

**THE
COMPLACENT
CLASS**

**THE
SELF-DEFEATING
QUEST FOR
THE AMERICAN DREAM**

TYLER COWEN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE GREAT STAGNATION*



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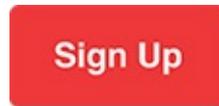
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To the rebel in each of us

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1.

THE COMPLACENT CLASS AND ITS DANGERS

Disruption has been the buzzword of the decade. And it's true that there have been some significant changes afoot, from the wiring of the whole world to the coming of unprecedented levels of multiculturalism and tolerance. But as important and yet neglected is a story that's happening alongside and to some degree in reaction to all of that change. It involves people making decisions that are at first glance in their best interests—that is, they are economically and indeed socially rational decisions. But the effects of these decisions at the societal level are significant, unintended, and not always good. They have made us more risk averse and more set in our ways, more segregated, and they have sapped us of the pioneer spirit that made America the world's most productive and innovative economy. Furthermore, all this has happened at a time when we may need American dynamism more than ever before.

Americans are in fact working much harder than before to postpone change, or to avoid it altogether, and that is true whether we're talking about corporate competition, changing residences or jobs, or building things. In an age when it is easier than ever before to dig in, the psychological resistance to change has become progressively stronger. On top of that, information technology, for all the disruption it has wrought, allows us to organize more effectively to confront things that are new or different, in a manageable and comfortable way, and sometimes to keep them at bay altogether.

Given the growing success of the forces for stasis, I see *complacency*—a general sense of satisfaction with the status quo—as an increasingly prominent phenomenon in American life. And I've coined the phrase *the complacent class* to describe the growing number of people in our society who accept, welcome, or even enforce a resistance to things new, different, or challenging. These people might in the abstract like some things to change, they might even consider themselves progressive or even

radical politically, but in fact they have lost the capacity to imagine or embrace a world where things *do* change rapidly for most if not all people.

This movement and this Zeitgeist have now become so pervasive that we could even speak of *the complacent classes*, but when I stick with the singular form, it will be to emphasize the underlying unities behind differing situations. Consider, for instance, three tiers of the complacent class, differing in terms of income and education and opportunity.

1. The Privileged Class.

Members of the privileged class are usually well educated, often influential, and typically stand among the country's higher earners, though not always in the top 1 percent (which starts at around \$400,000 a year). They correctly believe their lives are very good, and they want things to stay that way awhile, of course wishing to elevate as many others as possible. These individuals tend to be tolerant, liberal in the broad sense of that word, and often quite munificent and generous. They fit the standard description of cosmopolitan and usually take an interest in the cultures of other countries, though, ironically, many of them have become sufficiently insulated from hardship and painful change that they are provincial in their own way and have become somewhat of a political target (from both Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders in the recent campaigns). Because they are intelligent, articulate, and often socially graceful, they usually seem like very nice people, and often they are. Think of a financier or lawyer who vacations in France or Italy, has wonderful kids, and donates generously to his or her alma mater. I think of these people as the wealthiest and best educated 3 to 5 percent of the American population.

2. Those Who Dig In.

The individuals who dig in are more likely to be of middling station when it comes to income and education. They are not at the top of their professions for the most part, and they may have professional jobs, such as being dentists, or nonprofessional jobs, such as owning small businesses. Still, by either global or historical standards their lives are nonetheless remarkably good, and full of "first-world problems." Many of them are doing better than what we think of as a typical middle-class existence. But because they hold a lot of their wealth in the form of their homes, and in some cases have legitimate worries about their long-term employment, they do not have the luxury of not worrying about money. Further, pressures from the costs of housing, health care, and education intensify the money issue for them, and they do have to worry about financing retirement. They hope to hang on to what is a pretty decent life, whatever its stresses and imperfections may be. Think of a midlevel teacher or health care worker who is trying to keep the neighborhood in good shape, get the kids into a better college, and save something for a still-uncertain future, all contemporary

methods of trying to dig in.

