

Lead paint, entitlement and a generational class-backslide

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Dear friends,

I have a colleague, let's call them Geoff, who has worked for the University for 15 years. They have been promoted to level C during this time, and through essentially an act of social engineering, have managed to attract both a higher duties payment and additional loading for nudge-nudge-wink-wink special services to the Institution's senior executive over the past decade and a half. By any published academic standard, Geoff falls brutally short. Not only for a level C balanced academic [1] but for a level A teaching academic, Geoff's entire 15 years of work, compounded into a single year performance review, should have seen them placed on performance management. Instead, Geoff recently received a new title and a raise - because they complained to management about "how hard life is" .

Each day I am astounded by the growing aura of entitlement from the (pseudo)bourgeois who reach "a certain ageTM" and decide: now is my time for unearned and undeserved privileges. This is particularly expressed in contemporary academia, and is often rewarded far above any real value ever produced by workers claiming "me me me!" . Such has arrived the era of exorbitant compensation for some squeaky wheels, while the next generation remains precarious, invalidated, and under extreme stress from a never before seen variety of angles. This is the culmination of the world of work globalised post-1940s, after waves of boomers have intensified work, and hoist the ladder up behind them as they cement themselves as a far below run-of-the-mill Level C somehow earning over \$170,000 a year.

In conversations with our mate Geoff you would assume them to be a fairly nice human. Though, the unexamined facets of their personality join the calamity that is copious remuneration for no work. Geoff builds people up around them to do exciting and interesting work -great, there is certainly a role for creating excitement, connecting people, and fostering new ideas in the academy, or, rather, there should be. However, Geoff is actually a politician. Pumping up those around them and, in the meanwhile, undermining and invalidating them in private spaces with both management and their colleagues. If, by some miracle of human achievement, one of those colleagues they have pumped up manages to produce something exciting rest assured Geoff will be there to either claim the output, or to at-minimum co-opt co-authorship on a proceeding. In fact, Geoff's only outputs are co-authored papers and they have never been first or last author.

Okay, poor Geoff, now receiving public scrutiny. However, I want to be clear, at this juncture, Geoff is not one person -Geoff is a lumbering behemoth collecting most academic workers over "a certain ageTM" . Naturally, with any generalisation, there are serious exceptions to this rule, if you could call it that -notably several women, most queer, and almost all working-class origin academics simply do not accumulate the privileges necessary to act as an unadulterated backstabber, shit-stirrer and generalist asshole in the academic milieu. This is not to suggest that queer folk, women-identifying persons, and the working-class are immune to this behaviour. In fact, they can be amongst the worst gatekeepers and reproducers of the status quo, essentially on the "I suffered this so you need to too" bandwagon.

You guessed it, I'm not quite done on this rant...If you try and engage a colleague like Geoff in conversation about the struggles of contemporary academic work or life, they'll roll out: "oh yes, I'm really struggling too, you know the old gum at the back of my fifth rental property fell down and now the bastard tenants want me to pay costs to replace some of their

furniture, can you imagine?” I am increasingly convinced that I am living in a nightmare dreamed up by an AI’s interpretation of Friedman various capitalist manifestos crossbred with eldritch horror manifest in the form of governance hegemony and a hybridisation of every fascist dictator’s personal utopia.

So, with some frustration on the table, let’s think about the role of lead paint [2] in breeding narcissism and other personality malfunctions in the current enforcement class (the bourgeois, capitalist bootlickers). Hegemony bred, for capitalist reasons, two full generations of proles and petit bourgeois as fodder directly for the mill –under the same conditions that it bred the bourgeois (qua enforcement class). The affects of lead, quite literally, were well known, yet, everything was imbued with lead –it was the PFAS or climate change of 2024. “We know this isn’t good, but we don’t care to fix it” . Lead literally led to a massive decline in compassion, introspection, and capacity for reflection and sympathy from the 1940s through almost the end of the 1960s [3]. What happens when, particularly in the bourgeois –the class, discussed ad nauseam here, largely responsible for capitalist stasis and mass inequity –are further removed from their compassionate and otherwise human abilities? We get rank narcissism.

When we apply class theory, or really sociology 101, to a group of people with (relative) power and little-to-no empathy, the affects on those around them is immediately clear. A tortured, sick and fundamentally disturbed *modus operandi* emerges. The petit bourgeois, then, those who were either not strong enough, privileged enough, or otherwise “fortunate” enough to capitalise off of their peers and colleagues (or perhaps those who didn’t lick the walls as much as a child) are left in the position of our friend Geoff. The mediocre and fundamentally incapable 50-something with nothing left to do but bitch and moan about how their circumstances are “equally” if not “more unfortunate” than yours. Not to worry that you’re in the middle of trying scratch a living to put a roof over your head, Geoff’s third investment property attracted slightly more tax this year –what ever will they do?

When we extrapolate this phenomenon outside of “Aidan had another irritating week at work dealing with extremely privileged mediocrity” we can see how the bourgeois –the self professedly “miraculous” group of white colonists thriving (though they’d never admit it) off the exploitation and expropriation of their peers, younger generations, and rightful holders of the land, we can begin to see the backslide of the emergent petit bourgeois into proles. This, however, is a simultaneously dangerous condition for capital and the proles themselves (the latter of which we’ll save for another day).

You might assume that a member of the bourgeois, or even petit bourgeois, who chooses to reproduce will naturally create another member of the bourgeois. However, even the parental instinct has evaporated in the lead-paint-fuelled narcissistic twist-and-shout that marred subsequent generations with mental ill-health, ill-footing, and fractious debt and social circumstance (something, again, which would be denied by aforementioned mediocre peoples). Rather, what we are seeing now is an emergence of a bloc of proles descended from the “middle class” who themselves, unless their parents die very young and have not accumulated extraordinary debt to keep themselves comfortable at their children’s expense, are now –BAM – back in the proletarian class.

The problem? Well the capitalists are deeply concerned because this “stuck in the middle with you” class of neo-prole descended from the last generation’s petit-bourgeois are educated. And with education comes activism and social transformation. Or does it? Don’t worry, the Australian Labour Party, in close collegiality with their friends in the Liberal and National parties, are ensuring –by attending the Murdoch party together [4] –that anything resembling analytical and transformative education is denied to anyone “growing up” now.

And yet people wonder where superstition, fascism, rage, and hatred emerge. Huh. Who’d have thought.

Another cheery day on the mill,
Aidan.

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1. f.n. in the Australian system, an academic with both teaching and research requirements; i.e., they must teach, publish extensively, and engage with the community of their field. We have three broad categories, and different universities deploy these differently. At my institution, a teaching academic has close to an 80/20 load of teaching and scholarship, a research academic has an 80/20 research and engagement load, and so on. Some Australian universities with these loadings prohibit “teaching academics” or teaching focussed, teaching specialist, and so on from publishing or gaining ethical clearance, this is not the case at my institution.
 2. <https://www.today.duke.edu/2017/03/lead-exposure-childhood-linked-lower-iq-lower-status/>; <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/new-evidence-that-lead-exposure-increases-crime/>
 3. Wikipedia would say “citation needed” here so, here’ s some more citations: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6450277/>; <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/2613157>
 4. Literally, <https://www.smh.com.au/business/companies/lachlan-murdoch-hosts-albanese-dutton-billionaires-amid-real-life-succession-drama-20240725-p5jwk3.html>