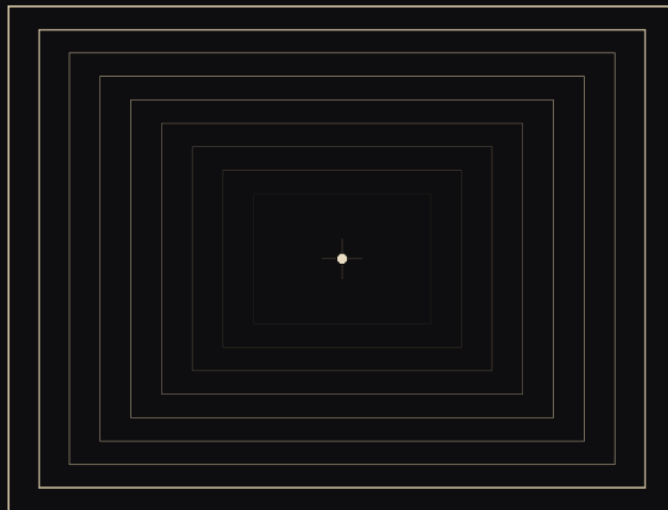

T H E

ENCLOSED

The Invisible Architecture of Power
and the Hidden Price of Staying in Your Place



BRADLEY DREW

The Enclosed

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By

Bradley Drew

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Aspirational identity and the long history of identifying upward

On October 15, 2008, Samuel Wurzelbacher walked across his yard in Ohio to defend a tax bracket he did not occupy. He was not an anomaly. He was the book's opening argument: that working Americans have been enrolled, through mechanisms they cannot see, in the class interests of people far above them. This chapter plants that puzzle and asks why it keeps happening.

Chapter Two: The Memo

Lewis Powell's 1971 blueprint and the fifty-year project it launched

In August 1971, a corporate lawyer named Lewis Powell wrote a confidential memo to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. It was a declaration of class war dressed in the language of civic concern. This chapter documents the specific institutions, funding networks, and legal and legislative campaigns that memo produced and traces their operation across five decades into the present.

Chapter Three: The Architecture of Consent

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The algorithm does not merely deliver information. It delivers a personalized ideological environment, calibrated to each individual's psychology, that continuously reinforces the individual explanation for structural conditions. This chapter examines how that mechanism works, what it replaced, and what it produces at scale.

Chapter Four: What the Feed Replaced

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The institutions that collapsed across four decades were not merely pleasant features of working-class community life. They were the specific mechanism through which working people developed the collective consciousness that enables collective action. This chapter traces its destruction, and identifies the forces behind that destruction.

Chapter Five: Platform Capital and the Revolving Door

How the engagement optimization business model produces hegemony as a byproduct and the human network that protected it from interference

Five companies control the information environment of most of the American working class. They did not need to conspire to suppress working-class consciousness. The profit motive does it structurally. This chapter explains the mechanism and documents the specific human network that protected it from the regulatory intervention that might have redirected it.

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The surveillance ambition and the infrastructure that finally made it possible

J. Edgar Hoover wanted to watch everyone. The technology of his era would not let him. This chapter traces the surveillance state from Hoover's FBI Index and COINTELPRO through the CIA's Operation CHAOS, the Church Committee's reforms, and the post-9/11 dismantling of those reforms through Stellar Wind and Section 702 to the data broker ecosystem and Palantir's integration layer that turned commercial surveillance into state power. The guardrails Congress built in 1978 were not torn down. They were rendered irrelevant, one terms of service agreement at a time.

Chapter Seven: The Stripping

The bailout, the enclosures, and a generation that will not own

The 2008 financial crisis was not an accident. It was a revelation: the same institutions that produced the crisis were rescued at public expense while the people on the other side of the transaction lost everything. This chapter traces three phases of the same process, the acute dispossession of 2008, the ongoing institutional acquisition of working-class assets, and the generational foreclosure of the path to ownership.

