

# The Chauffeur's Dilemma

The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting left behind. Why don't more people stick up for fellow citizens facing hard times? Because, argues **Arlie Hochschild**, empathy is being squeezed from the American way of life.



Brad Aldridge

HURRICANE KATRINA HAS PROMPTED a long overdue conversation about poverty in America. But poverty existed long before televised images of bereft victims re-started our hesitant national conversation about it. What has blocked honest talk about poverty in America and around the world—and what does so still—is revealed in the story of the chauffeur's dilemma.

Suppose for a moment that a chauffeur drives a sleek limousine through the streets of New York, a millionaire in the back seat. Out of the window, the millionaire spots a homeless woman and her two children huddled in the cold, sharing a loaf of bread. He orders the chauffeur to stop the car. The chauffeur opens the passenger door for the millionaire, who walks over to the

mother and snatches the loaf from her. He slips back into the car, and they drive on, leaving behind a baffled crowd of sidewalk witnesses. For his part, the chauffeur feels qualms about what his master has done, because unlike his employer, he has recently known hard times himself. But he drives on nonetheless.

Absurd as it seems, we are actually witnessing this scene as you read. Or more exactly, about half of us are in the role of the chauffeur opening the door for the millionaire, and the other half are watching from the sidewalk, bewildered and dismayed.

Commentators on the left and right seem to agree that George W. Bush won the last presidential election by making

himself a wartime president—though conservatives point to terrorism and our need for tough leadership, liberals to deceit and an unseemly rush into an unnecessary war. Both sides focus on Bush's role abroad. But I wonder if something hasn't been going on behind the back of the war—something in the way of a private moral deal between the millionaire and the chauffeur. It's a deal that has already left the world a lot meaner, but solves an emotional problem for some people who, given the way their own lives are being squeezed, find themselves with less empathy left over for others outside their social circle. We need to understand this empathy squeeze to grasp why so many Americans think and act like the millionaire's chauffeur when they are not, in fact, in his employ.

We might think the chauffeur's story too extreme a way of portraying our current political state, but consider the bread that has actually changed hands between 2000 and 2004 or, given Bush's plans and experts' predictions, are likely to change hands soon. Recent tax and budget cuts are together the biggest governmental blow to the poor and boon to the rich in many years, so it's worth getting very clear on the real numbers. Let's start with this:

- On average, the 2001 tax cut has already given \$93,500 to every millionaire. By 2010, it is estimated that 47 percent of the benefits of Bush's 2001-03 tax cuts will have gone to the best-off one percent of Americans (those with an average annual income of \$1,491,000).
- On average, the 2001 tax cut has so far given \$217 to every middle-income person. By 2010, it is estimated that two percent of the benefits of the tax cut will have gone to the bottom 20 percent of Americans (with an average income of \$12,200).
- During one or more years since 2000, 82 of the largest American corporations—including General Motors, El Paso Energy, and, before the scandal broke, Enron—paid no income tax.

In the meantime, the poor are being bled. Long-term unemployment has risen while the Bush administration has cut long-term unemployment benefits. Most American cities are looking at 15 percent cuts in already bare-boned budgets, which will close more libraries, cancel more after-school and ESL programs, and further

limit accessibility to health clinics. Already, according to the non-partisan Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the loss of federal funds from the Bush tax cuts in 2006 will mean \$925 million less for both Head Start and childhood education.

These cuts, combined with more proposed budget cuts starting in 2006, will significantly reduce programs serving low-income people over the next five years. By 2010, elementary and secondary education funding will be cut by \$4.6 billion, or 12 percent; 670,000 fewer women and children will receive assistance through the Women, Infants, and Children Supplemental Nutrition Program; Head Start, which currently serves about 906,000 children, will serve 100,000 fewer of them; and 370,000 fewer low-income families, elderly people, and people with disabilities will receive rental assistance with rental vouchers. The Bush administration proposes to cut housing and community-development aid by more than 30 percent in 2006 alone.

In truth, the story of the millionaire and the homeless woman is hidden in plain sight, camouflaged as “tax relief” (money to the rich) and “budget reform” (money from the poor).

We can understand, perhaps, why the millionaire, powerful enough to satisfy any desire, might want to claim another’s bread. *But why does the chauffeur open the door?* Why do lower and middle-income Americans approve tax cuts that favor the rich and budget cuts that deprive the poor?

One reason may be that over the last three decades, Americans have been repeatedly told that government—the military aside—is grossly wasteful and hopelessly inefficient. So why not pocket a little money yourself, no matter who gets the lion’s share, if it’s being wasted anyway? The message has been steady and strong and it would be surprising if people didn’t lend it an ear.

