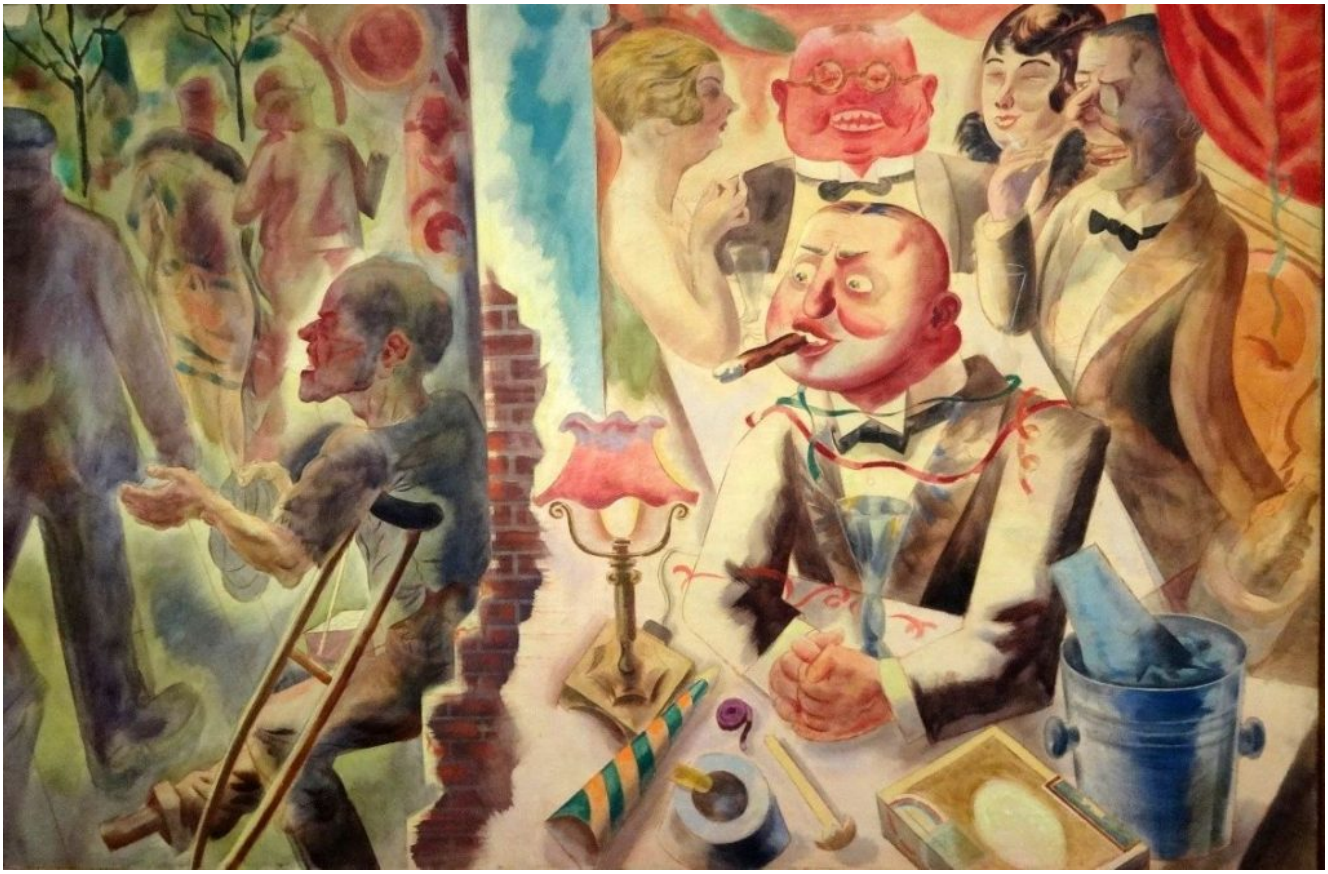
Class and Caste

by Robert Lewis (September 2022)



Insider and Outsider, Georg Grosz, 1926

> *Malevolence which delights*
> *in seeing others depressed.*
> —Samuel Johnson

As Thorstein Veblen contends in his landmark *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), of the many aspects of their existence the well-heeled want to make conspicuous, none is more satisfying than sitting tall in the saddle and riding the high horse for all it's worth. As for the rest of us living in the shadows (or worse) of the resented rider, our universal inclination to consume alcohol and drugs is perhaps in part

explained by the fact that we know where we aren't, and getting high, whose end game is to obliterate that recognition, helps to compensate for our mundane station in life. That an unholy percentage of our disposable income is dedicated to downsizing the awareness of our mediocrity is a telling indicator of just how unpleasant it is to be self-consciously unaccomplished, run of the mill, John-Doe-average.

