**The Death of Aspiration: The End of Work and the Emergent Culture of Middle Class Discontent**

**By**

**Ged Mirfin**

**We are entering a new age of global markets and automated production.**

**In his groundbreaking study “Turbo Capitalism: Winners and Losers in the Global Economy” and the book which proceeded it, “The Endangered American Dream: How to Stop the United States from Becoming a Third-World Country and How to Win the Geo-Economic Struggle for Industrial Supremacy” Edward Luttwak argues that the whole world is inevitably moving in a turbo-capitalist direction. "Turbo-Capitalism" is defined as the worldwide trend toward unregulated markets, free flow of capital and the pervasive impact of information technology which he argues has been a net destroyer of jobs in those areas of the economy and professional srvices that used to be dominated by White Collar Working Class Employees. He argues that via University Education, Professional Qualifications and Technical Training the Middle Classes had achieved a margin of Economic Affluence in terms of their occupancy of positions on the managerial hierarchy but also critically in terms of lifestyle based on the trappings associated with holding down well paid jobs. The pervasive impact of neo-liberal economics and information technology has kicked that out from under them.**

**Privatization of formerly nationalized industries and de-regulation are now the driving forces, bringing rapid change, dislocation of labor, uncertainty of employment and anxiety about economic security.Turbo-Capitalism Luttwak argues breaks up families; discourages investment; generates structural unemployment; and the simultaneous retraction of state social welfare provision established as part of the post-war consensus. Those working, work longer hours than they have done previously, although productivity has since then more than doubled. Instead of reducing hours, employers are reducing their fulltime workforces, intensifying exploitation and insecurity, while simultaneously maximizing the use of throwaway temporary workers.**

**For Luttwak these changes represent a permanent fixture of life for members of the Middle Classes. Life is becoming more uncertain, jobs being eliminated, families and societies being torn apart, and "job security" becoming a thing of the past. According to Luttwak today's capitalism with it’s managing for the short time, profits the happy few, but is a disaster for the many: abrupt mass firings, disruption of individual lives, of families, of communities and even of entire regions – represents permanent insecurity for the middle classes. Turbo capitalism he demonstrates utilising a range of statistical evidence has accelerated and accentuated class divides, reducing the influence and size of the middle class.**

**In a book entitled "The End of Work: The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era" the Social Economist Jeremy Rifkin takes the thesis advanced by Luttwak about the so called "Informational Revolution" one step further.**

**For Rifkin there is a direct correlation to the success of whichever modern day technology we are experiencing, and the situation in the inner-cities. "Today, millions of African-Americans find themselves hopelesly trapped in a permanent underclass. Unskilled and unneeded, the commodity value of their labor has been rendered virtually useless by the automated technologies that have come to displace them in the new high-tech global economy."**

**What he dubs as 'The ‘inner elite’ Rifkin identifies as those being responsible for the automation of production - the final step in the process of machines replacing the human mind – which has fundamentally changed the rules of how the market in manufacturing operates. This is because the market place in the digital age is global and production (in the near workerless factory) in the future can be controlled from a pre-programmed control-room next to a boardroom located in Switzerland or some idyllic paradise island.**

**Cybernation is the name that Rifkin gives to this process -a deliberate attempt by 'The inner elite' to replace man by machine in the cause of secure profit for the few. In a globalised world the notion of an 'inner elite’, with control of the majority of what passes for wealth, being able to relocate all of their manufacturing facilities in countries of their choice largely outside of the control of governments has a familiar ring to it when one considers the literture on capitalism and multilateral attempts at regulation of the profits of multi-national corporations trading across borders.**

**Cybernation is a particular feature of globalization. For today’s employers, a permanent workforce is costly. Faced by conditions of intense global competition they can no longer afford a permanent workforce, particularly with the, in some cases, vast pension costs that go with this. Wherever opportunities permit they adopt technologies which diminish the need for or do away with labour altogether. Where that is not possible contract labour is being used to replace permanent employees. The end of the era of mass employment despite an increase in the number of jobs available in the economy, particularly zero-hours contract labour, is rapidly bringing to an end the age of aspiration. It is in middle management that is being hit the hardest during the process of economic rebalancing which is built to a degree unseen before on large-scale public sector management delayering.**

