

Winners and Losers

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Throughout the long and vainglorious history of civilization, there have always been winners and losers. One could make the case that a small percentage of winners and a preponderance of losers is a staple of civilization, that the very structure of so-called “civilized” societies and cultures is designed to produce that inequity almost invariably. This is so for a host of reasons, among them the advantages and disadvantages of class, birth, wealth, etc. The case could be made that this is a feature of human nature, rather than a glitch or a bug. Either way, it has serious consequences.

America’s founders made an attempt to change this, at least to some extent. Although men and property owners were clearly given preference (with women and chattel slaves excluded), the principle of equality was included in both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. America was to be a nation where the rule of law guaranteed that opportunity be distributed more widely among its population, so that winning and losing would be determined more by individual effort and merit than by the vagaries of birth.

That’s not to suggest that America was ever a country where — in reality — everyone was equal. We haven’t been, still aren’t, and don’t appear likely to move in that direction any time soon.

During the quarter-century following World War II, as America enjoyed its status as the world’s reigning superpower and richest nation on earth, the percentage of winners versus losers was roughly 50-50. If you were white and male, you had a pretty fair shot of being (or becoming) a winner. That 50-50 balance began to deteriorate in the 1970s, worsened during the 1980s and 90s, and has continue to skew even more dramatically since the current century began.

50-50 became 40-60, then 30-70, and now it looks to be about 20-80. In other words, 20% winners and 80% losers. In addition, the 600 Americans who comprise the never-before-seen “billionaire class” (all but 15 of whom are men) are, in the perverse logic of money-as-the-only-value-that-matters, the Ultimate Winners. They amount to 0.002% of the population.

The change in America (and in most other countries as well) toward fewer winners and many more losers didn’t happen by accident. It was engineered by the wealthy and powerful, the result of structures created in the society and in the marketplace that were enshrined into both law and practice, and were completely intentional.

In addition, the implied meaning of “winners and losers” has shifted. Those words might imply “more and less fortunate” or “more and less well-off in terms of financial holdings and social opportunities.” They may also imply “more and less *deserving*,” which, when taken to the extreme, becomes the metaphysical judgment “chosen by God” and “rejected by God.” Both these sets of meanings can always be found among human attitudes and beliefs. Some people lean toward the first implication, others lean toward the second. What differs over time is the proportion of one versus the other.

I’m not sure whether the proportions of each narrative have shifted significantly over my lifetime. Maybe, maybe not. What seems obvious to me, however, is that the coarsening of public discourse has made more acceptable social expression of the attitude/belief that some people are intrinsically undeserving. Entire groups are now commonly branded with the epithet “losers,” used derisively, as a pejorative, and almost always aimed at people seen to be different — “Them” rather than “Us.”

What worries me most is that so many Americans are apparently fine with the way things are — not just the winners, but a significant percentage of the losers as well. These people seem to see nothing wrong with the current version of the American Dream, where money is the only value that truly matters. Many of the losers yearn for fame and celebrity, which are seen as the quickest doorways to wealth, but are in fact the statistical equivalents of winning the lottery.

This whole phenomenon — fewer “winners” and more “losers” — is what happens when empires decline. The social fabric unravels. Decadence increases dramatically as the headlong pursuit of wealth, privilege, and social status infect the society from top to bottom. As the process accelerates, the failing empire enters ever more aggressively into steep decline, leading up to the final stages of collapse. A kind of numbing nihilism takes over, not just among the those at the top of the winners list, but among damn near everyone, losers included. It’s as if nothing matters anymore, at least nothing real or meaningful. *“Après moi, les deluge.”*

America is clearly a failing empire, as are many of the most powerful countries of the world. Russia has its oligarchs. China has a whole new class of moneyed royalty, replete with dynastic families in the becoming, with children who believe they’re the chosen ones. And they are, at least for awhile.

One important difference, perhaps the most significant, between the collapse of all previous empires throughout history and the coming collapse of America is that this time, we won’t just pass the baton the next rising empire but instead will take down the entire world with us. That is a tragedy of monumental proportions, in part because of its unfathomable scale, but also because it arose so recently and took so little time to accomplish. Over a mere 500 years, we humans have wrecked the planet. It’s downright breathtaking.

If that happens, then winning won’t matter, and everyone will end up losing.