

# **Troubled: A Memoir of Foster Care, Family, and Social Class**

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I've come to understand that a warm and loving family is worth infinitely more than the money or accomplishments I hoped might compensate for them. (Preface, paragraph 1)

... while 85% of children born to upper-class families are raised by both of their birth parents, only 30% of those born to working class families are. (C. Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010*, New York: Crown Forum, 2012)

... 60% of boys in foster care are later incarcerated, while only 3% graduate from college.

... upward mobility should be the side effect of far more important things: family, stability, and emotional security for children. Even if upward mobility were the primary goal, a safe and secure family would help achieve it more than anything else.

## **Chapter 7 – What's Expected of You** (the Air Force)

For behaviors and habits to be stable and predictable, one's environment needs to be stable and predictable. (upon enlisting in the Air Force)

I learned that so much of success depends not on what people do, but what they don't do. It's about avoiding rash and reckless actions that will land us in trouble. The military presses the "fast forward" button on the worst, most aggressive, and impulsive years of a young man's life – the time when a guy is most likely to do something catastrophically stupid. ... For me, the military presented a clear juxtaposition with ordinary civilian life, where a misguided teenager can gain plenty of ground on the path to self-destruction before slamming headfirst into a wall of consequences. You can commit a lot of crimes before finally getting caught. You can do a lot of drugs before they start to take over your life. You can have a lot of hookups before confronting the consequences of pregnancy. For many young people, the gap between impulsive and unwise decisions and the consequences of those decisions is large. In the military, there is almost no gap at all.

... the military taught me that people don't need motivation, they need self-discipline.

I'd read *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl, and was moved by his observation that although his fellow prisoners in a Nazi concentration camp were in the worst environment imaginable, they responded to it in radically different ways. Some were primarily self-centered in their quest for survival, while others became selfless and sacrificed for others at great risk to themselves.

... about "critical periods" in childhood and how kids who don't form close bonds with a caregiver before the age of three are far more likely to have social and emotional problems later in life. My understanding was that if a kid doesn't feel safe early on, then it is harder for them to ever feel safe later. Other potential consequences of lack of attachment to a parent are lower-than-average intelligence, delinquency, aggression, and depression.

## **Chapter 10 – Problem Child** (+++++ – his initial experience at Yale; life among the upper class)

The student who called me “privileged” likely meant that due to my background as a biracial Asian Latino heterosexual cisgender (that is, I “present” as the sex I was “assigned” at birth) male, this means that I have led a privileged life. However, I also learned that many inhabitants of elite universities assign a great deal of importance to “lived experience.” This means that your unique personal hardships serve as important credentials to expound on social ills and suggest remedies. These two ideas appeared to be contradictory. Which is more relevant to identity, one’s discernible characteristics (gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and soon) or what they actually went through in their lives? I asked two students this question. One replied that this question was dangerous to ask. The other said that one’s discernible characteristics *determine* what experiences they have in their lives. This means that if you belong to a “privileged” group, then you must have had a privileged life. I dropped the conversation there. I’d arrived at Yale nervous about the possibility of being intellectually limited compared with my peers on campus because of my impoverished background and poor grades in high school. As I encountered many of their inept ideas, my concerns evaporated. ... I really wanted to understand what these students thought without risking them being weirded out by someone in their midst who they might have acknowledged as having had a tougher life than them, and who disagreed that words in an email could actually inflict “pain.” That was the language many students used. *Danger* and *harm* and *pain*. Words like *trauma* meant something different for them. At a party, a young woman told me about her family and how they’d always expected her to get into a top college. “My mom was super strict growing up,” she explained. “Classic Asian mom, I’m sure you know what I mean.” “Well, my mom is Korean,” I said. “But my family life wasn’t really like that.” “Ah!” she exclaimed. “So, you didn’t have a traumatic childhood.” <His mom was an addict. He was taken from her at about age 3, and spent his following years in 10 foster families, shifting between families regularly; that led to alcohol and other drugs, vandalism, fights, crime – etc., etc.> At Yale, more students come from families in the top 1 percent of income than from the bottom 60 percent, and here they were ensconced in one of the richest universities in the world, claiming that they were in danger. Broadcasting personal feelings of emotional precarity and supposed powerlessness was part of the campus culture. Conspicuously lamenting systemic disadvantage seemed to serve as both a signal and reinforcer of membership in this rarefied group of future elites.

... a potent blend of victimhood and superiority.

... many students seemed to be exploiting whatever commonalities they had with historically mistreated groups in order to serve their own personal, social, and professional interests.

