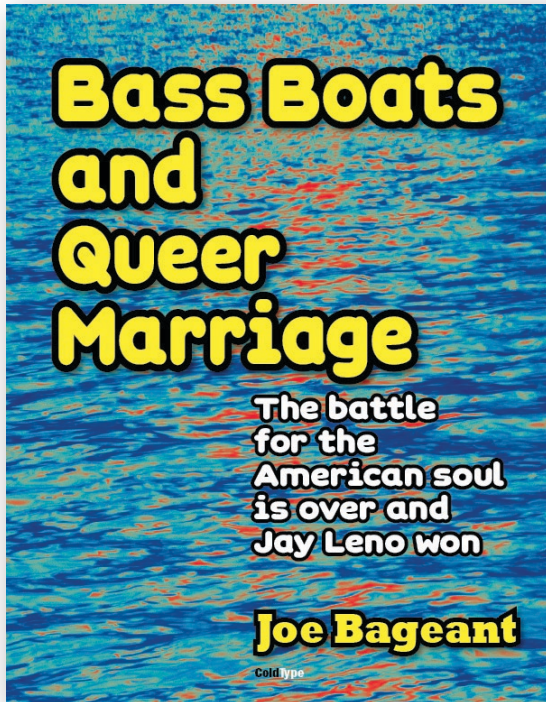


Bass Boats and Queer Marriage

**The battle
for the
American soul
is over and
Jay Leno won**

Joe Bageant



THE AUTHOR

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Bass Boats and Queer Marriage

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Holy smoking Jesus, America is losing its middle class! “We’re taxing the middle class out of existence,” charge the conservatives. “The middle class is being hollowed out,” wail the liberals, pouring forth great mock turtle tears (although one wonders how such a vacuum, as middle class life in America could be further hollowed).

For both political camps, high dud-geon over “the vanishing middle class” is supposed to represent some sort of “new populism.” Not that the populace disagrees with them, mainly because the populace, if we are referring to the genuine America populace, hasn’t the slightest notion of the definition of populism. But the word sounds like it has to do with popularity, the highest virtue in the American mind, and can even lead to the celestial heights called celebrity. So what the hell, they’re willing to run with it.

In any case, much overwrought political theater is being dedicated to the subject of the middle class’s demise. If demise is the right word for losing its ability to engorge on commodities at obscene levels.

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A month or so ago I watched news footage of some fat guy being interviewed inside his three car garage of his \$300,000 cardboard house. The poor fellow was about to lose his bass boat, and maybe his home, too. From the looks of it, I’d say the bass boat was a Ranger X520. Now these babies start at \$45K, not to mention the \$30K for the four wheel drive usually seen pulling. Looked like it was sitting on a 20-plus foot Hurricane boat trailer, another \$4K or \$5K. My wife, who was watching the show with me, turned and said, “What class is this man supposed to be in?”

“I don’t know, they say middle class.” “Hmmm. Whatever it is, we’ve never been members.”

George Jones and Tammy Wynette said it all when they sang:

*No we’re not the jet set
We’re the old Chevrolet set
Our steak and martinis
Is draft beer with weenies*

Indeed, we are witnessing the death of the American lifestyle, bass boats and all. Unless of course, the Chinese banksters will keep on loaning us enough dough for one more fix, one more snort of crank to

keep the American lifestyle from going into withdrawal. Yeah, sure.

That does not keep both political parties from assuring us that “the great American middle class lifestyle is not negotiable,” then proceeding to negotiate the hell out of it.

God save the middle class! Whatever the middle class is, they have the assurances of every administration of its eternal preservation.

When asked exactly what constitutes being middle class, most typical Americans, which is to say working class Americans, talk in terms of income. Better educated and more erudite Americans mumble some vague litany about college and home ownership, etc., then attach an annual income number about twice as high as the average working mook’s. Neither of them ever comes close to a real definition. Nevertheless some 300 million Americans fancy themselves as middle class, chiefly because they: (a) own microwaves and a car with plastic bumpers; and (b) live in perpetual hock to MasterCard and Visa. Debt, stress and insecurity being the only observable characteristics of middle class America, they rally round those things in a show of class solidarity. “Hell no! Our pointless stressful lifestyle is NOT NEGOTIABLE! No goddamned socialist is gonna take away my constitutional right to medical bankruptcy. God bless the middle class!”