3. Those Who Get Stuck.

Those who get stuck are the individuals who, among other combinations of possibilities, may have grown up in highly segregated neighborhoods, received a subpar education, were exposed to significant environmental toxins like lead paint, have parents who drank in excess or abused opiates, were abused as children, became alcoholics or drug abusers themselves, or perhaps ended up in jail. Their pasts, presents, and futures are pretty bad, and they are not happy about their situations. A lot of these people never really had a fair chance. Think of a single mom with a poorly paid retail job and no college degree, or the ex-con who has dropped out of the labor force because he can't find a decent job and is now trying to get on disability.

Despite the divergences in their situations, what these groups have in common is a certain level of social and emotional and indeed ideological acceptance—a presupposition—of slower change. More and more, America consists of people who belong to one of these three groups and are more or less OK with this division of the spoils.

You might think the group at the bottom cannot possibly be complacent about their situation, but by standards of recent history, indeed they have been when it comes to their actual behavior. As we'll see later, the numbers show this pretty clearly. They have been committing much less crime, engaging in much less social unrest, and embracing extreme ideologies such as communism to a smaller degree; if anything, they have been more disillusioned than politically engaged. I'll consider later in the book whether the Ferguson riots and the election of Donald Trump and other unusual current events might be signaling an end to this trend, but the point is that we have been building toward stasis for about the last forty years. Whether or not you think the break point has come just now, to understand why the stasis eventually must fall apart, first we must see how and why it has evolved.

The good news is that more and more Americans are entering the upper tier than ever before—it's nice to have something to be complacent about. Recent income data indicates that a core of about 15 to 20 percent of the American population is doing extraordinarily well, in terms of both income and also social indicators, such as happiness and health outcomes. There is an ongoing collapse of the middle class, as is often reported in the media, but the underreported upside is that some of the middle class is graduating into the upper class. The bad news, however, is that the accompanying structures are not ultimately sustainable for the broader majority of the population. As overall social and economic dynamism declines and various forms of lock-in increase, it becomes harder to finance and maintain the superstructure that keeps stability and all of its comforts in place. The most talented of the middle rise to

the top, while a lot of other forms of mobility slow down and congeal, thereby heralding the loss of dynamism and, eventually, control. And so the complacent class is but a phase in American life, rather than Francis Fukuyama's much-heralded "End of History." Still, for whatever cracks may be showing in the edifice, the complacent class defines our current day, even though we are starting to see parts of it crumble before our eyes.

One of the great ironies of the situation is that those most likely to complain about the complacent class are themselves the prime and often most influential members of that class themselves, namely what I call the privileged class. When we hear Progressives criticizing high income inequality or conservatives bemoaning America's fall in global stature, you might wonder, *If they are complaining, what makes them so complacent?*

The defining feature of these groups of people is, most of all, the lack of a sense of urgency. Our current decade can be understood by comparing it to the 1960s and early 1970s. The Watts riots of 1965 put 4,000 people in jail and led to thirty-four killed and hundreds injured; during an eighteen-month period in 1971–1972, there were more than 2,500 domestic bombings reported, averaging out to more than five a day. I'm not *advocating* these tactics, of course. My point is that, today, there is an entirely different mentality, a far more complacent one, and one that finds it hard to grasp that change might proceed on such a basis. Yet in the 1960s and 1970s, not only did riots and bombings happen, but large numbers of influential intellectuals endorsed them, defended them, and maybe led them to some degree. Back then the privileged class was not always so complacent because a large number of those individuals were far more willing to disrupt the social order. Today the critique is penned, and the enemies of reason and progress are condemned, but then the page is turned and the complacent class turns its attention back to the very appealing comforts of everyday life.¹

HOW DID SO MANY PEOPLE BECOME SO COMPLACENT?