But by itself, can anti-government propaganda account for acquiescence to such an extraordinary transfer from poor to rich? Most Americans used to believe, after all, that the government could help people achieve the American Dream. In 1970, when America had significantly fewer homeless children and millionaires, the government helped people more and taxpayers begrudged it less. Most people thought public programs were important and good. They believed we should be a middle-class society, without much in the way of an over-class or under-class—and they believed their government could foster

this ideal. Most Christians among them thought taxes on the rich and programs for the poor expressed a Christian ideal—sharing. For most Americans, these were also still economic good times.

Attitudes toward government and sharing have changed since then—even among those who would stand to benefit the most. When asked in a 2003 Roper Poll, “Do you think this (Bush) tax plan benefits mainly the rich or benefits everyone?” 56 percent of blue-collar men who answered that the plan favors the rich *still* supported it. For blue-collar men living on annual family incomes of \$30,000 or less, about half supported it. Apart from the super-rich, who do overwhelmingly vote Republican, an interesting pattern emerges: The more fragile your grip on the American dream, the more pro-Bush you are likely to be. So cultural influences on emotion are clearly at play here.

Indeed, politics—its ideas, vocabulary, and images—provide a way to re-channel the most powerful resource of all: human feeling. In the face of mounting problems at home, George Bush has re-directed fear and anger outward to foreign enemies and rechanneled hope of help away from the government.

## The empathy squeeze

Bush’s political talk also channels a feeling more precious still: empathy. Bush’s tax and budget cuts—the millionaire and the loaf—evoke real moral qualms in many a chauffeur who nonetheless drives on. Most people, however troubled their own lives, feel some empathy for the poor. So how can Bush take from the poor what few governmental resources they receive, while avoiding a cry of protest?

By exacerbating the pain of an economic transition and exploiting the empathy squeeze that results from it. That is, Bush’s can’t-help-you government worsens people’s headaches, which make them less prone, in turn, to empathize with the problems of the less fortunate. Then he offers them a way around a possible bad conscience.

To back up a bit, a lot of families feel like they are in a squeeze—between their hopes and prospects. Their *hope* is based on the American belief in progress and upward mobility: “the American dream.” Most Americans have a strong belief in individual progress. They “identify up” with people more rich, famous, and lucky than they, rather than “identifying down” with people more poor, obscure, and unlucky than they.

However underpaid, our chauffeur dreams of being a millionaire and counts his blessings that he’s got a job the homeless woman wishes she had. If others can make it to the top, why not him too?

At the same time, the *prospects* of many people are linked to a disappearing industrial sector, and a dearth of new jobs that pay as well as the old ones. Their prospects have thus dimmed with the declining earning power of men and reduced job security. Added to this is a growing split between rich and poor that leaves many families stranded in the shrinking middle. So, many Americans are hoping for one thing but bracing for another.

This is a new situation. Real earnings rose every decade for 150 years before 1970—including the decade of the Great Depression. (This held true for men and women, but because more men than women favor Bush, I focus here on men.) As University of Massachusetts economist Rick Wolff points out, however tough a man’s job or long his hours, he could always look to a rising paycheck.

But after 1970, the real earning power of male wages stopped rising, and as a result, Wolff argues, two things happened. First, life at home became tougher. The divorce rate climbed to 50 percent. Wives took paid jobs—and this in a society that had given little thought to paid parental leave or family friendly policies. For many men as well, hours of work rose. From 1973 to 1996, average hours per worker went up 19 percent. Since the 1970s, rises have occurred in involuntary job loss, in work absences due to illness or disability, and in debt and bankruptcy.

Since 1970, the social class structure of America—until then shaped like an orange with a skirt—has begun to look more like an hourglass. Here I add to Wolff’s story. Today a few jobs in the much touted “new economy” will get you to the top while the vast majority land you at the bottom of that hourglass. Jobs in the middle are harder to find. This means for our chauffeur that, despite his high hopes, it is much harder to get to the top and much easier to fall to the bottom.

This social class squeeze has given rise to an empathy squeeze. That is, many people respond to this crisis by drawing into their own communities, their own families, themselves—and drawing away from people they don’t know or don’t identify with. They have narrowed their empathy boundaries in a way that coincides with the hourglass America George Bush offers us.

If a man just got fired, or demoted, or if he can't make his house payments, if his wife is leaving him, if his son is failing in school, he feels like he's got enough on his hands. He can't afford to feel sorry for so many other people. He's trying to be a good dad, a helpful neighbor, and to help those in his own social circle. But given his own worries, he's tempted to narrow the circle of empathy to those like himself. Pay a tax for a homeless mother in another city? Charity begins at home.

We were all moved by the immediate hospitality and donations to the victims of Katrina. But why, we might ask, don't we see similar displays of empathy for people hit by the unnatural disasters of job loss and disappearing social services?

