

HAVES VS. HAVENOTS

One-fourth of humanity lives a comfortable life. Surrounded by an abundance of opportunities, goods, health care, cars, computers, money and wealth; survival is the least of the concerns of the affluent. The objective for the affluent has become the pursuit of objects in themselves. Where once technology and production assisted in coping with the difficulties of life, the reproduction and hoarding of resources is now the primary objective.



MATT HANEY/DN

This fascination and compulsion for wealth has reached outlandish proportions. An Associated Press dispatch reported that the "dog (owners) culture" in New York City spends 500 million dollars a year on their animals.

There are 19 upscale restaurants that serve and deliver dog food to order. There are dog psychiatrists, a limo service for dogs, a workshop for dog actors, a mechanical automatic dog wash and an upscale dog fashion industry that sells tuxedos, wedding dresses, kilts, blazers and lingerie — all for dogs.

In the mid-1980s, during the Cabbage Patch craze, several companies began selling fur coats to "dotting grandmas and indulgent parents" who wanted their child's favorite rag doll to be the best-dressed toy on the block.

Most coats sold were \$50 and were made of rabbit fur. For the truly socially upwardly mobile Cabbage Patch Kid, \$1,000 chinchilla fur coats were made on special order.

The item became so popular that orders for the coats became backlogged for months. A former Nebraska CEO of Level 3 Communications last year purchased an 11,000 square foot home for \$7.8 million.

The home overlooks the Rocky Mountains, has 10 bathrooms and a granite driveway leading to a 4,400-square-foot garage. The CEO received nearly \$70 million in compensation pay from Level 3's parent company in 1997.

The owner/CEO is listed as being only in the top 20 highest paid positions in the country; there are approximately 20 more people in the country who make even more money than he does.

These are the most extreme cases of pathological wealth obsession. However, all social classes in America, particularly the middle class, have been infected with consumerism.

As each new consumer item is introduced, corporate economists use the media to manufacture a need for it, a market. This has happened for every item you and I own.

As each market expands, the affluent American mass (you and I and probably everyone in your view) indoctrinates the new product into our perceived need. This leads to an overworked and overspent America, in which family values and basic human compassion play less and less important roles.

The capitalist machine, although insuring our economic growth, has alienated us from meaning and destroyed our conceptions of humanistic fraternity by emphasizing selfish values and material success.

Three-fourths of humanity resides in the social bowels of disempowerment and poverty. Their position is mostly unknown to the affluent. While the affluent bask in self-indulgence and luxury, the wretched of the earth live in the masses of rubbish produced by the affluent.

In a city not necessarily a part of the "Third World," the wretched co-exist with the affluent. Reduced to a routine of daily fighting with predacious rodents for rotten bread, the wretched battle for survival daily.

The winner of the battle not only eats the bread needed to scrape out another day's subsistence but eventually eats the loser as well.

The image stalks the affluent's insecurity the first time they acknowledge this side of humanity and continues to do so until the affluent find a means to justify their prosperity in contrast to the suffering of the wretched.

The sight of the wretched easily emotionally belittles the affluent. Imagine, a 5-year-old disfigured human form, wearing a suit of car smog and lice as it begs for change.

The child mimes through the scorched black pavement, sniveling through ambiguous traffic, oblivious to the half-hearted teases from death's wheels.

With utter disregard of fear and norms, the tormented boy resorts to standing in front of an oncoming speeding car to attract the attention, and hopefully the help of someone from "the other half." Death does not seem to be such a bad alternative to the child's ill-conceived life.

If the boy is lucky, the driver of the car will throw out a coin or two, prolonging the child's life before he is buried between the tires and the pavement.

Still, in another land, and often even our own, famine and malnutrition have replaced every sensual pleasure with unending, agonizing, disdainful pain.

The wretched, form caravans of fleshless pilgrims, wandering the world's deserts, slowly dying, perhaps at once dead and alive. They are searching for a better life, an instance of worldly peace before they enter the eternal peace of the next world.

A man carries his son — or the bones that were his son — in his arms and offers him to the wind in a reverent upholding, to be swept away by the ubiquitous angels that follow death's touch.

Dehydrated and sapped of any natural vitality, the man hasn't the strength to produce another tear in this tender moment.

The intensity and endurance of agony and despair have chiseled on the man's face a sadistic permanence that precludes animation.

A misplaced sacrifice, the son's life is a trivial gift to an obscure, oppressive force that he cannot understand or control.



SHAWN DRAPAL/DN

The affluent and the wretched are paradoxical illustrations of the dichotomy that divides humanity: consumer protection from the senses of living vs. the bombardment of all the senses of life from a lack of consumption.

While three-fourths of humanity, the wretched die, of starvation; we (the affluent) will die in a dogmatic defense of our right to over-eat.

We must remember that it's only by fortune that it is not you and me eating with the rats in a trash dump.

In the words of the immortal Che Guevara, we must, "always be capable of feeling any injustice committed against anyone anywhere in the world."



text by David Baker

art by Shawn Drapal