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## America's Lost Souls: the 21st Century Lumpen-Proletariat?



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America is a nation of lost souls, but who are they?

The online [Urban Dictionary](#) explains, “A lost soul has had a tragedy, so devastating, they find it impossible to give their heart to anyone. ... Lost souls can be dangerous to themselves and others, and can cause harmful memories of not careful.”

A [Christian publication](#) defines a lost soul as follows:

A “lost soul” is someone who seems adrift morally, spiritually, intellectually and emotionally. Such a person may be lost to drugs, alcohol, ambition, greed, gambling, sexual promiscuity or the “pragmatic” mentality that shows no respect for human life and measures everything only in economic or material terms

And a site called [Power of Positivity](#) intones, “true lost souls go through more intense periods of disassociation and confusion than the rest of us, and sometimes, they feel like their true path in life has evaded them.” Still [another site](#) states: “Lost souls are people who are spiritually adrift. For whatever reason, these individuals have blocked the intuitive guidance coming from their higher selves. ... As a result, a lost soul’s life is very challenging.”

Unfortunately, the suffering many people experience is more than their private grief or, as Power of Positivity admonishes, their inability to experience the “feeling the infinite love of the universe, and this leads to struggle, anger and sadness.” More consequential, the lost souls of America are part of the growing abandoned multitude, the 21<sup>st</sup> century lumpen-proletariat.

Lost souls dwell silently – sometimes shrieking, sometimes railing with weapon in hand – as they wander through everyday life. Some are homeless hiding on city streets for refuge, others camping in the nation’s parks and woodlands, while still others dwell in SRO flop-houses, abandoned houses, double-wide mobile homes, desolate old-age homes, psychiatric wards, hospital rooms and prison cells throughout the country. Some are cared for by family, friends and good Samaritans. A growing number include many who used to be called the “middle class” but now struggle from one pay check to the next, hoping to hold onto their job and credit card before the bottom falls out. And then there are those who commit suicide to end their suffering.

America’s lost souls live holding their breath, waiting for fate to take its toll. They are America’s living dead, the new lumpen-proletariat.

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A century-and-a-half ago, many radicals identified lost souls of that day as the “lumpen-proletariat,” a term little used today. *Lumpen* originally meant “rags,” but over time came

to mean “a person in rags,” a “ragamuffin,” and then “riff-raff” or “knave.” By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, “lumpen” was applied as a prefix to signify a pejorative term to almost any German word.

By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, leading radicals like Marx/Engels and Bakunin applied the term lumpen to the concept “proletariat” to identify a significant but dispossessed social sector. Their very different interpretations of the concept lumpen-proletariat suggest the fundamentally different roles this sector could play during a revolutionary process.

Their different interpretations are worth considering today for they offer insight into the deepening social crisis that led to Trump’s election and the tension casting a disquieting shadow over the country.

Marx/Engels dismissal of the lumpen-proletariat has been widely accepted by many within the left. Engels, in the “[Prefatory Note to the Peasant War in Germany](#)” (1850), warned:

The lumpenproletariat, this scum of the depraved elements of all classes, which established headquarters in the big cities, is the worst of all possible allies. This rabble is absolutely venal and absolutely brazen. If the French workers, in every revolution, inscribed on the houses: *Mort aux voleurs!* [Death to thieves!] and even shot some, they did it, not out of enthusiasm for property, but because they rightly considered it necessary above all to keep that gang at a distance. Every leader of the workers who uses these scoundrels as guards or relies on them for support proves himself by this action alone a traitor to the movement.

Marx, in [The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte](#) (1852), famously wrote:

Alongside decayed *roués* [a debauched man] with dubious means of subsistence and of dubious origin, alongside ruined and adventurous offshoots of the bourgeoisie, were vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, mountebanks [i.e., charlatans, con-artists], lazzarone [i.e., homeless idlers], pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, *maquereaus* [pimps], brothel keepers, porters, literati, organ-grinders, rag-pickers, knife grinders, tinkers [i.e., freelance repair-persons], beggars – in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither, which the French term *la bohème*; from this kindred element Bonaparte formed the core of the Society of December

10. ... This Bonaparte, who constitutes himself chief of the lumpenproletariat, .... here alone rediscovers in mass form the interests which he personally pursues ... recognizes in this scum, offal, refuse of all classes the only class upon which he can base himself unconditionally ....

Bakunin, writing in *On the International Workingmen's Association and Karl Marx* (1872), argued a very different interpretation:

To me the flower of the proletariat is not, as it is to the Marxists, the upper layer, the aristocracy of labor, those who are the most cultured, who earn more and live more comfortably than all the other workers. ... By virtue of its relative well-being and semi-bourgeois position, this upper layer of workers is unfortunately only too deeply saturated with all the political and social prejudices and all the narrow aspirations and pretensions of the bourgeoisie. Of all the proletariat, this upper layer is the least social and the most individualist.

