"Character"

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"Character" is invoked by the *bourgeois* media with inquisitorial reverence in US Presidential election campaigns as a means of problematising candidates. Distinctions are avidly drawn between "personality"—the psychological cards one is dealt—and "character"—how one plays them. A failing that derives from "personality" (which seems to be about fun and the id) can be overcome by "character" (which seems to be about repression and the ego/superego). In the 2000 elections, for example, George Bush Minor's character was valorized as distinct from the Republican norm, because of his putative compassion and bipartisan tendencies. He was not evaluated on the measurable materiality of his public service—spectacular educational underachievement and record rates of execution while Governor of Texas—or his recreational drug record, nepotistic affirmative-action entry to the Ivy League, and sordid business history. Conversely, Al Gore Minor's character was scrutinized in 2000 because of his fundraising activities on behalf of Democrats and putative tall tales about inventing the Internet, inspiring *Love Story*, and investigating the Love Canal. He was not evaluated on the measurable materiality of his public service—spectacular economic growth and record educational attainment under his Vice-Presidency. As of early May 2008, we have seen this media obsession with character played out over John McCain being a prisoner of war; Hillary Clinton collecting bouquets versus dodging bullets; and Barack Obama listening to a righteous critic of US imperialism. These activities are meant to tell us something about each person's capacity to implement sound public policy, along with whether or not they wear flag pins on their lapels.

Apart from the fact that the press is to the right of US public opinion**1** and is extremely nationalistic, what might explain such silliness? I suspect that the palaver about character is a grand metaphor for managing the differences and difficulties of language, history, race, gender, and class that color the nation's radical post-1970s project of redistributing wealth upwards.

The first great wave of immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century left the US 87 percent white/Euro-American, a proportion that remained static through the 1950s. But by 2007, the minority population included 44 million Latin@s, 40 million African Americans, 15 million

Asians, 4.5 million Native Americans, and a million Pacific Islanders. The foreign-born segment is double the proportion from 1970, half as many again as 1995, and back to Depression-era levels. Almost half the people living in Los Angeles and Miami were born beyond the border, and there was a net national increase of two and a half million arrivals without immigration documents between 2002 and 2006. Not surprisingly, private and public hybridity is increasingly the norm. Whereas in 1990, one in twenty-three US marriages crossed race and ethnicity, by 2005 the figure was one in fifteen, an increase of 65 percent. As for the labor force, in 1960 one in seventeen workers was born outside the United States, the majority from Europe. Today, the proportion is one in six, mostly from Latin America and Asia.**2**

At the same time as they confront these profound cultural changes, economic life for many US residents, both long-term and recent, is getting worse and worse. By contrast with European welfare systems, the capacity to exit poverty has diminished over three decades of neoliberalism and suburbanization, thanks to a gigantic clumping of wealth at the apex of the nation, atop a poor, unskilled, and unhealthy base. Forty-six million US residents are indigent (even the Bush Administration admits to 13.3 percent of the population living in poverty, the greatest proportion in the Global North); 52 million are functionally analphabetic; and 46 million lack health insurance, with an additional 36 million going without it at some point in the two years to 2003. One in six adults who *has* insurance experiences severe difficulties meeting medical expenses. Access to money and net worth are massively stratified by class, race, and gender. In 2003, black men earned 73 percent of the hourly wage rate for white people, and migrants are disproportionately represented amongst the poor, with wages averaging 75 cents for every dollar paid to Yanquis. Twenty years ago, neoclassical economists hailed the impact of market precepts over social democracy, because just 20 percent of the public's future income was predictable based on paternal income. By the 1990s, and two more decades of deregulation, that figure had doubled. Some suggest it now stands at 60 percent. In the first six years of his rule, Bush Minor presided over a 9 percent increase in the poverty rate, a 12 percent increase in people without heath insurance, and immobile family income. Minor himself has been forced to proclaim that “income inequality is real—it's been rising for more than 25 years.” In the two decades from 1979, the highest-paid 1 percent of the population doubled its share of national pre-tax income, to 18 percent. Incomes of the top 1 percent increased by 194 percent; the top 20 percent by 70 percent—and the bottom 20 percent by just 6.4 percent. In 1967, chief executive officers of corporations were paid 24 times the average wage of employees. Thirty years later, they received 300 times that amount. The Congressional Budget Office reports that across the late 1990s, the wealthiest 1 percent of US households had a greater combined income than the poorest 40 percent. In California, where I live, the economy is larger than that of all but a few sovereign-states around the world. So what? Working-class family income in the state has increased by just 4 percent since 1969, while its ruling-class equivalent has grown by 41 percent. Nationally, corporate profits are at their highest level in five decades, while wages and salaries have the lowest share of the national pie on record. Over Bush Minor's first term, profits rose by 60 percent, but wages by

just 10 percent. In 2004, after-tax profits for corporations grew to their highest proportion of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) since the Depression. In the eyes of *Fortune* magazine, corporations “deserve credit for their restraint,” because “[i]nstead of hiring recklessly, they found ways to produce a trim workforce.” The investment bank UBS avows that this is a “golden era of profitability.” The *Fortune 500* group of companies received US$785 billion of income in 2006, up 29 percent on 2005, and the biggest profits in the history of the index (Tully, 2007). Half the money made goes to a tenth of the population, even as tax burdens have shifted dramatically onto workers. In the three years from 2003, hourly wages (adjusted for inflation) declined, despite productivity increasing. Between 1999 and 2004, the bottom 90 percent of US households saw their income rise by 2 percent; for those “earning” over US$1 million annually, income grew by more than 87 percent. In 2005, real wages fell for all but the top 5 percent, while productivity rose by 3 percent and GDP by 3.2 percent. The Gini index saw inequality attain the same level as the Great Depression. Whereas there were 290,000 individual bankruptcies in 1980, 2005 saw more than two million. Over a similar period, mortgage foreclosures increased five times, and the personal savings rate became negative for the first time since the pit of the Depression.**3**