The forces behind the rise of the complacent class are quite general. For better or worse, the truth is that peace and high incomes tend to drain the restlessness out of people. For all the revolutionary changes in information technology as of late, big parts of our lives are staying the same. These days Americans are less likely to switch jobs, less likely to move around the country, and, on a given day, less likely to go outside the house at all. For instance, the interstate migration rate has fallen 51 percent below its 1948 to 1971 average and has been falling steadily since the mid-1980s. There has been a decline in the number of start-ups, as a percentage of business activity, since the 1990s. There are also fewer unicorn miracle growth firms, there is

less corporate churn and turnover of new firms replacing older firms, and there is a higher market concentration in the sectors where we can measure it. The average American is older than ever before, and so is the average U.S. business.

There is also much more pairing of like with like, whether it has to do with marriage, the associations we belong to, or the income levels of the neighborhoods in which we live. In our biggest and most influential cities, segregation by income has become so glaringly obvious that few people think it can be reversed. And many of America's trendiest cities, including cities with quality universities, are among the most extreme for segregation by socioeconomic class. I'll be giving specific numbers throughout the book, but those are some key external metrics by which we can see and measure the growing complacency in American life.

The clearest physical manifestation of these ongoing processes of segregation is NIMBY—Not In My Backyard. Building new construction gets harder and harder in many of our most important cities, and the ratio of rents to median income in those locales has been rising steadily. American life is more segregated by income than ever before, and the new innovations we are creating are cementing rather than overturning this trend, which is backed most of all by city and county laws but also by our own desires for suitably nice living quarters and experiences.

But NIMBY is just one specific physical manifestation of a broader mentality of stasis. There is also:

NIMEY—Not In My Election Year

NIMTOO—Not In My Term Of Office

LULU—Locally Undesirable Land Use

NOPE—Not On Planet Earth

CAVE—Citizens Against Virtually Everything

BANANA—Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anything

One upshot of this current Zeitgeist of community-enforced social stasis is that our physical infrastructure won't get much better anytime soon. Every time a community turns down a new apartment complex or retail development, it limits America's economic dynamism by thwarting opportunities for those lower on the socioeconomic ladder. The relative absence of physical construction also makes it harder to put people back to work when bad times roll around, and, at a deep psychological level, it gets people used to the idea of a world that more or less always looks the same, albeit with an ongoing proliferation of trendy restaurants, boutiques, and people walking around with earbuds, texting and staring at their smartphones. I don't mean that as snark; those are nice neighborhoods enjoyed by many Americans, including myself. Still, what has been lost is the ability to imagine an entirely different world and physical setting altogether, and the broader opportunities for social and economic advancement

that would entail.

Indeed, in this new world the performance of income and social mobility is rather disappointing. In spite of the people who are doing great, the data indicate that the upward mobility of Americans, in terms of income and education, which increased through about 1980, has since held steady. Partly this is because the economy is more ossified, more controlled, and growing at lower rates. It's also because it is much more expensive to move into a dynamic city, an option that gave many a way of making economic progress in times past. Two researchers, Chang-Tai Hsieh and Enrico Moretti, estimate that if it were cheaper to move into America's higher-productivity cities, the U.S. gross domestic product (GDP) would be 9.5 percent higher due to the gains from better jobs. Yet no one thinks that the building restrictions of, say, San Francisco or New York will be relaxed much anytime soon. Most of the complacent class just doesn't see building restrictions as an urgent issue, and even if they understand the problem intellectually, as many of them do, the selfish incentive to make changing restrictions a priority just isn't there.²

We've gone in relatively short order from a time when the physical world and its infrastructure were vital, ever-changing, and all we had, to one in which, at least for younger people, they increasingly play second fiddle. The visions of earlier science fiction were about how different things would look and how much more rapidly we would get around, for instance using the now universally cited flying car. In past generations, people moved through the physical world at ever faster speeds, whereas today traffic gets worse each year and plane travel is, if anything, slower than before. The passenger train network is not growing, and bus lines are being shut down, both reflections of America's decreasing interest in mastering travel and mobility across physical space.