By the flower of the proletariat, I mean above all that great mass, those millions of the uncultivated, the disinherited, the miserable, the illiterates, whom Messrs. Engels and Marx would subject to their paternal rule by a strong government – naturally for the people's own salvation! ... I have in mind the “riff-raff,” that “rabble” almost unpolluted by bourgeois civilization, which carries in its inner being and in its aspirations, in all the necessities and miseries of its collective life, all the seeds of the socialism of the future, and which alone is powerful enough today to inaugurate and bring to triumph the Social Revolution.

Yesterday's lumpen-proletariat are among today's lost souls.

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The American promise is failing an ever-growing number of people – and this failure gave rise to Donald Trump's election.

Henry Luce, the founder of *Time*, called the post-World War II period, “the American Century.” It was a period in which the U.S. achieved Cold War superpower status, marked by all the attendant military costs, yet offering its citizenry unparalleled economic

and social opportunity. For all the suffering inflicted by Sen. McCarthy, the Vietnam War and the Latin American terrors, the American Century remade the nation.

Postwar prosperity improved people's lives. The standard of living for many Americans improved. Life expectancy increased, birth control was adopted, abortion legalized and sex-ed (and contraceptives) made available to teenagers. Formally democratic rights were expanded to include African-Americans, women and gay/transgender citizens; even, for a time, nondocumented immigrants were welcomed. Most Americans felt a better sense of well-being.

Sadly, the American Century is over, a casualty of capitalist globalization. The U.S. is increasingly becoming a network of company towns, specializing in finance (New York), entertainment (Los Angeles), technology (San Francisco), scholarship (Boston), oil/gas processing (Houston) to name but a few centers. For those who can catch the wave, the world is their oyster – with all the accompanying rewards. And for those who don't?

America's lost souls are more than the card one is dealt from a loaded deck – one's individual fate or private suffering. It is a social category. There are no statistics as to total number of "lost soul" floating through American life. It is not a recognized category within the governmental or academic research world, but, rather, a descriptive term suggesting those merely surviving in postmodern America.

A glimpse or outline of this social phenomenon is suggested by a half-dozen categories for which revealing data are available.

+ The [U.S. Census Bureau](#) estimates that in 2016 43.1 million Americans (12.7%) lived in poverty; it reported that 18.5 million people reported deep poverty (i.e., a household income 50% below the 2016 poverty threshold); they constituted 5.8 percent of all Americans and 45.6 percent of those in poverty.

+ According to [one study](#), over a half-million Americans (564,708 people) are homeless in the U.S.; 15 percent of the homeless population (83,170 individuals) are considered "chronically homeless."

+ More than [2.3 million people](#) are imprisoned in 1,719 state prisons, 102 federal prisons, 901 juvenile correctional facilities, 3,163 local jails, and 76 Indian Country jails as well as

in military prisons, immigration detention facilities, civil commitment centers and prisons in the U.S. territories

+ In 2107, there were a total of 772,594 non-business bankruptcy filings.

+ The great promise of upward mobility, the college degree, has become a living nightmare. By one estimate, 4-in-10 people who have attended college took out loans to help pay their costs and the outstanding student debt now totals about \$1.5 trillion, more than credit card and auto loans. This staggering debt load is leading to delays in marriage and purchase of a first home.

+ In 2016, an estimated 45,965 suicides took place in the U.S. compared to 19,363 homicides; suicide was the tenth leading cause of death overall and was the second leading cause of death among individuals between the ages of 10 and 34, and the fourth leading cause of death among individuals between the ages of 35 and 54.

These are among the lost souls caught up in the post-Great Recession nightmare, a time in which the promise of prosperity has all but disappeared.

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Marx/Engels and Bakunin wrote about the lumpen-proletariat during the early phase of modern industrialization. For them, the lumpen-proletariat had no relationship to capital or the means of production. They were considered counter-revolutionary, enemies of the proletariat – at least for Engels/Marx – and opposed to socialism.

Some of the old categories that Marx/Engels used to identify the lumpen-proletariat still have meaning today — vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, swindlers, mountebanks, lazzarone, pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, *maquereaus*, brothel keepers, porters, literati, rag-pickers, knife grinders, tinkers and beggars. Organ-grinders have been replaced by buskers, but escaped galley slaves have disappeared from the postmodern American stage.

Marx/Engels did include among the lumpen-proletariat the chronically unemployed, the homeless, the mental ill and the enormous prison population. A century-and-a-half later, the newest sector of the lumpen-proletariat may be those surviving on “gig” jobs, best

understood as 21<sup>st</sup> century literati tinkers. Some will excel as next-wave entrepreneurs while others – the vast majority – will endlessly hustle to simply stay afloat in the treacherous waters of globalizing capitalism.

Inequality in the U.S. is increases to a level unseen since the Gilded Age of the late-19<sup>th</sup> century. More and more Americans are slipping into the 21<sup>st</sup> century lumpen-proletariat. The same question haunts the nation: who suffers? Who else but the lost, lonely and forgotten.