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Fear and Loathing in the California Gold Rush

or how the middle class learned to stop worrying and love the Dandy.

The California Gold Rush is a strange tale of lost dreams and mind-blowing debauchery. To tell this tale without paying special attention to the class conflicts it resolved and the people the gold hungry forty-niners left behind would be a ludicrous and vicious hypocrisy. During the Second Great Awakening the middle class lost their god-given right to fart, spit, get drunk and screw whores. While at first they seemed to take this horrendous change in value system lying down it soon became clear that the middle class was none too happy about this new Victorian set of values. These newly awakened middle class men were about to take one last shot at brass ring of united depravity and decadence. These men were desperate and deranged gamblers about to bet the family farm on a long shot. This last ill-advised wager was the California Gold Rush and like all good contests no seer nor soothsayer could predict the success or failure of this attempt until the final act had come to a close and the fat lady had sung her last little ditty.

To say that the middle class were the big losers of the Great Awakening and the Market Revolution is probably the understatement of the decade. Previous to the Market Revolution of 1825-1865 the middle class were hard drinking, hard working artisan craftsmen who took pride in their work. Hatters took pride in every hat that they made.¹ Each hat was an individual creation made on their own time. The craftsmen sold the

fruits of his labor directly and enjoyed all the profits and pride that labor could provide. The Market Revolution changed all that. These proud craftsmen could not compete with the roaring efficiency of the factory system. Their artisan system soon collapsed like the once great Roman Empire. What rose to replace the artisan system was the modern leviathan of capitalist industry. A system of large factories chasing large profits. These artisan workers were drafted to help build this system and many of them became clerks and managers in this new factory system. Separated from physical labor and detached from the act of creation these clerks were none too pleased with their unfortunate change of status. While the middle class were still reeling from the loss of their artisan system the Second Great Awakening, beginning in the early 1820s, took their society by storm and drastically changed their value system. The values of this new middle class would become synonymous with shame and would the middle class would be forced to abandon drinking, gambling and swearing, activities that had formerly been part of everyday life.² The new ideals of this society would be self-control and suppression of self-expression, reminding one of the uptight values of the Victorian Era. Out of these uptight middle class values came the stereotype of the Dandy. The Dandy is a weak, feminine, self repressed and over civilized middle class character. The Dandy is comical because despite the fact he is trying to be something he is not. Most Dandy characters are merely clerks during the day, but by night, they act with strict middle class manners generally learned from middle class etiquette manuals.³ The worst part of being a Dandy was the horrible conflict of values. During the day, the new profit-based economy forced them to cheat and lie to get to the top, a direct contradiction to their newly awakened middle class values of honesty and piety. The value contradictions and the fact that the Dandies were

acting shows their lack of authenticity. Authenticity is a very important thing, not just for currency or hand-crafted figurines, but for class-consciousness. The middle class knew that they were putting on airs; they knew that they were un-authentic and thus their class-consciousness was one based upon self-loathing.

The self-loathing of the rising middle class is exceptionally lucid in George Foster's book *New York by Gas-Light*. Foster illustrates this self-loathing inadvertently when telling the story of the Bowery b'hoy. The b'hoy was usually a youthful member of the working class, with poor upbringing and spent his leisure time drinking, visiting prostitutes and attending cockfights. Foster attempts to vilify the b'hoy for his garrulous attitude by describing him as rough, rude and profane and states that in "the b'hoy there is little, truly, to elicit our admiration."⁴ Foster's words may be a bold declaration, but they also illustrate a typical middle class illusion. Foster may act disgusted at the actions of the b'hoy, but soon it becomes clear that Foster actually harbors a furtive desire for the freedoms of the b'hoy. Foster later explains that "we see in those [b'hoys] the very traits which we are sometimes almost inclined to consider intolerable, the mere exuberant and undisciplined activity of qualities the most useful and noble."⁵ The obvious contradiction between "little to admire" and "useful and noble" is a vicious whirlpool from which Foster and the middle class never seem to realize that they've fallen into. However, fortunately for Foster he continues and eventually comes out the other side of the tunnel by continuing to applaud the positive qualities of this un-admirable character. He recalls the noble actions of the firemen who "work like Titans hour after hour at the brakes, standing knee-deep in ice and mud, with perhaps icicles freezing from their fingers and a calcined wall toppling above their heads."⁶ Foster's disgust and distaste has soon been

transformed into envy and jealousy directed towards the b'hoy for his hard work and dedication and more importantly his authenticity. Although he may be crude, rough and rude, the b'hoy is not repressed and subconsciously Foster and the middle class recognize this fact. The b'hoy is brash and speaks his mind without thinking of the consequences. In this lack of repression, we see the power of the working class. Power that is not stagnant, but that is constantly on the rise.