The big practical questions for the postwar generation were about what we might place in the physical world and how that would exert its effects on us, because the physical world was viewed as a major source of inspiration. Would it be cities reaching into the heavens, underwater platforms, or colonies in outer space? All of these possibilities were embedded with futuristic architectures and also utopian ideologies, such as space travel bringing humankind together in cosmopolitan dreams of peace. Those options seemed like logical next steps for a world that had recently been transformed by railroads, automobiles, urbanization, and many other highly visible shifts in what was built, how we got around, and how things looked. But over the last few decades, the interest in those kinds of transportation-based, landscape-transforming projects largely has faded away. Elon Musk's hyperloop plans will remain on the drawing board for the foreseeable future, and the settlement of Mars is yet farther away. Urban progress is less transformational and more a matter of making more neighborhoods look and act like the nicer neighborhoods—namely gentrification. When it comes to transportation, mostly we are hoping to avoid greater

suffering, such as worse traffic, cuts in bus service, or the rather dramatic declines in service quality experienced in the Washington, DC, Metro system.

I argue that the physical world matters no less today, but we are in denial about its power and relevance. We seek to control it, to hold it steady, and to marginalize it ideologically by worshipping Silicon Valley and elevating the value and power of information. We're much more comfortable with the world of information, which is more static, can be controlled at our fingertips, and can be set to our own speed. That's very good for some people—most of all the privileged class, which is very much at home in this world—and very bad for others.

The final form of stasis has to do with how and where we place our individual bodies. Most of all, it seems we like to stay home and remove ourselves altogether from the possible changes of the external physical world. Amazon, of course, can provide nearly everything now. Prepared meal services such as Hello Fresh will send you all the ingredients you need to make a meal. Wash.io will come pick up and do your laundry. Need an oil change? Press a button on an app and your oil change arrives a few hours later. Want to watch your kid play little league baseball? You can do that on Apple TV. Americans can literally have almost every possible need cared for without leaving their homes. This is a new form of American passivity, where a significant percentage of the population is happy to sit around and wait for contentment to be delivered.

The other side of this staying-home coin is the demise of a cherished American tradition: car culture. Buying one's first car was once an American rite of passage, and car culture was glorified in rock and roll from Chuck Berry through Bruce Springsteen and beyond. Driving in a car meant a rhythm, a freedom, and an individualism in which you alone steered the wheel and chose a location and, within limits, a speed for getting there. Car culture was an individualistic culture and of course not always in responsible ways, as the death toll from driving indicates. But today, only about half of the Millennial Generation bothers to get a driver's license by age eighteen; in 1983, the share of *seventeen-year-olds* with a license was 69 percent. Today, social media and the smartphone are more important both practically and symbolically. Mark Liszewski, executive director of the Antique Automobile Club of America Museum (Hershey, Pennsylvania), remarked: "Instead of Ford versus Chevy, it's Apple versus Android. And instead of customizing their ride, today's teens customize their phones with covers and apps. You express yourself through your phone, whereas lately, cars have become more like appliances, with 100,000-mile warranties."³

Apart from this shift in mentality, cars are harder to afford for a lot of young people due to sluggish wages and rising college tuition. Furthermore, there has been a migration of Millennials into larger cities, where Uber, bike lanes, and car-sharing services make owning one's own vehicle less important. Cruising, or taking the proverbial joy ride, just isn't that big a deal anymore, and each year the Americans

who do have cars are driving fewer miles with them.

America's future is likely to bring a much greater use of driverless cars, which will be a major gain in terms of safety and convenience. But just think of the reorientation in terms of cultural and emotional significance: It will be the cars controlling us rather than vice versa. The driver of the American car used to drive an entire economy, but now the driver will be passive, and what will the culture become?