In essence, preservation of the American middle class is an assertion we are entitled to waste as least as much of the earth’s limited vital resources as their fathers and grandfathers did, preferably more. Political assurances of the sanctity of the middle class come down to promising that the six percent of the world’s population called Americans may continue to rip through 36 percent of the



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earth’s resources in its endless pursuit of obesity and carcinogenic intake. Not to mention taking everybody else out with us in the process through ecocide.

Nobody but an unmitigated psychopath would even make such a case, much less hawk it to the American people as being in their best interests. In their best interests to wipe out our dwindling planetary sustenance and to piss off the rest of the world enough that a significant number are willing to strap on explosives and buy a plane ticket for the States.

Unfortunately, the psychopaths are in charge. And they are charging over the rest of us like rutting bull elephants on Jimson weed. There doesn’t seem to be enough Thorazine on earth to take ‘em down. Consequently, their delusions have escalated to the point where believe they are exempt from planetary catastrophe. Assumedly this is due to their wealth and authority. Which in America are the same thing. However, you can never rule out that they may believe they are gods. Which comes down to being bullet proof to the afflictions of common mortals, the shit that makes ordinary life miserable and in many cases, snuffs it right out – lifetime debt, lack of health insurance or the chain smoking that so often comes with such stress chew through your health.

Let’s get real here, folks. Do you think Barack Obama or Rahm Emanuel worry about ever being homeless or having a credit card company haul them into court and garnish their wages? Or that they will develop lung disease from living in or near Camden, New Jersey? Of course not. Because, in fact, they really are exempt.

But when the planet’s condition, which, despite Republican claims otherwise, affects human beings, gets bad

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enough (and that appears to be sometime next week) their children may not be exempt. This of course, matters not a twit to a psycho. Especially if the psycho is rich, powerful, and saluted by media networks wherever he/she goes, and has not the faintest clue that he/she is a psycho to begin with.

The “or she” refers to Nancy Pelosi, Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin or any of the other power crazed warped out bitches who’ve slit enough throats to make made it into that gladiatorial arena inside the beltway. White males by no means have a franchise on naked political blood lust.

America’s constellation of psychos occupying the real estate up there on Mount Olympus includes just about everybody with a few hundred million or a billion bucks behind their hallucinations – from Oprah Winfrey, who, despite her own delusions, is not responsible for the nation’s moral, spiritual and financial well being, to Ben Bernanke, who actually holds a great deal of responsibility for the latter, but is convinced the world begins and ends along the length of Wall Street and consists entirely of derivatives brokers and the money printing crew at the Fed.

Such people presume their anointment to rule, if they are willing to play the game hard enough. And why shouldn’t they? They’ve experienced nothing but success through gaming the system and the rest of humanity – dicking the proles in the ear and running the nation and its institutions for their own benefit as elites.

Needless to say, they do not see things that way. To them it’s just the natural order of the universe. Raw personal power has a way of justifying itself as having been inevitable. Over my 35 years as a journalist, I have met and/or interviewed many, and I have met only a couple who



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showed real humility or attributed their national influence, or fame and social status and national influence to simple good fortune. Paul Newman was one. Kurt Vonnegut was another. When you are pissing down on the world from the balcony of your suite on the 44th floor, it’s hard to be humble, or concerned about the pissant swarm on the streets below. Even if you are not the kind of psycho our political system attracts and legitimizes, it isn’t easy.

At the same time, for a person like, say, Hillary Clinton or Joe Lieberman, there is always the worry that one of your vengeful peers may have moved in on the 45th floor and is waiting on their balcony for you to come out. Even for princes and ladies of the royal court, our system holds its fears and frights.

Ah, the system! Hallowed legacy of Jefferson and the port besotted founding elites. Our system, owing to the magic of its “checks and balances,” holds all possible solutions. So we must “work within the system” for any desired change. Be an active factor within the rules.

These rules are sanctioned by big shots, a big shot being defined as anyone whose bullshit is beyond questioning because he has made his fortune by bullshitting millions of typical Americans. Which is not difficult because as both Goering and Hitler pointed out, then proved, if the bullshit is huge enough, normal people will not believe that anyone would have the balls to tell such a lie, and accept it as the truth. And so The Big Lie is sold.

