom of the hill are equally oblivious to their roles in preserving class lines. In the end, both upper and lower classes, liberal or conservative, are dancing partners at the same heartbreaking ball, where the same melody has been playing for two centuries. The lyrics may change to suit the national moment, but the dancers go on in their hopeless embrace, unwilling to leave their familiar, windowless American ballroom, never stepping into the light of day, simply because they do not know it is out there.

Even as I was peering into that window at Bell’s, America was well on the path to becoming the mountain of meaningless discarded stuff that has made us one big landfill site for China. We could already feel the rising tsunami of goods all around us: bigger refrigerators, home freezer-

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chests, Melmac dishes, Corning ware, console TV sets, hi-fis, air conditioners, lawn sprinklers, TV dinners, ‘sportswear,’ multiple family cars, vacuum cleaners that doubled as everything imaginable, crock pots, blenders, hair sprays, electric hair-dryers, automatic washer-dryer combinations, power lawn-mowers, instant potatoes, pancakes, biscuits, and coffee. It was a steadily building avalanche of wonders that no modern American family could do without. Cranking out these time- and labour-saving devices required massive amounts of time and labour. Tens of millions of American women now worked forty hours a week, and needed a dishwasher because they no longer had time to do the dishes. Men needed powered everything for the same reason. The time available to conduct the quiet family labours called ‘home life’ shrank, and then shrank some more.

Madison Avenue was trumpeting all this as the new, more affluent, sophisticated middle-class American life that everyone else was deliriously enjoying. Seeing is believing, and we could see it right there on the television screen: city people wearing bow ties were sipping martinis. I was so impressed by the snappiness of Gary Moore’s bow tie that I got hold of one — a clip-on bow tie — and wore it to school. Naturally, I was laughed out of the joint for looking like Alfred E. Neuman of *Mad* magazine, which I did. Unfortunately, I was wearing that bow tie in the only school yearbook picture I ever had taken. Thus my contemporaries from those days are still laughing.

Television’s urban sophisticates also cracked jokes, which we rural peasants didn’t quite get, about ‘taking a spritz’ and traffic on ‘the freeway’. Shapely women in matador pants threw up their hands and widened their eyes in near-

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sexual delight at the sight of Dad’s sizzling meat on the newest rage, the backyard grill, as he stood there in a barbecue apron and a ridiculous chef’s hat. Television, we knew, didn’t lie. Somewhere out there were smiling men who actually wore aprons and such contraptions on their heads. And, to be certain, a record number of Americans were owning more stuff than ever in history.

The closest resemblance on TV to the households in which we lived came from the show *Lassie*. And even then, Jeff’s mum, Ellen, never seemed to work very hard and, as my mother observed, ‘She definitely gets her hair done every week.’ Not to mention that the dog was smarter than the entire human family that owned it. But lest we felt inferior when our own family mutt pissed on the rug, there was always Jeff’s obese, dim-witted playmate, Porky, and his hopeless Bassett hound, Pokey, who ate dirt and slept through farmhouse burglaries.

Forgive me for being so anecdotal as to cite a television show. I cannot help myself — I’m an American. TV owns my brain as much as anyone else’s. Americans were the first to feel TV’s full impact upon culture; the first to become fully saturated and mutated by the medium they had created, and in turn recreated by the medium itself. The only reason I have some idea of TV’s effect on America is because I am among that dwindling older minority who started out in life without it. And they don’t care to discuss it at the moment because they’re too busy watching television.

Anyway, while Jeff’s mum, Ellen, was getting her hair done, my own mum was on the night shift at one of Winchester’s woollen mills or garment factories, and my brother, sister, and I were watching commercials for Swanson’s TV dinners

while we ate Swanson's TV dinners with gusto. Having a TV dinner to eat was our best-case scenario. At worst, it was mayonnaise sandwiches and 'coffee bread' — white bread soaked in coffee — because there was nothing else in the house to eat. I've laughed about this with many working-poor whites and blacks of my generation who ate those same things. 'The secret to a good mayonnaise sandwich was relish,' says my black friend George. 'If you had some pickle relish to scrape out of the jar onto the bread, you had a pretty good mayo sandwich. But you couldn't let the little kids see that, or there'd be no relish for your next sandwich.' We laugh about all that now because there's no use crying over it.

