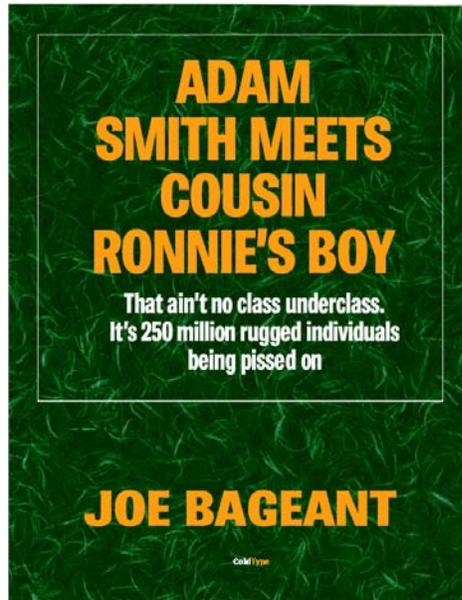


**ADAM
SMITH MEETS
COUSIN
RONNIE'S BOY**

**That ain't no class underclass.
It's 250 million rugged individuals
being pissed on**

JOE BAGEANT

ColdType



Joe Bageant is the author of a forthcoming book, **Deer Hunting With Jesus: Dispatches from America's Class War** from Random House Crown on working class America, to be released on April 24, 2007..

A complete archive of his online work, along with the thoughts of many working class Americans on the subject of class may be found at ww.joebageant.com.

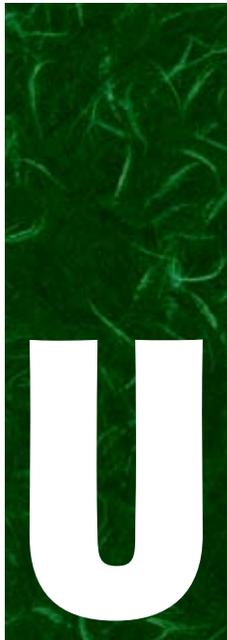
Feel free to contact him at joebageant@joebageant.com

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Unbelievable as it seems today, there was a time when such people as doctors and lawyers did not necessarily live apart from the dirt front yards and Saturday night domestic scraps of the laboring class. The doctor who delivered me in 1946, the most prosperous in town by all accounts, lived just a few short blocks from the rundown Kent Street “white trash and nigger street” my parents called home. His fee for dragging my screaming ass into the light was an exorbitant \$100 – and for a caesarian birth at that – because the US Army was writing the check. The good doctor lived close enough that my old man could walk a five-dollar payment over to his house on payday, close enough that I could see his rooftop from my upstairs bedroom window. As a kid, knowing such an educated, prosperous man lived so near was somehow comforting. And at least it gave an example of what one might possibly aspire to, given the education.

Not that the working people then generally aspired to an education. In those days most folks could make a living without being very educated, or even very bright. A high school education was adequate for the jobs available in East Coast agriculture and manufacturing based town like Winchester. As for the professions, our medical and legal needs were met by a handful of physicians and semi-savory lawyers ground out by the University of Virginia, “men of tradition” who made much of graduating from “Mistah Jeffah-sun’s University,” then went about their business of real estate theft and keeping the bubbas out of jail. As for teachers, nearby

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Shepherdstown State Teachers College provided the class in between the bubbas (“Yore Honor I never meant to kill that guy with my truck, I was only trying to take out his mailbox ...”) and the country club lawyers. But overall, life required little education. Nobody was yet writing computer programs to put multibillion dollar cybernetic nuclear dildos in outer space. It was just plain American life in a plain American town. I know I’m sounding like one more cranky fart lamenting the good old days, but hang on, it takes me a few licks to get good and wound up.

While we of the sweating classes were straining the limits of our educations to read the new fangled TV Guide, the smarter bugs were swarming elsewhere to build colonies of their own. People more relentless in the pursuit of actual intelligence – the cognitive elite, as they have been called – were aggregating in universities, scientific laboratories, publishing and financial institutions ... Bright folks who understandably enjoyed each other’s company much more than beer drinking and arm wrestling contests with the rest of us down South or out in the lonelier reaches of Midwest. Predictably enough, they married their own kind – everyone being smarter, better educated and having a reasonably attractive number of remaining teeth – and raising similarly bright children in neighborhoods of other like couples. From that point all it took was social, political and professional networking, and a diligent sex life of course, for them to become a class apart from the majority.