This new orientation would have seemed deeply strange to our ancestors, but we are trying to talk ourselves into seeing this obsession with digitalized information as normal. Anthropologist David Graeber expressed the point nicely when referring to his attempt to watch one of the *Star Wars* installments:

Recalling all those clumsy effects typical of fifties sci-fi films, the tin spaceships being pulled along by almost-invisible strings, I kept thinking about how impressed a 1950s audience would have been if they'd known what we could do by now—only to immediately realize, “actually, no. They wouldn't be impressed at all, would they? They thought that we'd actually be doing this kind of thing by now. Not just figuring out more sophisticated ways to simulate it.”⁴

THE ROOTS OF THE COMPLACENT CLASS

These more complacent dynamics in American life started, in their most general terms, in the early to mid-1980s, although in each chapter I offer more exact detail on the timing of specific mechanisms, some of which required the spread of the internet to come to fruition. In terms of attitudes, the 1980s were important because America was coming off the social and political turmoil of the 1960s, the youth movement, the Vietnam War, rock and roll and drugs, and the economic troubles of the 1970s. The Reagan recovery seemed especially dramatic to those who had lived through the earlier periods, because all of a sudden, everything seemed to be coming together again. Economic recovery resumed, American power again seemed to dominate the world, it was “morning again in America,” traditional patriotism returned to fashion, and global communism was to fall shortly thereafter. Collectively, as a nation, we used this newfound wealth and prestige to dig in, to protect ourselves against risk, and to build and cement a much safer and more static culture. So many features of the country became nicer, safer, and more peaceful, but as an unintended side effect, a lot of the barriers to advancement and innovation were raised. Ultimately America decided it didn't want a redo of all the turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s, and it did what was needed to stop that from happening.

This added social stasis came roughly at the same time as a slowdown in the rate of technological progress, starting in the 1970s, as I outlined in my earlier book, *The*

Great Stagnation. In 1973, the oil price shock and then some bad policy decisions hurt the American economy a great deal. The American government eventually repaired most of the policy mistakes, such as excess inflation, but since that time innovation and productivity growth have been relatively slow, and only the tech sector has been truly dynamic. America has been trying to run a new industrial revolution with a limited number of engines while checking potential losses for the well-off and upper middle class. You can think of this book as detailing the social roots for the resulting slow growth outcome and explaining why that economic and technological stagnation has lasted so long and why, for the most part, it has failed to reverse itself.

Sadly, the villain is us. Most Americans don't like change very much, unless it is on terms that they manage and control, and they now have the resources and the technology to manage their lives on this basis more and more, to the country's long-run collective detriment. America declines in the sense that it is losing the ability to regenerate itself in the ways it did previously, as during the postwar era or the Reagan revolution or even the good times of much of the Clinton administration. But Americans, at least the American "haves," are pretty happy within that decline. Overall, as a nation, Americans are sufficiently happy that they don't even notice their starring role in the stultification of what has been and still remains the world's greatest nation.

The slowdown and stasis in American life is not just about building and how we manipulate physical space. It's not exactly breaking news to point out that our political system has creaked to a standstill. Polarization is part of that story, but it's also true that an ever-increasing percentage of the federal budget is on autopilot, with only about 20 percent available to be freely allocated, and that number is slated to fall to 10 percent by 2022. In 1962, about two-thirds of the federal budget had not been locked in and could be allocated freely. Today, however, it is harder to have a meaningful debate about how the money should be spent because most of the money is already spoken for, and that is a big reason why problems of polarization—which have always been present—have become harder to solve.⁵

This change in the nature of the federal budget, and this quest for ever more guarantees, is one of many ways in which America's pioneer spirit has been replaced by a kind of passivity. In the meantime, politics becomes shrill and symbolic rather than about solving problems or making decisions. If politicians can't offer voters solutions, they can at least come up with rhetoric and symbols to motivate their supporters to fight for them. Yet the harsh exchanges across different points of view mask an underlying rigidity and complacency: For the most part, American politics does not change and most voters have to be content—or not—with the delivery of symbolic goods rather than actual useful outcomes.

