**Deeply unequal**

Sam Pizzigati

Tuesday, Dec 19, 2023

The summit of Mount Everest, in case you haven’t heard, has become somewhat of a trash heap, a high-profile embarrassment that some have taken to calling the “world’s highest garbage dump.”

A half-century ago, few would have expected this outcome. Back in 1976, Nepal, the Himalayan nation that counts Everest – Mount Sagarmatha – as its most glorious natural treasure, had created a national park to protect Everest and its fellow peaks. Three years later, UNESCO named Everest an official world heritage site. Nobody worried about Everest becoming a garbage dump.

But then, in the early 1980s, things started changing. Over the past four decades, as a new Statistica analysis points out, scaling Everest has become “a lucrative business”.

Between 1953, the year the climbers Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay first conquered Everest, and the late 1970s, no more than small handfuls of adventurous souls annually made the demanding trek to the Earth’s highest summit. Since those late 1970s, the annual conqueror total has exploded, to well over 800 in the year before the Covid pandemic hit.

What has also exploded in the years since the early 1980s: the world’s population of deep pockets. That explosion has clearly impacted the traffic on Mount Everest. We now have oodles of thrill seekers who can handily afford all the bells and whistles less-than-world-class climbers need to make a climb up Everest.

The combined cost of these bells and whistles, an analysis earlier this fall calculated, can reach anywhere up to $160,000 for a single ascent.

In today’s deeply unequal world we abound with people who can afford that sort of expense. The latest available data place the global population of “ultra high net worth individuals” – those fortunates worth at least $30 million – at nearly 400,000. These super rich can essentially afford to seek out any turn-on.

And the rest of us, defenders of these deep pockets claim, should be eternally grateful for all the spending this seeking demands. The outlays the rich make for adventure and pleasure, the argument goes, create jobs and keep our global economy humming.

In the Himalayas, for instance, an American affluent can engage the services of a local climbing Sherpa guide for a mere $5,000. Other Sherpa locals can make $2,000 plus tips for doing the cooking for a climbing expedition. These sorts of fees can make life-changing differences for families who live on the mountainsides around Everest. But fees like these barely make a dent in Nepal’s overall poverty.

In Nepal today, Oxfam points out, half of all children under age five suffer from malnutrition. Nearly as many Nepalese, 44 percent, live below the poverty line.

Nepalese above and below that line also have to deal with the environmental damage the small armies of affluent mountain climbers leave behind.

Climbers on Everest, notes National Geographic, spend weeks making their ascents, leaving the mountain’s slopes “littered with discarded empty oxygen canisters, abandoned tents, food containers, and even human feces.” That litter has contaminated the local watershed.

But the show must go on – for the awesomely affluent. And remember, shills for our deepest pockets never tire of reminding us, those affluents are creating jobs! And they unquestionably are. On Everest and around the world, the rich are creating lines of work we never imagined existed.

“High-net-worth wine enthusiasts,” journalist Cindy Lamothe observed last week, “often employ experts to curate and manage their wine collections.” These specialists both “select rare and valuable bottles” and “also ensure proper storage, rotation and auctioning when the time is right, creating a seamless wine investment strategy.”

Wealthy art collectors employ specialized art ‘authenticators’ who use forensic analysis and all sorts of other techniques to confirm an artwork’s authenticity, a must in ‘a market filled with forgeries’.

Without the wealthy among us, we’d also have to do without ‘private medical concierge services’, a line of work that connects wealthy clients ‘with top-tier doctors and specialists, offering speedy appointments, and even providing round-the-clock access for consultations’.

Jobs, jobs, jobs – and only the presence of an enormously wealthy few can ensure these jobs continue to be available!

In other times, in other places, the numbers of those employed directly by the wealthy have sometimes reached significantly high levels. In the early 20th century, an astounding 1.5 million British people worked as butlers, maids, and other domestics for the UK’s rich.

Our contemporary rich seem intent on recreating that Edwardian world – appropriately updated for high-end 21st century sensibilities. Our deepest modern-day pockets, explains a recent Washington Post analysis, “are pursuing the optimization of everyday life, supported by entourages of experts – often managed by a single power assistant – who help the hyper-successful live longer, do more and pursue a fleeting and intangible perfection in every aspect of their existence.”

The bigger the mansion today, the greater the need for the “new domestics,” the personal lifestyle experts who keep the “right furnishings” in the lounges and the “right cars” in the garages. Lush home theaters demand projectionists. Estates in Malibu even have “personal hospitality directors” who help house guests plan their daily activities.

Our contemporary societies do not, of course, have to revolve around the needs of the richest among us. Instead of watching the wealthy trek up Everest, for instance, we could be watching kids from average families having a blast trekking up climbing walls in community gyms.

But public services that imaginative will only materialize if we show some serious political imagination, if we dare to pursue tax and other policy changes that keep income and wealth from concentrating in a precious few pockets.

The rest of us don’t have to serve the rich. We can work to create societies that take a serious shot at serving us all.

The article was originally published as: ‘In Our Deeply Unequal World, the Garbage Rises Ever Higher’.

Courtesy: Counterpunch.org