Another time, I was on a social media page where Ivy League students and graduates shared stories about their schools. Someone had posted a story about Yeon Mi Pak, a North Korean refugee who had graduated from Columbia University. Pak described her alarm about how the monolithic culture at her Ivy League school reminded her of her home country. The top-rated comment, the one with the most “like” and “love” reactions: “She should have stayed in North Korea.” They couldn’t bear the criticism and posted endless mean-spirited comments mocking Pak, with some saying she should “go back to Pyongyang.” Ordinarily, the people who visited this webpage would have considered the statement that a refugee should have stayed where she came from to be reprehensible (and it is). But in this instance it was lauded because Pak’s comments undermined these peoples’ view of themselves as morally righteous. Many students and graduates of top universities are terrified as being seen as what they really are.

I later read a study that found that upper-class people are more likely to endorse utilitarianism and the belief that “the ends justify the means.” One reason for this is that affluent people score relatively low on measures of empathy and favor cold calculations for decision making.

On campus, it wasn’t necessarily important to know about the concrete details of a newsworthy event. Rather, it was more critical to know what to *think* about the event by reading the opinions of others. ... now that my life was more comfortable and my future more secure than it had even been, I was being told it was important to keep up with it <how to think about current events>. Being “informed” wasn’t important for day-to-day survival, but in this new environment, it seemed to be relevant for social acceptance.

But the ideas I would continue to encounter from members of the upper class were, perhaps inadvertently, hindering upward mobility.

## Chapter 11 – Luxury Beliefs

Gradually, I developed the concept of “luxury beliefs,” which are ideas and opinions that confer status on the upper class at very little cost, while often inflicting costs on the lower classes. The upper class includes (but is not necessarily limited to) anyone who attends or graduates from an elite college and has at least one parent who is a college graduate. Research has found that parental educational attainment is the most important objective indicator of social class. ... compared with parental income, parental education is a more powerful predictor of a child’s future lifestyle, tastes, and opinions.

<the idea that the elites promote one idea for others, while insisting on a different set of values in their own families> Later, I would connect my observations to stories I read about tech tycoons, another affluent group, who encourage people to use addictive devices, while simultaneously enforcing rigid rules at home about technology use. For example, Steve Jobs prohibited his children from using iPads. Parents in Silicone Valley reportedly tell their nannies to closely monitor how much their children use their smartphones. Chip and Joanna Gaines are well-known home improvement TV personalities who have their own television network. They don’t allow their children to watch TV and don’t own a television. ... Many affluent people now promote lifestyles that are harmful to the less fortunate. ... they are not only insulated from the fallout; they often profit from it.

They persistently look for new ways to move upward and avoid moving <looking?> downward.

Thorstein Veblen’s famous “leisure class” has evolved into the “luxury beliefs class.” ... because we can’t be certain of the financial standing of other people, a good way to size up their means is to see whether they can afford to waste money on goods and leisure. ... Such goods and leisurely activities could only be purchased or performed by those who did not live the life of a manual laborer and could spend time learning something with no practical utility. Veblen even goes so far as to say, “The chief use of servants in the evidence they afford of the master’s ability to pay.”

As NYU professor Scott Galloway said in an interview in 2020, “The strongest brand in the world is not Apple or Mercedes or Coca-Cola. The strongest brands are MIT, Oxford, and Stanford. Academics and administrators at the top universities have decided over the last thirty years that we’re no longer public servants; we’re luxury goods.” This is not to say that elite colleges don’t educate their students, or that Canada Goose jackets don’t keep their wearers warm. But top universities are also crucial for induction into the luxury belief class.

The chief purpose of luxury beliefs is to indicate the believer's social class and education. When an affluent person expresses support for defunding the police, drug legalization, open borders, looting, or permissive sexual norms, or uses terms like *white privilege*, they are engaging in a status display. They are trying to tell you, "I am a member of the upper class."

Focusing on "representation" rather than helping the downtrodden is another luxury belief.

<"representation" means bringing a few people from lower social classes into elite institutions> In fact, it might backfire. Elite institutions strip-mine talented people out of their communities.

White privilege is the luxury belief that it took me longest to understand, because I grew up around a lot of poor white people. Affluent white college graduates seem to be the most enthusiastic about the idea of white privilege, yet they are the least likely to incur any costs for promoting that belief. Rather, they raise their social standing by talking about their privilege. ... When policies are implemented to combat white privilege, it won't be Yale graduates who are harmed. Poor white people will bear the brunt.

A key inhibition against crime is the belief that our legal system is legitimate. Which means that those who promote the idea that we live in an unjust society also help to cultivate crime. The poor reap what the luxury belief class sows.