We may have come to settle in Winchester, but we never came to settle in any one particular place. There was North Kent Street, Cameron Street, Boscawen Street, a different rented house or apartment every year or less, on a street named for some lord in England, always in the part of town nearest the railroad tracks. I can't remember a time in Winchester when the late-night trains' whistles didn't blow near our home, and it got so I would wake up at 11.10 p.m. if the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad engine didn't blow its long, mournful airhorn. To this day, the sound is comforting to me.

Always these residences adjoined one of the two black neighbourhoods. The line between lily-white and black was clear to us because we were on the line — the redneck mongrels along a single street dividing white and black. We were usually next door to other once-rural families similarly displaced after two centuries out on the farms ... the McKees and Brannons, the Braithwaites and

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Caves, the Campbells, Yosts, Luttrells, and McIlweees. And since we didn't much fit into the world of our neighbours on either side — blacks didn't even walk on the white streets in our neighbourhood, and white people on 'the right side of the railroad tracks' stayed out of our neighbourhoods — the very closest neighbours' children constituted our friendship groups. We had no trouble recognising each other on sight, or recognising new arrivals in town or at school, with their plaid-flannel Sears mail-order shirts and work shoes.

Another way that kids from the sticks knew one another was our special status in the school system. In what would now be called middle school, many of us were put in what was openly called 'the dumbbell room', a special classroom for sub-intelligent and back-country kids. I arrived in the sixth grade reading well above my pay grade — popular authors such as Pearl Buck, Bennett Cerf, and no few classics, simply because I couldn't differentiate as to types or levels of literature. All of it was marvellous stuff to me, whether *Moby-Dick* or Betty MacDonald's *Please Don't Eat the Daisies*. Yet here I was in the dumbbell room with so-called retards, fist fighters, and drooling crayon-eaters. The usual stated reason was 'behavioural problems'; although, given my timidity, I can't imagine having acted up in class. After a few weeks, I was back with the 'normal kids'. Ultimately, we little crackers came to see being in the dumbbell room simply as pulling your time in this new, citified system. According to Beaky Anders, so named for his prominent nose, 'Aw, they're just seeing if they can crack ya.'

When a kid would make parole from the dumbbell room to regular class, there would be a hearty round of congratula-

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tions from the parolee's friends. Not all made it, though. I remember some who, despite the truancy laws, just disappeared — simply never showed up in school again. The official story was that they had moved.

Here we were, poor kids from poor families. We had cleared the first hurdle. Next year we would be seventh graders entering Hadley High School (which then also contained what we would now call middle school). At Hadley we would be told by the school superintendent, in an annual school 'boys' assembly' session, that we were legally free to quit school at the age of sixteen, reminding us that quitting would allow us to get jobs and make money. And that in only one more year we would be eligible to join the military. Lots of boys got up right then and walked out through the doors. I myself would later drop out of school and enter the U.S. Navy. In a scant five years, many of us would be fighting in the jungles of some place called Vietnam. We were twelve years old.

Hadley High School looks better than many of America's state capitols. It should. Hadley's 40-acre campus was designed by the Frederick Law Olmsted family of architects who designed Central Park. With typical Olmsted sensitivity to the natural beauty of the site, the school's long, tree-lined vistas and greenways lead the eye toward its cascading wide steps and up into the massive, white-columned portico. This viewscape was recently violated by a local real-estate developer's million-dollar gift to his alma mater, an outdoor sports facility on the front lawn. But based upon the architecture and remaining landscaping, it's obvious why Hadley is the only high

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school on the Register of Historic Places. Hadley is a rare bird in another way, too, because it is a 'privately endowed public school' — a public school with millions in an endowed trust. The endower was a Civil War-era judge named John Hadley, who left the equivalent of a million dollars in 1895, since grown into more millions, 'for education of the poor'.

After years of squabbling by local contractors, businessmen, and town leaders anxious to get a piece of the endowment-money action, the school was completed in 1925. As education went in those times, it represented the state of the art in both curriculum and facilities. To local business-class whites and elites, Hadley represented another opportunity beyond any piece of the trust money they might chip off for themselves — the opportunity to quit paying private high school fees, as was the common practice then. In the estimation of the high bourgeoisie steeped in the classist American South, the unwashed spawn of the poor were not capable of appreciating, much less benefiting from, such a school. So they appropriated it for themselves, and made it a bastion of Old Virginia traditions. The school reeked of heritage and dignity with its polished, hardwood-floored halls lined with busts of Confederate generals, founding fathers, and rolls of honour-listing graduates killed in war. It was a grand setting. Undoubtedly, the afternoons spent by the light of its eight-foot mullioned windows raised high to the summer's air while conjugating Latin verbs had some cultivating effect on young minds. But not much, and not on most of us.

