The Societal Divide: What Can We Do About It?

April 22, 2021

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It has been my privilege to serve as the APS President this past year. I have appreciated the ample

opportunity to reflect on our profession, the science, and ideas for practicing it and disseminating the knowledge it produces. I wrote about some of these ideas in my columns, covering topics including racism, the COVID-19 pandemic, diversity and inclusion, the scientific goals of APS, journal publishing, and the nature of scientific progress. But I have not done much on another pressing issue we face: the societal divide by social class. In what follows, I want to discuss the global context of this divide, articulate its consequences, and explore what we can do about it. To get a clear idea about the role psychologists can play, we must start with where the problem belongs—namely, society.

Economic globalization

Economic disparity is increasing in the United States and elsewhere. Few people would disagree that it is one of major driving forces behind growing populism and radicalism on the right (and, sometimes, the left)—again, both in the United States and elsewhere (van den Bos, 2018). Specific factors may vary from one place to another. However, when we look closely at these factors, we realize that many of them are ultimately linked to something seemingly unrelated: economic globalization.

A few decades ago, when the tide began to shift toward globalization in world trade and business, many people welcomed the change. The globe was said to be flattening, which seemed more egalitarian and even democratic. Economic interdependence across the world was realized through various technological feats, including the Internet. And this interdependence was promoted as a much-needed antidote against nationalistic egos and greed. Some feared that international chains, such as McDonald's and Starbucks, could expel local cultures, including regional cuisine and traditional practices, but many expected the benefits of globalization to exceed its downsides. If you had this optimistic view of economic globalization, you failed to understand its full scope.

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Everywhere on the globe, there has emerged a small group of educated, wealthy people who have benefited vastly from globalization. Let's call them elites. The elites have had easy access to the benefits of globalization. They can take advantage of global information networks to make new types of wealth through, say, international trade and global financial investment. They are not productive in the traditional sense of growing crops and crafting commodities. Rather, they access information and use it to create new social and personal capital and novel financial opportunities. People in this category are not limited to professionals in the financial sectors. Indeed, many psychological researchers fall into this category. Our profession is based primarily on information, rather than the production of tangible goods: We create and disseminate knowledge.

In this episode of Under the Cortex, APS Fellow Kees van den Bos discusses the psychological processes that push people from activism to radicalization.

Meanwhile, many others have been left behind. Although the United States has benefited more from economic globalization than most countries, the benefits have largely flowed to the elite class. For the rest of the population, many jobs have disappeared, and the jobs available no longer provide a living wage. For example, line workers in automobile plants in Detroit have seen their jobs outsourced to

places where labor is cheap and its conditions exploitative. Workers in the apparel industry have suffered the same fate. The decline of the working class in the United States has been exacerbated by the technological advances that have made globalization a reality, including automatization in all areas of production. Many traditional types of work, which produced something tangible, whether it be cars or clothes, are now automated, performed by robots, and regulated by computers. Increasingly fewer people are needed for production. Moreover, unlike in many European countries, no robust safety net is available in the United States for those who lose their jobs. The working class has thus been decimated.

To be left behind

The economic downturns that imperiled the White American working class have had a massive toll. For example, Case and Deaton (2020) have documented a precipitous drop in the longevity of non-Hispanic White Americans without college degrees over recent decades despite increases in longevity among other groups during the same period. Drug overdoses and suicides are likely the major culprits behind this tragic phenomenon.

Further, the economic downfall of the White American working class might have also motivated many to participate in populist movements and revolts against the elite class. Such revolts are evident in politics (as in Trumpism), business (as in protests against Wall Street), and science (as in the anti-vaccine movement during the current pandemic). Moreover, as many working-class people have continued to work hard and wait patiently for their American dreams to come true, they have perceived immigrants and racial and ethnic minorities as "cutting the line," so to speak, to move past them to achieve *their* dreams (Hochschild, 2016). They therefore see policies that seek to address past racial injustice (e.g., affirmative action policies) as favoring racial minorities at their expense (Lowery et al., 2006). As a consequence, they feel left behind completely—and unfairly. Metaphorically speaking, they have ended up feeling like "strangers in their own land"—to quote from the title of a recent book addressing this very issue (Hochschild, 2016).