Consider that compared to Americans who earn more than \$75,000 a year, the poorest Americans are 7 times more likely to be victims of robbery, 7 times more likely to be victims of aggravated assault, and 20 times more likely to be victims of sexual assault. And yet, as I write this, many affluent people are calling to abolish law enforcement. Maybe the luxury belief class is ignorant of the realities of who is most harmed by crime. Or perhaps they don't care that the poor will become even more victimized than they already are.

Most personal to me is the luxury belief that family is unimportant or that children are equally likely to thrive in all family structures. <cites a long list of studies and statistics>

I've also heard graduates at top universities say marriage is "just a piece of paper." People shouldn't have to prove their commitment to their spouse with a document, they tell me. I have never heard them ridicule a college degree as "just a piece of paper." Many affluent people belittle marriage, but not college, because they view a degree as critical for their social positions.

<speaking of the musical *Hamilton*, which the elite initially fawned over then later criticized because it didn't reflect the failings of American society in 18<sup>th</sup> century America> Once a piece of art becomes mainstream, elites must distance themselves from it and redirect their attention to something new, obscure, or difficult to obtain. The affluent relentlessly search for signals that distinguish them from the masses.

Furthermore, it is harder for wealthy people to claim the mantle of victimhood, which, among the affluent, is often a key ingredient to be seen as a righteous person. ... researchers at Harvard Business School and Northwestern University recently found evidence of a "virtuous victim" effect, in which victims are seen as more moral than nonvictims who have behaved in exactly the same way. Plainly, if people think you are a victim, they will be more likely to excuse your detestable behaviors.

Prestigious universities encourage students to nurture their grievances, giving rise to a peculiar situation in which the most advantaged are the most well-equipped to tell other advantaged people how disadvantaged they are.

The upper class's drive to distinguish themselves from the masses explains the ever-evolving standards of luxury beliefs. ... A common rebuke to those who are not fully up to date on the latest intellectual fads is "educate yourself." This is how the affluent block mobility for people who work multiple jobs, have children to care for, and don't have the time or means to read the latest bestseller that outlines the proper way to think about social issues. And by the time they do, as was the case with *Hamilton*, the cultural fashions will have shifted yet again.

I grew to understand that, at least within some upper-class circles, patriotism and support for the Constitution marks one as a rube. The irony was not lost on me – students who would burn flags or attempt to silence dissenting viewpoints were being protected by the very principles they despised and the people to whom they felt superior.

The luxury belief class claims that the unhappiness associated with certain behaviors and choices primarily stems from the negative social judgments they elicit, rather than the behaviors and choices themselves. But, in fact, negative social judgments often serve as guardrails to deter detrimental decisions that lead to unhappiness. In order to avoid misery, we have to admit that certain actions and choices are actually in and of themselves undesirable – single parenthood, obesity, substance abuse, crime, and so on – and not simply in need of normalization.

<in a GRE prep class, which relies on articles from magazines like *The Atlantic* or *Scientific American*> ... this is because the graduate programs ... are also *testing for people who read these kinds of magazines*. In other words, the instructor claimed the tests screens for social class as well as academic ability.

Another luxury belief: Both luck and hard work play a role in the direction of our lives, but stressing the former at the expenses of the latter doesn't help those at or near the bottom of society. If disadvantaged people come to believe that luck is the key factor that determines success, then they will be less likely to strive to improve their lives. ... Successful people tell the world they got lucky but then tell their loved ones about the importance of hard work and sacrifice.

## Chapter 12 – Twistable Turnable Man

... very young children are implicitly preoccupied with three questions: First, am I a lovable person who is welcome here. The answer kids perceive from those around them is critical for how they feel about themselves. ... Later comes a second question: How can a small, inexperienced being like me cope with this vast world and all these overwhelming feelings? If kids have parents that are calm and reliable, then they will develop an internal sense of security as they reach maturity. If not, they often find harmful ways to cope as a means of escaping awareness of their own vulnerability. ... the third question: Am I like other people, and am I accepted by them, or am I weird and unacceptable? When kids are in a stable environment with reliable parents and predictable patterns, they feel integrated into a social environment and find it easier to befriend peers who want the best for them. ... If these 3 needs aren't adequately met, then kids often go on to face severe challenges later in life.

... childhood instability has a much stronger effect than family socioeconomic status for a variety of important outcomes, including education.

... kids who are placed in <foster> care are 4 times more likely to abuse drugs, 4 times more likely to be arrested for a violent crime, 3 times more likely to be diagnosed with depression or anxiety, and twice as likely to be poor as adults.

A solid, two-parent home is critical for a child's future. There is simply no shortcut.

