

"Our hero," Harry Raymond, leaves home to seek his fortune in Sink or Swim (1870), by Horatio Alger, Jr. One of America's all-time best-selling authors, Alger once said that he aimed to provide the nation's youth with "inspiring examples of what energy, ambition, and an honest purpose may achieve."

Social Mobility In America

Not since the 1920s has the United States experienced such topsy-turvy economic change. During the current decade, the nation has witnessed a deep recession, a roaring bull market, instant Wall Street tycoons, bankrupt Texas oilmen, millionaire baseball players, a wave of farm foreclosures, Yuppies, and unemployed steelworkers. Who has gained, who has lost are matters of intense debate.

This year, politicians and academics ponder a “shrinking middle class” (variously defined) and a seemingly permanent black and white “underclass” (also variously defined). Are the losses of high-wage factory jobs and federal cuts in college aid hurting individual opportunities to get ahead? In short, is upward mobility—a key element of the American Dream—in a sudden decline?

It may seem so, if the U.S. economy turns sour. And, in that case, some historians predict that we may see a revival of class tensions, of political appeals to new “have-nots” to take it away from the “haves,” as during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Nevertheless, as measured by sociologists, social mobility in America—people moving up or down the socioeconomic ladder in each generation—seems to be continuing at roughly the same lively tempo as it has been during most of this century. Of today’s white-collar male professionals and managers, more than 40 percent are the sons of blue-collar workers.

At any given moment, a statistical snapshot shows considerable income inequality in America; but there are also considerable changes in individuals’ status during their own lifetimes. Fewer than one-half of all Americans below the poverty line in one year, for example, are still below the poverty line the following year.

Here, Clyde C. Griffen describes the evolution of upward mobility—as ideal and reality—in America. Robert W. Hodge and Steven Lagerfeld analyze the changing politics of opportunity. And Howard M. Bahr revisits “Middletown, U.S.A.” (Muncie, Indiana) to report on the fortunes of three local families.

UPWARD BOUND

by Clyde C. Griffen

Land of opportunity, of self-made men, where newcomers from every nation can slough off old habits and restrictions and strive for advancement. That is one of the ways Americans like to think of their country. And it seems as if they always have. In 1782, the French-born New York farmer-author, J. Hector St. John Crèvecoeur, wrote of the immigrant in the New World: "He forms schemes of future prosperity, he proposes to educate his children better than he has been educated himself; he thinks of future modes of conduct, feels an ardor to labor he never felt before."

In one sense, the contemporary ring of Crèvecoeur's observation is misleading, for the popular meanings of "self-improvement" and "opportunity" have varied over the years. Chattel slaves aside, Crèvecoeur's America was mostly a nation of farmers, savoring the freedom of thought and action that comes with tilling one's own land. The early goals that he described were those of sturdy independence or a modest rise in earnings and status. Later came visions of "rags-to-riches," and, especially during the 20th century, notions of success as "self-fulfillment" and psychic well-being.

But, in another sense, the freshness of Crèvecoeur's words is a reminder of the tension that has always existed between American ideas of material success and other notions of self-improvement—moral, religious, and intellectual. Today, in academe, in the popular press, and in opinion polls, Americans still seem to vacillate among these diverse ideas, even as "social mobility" is generally equated with individual movement up or down the socioeconomic ladder.

Moreover, only during the past few decades have historians looked closely at the changing visions and realities of social mobility in American history. Easiest to see were the heroes and maxims held aloft by authors of popular fiction (e.g., Horatio Alger, Jr.) and advice books. Even with the help of computers, the more difficult task has been the analysis of masses of data (censuses, tax lists, probate records, and other quantifiable sources) in an attempt to reconstruct changing patterns of Americans' fortunes during individual careers and between generations. Archives vary in quality and coverage. Scholars' confidence in generalizing from these sources also varies. But historians have enough of an outline to see that the story of social mobility—up and down—in America is much more complex and significant than was previously thought.

Anglo-Americans began life in America with Old World visions of a static social order. In 1630, when John Winthrop addressed his Puritan



"The wilderness ever opened the gate of escape to the poor, the discontented and oppressed," declared historian Frederick Jackson Turner. But the West was most important as a safety valve for displaced farmers from the East, aided by the Homestead Act of 1862. Here, a family arrives in Nebraska's Loup Valley in 1886.

shipmates aboard the *Arbella* before leading them ashore in Massachusetts, he reminded them that a fixed social hierarchy was God's ordering of "differences for the preservation and good of the whole . . . in all times some must be rich some poor, some high and eminent in power and dignity; others mean and in subjection."

In Winthrop's austere Massachusetts Bay Colony, personal ambition received no encouragement. The well-being of the community required that all individuals fulfill the responsibilities of their respective ranks in life. The vast majority would follow in the footsteps of their fathers and become farmers. (In a more unusual example of continuity, Winthrop, his son, and his grandson all served as colonial governors.) The few colonists who rose from lowly origins to grander positions would simply adopt the customs, dress, and manners of their new peers.

A century and a half later, Benjamin Franklin signaled the beginning of a shift in American conceptions of both individual mobility and community. Once a poor boy, now rich and famous, the plump, bespectacled Franklin sailed to Europe at age 70 in 1776 to enlist the aid of France in the war against Britain. Presenting himself to the elegant court of King Louis XVI "plainly dressed," he served notice on the world that upward mobility in the United States need not entail putting on the trappings of aristocracy. The French adored the author of *Poor Richard's Almanack*

(1733–58); the Comte de Ségur marveled that such a “rustic” sage could appear in “our effeminate and slavish age.”

Much earlier, Franklin had begun shedding the habits of deference and dependence bred by the hierarchical Anglo-Saxon social order. He had started his career as a printer in colonial Boston during the 1720s with the traditional hope of finding helpful patrons in high places. Sadly disabused of that notion by Sir William Keith, the colonial governor, who had deceived him with empty promises, Franklin moved to Philadelphia and turned to self-reliance. With 11 other artisans and tradesmen, he founded the Junto, a voluntary association devoted to civic uplift—it created a subscription library and a volunteer fire company—and to the advancement of its members’ business interests.

In effect, Franklin pointed the way from an Anglo-American tradition of order and hierarchy to new ideals of voluntary association designed to meet collective needs and to provide opportunities for individual social and economic progress for everyone.

An Aristocracy Is Born

Ironically, this change began even as upward mobility was, in fact, declining in some areas of the country, notably parts of the South.

Many of the first Southern settlers had made extraordinary gains. During the early 1600s, Maryland and Virginia were the extreme cases, where economics (i.e. a tobacco boom) and demographics conspired to create striking opportunities. The profits from producing and exporting tobacco leaf spurred growers to import hundreds of young male indentured servants from England. They contracted to labor for roughly five years in the tobacco fields and curing sheds, in return for passage to the New World and room and board once there. Typhoid fever and other diseases took a heavy toll of the new arrivals in the humid Chesapeake lowlands. But, perversely, the high mortality rate opened possibilities for those who survived.