Next, the big political players, Republican and Democrat, determine some minute variations on the most current lies being sold. These slight variations are proclaimed as profound differences between the parties, because both parties’ role on the political stage is to act as

opponents. So cosmetic differences are netted out and then savagely contested in the theater state as life or death issues for the American people. That's how we got such massive public agitation and incitation regarding just how hundreds of billions more will continue to be delivered to health insurance companies. Yes, dear, they are unnecessary. But they are players. They are sitting at the national poker table because they have the muscle get into the most important backroom game in town – the one where the people's wealth is divvied up before the people ever see it.

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If you have watched any old mob movies, you know that any racket needs a front. In America the front is called democracy. Like the term populism, the people have no idea what democracy really is, but has something to do with the free market capitalism that issues forth such things as bass boats. And it certainly it has to do with every citizen having a small piece in the determination of national matters. Clearly untrue as that is, nevertheless it is one helluva a sales point, revered by the proles and not to be fucked with if you are to maintain the illusion of the consent of the people among the people. The front.

So the people are given such narrow electoral choices as not to even be real choices, but packaged in somewhat different wrappers – such as skin color. Or if a president and Congress can see a clear path in rolling over the dimwits out there, the dimwits are given no choice at all. Such as going to war against Iraq.

Still, there are always those citizens who will not settle for simply voting based on what they have been fed. They detect the odor of swill, but cannot quite name the ingredients. So they feel they



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must test democracy, exercise their uncontrolled “freedom of choice,” as fully as possible through activism.

So they turn to one of the two controlling political parties to put them to work. After all, anyone who doesn't is considered a kook. Right?

In a marvelous bit of Mobius strip logic, the activists end up working toward the success of some minute difference in national policy that serves the purposes of the established power cartels. The main difference is in the degree of profitability for the corporate state. More profit or a helluva lot more profit.

In the end the activists find themselves working for the election of someone who, by the very nature of being selected as a candidate by the system, has been vetted by his or her own elite peers as one who will – ta ta! – preserve the system from change.

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Nevertheless, the activists have their issues by god and by golly, and cling to them every step of the way. The issues come prepackaged to fit their established belief systems. No great trick really, given that the corporate people at the top own all the media and information distribution and make the first cut. And there's something for everybody's political stocking. When the issue is not wrapped up in religion or blood-in-the-face patriotism by corporate managed conservative elves, it is packaged as a moral or social justice issue for liberals.

And so, charged up on emotion, activist proponents of both minute differences attack one another at every turn, both sides convinced they are fighting the good fight in one or another “important issue of our times.” Gay marriage, gun laws, abortion, animal rights, you name it. It's small stuff in the big picture. None

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of these mean anything in the monotonic gray life under the emerging corporate totalist state. So you both have the same plumbing and are married. So what? What is that worth if you spend your life chained to a headset in one of the corporate gulags' cubicles punching out digits for the overlords so you can keep your health insurance? Terrified of losing your job or insurance, or being forced to join the Army and go to Iraq to put bread on the table?

Freedom is freedom, and you have it across the board or you do not. It does not come piecemeal and is not defined by any single freedom. Human freedom is holistic – full spectrum. It covers everything because, well, it's freedom.

In a free country none of the above pseudo issues would be being debated. Bottom line on freedom: You have the right to fuck any other adult you want to by mutual consent. You can marry anyone you choose regardless of sex or race or religion. Even a member of the US Senate if you have the stomach for it. Your body is your own to do with as you see fit, not governable by state laws or for profitable abuse by pharmaceutical corporations or the medical industry.

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The 24/7 deluge of falsely manufactured issues has done more than detract from comprehension of the real and life or death issues at hand. Over a couple of generations, it has rendered us incapable of ever grasping the real ones and what is at stake. The ability to do so dies out, as each subsequent generation is conditioned by the reality (or state induced non-reality), it comes up in.

Important as they look and feel because we have lived our entire lives amid these so-called national debates, they have nothing to do with our freedom.



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Freedom itself was always, and will always be The Issue. The only issue. Everything else follows. The Big Lie is that it does not.

Lies for the sake of generating emotion enough to destroy reason have been a mainstay of American politics from the beginning. Jefferson spread lies about Madison. Madison returned the favor. The lies served the purposes of two ambitious individuals.