**The core of UKIP support may well be Blue Collar Working Class Voters but the Core of the expansion in their support from Protest Voters come from Middle Class Voters. From a Political Economy perspective the core of this Middle Class Protest Vote is largely constituted of what I have termed the White Collar Working Class - Middle Managers. Middle management** **is the intermediate management of a hierarchical organization in either the Private or Public Sectors, that is, those employees who are subordinate to the senior management team but are responsible for managing lower levels of operational staff. Middle management has typically been reduced in both Private and Public Sector Organizations as the result of the downsizing, delayering and as identified earlier, outsourcing, that has followed as a consequence of the economic downturn. Effectively what has happened is that a layer of management has been got rid of in order to reduce costs - middle management costing more than junior staff. Managerial theories making the claim in favour of flat or matrix organizational structures or lean management structures designed to flatten an organization or worse still empower employees within the organizational structure to make the organization more innovative and flexible are seen by Middle Managers for what it actually is to them when it occurs – redundancy.**

**There is an additional downside to this phenomenon and that is the impact of the loss of Middle Managers on the Performance of Businesses. Elsewhere I have called this phenomenon the Death of the Intermediary Economy. It has two aspects. The first is the loss of collective memory and tactical decision making input from Middle & Senior Managers who would have been responsible for the Management of Purchasing and the Direction of Projects in Large and Medium Sized Enterprises. A lot of this is based on personal business relationships and know-how which has evaporated as jobs have been shed and cost control and tighter de-stocking regimes deployed. The second is the disappearance of a layer of Intermediary Businesses which sit between Suppliers and Purchasers of Services. The Direct Line Business Model holds sway not just in the Consumer Insurance Market. During an Economic Recession Businesses have moved away from working with Agents, Brokers and Consultants and going to direct to supplier who themselves have become much more e-commerce platform savvy. Businesses have also become less prepared to invest in speculative long-term projects with an expensive consultancy price tag attached to it. Even established City Centre Business & Professional & Service Community Businesses have recently seen a slowing in revenue growth and/or a contraction in staffing requirements. The impact of the shrinkage in the intermediary economy is a key trend which is also insufficiently understood. The shrinkage in the intermediary economy however maybe to the ultimate benefit of large outsourcing businesses which are beginning to absorb and sub-contract work to an army of consultants whilst squeezing their revenue base.**

**The felt impact of the improvement in economic performance has been mitigated by a whole series of deep changes in the structure of the economy. Radical and widening discontinuities are beginning to open up not only between the Public and Private Sectors but more importantly within the Private Sector between High and Low Wage Occupations. The divisions are not mutually exclusively between Skilled and UnSkilled Professions or even between those occupations where Employment Status is given a modicum of Protection by Professional and Tertiary Qualifications and those where No Protection exists. The critical disjuncture is those that are exposed to Market Forces and the potential of Outsourced Service Provision and those that aren’t. The Legal Sector, Local Government, the National Health Service and increasingly large parts of the Military and the Police Services are the latest in a long-line of Services that are currently being exposed to the potential of institutional re-engineering by the likes of Capita and Serco. No-one is immune.**

**What this ultimately means is that the conduits for the transmission of wealth following economic expansion have been increasingly diverted to the pockets of big institutional shareholders and their C-Level Executive Management Structures. Even Knowledge Workers who previously colonised the corridors of Government Departments, Agencies and QUANGOs during the biggest expansion the Public Sector has ever seen under New Labour are increasingly becoming a Sub-Contracted labour resource under the New Outsourcing Revolution. It is perhaps why there is such resentment among both the Public in general and Knowledge Workers in particular over the bonuses paid to Investment Bankers. This is perhaps the only area of the economy that is generally immune from outsourcing. You can’t outsource professional institutional gamblers.**

**The division that exists between Direct and Indirect Employees will be one of the most significant cleavages faced by parties at the next election. It will not be the number of jobs that are created in the economy but the security and the nature of tenure of those new jobs. Voter preferences will be determined not by whether they have a job and whether they have an income; it will be determined increasingly by the security of that income. The future orientation of the electorate is far harder o measure than their current or present orientation, particularly on circumstances when they face continued uncertainty.**

**What we are effectively talking about here are Middle Class fears and anxieties, unease and insecurity writ large. The Middle Classes are feeling increasingly vulnerable. The question is: how entrenched has that feeling become? In his book “Broke: How to Survive the Middle-Class Crisis” David Boyle articulates these fears and uncertainties. For the first time ever, today’s middle classes will struggle to enjoy the same privileges of security and comfort that their grandparents did. At the heart of Broke is an account of how the economic upheavals of recent decades have impacted upon the population, from the point of view of those in the middle income bracket. The account is one of how Britain's middle classes are under pressure and have lost many previous certainties (such as job security, professional development, ability to afford a new house and a decent pension).**