To understand an American public school like Hadley, and its role in preserving class barriers, one has to understand a bit of American social history, and how

long our republic has struggled to assure an adequate supply of dumbed-down proles for American labour — especially in Southern climes like my native Virginia/West Virginia. Dominated by an aristocratic upper class, state-supported public education arrived in our region nearly 100 years late. When a fund for public elementary education was finally established, it was to supplement teacher pay only, at five cents per student. Anyone who wanted their children to attend school free had to publicly declare themselves to be destitute and a pauper. Most working-class people had too much pride to stomach such grovelling. Beyond that, county commissioners would not approve children for school anyway, preferring to let the designated money accumulate in county coffers, a surplus always being a sign of their good management. Common citizens in small communities sometimes built ‘field schools’, the traditional little red schoolhouse, run by people with perhaps a high school education, but untrained as teachers. State and local elites did not want to pay the taxes associated with real public education, so the public went uneducated.

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, while judge Hadley’s money was still sitting in trust, there was growing pressure for public education from an emerging business middle class. They wanted free public schooling for their children. By 1914, Virginia’s political clique, dominated by descendants of the old aristocracy, finally accepted that some sort of state-supported public education was going to be unavoidable, even in the rural counties. That year saw 60 of Virginia’s 95 counties organise rural school-aged males into ‘boys corn clubs’, wherein each boy planted, ploughed, weeded, and harvested an acre of corn

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in the name of education, which is still hailed in our state’s education history as an era of staggering progressiveness. Not a penny of state money was spent; the federal government paid all the costs. Meanwhile, the children of the gentry continued to attend what were known as academies or ‘classical schools’. Today, they attend even more exclusive Virginia private schools such as Powhatan elementary school (with fees of \$17,000 per year) and Foxcroft high school (\$40,000 per year).

So here I was, entering this fine high school endowed with what had grown into a multi-million dollar trust, and through the doors of which no black child was allowed to pass, on the grounds that a privately endowed school did not have to accept blacks. (High courts later ruled that, endowed or not, anything calling itself a public school and accepting public tax money had to accept blacks along with the money. With that, the school superintendent resigned.)

Back when the school was appropriated by the business class and town elites, they set in motion a continuing spirit and set of practices called ‘the Hadley experience’, an experience that back then did not include the sons and daughters of gas-station attendants and warehouse workers, or the labouring class of any sort. We were encouraged indirectly to drop out of school at the earliest legal age, and, as I said earlier, once a year directly by the school superintendent himself. Now elderly and retired, most of the teachers of that time swear there was no such bias. But a few of those still alive are not afraid to say otherwise. ‘Those teachers, including me, were afraid to fall out of the middle class,’ recalled Mr. Dee, an elderly Hadley English teacher (since departed). ‘That was a class-manufacturing

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system if ever there was one.’

‘I never in my life thought I would be sitting here on your lawn talking about this subject,’ I told Mr. Dee. ‘I’d never have guessed you ever thought about it.’

‘Well, Joey, a few of us did. And, once in a while, one would speak out, and they wouldn’t be back the following year. Me, I had a wife and a new baby and a new house, and was earning \$4000 a year. I had responsibilities to my family. And, you have to admit, you could get a good education at Hadley if you tried hard enough.’

‘Ummm ... I suppose so, but I don’t think most adolescents are well enough equipped to get over such social hurdles,’ I said.

‘Those were not times when people considered sociological implications. It was a different system then.’

Soaked in my old man’s aftershave and self-doubt, I walked into that high school system at the age of thirteen. And there was ole Beaky with his flattop haircut and buck teeth, sitting alphabetically in the desk in front of me because his last name began with the letter ‘A’. We were no longer in the grammar school penitentiary; we were in the Big House now, by his estimation. He looked to be right. Senior high jocks scowled threateningly at you, or bumped you hard in the halls for laughs; the poorer-neighbourhood kids you already knew seemed to have turned surlier over the summer, some even challenging male teachers to fistfights in the classroom; pretty girls with genuine tits instead of wadded Kleenex looked at you like you had lice; and in the principal’s office was a cricket bat used on your arse. It was labelled ‘The Board of Education’.

‘The best thing to do around here is to lay low,’ Beaky advised. ‘Blend in and look like a dumb fuck.’