In fact, they considered themselves the majority (and still do.) When they looked around in their communities, they saw themselves. They saw people who had read a good book recently, people who understood the ramifications of compound interest, office politics and cheese fondue too close to bedtime. There was not a bus driver or carpet layer or cop in sight. America to them was Scarsdale or Brookline or a variation thereof, where everyone’s job consisted of fiddling around with some type of paperwork or other in as serious a manner as possible, pursuits such as engineering, academia, advertising or market research, or perhaps physics and engineering, developing resource gobbling “modern miracles” of the suburban lifestyle such as central air, and more currently, ominous ones such RFID chips for our driving licenses as an intermediate step on their way into our necks. But these were not real jobs mind you, not the kind that made you sweat, but the fun kind the rest of us saw on television with pretty, wise cracking secretaries who seemed to regulate traffic in riotously enjoyable workplaces. The kind of workplace Dick Van Dyke had. And they sure looked like they were getting smarter. And richer too. I remember my family’s

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amazement when Laura bought a \$40 outfit: "A clothes horse is what that woman is!" declared my old man. But I'm sure he thought to himself: "Nice legs though." These people, who invariably lived Up North somewhere, even played tennis and golf and ate things like chicken a la king, whatever the hell that was. They were definitely "holding the good end of the stick."

Here on the other end of the stick, places such as Winchester, Virginia and the Stockyards neighborhood of Cleveland and true working class environs large and small, the opposite was happening. Hopelessly stuck in the pre-war industrial working class tradition, somehow, we were becoming dumber and more given to consumer spectacle such as stockcar racing. Arm wrestling and even Saturday night fights could no longer hold our pitifully debased attention, in which television doubtlessly played some part. So speed and stupidity were added to the mix, begetting NASCAR.

There were exceptions among the workers. Some blue collar people managed to get advanced degrees and flee into more upscale realms, where they presumably mowed their lawns in Madras shorts and anticipated their 6pm highballs. But most of us stayed here, or moved to similar places following employment, and continued to breed our own sturdy-if-dull stock in an atmosphere where the values of labor, actual hard physical work, prevailed, mainly because we had a lifetime of it before us.

One is forced to contemplate what effect, if any, generations of flight of the brightest from the blue collar America had on the vast working class gene pool. It may even help explain the popularity of such things as snowmobiles, Garth Brooks and hot chicken wings. Or the inexplicable willingness of people to wear foam rubber cheese wedges on their heads and display threatening tribal sports slogans on exposed beer bellies in freezing weather.

Whatever the case, today we are unarguably looking at the uncurried jowl of a white underclass. One far, far larger than is acknowledged by our media, which are obsessed with the Latino and black portion of the underclass, mainly because color coding the class struggle enables even the ditziest airhead anchor person or insulated urban liberal to connect the dots. And let's face it, street gang killings make for better TV ratings than Cousin Ronnie cooking a weenie on his bug zapper for amusement. For those interested, cooking time is measured in seconds, and NEVER try a chicken breast. Still, as my sainted father used to say, "Ignernt is ignernt. Some peo-

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ple just never amount to nothing and he's one of'em!" While most of the underclass may not be chortling in the glow of a bug zapper, enough ignerence prevails to sustain the heartland's delirious happiness with the Wal-Martization of America. An underclass exists and has become the biggest class. Don't be fooled by the Discount Dockers and the polo shirts.

You can't smell the rabble from the putting green

The potential genetic implications of class-flight-as-selection are something liberals refuse to even consider, though I cannot imagine why, given their enjoyment of moral and intellectual superiority over any kind of majority. But when it comes to the possibility of people, especially black and brown people, being possibly born dumb, their minds snap shut. Being born dumb is a special category reserved mostly for Southerners (not that Southerners don't make every effort to prove them true). Such liberal denial is likely the result of now-calcified liberal dogma developed over many years, and created in a time when society was better mixed and the divide was not so great nor so firmly established.