They prospered amid adversity, often quite visibly. In 1618, John Pory of Virginia noted that “a wife of one that in England had professed the black arte not of a scholler but of a collier of Croydon, weares her rough bever hatt with a faire perle hattband, and a silken suite therto correspondent.” (The next year, the colonial authorities felt impelled to enact an ordinance banning such flamboyant dress.) Of the indentured Englishmen who entered Maryland before 1642, and who survived for a decade or more, only about one-tenth failed to become landowners. Their holdings—usually 50 to 400 acres—might be enough only to

Clyde C. Griffen, 58, is professor of history at Vassar College. Born in Sioux City, Iowa, he received a B.A. from the University of Iowa (1952) and a Ph.D. from Columbia University (1960). He is author, with Sally Griffen, of Natives and Newcomers: The Ordering of Opportunity in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Poughkeepsie (1978). Copyright © 1987 by Clyde Griffen.

allow a "rude sufficiency" of living, but the owners were independent.

By the 1660s, however, falling tobacco prices sharply reduced opportunities for ex-servants. Only half of the young indentured English who stepped ashore in Maryland during that decade eventually obtained their own land. Ordinary farmers struggled just to stay out of debt. It generally took money—enough capital or credit to support large-scale enterprises, or to branch out into trade—to make money. Throughout the Chesapeake region, this disparity between rich and poor promoted a new social structure, a nascent Southern "aristocracy." The self-made men acquired titles—mister, gentleman, esquire—and demanded deference from the less fortunate souls who were now their social inferiors. The *nouveaux riches* presumed, as people back in England did, that hierarchy was the Divinely intended order of things, even though their own ranking within it had changed. Upward mobility had not yet emerged as a popular ideal.

In New England, the 17th-century settlers were soon established in well-regulated towns and villages. Religious faith, poorer soils, the least dynamic economy in the colonies, and a healthier climate combined to create a more stable society. Often surviving into old age, Yankee parents did not designate their heirs early, thus giving older people subtle influences over the careers of the young. Individual progress largely followed the life cycle. The men at the bottom of society at a given moment, mostly young and single, would generally gain entry to the middling ranks of established farmers if they lived long enough to inherit their parents' farms. Those who lost the favor of their parents might light out for the frontier to acquire land, or seek jobs in the coastal towns and cities as dockworkers, stable boys, or sailors.

Looking West

Few struck it rich. Colonial seaport cities, even in New England, were not showcases of rapid individual advancement. During the decades before the Revolution, thanks in part to windfall profits reaped by merchants who secured contracts to provision British troops and warships in the colonies, the size of the largest fortunes in Boston and Philadelphia increased dramatically—and so did conspicuous consumption. The wealthy built fine new homes and purchased country estates. In the City of Brotherly Love, John Cadwalader, a hugely successful merchant, rode through the cobblestone streets during the early 1770s in an elegant new English-made coach behind a coachman and six horses, with two of his 12 slaves riding postilion.

At the other extreme, the harsh Northern winters often brought joblessness and uncommon hardships to dockworkers, bricklayers, and ordinary laborers. The rising cost of living reduced even journeymen in some crafts (e.g., tailors, cobblers) nearly to the subsistence level. The indigent filled almshouses. But historians know relatively little about mo-



The "log cabin" myth. In 1840, General William Henry Harrison, the hero of Tippecanoe, boasted of humble origins when he ran for president on the Whig ticket. Actually, he was born on a Virginia plantation. But Harrison and his running mate, John Tyler, defeated Democrat Martin Van Buren.

bility in the middling ranks, among men in the professional, commercial, and artisan classes, who in theory had fair prospects for self-employment and at least modest prosperity.

What is clear is that by the 1770s, a small but influential patriotic gentry had emerged in Boston, New York, and other cities, and in the plantation colonies of the South. These were the men who would lead the Revolution. When Thomas Jefferson proposed in 1778, during the Revolution, that 20 bright but poor Virginia boys "be raked from the rubbish" and educated at state expense, he consciously did so to enlarge, as historian Robert Wiebe says, "the small pool of leaders at the top of the pyramid where gentlemen of breeding, wealth, and talent made their contribution 'to the general happiness' by forming and directing the revolutionary republics."

But the gentry's heyday was brief. Only a few decades after Jefferson made his proposal, the nation's rapid expansion toward the midwestern prairies mixed and dispersed the population, creating new societies where even those settlers who had been leaders in the East had to prove themselves anew. "The feeblest and most obscure do not now despair of exerting influence," declared temperance leader Justin Edwards.

"No longer looking upward within a contained system," writes

Wiebe, Americans "looked outward, saw the land stretching endlessly ahead, and followed it."

By the 1820s, universal white manhood suffrage had been achieved in nearly every state, as property qualifications and other restrictions were dropped by well-to-do Federalists in some states, and by their equally well-heeled Jeffersonian opponents in others. Each party hoped that the new voters would remain loyal out of gratitude to their upper-class benefactors. Instead, the spokesmen for the unwashed engaged in scathing attacks on the "privileged aristocracy" and clamored for more egalitarian reforms. "We find ourselves oppressed on every hand," complained Philadelphia's "Unlettered Mechanic," a pamphleteer, in 1827. "We labor hard in producing all the comforts of life for the enjoyment of others, while we ourselves obtain but a scanty portion."

Being First Is Best

After Andrew Jackson, widely perceived as the candidate of "King 'Mob,'" defeated the Old Guard's John Quincy Adams in the election of 1828, American politicians learned to portray themselves and their allies as men with a common touch. In 1832, Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky found it prudent to describe the home state manufacturers whom he wished to aid with a protective tariff as "self-made men, who have acquired whatever wealth they possess by patient and diligent labor."

Generally, as historian David Brion Davis notes, "mobile men began boasting of their humble origins and their ability to have made it on their own, without influence and patronage, even without education, or at least a gentleman's education."

It is now easy to forget, says Davis, how "novel, indeed, radical" this was. The new American obeisance to the self-made and the self-taught baffled English visitors like Mrs. Trollope, mother of the famous novelist, to whom these labels meant badly made and badly taught. In Europe, kings, generals, and poets might be considered worthy of respect; the entrepreneur as hero was a preposterous notion. The London *Daily News* was still flying in the face of received opinion at mid-century when its editors wrote, "It is time that the *millionaire* should cease to be ashamed of having made his own fortune."

During the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville emphasized how restless and mobile Americans were, endlessly abandoning homes, occupations, and half-completed projects to pursue new opportunities. In fact, recent research shows, population turnover was dizzying: Because of out-migration and deaths, for example, 56 percent of the men living in Boston in 1830 had disappeared by the end of the decade, replaced by new arrivals. (Similarly, today in Boston and other cities, 40 to 60 percent of the inhabitants depart every decade.) Tocqueville and some American conservatives worried about the social costs of this continual upheaval. But most Americans seemed to find change exhilarating. Ralph Waldo Emer-

son cheered the “sturdy lad from New Hampshire or Vermont, who in turn tries all the professions, who teams it, farms it, peddles, keeps a school, preaches, edits a newspaper, goes to Congress, buys a township, and so forth . . . and always like a cat falls on his feet.”

The path of advancing settlement from Ohio to Iowa comes closest to Tocqueville’s portrait of a bubbling, restless society, uncongenial to the aristocrat. In the towns that sprang up on the frontier, deference to “gentlemen” vanished, and so did many an Eastern fortune, lost in land speculation. The first settlers honed their political skills building local governments and campaigning for roads, bridges, and canals. Possession of at least some capital gave many a head start, but, generally, first arrivals made greater gains than either their descendants or latecomers. Being first was best. Here and there, “first families”—such as the Coulters, Fogles, Shorbs, Lathrops, and Stidgers of Canton, Ohio—managed to preserve their local pre-eminence for generations.