One thing most Americans agree on in politics—for all the complaining about the bank bailouts—is that there should be more guaranteed and very safe assets. The

Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond has estimated that 61 percent of all private-sector financial liabilities are guaranteed by the federal government, either explicitly or implicitly. As recently as 1999, this figure was below 50 percent. We're also more and more willing to hold government-supplied, risk-free assets, even if they offer very small or zero yields—negative yields in the case of many foreign securities, such as those from Japan or Switzerland. Plenty of commentators suggest that something about this isn't right, but again the push to fix it is extraordinarily weak, especially since that would mean someone somewhere would have to take significant financial losses.⁶

There is a Zeitgeist and a cultural shift well under way, so far under way in fact that it probably needs to play itself out before we can be cured of it. The American economy is less productive and dynamic, Americans challenge fundamental ideas less, we move around less and change our lives less, and we are all the more determined to hold on to what we have, dig in, and hope (in vain) that, in this growing stagnation, nothing possibly can disturb our sense of calm.

THE NEW CULTURE OF MATCHING

Even when we do get a big breakthrough, its impact is not in every way revolutionary. Paradoxically, Americans can use innovative, ever more efficient information technology to *slow down* the change in many parts of life and to become more rather than less settled. Not long ago someone tweeted at me: “Hope you write more on angle that Internet w/ its ready, free amusements takes edge off human ambition.”

Without conscious intent or explicit planning of anyone in particular, rapidly evolving technology has turned us into a nation of matchers. Today it is easier than ever before to be on a quest for people like ourselves, for an indistinguishable mate, for the ideal hobby, for the perfect meal and the perfect app to photograph our pets. We match on our own, or, more and more, algorithms guide us. [Match.com](#) matches us in love. Spotify and Pandora match our taste in music. Software matches college roommates. LinkedIn matches executives and employees. Facebook helps us reconnect to our past—our old neighbors, our old boyfriends—and more generally even brings us to just the right news and advertisements, or at least what we think is just right.

The bright side is that these processes also lead us into a lot more exciting foreign travel, or perhaps to encounters with people who truly have different outlooks than we do and who can communicate that to us online or later maybe even in a personal meeting. Still, even with these most positive and diverse of cases, there has been a fundamental shift of societal energy away from building a new and freer world and toward rearranging the pieces in the world we already have. There was something to

be said for less-compatible, more challenge-laden accidental pairings with all their conflicts and messy resolutions. At the end of the day, you weren't quite satisfied with your pairings, and so you felt you had to go away and do or build something great, because you had no notion of just waiting for the next social network–based encounter to come along. The great adventures of life, the surprise of strangers, of strangeness, of the electric and eclectic moments of happenstance, and also of extreme ambition, are slowly being removed by code as a path to a new contentment. We are using the acceleration of information transmission to *decelerate* changes in our physical world.

From an economic perspective, a lot of the matching of the contemporary world is great. Buyers are less likely to be disappointed with their purchases—they get what they want, and that means consumers are doing better than GDP statistics indicate. A more intense matching of top intellects, made possible by email, social networks, better job recruiting, and easier travel and collaboration, leads to higher peaks of cooperative achievement and excellence—these days the very best collaborators are more likely to work together in our most productive firms.

Or consider better matching in the context of marriage. One study from 1932 found that over a third of the people in one part of Philadelphia married someone who lived within five blocks. A more recent study showed that of the couples who married between 2005 and 2012, more than one-third of them met online; for same-sex couples, that figure is almost 70 percent. Even if love doesn't always work out, most Americans embrace this freedom of choice because it expands our horizons, helps us feel in control, and most importantly gives us what we really want, or at least what we think we want.⁷

But again, this matching brings a very real collateral downside, no matter how comfortable life may feel in the short run. America's prowess at matching means more segregation by income and educational status and indirectly more segregation by race in many parts of the country, even as racial tolerance has never been higher. It is price and rental rates that are driving different groups apart, not outright prejudice, so that good matching technologies can separate us more rapidly and more effectively than ever before. There is also more assortative mating of high earners and high achievers—the investment banker will marry another investment banker rather than a next-door neighbor or high school sweetheart or secretary. That's great for wealthy and accomplished couples, but it is harder for many others to break into these very exclusive pairings.