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That didn’t seem too difficult. We dumb fucks were by far the majority. And, besides, there were some benefits to being a dumb fucker at Hadley High School. We had our own designated cigarette-smoking area under the school’s front portico. I didn’t smoke yet, but I bought a pack of cigs so I could hang out down there because in smoking there was a sort of weird class-solidarity.

In every classroom there were three or four of the kids for whom the school was meant. They dressed well, and made good grades without question, or even effort, as I later found out. One former classmate, now the inheritor of a large engineering company, said, ‘I seldom opened a book, and would have flunked out, but there was always enough “extra credit work” for me, like taking down the set after a school play, that I got good-enough grades to get into college. And in college (at the good-ole-boy network called the University of Virginia), I was good at sports, and there was enough of a social network that I got by and even learned enough engineering to keep this company together.’

He was one of those fortunate few who played football, who went to away games with parents and friends, had money for milkshakes at the drugstore after school, lived in the brick houses up behind the school where there were no broken bottles in the dirt yards, and whose mothers and fathers attended school functions in cashmere sweaters or ties. These are all clichéd images, but true. It was the waning of the Fifties and the cusp of the Sixties — which arrived in Winchester, partially at least, in the Eighties.

School life offered a combination of insecurity, sexual longing, and continuing adolescent cruelty. It might be the ‘Highland Gang’, poor and working-class

kids in the adjoining neighbourhood, who once hung me and a friend in a tree by our hands for a couple of hours. Or it might be the dreaded Frankie Anderson flopping his dick in your face in the locker room for amusement. Or my own neighbourhood's Grey Boyd simply beating somebody bloody senseless — even to the point of hospitalisation, in a couple of cases — out of pure boredom some afternoon on the way home ... I admit that I took delight in hearing that Boyd is now serving 25 years in the state pen for some crime or other, doubtlessly violent.

Compared to many in the neighbourhood, though, I was lucky to escape much of the adolescent violence. I found refuge in the school and the city libraries. None of the Highland Gang would ever be caught in a library, so I was left in peace to read *Boy's Life Magazine*, the history of the Shenandoah Valley, Pericles' orations, Jack London, *Fur, Fish and Game* magazine, countless books on painting and great painters, Civil War diaries, *American Heritage Magazine*, and old hardbound editions of *Lord of the Flies*, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Dickens, Genet, Sartre, and Rimbaud — all in a marvellously undirected pursuit of the mind. I came to lust after the world that rolled away endlessly from the Shenandoah Valley. There was a world out there of grim or glorious cities, exotic ideas and peoples, and onrushing progress. With the impending entry of mankind into outer space, it was as if I could feel like the churning dynamo of my own century. It made me optimistic. It seemed to be a great time to be alive, a fortunate time to be born — as long as I stayed inside the library walls.

Hot damn, time for another education-

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al film! Another chance to get out of regular class for about 45 minutes. One good thing about town life was that the school system showed lots of so-called educational films. All through the 1950s and 1960s, American public schooling was packed with propaganda films. They didn't die out until the 1980s, when they became too laughable for even the worst educators to stomach. More than 3000 were made and shown in American classrooms.

There was *Shy Guy*, extolling the message that fitting in with society's most urban conventions was the key to social happiness. In *Shy Guy*, a new kid in school, named Phil, is lonely because the other kids avoid him. Dad teaches Phil to study the most popular boys and girls, and to buy the same clothing that the other guys buy, and basically to kiss arse all the way in order to achieve social success. Girls had their own versions of these 'conformity films', according to Megan Stemm-Wade in *The American Dream Postwar Classroom Films*. One was *Habit Patterns*, starring an obviously lower-class girl named Barbara. She learns to improve her chances by buying the same clothing as her more affluent classmates and learning to talk like a 'middle-aged art patron': 'I've bought tickets to the entire concert series' ... 'I just love the museum, they have a wonderful costume exhibit.' Barbara resolves to change her habit patterns. The narrator lauds her decision, but cautions her to stay the course, because 'you know how quickly you can be left out of the crowd'. Be left out of what crowd? Recently, I saw old group photos of those sixth- and seventh-grade classes. Fifty years later, I can see that perhaps six of those kids managed to live the mannered middle-class consumer lifestyle portrayed in the con-

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formity films.

Corporations such as Coca-Cola, General Motors, and Kimberly-Clark sponsored many of these films, selling their food products through dating and dinner-etiquette versions, and their cars through driving instructions (the Ford Galaxie and Fairlane seem to have been favourites) with what then passed for subtlety.

