HOW WELL YOU PLAY THE WAITING GAME SAYS A LOT ABOUT YOUR SOCIAL CLASS

The gardens are in for this year and now begins the waiting game that says more than you think about social class.

Gardening used to be a matter of planting a few trees, peonies, carrots and annuals to brighten up the corners. Now it's evening courses on landscape architecture, encyclopedic guides on flora, garden blueprints, water features, walls, pavings, pots, trellises, recycling, lights and, of course, hours at plant nurseries browsing. There is a great deal to learn about gardening as both science and culture, and wheelbarrows of money to be spent.

But other than fashion, how does gardening relate to social class? Well, gardening requires enormous tolerance for delayed gratification: you have to wait for things to grow. Planning a garden requires that you imagine the size, shape and colour of many plants and trees that will take years to reach maturity. A lot of knowledge, creativity and resources must be invested in the expectation of a full reward much later down the line.

The ability to imagine a better future, the desire to experience it, the willingness to invest in it and the patience to wait for it is, perhaps, the best single test of social class.

Twenty years ago, in his controversial book The Unheavenly City, Edward Banfield offered "future orientation" as a measure of social class. Personal aspirations, assumptions and habits—especially one’s time horizon—were, he argued, the real determinants of class. The further an individual looked into the future to set his goals, and the more an individual was willing to work without early return to reach those goals, the higher his social class.

(This thesis was so controversial when used to explain the troubled status of minorities in U.S. cities that Prof. Banfield was shouted off the University of Toronto campus when he came from Harvard to speak.)

In this context, someone who is addicted to immediate gratification of his appetites N defined as lower class, whatever his income. Someone who cannot understand the long-term consequences of his behaviour, good or bad, is lower class. Even someone who can foresee long-term consequences, but who lacks the will to fashion current behaviour so as to realize future benefits, is lower class.

A student from a poor family who gets up early to study German as part of his plan to qualify for the PhD program in history at Stanford is a member of the upper class. He does not have to wait for graduation and a higher income to qualify. As long as his future orientation is strong, and his willingness to invest in delayed returns is clear, he is exhibiting upper-class behaviour.

In contrast, a wealthy student with a strong appetite for immediate gratification, and who generally eschews self-denial now for rewards later, is a member of the lower class (and will probably fritter away his wealth over time—a wastrel).

Apply the principle to nations, and those nations with a penchant for long-range strategic planning at some cost to current consumption are likely to dominate regional or global affairs. Japan leaps to mind.

Future orientation—which is a longitudinal measure—is not the only measure of class. Breadth of experiences latitudinal measure—is another leading indicator. Travelling widely and by that, we must include travel among social classes

and subcultures, as well as places—is a necessary antidote to parochialism.[1] Parochialism deprives an individual of the references and comparisons that are essential to good judgment. Good judgment, in turn, is essential to membership in the upper class.

Just talking about social class offends many people who are properly concerned that individuals not be "pigeon-holed" and therefore oppressed by assumptions. Concern for discrimination can apply even to upper-class individuals, who may be pilloried on the assumption that they are, for example, self-centred. But concern for the abuse of understanding about social class is no rationale for ignorance of its nature.

And you thought you were just planting roses.

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[1]parochialism—selfishness or narrowness of opinions or views