Nostalgia for the 30-Year 'Century of the Common Man'

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Abstract

Jack Metzgar grew up in a steelworking family during the best 30 years in U.S. history for common people, what the French call the Glorious 30 (*trente glorieuses*) from 1945 to 1975. It was a time of extraordinary economic prosperity that was widely shared. Average real incomes rose faster than ever before or since, with the bottom income quintiles advancing faster and stronger than the middle or top. This unprecedented shared prosperity did not lead to complacency and mindless consumerism, as was feared at the time, but rather to a golden age of collective action and a string of liberatory movements beginning with the black civil rights struggle and followed by the beginnings of the women's and gay liberation movements, among many others. The following is an excerpt from an auto-ethnography Jack is writing about his experience of working-class and professional middle-class cultures from those times to today.

Keywords

Working class, nostalgia, steel workers

'The lost U.S. paradise is associated with the country's beginnings: there is nostalgia for the era of the Boston Tea Party, not for Trente Glorieuses and a heyday of state intervention to curb the excesses of capitalism'.

Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, p. 350

'The future ain't what it used to be'.

Yogi Berra[6]

In 1982 I turned 39 and was making $15,000 a year, having recently given up a somewhat higher-paying administrative job to take my first full-time teaching position. My brother-in-law Albert Mikula had just been laid off as a machinist at U.S. Steel in Johnstown, where he had been making $26,000. (In today's money that would be the difference between $37,000 and $65,000.)

I remember these amounts because at a meeting of progressive academics in Chicago, I made reference to the prospects of Albert and his family if the Steelworkers union accepted the kind of wage concessions the steel companies were asking for in the Fall of 1982. I was taken aback when Joe Persky, an economist who was skeptical that

[6] Berra was an American professional baseball player.

our anti-concessions stance was correct given the potential danger of mills closing, made a crack that Albert 'probably makes more than you do as a professor.' I responded too concretely at first – revealing Albert's wage and my salary, and pointing out that Albert and Judie's sister, Peg, had six kids, while Judie and I had only one. I then went off in self-righteous Lefty mode about Albert's and other steelworkers' working conditions-- the alternating heat and cold, the hard physical labor standing all day, the crazy swing shifts, the tight supervision. By comparison, my job hardly seemed like real work at all, and then I got the summers off. It was only fair that Albert should be paid more and be able to retire earlier than people like me and Joe.

Joe responded that fairness had nothing to do with it, arguing that steelworkers made more than we did because they were productive labor, whereas we were living off the economic surplus they produced – plus they had a union and we didn't. Joe's point was not that academics should necessarily make more than steelworkers, but that their incomes were large enough to allow steelworkers to take a financial haircut if it meant saving jobs and entire mills. In retrospect, Joe was probably more right than I was, but my view of fairness was popular then among our small group of academics – and was not outrageously out of whack with general professional middle-class opinion at the time. Today, of course, it would seem outrageous in middle-class settings for a factory worker to be paid more than a professor, as higher education is now a key measure of every kind of worth, including financial.

Concrete moments like this stick in memory for a reason. One of the reasons this one stuck, I think, is that it occurred at a turning point in both my and Albert's life, and part of the remembrance is about what we did not know then, but do know now. I didn't know that I was at the beginning of the best decade of my life, followed by some other pretty good ones. Or that Albert was at the beginning of his worst decade followed by some more bad ones. I also didn't know the Glorious 30 had ended seven years earlier – or indeed, that it had been glorious.

Nostalgia

My nostalgia for the Glorious 30 and the brief glimpse of a 'century of the common man' it provided is not based on how great those three decades felt at the time nor even on how much was accomplished during those 30 years (which was a lot). Unlike my parents' generation, who often reminded us youngsters of how good things were in comparison to the preceding years of Depression and War, my appreciation for 1945-75 is founded on what has happened since – an initially dramatic but then steady erosion of working-class living standards and working conditions that by now has seeped into the mainstream of the professional middle class. What's more, working-class culture is not as strong and proud, nor as self-assured, as it once was, and middle-class culture is more crabby and tense, more self-centered and less willing to acknowledge and explore more than its 'one right way.'

'Nostalgia' is a word that often has no real meaning, but just a strongly negative connotation. Like 'liberal,' 'petty-bourgeois' or 'mediocre,' it simply evokes something you don't want to be, and is often used as an efficient way to dismiss someone else's point of view without having to explain why. Insofar as it has meaning, the negative aspect of nostalgia is appropriately defined as a sentimental

yearning for an irretrievable past, and this is thought to be backward-looking in a way that is unproductive for moving forward. I admit to some yearning for key elements of this past, but I don't think any of those elements are irretrievable, and I argue that my yearning is rational, not sentimental – or, at least, not only sentimental.

I have not directly experienced what Geoff Bright (2016) calls the 'social haunting' of those who lost their livelihoods and lived through the deterioration or complete disappearance of their communities and ways of life. Sometimes nostalgia is not a self-indulgent, gauzy remembrance of good old days, but a powerful, often overpowering process of grieving for what has been palpably lost. I am a witness to that grieving, not a participant in it. As such I have witnessed stages of grief that often end up with what I'd call a restorative nostalgia – a spontaneous sorting out of what could be and what cannot be retrieved, often expressed at the end of a reverie as 'at least we ought to be able to . . .'