Back East, as factories began to develop, opportunities for artisans to work for themselves dwindled. As early as 1802, a New York City journeyman in Benjamin Franklin’s trade complained that “the business of Printing being very expensive to establish, from the high price of materials, very few of those, who are obliged to resort to journey-work . . . ever have it in their power to realize a capital sufficient to commence business on their own account.”

The Rich Get Richer

Yet opportunity contracted so unevenly in different places and in different industries that urban Americans could easily fail to see that, for the majority, industrialization was destroying the old dream of becoming one’s own boss.

In Paterson, New Jersey, for example, only a small number of workmen actually became iron, machinery, and locomotive manufacturers after 1830. But most of Paterson’s successful industrialists had been apprentices and journeymen before opening small shops or factories of their own, so it was tempting for artisan wage-earners to imagine becoming entrepreneurs themselves. In the bigger cities, most workers probably saw that aspiration as fantasy by 1860. Indeed, the first stirrings of class-conscious labor activity had already appeared in the metropolises; in 1828, Philadelphia’s Mechanics’ Union of Trade Associations created the first of many local workingmen’s political parties.

But, even before the Civil War, industrialization created a host of new white-collar jobs in the towns and cities—downtown retailer, mill supervisor, bookkeeper. From Baltimore to Chicago, the new middle class enjoyed important advances in consumption—wool carpets, indoor toilets, pianos, and other “luxuries” that few had known earlier.

Ironically, the new age also brought the first marked overall rise in economic stratification since the late 17th century, chiefly because the

profits from emerging industries, such as textiles and iron, lined the pockets of the well-to-do. The rich got richer. Among the 52 men in Boston worth more than \$200,000 in 1848, notes Edward Pessen of the City University of New York, 75 percent had been rich already in 1833, and most of the rest had been at least well-off. By 1860, five percent of the nation's families owned more than half of its wealth.

Amid the economic ferment of the era, Americans struggled to reconcile different models of success—fulfilling the obligations of one's calling, improving one's character, becoming a capitalist. They devoured popular almanacs, advice books for the young, and sentimental fiction, penned mostly by men from "proper" middle-class families, who tended to uphold the old notion of achievement only within limited bounds. "Instruct them that the farmer's frock and the mechanic's apron are as honorable as the merchant's and clerk's paletot or the student's cap," wrote Sylvester Judd, a Massachusetts minister and popular novelist. "Show them how to rise *in* their calling, not out of it."

The Wheel of Fortune

Franklin remained the great symbol and teacher for all Americans, but it was possible to draw different lessons from his writings. At mid-century, Connecticut's famous "learned blacksmith," Elihu Burritt, who had schooled himself in ancient languages, mathematics, and geography while working at the forge, gained national fame as a living incarnation of Franklin's credo that the dignity of manual labor could be reinforced through self-education.

Businessmen emphasized Franklin's view that success depended upon practice of the simple economic virtues—thrift, zeal, honesty, hard work. But strains appeared as the marketplace changed and the size of fortunes increased. When John Jacob Astor, fur trader and real-estate speculator *extraordinaire*, died in 1848, leaving almost all of his \$20 million to his relatives and a pittance to charity, newspaper obituary writers hinted darkly that Astor had made part of his fortune by illicit means. The New York *Herald* accused the "self-invented money-making machine" of trying to create an "Astor dynasty"; another newspaper noted that Astor's estate was "much less than was expected, but still too much for any man."

As attacks on the rich grew sharper, many conservatives feared that the rights of property—and the future of the Republic—might be in jeopardy. They insisted even more vehemently that the wealthy in America generally succeeded by their virtues, that every American could be a capitalist. "The wheel of fortune is in constant operation," declared Governor Edward Everett of Massachusetts, "and the poor in one generation furnish the rich of the next."

Even after the Civil War, many Americans probably accepted one of these idealized visions of self-improvement. But also popular were doz-

THE GOLDEN DOOR

“With me bundle on me shoulder,/Faith! there’s no man could be bolder;/I’m lavin’ dear old Ireland without warnin’/For I lately took the notion/For to cross the briny ocean,/And I’m off for Philadelphia in the mornin’.”

So went a 19th-century ditty, hummed, presumably, by many of the 650,000 Irish who fled the Great Potato Famine of the 1840s. Between 1820 and 1880, they were joined by some nine million other immigrants—Germans, Britons, Scandinavians. A “second wave” of some 23 million immigrants, mainly from Italy, Greece, Poland, Russia (mostly Jews), and other Slavic countries, arrived between 1880 and 1920.

Many of the immigrants sailed into New York Harbor, hoping, as the famous inscription at the base of the Statue of Liberty promised, that they were passing through a “golden door.” But a good number were driven across the Atlantic less by dreams of wealth than by the lash of necessity. Some, such as the Irish, were escaping economic misfortune, or, in the case of Russian Jews, religious persecution. Others hoped chiefly to win better pay for their toil. At the turn of the century, for example, a Hungarian mechanic could multiply his wages fivefold simply by emigrating to the United States.

Disillusionment awaited more than a few. “I looked out into the alley below and saw palefaced children scrambling in the gutter,” recalled Russian-born novelist Anzia Yezeirska (1885–1970) of her early years in New York City. “‘Where is America?’ cried my heart.” But Yezeirska, like many others, did finally make her way out of the slums.

How the various ethnic groups fared in the New World depended not only on what attitudes and skills they brought with them, but also on where they settled. Many mid-19th century Irishmen, for example, clustered in relatively stagnant, pre-industrial Yankee Boston. Having worked mostly as unskilled farm laborers at home, Irishmen took jobs as bartenders, teamsters, and dockworkers; women often served as maids or mill hands. Only a handful managed to escape to Dorchester or other “lace curtain” neighborhoods. The Irish knack for politics—Hugh O’Brien’s Democratic machine captured City Hall in 1885—yielded Thanksgiving turkeys and street-cleaning jobs for the party faithful, but upward career mobility for only a few.

Several generations later, many Irish of South Boston work at the same jobs as their forefathers did. But, in cities where economic opportunities were greater, such as San Francisco and Detroit, the Irish moved somewhat more easily into the economic mainstream.

By contrast, the German immigrants tended to arrive with useful skills, as shoemakers, tailors, and butchers. In St. Louis, Milwaukee, and other cities, they often advanced relatively quickly; many opened their own shops. Likewise, many Jews of the “second wave” were experienced in the needle trades, and arrived in the United States just as New York City’s garment industry was beginning its rapid expansion.

The Jews quickly embraced the American “success ethic.” Like the Ger-

mans, they opened their own small shops as soon as they were able, or became subcontractors to garment manufacturers. One such “sweater” family was described by Danish-born New York journalist Jacob Riis in his 1890 classic, *How the Other Half Lives*: The family “hoards up \$30 a month, and in a few years will own a tenement somewhere and profit by . . . rent collecting. It is the way the savings of [the Jews] are universally invested.”