Once we subscribe to the idea that all people are born geniuses, the solution becomes easy: Affirmative action and more computers in the classroom. I want to go on record here as not being against affirmative action, despite that it has blessed us with the likes of Condee Rice and Clarence Thomas, thus proving that some people probably shouldn't be educated no matter what color they are. But it's the computers and technology in white underbelly classrooms which has not panned out as expected. Nevertheless, cognitive elite Democrats, who themselves have no problem at all setting up a spreadsheet or a digital video conferencing program, believe ever more computerization of the classroom will somehow make underclass kids prefer Immanuel Kant to cruising the mall and smoking dope. A laptop on every desk simply enables them to cut and paste written homework assignments faster so they can get to the mall sooner. At best, under the current system, it prepares them for a life of data entry in the Empire's electronic plantations. The bottom line is that they can't read. Feel free to blame anyone you want here, except the free market system's extreme preference for dim-witted consumers. Most people blame the teachers, who don't have much say in any of this, but what the hell, they are close to the crime and easy to hit.

Ultimately these kids will join the millions of adults who cannot read because: 1 –

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They do not have the necessary basic skills; 2 – it's not entertaining enough to compete with the electronic stimulation they are constantly subjected to; 3 – they cannot envision any possible advantage in reading, the advantages stemming from extended involvement; never having practiced such, the benefits are understandably beyond their comprehension; and 4 – their peers do not read as a serious matter, thereby reinforcing the original premise that it's obviously not worth the time and effort. On underclass planet, it's a reasonable assumption.

Nevertheless, members of the educated American overclass, liberal and conservative, assume we are all equally capable of learning new ways of doing things, and need to learn exactly those sorts of things they perform daily in the service of the empire that rewards them for managing its educational, financial and technical affairs. "All are created equal," runs the mantra. Every last one of them knows it's not true. Not in the society we have created. But it's vital that everyone keep up the pretense that Cousin Ronnie's flabby 220-pound 16-year-old, who recently speculated on "how they manage to grow spaghetti so straight," has an equal chance in society with the kid in private school purposefully taking his SATs three times in order to get the highest score possible. Equal or not, somebody has to muck out the Imperial stables and fight the corpocracy's wars. It won't be that kid with the huge bookbag lugging his laptop around.

Some part of it is not pretense. Some of it is the ignorance of educated elites, who will take umbrage at the term and swear up and down, WE ARE NOT ELITES DAMMIT! Ensnared out there in suburban cupcake land, or perhaps Manhattan, they seldom if ever encounter this class they inwardly loathe but claim to care about. Someone needs to tell them that loathing is not only legal, hell it's OK with the loathed. We don't much like them either. It's the pretense that galls we the ignernt. Which is one reason so many of us mutt people see the highly educated as arrogant phonies. This is by no means entirely true of course. Educated phonies are heartfelt and genuine by their own peer standards. But still, phoniness and arrogance, the two biggest sins by working class lights, are the only terms we have in which to conceive of and counter the inherent insult posed by the overclass pretense of equality. We ain't all equal, and a hundred more years of affirmative action will continue to liberate only the brightest among us, who will then promptly move into the American overclass, if they are lucky, and join in the unacknowledged loathing. Maybe they'll become the producer of *My Name is Earl*, therein being highly paid for expressing

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their loathing by painting the underclass as untroubled petty criminal philosophers, living happily and hornily one step out of the jailhouse and one step ahead of the bill collectors. Louis XIV staged the same sort of illusions of a naïve, ribald, content underclass – milkmaids, bold sexual bumpkin cowherds, and such – for his amusement. Lacking the mass hypnotic capabilities of television however, his overclass fantasies never got outside his gardens.