But the most club-fisted of all had to be the capitalist ‘concept films’. The American Petroleum Institute’s *Destination Earth* exalted petroleum as the key to civilisation through the free-market system, and taught youth that buying a car was the way to battle communist despotism. In *Destination Earth*, a Martian is sent to Earth in order to discover the secret to America’s greatness. His research shows that petroleum products and the free market are what makes America the greatest civilisation on the planet, and the reason why America has not succumbed to communism. Overcome with gratitude and excitement, the Martian not only carries the message back to his planet, but also destroys the totalitarian ‘Masters of Mars’, bringing democracy to his own planet.

There was no way I could buy the right sweaters like the lonely Phil in *Shy Guy* did ... or ever hear any of our family’s dinner conversation resemble the white middle-class model in the films (‘Fä-thər, would you please pass me a baked pə tāt ō?’). But, even though I had not the slightest interest in cars or driving (I didn’t get a driver’s licence until I was 36), I was damned well against a Martian-style communist dictatorship right here on Planet Earth!

My friend Beaky felt the same, but posed the question, ‘Zactly how do you know a communist when you see one?’

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We both agreed that Marvin, the only effeminate male member of the sixth grade (who came out as gay 30 years later, after getting about as far from our burg by land as is possible — San Jose, California), was probably a communist.

At that young age, we felt no need to worry about those filthy communist nations across the waters. We had atomic bombs. And, by feeling such confidence, we proved ourselves to be America’s first thoroughly government-brainwashed generation. Eventually, I read Nevil Shute’s *On the Beach*, and lost confidence in nuclear weapons; in doing so, I was joining the previous generation, though I didn’t know it.

Horrified by Hiroshima and Nakasaki, a majority of our parents and grandparents had felt that America should give up its nuclear weapons after the war. Even Pap figured that, ‘Now the atomic bomb has done its job, they need to put it where nobody can get their hands on it anymore.’ In 1946, some 54 per cent of Americans thought that the United Nations should control all the world’s major weapons, especially nuclear weapons, including those of the U.S. And a staggering 40 per cent endorsed some form of one-world government, according to Gallup polls of the period. That same year, 14 states adopted the Constitution for the Federation of the World, as an expression of their belief in ‘One World or None,’ and ‘Peace in the World — or the World in Pieces.’

With much assistance from the military-industrial corporate complex, Americans eventually overcame their unreasonable fear of being vapourised or turned into staggering, cancer-ridden mutants. The Pentagon, Truman and, later, Eisenhower, spent many millions to reverse America’s strong distaste for

anything nuclear. Government advisers stressed that the key was to influence the next generation, the post-war babies — us. Thousands of programs in the public schools were funded to grab youthful minds. ‘Friendly Atom’ school programs and science clubs focusing on atomic energy sprang up in nearly every school in America.

Participants in the Friendly Atom programs consisted mainly of brainier, more upscale kids, the college-bound ones who’d be future technological and engineering majors in universities. Certainly not Beaky, who called it a good day in school if he didn’t get sent to detention; nor me, who harboured a secret fear of maths that took decades to overcome. The Friendly Atom program was social-class selective in choosing its friends. We understood that.

‘Atoms in the Schools’ worked. We learned to accept the atom so well that we are now deep into our fifth nuclear war without flinching. Or even noticing. However, I suspect Beaky flinches now at least a little, given that he has a grandson on his third ‘rotation’ in Iraq. Indeed, the last five U.S. conflicts have been nuclear through their use of depleted uranium. Ever innovative, the military’s happy solution to the problem of what to do with

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our nuclear waste turned out to be the production of millions of little radioactive weapons — the depleted-uranium, armour-piercing shells and other ordnances that have made stretches of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Yugoslavia horror zones of cancer and birth defects (over 1000 tons were expended in the first month of the Iraq War alone, mostly in cities). Most Americans still do not know this; and those who do, usually could not care less. But almost no Americans know that, for a few years at least, we were a nation that believed a peaceful world was possible through co-operation and humility, and were willing to prove it through disarming our own nation of all major weapons.

The governmental/corporate military industrial attempt to “grab youthful minds, scarcely more than a decade long,” was one of the greatest social consciousness engineering feats in American history. And yet, some of those youthful minds grabbed so long ago are now old minds, more reflective minds, which squint into the fog of the past. And compare the national narrative with our own experience. And what some of us see gives us chills. ●

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