

The Rage of Reason

The man pulled me aside after my speech and said, "We need to talk."

He is a banker, and he wanted me to know that he shared my working-class roots and had made his fortune the hard way, through long hours and a laser focus.

"You've got to speak out against this class warfare," he said. "People are getting so angry at us, and it's dangerous. I *earned* my money. I *earned* my bonuses."

I suggested that the anger of millions of Americans is not directed at him, but at failing [banks](#) that got bailouts and then awarded bonuses to employees who were darn lucky to still have jobs. Surely, he could understand why that bothers a lot of people. Why would anyone working for a company in that much trouble get a bonus?

As it turned out, he works for one of the banks that did exactly that, and he was in no mood to hear that this isn't the best time for him to be singing the po' man's blues.

"I *earned* my bonus," he said again. "And I'm tired of this populist rage that makes me the bad guy. I'm tired of being attacked for being rich."

It was an uneasy moment for both of us. He couldn't see why our shared background didn't make me take his side, and I couldn't see why our shared background didn't make him angry on behalf of the people we come from. The only thing I think we agreed on was that the person standing in front of us was clueless.

There has been much hand-wringing lately over the surge of "populist rage." Love that term: populist rage. What a fancy way to say the majority of working Americans are done being chumps at the hands of the privileged few.

Some people — mostly wealthy white males — want us to think this outrage is scarier than Satan knocking at the door, but American history indicates otherwise. Populist anger has brought sweeping changes to our country, including child labor laws, safe drinking water and 40-hour workweeks. I am reminded of one of my favorite bumper stickers: "The Labor Movement — The Folks Who Brought You the Weekend."

Sometimes anger among the masses is a good thing.

And right now, it's understandable, even if that banker doesn't get it.

"What is hard for people like that banker to understand is that while he may feel his bonus is threatened, other people's [retirement](#) has been wiped out. Their jobs are gone. Their houses are gone," Amy Hanauer said. She is the executive director of Policy Matters Ohio, a nonprofit organization dedicated to recasting economic policies to benefit everyone, including workers and their families.

Some call Policy Matters a liberal think tank, but its funders include mainstream organizations such as the Cleveland Foundation, The George Gund Foundation and the Sisters of Mercy. Unless you believe that [investing](#) in the stability and growth of your community is a lefty cause, it's hard to paint these organizations in partisan hues. And isn't that beside the point anyway?

Right now, 47 million Americans have no [health care](#); the unemployment rate is at its highest in 25 years; and our whole economic infrastructure appears to be imploding. How is this mess not everyone's problem?

Lately, I've been hearing from an increasing number of people like that banker. They send e-mails and leave phone messages, and sometimes they corner me at public events. They're tired of being demonized, they say, for being "successful." They stress how hard they've worked over many years, but they seem oblivious to how that same formula for success has failed so many of their fellow Americans.

"Many people weren't sharing in the boom," Hanauer said. "Our country was growing rapidly and steeply in productivity and output, but wages didn't go with it. So many of these people worked hard and played by the rules, and now they have nothing. *Everyone* should be angry."

There's no use trying to demonize the Americans who've had their fill of policies that reward cleverness over due diligence and greed over an honest day's work.

For one thing, they're right to be angry.

For another, they're in the majority.

As the saying goes, membership has its privileges.

Connie Schultz is a Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist for The Plain Dealer in Cleveland and the author of two books from Random House: "Life Happens" and "... and His Lovely Wife." To find out more about Connie Schultz (cschultz@plaind.com) and read her past columns, please visit the Creators Syndicate Web page at www.creators.com.

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