It is easy to imagine how refreshing the populist arguments of many right-wing politicians, including Donald Trump, would sound to the ears of those who feel left behind by the shift of the times. Remember, these politicians have strongly denounced the elites in Washington and on Wall Street, even though they are arguably elites themselves. Many of the same politicians have also dehumanized immigrants and foreigners. It is easy, too, to imagine how this public discourse has precipitated violence against racial and ethnic minorities, including the deaths of countless Black and Brown people, such as George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, at the hands of White police officers, as well as the recent flood of anti-Asian violence.

Moral crisis

I see a moral crisis simmering everywhere. This crisis has deep roots in many contradictions in economic globalization. From the perspective of White working-class Americans, two contradictions would stand out. One is that you work hard and yet don't earn enough to make ends meet or, even worse, can't keep your job. Another is equally serious: While you are waiting for your turn to realize your dreams, you perceive that others, particularly minorities and immigrants, are moving quickly toward their dreams and leaving you behind. You surely did not do anything wrong, so you feel cheated.

Moreover, the system that cheats you does not seem to acknowledge the moral values most important to you, such as discipline, reputation, hard work, and honor. That system seems like nothing more than a profit-making branch of the globalization agenda that ignores you.

I must note that this perception itself is unfair and deeply troubling from a different perspective—that of many racial and ethnic minorities and immigrants. Many of them have also been left behind by the forces of economic globalization. Indeed, the perception that minorities have gained economic ground is a misconception that has contributed to the maintenance of wealth disparity across racial lines in the United States (Kraus et al., 2019). Moreover, minority groups have long suffered from systemic racism in ways the White majority has never experienced.

Despite these caveats, however, it is still valuable to learn and see what's going on from the White American working-class perspective. You can then begin to understand an important aspect of the psychology behind ultra-right-wing movements. This perspective will also help explain why many rioters in the January 6 U.S. Capitol surge have not shown any remorse or contrition. They acted on the conviction that they had been morally violated, cheated, and left behind. To be clear, the riot was a serious crime. The rioters must be prosecuted. However, this prosecution would not address the deeper problem that precipitated the riot. The problem is a long time coming and now appears to be getting worse. Addressing the resulting discontent of those left behind will require something more fundamental.

In his song "Like a Rolling Stone," Bob Dylan captured this sense of alienation at its core. The 6-minute tune encapsulates betrayal, fear of being left behind, and anger toward those who treat you like "a complete unknown." Combine all this with the realization that there is no safety net to protect you. Dylan repeatedly asks, "How does it feel (to be like that)?" He wrote the song in the 1960s, during the early years of his extremely prolific career, well before the demise of the American working class, yet he crystalized the sense of alienation and despair that many White working-class Americans are now feeling. When you are betrayed by a trusted somebody, perhaps by society at large, you are a stranger in your own land. No dignity is left in you, which threatens the most basic aspects of what it means to be human.

I must add that this moral crisis is not a uniquely American problem. This crisis is tied to economic globalization, and as such, it is global in nature. Think of the terrorist attacks in Paris and Amsterdam. Also, radicalization is on the rise in Asia, Latin America, and Africa—that is, everywhere. Kees van den Bos (2018), a prominent justice researcher in the Netherlands, has concluded that the moral crisis and the resulting radical movements so rampant in the world today are rooted in the perception that "we" are being unfairly treated.

The psychology of morality and alienation

What can we do to address this moral crisis that confronts humanity? At one level, more research is needed. Those left behind feel moral resentment, which comes with a deep sense of alienation by society. So, particularly relevant would be the intersection of these two research topics: morality and alienation.

First, there has been a recent, timely comeback of morality research. Many readers must be aware of an early Kohlbergian tradition of conceptualizing the different stages of moral development. This work motivated subsequent cross-cultural work on morality (Shweder et al., 1997) and values (Schwartz, 1992). Now, many scholars are extending this literature with new experimental paradigms and novel methods in social cognition and neuroscience (e.g., Haidt et al., 1993; Greene et al., 2001). Paul Rozin must be noted in particular for his pioneering effort to clarify the emotional basis of morality (e.g., Rozin et al., 1997), which paved the way toward more recent examinations of embodied moral emotions (e.g., Lee & Schwarz, 2012). Altogether, this emerging literature promises to enrich our understanding of moral cognition.