With their traditional respect for learning, the Jews emphasized the education of their young at all costs, while Irish, Polish, and Italian Catholic families, if forced to choose, tended to send their children to work instead of to school. In 1907, the editors of New York’s Italian-language *Bolletino della Sera* complained that “Italian families falsify even the ages of their children in order to send them to the factories.”

The Italians, as well as the Jews, Poles, and Scandinavians, benefited from active religious traditions, and the various charitable and mutual-aid organizations that revolved around their churches or synagogues. Strong families and a commitment to community seem to have helped all of these groups adjust to life in America. But, as in Irish South Boston, too much ethnic solidarity could hinder assimilation.

In certain enclaves, such as the working-class Italian North End in Boston, cloistered immigrant groups simply rejected the success ethic as destructive to church, family, and community life. Studying these “urban villagers” as late as the 1950s, sociologist Herbert Gans found that “the idea that work can be a central purpose of life . . . organized into a series of related jobs that make up a career is virtually nonexistent.” In the close-knit Scandinavian farming communities of Minnesota and Wisconsin, “overachievers” were discouraged. Garrison Keillor recalls in his fictional memoir of his Minnesota boyhood, *Lake Wobegon Days* (1985), that the firing of Bernie Carlson, host of the local radio station’s “Farm Hour,” was held up by local folk as an example of “what happens to people who get too big.”

By the second generation, differences in the mobility of the various groups became more pronounced. Jews progressed the fastest, followed by Italians, Catholic Slavs, and Scandinavians. The Irish lagged behind. But, as historians Alice Kessler-Harris and Virginia Yans-McLaughlin observe, the link between ethnic background and individual progress weakens dramatically by the third generation, except among Jews. By 1969, for example, Italian-Americans and Irish-Americans had achieved nearly identical levels of schooling, income, and occupational status. After three generations, the “golden door” had finally swung wide for them, and new immigrants—Mexicans, Koreans, Chinese—were arriving to test Miss Liberty’s promise again.



Ellis Island, 1905

—C.G.

ens of satires that undercut all the solemn talk about sticking with the daily grind as the way to succeed. "It is good to be shifty in a new country," was the motto of J. J. Hooper's fictional Simon Suggs.

By the end of the 19th century, the wealth of the very rich both awed and alarmed the American public. Carnegie, Vanderbilt, Rockefeller, and Duke became household names; the New York *Tribune* astonished its readers in 1892 when it published a list of reputed millionaires containing more than 4,000 names. That year, the Populist Party platform of presidential candidate General James Baird Weaver warned that the nation was splitting into two classes: tramps and millionaires. "The fruits of the toil of millions are boldly stolen to build up colossal fortunes for a few, unprecedented in the history of mankind."

"The problem of our age," declared steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, one of the few truly self-made men among the millionaires, "is the proper administration of wealth, so that the ties of brotherhood may still bind together the rich and poor." As Carnegie noted, the transformation of the economy by big corporations meant that, in many cases, face to face contact between employer and employees "is at an end. Rigid Castes are formed, and, as usual, mutual ignorance breeds mutual distrust." But Carnegie argued that the change was both inevitable and beneficial, that cheaper and better goods provided by the modern economy meant that the "poor enjoy what the rich could not before afford."

He had a point. Real wages had increased after the Civil War, so that skilled workers, and even ordinary factory hands with children who brought home wages, could acquire decent housing, sewing machines, and other comforts that helped take the edge off the huge disparities in wealth during the Gilded Age. A workingman might resent those who dined at Delmonico's or owned mansions in Newport, but a rising standard of living could be enough to resign him to his lot.

Doing Better Than Dad

Redefining the meaning of opportunity in an age of Big Business proved to be a long and often confusing process. Dozens of new books about success appeared, increasingly with that word in their title. Many were soothing but largely irrelevant sermons, harking back to the bygone world of small shops and counting rooms, defining success in terms of "living an earnest, honest, pure life." Contrary to today's popular impression, even the prolific Horatio Alger, Jr. (1832-99) did not emphasize money-getting. As historian John G. Cawelti writes, Alger's young heroes did not go from "rags to riches," but (often with more luck than hard work) from "rags to respectability."

White Americans who extolled the "land of opportunity" before 1900 did not have blacks or women in mind. Unless economic hardship forced women to work after marriage, they belonged at home. Their social status depended on that of their menfolk. The feminization of



Henry Adams (1838–1918), whose grandfather and great-grandfather had occupied the White House, was one of the harshest critics of materialistic individualism. At the turn of the century, he criticized America's "20 million horsepower society" for its excessive rationalism and naive optimism.

teaching did provide careers, and, in the larger city school systems, some upward mobility for single women. But female achievement was discouraged and remained exceptional, and so, like that of blacks, invisible in the literature on success.

Not until 1891 did an American dictionary, *The Century Dictionary*, define success as the "art of gaining money." By then, the careers of the notorious "robber barons"—Daniel Drew, Jay Gould, and Cornelius Vanderbilt—rendered largely implausible the traditional notion that wealth was a reward for personal virtue. The defenders of the very rich increasingly emphasized not their personal virtues or how they made or disposed of their money, but simply the number of jobs which their capital created—a far more utilitarian justification.

Neither the robber barons nor the growth of corporate business, nor sermons on success seemed to have any effect on American opportunities during the late 19th century. Surveying studies of U.S. cities, Stephan Thernstrom found that little changed; indeed, mobility remained the same at least through the early 20th century. Overall, he discovered much more upward mobility in individual careers (12 to 22 percent of his sample population per decade) than downward (seven to 12 percent). Progress *between generations* was even greater: In Boston, more than

two-fifths of the sons in every generation climbed at least one rung above their fathers on the ladder.

The men who managed to get ahead within their own lifetimes generally took small steps: A casual laborer might land a regular factory job; a wage-earning shoemaker might open his own shop; or a clerk in a hardware store might become a partner in the enterprise. During the mid-19th century in Boston, the nation's fourth largest metropolis, and Poughkeepsie, a small Hudson River city, 60 percent of skilled manual workers remained at that level. But an impressive one-fourth or more rose (mostly to run their own small workshops and stores), and just one-seventh or less sank into lower status jobs.

In the two cities, according to Thernstrom, one-third or more of the men who started work in menial jobs (e.g., porter, stable man) managed to better themselves. In Boston, the largest percentage found low-paying white-collar jobs, probably reflecting the greater opportunities for sales and clerical workers in a commercial entrepôt; in Poughkeepsie, more found their way into the higher-paid skilled trades as masons, coopers, or machinists.

Mental Sunshine

Beyond showing how differences among cities and their occupational structures affected one's chances of getting ahead—best in a commercial center like Boston, worst in a one-industry mill town—historians have been unable to pin down other factors affecting individual mobility during the nation's 19th-century industrial surge. We can say, however, that the school of "hard knocks" had more graduates than did formal institutions of learning. In 1870, only two percent of the nation's teenagers received high school diplomas; by 1910, only nine percent did. But many professionals, shopkeepers, and some craftsmen saw that the future lay in the expanding world of white-collar work. Increasingly, they sent their children to the new public high schools.

