The Rise of the Servant Society

written by Michael J. Thompson | February 9, 2016

We are witnessing a grand shift in the nature of capitalist society. It is not to be found simply in the expanding chasms of economic inequality, nor in the rapid social and cultural transformations shaped by globalization. Of course, economic inequality raises concern among liberals, social democrats, and socialists alike. For all see in it an ethical problem, one of unfairness, of greed, of unequal control and power. But the new explosion of wealth inequality is much larger in scale than in the previous Gilded Age. It poses different questions with respect to the transformation of capitalism and the classical models and assumptions within which left politics typically operate.

New forms of wealth are leading to new forms of labor and to new forms of economic servitude. One element of the phenomenon that is frequently overlooked is the kind of culture that extreme wealth inequality promotes, as well as the kinds of ideas, norms, and attitudes that it shapes. These attitudes and norms are now more integrated than ever into a culture industry that actively erodes any sense of dissent and, as I will show, increases the likelihood of accepting authority relations, thereby cementing the legitimacy of the system as a whole.

Economic inequality leads to broader, more general forms of power and control. Despite the dynamic nature of capitalism, the persistence of oligarchy and elite control should still be seen as the central, salient feature of modern society. Indeed, as Thomas Piketty has pointed out in his exhaustive historical-empirical study of the history of economic inequality, one thing is consistent throughout the data on social stratification under capitalist societies: The return on capital always outstrips the overall growth of the economy. The wealthy are always gaining ahead of the growth of the economy as a whole, and as wealth and income inequality continues to widen, we can see that this is leading to a new kind of economy, a new kind of culture, and a new kind of consciousness.

I maintain that this new inequality is shaping economic life in ways that are erecting what I will call here a “servant society.” By this I mean two things. First, that new forms of labor in advanced post-industrial society, as well as new pressures for consumption, are leading to new forms of service labor that is increasingly directed by and toward the needs of the wealthy. Second, and as a consequence of the new pressures for consumption, a new kind of culture and consciousness is emerging that is increasingly docile in real political terms. The legitimacy of the basis of the system is more entrenched now than in previous decades.

The servant society is the result of new developments and currents in capitalism. It is the result of a large-scale de-skilling of work, urban centers concentrating service needs for wealthy elites, as well as the shrinkage of conflict within the various levels of social relations and the socialization of subjects. What has emerged in the place of the nineteenth-century model of socio-political conflict is one premised on servitude in the most basic and most pervasive sense of the term. In fact, the de-skilling of labor, the rise of consumption pressures, the atomization of workers, and the loss of the values of democratic working life all conspire to promote a new culture of work and attitude toward the political elements of the economy.

In what follows, I briefly probe the emergence of the servant society: an economic and political culture that encourages not political rebellion and social critique, but docility and acceptance in the

face of hierarchy and authority. I conclude that it is not a post-work future that we should expect, but a society of servitude: of services for the wealthy and for corporations and a future of meaningless labor for basic subsistence that will be the probable outcome of the trends in contemporary capitalism.

The New (and Old) Economy

Central to the rise of the servant society is the admixture that has emerged of new and old forms of capitalism. For Marx, who developed his theory of capitalism through an analysis of industrial-producer capitalism, the basis of capitalist growth was rooted in the labor process. It was a system of exploitation in which capitalists gained at the expense of labor. This gave rise to radical social and political movements that blossomed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Marx was correct that the crises of capitalism, mixed with a consciousness of the inequalities produced by labor exploitation, would fuel labor and socialist movements. But the failure of these movements politically, and the transformation of capitalism after World War II, gave rise to a society of consumption whereby social democratic and welfare state policies allowed for an increase in economic growth and where wages and consumption could expand. But as the profitability of this model began to wane in the 1970s due to increasing successes of worker militancy on the one hand (or what Samuel Huntington proclaimed as "too much democracy") and the limits to expanded consumption on the other, new forms of labor and consumption would need to be developed.

Globalization, neoliberalism, and the manipulation of consumer demand toward a massified leisure-class mentality all encouraged the expansion of capital and the degradation of political consciousness. The move away from industrial-producer capitalism in the developed world has been accompanied by the emergence of not only a consumer-oriented society and new forms of consumption-based exploitation (that is, paying more than things are worth, purchasing things that are not necessary, and so on) but also an erosion of skilled forms of labor. The rise of the service economy has decoupled work even further from skill than has the technologization of industrial production. Whereas previous generations were able to relate themselves to the world through some meaningful form of productive work, the new economy has flattened out the realm of work to the extent that it no longer offers a space for expertise and highly developed skills. Rather, the emergence of robotic labor, the computerization of many tasks, as well as the outsourcing of many middle-class jobs have meant that the new economy is less dependent on distinctive human skills.