Chapter Eight: The Taste of the Class Above

How the professional managerial fraction transmits dominant class ideology downward

Between the dominant class and the working class sits a professional managerial fraction that implements, administers, and normalizes the system without conspiring to do so, and often while genuinely believing it is serving the public interest. This chapter examines how that fraction forms, what it believes, and what it does to the working class it administers.

Chapter Nine: The Friction Problem

How environments engineered for frictionless engagement reorganize relational capacity and what happens when the need to be heard gets partially met by a machine

Genuine human relationships require friction, tolerance for ambiguity, the capacity for conflict and repair, and comfort with the unpredictability of real persons. Environments engineered to remove friction systematically reduce the practice of those capacities. This chapter examines what that attrition produces, and what happens when an AI relationship begins to partially substitute for the human.

Chapter Ten: Why the Anger Goes Nowhere

The closed loop of algorithmically directed collective action

The Tea Party, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, January 6th. Four movements spanning the ideological spectrum, each mobilizing millions, each producing limited durable institutional change relative to the scale of the mobilization. This chapter examines why and argues that the answer is structural rather than tactical. The feed converts anger into engagement. Engagement is not organization.

Chapter Eleven: What Breaking Through Looks Like

The conditions under which material reality overwhelms ideological management

The enclosure has a structural vulnerability: it requires the material conditions it manages to remain tolerable. When they do not, common sense begins to crack. This chapter examines when that has happened historically, what made it possible, what is different now, and what the book's argument implies about whether the loop has exits. It ends where the book began and asks what would have had to be different.

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Chapter One: The Plumber

Aspirational Identity and the Long History of Identifying Upward

On the morning of October 15, 2008, Samuel Wurzelbacher was standing in front of his home in Toledo, Ohio, when Barack Obama walked down his street. Wurzelbacher was stocky, with a shaved head and the confidence of a man comfortable in his own skin. He had been thinking about buying the small plumbing company he worked for. He was worried about what Obama's tax plan would mean for him if he bought it, so he walked over and asked.

The exchange lasted several minutes and was captured on video. Obama explained his proposal directly: he planned to raise taxes on incomes above \$250,000, today the equivalent of roughly \$386,000. Wurzelbacher pushed back, even though court records from 2006 showed he earned approximately \$40,000 a year, nowhere near the threshold. He didn't hold a plumbing license, he was working under someone else's. The possibility that he might someday make \$250,000 was enough to make him speak up for the class he aspired to, rather than the class he lived in. "The reason I ask you about the American Dream — I mean, I work hard, I'm a plumber, I work ten to twelve hours a day," Wurzelbacher told Obama. "I'm buying this company and I'm gonna continue to work that way. I'm getting taxed more and more while fulfilling the American Dream."

Republican candidate for President John McCain seized on the exchange in the next presidential debate, invoking "Joe the Plumber" nine times in ninety minutes. Within days, Wurzelbacher had become a national symbol. He was a small businessman, the self-made man, the ordinary American who just wanted to be left alone to build his business. The symbol worked not because it was accurate but because it felt true. Accurate would have been a man earning \$40,000 under someone else's license, worried about a tax bracket he would not reach in that industry. True was the feeling that he was on his way there, that the distance between where he was and where he was going was a matter of time and effort, not structure. Samuel Wurzelbacher looked at a tax policy designed to help people at exactly his income level and saw himself in another class's shoes, he identified upward.

The Republican Party didn't just capture working-class language, it colonized the working-class identity. In 2004, Thomas Frank examined Kansas, a state whose farmers had once marched against what they called "the money power", and found it had become one of the most reliably conservative states in the country. His diagnosis: the culture war was a bait and switch, vote your rage, ignore your wallet. Channel the anger toward liberal elites and coastal condescension, keep it away from the economic forces actually extracting wealth from these communities. It was a compelling argument, and on its own terms it was mostly right, but it assumed the problem was one of misdirection. That working-class voters were being fooled, that beneath the cultural anger sat a rational economic actor waiting only to be correctly informed

and directed. If you fix the messaging, name the real enemy, break the spell, and the identification would collapse. What Frank was describing was not a trick being played on working people, it is a condition they inhabit. Samuel Wurzelbacher was not performing in that yard in Ohio. He genuinely believed he was on his way to the tax bracket he was defending. The aspiration was not a manipulation he had fallen for, it was the operating system of his self-understanding. That had been installed so early and reinforced so continuously that it felt indistinguishable from his own thoughts. Better messaging won't fix it. There is something structurally doing that work, and it's been doing it a long time.