**There are two principal sources of this fear and uncertainty neither of which the Government currently has an answer to. The first is related to insecurity of tenure. Just because you have a job does not mean that you will keep it. Contracts of Employment are increasingly time limited (and with Zero-Hours Contracts increasingly time de-limited). Voters are making judgements about their future prosperity and with it the security of their family on the promise of the political party most likely to fulfil that in the short to medium term. Voters are reserving judgement about whether to support either of the main parties. It will not simply be the continuation of the rate of growth which is the decisive factor in Voter’s locus of their decision to support either political party at present or to protest by voting UKIP but rather the impact of that rate of growth and the impact that it has on the money in their bank accounts and family finances and how quickly the effect of this feeds through. This will be far harder to predict.**

**Indeed the political picture has been complicated by continuing reductions in public expendiure and, potentially, retardation in the current rapid rate of job creation. A critical question is whether the Private Sector will have the capacity to absorb what are likely to be even larger reductions in the size of the Public Sector than have taken place already? What this entails is uncertainty amongst a different and this time potentially much larger group of Public Sector Employees than previously. The problem is that such Public Sector Employees are concentrated in geographies of managed decline in areas where older industries were more prevalent across the country, especially in the North of England.**

**It is arguable that when the economy is fully restored to health that health will be measured by the restoration of the intermediary economy and with it the employment and financial prospects of White Collar Middle Managers. If it is the case sense that many key financial milestones once assumed to be the benchmarks of Middle Class life are now felt to be beyond the reach of all but the rich then the Conservatives are in trouble. It is why. After years of economic turmoil, most families now believe the most valuable —**

**and elusive possession is economic security. Elsewhere I have argued that the squeezed Middle Classes in the UK are suffering from what I have called Post Traumatic Debt Stress. A sense of powerlessness exists with an increasingly traumatized population watching from the sidelines has fostered pessimistic expectations as to what is achievable in the short to medium term. As a population we have been conditioned to believe that things are going to get better and that Governments will be able to deliver during the period of an electoral cycle and in some cases - like Former Public Sector Employees - that we can simply turn back the clock. The current recession has elongated the political business cycle. Governments for the foreseeable future will be faced with managing expectations over a much longer economic horizon. The polls already suggest that debt fatigue has already set in. The problem is that certain parts of the electorate are struggling to see the light at the end of the tunnel. After an artificially overextended credit fuelled period of growth the electorate is struggling to come to terms with the prospect of an even longer period of deficit reduction than even the most pessimistic forecasts predicted. It is akin to some form of post-traumatic economic stress.**

**The consequence is that there is a danger for the foreseeable future of single parliament governments or a willingness to turn to political alternatives offering simple reflationary solutions or indeed withdrawal from the EU. Neither are they likely to deliver a permanent feel good factor or one sufficiently long lasting to sustain a government in office for the long-term. This is the enduring paradox that the current economic recession has bequeathed to Britain.**

**Their main concern is falling out of the Middle Class altogether because they see what is happening to others around them. Their mood is very bleak at present despite the overcurrents of optimism that abound in certain parts of the right wing press. A substantial number are concerned about maintaining their current standard of living. They feel they are standing still rather than moving forward and have been working longer and harder in order to make no progress. Upward mobility has effectively been postponed. There is a very real danger however that potential for advancement and greater prosperity rooted in merit and hard work, rather than in the circumstances of one’s birth is being symied. It breeds resentment and clearly has done amongst a core of UKIP Voters.**

**The problem has been caused by two directly inter-related economic factors. The first is the persistence of cost-push price inflation in a low growth economy. Thus although the rate of inflation has been much reduced in absolute terms in comparison to previous eras, the rate of growth of inflation continues to massively outstrip the rate of growth of wage inflation, particularly for low and middle income earners and more importantly in the price of commodities and utilities, in particular. The result is that the effect of inflation is actually felt far more than when it was at double-digit levels, because wages were rising much faster to compensate for this. It is taking far longer for the feel good factor to be felt in voter’s pockets, particularly amongst current or former public sector employees have either been subjected to a pay freeze for the last three years. The micro-economic impact of price inflation on living standards (or should that be the cost of living) in a deregulated economy suffering from multiple instances of economic market failure was little understood. The impact of an old fashioned 1970s income policy with wage restraints imposed across the public sector was both expected and has followed a familiar pattern. The fact that it has only recently been accompanied by voluntary price restraint amongst energy retailers in particular suggests that the Government may have missed a trick in either understanding the key contributory sources of inflation. It is hardly surprising therefore that there has been relentless public criticism of the behavior of Big Business in the Energy and Banking Sector. A structural feature of the British Economy which is a greater cause of imbalance than any other is the lack of sufficient competition in key functional areas of the Economy as a consequence of Concentration of Monopoly Buying Power – the Big Six (Energy Companies); the Big Five (High Street Banks) and the Big Four (Supermarkets). What we lack in the UK in comparison to the US according to Edward Luttwak is effective Anti-Trust legislation to force the break-up of Private Sector Monopolies and literally force greater competition into key areas of the Economy to the greater benefit of Middle Class consumers. It is surprising that there is such a lack of willingness to legislate or intervene more actively against monopoly suppliers.**

