

SHAWN MICALLEF

**THE
TROUBLE
WITH
BRUNCH**

**WORK, CLASS AND
THE PURSUIT OF LEISURE**

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*To Windsor, Ontario,
a good place to come from*

A Tale of Two Brunches

Few leisure pursuits enjoy the near-religious devotion that brunch does. In cities around the world, it's a weekly ritual that can take up an entire day, with its devotees chattering, texting, tweeting and Instagramming about the lineup, the food, the decor, the experience. One must brunch in order to live – or so the passions involved would suggest. Somewhere, in his writing about the good life, Aristotle must have a lost chapter on brunch. But scratch the surface of brunch (maybe with your grapefruit spoon), and you'll find a high-pressure, predictably choreographed event that consumes time and money most people can't afford to waste. The overpriced food is overthought and overrated, the service often substandard. It's a grand performance of leisure that is not, in itself, at all leisurely.

Most of the brunches I've endured in my lifetime have taken place in Toronto, but I've also been to brunch in New York, Montreal, London, Buenos Aires and a few other cities in between. Though the locations varied, as did the people I ate with, the elements of each meal recurred in such ways that an event that's often billed as unique, local and authentic took on the unsurprising uniformity of a Starbucks outlet – the chairs, tables, display cases and washrooms all the same, just rearranged a little from location to location. Empathy, I observed, does not exist at brunch. Diners linger over cooling, almost empty cups of Lapsang souchong even as people waiting for a table stand in conspicuous view. There is no inclination to clear out and let others enjoy their time here. Brunchers treat servers uncharitably and servers, in turn, view them with contempt. Chefs bury the dregs of the week's dinners under rich sauces, arranging them in curious combinations. At on-trend brunch restaurants, heretofore liberal-minded, compassionate and socially aware people become monstrous amalgams of Ayn Rand and Margaret Thatcher: there is no society, no community – there are only small, awkwardly shaped tables and the individuals seated uncomfortably around them.

In Windsor, Ontario, where I grew up, the codes and rituals of brunch were different. So different, in fact, that the two kinds

of brunches should not even share a name. Windsor is a midwestern, industrial (or, perhaps, post-industrial) city across the river from Detroit. It's a Springsteen kind of town, dominated by the car industry, but thanks to the Canadian social safety net, not nearly as desperate as the dying landscapes described in the Boss's lyrics. Brunch in Windsor was a rare event, attended only on Easter, Mother's Day or after a christening or First Communion. Often held at an Italian or Croatian banquet hall, a golf course dining hall or one of the fancier hotel restaurants, brunch meant a buffet with a long line of metal warming pans over a lit Sterno can with the strange blue flame that signalled to kids (and maybe some adults) it was a special occasion. *Fire in a can!* The brunch lines moved quickly and efficiently. People served themselves until they reached the end of the buffet, where someone in a chef's hat would carve and serve slices of roast beef, while referring to everyone, even us preteens, as *sir* or *ma'am*. It was quite a thrill. Certain airs were put on, but obviously and without shame. Seating was at a large table. Nobody's arms, knees or elbows touched. Larger groups were seated immediately. Washrooms were plentiful, toilets worked on the first flush and the hand dryers were powerful. There was always a wide variety of traditional breakfast and dinner items available, but there was no inappropriately creative mingling of foods. Separate but equal, the scrambled eggs stayed in the eggs pan, and the roast potatoes, green peas, chicken legs and pancakes all remained in their own respective pans. If you combined two things that weren't supposed to go together and gave this concoction an obnoxious name, you'd probably be asked to leave. There was camaraderie at these brunches, conversations had and joy shared, but the food remained, at its core, fuel for doing other things.