As if to reconcile urban Americans to their dwindling chances of becoming their own bosses, a number of popular writers around the turn of the century offered a new definition of success that seemed more compatible with the emerging economy of affluence and large firms. With the right outlook, these writers suggested, one could make just about any confining corporate job satisfying. Ralph Waldo Trine, Orison Swett Marden, and other advocates of "New Thought" saw success chiefly in terms of "fulfillment" and "self-realization." They spoke of the "creative life" and of the pleasures of achievement rather than of competition in the world of work. Philosopher William James lent crucial support: "*Believe what is in the line of your needs*, for only by such belief is the need fulfilled Have faith that you can successfully make it, and your feet are nerved to its accomplishment."

The New Thinkers also advised middle-class readers to cultivate

“mental sunshine” and to take time to savor nature, family, and hobbies; they warned against total obsession with business.

Even writers who clung to more materialistic notions of success began to emphasize new virtues, such as “personality” and “psychic energy,” which seemed useful in getting ahead within the new corporate bureaucracies. Americans would have to learn to sell themselves. In *The Man Nobody Knows* (1925), adman Bruce Barton portrayed Jesus as both the exemplar of these qualities and the founder of modern business. Jesus, wrote Barton, had “picked up 12 men from the bottom ranks of business and forged them into an organization that conquered the world.”

Jesus was no “kill-joy,” he said, but “the most popular dinner guest in Jerusalem” who could teach modern Americans “a happier more satisfying way of living.”*

At various times later in the 20th century, popular writers, politicians, and academics would reconsider the challenge that the rise of Big Business (and, later, Big Government) posed to traditional American notions of success and independence. Few would take so complaisant a view of the challenge as did these early writers.

The rise of Big Business may have made self-employment a receding prospect for most urban Americans, but studies of the early 20th century show an increase in upward *occupational* mobility, most of it due to the massive American exodus from the farms to the cities (which began around the time of the Civil War). Already by 1900, 20 farmers were leaving the land for every city dweller who became a farmer. A man fresh from the hinterland might land a job in a Dayton, Ohio, cash register factory or as a shipping clerk in a Chicago warehouse; his sons could expect to do better.

Moving Up In Europe, Too

Helping them along was the influx of cheap labor, chiefly from Italy and Eastern Europe (1.2 million people in 1907), which pushed many earlier immigrants and American-born white unskilled factory workers up into foremen’s jobs and other supervisory occupations [see box, p. 102]. The immigrants, or their sons, could hope eventually to follow the same route, although members of different ethnic groups would progress at widely different rates. “If America was the land of promise,” writes Hartmut Kaelble of West Berlin’s Free University, “this was more true for the unskilled workers . . . than for any other social group.”

But many scholars now believe that for everybody else, from carpenters to schoolteachers to business executives, opportunities were no greater in the United States after 1850 than they were in Europe. In

*Later writers, such as the Reverend Norman Vincent Peale and Dale Carnegie, expanded on the notion of reshaping one’s personality in order to get ahead. Peale’s 1952 best-seller, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, is still in strong demand.

essence, industrialization seems to have had the same effect on both sides of the Atlantic. In cities as diverse as Graz, Austria, and Waltham, Massachusetts, Kaelble found that 17 to 25 percent of the male workers moved up or down at least one rung on the class ladder during every decade through 1930.

Why, then, this notion of America as a *unique* "land of opportunity?" It simply may have been the legacy of the years before 1850, when opportunities probably were greater in the United States than anywhere else. Or perhaps the existence of hereditary aristocracies at the top of society in Europe discouraged the expression of yearnings that Europeans felt as keenly as Americans did. In the United States, where all it took to join the "aristocracy" was enough money, anybody could hope, in theory, to scale the very summit. Today, the persistence of the "rags to riches" myth and its variants testifies to the depth of Americans' belief in the ideal of opportunity. But historians still do not know how strong or pervasive the hunger actually was to "make it," and especially to make it big, among Americans in the past.

Tocqueville gave us lasting images of the restless American, forever hoping to better his lot: "Death at length overtakes him, but it is before he is weary of his bootless chase of that complete felicity which forever escapes him." But labor historians during the last decade have suggested that the visions of personal advancement among many farmers and workers before 1900 were relatively modest. To Americans with strong community or ethnic loyalties, happiness meant staying put. If they were farmers, they aimed chiefly to secure the family patrimony, while many urban workers aspired simply to a decent standard of living, to job security, and to dignity in the workplace.

Thus, then as now, individual Americans' ambitions for themselves or their children varied; not everyone aspired to reach the top, despite the impression often given by best-selling writers of the day. But broadly popular goals did seem to change. If during the early 1800s one ideal appears to have been independence through self-employment, something new had begun to emerge by the turn of the century.

That something new was simple consumerism.

Higher average incomes, the rapid proliferation of widely advertised goods, and the availability of consumer credit whetted the appetites of Americans for everything from washing machines to automobiles. As time went on, people of all classes seemed increasingly to measure personal accomplishment by the ability to satisfy growing material expectations. Indeed, by the late 1920s, more Americans than ever before seemed to embrace Tocqueville's "bootless chase," which continues to this day.

THE POLITICS OF OPPORTUNITY

by Robert W. Hodge and Steven Lagerfeld

Trying to account for the absence of a self-conscious, politically cohesive working class in the United States, Karl Marx observed in 1852, that, "though classes, indeed, already exist, they have not yet become fixed, but continually change and interchange their elements in a constant state of flux."

There have been other explanations.

In *Why is There No Socialism in the United States?* (1906), Werner Sombart, a left-leaning German economist, cited the availability of Western farmland—even though, in 1906, the frontier was "closed." On other points, Sombart was more perceptive. He noted that the American belief in political equality, in "the efficacy of the People's will," firmly attached almost all citizens to the existing political system.

Like Tocqueville 70 years earlier, Sombart also put great store in the easy American sense of social equality. "The worker," he wrote, "is not being reminded at every turn that he belongs to a 'lower' class." Moreover, American wage earners lived rather well compared to their European counterparts, and their standard of living was rising.

"All Socialist utopias," he observed, "came to nothing on roast beef and apple pie."

But the most important ingredient of all in the American "proletarian psyche," in Sombart's view, was the opportunity to "escape into freedom." Reluctantly, he concluded that there was some truth to the "rags to riches" sagas that he had heard everywhere in the United States during a visit in 1904. "A far from insignificant number of ordinary workers ascend the rungs of the ladder of the capitalist hierarchy to the top or almost to the top." Others rose more modestly, he noted, but rose nonetheless.

In the years since, both American and foreign scholars have offered fresh theories to explain the scant appeal of egalitarian socialism in the United States. Among them: 1) the continual influx of various immigrant groups hindered working-class solidarity; 2) enormous *geographical* mobility hampered efforts to unite workers; 3) American socialist leaders were inept organizers and divided among themselves.

Of course, the United States does have social classes, and, more obviously, class politics—think of the New Deal, the Fair Deal, the Great Society. Frequently, class tensions have been played out in debates over taxes, or, especially since the 1960s, welfare.

But what most Americans do *not* entertain is the belief that individual status and earning opportunities are fixed for life. Among Europeans that belief has been far more common. In 1926, Austrian-born economist Joseph Schumpeter defied Europe's conventional wisdom when he compared the social strata to various rooms in a hotel, "always full, but always [full] of different people."