**Both Luttwak’s and Rifkin’s treatments of technological automation have a dystopian, one might even argue conspiracy theory flavour to them, were that not for the fact that they are fully grounded in empirical evidence and based on detailed research. Both Luttak and Rifkin provide powerful explanations for the fate of blue collar jobs, the decline of the middle class and the growing chasm between the haves and the have-nots. The future is not bright and it’s certainly not aspirational. Indeed one can well argue that aspiration has actually gone into reverese. It is a function of the fear that once the middle classes have lost job insecurity they will never get it back. The middle class fear that they will be compelled to spend the rest of their working lives in contract employment or as a self-employed consutant trying to make ends meet. It is hardly the most aspirational of existence. The middle classes are becoming therefore part of an ever-groing lump of casualized labour that is swallowing people up. It is this erosion of secure job holding rather than the pervasive threat of unemployment that is increasing personal economic insecurity.**

**Apathetic indifference is a symptom not merely of thwarted ambition but also of the fact that the inevitable linear forward movement of history has been stymied by increasingly retrogressive forces which are placing insuperable barriers in the way of progress in the machine age. The central problematique is that in the machine age it appears that the foundational technological issues of modern industrial (or should that be post-industrial) societies are increasingly impervious to policy led change instead technology is becoming the key determinent of change led policy. There is no such thing as Past-ism or rather Futurism in reverse. One of the symptoms of Presentism is the superceding of the base economic superstructure by the base technological superstructure in the new post-industrial epoch. It may be not that the end of history is already here but rather instead that the future is already here and now.**

**A number of economists and sociologists have been critical of what has become knon as the "end of work" thesis. Rifkin has been accused of being a technological determinist because it is argued that his work does not take into account both the technological change hich is the central focus of its narrative together with changes in the nature of work and employment that such technological change is in turn a progenitor.**

**It is not so much determinism as what I have re-dubbed the technological imperative (with a nod in the direction of selfish gene theory). The reference is Daniel Chandler in a book entitled “Technological or Media Determinism” in which he argued that once a technology is introduced into a culture, what follows is the inevitable development of that technology. It is however neither an inevitable nor necessarily fatalistic. Technology does not become an end in itself merely it is part of the foundational framework of society – a large, complex, interconnected and interdependent system. What is technically possible is not always developed and where it is developed is sometimes rejected. One should remember that the human element is a critically important part of this process. Individuals (human agency) still form an integral part (we think) how we as individuals (human agents) think, feel, act and think in turn about how society operates as we move from one technological age to another. Technology is a causal not the principal element of causation in social change.**

**The destruction of jobs however has been slow and insidious and inexorable taking place over a very long period against a backdrop of alternative periods of high growth and seeming bottomless recession. The paradox is that computers have not resulted in the loss of even more jobs but that the use of information technology has been so labour intensive. What is clear is that the most recent recession was not only unemployment lite but also employment growth lite. Economic growth without the absorbing of large numbers of unemployed is called a jobless recovery. Historically, innovation that obsoletes existing jobs and technologies has not created permanent unemployment, but has instead opened jobs in new industries and moved jobs from agriculture to industry and the service sector. This process has been dubbed creative destruction by Joseph Schumpeter.**

**Rifkin worries that the process of more disruptive economic change presages the creation of what he titles in one of the chapters in his book as "A More Dangerous World". Rifkin argues that there is a direct correlation between growing wage inequality and increased criminal activity. "Rising unemployment and loss of hope for a better future," he argues, "are among the reasons that tens of thousands of young teenagers are turning to a life of crime and violence."**

**The problem for Rifkin is the fact that no matter how much education some receive this will not necessarily be either an aid to progress or indeed survival in the new high technology age. Many are already feeling the pressure. The kind of work they are hired to do is low paying and not enough to support themselves and their families that an increasingly large number of workers are deciding they can't afford to start.**

**Rifkin therefore suggests providing subsidized income for service provided to the community for the staffing of community buildings like libraries and children's centres, which he suggests might help the "growth and development of the social economy and facilitate the long-term transition into a community-centered, service-oriented culture."**

**Faced as I am at present by the threatened closure of several Comunity Buildings in My Ward, where I am a Local Councillor, community buildings providing vital social economy functions Rifkin's approach resontes strongly ith me, reducing he age costs of local authorities and providing employment opportunities for long-term unemployed individuals ho are the victim of job automation.**