In 2000, when I moved to Toronto, I was often invited to brunch. And as a newcomer, I felt compelled to go. These brunches were served in tiny, fashionably fey places carved out of old butcher shops, Victorian houses or former five-and-dimes with enough intact sandblasted architectural details and artifacts to remind customers of the dirty, laborious days we have left behind, a nod to a workaday world that has become leisurely. There was always

a lineup, even if the diner down the street had free booths and identical food. Even then, brunch was a significant part of the rise of 'extreme eating' – the proliferation and celebration of unhealthy (usually meat-heavy) foods, meals and restaurants that appeared along a hollandaise-to-charcuterie continuum. 'I love the smell of maple bacon in the morning!' brunchers might have shouted. The ritual intake of fat and grease at brunch (often devoured as a supposed hangover remedy) took on a defiantly rebellious air, akin to teenagers wearing punk T-shirts to school, affluent white people using hip-hop slang or investment bankers donning leathers and riding perfectly polished Harleys on weekends. The unhealthiness of the food was, perversely, value-added. The thicker and more fatty the hollandaise, the greater the risk for people who otherwise led very safe, secure lives. By the same token, the small portions and extortionate prices added a patina of preciousness – *Look how much I'm paying for food that's bad for me and doesn't even fill me up.*

I went, because that's what I thought I was supposed to do. After a number of these extended, uncomfortable meals, I realized that even though I liked the people I was with, brunch was not an enjoyable way to be with them. At the same time, during the misery of these meals, regretfully aware that the sugary buzz of my mimosa would likely make the rest of the day a write-off, brunch provided me with a particularly vivid prism through which to view class and leisure in the West. Why were my fellow brunchers, most of them working longer hours than their parents' generation had, and often for less money, squandering their precious free time on something as onerous as this chronically unsatisfying midday meal? With so much of modern life in unending flux, I wondered what the way the contemporary, urban middle class spends its leisure time could tell us about who they are and how they see themselves. And further – are there other delusional fictions the middle class tells itself about its lifestyle that are allowing for erosions of quality of life? The line between leisure and work is increasingly blurred, and the notion of working nine to five seems archaically quaint now. If what's thought of as leisure time well-spent is, in fact, not spent well at all, what does this

mean? And why was I coming across similar brunch scenes when I travelled to what I thought were different cultures, and could that sameness be useful in connecting people in disparate places?

The artifice and performance of leisure around brunch and other non-work activities has created a smokescreen that clouds our understanding of our work, social and civic lives. A lack of class-based self-examination means we may have been brunching while Aristotle's elusive good life has, in fact, slipped away. Without a clear-eyed look at how class functions in our lives, whether it's how we view the neighbourhoods we live in, or where we shop for food, it becomes easy to forget the hypocrisies that infect and threaten middle-class ideals. The brunching class needs a class-consciousness reset, one that will allow us to understand how we live now, not how we *think* we live. The fierce individualism that creative producers require to make their unique works doesn't have to be a solo pursuit; connections and collaborations can be made to shore up the foundations of this new emerging class just as the working class did throughout the twentieth century. There's more in common among these workers than not, but these similarities aren't as obvious as they were in the past. The trouble with brunch is it could be so much more.

As a relative newcomer to the so-called middle class, I've had the privilege of experiencing it with a context I might not have if I'd been raised in a self-consciously middle-class environment. In Windsor, I always thought of myself as middle-class, though I recognize now that many of the signifiers of my life were working-class. At least, that's what they're considered by the middle class outside of cities like Windsor. Springsteen towns offer considerable perspective on how contemporary life in larger, mixed-economy cities play out. When I arrived in Toronto, I became part of a culture – semi-bohemian, creative, academic, artistic, intellectual, call it what you will – that was ostensibly middle-class and enjoyed middle-class pursuits like brunch, but that, if you define middle-class strictly by income levels, was hardly middle-class at all. In Windsor, I knew people who worked at the Chrysler plant and who could afford to buy a home with a two- or three-car garage before their twenty-

fifth birthdays. In Toronto, I hardly knew anyone who owned even a five-hundred-square-foot condo.

That has changed, of course, even in Windsor. While the city remains defiantly attached to its manufacturing and industrial roots, it is also undergoing gentrification in its own minor key. There are hip bike shops, indie bars, bookstores run by iconoclast literary presses. There are even brunch spots where you won't see a can of Sterno but you'll find vegan entrées made from local Essex County produce and, yes, artisanal bacon and fair-trade coffee. Such gentrification – often seen as desirable and courted in places like Windsor – is unfolding in post-industrial cities all across the continent, from Hamilton to Pittsburgh, St. Louis to St. John's. As traditional industrial and resource economies falter, these metropolises are now trying desperately to diversify their economies through entrepreneurial innovation, tech, tourism and a vast array of cultural endeavours that, broadly, fall under a new classification known as the creative class.

