

## The Doomed Middle Class

by Steve Donoghue via claire - Christian Science Monitor *Friday, Jun 29 2018, 11:34pm*  
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### Squeezed: Why Families Can't Afford America

*The following essay applies to all western nations to a greater or lesser extent. A new feudalism has been emerging over the past few decades characterised by a new mega-wealthy elite aristocracy and everyone else reduced to indentured (debt) serfs by elite design.*

Alissa Quart's new book *Squeezed: Why Our Families Can't Afford America* sports a cover blurb by Barbara Ehrenreich, whose 2001 book "Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America" became a bestseller by reporting on the deepening financial crisis facing the American middle class. People born in the year Ehrenreich's book came out have grown up in the darkening world her book describes, and "Squeezed" can easily be seen as a follow-up, a front-lines report on that darkening world.

Quart opens with the story of her own pregnancy, which happened after she and her husband had for years been enjoying the modest professional freedoms of "doing what they want" and which came as a series of eye-opening financial shocks. She quickly realizes that they are in no position to absorb the sheer costs of having a child; before she and her husband find more secure and better-paying jobs, they had been members of what Quart terms "the Middle Precariat," highly educated people whose labor has become irregular and contingent, often entailing a good deal of unpaid "shadow work," and all only barely sufficient to keep up the facade of middle class respectability. "These people believed that their training or background would ensure that they would be properly, comfortably middle-class," she writes, "but it has not worked out that way."

In a series of in-depth and deeply personal interviews, Quart delves into the lives of some of these people - an adjunct professor who must use food stamps to feed herself and her daughter, despite working constantly, harried caregivers who work so much they barely see their own children, and half a dozen others caught in the endless cycle of "running just to stay in place."

Piece by piece, these interviews tell the story of the "gloomy revolution" that's taken place in the last 30 years between employers and employees. US workers are now expected to work inconsistent, often brutal hours (weekends, overnight, etc.) with far less security than their parents or grandparents had - fewer benefits, no pensions, and their dollar stretched thinner than ever to cover a steadily-rising cost of living. The people Quart meets are generally clear-eyed about their predicament, "desperately holding onto their status and trying to keep up appearances" but privately buried in debt and constantly, corrosively worried about how they'll survive another year or another month. They have marketable skills or college degrees, but every week their poverty forces them to choose between food and medicine for their children.

It all adds up to an almost smotheringly bleak picture of an America in which a two-income middle-class household can no longer afford to have children - in which the raising of a happy, healthy, well-educated next generation is solely the task of the very wealthy. Against this stark prognosis Quart can offer only faint counter-measures. She'd like much-expanded government subsidies for all aspects of parenthood and child-rearing, from guaranteed paid maternity leave to subsidized

daycare and elementary schooling; she points to countries like Iceland where such measures have greatly eased the burdens of the middle class. And less materially, she advocates a greater cultural honesty about the current grim realities in a country where, as one of her subjects puts it, everybody just reflexively considers themselves a temporarily embarrassed millionaire. "If our political and corporate cultures pit families against one another," she writes, "we can at least start to resist that by being frank about our position and our feelings about our position."

It's slim comfort. The kinds of parenting safety nets she describes will never be enacted in a country with America's staggering income gap, and there are plenty of American taxpayers who'd resist such measures in any case. "You knew with perfect clarity in 2008 that you couldn't in any way afford to care for and raise a child in America's economy, and you went ahead regardless," those taxpayers would say. "Now you have a toddler who's bankrupting you - why should I help to pay for your refusal to accept reality?"

Those taxpayers - and doubtless some of Quart's readers - will be annoyed by what she refers to as the unofficial mantra of her book: "it's not your fault." There's plenty of fault to go around in 'Squeezed,' from young professionals barely able to pay their monthly bills intentionally deciding to have children without any plan or even prospect of how to afford those astronomical added costs to a wider society that had allowed itself to drift into heartless plutocracy where the top 1 percent has more money than the bottom 50.

But regardless of where readerly sympathy falls, it's easy to agree with the stunned, exasperated sentiment of everybody in this book: It wasn't supposed to be this way.

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*[The trick is simple. Increase prices and costs of living incrementally while depressing real wage growth, which traditionally matched the increase in prices, but no more. As populations become more and more desperate to provide for their families people begin to compete to grab any low paid job available, which behaviour ensures continuing depressed wages. Unions were once the safeguard of all workers with their ability to paralyse industries, however, as history records the elite have undertaken every measure possible to weaken and eliminate all unions, white and blue collar.*

*So who is responsible for this worker disunity which allows elites to enslave entire populations? Have a guess! Nevertheless, we workers have always been able to unite and demand a fair share of available wealth. It's up to all of us to resist the new slavery by forming united groups fighting for a basic livable wage and wage increases to match price increases, that simple. It was done before as history records, and can be achieved again. No industry or business could survive without its workforce and therein is the power of a united work Force. Either that or remain divided and conquered (enslaved) -- there is NO middle ground.]*

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