

# Class consciousness at Davos

THE ECONOMIST

Was this the year when class came to Davos? To many outsiders, the event reeks of privilege, but from the inside its spirit has long attempted to be egalitarian. The bespectacled figure clumping along in the snow in his ski jacket could on closer inspection turn out to be a billionaire, a green campaigner, central banker or a politician. Yet somehow each year the divisions grow. Ever more of the plutocrats seem to travel by limousine, rather than foot. (The tell-tale indicator of status remains footwear: the more impractical the shoe, the clearer it is that the owner has arrived by car). There seems to be more queue-jumping by the powerful. Security is the obvious excuse: police kept a herd of freezing people outside one hotel for close to half an hour on the pretext that a Russian politician (and his courtly motorcade) might, just might, appear.

Class is also part of the conversation this year, especially in the Anglo-Saxon business world. There is a growing realisation that the pain is disproportionately hitting the bottom of society, an acknowledgement that it is not going to change soon and, perhaps more selfishly, a worry that it will result in a backlash of some sort. Thus British businesspeople, especially those with consumer businesses, fret what will happen when governments cuts begin to bite in northern towns where many households depend on the state (either through benefits or as an employer). But the biggest worry is in America.

## THE TWO AMERICAS

Take the views of two extremely rich Americans: a retailer and a banker. The retailer points out that his firm is now in effect dealing with two Americas. The first group are broadly upper-income and defined by a sense of mild optimism. They tend to work for the larger companies represented at



Demonstrators hold a flag as they walk past the Congress Hall to protest against the World Economic Forum annual meeting in Davos.

Davos, which are doing well. Their mortgages cost less because of lower interest rates. They often own shares, so they are pleased by Wall Street's recovery. They are not spending in the completely carefree way they did before the crunch, but, if they see something they want, they don't pause before producing their credit card. The second, which he defines as middle- and lower-incomes, is defined by fear: they have either lost their jobs or they are worried about losing them. They

spend money on essentials but not on discretionary items -- and they are living from pay-packet to pay-packet. There is a clear monthly pay-cycle effect, with spending rising at the beginning of the month when they have cash in their pockets, but falling at the end.

The banker's world is Wall Street -- a long way from Middle America. But that is where he grew up, and he is deeply worried that well-paid middle-class manufacturing jobs are disap-

pearing. He points to General Motors' recent IPO prospectus, and the huge gain the carmaker has achieved by shedding UAW workers. "Frankly, I think those guys are never going to get jobs." Wherever he looks in America he sees working-class males with little future.

Their worries are compounded by two things. The first is a sense that there is little that can be done to stop this. America is simply going through a period of deleveraging and slow

growth. Both the retailer and banker think money should be spent on education, retraining and the other familiar bromides. But neither wants to increase intervention, nor do they want higher taxes -- which would simply delay recovery still further. There is a sense of a process we have to go through. The second is fear of a backlash: how long will so many people tolerate this degree of economic sluggishness without populism taking hold?

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# Solar lamps to empower the poor

AFP, Chumbi, Kenya

Evans Wadongo is not yet 25 but has already changed the lives of tens of thousands of his fellow Kenyans living in poor rural communities by supplying them with solar lamps.

As a child growing up in west Kenya, Wadongo struggled to do his homework by kerosene lamp. He was caned at school if his family ran out of fuel for the lamp, and he permanently damaged his eyesight by sitting over the smokey fumes when they did have kerosene.

But his father, whom he describes as a teacher who was "very strict" and "my greatest inspiration", saw that he completed his studies and made it into university.

Once there, Wadongo started wondering how to improve conditions for children in communities similar to his home village -- and there are many. Though Kenya is one of the richest countries in east Africa, more than half the population lives on less than a dollar a day.

The young man had always wanted to help people but did not have the stomach to go into medicine, so he opted for engineering. He was only 19 when he invented his first solar lamp after using part of his student loan to buy what he needed.

"Then, I never thought it would take off on this scale. I just wanted to take one to my grandma," he recalled.

Some 15,000 lamps have been turned out since production started in 2004, and Wadongo says his goal is to hit 100,000 by 2015.

"I started in the village where I grew up and I saw kids going from primary into high school," he told AFP.

He has no time for Kenya's political class, accusing them of "wanting people to remain poor so that they can stay in power".

For Wadongo, the lamps are not an end in themselves, but rather "a way to lift people out of poverty."

He and his team from the "Use Solar, Save Lives" project start by identifying impoverished communities that rely for lighting on kerosene lamps -- when



A villager at Chumbi village, 50km southeast of Nairobi, hangs an innovated solar-lamp outside her house to get some sunlight.

they can afford the fuel. They hand out 30 lamps to a community association, often a women's group, and encourage the locality to pool the money each family has saved by no longer buying kerosene.

When the fund accumulates the group can use it for a project, such as fish farming or rabbit breeding.

Nomadic communities get a special model of lamp for easier transport.

Typical is Chumbi village, some 50 kilometres (31 miles) outside Nairobi where Wadongo gets an enthusiastic welcome.

"They all want lamps," smiles Agnes

Muthengi, a representative from a local association, the Kalima Kathei Women's Fellowship, who accompanied him to the village.

Jennifer David, 47, lives in a mud-brick house flanked by outbuildings made largely from scrap metal.

Next door, a field of maize wilts for lack of water. David's husband is a casual day labourer and work is hard to come by. Her only other source of income is a fledgling rabbit breeding business. But with one rabbit only fetching the equivalent of one euro (\$1.3) locally and one of the five children sick and in a home, life is a strug-

gle.

A slogan painted on rusted corrugated iron informs the visitor that the inhabitants "trust in Jesus". Hanging on a post in the yard, one of Wadongo's lamps is charging.

"Since I got this lamp things have changed," David told AFP. "Before I was using kerosene. It smelled and gave off a lot of smoke and I was using a lot of money to buy the kerosene."

Now, her children can read and study in the evening, without cost or nuisance.

Wadongo plans to extend his project to neighbouring countries -- Uganda is

next on the list. He is already training interns, not only from Kenya and elsewhere in Africa but also from US universities. He also aims to decentralise production of the lamps, thus providing work for unemployed youths.

The young engineer is also planning a "model" village at Nyaobe in the west of this country, which straddles the equator. Residents will be hooked up to a local solar-powered grid and will have access to Internet.

"If every one of us started thinking about others before thinking about ourselves the world would be better," he says.

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