

All Countries Have Underbellies
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For the past 10,000 years, since our ancestors gathered into settled communities based on farming and trade, the pecking order of power was: rulers (or one ruler) on top, priests dealing with the gods, soldiers defending the community under the leadership of the ruler, merchants and traders bringing in the money, and laborers doing the heavy work of farming and digging irrigation systems or roads. Below that last group were women and slaves (mostly the same thing). India's ancient caste system is the best representative of this arrangement.

The difference between caste and class, however, is that in caste, members can never change. They cannot intermarry, cannot be promoted out of it, cannot escape its occupational niche. Civilizations with a class system, however, permit movement. In medieval Europe, a peasant boy could be educated by the Catholic Church, become a priest, and even rise to Church leadership. A peasant girl could become a nun, and her talent could raise her to leadership of an order. A clever peasant could run away and become a merchant or soldier.

All civilizations have suffered periodic rebellion, the masses attempting to remove or kill their "betters." These rebellions usually failed because the rulers had much more muscle at their disposal. But in some civilizations, such as China, either misrule or bad luck (famine) could signal to the masses that their emperor had lost the "mandate of heaven," and must be replaced.

The world today is certainly a different place. In the best of societies, class differences are minimal and representative government (Liberal Democracy with checks and balances) works well. The Scandinavian countries do this best, all of them small in population, mostly uniform in ethnicity and language, and trained to participate in their governance. Some have even gone beyond historic norms in electing women to govern them.

But in today's larger countries, the revolt of the underbelly against their leadership is in full mode. Civil wars and rebellions are seen everywhere, and in some cases, the downtrodden prevail over their richer, more powerful, leaders. Previously unrepresented natives of Latin American countries (Ecuador, Venezuela) have risen to power, predictably becoming more corrupt than their elite predecessors.

My favorite example of how this works took place in the Middle Ages, which Shakespeare demonstrated, in Henry VI, one of his history plays. He gives us a memorable character taken from real history, Jack Cade, who leads a rebellion in London, heading for the homes of the elites who ruled then. He is a master rabble-rouser, telling the mob that he is the illegitimate son of a king, and promises that his rebel army will finally take what is theirs. He promises them maidenheads (virgins to rape), sewers flowing with good wine, and revenge against their unjust rulers.

He loses, and is slaughtered while running away.

Today's "underbellies," however, are not so easily identified. Those at President Trump's rallies, wearing "Make America Great Again" hats or tee-shirts labeled "read the transcript," are the most obvious candidates. Those underbellies are not well educated, and they resent the "elites" (educated professionals), whom they think look down on them. They are the low-hanging fruit.

More concerning are those with educations sufficient to know the difference between facts and conspiracy theories. Nice middle-class women who rebel against inoculating their babies against deadly diseases are preferring conspiracy theories to modern medicine, with danger to the entire society.

Educated citizens who once respected science and scientists now scoff at "global warming" and reject any attempt to address an imminent danger.

The worst of the underbellies are those rebelling violently against fellow citizens they regard as depriving them of their status as male and white. They refuse to respect those who govern them or who are essential professionals if they are female, Black, Asian, Hispanic, or Jewish. They will follow anyone who feeds their rage.

Worst of all are educated lawyers or cynical representatives willing to enable a demagogue president to break the law. It is up to the law-abiding and decent among us to bring this underbelly to account. Without rule of law, we have no democracy.

688 words

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