For many people, if they are taking care of a baby that isn't "theirs," they will be more likely to sedate them out of convenience.

We now live in a culture where affluent, educated, and well-connected people validate and affirm the behaviors, decisions, and attitudes of marginalized and deprived kids that they would never accept for themselves or their own children. And they claim to do this in the name of compassion. It's fine if Antonio and I skip class and ruin our futures, but it's definitely not fine if *their* kids do so. Many of the people who wield most influence in society have isolated themselves and their children from the world I grew up in, while paying lip service to the challenges of inequality.

... there is evidence that familial adversity in childhood reduces happiness in adulthood. Interestingly, though, people who grow up in poor families are not more likely to be unhappy as adults. ... A similar pattern has been found for health – childhood instability, but not poverty, is linked to poor physical and mental well-being in adolescence. In short, to grow up to become a healthy and happy adult, having a loving family as a kid is at least as important as having money.

NYTimes – Rob Henderson – 10July24 – **When Progressive Ideals Become a Luxury** (video w/ intro text)

[https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/10/opinion/campus-protests-progressive-henderson.html?campaign\\_id=39&emc=edit\\_ty\\_20240710&instance\\_id=128366&nl=opinion-today&regi\\_id=92605874&segment\\_id=171755&te=1&user\\_id=abcdb11699e0ef6096140486cfc754d9](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/10/opinion/campus-protests-progressive-henderson.html?campaign_id=39&emc=edit_ty_20240710&instance_id=128366&nl=opinion-today&regi_id=92605874&segment_id=171755&te=1&user_id=abcdb11699e0ef6096140486cfc754d9)

### 3 Golden Rules of Luxury Beliefs:

1. Play the victim
2. Protest without penalty (no real long-term consequences)
3. Push the less privileged down (example of a blue collar, black worker being assaulted by rich student protestors at Columbia University, as part of their occupation of a university building)

Student protestors were 2x more likely than the general population to have family incomes greater than \$100k per year

News description of student protestors: "Among these white, woke, pampered children from wealthy families, there is a complete ignorance of the complexities of this issue." (Speaking of the Israeli / Hamas conflict)

"Luxury belief activists turn causes into props that transfer attention to where students really want it: on themselves."

<Student activist: "Do you want students to die of dehydration and starvation?" in context of demanding that the university, where their occupation was taking place, supply them with food, water, tents, and personal safety.>

Real protesters, in earlier generations, had "more skin in the game" <they faced and accepted real consequences> and "were almost always non-violent."

<In contrast,> “ ... today’s students oversimplify complex geopolitical issues into narratives of good versus evil, while destroying property and harassing people ... ”

<and in the end:> “ ... when savior theater is done for the day, campus protestors have the best luxury of all: Someone else cleans up the mess.”

<Henderson is really describing protest as performance art– the same as often happens with typical social media.>

Brad Wilcox, University of Virginia, in Politico interview – a nice summary of “luxury beliefs”

<https://www.politico.com/newsletters/politico-nightly/2024/03/29/are-americans-marrying-enough-00149826>

**In your book you argue that liberal elites in media, academia and government have disparaged the institution of marriage publicly, while benefiting from it privately. Why, as you argue, are liberal elites “talking left but walking right?”**

There’s a tacit recognition that it’s better for people to get married: It gives them direction and stability and is better for the kids. Marriage is still recognized as providing real value to couples and families. But as our culture has moved in a more progressive direction in recent decades, there’s been an embrace of what I call the family diversity theory, which suggests that every kind of family form is equally valuable.

There’s also an assumption that what matters for Americans is structural, economic and policy factors rather than culture and family. Elites also tend to place a real premium placed on maximizing individual choices. ... I also don’t think people want to come down strongly in favor of a stable marriage for fear of being hypocritical or seeming to be judging their own families or friends.

This has all combined to make elites more likely to devalue and discount marriage in their public positions as journalists, professors, educators, policymakers, or Hollywood moguls, while often benefiting from it in their private lives.

Winters, Natl Catholic Reporter, 5Apr24 -- Why is reporting on religion and politics so lousy?

<https://www.ncronline.org/opinion/ncr-voices/why-reporting-religion-and-politics-so-lousy>

Trump's path to the White House is built on working-class resentment of condescending <dismissive, contemptuous> elites

Trumpian populism is about many things, but one of them is this: working-class people rebelling against administrators. It is about people who want to lead lives of freedom, creativity and vitality, who find themselves working at jobs, sending their kids to schools and visiting hospitals, where they confront “an immense and tutelary power” (Tocqueville’s words) that is out to diminish them.

David Brooks, NYTimes, 18Jan24, *Death by a Thousand Paper Cuts*