Now they serve the purposes only of those forces who can afford to buy politicians. Nor are they the simple sort of lies told by fallible human beings such as Jefferson or Madison, but rather the lies of massive faceless, deathless entities subject to no man, only the accounting regimen of postindustrial capitalism. They have not become pathogenic; they are pathogenic by nature and from the outset to society. To the world too, given what our nation is doing and willing to further do not just to ourselves, but also to the world. It is increasingly said, and not unreasonably, that the United States has reached the same level as those malevolencies” that poisoned Nazi Germany. You may not believe folks who say that. The Germans did not believe it was happening to them either.

Can we change? Or is it too late? Most days I feel it is too late.

Well hold on now, Jake! Didn't we just see change? Didn't we just throw out the sickest regime in US political history? Remember all those people and all that conviction and activism that delivered us from heaven only knows what Cheney and Sparky Bush might have done? How can you say conviction and activism, especially liberal activism, is useless?"

No arguing that activism is considered absolute proof of conviction by most liberal political lights. Activism is the unar-

guable stigmata, the nail hole in the palm as proof. Yessir, when it comes to putting your money where your mouth is, when it comes to “put up or shut up,” when it comes to “lead, follow or get out of the way,” political activism answers any and all charges of faintness of heart. It requires tremendous amounts of time and energy and has only one small flaw.

It doesn't work. Not for liberals. Tea partiers armed with baseball bats and megaphones get results. But liberal activism is sort of like sending a rabbit to sell wolves on the benefits of veganism. Liberal activism requires convincing the pissed off and scared citizenry that your guy is different, better, more kind and possessive of the higher moral ground than his opponent, and will govern accordingly. This is hard stuff to peddle in a nation that has, for quite understandable reasons, grown meaner, more distrustful and more ideological over the past 30 years, not to mention demonstrably more stupid.

But hell, even some liberals are becoming mean ideologues these days. Many want a candidate who will break some GOP knees on their behalf. I cannot say I blame them. Unfortunately, the Westchester Country Club, which runs the Democratic Party as a hobby, will never stand for it.

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I never subscribe to email or organizational mailings. Well, almost never – I get truthout.com and Patrice Greanville's Cyrano. I'm not really an Internet denizen or a liberal blog freak. So I notice when there is a sudden unsolicited surge in my personal account with aim.com (yeah, I know it's a piece of AOL shit, but now I'm stuck with it).

Anyway, there has been a surge lately in heated liberal calls to action, mostly



The saddest part is that you could put every sincere liberal in America on the streets knocking on doors and I dare say damned little, if anything, would ever change

pleas for money. Nearly all of them are from some tentacle of the Democratic Party.

With Obama safely in office, three years to go before next election, and no sign of George W. Bush, not even an empty malt liquor can, it seems a bit early for raising cries demanding more liberal activism. It that's what they are, the calls for “a renewed effort at changing American hearts and minds” toward “social justice” and “a more humane human society” [sic]. In typical Dem fashion, you seldom get specifics, just noble words like “justice” and stuff nobody can disagree with, like being humane to humans. I reckon though, that by next election enough disappointed Obama-ites will have recovered from their current depression to resupply the Dems with ground troops. The party will have plenty of sincere liberals out on the streets again. Partly because Obama will be spearheading the effort, and partly because the Republicans have an endless supply of embalmed brain dead geezers, any of whom could be slipped into a good suit and a red white and blue tie and dollied onstage. Not much legwork involved for Goppers, really. They just yell ‘TEAAAAA PARTY!’ and throngs of trained simians come running. The Dems have no equivalent liberal mating call, except possibly “Free Argentinean Malbec.”

The saddest part is that you could put every sincere liberal in America on the streets knocking on doors and I dare say damned little, if anything, would ever change (although there is rumor of possibly limiting handgun owners to 60 weapons per person and 100,000 rounds of ammo. Most of my family in Virginia is dead agin it!).

About the most that can happen is what happened the last time liberals effectively mobilized in force: We will re-

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elect Barack Obama, yet another pure product of the system, yet another candidate who has deeply interiorized the processes, values and folly of a spent and exhausted hyper capitalist state.

OK, so I will drop the “exhausted hyper capitalist state” stuff, though it’s true. No matter whom we elect, he is not going to beat the odds against eco-collapse and resource depletion.