The identification of working Americans with the class above them is not a recent invention. It is woven into the founding logic of the country. America was built, in part, on the promise of social mobility. The idea that the distance between where you were born and where you could end up was a matter of your effort rather than your circumstance. From the beginning, this was only partially true. Slavery made it entirely false for millions of people; indentured servitude made it false for hundreds of thousands more. The rigid hierarchies of inherited land and inherited status that immigrants were escaping followed them across the Atlantic only in a modified form. The promise survived the contradictions because it was functional. It kept people working, it kept people hoping. It kept people identifying not with where they were but with where they were going.

Alexis de Tocqueville noticed this in the 1830s, traveling through America and trying to make sense of what he saw. Americans, he observed, were not a contented people, they were restless, striving, perpetually measuring themselves against what they might have. He called it a "strange melancholy", the experience of people who had more freedom and material comfort than almost any population in history yet were perpetually anxious because the horizon kept moving. Tocqueville saw that the promise of American mobility didn't produce satisfaction but an endless appetite for more. What he was describing, in the language of the 1830s, was the psychological infrastructure of upward identification. When the horizon is theoretically available to everyone, you don't measure yourself against where you are, you measure yourself against where you're going. Your interests, your loyalties, your political instincts, all of them align not with your current class position but with your anticipated one. This is not a character flaw, it is a rational response to a genuine cultural promise. If you genuinely believe that your situation is temporary it makes sense to defend the class you expect to join. You are acting in your own interest. You are just calculating across a longer time horizon than your bank account would suggest.

The promise has never been as real as the belief in it, and that gap has been widening for fifty years. Economic mobility in the United States peaked sometime around the mid-twentieth century. In the decades after World War Two, the combination of union density, GI Bill benefits, low housing costs, accessible public higher education, and a manufacturing economy that provided genuine middle-class wages for non-credential workers created the conditions where

the promise and the reality matched. If you worked hard, and were a white male, and those were significant qualifications, you could expect to end up better off than you started.

That world began to change in the 1970s and accelerated through the 1980s. Manufacturing employment began its decline, union membership fell, real wages for workers without college degrees stagnated and then began to shrink. Economists Raj Chetty and Nathaniel Hendren found that absolute mobility, the measure of whether children earned more than their parents at the same age, had fallen from ninety percent for children born in 1940 to fifty percent for children born in the 1980s. Half of the country, by that measure, was already failing to move up by the time Samuel Wurzelbacher was in high school, yet the belief persisted.

Survey after survey finds that Americans dramatically overestimate social mobility. Americans believe the ladders are more accessible than the data actually shows. In one study, Americans estimated that the chance of moving from the bottom fifth to the top fifth over a lifetime was about twelve percent, the actual number was closer to eight. The gap between belief and reality is consistent. Americans believe, as a matter of cultural faith, that the system works better than it does.

While Wurzelbacher was becoming a symbol, something else was happening in the fall of 2008 that would determine the shape of the next two decades of American working-class life more than any election. The largest financial institutions in the United States were collapsing under the weight of their own recklessness. They had spent years packaging mortgages into complex financial instruments. Then they would sell them to each other, often leveraging their positions to collect enormous fees all the while assuring investors and regulators that the risk had been distributed so widely that no single failure could affect the system. They were wrong. When the housing market collapsed, the entire financial industry came apart with a speed that surprised even the executives who had built it.