Many who supported George Bush may feel the same real qualms about the homeless mother and her hungry children. That is, the chauffeur in our story may not want to just "drive on." In his heart of hearts, he feels badly that he has put such space between himself and the homeless woman's plight. If he goes to a Christian church, he wants to be a generous Christian. And here is where George Bush and his social issues team make a stealthy empathy grab.

How? They "privatize" the chauffeur's morality in two ways. They do so first by redefining "good" as a matter of judging, not of giving. The chauffeur is offered the chance to feel good by disapproving of gay sex or marriage, while quietly setting aside the idea of helping the poor, the disabled, the mentally ill, and the unemployed. More important, Bush and his social issues team propose the idea of giving through private, religious channels, and through this they offer moral cover for the idea of giving less. We will stop giving to the less fortunate as citizens through our government, the idea is, and start giving as parishioners through our churches. But, quite apart from this as a bid to expand the fold, it is a way of offering moral cover while one substitutes a lake with a drop of water.

Rather than fixing the problems that are making people anxious, President Bush appeals to the very feelings of anxiety, frustration, and fear that insecurity creates—and which his policies exacerbate—while deflecting their hopes away from any real government help. He makes life quietly harder at home while pointing a finger of blame to one enemy after another abroad. He is, I think, deregulating American capitalism with one hand while regulating the fear and anger it evokes with the other.

The fervor that in the 1930s led to massive demonstrations, strikes, and eventually W.P.A. projects, unemployment insurance, and, of course, our social security system, now goes into blockading abortion clinics and writing Darwin out of school textbooks. The inner city homeless, the disabled, the 15 percent of American children who don't get enough to eat each day become—if they don't make it to the chauffeur's church—part of the glimpsed world he drives by *even as* he feels morally good. Bush offers him morality on the cheap. This deal, first struck between right-wing anti-tax interests and evangelicals back in the 1970s, turned out to be far more than a leader-to-leader handshake. It has had widespread appeal, offering a way to satisfy the chauffeur's better angel while getting his okay to take the bread.

## The religious turn

As economic conditions have grown worse, Rick Wolff notes, membership in non-traditional protestant churches rose. Among these are some churches which promote the belief that the world is coming to an end and that, following this, Christians will ascend to heaven in a Rapture, and all others will suffer in hell. Those who hold to these beliefs are not a minor group. According to a recent Gallup poll, 36 percent of Americans believe the world is coming to an end, and the series of 12 Christian novels entitled *Left Behind* have sold more than 62 million copies.

Given the situation a lot of people are in, I can begin to understand—though not in the believer's terms—why the idea of a Rapture has taken hold. There really *is* an end of one world—the industrial world of the well-paid blue collar worker. It is a world to which he has already sacrificed his time and from which the promised reward has disappeared. Belief in the Rapture provides, I would speculate, an escape from anxiety over a very huge loss. It offers the image of magical social mobility, a moving "up"—"progress." It opens to view a split between haves and have-nots—with no one in the middle. And in this vision, those caught in a social class squeeze are at last securely on top. In this light, the Rapture makes sense. It absorbs the sting of being hard-working losers in a winner's culture. But, of course, in a just society, there need be no losers. Our government could get busy establishing a soup-to-nuts job retraining program that eases—rather than fatalistically pastes over—the painful transition from an industrial to a service

economy. But George Bush has cut funding for job retraining and cut unemployment insurance.

## Selling the aura of empathy

If the idea of giving is to move from the public to the private sphere, it makes a certain sense that empathy, however squeezed, might also be bought and sold. Remember that after 9/11, President Bush responded to an outpouring of civic goodwill by telling us it was our patriotic duty to shop.

"You want to feel like you're good?" companies increasingly ask. "We can sell you good." Attuned to an opportunity for brand enhancement, many companies—liberal no less than conservative—have responded to the new cue. The Gap, for example, is offering \$20 teddy bears on the promise that a portion of the money will go toward giving 70,000 coats to poor boys and girls in our country. Nike, Build-A-Bear Workshop, and the Discovery Channel stores are now selling \$1 Lance Armstrong Live Strong bracelets to finance cancer research. John Morris, a retail analyst interviewed by *New York Times* reporter Tracie Rozhon last year, saw in these shopping patterns a new moral mood: "This is a born-again Christmas, the first year I have seen such an outpouring of charitable feelings. And while this is not a religious thing per se, it does have echoes of the heartland."

Shopping with a moral tag is an inspirational idea. But by itself, it cannot return the bread. The Bush government hand-over to the rich is enormous, the commercial transfer to the poor miniscule. Given this basic fact, born-again shopping becomes another part of a bad-faith answer to the chauffeur's dilemma. We desperately need a better answer. In the meantime, perhaps we can remind the chauffeur that it is within his power to stop the car—to tax the millionaire and get the homeless mother on her feet. Otherwise, the deal Bush is brokering between millionaire and chauffeur will impoverish the chauffeur—in his pocketbook and in his soul.

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