Golden Age

This paper is the beginning of that kind of sorting out.[7] It is a precursor to an interpretive case that the thirty years after World War II were a Golden Age not only for the American working class, but for wage labor as a whole. The main evidence, as has been thoroughly documented by others, is economic. But there was a lot of gold in the cultural transformations that occurred during that time. In addition to the string of liberatory movements, there was an elaboration of ancient yearnings in working-class life for a stable and autonomous space with more free time and money for what you will. There was also an emerging cultural hegemony of middle-class professionalism that was expansively exploratory for a time. Two strong and vital class cultures flowered, with a complicated commerce between them, allowing both independent elaboration and a wonderful (if sometimes painful) mix of conflict and cooperation. The two cultures had deeper historical and personal roots than anybody at the time suspected, as we all made an effort to cast off various pasts. These cultures have endured for longer, and more strongly, than the economic transformations. But the loss of a growing economic base – the jettisoning of working-class prospects and possibilities as wages and conditions have been systematically attacked and successfully eroded over the past 40 years – has weakened middle-class professionalism too, economically a little (so far), culturally quite a lot, I think.

In the first decade of the 21st Century, when both Albert and I retired, I was making about $67,000 and he was still somewhere around $25,000 – a spread in 2016 dollars between $81,000 and about $31,000, and a complete and utter reversal of where we had been in mid-life. Both the U.S. Steel and Bethlehem Steel mills in Johnstown were long gone, though pieces of them were still in operation by various smaller companies. Albert went back to work, after three years of unemployment, at one of these pieces – back to a severely sped-up job at a much-reduced wage and with meager benefits (Metzgar: 2000). His younger son got work at one of the pieces that had been Bethlehem, and his older son works at a furniture store, both making less than the median wage for all full-time U.S. workers now. Three of his four daughters have worked sporadically at Walmart, usually for much less than the median, and the other has had steady work as an administrator at a credit union with what all describe

[7] This paper is part of an early chapter in a longer work.

as 'decent wages and benefits' – though what counts as 'decent' is not what it was when she was born in the late 1960s. Albert and Peg subsist on Social Security and a collection of very small pensions – the largest one from his 18 years at U.S. Steel before it closed, a tiny one from his 20 sporadic years at U.S. Steel's successor companies, and another bit from the National Guard for his decades as a weekend warrior operating several generations of tanks.

Albert has been through his stages of grief, and I have spent some incidental bar time with him as he expressed and recounted some of it. Shortly after he retired, he told me he was finally at peace because 'there's nothing left they can take away.' The 'they' who had taken so much away from him was ill-defined and impersonal, but it clearly was not intended to include me. I had a vague but powerful sense, however, that it should.

We were once roughly equal. He had a higher income and a more plentiful standard of living, and I had work that didn't wear me down day-by-day as I got older. I had greater prestige 'as the world goes,' but in our extended working-class family he had a lot too as a decidedly better hunter of game and fixer of physical objects. Likewise, he was thought to have more common sense than me as even though my various credentials were respected (even bragged on), my actual 'book-learning' was generally seen as of doubtful relevance. Now I have everything – more income and more wealth, and now a more secure and fulsome retirement that includes expensive vacations (from retirement!). Even my relative prestige is enhanced, certainly as the world goes, but also within our working-class culture because more than three decades of deterioration in the material conditions of their lives and in the prospects for their children have sowed doubt about their ways of doing things and living a life.

I only occasionally feel guilty about this, and I have little inclination to give up much of what I now have. But I do have a profound sense of regret and loss, and of intellectual embarrassment at not having appreciated what our society had when we had it. I really can't say it was 'a better world' then, as a great deal was worse, much worse, than now. But our trajectory, the direction we were going during those 30 years was better, way better, than the direction we are going now and have been going for the past 30 and more. It's not just the increasing standard of living and expansion of free time for what you will among the working classes that I'm nostalgic for, but for the way shared prosperity from the bottom up tends to enhance both aspiration and generosity across the board (Friedman: 2005).

I have my own class interests to protect, and a good part of what I'm nostalgic for is a time when middle-class professionalism had not only its characteristic status-anxiety and competitive success ethic, but also a countervailing willingness and drive to conscientiously explore what a good life might be in the absence of scarcity. Today there's no time for that as nearly all our conscientiousness is forced into mobilizing our social and cultural capital so we can pass on our class advantage to our children and, in my case, grandchildren for fear they might fall into that swirling downward economic spiral that is working-class life today. But with its increasing isolation from and active avoidance of working-class life and culture, it's harder and harder for middle-class generations to see the attractions and value of working-class ways, let alone learn from and borrow some of those ways. It was not always so, and that too

is a reason to be nostalgic for 30 years that were not-so-bad in themselves and actually pretty glorious compared to the directions we're heading now.

Author Bio

Jack Metzgar is Emeritus Professor of Humanities and Social Justice at Roosevelt University in Chicago; the author of *Striking Steel: Solidarity Remembered* (Temple U. Press 2000), and a past president of the Working-Class Studies Association.

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