The federal government acted quickly and decisively. The Federal Reserve extended emergency credit on a scale not seen since the Great Depression. Congress passed the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act, authorizing \$700 billion in public funds to stabilize private financial institutions. The executives who presided and perpetuated the collapse kept their jobs. Many kept their bonuses. Most of the institutions survived and in a few years were profitable again. The same government moved considerably more slowly for the families on the other side of that transaction. Congress created a program to help the millions of homeowners facing foreclosure. It was underfunded, inconsistently administered, and reached a fraction of the people it was designed to serve. Between 2007 and 2016, approximately seven to nine million American families lost their homes.

In Cleveland, Sheri West ran a group home for men with mental illness before the 2008 crash. When her mortgage company wouldn't work with her and her home went to foreclosure, she had to start living in her car. Her story was not unique. It was just one of millions of

variations on the same event. When the equity a working-class family had spent years building in the walls of their home was transferred to an investment fund. The families who lost those homes became renters in them. Blackstone and companies like it spent billions acquiring single-family homes at distressed prices in the years after the crash. The savings that were embedded in those walls became monthly payments that went to a line on a financial statement, not a working-class future.

The system rescued the institutions that broke it. The working-class people who got lost everything were told the lesson was personal responsibility.

Think about the last time you watched Shark Tank. Maybe you were rooting for the entrepreneur. The nervous small business owner pitching their idea in front of the panel of millionaire investors, hoping for the investment that could realize their dreams. Or maybe without even noticing, you were watching from the other side of the table. Evaluating the owner's pitch, calculating the profit margins, extrapolating the company valuation, wondering whether the investment made sense. If it was the second, you were doing something worth examining. You were inhabiting the perspective of a class of people whose financial interests, and often values, are starkly different from your own. People whose returns depend on acquiring stakes in businesses at the lowest possible price and extracting the maximum possible profits before exiting. You were doing it voluntarily, for entertainment, and you probably enjoyed it. That is not an accident, and it is not your fault.

When the crisis hit, Americans were angry. The Tea Party channeled some of that anger into the political system. Occupy Wall Street named the structure directly, the one percent versus the ninety-nine percent, with a clarity that no American political movement had managed in a generation. People who had never talked about class were talking about class. Within a few years, the anger dispersed. The Tea Party was absorbed into Republican Party politics and directed its energy toward cutting the programs that served the people who had joined it. Occupy Wall Street produced no lasting institutions, no policy victories, no durable political formation. By 2012 it was a memory. The anger of 2008 had generated one of the most significant waves of working-class political energy in decades, and it went nowhere.

The standard explanations for why the political energy of the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street dissolved are all partly true: poor organization, co-optation, repression; but they miss something. The anger dispersed because the places where anger becomes organized and impactful were gone. The place where people actually processed their feelings about 2008 was online and in the social media feed. The feed was not designed to turn anger into organization. It was designed to turn anger into engagement. It is designed to achieve the particular loop of outrage and return. That keeps people in the app, scrolling, watching, sharing content that expresses their feelings without changing their situation. The anger of 2008 went into the machine, and the machine dissipated it.

If you were born after 1981, there is a reasonable chance you do not own a home. You have tried, you have wanted it, and you have worked hard. The median home price in the United States has increased by more than fifty percent since 2020 alone. Mortgage rates that sat near three percent or lower during the pandemic years climbed above seven percent by 2023. A monthly payment on a median-priced home in 2024 was more than double what it was just four years earlier, yet the average American's wages did not double. In 1983, a thirty-year-old Baby Boomer had about a one in two chance of owning a home. A thirty-year-old Millennial in 2023 had roughly a one in three chance. The numbers just stopped working. Generation Z, the people born in the late 1990s and early 2000s who are now in their twenties, watched the pandemic housing boom happen in real time and understood that they were watching a door close. The people who already owned property became wealthier, and the people who didn't watched the price of entry rise beyond their reach. By age twenty-five, nearly thirty percent of Generation Z are still living with their parents, not because they want to, because the numbers just don't work.