This transformation of modern capitalism has led to two distinct realities that have forged the foundation for the servant society. First, the increased capacity to exploit cheaper labor industrially due to globalization has led to super-profits on the production side of capitalism. At the same time, the new culture of mass-consumption has allowed for the manipulation of demand, the cultivation of new levels of perceived quality of life, and a massified, commodified culture of leisure-class-style consumption, leading to a massive expansion of profits on the consumption side of the capitalist dynamic. The rise in profits from these new developments in global political economy has meant that the wealth commanded by elites grants them more social power than before. Today's cities are now a site for this new form of economic life. Enticed by the allure of large cities such as New York, San Francisco, London, and many others, young labor flocks to work for the concentrated wealth of the city. This new wealth itself is largely the product of *unproductive labor*, or the fruit of rent-seeking, finance capital, and other forms of non-productive wealth.[1]

As economic inequality deepens, the capacity of the wealthy to control labor for their own ends becomes more intensive and extensive. The servant class—restaurant workers, child care givers, Uber drivers, dog walkers, and so on—is becoming a new economic paradigm, one prefiguring a new economy where service to the consumer becomes the central locus of economic life. The term "consumer" in itself is problematic, as this increasingly means the high-powered, super-wealthy

elite. Capital from bloated wealth also chases after new spaces for service provision. Online butlers, online cleaning services, alcohol delivery, and so on, all point toward the spreading out of service provision as the basis of new forms of labor. But it is not only these more obvious kinds of work that constitute the servant society. Increasingly, an ideological framework is being put into place that sees all kinds of labor—teachers, lawyers, doctors—as offering services.

Key to the servant society, as opposed to the purely service society, is that the material reality that grants the wealthy increased control over others also infects the culture and consciousness of the society as a whole. A new form of acceptance and acquiescence to authority begins to be routinized within the consciousness of individuals and the culture more generally. The servant society is therefore the product of a new kind of social power generated by increasing inequality, an inequality based on what I will call here "oligarchic wealth."[2] Oligarchic wealth is essentially measured as the kind of wealth that grants individuals power over the labor of others and the power to control and direct that labor toward their own ends and interests. But it is also a kind of wealth that allows elites to use resources that could otherwise be employed for common goods for their own ends. This is not strictly to employ servants, to purchase yachts, or whatever, but in their control of resources, to orient those resources toward what will grant them the highest return—to change education toward their values, to remake cities according to their consumptive ends, and to remake the nature of everything into a market where they alone will benefit.

But a democratic conception of wealth is one that seeks to orient capital and its various resources toward common goods, ends, and purposes. It requires not only a revolution of values, but of consciousness as well. Only a self-aware class consciousness can grasp the implications of the difference between oligarchic and democratic wealth. But as class mobility continues to stagnate in places like the United States and the de-industrialization and de-skilling of labor continues, the spread of the servant mentality will continue to grow. These new forms of labor and work culture lack the sociological roots necessary in previous, industrial society for class consciousness. This new culture of consent is therefore a product of not only economic inequality itself, but of the kind of labor, the kind of consumption, and the kind of values to which a consumption-based, post-industrial labor force gives rise.

The Culture of Consent

The process of socialization necessitates the routinization, rationalization, and internalization of different values and ideas for social institutions to achieve power and stability. Since these values are increasingly unified by the needs of capital, diversity in value patterns decreases, leading to a more unified set of normative ideas and practices that shape institutions as well as individual consciousness. Now, in place of a disruptive, anomic break between the individual and society—one that was characteristic of earlier cultural and psychological forms of alienation—the neoliberal world, with its basic economic imperatives, is able to weave a more seamless unity between the subject and the institutions and norms of society. This does not mean, however, that psychological pathologies and neurotic tendencies decrease—indeed, they increase and widen their effects on the self and society at large. But the difference now is that they are no longer experienced, nor are they culturally recognized, as expressions of a pathological society, but rather as a form of deviance that requires adaptation back into the system itself.

