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How to Tell Your Civilization is Corrupt

How can we distinguish between decent civilizations and deeply corrupt ones? How can we tell whether a society rates as wise or foolish, moral or vile?

Philosophers have been debating questions like these for several millennia, and those debates will likely go on — knock on wood — for several millennia more. But let's fix our attention for the moment on just one telling indicator that seems to hold true across wide stretches of human history: In wise societies, those with the most to offer do labor that benefits the many, not the few.

What measure of a society's core ethos could be simpler to understand — and ace?

In the United States today, at least on this ethical front, we're not doing much aching. The evidence for that failure abounds. The latest egregious example? Consider the Gulfstream G700, a new flying machine that ranks among the most impressive technical achievements of our time.

Gulfstream Aerospace, a unit of the giant military contractor General Dynamics, birthed the G700 just about two years ago. The G700 doesn't carry bombs. This incredibly sleek jet carries corporate executives — or, to be more exact, *will* carry corporate execs when testing on it completes next year.

The tests so far have been going extremely well. The G700 — the “world's most expensive private jet” — has already set a transatlantic speed record. This all-time best came flying from Gulfstream's headquarters in Savannah, Georgia to the Middle East city of Doha in Qatar. The G700 flew the 6,711 nautical miles between the two sites in 13 hours and 16 minutes nonstop. Not bad for a plane's first international run.

Gulfstream Aerospace is positioning the G700 as an “ultra-luxury answer” to the \$75-million Bombardier Global 7500. Potential G700 purchasers, the firm pledges, will get the “the tallest, widest, longest cabin in business aviation.” Inside that space, Gulfstream’s flagship private jet “can accommodate a master-bedroom suite with a spa shower” and four other living areas, including a dining area for six.

The plane also features “a new lighting system designed to mimic circadian rhythms, to help travelers sleep on long-haul flights.”

The flying public for the G700 — that slim slice of humanity known as the super rich — is going gaga over Gulfstream’s latest offering. This past July, General Dynamics CEO Phebe Novakovic released Gulfstream’s sales figures for 2021’s first half. From an order perspective, she noted, Gulfstream’s second-quarter results “bordered on spectacular.”

The G700’s price-tag now starts at \$78 million. Ten of the jets, all ordered soon after Gulfstream unveiled the G700 two years ago, will be going to Qatar Airways for its Qatar Executive charter service. What makes the G700 so appealing to buyers like Qatar Airways? Not speed alone. Corporate execs can already fly great distances nonstop — really fast — on commercial jets from Boeing. But those Boeing flights have execs rubbing shoulders with the great unwashed, and what self-respecting master of the universe would want to do that?

So, ever eager to please and profit, the aviation industry is designing, engineering, and manufacturing magical aircraft like the G700, marvels that serve no function other to keep the world’s most comfortable in ever-greater comfort.

That comfort comes at a heavy price — for the rest of us. We pay more for products when corporations build into their “expenses” costly perks like rides in luxury private jets. And these private aircraft foul our atmosphere and supercharge climate change. Private jets, notes one European report released this past May, turn out to be “10 times more carbon intensive than airliners on average and 50 times more polluting than trains.”

But the real cost of extravagances like the G700 may be impossible to calculate. We are wasting the talents of scientists, technicians, and so many more highly skilled people on endeavors that serve only to sweeten the lives of extraordinarily wealthy people.

This makes no sense. More to the point: Societies with extraordinarily wealthy people make no sense.

Sam Pizzigati writes on inequality for the Institute for Policy Studies. His latest book: The Case for a Maximum Wage (Polity). Among his other books on maldistributed income and

wealth: The Rich Don't Always Win: The Forgotten Triumph over Plutocracy that Created the American Middle Class, 1900-1970 (Seven Stories Press).

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