Historians doubt that individual opportunities have actually been vastly greater in the United States than in other Western industrial societies. But sociologists, studying more precise 20th-century data, conclude that America's current advantages are at least "statistically significant." In any event, the vision of upward mobility retains its popular appeal. It bridges two often contradictory ideals: equality (discouraging overt distinctions of rank) and individualism, which tugs the other way, encouraging enterprise, self-reliance, and success based on merit.

'Every Man A King'

The belief in equal opportunity, that everybody *begins* with a roughly equal chance to get ahead, is what eases the tension between equality and individualism. "Although denied every day by experience," wrote Margaret Mead, the belief "is maintained every day by our folklore and our daydreams."

A rising standard of living, allowing ordinary workers as well as the rich to own cars, television sets, and houses, is essential to the general sense of opportunity. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, social mobility among the employed did not decrease. However, massive unemployment, widespread farm foreclosures, and a sharp drop in living standards for millions of citizens (but not all citizens) provided harsh reminders of what had always been (and still is) true: In America, as elsewhere, opportunities are not equal for all.

"Looking at the world," wrote French socialist Léon Blum in 1932, as bread lines lengthened throughout the West, "one has the impression of an audience . . . waiting restlessly for the end of one act" and the beginning of another. Four years later, after Italy and Germany had succumbed to fascism, Blum became premier of France.

In the United States, there were fears of open class warfare. But the voters turned to Franklin D. Roosevelt, a wealthy Hudson Valley patrician, who promised on one hand to help the "forgotten man" and, on the other, to slash government spending by 25 percent!

Roosevelt, observed columnist Walter Lippmann, "is no crusader. He is no tribune of the people. He is no enemy of entrenched privilege."

Robert W. Hodge, 50, is professor of sociology at the University of Southern California. Born in Washington, D.C., he received a B.A. from Reed College (1959) and a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago (1967). He is the author of numerous articles on social mobility and related subjects. Steven Lagerfeld, 32, is senior editor of the Wilson Quarterly.



In August 1935, Senator Huey Long (D-La.) tells reporters that he will make an independent bid for the presidency if no other "liberal" mounts a challenge. At the time, some observers thought Long might be able to win.

He is a pleasant man who, without any important qualifications for the office, would very much like to be president."

Economic hard times brought the tiny Moscow-run American Communist Party few new supporters, except among writers and intellectuals; Norman Thomas's milder Socialist Party claimed a grand total of 15,000 members the year Roosevelt was first elected—although Thomas won nearly one million votes in the 1932 presidential election.

Instead of doctrinaire leftists, the Great Depression spawned a host of popular demagogues, notably Father Charles E. Coughlin, the Detroit "radio priest," and California's Francis E. Townsend, advocate of generous pensions for the elderly. The most popular of the new leaders was Huey P. Long, the colorful Louisiana "Kingfish," who promised to make "Every Man A King."

A spellbinding orator who served as Louisiana's governor and then as a U.S. senator, Long gained a national following by blaming the nation's ills on J. P. Morgan and a cabal of Wall Street "plutocrats." "All of our businesses have been taken over by a few men," he thundered. If they were not stopped there would be "no profitable enterprise left to anyone except them."

Long promised to raise living standards through a scheme to Share Our Wealth. New taxes would gradually eliminate all personal fortunes

over \$3 million or \$4 million; inheritances would be limited to \$1 million. The tax revenues would, he claimed, supply a basic household nest egg of \$5,000 for every needy family—"enough for a home, an automobile, a radio, and the ordinary conveniences"—and a minimum income of about \$2,000 annually. As one contemporary study indicated, even stiffer taxes than the ones Long proposed would have produced only a bit more than \$400 per needy family. No matter. Millions of Americans were ready to believe that a tiny upper class had grabbed a greater share of the nation's wealth, an inequity that "soak the rich" taxes could remedy.

By the mid-1930s, the Kingfish loomed as a possible third party candidate running against FDR in the presidential election of 1936. That threat ended in 1935 when Long was assassinated by the son-in-law of a Louisiana political foe.

Dangerous as he may have seemed, concludes historian Alan Brinkley, Long was not quite as radical as he often sounded. His followers were not workers aiming to topple "the bosses," but mostly members of the small-town lower-middle class, struggling to hold on to hard-won respectability. Long's attacks on Wall Street's "plutocrats" echoed a tradition of American politics going back to the Revolution—opposition to concentrated economic or political power. (Indeed, Long also criticized FDR for accumulating too much power for his New Deal agencies in Washington.) The Kingfish harked back to a simpler America where even the least well-off could hope to improve their lot by going into business for themselves. "Where is the corner groceryman?" he asked the Senate. The "little independent businesses operated by middle class people . . . have been fading out . . . as the concentration of wealth grows like a snowball."

Attacks on "bigness" would recur under different circumstances, from the Left and the Right, later in the 20th century. The villains would be giant institutions—variously public or corporate—which seemed to threaten not only the American egalitarian ethos, but the spirit of individual enterprise and self-reliance.

Soaking the Rich

In June 1935, before Long died, FDR decided to "steal Huey's thunder" with a tax program of his own. The so-called Second New Deal also included Social Security, the Wagner Act (which encouraged the organizing of labor unions), and banking reform. In proposing new taxes—stiff levies on Big Business, an inheritance tax, and sharply higher income taxes on the well-to-do—FDR appealed to a mixture of class resentment and fears of "bigness." "Social unrest and a deepening sense of unfairness," he declared, "are dangers to our national life which we must minimize by rigorous methods." Then, as the Hearst newspapers opened fire on what they called his "Soak the Successful" plan, the president blithely departed for the annual Harvard-Yale boat races at

New London, Connecticut.

Eventually, Congress approved FDR's Second New Deal. But the president's tax proposals, denounced by conservatives as "class legislation," were whittled down. No inheritance tax was passed.* The top income tax rate did jump from 63 to 79 percent, but only one man in the country (John D. Rockefeller) fell into this bracket.

Many historians now conclude that Roosevelt's soak-the-rich scheme was largely a symbolic gesture. Overall, writes William Leuchtenburg, because FDR insisted on financing Social Security with a regressive payroll tax, the wealthy claimed about the same share of the nation's income after the Second New Deal as they had before.

The G.I. Bill

Nevertheless, during the 1936 presidential campaign, FDR barely mentioned the GOP's candidate, Kansas Governor Alf Landon, and gleefully campaigned against America's "economic royalists." On Election Day, FDR lost only two states to Landon. (William Lemke, running as the candidate of Father Coughlin's Union Party, won 892,267 ballots; Socialist Norman Thomas garnered 187,833; and Communist Earl Browder collected 80,171.) "As Maine goes," the president's advisers joked, "so goes Vermont."