Based upon Foster's depiction of the working class it is clear that the working class is the dominant class when it comes to social power. Foster waxes poetically about upstairs drinking saloons stating that: "each man is furnished with a glass of hot toddy or whisky punch, and carries a cigar desperately clipped between his teeth and elevated at an angle of forty-five degrees, --like the telescope on the side-walk pointed at the full moon"⁷ While Foster later attempts to undermine this poetic description by explaining that these saloons are "seminaries of dissipation and primary schools of debauchery"⁸ Foster is merely paying lip service his master, the middle class morality. Foster is deeply excited by the debauchery that the lower class are engaging and has dedicated an entire book to a study of their debauchery that sometimes crosses the line between idle curiosity and lurid voyeurism. What is even more telling is the popularity of Foster's book during the time period, illustrating that many others in the middle class felt similarly excited. Throughout *New York by Gas-Light* Foster glorifies the working class. They are free to do what they like, whether it be gambling, drinking or even visiting brothels so revolting that Foster cannot even describe for fear it would offend the middle class morality of his readers.

The working class tower over the middle class so completely that the middle class should not even venture into working class neighborhoods, like the Bowery in New York or they will be robbed blind by street-smart con men. This power and the fear that drives it is clearly shown when Foster tells us the story of young Zerubbabel. Zerubbabel is a young middle class man from out of town who visits New York City and makes the horrendous mistake of wandering into the Bowery. Despite his middle class social status, Zerubbabel is quickly taken in by confidence men who convince him to entrust his pocketbook to the "Chief of Police". Having deprived poor Zerubbabel of his money, they then convince him to wager his watch on of "thimble-rig" (which appears from Foster's description to be a thimble based version of three card monty). When Zerubbabel accuses these rouges of cheating him, which they no doubt were, a brawl quickly ensues and Zerubbabel wakes up in the street being dragged by two men. The two men are policemen and Zerubbabel then spends the evening in jail having been deprived of both his pocketbook and now his watch. The highlight of the story is at the end when he is asked if he has any change. Zerubbabel "put his hand in his pocket, then in his breast, and replied bitterly—'No! that gosh-blamed Chief of Police has got every cent!'"⁹ Zerubbabel an obvious representation of the middle class Dandy has been taken for everything that he carried with him into the city and he still has not figured out that it was all a swindle. For Foster to print such an obviously Dandy-bashing story and for the book to still be popular shows the incredibly low self-esteem of the middle class. The middle class does not challenge the validity of the Dandy stereotype, they simply accept it. This acceptance shows the incredible power of the working class. The middle class

has so much respect for the working class icons of b'hoys and g'hals that they persistently mock their own dandified selves.

The growing power of the working class is also shown by the growth of unionism and the writing of the Communist Manifesto. The working class are experiencing their own kind of great awakening. An awakening of class-consciousness. The workers of the world plan to unite, and this idea terrifies the middle class and with good reason. If the workers had an organized political voice to add to their already looming moral superiority (superior due to lack of morals) they could completely destroy the middle class. The middle class are already seeing the effect of this burgeoning working class unity in the growing number of strikes. The most frightening thing about the growing working class unity is that the middle class is well aware of the fact that is further illuminated by Marx and that is that if the workers of the world do unite, there will be nothing the middle class will be able to do to stop it. The working class lack fear and accept their social standing. It is this lack of fear combined with the rise of working class that will terrify the middle class and send them off on one hell of a trip.

The gold rush is clearly a middle class attempt to regain what they have lost in the transition to the market economy. The middle class was engaged in a great deal of fear and loathing. They feared the rising working class and loathed their own middle class values that caused their loss of power. They hoped by journeying out West they would be able to remove some of their ethical baggage and regain their authenticity by contact with tough miners and hard labor. Unfortunately, for the middle class, gold was not plentiful and their journey to nirvana would soon become a bad trip full of insanity and despair.

The gold rush was not the first attempt by the middle class to escape from the condition of Dandyism. Richard Henry Dana a Harvard educated Bostonian found himself wishing to escape from "the depressing situation of inactivity at home."¹⁰ Dana joins a voyage around Cape Horn to the Pacific and by bonding with his crewmates and reveling in "hard work" and "wormy food" he was able to escape from middle class Dandyism and return to Boston rejuvenated.¹¹ Dana's adventure and rejuvenation illustrates several important things about the middle class Dandy. The new middle class was clearly not pleased with their new status as Dandies and wished to do whatever was possible to successfully flee from Dandyism. Dana's adventure and the success of his transformation proved to many middle class Dandies that the key to their salvation lay in the healing power of an adventure. Many middle class men were desperate to go on such an adventure to be freed from Dandyism. The gold rush was a perfect opportunity for these middle class Dandies to rebel against their newly acquired middle class values and regain their rough, rude and most importantly masculine roots.

