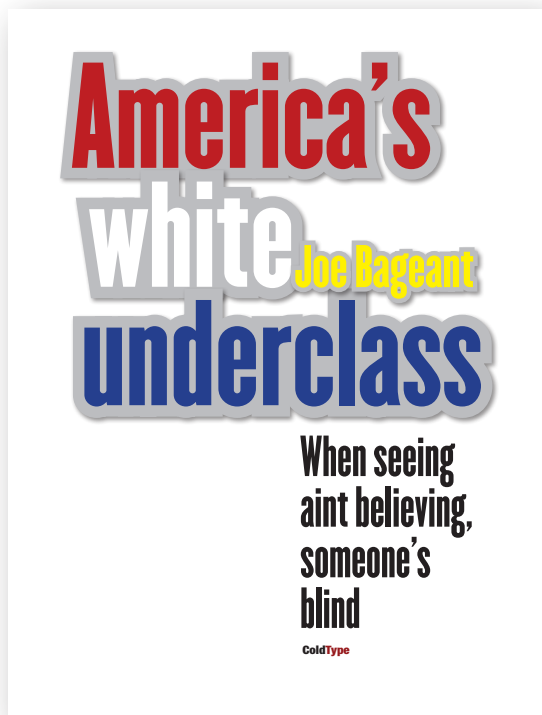


**America's**  
**white** Joe Bageant  
**underclass**

**When seeing  
aint believing,  
someone's  
blind**

**ColdType**



## THE AUTHOR

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# America's white underclass

“**W**hite underclass” is a term I’ve used often in my writing, and most American readers seem to know what I mean. They’ve got eyes and live in the same nation I do. But in a sudden burst of journalistic responsibility, I decided that if I am going to throw around the word underclass, then I should offer some clearer, perhaps more scientific definition.

So I started writing this with a pile of published research papers before me. Now they are in the trash can by my side. Looking down on them, I can see the gobble-dygook titles, the stuff of which government policy and political platforms are made. They run together in slurry of the language of our society’s commissars: Concerning-Prevalence-Growth-and-Dynamics-Concentrated Urban Poverty Areas- block-level vs. tract-level segregation-800-tract-tables-urban abstracts-Defining-and-Measuring-the-Underclass-from-The Journal of Policy Analysis and Management-statistical-summary-of...

“

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What I find is that nobody in social science seems to agree on the term, or, being firmly placed in the true white middle class themselves, even agree if such a thing as a white underclass exists. You can’t smell the rabble from the putting green. To others, some blacks for example, the term white underclass is an oxymoron, or maybe yet another new white social code word to be deciphered. I can’t blame them for their wariness. You have to be an American to even get these code words. For instance, for all practical purposes and to most Americans, regardless of race, the term “middle class” means “white.” Plain and simple. We all know that, even members of the “black middle class.”

Middle class also has implications of people’s occupations, usually white collar occupations, though it also includes some of the ever thinning ranks of blue-collar workers. But this comes down to describing human beings solely in terms of their jobs in the capitalist labor marketplace, and assumptions about income

and whether one takes their daily shower before they go to work or after they come home. By that definition, anyone of working age who doesn't have a steady job of the right type, for whatever reason, is in some sort of "economic underclass." In other words, they are the people that middle class folks feel should damned well be working, if they are over age 18 and have a pulse. ("If I gotta do time in this meaningless workhouse of a nation, you do too!") This underclass includes any people of color seen on the street at midday during the week, single mothers, and paraplegics too, now that the middle class is paying taxes for handicap parking spaces and wheelchair access to the public shitters.

Another way we define underclass is as "losers." People who cannot talk, think, or act like middle class professional and managerial workers, people who cannot even be posers. There is absolutely no excuse for these people. We've got television 24/7 to show'em how to behave. They could learn to act like the blue collar workers we see on the endless reruns of *The King of Queens* (an American sitcom about a parcel service delivery truck driver.). They could at least be funny and amiable fer godz sake.

