

# The Frustrated Working/Middle Class in the Developed Countries Real Causes and Needed Adjustments

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Thomas A. Burns PhD.

Klamath Falls, Oregon

In my essay, “Trump – Reasons for Nomination Success.....,” I identify the following factors as significant:

1) The frustrated, angry American working class has seen its expectations of participating in the American Dream wane or disappear in the last 45 years as a result of the negative effects of the world economy on their standard of living. Trump grabbed a hold of this anger and became a vehicle for that anger to be vented – against outsourcing, trade deals, job loss, wage stagnation, immigrants, terrorists, Muslims.

2) Trump took on the political elite, the establishment, the educated, the intellectuals, and he scoffed at them and prevailed. This process and its successful result was attractive for those who are not intellectually inclined and who feel themselves to be overlooked or misrepresented by the political elites.

3) Trump is an outsider in an electorate that is fed up with the failure of the establishment [politicians and their entourages at all levels] to get anything done – gridlock, and especially anything done to help the middle class. Trump is attractive to many in the frustrated working/middle class who just want to oust any political insider. So, establishment candidates were not favored by the extremists who dominated the voting. Trump benefited from being a flamboyant, total outsider, and many voters actually regarded his complete lack of political qualifications as a plus.

4) Trump claims to be a successful doer in a sea of “politically correct” talkers and policy wonks, and the discontented and down trodden, working class conservatives were drawn to someone who claimed to be a straight talking doer – “Hands on,” “Tell it like it is,” like them.

While these statements are identified as some of the factors that account for Trump's success in the 2016 Republican Presidential Primaries, the core concepts in this list apply much more broadly to the socio-economic condition and the political response of the working/middle class throughout much of the developed western world. In what follows I indicate what I see as the underlying causes and the solutions for this current situation – socially, economically, politically, and ecologically.

The developed western nations share in the general condition on the planet of human over population. It is highly questionable whether the resources on Earth are capable of supporting the current population at the current worldwide average standard of living. And most ecologists contend that it is impossible for the Earth to support the current western standard of living for all 7 billion people [soon to be 9 billion]. Global warming and the potential for pandemics magnify this numbers problem. Without being alarmist, there are credible commentators who are suggesting that the potential for the collapse of civilization as a whole is very real if humans, including the working/middle class in the developed countries, persist on the same denial, do-nothing track.

Since at least the time of western colonial expansionism, European countries have depended upon the resources and cheap labor of undeveloped countries to support their expanding economies and the increasing standard of living for their populations. In part, this exploitation was justified at the time in terms of the prevailing theories of cultural evolution paired to views that differentiated the fundamental competency among the different races. These views, conveniently, set European whites at the top of the heap and excused their exploitation of those less “advanced.” So, for at least three centuries western countries have been the beneficiaries of the privileged socio-economic position that they created for themselves.

Over time and with increasing specialization and industrialization in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the working/middle class of western countries has come to expect that their living standard will improve for each successive generation. This expectation is an integral part of the American Dream, and the same “dream” exists elsewhere in the developed western world.

Realization of this expectation has occurred until this last generation. In the last 60 years, as the prejudicial views that supported the colonial system have been discarded, undeveloped and under developed countries have begun demanding their turn at an improved standard of living. And especially over the last 40 years, the world economy has taken off and has been gradually providing and spreading this desired result.

In the modern world economy, the “dream” in the western world of a constantly improving standard of living is not sustainable as the economic benefits are going to improve the standard of living in the less developed countries. These countries are playing catch up, and when fairly considered, the developed countries are in debt to these peoples, who have been exploited for a long time.

Unfortunately, it is not just the effects of the world economy that have put economic pressure on the working/middle class. The Great Recession really put the squeeze on with significant asset and job losses. But, while the overall economies of western countries have largely rebounded from that event, the working/middle class has continued to languish – augmenting the frustration of this group. Job growth has not kept pace, and many economic experts attribute this situation to the effect of technological innovation. They assert what has been the prevailing view to about the year 2000 that innovation opens as many job doors as it closes no longer pertains. Instead, and particularly in developed countries, technological innovation – especially the computerization of so many tasks together with the application of adaptive artificial intelligence – now is closing more job doors than it opens. If this new assessment is correct, the working/middle class is suffering economically from the effects of both the world economy and technological innovation. And neither of these effects is temporary. This double whammy magnifies the problem for those invested in the “dream.” And, again, there is little awareness of this additional source of the diminished occupational situation that the working/middle class faces.