This shift isn't always successful, and in many cases the gentrification has brought along unsurprising problems of affordability and homogeneity. But it's having radical ramifications for our understanding of class. How does this new creative class interact with what we traditionally perceive as the lower, middle and upper classes? Are these categories still useful, and if so, for what purpose? For my part, when I moved to Toronto, I found myself directly confronting an existential dilemma. I was suddenly trying to 'pass' as middle class by grasping at a sensibility I knew mostly through the movies and books. This is certainly not an Eliza Doolittle story – the changes I went through were much more subtle and even began in Windsor when I went to university and decided to continue on to grad school – but never underestimate how overwhelming and vertiginous it is to realize, during a social situation, that you're ostensibly from a rung or two lower than someone else, when the things and experiences people around you are talking about suddenly seem foreign. During conversations, there were many knowing nods on my part, when I pretended to understand and agree, only to Google, when no one was looking, the unfamiliar references and names – Negri, Žižek, Arendt –

that were being casually dropped in conversation. ‘Of course I know what Gramsci thought about hegemony,’ I’d say, ‘but I must pop out to the washroom right now, and yes, I do need to take my phone in there with me.’ Sometimes the references were academic, other times literary, musical – no, I don’t have a favourite opera, but does *Fantasia* count? – or even around matters of social etiquette. Both ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture were part of the community I aspired to join, but my major in the university of life had heretofore focused mainly on the latter. None of this was, or is, terribly onerous – Wikipedia is a class-jumping grifter’s best friend – but it takes a quick learner, and not everybody has the patience or desire to do this.

Why did I even want to be middle-class? In a word, it’s incredibly attractive. The ideal middle-class life takes the edge off Hobbes’ infamously dire characterization of the state of nature. In the middle-class ideal, there is the possibility of a so-called work-life balance, where work is fulfilling, performed largely by choice rather than necessity, and life includes ample time for worthwhile leisure and socializing. Above all, the middle class represented a solid foundation upon which to build a life, one where I could have some control and agency over my own destiny, rather than accepting the reflexive non-choice so many of my fellow Windsorites accepted – a life of reasonably well-paid, if increasingly precarious, factory work. However, now that I’m here, essentially ensconced in the middle-class life I thought I had dreamed of, I’m worried I too might become confused about what being middle-class means and thus oblivious to its shortcomings, blind spots and pitfalls.

Figuring out what class means is a work-in-progress for me, and this slim volume is, in part, an attempt at articulating the shift I went through over the last decade and a half, as my circumstances changed (even if my income level didn’t come along for the ride). This is not an exhaustive study of class and class shifts; people with different racial, economic or gender backgrounds will have a different experience of class than I did, some considerably more fraught than mine. But I want to understand class because it’s been there all my life, and most of the time, I didn’t notice. It’s

only because I've moved between the classes that I see it now, the elephant in so many rooms.

We don't talk about class in North America very much – unless we're saying, proudly, how we don't have a class system. Or, unless you're a vote-seeking politician vaguely, unhelpfully talking about the 'disappearing middle class.' Similarly, in the U.K. we hear a lot about how the class system no longer exists. And yet it does, all around us. It exists in sensibility, in lifestyle, in income. The only people who think class doesn't exist are ensconced deep within a bubble of their own class, unable to see where it ends. All of these things, especially income, make us incredibly uncomfortable when discussed and unwrapped. (Perhaps this is why TV shows and magazine articles about real estate are so popular – they're a covert surrogate for an actual, open discussion of class.)

We need to talk more about class, both to understand our relationship to our selves and others, and to examine why we can't seem to find the same sense of unity as working classes did and do. But also, and most significantly, to see what kind of illusions we've created about the good life that seemingly surrounds us.