Conservatives, on the other hand, entertain no illusions about computers in the schools or anything else. Instead, they stick by the bootstrap myth, and free marketism as the course to personal and national success. We have over 200 years of evidence strongly suggesting that America's favorite theological premise, Adam Smith's "unseen hand," like the gravity defying bootstrap theory, is a sorry thing indeed for any sane person to hang his ass on, given that both are endorsed chiefly by the smuggest, the greediest and richest among us. Most working folks would simply prefer an even start – a fair break for everyone without depending on bootstraps or unseen hand theology crafted by a man who offered that the self-interested pursuit of money somehow made men more altruistic. Despite modern apologists' assertions to the contrary, Smith also believed the unseen hand was actually that of God, "whose wisdom works itself through competition for wealth," and that "providence rightly divided the earth among a few lordly masters." He disliked government except when it was clubbing down "the vice ridden and slothful poor." Property is government, he said, and "Till there be property there can be no government, the very end of which is to secure wealth, and to defend the rich from the poor," thereby writing the Republican Party platform a full 89 years before the party was even born. Even allowing for the times, the guy was a bloodless prick. But then, so was Ronald Reagan, yet we are forced to suffer a similar deification of his addled free market cowboyisms. Feel free to hold your head and scream.

Us? An overclass? You're nuts!

By now you have asked, "How can the largest class be an underclass?" Simple. The few can indeed fuck the many (Shock and horror! Who would have guessed?) even here in the shadow of Lady Liberty, who lifts her lamp beside the Golden Arches, beckoning cheap labor, Arab oil and Chinese loan sharks willing to participate in the global Ponzi scheme known as the Federal Reserve Bank. Again, it's the pretense, the

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utter refusal to call a spade a spade, that allows the overclass to deny its advantage. But if the bright cognitive elites are standing on the throats of an unacknowledged majority while setting up a college fund for their little Cameron, then they are an overclass. If they go off to the office to write the deep psychographic marketing campaigns that make Ronnie and Tracy believe they need to buy a Dell computer on overstretched credit cards for the educational benefit of their kids, despite evidence to the contrary (Oh boy, now I can print out pictures from rotten.com!) then they are an overclass. And if they are financial managers of the extractive economic schemes that bleed ole Cousin Ronnie to death by a thousand tiny cuts hidden in his utility bill, and if the same bright elites own portfolios of non-union industries that pit Cousin Ronnie against Malaysian villagers living on 1000 calories a day, just to keep his job soldering worthless gewgaws on an assembly line, then they are an overclass. And if they send him off to Iraq (all the while swearing they are dead against the Iraq War, but what the hell, it's just redneck Ronnie, and his sort actually likes that kind of thing, being dumb crackers and all) to defend their investments in Halliburton, or IBM or ConAgra, then they are an overclass. It isn't numbers that define an underclass. It's which end of the screwjob you are on. It's not about money. Some of the underclass, such as coal miners, earn surprising wages. It's about inherited advantage and never having to dodge IEDs in Iraq but selling insurance policies to those who do.

The widening affluence gap aggravates an already existent class system, though neither class is willing to acknowledge it. The national mythology holds that we are a "nation of rugged individualism," the implication being that there are no classes, no masses, just 300 million rugged freedom loving Daniel Boone/Marlboro Man types completely in charge of their own destinies. And on rare occasions when class is acknowledged by working Americans, they express the simplistic consumer state induced view that class has entirely to do with money, and say they are all "middle class" in a country that is pretty much divided into only two classes. An astonishing number of families in the \$30,000-per-household bracket believe they are in the top 10%, according to some surveys.

Regardless of media-manufactured underclass hallucinations as to class, only one class is paying half a week's wages or more for a single doctor visit to a member of the other class. Only one class is counting on Social Security for its entire retirement

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income (at least 64% of Americans and rising, by last count.) Yeah, yeah, more than half of Americans are invested in the stock market through 401Ks etc. we are told. But only at a few thousand dollars per household. When it comes to the much-ballyhooed stock market, 10 % of Americans split the national hog between themselves, tossing the ears to the other 90%. At this point bona fide pinkos may be excused from reading the next paragraph. You've heard it a million times, but I just can't help myself, comrade.

