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Capitalists of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your post-industrial leisure.

The Virtue of Prosperity: Finding Values in an Age of Techno-Affluence

By Dinesh D'Souza

254 pages, The Free Press, \$26

Super-Cannes

By J.G. Ballard

392 pages, Flamingo, £17

DINESH D'SOUZA'S NEW book, *The Virtue of Prosperity*, makes a claim that I'd probably consider crazy if I did not agree with it so much. Mr. D'Souza believes that if "in the past two hundred years the great achievement of the modern West was to create a middle class, allowing the common man to escape poverty and live in relative comfort...now the United States is ready to perform an even greater feat: it is well on its way to creating the first mass affluent class in world history...Call it the overclass...already large and growing so fast that perhaps one day it will outnumber the peasants."

I don't think this is foolish at all. If the industrial revolution is a relevant comparison, we should recall that in the early decades of the 19th century, the societies of the developing European nations largely retained agrarian, nearly feudal characteristics. Fifty years of successive technological shifts—with the steam engine, the railroad, the factory, the steamboat, the telegraph, and electricity—swept that away. Mr. D'Souza's thesis—since it's both heterodox and based on good evidence all around us—can be counted on to irritate not just many of his regular conservative constituency at *The Weekly Standard*, but also readers of liberal magazines like *The New Republic*. Nevertheless, he marshals pages of supporting figures.

For instance, in 1982 a trifling \$100 million would have made you one of *Forbes's* 400 richest Americans. The wealthiest person then, shipping magnate Daniel Ludwig, possessed \$2 billion; the total worth of all U.S. billionaires amounted to merely \$15 billion. Today, Bill Gates's wealth exceeds the gross domestic product of Ireland or New Zealand, although, as market swings can create greater fluctuations in individual wealth than in the GDP of small countries, occasionally the world's richest man may be Larry Ellison, who rings in ahead of Ecuador's GDP. After proceeding down the line of folks like

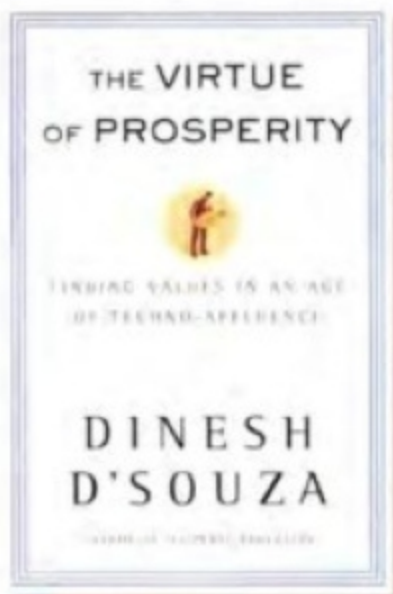
Michael Dell, we reach John Doerr and Vinod Khosla, who, with a paltry \$1 billion, still score higher than the GDPs of Monaco and Greenland.

But is the United States creating the first mass affluent class in world history? Let's assess the rank and file of America's wealthy. Some statistics I've collected may shed more light than Mr. D'Souza's estimates, which, being based on IRS figures from 1987, are quite conservative. (As he notes: "We all know that Americans routinely seek to minimize their reported incomes.") In 1996, 1 of every 36 workers was a millionaire, according to the Texas Banking Association, with millionaires totaling 3.5 million out of about 126 million workers. By 1998's end, according to the VIP Forum in Washington, D.C., 6.7 million households possessed a net worth of \$1 million or more, up from 5.3 million households in 1997.

So that's the larger pattern. And it doesn't only suggest that things ain't what they used to be. In broader terms, it's reminiscent of the old adage about China: for 40 centuries nothing happened, and then in a single century everything happened. As it turns out, the graph of Chinese history is representative of human history as a whole: until relatively recently, the very idea of progress often didn't exist. Then capitalism and technological innovation took hold in the 16th century and have accelerated exponentially to the present day. Now it's as if a breeze that was hardly perceptible has risen suddenly to a gale-force wind.

Which brings us to Mr. D'Souza's other theme. American conservatives have largely maintained blissful ignorance of the contradictions inherent in being both conservatives and capitalists. The market's "invisible hand," they've assumed, could settle whether too much inequality existed or development damaged the environment; the more sophisticated invoked Viennese economist Joseph Schumpeter's phrase about capitalism's "creative destruction." But as the storm wind of capitalist progress rose in the '90s, some conservatives grumpily woke to the fact that capitalism might be problematic, and that, as conservative columnist George Will wrote, it "undermines traditional social structures and values."