CALM AND SAFETY ABOVE ALL

Physical disruptions, in the form of riots or violent protests, are these days harder to accomplish, and most Americans seem less interested in them than during the 1960s

and 1970s. Americans value civil disobedience less and obsess over safety more. Even the prison riot—which always was doomed to failure—is mostly a thing of the past. There is today nothing comparable to the 1971 Attica prison riots, with about forty hostages taken, the arrival of hundreds of state troopers, and, by the end, forty-three people dead, including ten who worked for the prison.⁸

When it comes to the streets or political events, the police use managerial science and information technology and surveillance to control potential “troublemakers,” and most Americans approve or maybe even demand more such control. Rather than busting heads, the wiser police departments confer with consultants and public relations experts on how to defuse potential troubles. Ferguson and related demonstrations may well be the start of a new and countervailing trend, as I discuss in later chapters. Still, until very recently, the overall thrust of the last forty years has been toward more peaceful public gatherings and far less confrontation. Toward this end, although the American legal system has allowed police to place quite severe restrictions on rights of public assembly, the demand for peace and calm and safety is so high that this is barely a public issue at all, and this development is another form of the NIMBY mentality.

Current philosophies and aesthetics mirror this shift toward the calm. The metaphysics of the big political debates of the 1960s now strike us as absurd. In the 1970s, intellectual, angst-ridden American teenagers noodled over Nietzsche, the meaning of the counterculture, and the classic Russian novels of ideas. Woody Allen satirized these books in his movie *Love and Death*, and it was assumed that enough of the viewers would catch the references. These days Jane Austen is the canonical classic novelist, with the *Wall Street Journal* even referring to “the Jane Austen industry.” And a lot of her stories are about ... matching. For better or worse, these stories are less concerned with the titanic struggle of good versus evil—can you imagine Mr. Darcy shouting, as would a Dostoyevsky character, “If there is no God, then everything is permitted!”? Instead people are afraid of having their calm disturbed, so the frontier issue in many colleges and universities is whether to put “trigger warnings” on school curricula, out of fear that somebody will be offended or traumatized by what we used to welcome as radical and revisionist texts. I don’t actually mind trigger warnings and in fact I use them myself for some of my classes. What I find strange is that they have become such a well-known and controversial social issue. That is a far step away from the 1960s, when the battle was over the right to denounce authority, sometimes sliding into outright advocacy of violence, as with the Black Panthers and the Weather Underground.⁹

In the 1970s, American gay culture was a source of innovation, restlessness, and outright rejection of traditional bourgeois values. Over the last decade, we’ve seen the mainstreaming of many LGBT communities and their incorporation into a very stable and legalistic status quo. As a result, there is certainly more happiness, more equality,

and more justice, all good things. Yet gay culture as a driver of radical change—rather than as satisfied contentment—probably peaked in the 1970s and early 1980s, with the evolution of sexual mores and the evolution of disco, house, and other musical forms out of “outsider” gay communities, as well as the Pop Art of Andy Warhol and Keith Haring.

The 1960s was also an era that called for greater freedom with drug experimentation. But of all the drugs that might have been legalized, American citizens chose the one—marijuana—that makes users spacey, calm, and sleepy. LSD attracted great interest in the 1960s for its ability—for better or worse—to help users see and experience an entirely different world, often with different physical laws. That is now out of fashion. Crack cocaine, a major drug of the 1980s, can rile people up, but for a few decades now it’s been losing ground to heroin and other opioids, which relieve pain and induce a dreamlike stupor and passivity.