**This is a plea for kinder, gentler high-tech capitalism. there's still so much work to be done, be it ever so feel-good and "community-based", and if people are to be paid to do it -- whatever the "creative accounting" by which their wages are paid. Like Rifkin, I accept that a lot of people will continue to work while a lot of others will not. This is a partial solution to those whom the economy has rendered idle. The solution entering what Rifkin has dubbed "the third sector", the volunteer sector (as opposed to the market and government sectors), encouraged by "a tax deduction for every hour given-to legally certified tax-exempt community interest organizations."**

**Worldwide unemployment is now at the highest level since the great depression of the 1930s. The number of people underemployed or without work is rising sharply as millions of new entrants into the workforce find themselves victims of an extraordinary high-technology revolution. Sophisticated computers, robotics, telecommunications, and other cutting-edge technologies are fast replacing human beings in virtually every sector and industry-from manufacturing, retail, and financial services, to transportation, agriculture, and government.**

**Many jobs are simply never coming back. Blue collar workers, secretaries, receptionists, clerical workers, sales clerks, bank tellers, telephone operators, librarians, wholesalers, and middle managers are just a few of the many occupations destined for virtual extinction. While some new jobs are being created, they are, for the most part, low paying and generally providing little more than temporary employment and in many cases much less. More than fifteen percent of the U.S. population are currently living below the poverty line. The world is fast polarizing into two potentially irreconcilable forces: on one side, an information elite that controls and manages the high-tech global economy; and on the other, the growing numbers of permanently displaced workers, who have few prospects and little hope for meaningful employment in an increasingly automated world.**

**Rifkin contends that worldwide unemployment would increase as information technology eliminated tens of millions of jobs in the manufacturing, agricultural and service sectors. He predicted devastating impact of automation on blue-collar, retail and wholesale employees while a small elite of corporate managers and knowledge workers would reap the benefits of the high-tech world economy, the U.S. middle class would continue to shrink and the workplace become ever more stressful. For the U.S. middle class read the British middle class.**

**The global economy has never been more productive, but worldwide, unemployment is at its highest since the Great Depression. New technology does not always replace the jobs it destroys. All the evidence, according to Rifkin, is to the contrary. This is why retrained older workers are being discriminated against in favour of younger workforce, which, according to Rifkin, is more tractable and less burdened by past working practices. That is why Rifkin belives we are moving toward a "near-workerless world." Out of 124 million U.S. jobs, 90 million "are potentially vulnerable to replacement by machines."**

**The tech-driven downsizing of the workforce is sparing no sector of the economy. In the U.S. the end of the tertiary or service sector which is now by far the largest sector, is in sight. Automatic teller machines replace bank tellers. Middle management is dramatically diminished: the bosses relay their orders to the production workers directly, by computer, and monitor their compliance by computer too.**

**Are we approaching what Bill Gates calls "frictionless capitalism": direct transactions between producers and consumers? With Capitalism will eliminate the mercantile middlemen who created it. Elsewhere I have dubbed this phenomenon the death of the middle manager syndrome.**

**For Rifkin there is a more despairing phenomenon which is absolutely crushing the aspirtional life out of the remaining knowledge-workers, whose existence is becoming immensely stressful. For every worker who can't take it, there's another in "the new reserve army" of the unemployed ready to take their place. For Rifkin the redundant majority is a reservoir of despair. Not only are these people going to be poor, they know they’re going to be effectively useless. All aspiration has been knocked out of them. They face the prospect of ending up as a permanent underclass. We already know the consequences of this: crime, drugs, family breakdown and inevitably following - social decay. Their support for populist right politics in the UK in the form of UKIP and in the U.S. for Trump is hardly a surprise.**

**Work has always been more than about economics, it was always more than that: it is also very much about politics and aspiration too. Work dominates most of our waking hours. It is both physically and mentally enervating. It is not just about consuming or commuting. Sucking the aspiration out of that part of the population ejected from the workforce is literally sucking their very lifeforce out of them. It is romoting at one and the same time mutual hostility towards and abject dependence upon a state which is increasingly unable to deliver – that is incredibly disempoweringand ultimately demotivating for an increasingly large part of the population. The brave new world of techno-driven abundance – in essence the ability to purchase more commodities and luxury goods is becoming separated by a wider gap from the dark denizens of the world inhabited by the underclass revealed by TV Programmes on Britain’s benefit culture.**