The foundations that anchored working-class individuals to their communities are being dismantled for profit. American farmland is being purchased by investment funds and wealthy individuals at a pace not seen since westward expansion. American food supplies are being consolidated into corporate hands. The local newspaper, once the place where communities tracked their own lives, has been bought, gutted, and in many cases shut down. Rural hospitals have closed their doors as private equity firms stripped their assets and left these communities. The local grocery store, the hardware store, the community bank, one by one, these foundations of community have been replaced by national chains or simply closed.

Something is being taken from communities. It is happening methodically, legally, and right in front of all of our eyes. The communities it is happening to have nothing left to organize around, and nothing left to fight back with.

The smart phone in your pocket knows, with extraordinary precision, what keeps you engaged. It knows what makes you feel good and what makes you feel like you're missing out. It knows whether you respond to aspirational, outrage, and fear content. Everytime you pick it up it becomes increasingly optimized for your engagement to sell your attention to whoever is willing to pay for it.

What happens when the technology that shapes how we understand the world is owned by people whose interests are for us not to understand it? What happens when the place we go to make sense of our lives, to understand why things cost more, why a home feels out of reach, or why the anger we all felt in 2008 never quite turned into anything substantial, is a place specifically designed to keep us scrolling rather than turning toward one another?

The morning Samuel Wurzelbacher walked across his yard was not the beginning of the story. By October 2008, a project had been underway for more than thirty years. It was a well-funded effort to reshape the ideological terrain on which working-class Americans

understood their position in politics and the economy. It began in 1971 with a confidential memo from a corporate lawyer named Lewis Powell to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and proceeded with a patience its targets could never have matched. The memo was a mobilization plan. Powell argued that the American economic system was under coordinated attack from environmentalists, consumer advocates, campus activists, and a press he considered hostile to business. His prescription was that American businesses had to organize simultaneously on every front. The universities, the courts, the legislation, the media, and public opinion. The goal wasn't to win the battle, it was to control the ground on which the war would be fought. He called for funding scholars who would produce the right arguments, training lawyers who would make the right cases, cultivating and supporting politicians who would pass the right laws. He was describing the construction of an entirely new class of institutions with the purpose of making the interests of capital feel like the common sense of ordinary Americans. Within a decade, those institutions existed. Within two decades, they had reshaped the federal judiciary, the regulatory environment, and the terms of mainstream political debate. Within fifty years, the project Powell outlined in those thirty-four pages had become the invisible enclosure of American political and economic life.

Powell's most important achievement was architectural. The dominant class built what he designed, the environment in which Samuel Wurzelbacher's upward identification didn't feel like manipulation but like his own common sense. The most effective ideological systems are the ones that feel like reality rather than ideology. By 2008, thirty years of deliberate construction had produced exactly that system.

There was a time when life was organized around institutions that put people in rooms with one another, facing the same material conditions. The working-class neighborhood, the union hall, the church with a deep political tradition. The fraternal organization or the local civic club where precinct representatives built relationships over years and mobilized neighbors into something that resembled collective action. These institutions were not perfect. They were often exclusionary and sometimes corrupt. They were frequently narrow in their vision, but they were places where the working-class identity was formed and maintained through contact with other people living the same material reality. That contact produced something that has been dismantled: a shared interpretation of shared conditions. A deep understanding developed through contention and argument and the weight of common experience. An understanding that what was happening to you personally was happening to other people too, and it was happening because of something structural rather than something individual.

Antonio Gramsci called this counter-hegemonic consciousness: the development of a worldview grounded in the actual material conditions of working-class life rather than in the dominant class's narrative of those conditions. That consciousness develops through sustained contact with people in the same position, over time, through the kind of tension that digital interactions are specifically designed to eliminate. Those institutions declined, gradually at first, then with acceleration from the 1970s onward. The decline was deliberate, legislative, and

documented, and the space they vacated was filled. Television first, then cable, then the internet, then the smartphone, then the feed. Each transition moved the production of social identity further from the local and collective and closer to the individual and the algorithmic. Each step made the machinery of upward identification more precise.