The other drugs that have boomed are the antidepressant medications, including Prozac, Zoloft, Wellbutrin, and the like. In the 1990s, there was a great deal of angst, and several best-selling books, about how Prozac was calming users down but perhaps stealing their personalities or removing their authentic selves. These worries are mainly gone, as the quest for greater calm is now seen as being of overriding importance. Katherine Sharp, who wrote one of the seminal studies of antidepressants, notes that we’re just not that into personal authenticity anymore, and furthermore social media have busted our notion of having a “true self” for the medications to ruin. The necessity for ever greater calm creeps along, and the next frontier is that it is becoming common to give drugs for schizophrenic and bipolar individuals to disruptive children under five years of age. In 2014, in fact, 20,000 such prescriptions were written for children under the age of two. The debate over the propriety of antidepressants seems to be largely over, and tens of millions of Americans are continuing to enjoy their medicated sense of calm.¹⁰

Medication became the accepted answer to attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or supposed ADHD, some time ago. (Reading through the current debates does not exactly inspire confidence that we’ve got the matter figured out.) Somehow kids are supposed to match the levels of calm and composure we might find in mature forty-seven-year-olds. Estimates vary, but according to some, almost 20 percent of American boys and 10 percent of American girls, ages fourteen to seventeen, have been diagnosed with ADHD, yet that concept, with the attention deficit disorder label, wasn’t even formally introduced into the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* until 1980, although there were earlier and far more marginal notions of hyperactive and hyperkinetic children. According to another related estimate, 10 percent of American teenagers currently have had medication prescribed for ADHD; whatever the exact numbers, it is commonly agreed that there is a kind of epidemic of diagnosis and medication. Maybe these medications help some of these children, but

again the net social pressure is to force everyone to focus, and not always for the better. To make sure no one is too disruptive, we have elevated the power of our institutions to restore or ensure tranquility, most of all our schools, the government, and the medical establishment.¹¹

Medication is not the only reason why American kids have become calmer and more tranquil. In 1965, the most common leisure activity for American kids was outdoor play. Recent surveys suggest that the average American nine-year-old child spends fifty hours a week—by direct comparison, nearly seven hours a day—or more looking at electronic screens, which include televisions, computers, and cell phones. For the average American teenager, there are estimates ranging as high as seventy hours a week in front of those screens. I don't find that so easy to believe, but it's obvious we're less physically mobile, and we're picking up these screen-staring habits at ever younger ages.¹²

In the 1970s, a game called dodgeball—one variation of which was known as bombardment—was popular in American schools. The premise was to throw a hard, inflated ball at the players on the other side with as much force as possible, to see if they could catch it without dropping it. The face and the belly were two popular targets for each hurl, and of course the most fearful and intimidated players had the most tosses sent their way. At least in my elementary school, it wasn't unusual for a kid to get whacked in the face and leave the playing field crying. I recall my gym coach barking out, "Suck it up, kid!"

Flash forward to 2015, when a school district in Washington State bans the game of tag on the grounds of its excessive violence. From now on, those schoolchildren are supposed to keep their hands to themselves during recess. There is a Facebook group called "Supporting tag at recess," but so far it has yet to triumph. The restrictions, however, go far beyond tagging or touching other people. In late 2015, I read of a seventh grader who was told his *Star Wars* shirt was not allowed in school because it portrayed a weapon, namely, a lightsaber. There is also plenty of talk these days about banning football, for fear that many concussions can lead to permanent brain damage. Several decades ago, these questions didn't even come up for consideration.¹³

These days schools are occupying students with the safest possible activities, most of all homework, and also classifying them more thoroughly through more testing. According to one estimate, a typical student will take 112 mandated standardized tests from prekindergarten through the twelfth grade.¹⁴ Parents have begun to revolt, but most of these tests are probably here to stay, as school bureaucracies change only slowly and the longer-term trend is indeed toward more tests.

Given all that, it should not come as a total surprise that Millennials are not such an entrepreneurial class. The share of Americans under thirty who own a business has fallen by about 65 percent since the 1980s. It can be debated how much this is the spirit of the times, high levels of college debt, or maybe just a sluggish economic