Belatedly, such conservatives are reasoning identically to the 19th-century European economist who first warned that competition would continually compel capitalists to innovate new technologies, and the social cost of capitalism's ceaseless transformations would be that "everything that is solid melts



into air." In other words, when Mr. D'Souza interviews somebody like right-wing economic historian Gertrude Himmelfarb, and she fumes, "In the name of progress, we are destroying much of what gives meaning and purpose to life... What good are our stock market returns when our lives have been diminished," she's echoing Karl Marx's critique of capitalism. Mr. D'Souza himself is aware that we cannot return to that. But he fails to produce a specific agenda that conservatives might implement in the face of the gathering storms—particularly those emerging from the biotech revolution. Indeed, he proposes no specific responses we might undertake, either through the civil sector or (horrors!) government, and only waffles with homilies about "living both the good life and the life that is good" and celebrating "the gift of America."

We'll need more than that. For it's no longer a pipe dream off somewhere in the misty future, but an imminent reality: in the developed nations, within the next few decades, many of the assumptions about scarcity that hitherto were underpinning our economies (and before that framing our biological evolution) will be removed. Hopeful prospects for restructuring our societies, I think, lie along the lines of management theorist Peter Drucker's prediction that health care and education will be the 21st century's growth sectors. That is, economically purposive activity on behalf of others will remain reasonable after it has ceased to be for ourselves.

But, of course, there are also darker alternatives. For more than 40 years, British writer J.G. Ballard has considered—though in very different ways than Mr. D'Souza—what the implications of post-industrial leisure societies might be. Now his new novel, *Super-Cannes*, is set in Eden-Olympia, a fictional high-tech community constructed in the hills above the French Riviera as "Europe's answer to Silicon Valley" (like the Sophia-Antipolis science park, its real-life model on the Côte d'Azur). Inside this gated utopia, a multinational elite of executives and researchers work ceaselessly—secluded from the tourists, nouveaux riches, Russian mafiosi, and African hookers in the towns below. As one character explains: "Years ago people took for granted that the future meant more leisure. That's true for the less skilled and able, those who aren't net contributors to society... For the talented and ambitious the future means work, not play... No one ever asks what Newton or Darwin did to relax, or how Bach spent his weekends. At Eden-Olympia work is the ultimate play and play the ultimate work."

Mr. Ballard is an authentic visionary. He showed total disinterest in standard sci-fi tropes when his work was initially published in the late '50s in science fiction magazines. In his fiction, the space program, then at its cold war peak, typically became only a pretext for hallucinating ex-astronauts, who wandered through the postapocalyptic ruins of Cape Canaveral and its suburbs among empty swimming pools and launching pads overgrown by jungle. Some of Mr. Ballard's short stories

from this period are among the 20th century's most beautiful; his work gained bemused recognition from figures in mainstream literature. But he himself insisted mainstream literature was "parochial," whereas the transformations wrought by science and technology would affect everyone. He claimed to be a science fiction writer, even though his idea of science fiction resembled nobody else's. His notoriously sly *Crash* (Farrar & Rinehart, 1973), for instance, imagined the new sexual possibilities available in automobile collisions. *High-Rise* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975) portrays the tenants of a luxury apartment block as they descend into ritual cannibalism and tribal warfare between floors. And *Rushing to Paradise* (Picador Press, 1994) depicts a radical feminist/environmentalist who, having created a wildlife refuge on a Pacific island, becomes the Jim Jones of the Greenpeace set.

For all his provocateur's stance, Mr. Ballard has proved to have a surprisingly accurate track record of predictions. For example, going against the grain in the '60s, he foresaw both the decline of the space program and the increasing domination of what he regarded as a toxic, often psychopathic entertainment culture (in this he is in agreement with Mr. D'Souza's conservatives), with media celebrity becoming society's determining influence—to the point, he envisioned, where Ronald Reagan could become the American president.

In recent years, Mr. Ballard has been mulling over a possible future in which only some citizens work—and maybe for only a fraction of their lives—or in which an elite monopolizes the creative labor, which then acquires the status that previous ages reserved for leisure. In *Super-Cannes*, an English aviation journalist, recuperating from an accident, accompanies his young wife, who is filling a vacancy at Eden-Olympia's medical center: her predecessor, a mild-mannered pediatrician, slaughtered ten coworkers during a seemingly motiveless shooting spree. Mr. Ballard seems at first to be operating in the mode of that kind of detective thriller where a man with time on his hands starts asking questions he shouldn't. Except that everybody actually

seems quite eager for Mr. Ballard's protagonist to ask those questions—and in the end, there will be no comfortable return to "normality."

How might leisure societies be energized and consumer capitalism maintained? Eventually, Mr. Ballard suggests, some citizen may decide that one great resource can be tapped to play upon our need for strong emotions: criminal and transgressive behavior. As one character in *Super-Cannes* insists: "The Adolf Hitlers and Pol Pots of the future won't walk out of the desert. They'll emerge from shopping malls and corporate business parks." 🍷

MARK WILLIAMS is a science and technology writer living in Oakland, California. Write to markred@pacbell.net.