Samuel Wurzelbacher walking across his yard in 2008 was the product of decades of cultural machinery telling him he was on his way up. The working-class American checking their feed at six in the morning before a shift is the product of that same machinery, only now running at orders of magnitude with greater precision and penetration. When the union halls emptied, the identification went digital. It was no longer the background hum that working-class Americans lived inside without quite noticing, but an active, personalized, continuously optimized production of the feeling that the class above is your destiny and the class below is your enemy.

Wurzelbacher abandoned his dream of owning the plumbing business. During his fifteen minutes of fame he went on speaking tours and just one month after his confrontation with Obama, published a book. He ran for Congress, won the Republican primary, and lost in the general election. In the years that followed he gave interviews comparing gun control to the Holocaust and made statements about immigration that would have been welcomed at a Trump rally. He was not a villain who revealed himself over time, and he was not uniquely susceptible to manipulation. He was just a working-class man with genuine economic anxiety. That anxiety had been routed, through machinery that he could not see and did not suspect, toward conclusions that served the interests of people whose tax bill he was volunteering to protect and defend. He identified upward because everything around him had been built to make that identification feel like freedom rather than enclosure.

The dominant class that built that system were not mysterious. They left documents, funding records, the organizations they founded, legislation they passed, judicial appointments they cultivated, and the think tank papers they published. The architecture of the enclosure is visible if you know where to look. This is an attempt to show you where to look and what it is.

The anger of 2008 has never gone away. It couldn't. It comes from something older than 2008 or 1971. Following the financial collapse that produced the Great Depression, Franklin Roosevelt stood before the nation and explained the cause of their turmoil: *We had to struggle with the old enemies of peace — business and financial monopoly, speculation, reckless banking, class antagonism, sectionalism, war profiteering. They had begun to consider the Government of the United States as a mere appendix to their own affairs.* Samuel Wurzelbacher died in 2023 still believing he had been on his way up. Millions of people are still there. The enclosure that produced that belief is still running. It has never stopped.

Acknowledgements

This book was written for the people that are being alienated by the enclosure this book describes. The working-class people across this country that build things that they will never own or who service systems designed against their own interests. The people who hate to open their email or mailbox, afraid of the next medical bill or the next collection letter. Those who feel the weight of something being pressed down upon them.

You are right in what you feel. The system is neither right nor left and the system is not broken, it is working exactly as it was intended.

You are not alone, you are not wrong, and this book is yours.

A Note on Sources

This book makes specific claims about specific people, institutions, and events. Every claim of fact is sourced. Included in the book is a condensed works cited list. The full works cited, organized by chapter, is available at baprole.com.

The sourcing for this book draws on four categories of evidence: peer-reviewed academic research, primary government documents including congressional testimony, declassified records, and agency reports, investigative journalism from established outlets working from documentary evidence, and direct primary sources including court filings, corporate disclosures, and legislative records.

This book was not written from a university office or with institutional support. It was researched and written by a working-class person with a public library card, an internet connection, and access to the same government databases and FOIA archives available to any citizen.

Readers who disagree with the book's conclusions are encouraged to examine the sources. The argument does not depend on accepting the author's interpretation. It depends on looking at what actually happened.

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The system is not broken. It is working exactly as designed.

For fifty years, a deliberate and funded project has been reshaping the ideological terrain of American life — building the institutions, staffing the courts, constructing the media environment, and finally delivering the feed directly to your phone. The result is a working class that votes against its own interests, defends the wealth of people it will never join, and cannot sustain the anger it genuinely feels long enough to change anything.

The union halls are gone. The churches that named poverty as injustice are gone. What replaced them was specifically engineered to make sure the replacement could never do what they did.

You have felt this. You have felt the gap between the life you were promised and the life you are living. You have felt the anger go nowhere.

This book explains why. And who built the enclosure you are standing in.

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