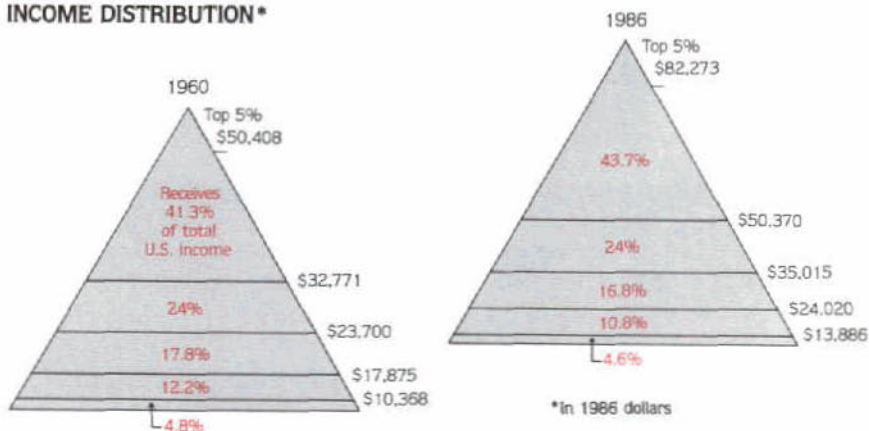
Roosevelt's re-election firmed up the New Deal coalition and signaled the political realignment of Americans more closely along socioeconomic lines. Business contributions to the Democratic Party dropped sharply. Blacks deserted the Party of Lincoln, and fiery labor leader John L. Lewis, until then a Republican, aligned the one million-member Congress of Industrial Organizations with the Democratic Party. Blacks and Big Labor have remained more or less firmly attached to the Democrats ever since. But class politics, even the polite form practiced by FDR, never seem to get very far in the United States. The defection of conservative Southern Democrats in Congress from Roosevelt's coalition in 1937, coupled with Republican gains in the congressional elections of 1938, wrote *finis* to any possibility of a radical Third New Deal, even if FDR had desired one. (It would be almost 40 years before a Democratic presidential candidate, George McGovern, would appeal quite so openly to class resentment again.)

After a decade of economic hardship, Americans still longed for a restoration of national prosperity and individual opportunities, not a sharpening of class conflict or a general redistribution of wealth.

Such sentiment has always helped bar the way to class-based politi-

*Except during the Civil War, Washington has never imposed an *inheritance* tax (i.e. a tax paid by the recipients of bequests). Congress imposed a modest levy (one to 10 percent) on large estates in 1916. The estate tax remained essentially unchanged until 1976, when it was lowered, and it was reduced again in 1986. The tax, which falls on less than one percent of all estates, yields some \$6 billion annually. Sweden and other European nations levy an annual tax on wealth. The United States does not, but individual states *do* tax "personal property," real estate, and estates and inheritances.

THE UNCHANGING U.S. INCOME DISTRIBUTION*



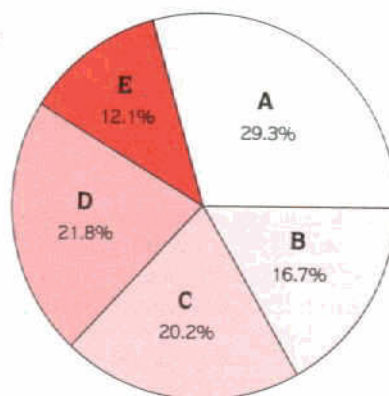
Overall, the distribution of income (above) has changed very little since 1960. (Each segment represents one-fifth of all U.S. families.) The dollar figures show the lowest income in the top five percent and the highest income in each of the lower four quintiles. The chart below shows how Americans aged 25-30 who had established their own households by 1981 fared as compared to their parents. Not many offspring remained in their parents' bracket (see the percentages underlined in red). And more than half of all these young adults will rise or fall into a new bracket by 1991.

INCOME MOBILITY BETWEEN GENERATIONS, 1981

Percentage of Sons and Daughters In Various Income Quintiles

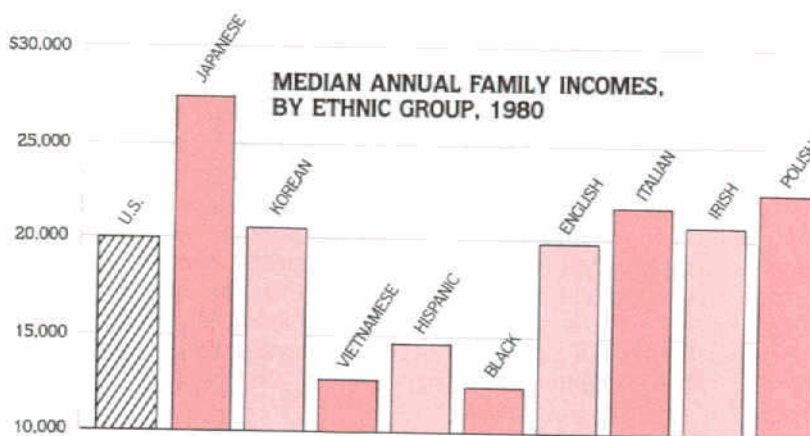
Income Quintile of Parents	Highest	Second	Third	Fourth	Lowest
Highest	<u>36</u>	<u>23</u>	<u>19</u>	<u>13</u>	<u>9</u>
Second	<u>25</u>	<u>26</u>	<u>22</u>	<u>17</u>	<u>10</u>
Third	<u>17</u>	<u>26</u>	<u>23</u>	<u>23</u>	<u>11</u>
Fourth	<u>15</u>	<u>19</u>	<u>19</u>	<u>24</u>	<u>23</u>
Lowest	<u>2</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>18</u>	<u>27</u>	<u>44</u>

**MOVING UP:
SOCIOECONOMIC ORIGINS OF
HIGH-STATUS
WHITE-COLLAR MEN,*
1973**



*Includes professionals, executives, officials, and non-retail salesmen

The chart shows the occupations of the fathers of American men (aged 21-64) who held high-status white-collar jobs in 1973: A) Same as son; B) Proprietors, retail salesmen, and clerical and kindred workers; C) Craftsmen and foremen; D) Semi-skilled or unskilled factory workers and service employees; E) Farmers and farm managers and laborers.



The family incomes of various American ethnic groups have tended to grow more equal over time. But some groups progress faster than others, and a few (e.g., Japanese-Americans) seem consistently to surpass others.

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau; Panel Study of Income Dynamics, University of Michigan; David Featherman and Robert Hauser, *Opportunity and Change* (1978).

cal parties, so common in Europe. Yet, curiously, the nation's widespread belief in individual opportunity has never spurred elected officials to *promote* individual upward mobility.*

In the United States, politicians hail the "common man," not the "self-made" man. The ideal of the self-made man and "making it" has been nurtured mostly by popular authors and by magazines (from *Work and Win* at the turn of the century to *Inc.* today), clergymen, and business leaders. Politicians promise prosperity (or a "safety net") for all; to promote openly the success of some individuals, but not others, is to court political oblivion.

After the Great Depression, however, the federal government did begin to do more to boost the long-term prospects of selected classes of individuals. The first of these measures was the so-called G.I. Bill of Rights (passed by Congress in 1944), which provided a massive array of benefits for World War II veterans. It was intended only partly as a reward to the returning soldiers. More to the point, as a government report said, it provided a "solution of a problem as old as war—the returning soldier embittered against the society he fought to protect."

Free-Swinging S.O.B.'s

At the time, it also seemed possible that after the World War II boom ended, the Depression would simply resume. The G.I. Bill, by pumping money into the economy and keeping veterans out of the job market, would help to prevent such a disaster. Looking further ahead, Harvard president James Bryant Conant declared in 1943: "The demobilization of our armed forces is a God-given moment for reintroducing the American concept of a fluid society. If it is handled properly we can insure a healthy body politic for at least a generation." Two decades later, the idea of drawing a potentially alienated minority into the mainstream by giving its members a chance to get ahead would reappear.