Cometh the old familiar numbers so oft heard, but worth repeating in hope that their meaning may by mysterious courses known only to God, take spark in the football besotted minds of my fellow underclass mutts: The richest 10 percent of families own a little over 85% of all outstanding stocks, 87% of all financial securities, and 90% of all business assets. If you throw in assets such as homes, checking and savings accounts, CDs and money funds, and pension accounts, then 20% of Americans own 83% of all wealth. The bottom 20% have no assets, no net worth at all. Put simply, the top 20% eat the cake, the middle 60% eat the crumbs and the bottom 20% get to lick the plates while they do everyone else's dishes.

Most true liberals know these numbers by heart. So do conservatives, although conservatives these days seem to take perverse glee in them. They usually explain them in terms such as those of Michael Medford, who cherry picks Will and Ariel Durant's pop history books for gems like: "Concentration of wealth is a natural result of concentration of ability and special attributes [one immediately thinks of George Bush and Paris Hilton] ... The rate of concentration varies with the degree of economic freedom, democracy and liberty ..."

I would not argue that it may derive from a concentration of abilities due to the aggregation of the brights into a clear-cut self-serving elite who make the rules, and author bills (such as the one passed by the House this very morning which would raise the estate tax exemption for couples up to ten million dollars.) They're bright, they're tight and out of sight. It's the "freedom and democracy" part that stinks up the conservative argument, as if Republican logic were not already rancid enough. It's to be expected though. The bullshit misuse of the terms *freedom* and *democracy* has ever ripened the hubris of the rich and near rich of the business class. But for the hell of it, we might ask exactly what abilities and "special attributes" are being concentrated in America these days by the gilded classes of government, business and

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media? Paris Hilton's are clear, attractive even. Jack Abramoff's are obvious as hell. George Bush's talents are genuinely astronomical, in the same sense as those astonishingly energetic gamma rays from outer space – they are unobservable.

In any case, Adam Smith lived in a time when money was described in terms of its effect on human beings, breathing entities who encountered one another on the streets even as chamber pots of both the rich and the poor were being emptied in the gutters in plain sight of all. He lived in what cyberheads now call “meatspace,” a place where most of the things that governed life were out in the open and fairly obvious. Money simply meant gold. Now money consists of digits coursing through the telecommunications satellites of a global financial system that manages teeming humanity for its own perpetuation, hollowing out the common classes in a new financialized feudalism, although preserving a smaller carriage class necessary to administrate and preserve the system for a handful of unseen global lords in New York, Zurich and Beijing. Calculating bastard that Smith was, I doubt he would much like what we have today.

Lest I sound unnecessarily mean spirited here, I must give the America overclass its due. Say what you want about the overclass, but godammit, they love us to death. We may not get a kiss when they rape us, but we seem to have the undying affection of perps. Liberal or conservative, the overclass professes belief in and affection for “the people.” Then they do everything humanly possible to assure their families will never be exposed to them. Not that they know any of the underclass personally, but they know they do not want to be around them and definitely don't want them anywhere near their kids. Visions of venereal warts and crystal meth, I suppose. Yet, about the worst that could actually happen, should we all be forced to live in the same condominium, is that all parties would be mutually bored to death.

Affection aside, the screwjob continues to escalate. Now you'd think the screwwees would rebel. Hell, illiterate Indians in Chiapas are doing it and getting results – finally. It all comes down to awareness and the way the awareness of the classes are purposefully cultivated and manipulated by the cognitive elites who run media and education. Take health care for example. Were there cultivation of underclass awareness of the health care industry, every doctor in America would be strung up by the nuts. Spell out how Citibank actually makes its money and no banker in America would dare leave his house. So far though, bread and circuses (produced by, guess

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who?) seem enough. That, plus a steady deluge of cheap electronic crap. Having sprung from a tool and artifact producing labor culture, the underclass LOVES gizmos, however crass. Then too, we cannot discount the value of the overclass' lush affection for the people.

So what is to be done to establish at least some semblance of an equitable society in which all or most members operate on a reasonably common plane, rather than compete by claw and tooth? One in which mutual human respect dominates because long denied classism is exposed, then, over time, dissolved? To put it more practically, what is to be done about kids such as Cousin Ronnie's?