From reading the studies, I can see that social scientists dislike plural nouns, and thus shun the word losers. So they call this the "educational underclass." Either way, it comes down to folks too wooly and uncurried for office water cooler society. Nobody is denying that they all should have jobs, of course, just nowhere near the water cooler.

Yes, eight to eighty, crippled blind or crazy, Americans generally agree that every man or woman in America should have a full-time job, except those women who manage to snag a wealthy man. They are exempt, as are the middle class commis-



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sariat's own beer guzzling spawn keeping the pizza delivery and the all-night video arcade businesses thriving in college towns across the republic.

Then you've got your moral underclass. Like the rest of us, they come in two major varieties -- male and female. Females who don't bother to get married before they have babies (the non-technical term is "welfare sluts"), and men who have things more serious on their national police state blotters than a parking ticket. "Non-mainstreamers," in socio-demographic speak. Many of these are men who say, "Screw it, I ain't gonna even bother to work my ass off and be treated like dirt for six bucks an hour. I'd rather shoot pool." Me too.

The unwed mothers come in two varieties. There are those who decide they want children, but are choosy about the husband that traditionally comes with the deal. And there are those who are so young and naive due to cultural circumstance and environment they do not know what this country does to, not for, single mothers. They often find themselves working at least part time (workfare), yet permanently institutionalized into poverty by our social services industry, instead of being lifted out of it. More than 45 percent of U.S. single mothers are poor, compared five percent in Sweden and Finland, where no stigma is attached and substantial public resources are applied to child health and development. But research done in Europe shows that even if U.S. women had a zero rate of single motherhood, poverty among American women would still be higher than in European and other socially advanced nations.

Armchair sociologist that I am, I have a theory about this: Millions of American women are in poverty because they are paid poverty wages. I could be wrong, I often am, but there seems to be a connec-

## AMERICA'S WHITE UNDERCLASS

tion between poverty and money. I started developing this theory when I was in a Melbourne, Australia hotel and learned from a single mother hotel housekeeper there that she made \$19 an hour, had government assisted childcare and was going to college at night toward becoming a medical technician. Hmm Over here we tell single mothers, "Get a six dollar an hour job or get married bitch! Workfare, baby, workfare." Then too, contrary to the American middle class belief system, out-of-wedlock babies are increasing at all levels of white American society. Even more contrary to popularly held notions, as many of these children turn out to be as well adjusted people as do children of the middle class. But for damned sure poorer in most cases.

And finally we have simple snottiness as a line of underclass demarcation -- one's manner of physical gesture or accent. Believe me from personal experience, a Southern accent in America is no ticket to the top. But even with a Southern accent, if you talk like a college grad, don't wear bib overalls or gang banger gear, and appear to know where South America is on a map, Americans will deem you middle class. Actually, if you smile a lot, and sound like any sort of white customer service type, it will fly. It's called having the appropriate social and cultural skill set. Yeah, right, appropriate to be hired as a telemarketer so you can piss people off by interrupting their dinner hour.

But even if you gather aluminum cans from dumpsters for a living, with effort, you can "pass" like light skinned black folks used to do in this country. As testimony to this, I, who am a high school dropout with a Southern accent, have successfully managed entire magazine publishing groups for a living. (The secret is balls). If I'd been black or Hispanic though,



You can indeed be black or queer, but with the properly buffed patina of white middle class mojo you can make it to the top, or near to the top of the heap (in America, proximity to the top of our cultural garbage heap is everything. All the rest of us are mere consumer refuse, as the Michael Jackson Morbidity Festival demonstrated

I'd have been distributing the urinal cakes in the rest rooms at night. So yes, there is a slight edge to whiteness, though not nearly as much as minorities assume. Still, you gotta make the most of that little edge.