**There is a very real danger that the middle class and middle management will be reduced to a strata of society performing functionary roles (or should that be perfunctory roles) as police, social "workers", schoolteachers, solicitors, accountants, university administrators and lecturers. Upward mobility will be come an increasingly less aspirational activity and more a preservational necessity for those maximizing the value of the professional qualifications they strove so hard to acquire in the first place. Indeed the process of delayering as a consequence of the technological destruction of jobs is likely to spell ruin for many in the professions. Or, should this vision be rejected as overly apocalyptic? Does history not show that new technology creates as many jobs as it destroys as a consequence of the process of creative destruction? According to Schumpeter, the "gale of creative destruction" describes the "process of industrial mutation that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one. This process of Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism." The paradoxical term subsequently gained popularity within neoliberal or free-market economics as a description of processes such as downsizing in order to increase the efficiency and dynamism of a company. The irony is therefore that process has become associated less with its creative and more with its destructive aspects.**

**The free market’s ceaseless churning results in lost jobs, ruined companies, and vanishing industries are inherent parts of the growth system. We must recognize however that from all this turmoil comes some economic good. Over time, societies that allow creative destruction grow more productive and richer; their citizens see the benefits of new and better products, shorter work weeks, better jobs, and higher living standards. E-mail, word processors, answering machines, and other modern office technology have cut the number of secretaries but raised the ranks of programmers. The birth of the internet spawned a need for hundreds of thousands of webmasters, an occupation that did not exist as recently as 1990. Herein lies the ultimate paradox of progress.**

**A society cannot reap the rewards of creative destruction however without accepting that some individuals might be worse off, not just in the short term, but perhaps forever. What analyses which stress the creative part of the process of creative destruction is the instability in the division of labour that the destructive part of the process of creative destruction has wrought bringing about deep changes in the culture of work. The combination of information technology in combination with the pressures of a deregulated and increasingly globalised marketplace in skills has made the prospect of a job for life nothing more than a historical memorary. It has destroyed the idea of a career or vocation on which the culture of work is founded. The reality is that we will all have to change jobs much more often. Such changes have had a deep and far reaching impact upon our culture particularly on the behaviour of the middle classes whose social identity upuntil recently has been defined by their jobs. As the middle classes are unable to define themselves in reference to any single occupation they have sought alternative means of self-definition including a robust defence of their lifestyle and culture. In an economy in which skills are more much more rapidly rendered obsolete our lives are becoming increasingly defined by the community in which we live rather than the job in which we work. Our sense of personal identity and self-esteem are coming to depend much more upon our contribution to the larger informal economy of family and community**

**There is emerging a “Culture of Discontentment” within the middle classes. The Culture of Contentment is a book by economistProfessor John Kenneth Galbraith*.* Galbraithdraws attention to the growth of a stultifying contentment in the Western industrial world, in particular the self-serving economic comfort achieved by the fortunate and politically dominant community contrasting this with the condition of a functional underclass (to do the stuff we won't), market worship, fear of high taxes, hatred of government intervention (except for bailouts and subsidies) and short-term thinking. For Galbraith the self-interested, short-term perspective of the well-off has shaped modern political and economic culture. Galbraith argues that the contented worry mostly about current conditions and their own immediate welfare, failing to consider future consequences of current policies. This short-sightedness, Galbraith conjectures, is likely to lead to one or more social problems.**

**For Galbraith the system of contentment used to be functional, when the lower classes had some hope of advancement into the upper classes. Now, Galbraith says, there is a functional underclass, a group of citizens that cannot expect to improve their condition. The contented upper class, in typical myopic fashion, does not realize the danger posed by such a permanent underclass with no hope for the future. Galbraith predicts social unrest as the discontented attempt to improve their situation. He offers what he calls three plausible possibilities that would bring about the end of the culture of contentment: widespread economic disaster, adverse military action that is associate with international misadventure, and eruption of an angry underclass. They are all predictions which have come true.**

**It is hardly surprising therefore that one of the manifestations of middle class discontent has been a form of radical right politics or right wing populism that rejects the existing political consensus and is anti-elitist. The elites are depicted as trampling upon the rights, values, and voice of the legitimate people.**

**A second manifestation of middle class discontent against the process of creative destruction of the machine age has been the rise of “middle class dissidence” with members of the middle classes rebelling over the withdrawal of former economic benefits in the form of things like libraries and children’s centres. They will do this on principle believing their long-established beliefs have been compromised and their privileges are being deliberately curtailed. The future isn’t dystopian merely a continuation of present trends however implausible their impact. Half the adult population already does volunteer with very little economic encouragement to do so not even the following of something which is merely the extension of their economic self-interest. So why are they donating their services on a voluntary basis? There is clearly an element of civic benevolance or altruism in all this. Many people derive satisfaction from helping other people. The second is self-satisfaction (or should that be self-actualization?) in the activity of helping others: the flood volunteer who enjoys the company of others, the food-kitchen cook who enjoys cooking, or anybody with a craft or skill they wants to pass it on to others? Often you can't help people better than by imparting your skills to them. Most people have more ability than money, and sharing their abilities, unlike sharing their money, doesn't deprive them of anything. They gain satisfaction and they lose nothing. The voluntarist spirit is vitally important in society as the state retreats and local government finances diminish severely.**