Second, there is a growing body of work investigating loneliness (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2009; Ozawa-de Silva, in press). It is now very clear that loneliness is linked to a series of gene-level, transcriptional activities causing inflammation and immunosuppression (Cole et al., 2015). Loneliness comes from a perception that one has lost meaningful touch with others, which amounts to alienation. Thus, by combining morality research with the neurobiology of loneliness, a new research horizon may open up to illuminate the nature of alienation. There is much more to learn, but our science is moving forward.

Although the resulting scientific knowledge on alienation is indispensable, it is also clear that something more is needed. We must be able to present forceful visions about what to do with this thing called alienation and propose strategies to address the misery at the social structural or systemic level. In my December 2020 column, I pointed out that racism at its core is systemic and structural. This argument applies to the alienation of the American White working class as well. I hope this column can initiate a much-needed conversation about what to do to reform the societal system behind the current misery of people who have been left behind. Although everything is up for debate, I believe one broad avenue presents itself as particularly promising to examine, explore, and perhaps try.

The pursuit of dignity

The key, I think, is to recognize and acknowledge the ultimate significance of the pursuit of dignity—a view of the self as a respectable, reputable, and honorable being. This pursuit must be recognized as a fundamental human right. This right is not on the list that has undergirded modern democracy. It did not make the *Declaration of Independence* (which highlighted life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness), for example. Only after World War II, when the United Nations was founded, in part, to prevent all future genocides, was this concept formally introduced (Hughes, 2011). But even though the pursuit of dignity has only recently come to the fore of collective consciousness, I would argue that it has long been taken for granted. This explains why it did not get into many foundational documents of modern democracy.

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Before the postindustrial era, until just a few decades ago, dignity was tied closely to production—initially through hunting and gathering, and then through farming and herding. For much of our history, humans farmed crops, kept animals, crafted various goods, and sold them. These activities were indispensable, and as a consequence, they were also respectable, honorable, and reputable.

Everyone depended on those products, which meant they depended on one another. More recently, acts of production have become increasingly disposable (because of automation) and replaceable (with robots). If dignity was inherent in humanity, as is often assumed, that was only because it was guaranteed by the mode of production. That may no longer be the case, leading to a new challenge of our time—namely, assuring human dignity when the very source of it for much of our existence in cultural evolution has begun to slip away from us.

How can we address this challenge? My idea pertains to the societal guarantee of basic life. It is often discussed under the rubric of universal basic income. Given what we know from our science, safety and security are prerequisites for meaningful social relations, exploration, and creativity (Bowlby, 1990), all of which become the basis for hard work. Hard work is expected to lead to success, which translates into a sense of dignity. Dignity must be earned, but it must be made earnable to begin with. Basic income is a means to protect each person's inalienable right to pursue and earn dignity. Basic income does not give dignity automatically. But it affords it, making it possible to attain and realize. This proposal is not advocacy for increased welfare in disguise. Nor is it meant to eliminate competition, which has been the single most important motivational basis of the success humans have earned over several millennia. Rather, it is meant to raise the sea level so every boat can start to float and sail again (Michael Kraus, personal communication, April 2, 2021).

One could worry that people might stop working upon receiving free money. I would respond by pointing to children born into wealthy families. They inherit wealth "for free," and their basic needs are abundantly protected by birth. Do they stop working as a result? A few undoubtedly do. But most don't. Children in rich families are guaranteed a chance for hard work, success, and thus an ample possibility for dignity. For those from less fortunate families, society must step in and secure a chance for hard work and success. Once this opportunity is guaranteed, most people will try to creatively and productively contribute to society. And this productivity must be rewarded. The more they work, the more they ought to be able to move upward in their life journeys. I submit that it is a moral obligation of APS to present some vision like this.

In closing

This concludes the series of my presidential columns. It was my pleasure to have this opportunity to write them. At the end of June, I will pass the baton to the next president, Jennifer Eberhardt. First, though, I will lead the Presidential Symposium during the 2021 APS Virtual Convention. The symposium will explore how we might achieve a theoretical integration of race, social class, and culture. Joining me in conversation will be an outstanding panel consisting of Hazel Markus, Michael Meaney, and Rob Sellers. I look forward to seeing you all, if only virtually, in a few weeks.

Feedback on this article? Email apsobserver@psychologicalscience.org *or scroll down to comment.*

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