The kind of subjectivity that is here created is necessarily a shallow one. The incessant penetration of institutional norms into the domains of the family, education, culture/entertainment industries, and the like has had the effect of increasingly reifying the values that orient identity and role formation. As a consequence, it has succeeded in creating subjects that are ever more compliant to the dominant reality, who find their very sense of self and identity only within that sphere of reality, and who lack any genuine, efficacious sense of critical cognition. Hence, when there is resistance, it

is expressed as transgression. Deviance, once disruptive, is now built into the system: The new lifestyles and forms of music no longer shock a pallid, conformist culture, as they did from the1950s through the 1980s. Rather, deviance is now defanged and normalized into smaller mini-publics, where cultural "expression" is merely another form of conformism and a need to construct the self in accordance with the new communities that grant the weakened ego acceptance and a stable, albeit fragile, identity.

This is due to the increasing control that elites have over the culture industry itself. One of the basic principles of economic division needs to be pointed out: Unequal control over resources entails unequal control over the hegemonic ideas and values that dominate that culture. Inequality therefore has the capacity to instill within individuals a new set of norms and values that legitimate forms of hierarchy and authority granted by the new wealth. We are faced with the reality of social trends that will increase conformity to wider patterns of socialization and norms as required by the economic system for its reproduction. As the ego weakens under such conditions, there is little room for the development of the kind of critical cognition that was seen as the hallmark of Enlightenment rationality and culture. This kind of culture would be one where individuals possessed the capacity to cooperate and debate ideas in order to provide a culture and politics of genuine self-determination.

Psychology of Legitimacy and Authority

If my basic hypothesis is thus far correct, namely that the new economic forms of labor, production, and consumption are creating a new culture for consent and legitimacy for the system as a whole, then it remains for me to point to the psychological dynamics of the individual and show that they, too, are shaped by unequal power. Hierarchical inequalities between social groups give rise to attitudes specific to those groups. Hierarchies not only exist because of violence and power, but they persist because of the forms of legitimacy that are woven around them. Individuals are formed by these hierarchies, and their tendency toward either authority or servitude are written into the social roles and scripts of that hierarchy.

This argument finds its first real expression in book IV of Aristotle's *Politics.* His discussion of the defective kind of society that emerges under conditions of oligarchy is illustrative. Whereas in a free society, each citizen, he argues, knows how to rule and be ruled according to the arguments that serve the common interest, under conditions of economic division, wealthy and poor no longer follow reason, but know only despotism and slavery. He argues that for the wealthy,

by reason of the luxury in which they are brought up, they never learn, even at school, the habit of obedience. On the other hand, the very poor, who are in the opposite extreme, are too degraded. So that the one class cannot obey, and can only rule despotically; the other knows not how to command and must be ruled like slaves. Thus arises a city, not of freemen, but of masters and slaves.[3]

Here we have the basic formula, if you will, of the servant society: a pattern of psychological and attitudinal dynamics that reinforce not only economic divisions, but political and cultural ones as well.

More recent studies on the effects of inequality and authority have shown that the more one is exposed to hierarchical relations, the more prone one will be to justify them as well as one's place within them. Individuals become more likely to justify the social order, blaming themselves for their conditions, consistently believing that mobility is everywhere and it will be immanent for them and their family. Even more, the mythos constantly cultivated around capitalist entrepreneurs, from Donald Trump to Steve Jobs, is reinforced by the media and internalized by non-elites. Consistent exposure to hierarchies therefore predisposes people to the attitudes and norms of the wealthy. As

Frederick Solt has recently found in his empirical analysis of inequality and attitudes displaying deference to authority, "Societies with higher levels of economic inequality are concomitantly more hierarchical, making experiences that reinforce vertical notions of authority more common and so authoritarianism more widespread."[4] As the scale of inequality continues to expand and the nature of the workplace takes on more of a neoliberal, fragmented, and domesticated culture, the attitudes of compliance lead to a psychology of docility.

Reclaiming Left Politics

The implications of this argument for left politics should be seen in stark terms. On the one hand, the culture of compliance and political docility that forms the essence of the servant society is one that will be largely immune to the political arguments of the left. Lacking any mediating institutions such as labor unions, working people are increasingly routinized into the dominant patterns of the system and its imperatives. On the intellectual side of the coin, decades of postmodernism, poststructuralism, and essentially pseudo-political academic writing has morphed the concept of politics into issues of identity.