Throw in the current human overpopulation – which our free market capitalists assure us are, oh joy of joys, an “expanding customer base” – and you have a guaranteed disastrous outcome for, oh, let’s see now, human civilization for openers. Maybe even our species, if Big Energy and da military industrul complex has any say so in it. Which they do. You do not need a PhD in physics to figure out that a geometrically expanding hydrocarbon based civilization fueling itself at unsustainable levels of consumption, waste and toxicity on a finite resource is bound to hit the wall at some point. “Earth to Congress, we have a problem. My wife just sprouted an extra row of teeth; my heating bill is \$6,000 a month and my 12-year-old weighs in at 250 pounds and is stuck in a booth at the food court.”

I am no political genius, which I prove regularly by writing these essays. But I dare say leftish activist energies could be better spent than by selling the latest political greaseball to one’s neighbors and/or perfect strangers willing to answer the door. One option would be to expend that effort in destroying the genuine common enemy of the people, all the people: Capitalism and its brutal commoditization of our very lives and breath. Which would make one a socialist.

True, socialism has not a chance in hell in the USA. So there is no use in even discussing our little problem of thug



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capitalism and rogue nation warfare in that context. Forget that democratic socialism by its very nature (along with a few buckets of hot tar and thumbscrews judiciously applied on Wall Street) is the solution to the most brutal material aspects of our degenerative capitalist disease, now nearing its full-blown outcome. If you haven’t noticed, the rich and the mean have prevailed. Only a fool would believe that having prevailed, they are going to mellow out, become kinder and more compassionate.

However, if there is a God in heaven, or even of there ain’t, then the traditional cruelty of the unleashed rich could work in the people’s favor for a change. Even by the monkeys and typewriters rule, at least some portion of “the people” must eventually wise up.

There are hopeful signs that a significant number of Americans are sick of watching the cash laden cargo planes pass overhead on their way to gated CEO compounds in Zurich and Dubai. And they have a gnawing suspicion that somehow in the big picture, somewhere backstage, something or someone has been relentlessly working to fuck them at every turn.

Not that most Americans can see the big picture. They were blinded at birth, so as not to view the monstrous system that has taken on a life of its own. One that rules their lives through the small elite class it created and governs. Blame it on water fluoridation, lousy education or degraded breeding stock, but not one in a hundred Americans can grasp that monolithic ideo-economic systems can become intelligent entities of their own sort (although capitalist state indoctrination has conditioned Americans to readily accept that Soviet Communism did just that).

Nurtured on the national mythology of freedom and American individualism, we cannot imagine anything larger than the citizenry itself affecting the nation's direction. We find no contradiction in 300 million totally unique, ruggedly individual Americans, a people blessed with free choice in life, swarming the same mall stores coast to coast – and living under the same hard edged capitalist philosophy and ever tightening laws. Obviously they all made exactly the same choices as to their destinies – to live their lives as debt ridden shoppers and television addicts. I admit though, I cannot say for sure. They may have all taken a vote at some convention behind my back.

Given such belief in the individual, Americans tend to believe that some individual or group of individuals elsewhere is in control of the state of the union (though apparently not in Washington, where nobody seems in charge of anything, so near as we can tell). Therefore, some individual or group of them can be blamed for their increasingly bleak situation. And by that same logic, some other individual or individuals can set things right.

Now of course there are a few assumptions in this postulation:

- That the magic fix candidate can raise a few hundred million campaign dollars to get onto the game.
- Run the gauntlet of a stacked electoral college.
- Tap dance through gerrymandered voting districts.



The fact that it does not work worth a damn and that the system is as crooked as a dog's hind leg does not interfere with our reverence and obedience to it. Because the alternative, socialism, as we have been so indoctrinated to believe, is "too terrible to contemplate"

- Pole vault over black box voting fraud.

- Circumvent nine glory whores on the Supreme Court who will throw up their skirts for whichever party bought them their robes.

Despite their mounting insecurity and fears, that is what most of the American people still believe is the best of all possible political systems now and forever more. They believe it enough to bomb other people into accepting its graces and benefits.

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By now you have figured out there never was theme or thesis to this screed. So let's put it out of its misery and bring it on home. Besides, who wants to contemplate anything on a good Tuesday night when Sarah Palin is gonna shake it on the Fox Network, not to mention the Conan vs Leno title fight for the hearts and minds of the nation.

Later.

Postscript: It is all well and good for me to sit here at a safe distance and criticize the folly of my native country. But Mexicanos in my working class neighborhood in Ajijic are burning candles and offering prayers for their Haitian brothers. We should all do the same.

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