Lacking awareness of these combined causes of economic stagnation, the working/middle class experiences only growing disappointment, frustration and anger when their dream based expectations are not being met [building from 1980s to the present]. In this context, it is logical that the search begins for what the cause[s] might be.

Of course, it is always easier to blame the stagnant to declining economy of the working/middle class on others – the scapegoat targets. This is what is occurring throughout the developed world. And the populists like Trump arise in the political realm to satisfy this urge to project cause away from the hard reality of the situation.

This hard reality is that the economically flat condition of the working/middle class in the arena of developed countries is and will be the norm for the foreseeable future. We can not make the dream conditions come back, and it is useless to blame “others.” We need to be honest, identify and accept the real causes of this regrettable economic situation, and adjust to the new reality of how the world economy and technological innovation work to distribute economic benefits in a very different way from what we expected in the past.

It is not just the working/middle class in developed countries that need to adjust. There are at least two additional changes that can and should be made, and, importantly, these changes can alleviate the hit that the working/middle class is being required to accept.

First, the wealthy 5%ers in the western countries have to realize that the extent of the economic benefits that are flowing exclusively to them in their countries is unjust. The 5%ers will have to start sharing more of the benefits that they receive as the privileged few who have the capital resources to invest in the world economy. If these 5%ers do not recognize this responsibility, income and wealth inequality will continue to escalate to the point where full blown oligarchies will emerge. And oligarchy invites revolution.

Second, the WTO, and the various regional trade pacts that come under its umbrella, must revise the criteria that they use to relate economies across nations to include social, monetary, and ecological variables. It is unfair to consider only economic variables and allow the working/middle class in socially, monetarily, and ecologically responsible countries to suffer unjustly while the polluters, monetary manipulators, and civil rights oppressors are allowed to attract business to their low cost havens. Achieving true parity in the economic competition among nations for jobs and trade will help developed countries to retain good jobs and support their working/middle classes. And it will restrain corporations from playing musical chairs as they move every five years from one lowest cost nation to the next.

## Conclusion

Political movements in many of the developed countries are ignoring the real causes of the disgruntled working/middle class. Instead, they are projecting cause to secondary issues and sources and avoiding the hard work of confronting the real situation. The sooner we are honest about where we are and make the adjustments that we need to make, the sooner the tension and frustration will abate. We have to settle into a sustainable rather than an expanding economy model at all levels from families to countries. And, if we do this and if economic benefits are shared more equitably, the citizens of the developed world can remain relatively well off. It is time to take more pride in community and less in the material things we “adorn” ourselves with. We need to adjust our desires to come into line with our actual needs and to locate our security in our membership in our communities rather than in the height of the fences we build around our homes and the size of our personal bank accounts.

Edwards Deming, the father of the post WWII Japanese economic recovery, held that the total economic benefit difference between the CEO of a corporation and the worker on the factory floor should not exceed a factor of 10. Even allowing this figure to be revised to a 10 times greater multiple of 100, the situation in America is extreme where the difference is often a factor of between 1,000 and 10,000. The Scandinavian countries pretty much abide by the “revised” Deming standard, and their people are mostly happy with well-maintained housing and infrastructure facilities, free education and health care, minimal poverty, and relatively flourishing economies. This form of moderate socialism encourages individual identity and security to be vested in the community, and it is a good fit for the new reality of the working/middle class in modern developed countries in the world economy. These Scandinavian countries do have high progressive tax rates, but they still reward creativity and industry, and they still have their wealthy, just not the multi-billionaires of more conservatively oriented countries like the United States.

Identify real causes and real solutions, avoid scapegoating, identify actual needs rather than fanciful wants, share the wealth to reduce inequality, create a fairer playing field among nations in the world economy, focus more on community and less on individual materialism, allow reasonable individual/corporate reward for creativity and industry but require social responsibility, and vest security in communal identity and community support and not in excessive individual asset accumulation. These are the answers that I suggest for addressing the current frustration/anger of the working/middle class in the developed countries.

Yes, the above assessment is what these days passes for a liberal or progressive view. But, I am open to any real alternative that addresses the full array of variables. And as a professional of the cultural anthropological type, I am struck by the fundamental similarity of the view I present here and the “socialistic” conditions that prevail at the much smaller societal scale of human bands and tribes. What came to be the well balanced socio-economic-political-ecological worldview for aboriginal bands and tribes evolved to define human societal success for 99% of human history. Modern, complex, civilized society, which has much to offer in its own right but which is in its infancy, would do well to recover and implement the essentials of this “simpler,” more communal and egalitarian approach to living successfully. And the working/middle class in the developed world would find itself more respected and better served under this adjusted societal umbrella.