It is this conflict between moralistic values and economic reality that led many of the middle class to seek a new beginning in the utopia of California. Rumors of the Gold Rush spread quickly throughout the new literate middle class. Pamphlets like *Three Weeks in the Gold Mines* secretly written by George Foster spread three main points about California: "first, gold was everywhere and finding it was easy; second, the region's miners were good companions, not competitors; and third, the life in the gold camps was perfectly happy."¹² This idea of a utopian society where competition was unnecessary was the ideal solution to the moralistic quandary of these middle class men. If there was such an abundance of gold that no competition was necessary they could earn a living

without having to break their moral code and cheat to get ahead. Additionally by working hand in hand with these miners who were "good companions", they could get in touch with their working class roots and shed this curse of Dandyism. While a simple man would realize that if gold really was that abundant it would not be rare and thus not be valuable, none of the prospective miners came to this conclusion. This lack of scrutiny on their part would lead to many people being fooled by this utopian ruse and would lead them to realize that there was no pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

The gold rush was both a complete disaster and a surprising success for the middle class. The middle class had hoped that the abundance of gold would allow them to support their families but not have to engage in the cutthroat business strategies that dominated the new market economy, but this was not the case. Upon their arrival to California, the middle class quickly learned that the economy of the Gold Rush was no different from the economy they left behind on the East Coast. Gold was not abundant and the only way to succeed was rely on the immoral tactics of deception and deceit. Tactics that signified a major break with the values of the Great Awakening. This unfortunate economic similarity left the middle class to discover the literal meaning of Utopia, which is "no place".

The middle class did succeed in their attempts to get back to their lower class roots and performed a great deal of immoral and violent actions in what historian Brian Roberts called "a wild, free, disorderly, grotesque society".¹³ The formerly uptight and repressed middle class able to leave their families and their morals behind on the East coast. This great distance allowed the forty-niners to behave like drunken fraternity brothers set loose upon an unsuspecting Las Vegas hotel over spring break. The extents

to which insanity and wanton destruction could be pushed to would rise to new peaks in the California Gold Rush.

Additionally the Latin exposure that some forty-niners achieved in their trip around Cape Horn helped them prepare to let these repressed feelings run wild and free. Zachary Taylor's men described these women as having "well-developed magnificent figures" and wearing "as little clothing as you can fancy."¹⁴ While the lack of shame of these Latina women may have been offensive to the middle class morality of the forty-niners it was clear that the men were enjoying being offended and most likely attempted to be offended by these "heaving bosoms" as much as possible.

However extreme the failure of the middle class may seem, it is clear that the middle class was successful in learning from their mistakes. The middle class came to accept their place in the world as over civilized Dandies. With this new acceptance, the middle class would be able to unite and stop the working class from successfully rising against them.

The Gold Rush held many other lessons besides the failure of the middle class to break free of the repression of Dandyism. The businesses of the east that the forty-niners left behind did not collapse as one might expect, instead they thrived. Charlotte Prince, wife of William Prince, in particular molded perfectly into this new role of business manager. While her husband was in California, she ran a very successful nursery in Long Island and under her diligent rule the nursery not only survived her husband's absence, but also actually thrived. Prince even managed to continue working with a broken ankle and expanded the business by requesting that her husband send home exotic seeds and bulbs from California to further expand the selection of the nursery.¹⁵ The wives were

left in charge of the businesses, because the middle class already had reason to distrust their workers. One would assume because women were the epitome of middle class values that they would fail to adapt to the lying and cheating necessary to successfully run a business, but this was simply not the case. Many women simply fell back upon the system of kinship relations. Historians would like to make you believe that the system of kinship relations that was the foundation of the economy during the time of Martha Ballard had completely disappeared following the market revolution, but this was clearly not true.¹⁶

The Gold Rush indeed one whacked journey for the middle class. A journey filled with sin, decadence and failed prospects. The middle class hoped to recapture the moral freedoms they lost during the Second Great Awakening and the Market Revolution. A return to the good old days of hard drinking and hard working. Unfortunately, their dreams of drunken freedom were nothing more than a bright shining lie. There was no light at the end of the tunnel for these poor fools and they were only allowed to go home with the consolation prize. They had bet the farm and lost, but sometimes only in defeat can victory truly be found. The middle class rallied around their failure and learned from their mistakes. They learned to accept their dandified status and through the outburst of freedom that was the Gold Rush, they were able to establish a therapeutic break from their self-loathing. They returned to the East with their tails between their legs, beaten but not broken. The fat lady had sung and the curtain had fell, but this is not the last we would hear from the middle class.

¹ Brian Roberts, Class Notes.

² Roberts, Brian. *American Alchemy: The California Gold Rush and Middle-Class Culture* (London, University of North Carolina Press, 2000) 121.

³ Roberts, 3.

⁴ Foster, George C. *New York by Gas-Light* (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1990) 170.

⁵ Foster, 171.

⁶ Foster, 172.

⁷ Foster, 105.

⁸ Foster, 106.

⁹ The entire lurid tale of Zerubbabel is told in great detail in Foster's chapter entitled "The Dog-Watch". Foster 178-188.

¹⁰ Dana as quoted in Roberts, 58

¹¹ Roberts, 59

¹² Foster as quoted in Roberts, 61.

¹³ Roberts, 197.

¹⁴ Roberts, 135.

¹⁵ Roberts, 187-189.

¹⁶ Ulrich, Laurel. *A Midwife's Tale*. (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1990)