Liberals, bless their hearts, do know the answer to that one. But it will cost more than ten Iraq wars, so they never will demand it. Most of what needs to be done needs to be done before first grade and over generations. Things like universal health care and purposeful husbandry of security and love in the homes where children are raised, because these things are actually allowed to flourish in the home. Flourish because mom and dad are not clawing their lives away in the Darwinian Survival Working Class Reality Show. Hillary Clinton pays lip service to it. So does the Black Caucus. But nobody has the ass to demand an American makeover that will cost, at the very minimum, maybe ten trillion dollars over at least two or three generations. And besides, the money is no longer there and never will be again. When empires die they die broke.

Meanwhile, there is the overclass itself to maintain. Honestly speaking, most of them work harder these days than ever before and few of them underestimate their own replaceability as they watch the early stages of the hollowing out of their own class. But somebody has to keep on paying lest they, god forbid, be forced to drink boxed wine. And money must be extracted from the system to pay for their kids' education, and quickly too, before the housing bubble bursts, evaporating all that digital fiat dollar equity everyone knows is not really there. Nothing for the members of the financial overclass to do but design new hidden charges into Ronnie's credit card debt, which will indirectly pay for their kids' enrollment at the university's academic summer camp so that he can compete and remain in the overclass in which he grew up. No wonder Ronnie's kid smacks the snot out of "the rich kid" after school. Somewhere down inside he grasps the truth of it all.

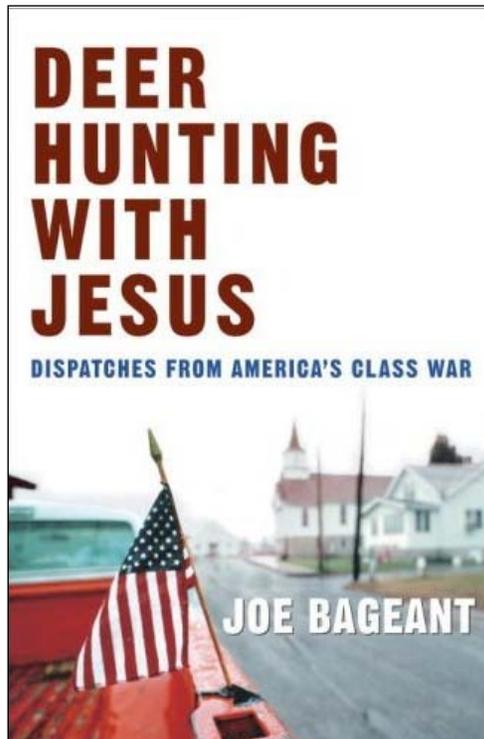
This morning I watched an upscale mom and her two kids get out of the Nissan

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Maxima at the Smithsonian Naturalist Center next door to the office complex where I work. As the big tinted plate glass door flashed in the sun, then swallowed them into its serene quiet realm of mysterious bones and flies sleeping off eternity in amber, I noticed that both kids were armed with notebooks and digital cameras for their “unique hands-on museum experience.” I couldn’t help but think of Ronnie’s kid and his straight spaghetti theory of botany. It’s a laughable thing. Even Ronnie laughed at it. But it was the kind of laugh meant to hide family shame.

Acknowledged or not, it is also our national shame, this denial of the existence of class. Ultimately, it is denial of the one truth held common by every enlightened civilization existent:

We are our brother’s keeper.



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"Many friends and readers will notice that the title has changed to *Deer Hunting With Jesus: Dispatches From America's Class War*. The original title was *Drink, Pray, Fight, Fuck: Dispatches From America's Class War*. Contrary to what one might suspect, the name change had not as much to do with the word "fuck" as it did the fact that a book was recently released with a very similar title. Then too, when I started putting the title "Drink, Pray, Fight, Fuck" on the web, it kicked off some merchandising by small scale entrepreneurs of ball caps, tee-shirts, etc. bearing the four words. Which is no problem with me -- I like to see the little guy printing tee-shirts make a buck" – **JOE BAGEANT**

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