In the end, race, gender or sexual preference are just moving parts of the class machine, with middle class perceptions setting the standard. You can indeed be black or queer, but with the properly buffed patina of white middle class mojo you can make it to the top, or near to the top of the heap (in America, proximity to the top of our cultural garbage heap is everything. All the rest of us are mere consumer refuse, as the Michael Jackson Morbidity Festival demonstrated. You can even be celebrated as an icon of diversity if you act white and middle class enough. Obama is Harvard white guy enough, Ellen DeGeneres is going strong ten years after coming out, gay Congressman Barney Franks still gets reelected. They've all got white middle class mojo. Al Sharpton on the other hand, has cootie mojo. (Tip for Al: They need golf cart drivers at the Congressional Country Club. A year of that and you'd know all you need to know about the white mojo shtick. Because you can watch Obama play golf there).

When it comes to the underclass, there is no arguing that some people are members because they are so damned uneducated they cannot count their toes or read well enough to fill out a job app, the causes of which are too deep and tangled to go into at the moment. Others just don't care to do the smiling grammatically correct wimp assed customer service zombie thing. They prefer swinging a bigger hammer than that -- doing real work, like America used to do. And doing it without kissing ass, which is why they are called the "permanently jobless." As sociologist Christopher Jencks points out, "There

is no absolute standard dictating what people need to know in order to get along in society. There is however, an absolute rule that you get along better if you know what the elite knows than if you do not.” He also cautions that “the term underclass combines so many different meanings that social scientists must use it with extreme care.”

Which is fine. But I’m no social scientist. If in my travels and experience in American life I see that tens of millions of Americans being screwed silly by a handful of chiselers at the top, or if I see one percent of Americans earning as much annually as the bottom 45 percent of Americans, then that 45 percent is an underclass. When I see a 70-year-old man on his second pacemaker limping through Wal-mart as a “greeter” so he can pay at least something on last winter’s heating bill this month, then he is part of an underclass. When I see the humiliated single mom waitress tugging downward on the ridiculously short red plastic skirt she must wear at the Hooter’s type joint so her crotch won’t show, she’s part of an underclass of humiliated and socially oppressed people. Screw the hair-splitting about who qualifies as underclass and what color they are. Just fix it. Or reap the consequences.

We’re finally starting to hear a little discussion about the white underclass in this country. Mainly because so many middle class folks are terrified of falling into it. Frankly, I hope they do. We’ve got room for them. All the lousy, humiliating jobs have not yet been outsourced. The Devil still has plenty for them to do down here.

Call all of this anecdotal evidence. You won’t be the first. I was on a National Public Radio show last year with a couple of political consultants, demographers as I remember. One, a lady, was obviously part of the Democratic political syndicate, the



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other was part of the Republican political mob. The Democratic expert said dismissively of my remarks, “Well! Some people here seem to believe anecdotal evidence is relevant.” Meaning me. I held my tongue. But what I wanted to say was this:

Sister, most of us live anecdotal lives in an anecdotal world. We survive by our wits and observations, some casual, others vital to our sustenance. That plus daily experience, be it good bad or ugly as the ass end of a razorback hog. And what we see happening to us and others around us is what we know as life, the on-the-ground stuff we must deal with or be dealt out of the game. There’s no time for rigorous scientific analysis. Nor need. We can see the guy next door who’s drinking himself to death because, “I never did have a good job, just heavy labor, but now I’m all busted up, got no insurance and no job and it looks like I’ll never have another one and I’ve got four more years to go before Social Security.” He doesn’t need scientific proof. He doesn’t need another job either. He needs a cold beer, a soft armchair, some Tylenol PM and a modest guarantee of security for the rest of his life. Freedom from fear and toil and illness.

And furthermore, Sister, we cannot see much evidence that other, more elite people’s scientific analysis of our lives has ever benefited us much. When you’re fucked, you know it. You don’t need scientific verification.

I wanted to say that on the radio. But I didn’t. The little white guy mojo voice in my head told me not to. So I just laughed good naturedly. Like any other good American.

May God forgive me.

*With ironic gratitude to Christopher Jencks of the Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research at Northwestern University*

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