Put another way, the gap between what labor produces and what it reaps is greater than at any point in recorded history. This bizarre re-concentration of wealth in the hands of the *bourgeoisie* is unprecedented since the advent of working-class electoral franchises. No wonder Britain's *Economist* captioned a photo of the Queen of England greeting Bush Minor and his wife Laura, as “Liz, meet the royals.” We are back in what Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner bitingly satirized as *The Gilded Age*, the nineteenth-century heyday of capital when Andrew Carnegie coined the term “The Gospel of Wealth” to legitimize his race, class, and gender privilege.**4** No wonder Warren Buffet avowed in a 2003 letter to Berkshire investors that “[i]f class warfare is being waged in America, my class is clearly winning.”**5** Even some unrepentant fans of capitalism complain that “[m]any Americans are one lost job and one medical emergency away from bankruptcy,” while James Glassman, one of the reactionary American Enterprise Institute's pop thinkers, acknowledges that “[w]e've redistributed income about as much as we can.” Almost half the population does not see hard work as the means to a better life, because employment is less secure, and fluctuation in household income more intense, than people were brought up to remember. In sum, if we juxtapose aggregate prosperity against personal insecurity, the economy is doing *well* by ruling-class indices, but *poorly* by working-class ones, in terms of both inequality and instability.**6**

Each major political party rejects serious policy changes that would address these social transformations. Putative fans of *laissez-faire* obsess over slashing social services, but abjure a truly open labor market that would welcome workers of the world. Putative champio ns of the poor obsess over the mythic middle class and do nothing to restrain either corporate welfare or wealth redistribution upwards. In place of such real policy questions, the focus of campaigners

and pundits alike is on trivial shibboleths such as “hope,” “change,” and “experience.” We are forced to endure homilies without end: of children, church, and hearth. “Character” continues to be a displaced and displacing shifter in the semantic mess of US politics. In place of such clichés, we need a politics that addresses the profound cultural and economic transformations of our era. Character be damned.

Notes

1. Thanks to Barb Biesecker for helpful comments. Justin Lewis, *Constructing Public Opinion* (New York: Columbia University Press), 2001.

2. United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2004: Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World*, 2004; Pew Hispanic Center, *From 200 Million to 300 Million: The Numbers Behind Population Growth*, 2006; Irene Bloemraad, *Becoming a Citizen: Incorporating Immigrants and Refugees in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Abraham T. Mosisa, “The Role of Foreign-Born Workers in the US Economy,” *Monthly Labor Review*, May 2002: 3-14; Marta Tienda, “Demography and the Social Contract,” *Demography* 39, no. 4 (2002): 587-616; Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration*, 3rd ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2003); US Census Bureau News, “Minority Population Tops 100 Million,” 17 May 2007; Pew Hispanic Center, *Statistical Portrait of the Foreign-Born Population in the United States, 2006*, 2008; “Open Up,” *Economist*, 5 January 2008: 3-5.

3. Theda Skocpol, “The Narrowing of Civic Life,” *American Prospect*, June 2004: A5-A7; Bruce H. Webster Jr. and Alemayehu Bishaw, *Income, Earnings, and Poverty Data from the 2005 American Community Survey*, US Census Bureau, American Community Survey Reports, ACS-02, 2006; Susan Sered Starr and Rushika Fernandopulle, *Uninsured in America: Life & Death in the Land of Opportunity*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Michael D. Yates, “A Statistical Portrait of the U.S. Working Class,” *Monthly Review* 56, no. 11 (2005): 12-31; Will Hutton, *A Declaration of Interdependence: Why America Should Join the World* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003); Gary Younge, “In the US, Class War Still Means Just One Thing: The Rich Attacking the Poor,” *Guardian*, 3 September 2007; Minor quoted in Isabel Sawhill and John E. Morton, *Economic Mobility: Is the American Dream Alive and Well?*, Economic Mobility Project of The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2007; Jared Bernstein, *All Together Now: Common Sense for a Fair Economy* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2006); Jacob S. Hacker, *The Great Risk Shift: The Assault on American Jobs, Families, Health Care, and Retirement and How You Can Fight Back* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Shawn Tully, “A Profit Gusher of Epic Proportions,” *Fortune*, 15 April 2007.

4. Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner, *The Gilded Age: A Tale of To-Day* (Hartford, CT: American Publishing, 1874).

5. “Ever Higher Society, Ever Harder to Ascend,” *Economist*, 1 January 2005: 22-24; Norton Garfinkle, *The American Dream vs the Gospel of Wealth: The Fight for a Productive Middle-Class Economy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006).

6. Tully, *loc. cit.*; Stephen S. Cohen and J. Bradford DeLong, “Shaken and Stirred,” *Atlantic Monthly*, January/February 2005: 112-17; Kevin G. Hall, “The Rich are Getting Much Richer, Much Faster than Everyone Else,” *McClatchy Newspapers*, 3 November 2006.