**The deep irony of the situation, however, is that self actualization requres a margin of economic security as Abram Maslow articulated through his need hierarchy thesis. Rifkin’s attempt to square the circle by proposing that tax allowances and benefits should be made available to participants taking an active role in community endeavours is a highly significant policy proposal. The Big Society however cannot simply rest upon civic benevolance – literally on the available time and financial resources of a small number of volunteers motivated for the most part by their shared passion and not a little sense of public obligation.**

**How can one reconcile engagement in firstly, radical right populist activity which is anti-status quo in nature with populist appeals to middle-class resentment via policies on opposition to immigration; membership of international organizations – in Europe the EU in particular; more lavish, support for the welfare state through more restrictive, domestic social spending; incomes policies; state ownership; reform of political institutions and electoral systems so they are more representative and less elitist in nature and imparting greater control over the press and media so that it represents the views of deliberately excluded, marginalised and silenced voices and anti-establishmentarianism which aims to deliberately disrupt and then break-up the existing networks of political influence and control. Secondly, a form of communitarian politics which is both authoritarian in nature and oriented in terms of the preservation of the status quo?**

**Communitarianism is a philosophy that emphasizes the connection between the individual and the community**. **Communitarianism should be understood, in the wider, as a collection of interactions, among a community of people in a given place (geographical location), or among a community who share an interest or who share a history. Communitarian philosophy is based upon the belief that a person's social identity and personality are largely molded by community relationships. In that sense** **Communitarianism is a conservative tradition, founded upon the sources of social cohesion in shared assump­tions deeply ingrained in everyday life: customs, prejudices, social habits. The danger is that during an economic recession defence of middle class social benefits and welfare privileges can tip over into defence of traditional forms of social life and reinventing national identity. The result is an incipient form of fascism. When middle class protest becomes movement politics the result is the kind of politics we currently witness in Greece and to a lesser degree in Spain, Portugal and Italy in Western Europe. Thankfully we are no near this level of social or economic breakdown in the U.K.**

**The problem identified by Professor Robert D. Putnam in his hugely influential book “Bowling Alone. The collapse and revival of American community”, and the essay that proceeded it, “Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community”, is that there has been a decline in what he calls Social Capital within U.S. society - the reduction in all the forms of in-person social intercourse. For Putnam “social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them”. Social capital, according to Putnam, is best, “embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations”. When community members trust one another, democracy flourishes. Those concerned with social capital have looked to the density of social networks that people are involved in; the extent to which they are engaged with others in informal, social activities; and their membership of groups and associations.**

**Putnam discusses ways in which U.S. citizens have disengaged from political involvement including decreased voter turnout, public meeting attendance, serving on committees and working with political parties. Putnam also cites Americans' growing distrust in their government.**

**In the book Putnam observed that nearly every form of civic organization has undergone drops in membership. The big worry is that in the U.S.there has been a significant decline in the active membership of associations (like PTAs, football teams and community groups) and an aggregate loss in membership and number of volunteers in many existing many traditional civic, social and fraternal organizations such as religious groups, labor unions together with volunteers with Boy Scouts and the Red Cross and fraternity organizations like Lions Clubs. To illustrate why the decline in Americans' membership in social organizations is problematic to democracy, Putnam uses bowling as an example. Although the number of people who bowl has increased in the last 20 years, the number of people who bowl in leagues has decreased. If people bowl alone, they do not participate in social interaction and civic discussions that might occur in a league environment.**

**The result is that social capital is weakened. This results in a decline in social capital and the inclinations that arise from social networks to do things for each other. According to Putnam and his followers, social capital is a key component to building and maintaining democracy.**

**Putnam demonstrated that on a range of indicators of civic engagement including voting, political participation, newspaper readership, and participation in local associations it appeared that social capital was in decline. Over the last three decades of the twentieth century there had been a fundamental shift in three factors.**

**Firstly, political and civic engagement. Voting, political knowledge, political trust, and grassroots political activism are all down. The declines are equally visible in non-political community life: membership and activity in all sorts of local clubs and civic and religious organizations have been falling at an accelerating pace. Secondly, informal social ties. Virtually all leisure activities that involve doing something with someone else are declining. Thirdly, tolerance and trust. Although we are more tolerant of one another than were previous generations, we trust one another less. There has been a growth of dishonesty and distrust, particularly of politicians.**