What is needed is a new vision of politics that takes aim at the kind of power that oligarchic wealth provides for elites and the ways that they gain control over the goals of the community as a whole. What is needed is a vision of *democratic wealth* that insists on the accountability of capital, as an institution, to the needs of the public. The left must shake off illusory utopias such as a "post-work future" or "post-work imaginary"—ideas spawned from a deeply delusional relation to both economic and historical reality. Rather, it must confront the more likely scenario of declining wages, increasing service labor for the wealthy and for corporations, and the general de-skilling that Harry Braverman rightly saw as the consequence of monopoly capital. Whatever meaningful work might be left will still be rooted in the needs of capital: the rise of the urban-millennial "creative class" will still remain, but their labor will still service the needs of capital.

A new vision of the future must therefore be built around this reality, and the need for the democratization of social surplus must be at the forefront of any valid class politics. This renewed emphasis on the structure of the economy is still to be understood in class terms. But the primary problem is that the classical Marxian model of class consciousness can no longer be assumed. What is needed is an auto-critique of the left: an intellectual and political reorientation that moves us away from the emphasis on issues of identity, of niche concerns that alienate working people, and instead sees that the progression of cultural liberalism is distinct from economic progressivism.

Today's left is a congeries of different "political" concerns, from the legalization of prostitution and narcotics to the promotion of different forms of identity. But whatever it may be, it is not a movement oriented toward building class consciousness informed by a more radical conception of social justice. Liberalism and socialism should not be collapsed into one another. Each has different goals and ends when it comes to the power relations rooted in economic resources, different assumptions about the nature of human beings, and different ideas about the purpose of human association. Marx's model of class consciousness made sense for the time because the sociological substrates of the workplace, worker organization, and the nature of production-oriented economies all made possible a clearer grasp of the power dynamics of capitalism.

But today's left does not provide this clarity for working people. Socialist movements did not marginalize cultural and noneconomic concerns, but they rightly saw that they were part of a broader ethos of non-domination and that the economic structure of capitalist society would always tether all forms of real cultural progress. A new class politics will therefore seek to make a similar move: Working people need to look not simply to their interests in terms of *wage-consciousness*, as the legacy of liberal trade-unionism has always framed the matter, but in terms of a broader class

consciousness that seeks the democratic accountability of capital and the reorientation of social wealth toward public ends. This means enlarging the scope of potential political agency: As in Marx's classical theory, anyone not controlling capital is put into subservient relation to it. The material agent of social change is therefore made not through the *nature of work*, but through the *nature of its demands*. Without a shattering of the basic alienation that constitutes what I have called here the culture and mentality of the servant society, no viable, radical political agency can be restored to working people.

The left must therefore make the concrete issues of economic power and its corrosive effects on the common interest its central theme. It must seek to rework and retool the critical categories and theories of Marx and others into a more sophisticated intellectual-political framework that can shape real politics, not utopian dreams. A society defined by social justice is one defined by the free, equal membership of all in the pursuit of a common interest: the preservation of precisely that free, un-dominated, equal, cooperative society itself. This common interest is one where we cease to see the oligarchic use of wealth—for the narrow ends of profit, mass consumption, and so on—as valid and counterpose to it a democratic understanding of wealth that is employed for common goods. We need not appeal to romantic conceptions of revolution, of past movements and their ideals. We must confront the harsh realities of the present with the democratic, rational principles of social justice that true radicalism should have at its core. Perhaps then radicalism can once again capture the imagination and harness the interests of working people toward social transformation, dispatching servitude and mastery altogether.

Footnotes

1. See the important analysis by Aldo Barba and Giancarlo de Vivo, "An 'Unproductive Labor' View of Finance," Cambridge Journal of Economics (No. 36, 2012), 1479-1496.
2. The twin concepts of "oligarchic wealth" and "democratic wealth" were first introduced by Roy Harrod in "The Possibility of Economic Satiety: Use of Economic Growth for Improving the Quality of Education and Leisure," Problems of United States Economic Development (Committee for Economic Development, 1958), 207-213. They are further discussed by Fred Hirsch, The Social Limits to Growth. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976) as well in Michael J. Thompson, "The Limits to Liberalism: A Republican Theory of Social Justice," International Journal of Ethics (vol. 7, no. 3-4, 2011), 1-27. Harrod and Hirsch do not develop the concept with any sophistication, and my use of it here and elsewhere is my own development.
3. Aristotle, Politics, IV, 11.
4. Frederick Solt, "The Social Origins of Authoritarianism," Political Research Quarterly (vol. 65 no. 4, 2012), 703-713, 706.