Beyond the material privileges and perks that go to the winners, the supreme pleasure of sitting high on the horse is the vantage point that allows the rider to look down upon and gloat over the failings and follies of the multitudinous ordinary. The math is simple. Positive gratification indices are a function of increasing disproportionality, meaning the more I have, the more I can make conspicuous = greater gratification.

The behavioural laws that describe our "reach for the top" mind-set are as absolute as they are self-perpetuating because there is no final fulfillingness; every increment of gratification implies the next and then the next *ad infinitum*. Happiness may indeed be a warm gun. It is debatable whether the incessant jockeying for position that characterizes human striving—raising callousness and cruelty to unprecedented distinction—viewed from afar, is a formula for madness or the guarantor of man's purpose in life. From pole to pole, it seems to be the favourite game in town.

Cultures and nations, no less than the individual, are prone to the chest-thumping that comes with pre-eminence and superiority. The West smugly looks askance at the technologically challenged Third World; Christianity and Judaism routinely scoff at what is barbaric in Islam. And almost everybody holds in utter contempt the Indian caste system, in theory banned by Nehru in 1947, but still a going concern in especially rural India—less those faceless, dowry-challenged brides shamelessly fed to the fires by their inconsolably shamed families. But even among the most

obnoxious, die-hard aristocrats, for whom rank and title are as essential as water to marine life, the argument for untouchability—where a Brahmin is deemed offended (polluted) for having come in contact with only the shadow of an untouchable—incites disgust and revulsion. Or does it?

Are we in fact that far removed from the spirit of the caste system if, as Veblen argues, we not only delight in the perspective offered by the high horse, but are forced to acknowledge that far too many of the major and minor decisions we make over a life time are taken in order to acquire the means to purchase and ride?

One only has to reflect on what we wish for ourselves and our loved ones to know that class shares the same conceits and aspires to the same disparities and discriminations as caste. Who among us wouldn't rather our sons and daughters marry someone rich as opposed to poor, professional as opposed to unprofessional, admired and respected than not? Who among us wouldn't rather sit in the best seats in the house than the worst, or travel first class than economy, drive a Ferrari instead of a Fiat, wear the latest styles, meet and mingle with the rich and famous? Do not all of these together constitute the trappings of class? If the answer is yes, we subscribe, at a very minimum, to an equal opportunity caste system. Our enlightened version allows for mobility which the Indian caste system, based on the luck of the draw, did not: the caste into which you were born was for life. But whatever the system, in both East and West, the rider will defend and cherish his top ranking not only for the privileges but especially the envy it induces in those without.

In the deepest (and darkest) reaches of our being we are hierarchical, and there shall be no finessing the king and king's counsel despite our purported embarrassment over the unsightly world we have confected: a two-tiered travesty where the rich get richer and the poor get wretched.

Enlisting language to beg your pardon, we blithely wax indignant over the caste system as if immune to its beguilements, but the facts on the ground tell a different story, whose pages we refuse to turn, turning us into a brotherhood of deniers.

To appease the conscience, that maddening fly in our face, we have successfully reworked the original meaning of class—disassociating it from its natural affinity with caste—so that it now means something kinder and gentler. We admire and approve of someone who is classy. Someone who does the right thing is a class act. To declassify is to make available once privileged information. Marx made the notion of class struggle central to eliminating unacceptable economic disparities between classes. We have the class room as a place of learning; the classics refers to time-tested, *non ultra plus* works in literature, art and music.

But dress it up as is our wont, class is but a stone's throw from caste, and shares with it the same tempered-in-steel disposition to promote and defend the principles of inequality.

Class is one-upmanship; class is exclusion; class makes us look up to or down on people who we don't know, have never met. Class is the reduction of friendships and relationships to an expediency, a category of purchase. Stripped of its veneer, class is prejudice after a shower, shave and change of clothing; the same in kind that deemed blacks 3/5 human, that stoked the ovens at Auschwitz and made turkey out of the Armenians. And since there is a part of it in everyone, the only way to get the better of it is to stand ourselves before the mirror and then smash it to bits with a lifetime of deeds that answers to the calling of conscience, which is simply doing what we know is right, which will always be conspicuous to those who, unlike the rider high on his horse, have their feet firmly planted on *terra firma*, whose self-valorization(self-worth) is work in progress that, restating

Kant’s categorial imperative, seeks to make man equal to a set of universal values that does him proud.

Class is ugly and venal and counts among the sins of the species that would be blessed had they left any shame.

Table of Contents

Robert Lewis was born in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. He has been published in *The Spectator.* He is also a guitarist who composes in the Alt-Classical style. You can listen here.

Follow NER on Twitter @NERIconoclast