**Is the same happening in the U.K.? The hollowing out and inexorable withdrawal of local government has the very real potential to badly weaken political institutions and democracy. People are beginning to look to voluntary associations out of frustration with the perceived failures of local government and political parties. Public trust is also being inhibited by immigration and rising racial diversity within or bordering on adjacent communities. Whether we admit it or not citizens are far less trusting of others than members of more homogenous communities.**

**If the middle class in the U.K. prove unable to provide the vital social capital which underpin communitarian initiatives following the shrinking of the state and the replacement of some of its functions by voluntarist associations and groupings this will not only lead to a glaring gap in the delivery of highly valued services but also lead to further and increasing frustrations amongst those members of the middle class who are the principal consumers of those services. This is a recipe for the creation of an increasing political vaccuum which neither the Conservatives, nor the Labour Party, will find able to fill easily. If there is to be a New Politics in the U.K. it will be far ore localised and far more unpredictable.**

**If there is a model then it is a version of the Liberal Party Caucus Model of late 19th/early 20th Century Birmingham but where a Political Party becomes a function of the Caucuses which it is made up of rather than an electoral vehicle which utilizes Political Caucuses for the purpose of Mass Electioneering. Effectively what we are talking about here is the systemetization of political forms and relationships of long standing and incorporating the within a well organized institutional framework adapting them to the requireents of electoral politics. What we are talking about here is a new and different model of grass roots political organization.**

**Political parties in otherwords will be made up increasingly of disparate dissident middle class protestors, campaign organizations and action groups. In order to have electoral influence politicians will by and large emerge from this network of local collectives. Political Parties will become less the oligarchical vehicles, described by Ostrogorski, determining behaviour through organisational structure and much more factionalised, if they are not already so, with factions led by the leaders of local caucuses.The transmission mechanism for the delivery of mass political support will be the ability of the leaders of local factions to deliver benefits for the local community or at least to protect the local community so that its interests are protected. It will be far more of a zero-sum political game measured much more in terms of gains and losses rather than simply as representatives of political parties on temporary employment contracts renewed on a short-term basis by the electorate.**

**Putnam dubs the process of socializing with people who are like you as Bonding Social Capitaldenoting ties between people in similar situations, such as immediate family, close friends and neighbours. Bonding Social Capital, according to Putnam, is good for under-girding specific reciprocity and mobilizing solidarity. Bonding social capital constitutes a kind of sociological superglue.Putnam suggests that Bonding Social Capital may be inward looking and have a tendency to reinforce exclusive identities and homogeneous groups. Bonding social capital can also perpetuate sentiments of a certain group, allowing for the bonding of certain individuals together upon a common radical ideal. Bonding Social Capital bolsters our narrower selves but "Bonding" groups can become isolated and disenfranchised from the rest of society.**

**It is hardly surprising therefore that politics for the disenfranchised middle classes therefore is becoming more localised. This will be less the gospel of civic improvement through the promotion of civic virtue than it will be a gospel of civic decline prevention through the impediment and denunciation of public vice. The creation of Combined Authorities is likely to give further impetus to this process as what it will throw into stark relief the growing differentials in service provison and delivery between different political geographies. It’s not just that winners and losers from particular funding regimes will be revealed much more starkly but politicians will be held accountable for decisions which favour one area over another. If they are unable to justify their decisions on other than political grounds the outcome is likely to is increased public pressure for much more localised forms of government with powers and funding cascaded down to the lowest level. The result is likely to be increasingly fragmented government and decisionmaking at the layer below sub-regional combined authorities. The two processes of city regionalism and local subsidiaritization are likely to pull against each other. Metro Mayors are likely to exacerbate the tensions between the two levels of government because it will be impossible for them to arbitrate equitably between different geographies.**

**It is clear that there is already much lower confidence in local government, local leaders and the local news media. Political scientists have also identified lower political efficacy – that is, confidence in one's own influence. On other indices there is much more interest and knowledge about politics and more participation in protest marches and social reform groups. That is why there is higher political advocacy but far lower expectations that it will bring about a desirable result.**

**At a local level therefore social capital will become even more important. It will allow citizens to resolve collective problems more easily. People might be better off if they cooperate but this is very much dependent on each of them doing their fair share and more importantly actively participating in problem solving activities. Given that not everyone has the same resources or motivation to participate this is unlikely. What this eans is that the burden will fall increasingly on the disinherited middle classes. This is unlikely to make them any less disillusioned or more aspirational in their outlook.**

**Ged Mirfin**

[**ged.mirfin@gmail.com**](mailto:ged.mirfin@gmail.com)

**07841 729 146**

**Wednesday 08th June, 2016**