During the late 1940s, however, few veterans seemed alienated. The nation was grateful; the economy stayed healthy. The G.I. Bill offered a smorgasbord of benefits, such as low-interest home mortgages, but the most important, symbolically, was generous aid for the college bound: up to \$500 annually for tuition plus a modest stipend for living expenses. All told, 2.2 million World War II veterans went to college on the G.I. Bill, and another 5.6 million attended vocational and technical schools, at a cost of \$14.5 billion.

Hailed, in the words of one educator, as "one of the most significant contributions to the development of our human resources that this nation has ever undertaken," the impact of the G.I. Bill has been, in fact, somewhat overrated. Although the G.I. Bill made it easier for 2.2 million

*One could argue that federal efforts to increase farm ownership (e.g., the 1862 Homestead Act), or the creation of the Small Business Administration (1953) to help struggling entrepreneurs, assisted upward mobility in many cases, but they were not promoted as such.

veterans to attend universities, scholars estimate that only about one-third of them would not have done so without federal aid.*

At first, few of the returning veterans aimed for the top. They went to school, worked hard, and sought promising but secure jobs. *Fortune* magazine, surveying the college Class of '49, found that only two percent of the graduates planned to go into business for themselves. "I know AT&T might not be very exciting," explained one young man, "but there'll always be an AT&T."

Fortune noted with dismay that "the Forty-Niners" were reluctant even to discuss money, but generally seemed to aim for relatively modest incomes of about \$10,000. They conceived of the Good Life chiefly in terms of a happy family (with three children), a comfortable home, and two cars. It was just about what Huey Long had promised their parents during the 1930s. *Fortune* worried that the new generation might not furnish enough of the "free-swinging s.o.b.'s we seem to need for leavening the economy."

As it turned out, there would be, eventually, a sufficiency of s.o.b.'s. But memories of the Great Depression had lowered, temporarily, the ceiling on popular expectations. The wartime military, by throwing men of varied ethnic backgrounds together, had acted as a giant Mixmaster of the social classes, at least among whites. With the return of prosperity during the late 1940s, Americans seemed to strike a new balance between egalitarianism and competitive individualism. As politicians saw it, the United States would "level up": Everybody—everybody white, that is—would be middle-class.

In this optimistic postwar climate there was no significant agitation for redistribution of the wealth, and hardly any public discussion of what had happened to the "one third of a nation" that Franklin Delano Roosevelt had found to be ill-housed and ill-fed.

The Lonely Crowd

Assessing the political landscape in 1952, shortly before the election that put Dwight D. Eisenhower in the White House, political scientist Samuel Lubell argued that there were now two middle classes. One was older, small-town, mostly Yankee (or from established immigrant groups), "instinctively" Republican; the other, composed mostly of first- and second-generation Jews, Irish, and other urban ethnics who had "made it" since the Depression, was also conservative, but wedded by sentiment to the Democratic Party.

"We are witnessing an almost complete refutation of the Marxian thesis," Lubell concluded. "Our class struggle, if it can be called that, arises not from the impoverishment of the masses but from their

*College enrollments had grown by about 400,000 during the Depression, reaching 1.5 million in 1940. With the return of the veterans, enrollments reached 2.3 million in 1950. A decade later, 3.6 million youths were in college, and by 1970, 7.9 million were.



From The New Yorker
(1987): "Stop moping. Lots
of people who don't make a
million by thirty make tons
later on."

progress in postwar America."

Even the intellectuals seemed to have forgotten the poor. During the 1930s, they had decried the nation's poverty and clamored for collective action by the masses; now, they recoiled from the prosperous "mass man" of the 1950s, and jeered at his *spiritual* impoverishment.* Among the most famous of the many books in this vein was *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), by Yale's David Riesman, and two colleagues. Riesman warned that the sturdy, enterprising, "inner-directed" man of the past was rapidly being replaced by a joyless, conformist, "other-directed" type. The cause of this new phenomenon: "a centralized and bureaucratized society." Or, in a word, *bigness*.

In a world of large institutions, Riesman argued, getting ahead "depends less on what one is and what one does than on what others think of one—and how competent one is in manipulating others." Yet, what Riesman conceded then is still true: Only a fraction of the working population is, in fact, employed by Big Business. (Today, only 10 percent of

*Ironically, the "classless" 1950s produced a burst of scholarly writing on social mobility, class, politics, and status. Thus, sociologist Martin A. Trow argued that Senator Joseph McCarthy (R.-Wisc.) drew his main support for his anti-Communist, anti-Eastern Establishment crusade from small-town businessmen who looked to him to express "their fear and mistrust of bigness, and the slick and subversive ideas that come out of the . . . big institutions to erode old ways and faiths."

working Americans are on the payrolls of private firms with more than 1,000 employees.) But he had a point. A personal reputation for old-fashioned rectitude, thrift, and honesty counted for more in a close-knit town of small merchants and farmers than it did in large, impersonal organizations, where nice guys might finish last. But hard work and intelligence still mattered a great deal, then as later. As certain small-town virtues faded in importance, for better or worse, the values of "meritocracy" took their place.

There was a socially benevolent side to the postwar growth of corporate capitalism, but it was not widely appreciated at the time. The rise of publicly owned corporations, underway since the turn of the century, spelled the demise of "family capitalism," and all that went with it. In former days, a Swift, duPont, or Rockefeller could create an enormously successful company and hope to pass its management on to his children and grandchildren. Especially in smaller cities, such as St. Louis, locally prominent families could thus also preserve their social and political power for generations.

More Room at the Top

When companies are owned by a vast, amorphous group of shareholders, such perpetuation of wealth and power is far more difficult. By the 1950s, large family-controlled enterprises, such as the Ford Motor Company, were anomalies; much more common were publicly owned corporations, such as General Motors, run for many years by Alfred P. Sloan, Jr. Sloan and other professional managers could pass on whatever wealth (usually modest) they accumulated to their sons and daughters, and they could provide them with superior educational opportunities, but they could not confer automatic "position" and power, as Henry Ford I did, in effect, in his last will and testament. Under the pressure of competition, Big Business had created room at the top.

Not that "rags to riches" sagas became more common. In 1959, reviewing various studies of the "business elite" stretching back to colonial times, sociologists Seymour Martin Lipset and Reinhard Bendix found that only 10 to 20 percent of executives have ever come from the most humble socioeconomic origins. Instead, the changing structure of business allowed those Americans whose parents already had made it into the middle class to stand on the shoulders of their fathers and climb a bit higher.

By 1950, according to one study, such "second-generation" Americans occupied 18 percent of the offices in executive suites, up from only two percent in 1870. White Anglo-Saxon Protestants still dominated the business establishment, but the "old" families were losing their grip. In 1870, 86 percent of top business leaders traced their origins to colonial forebears; by 1950, the proportion had dropped to 50 percent, mirroring the composition of the U.S. population at large.

Overall, sociologists have found, the 20th century has seen a slight but measurable rise in social mobility in America. It has been steady, unaffected even by the Great Depression—although the careers of young people during the 1930s were set back—or by the great burst of prosperity after World War II.

No single factor seems to explain the increase. The growth of service industries, which employed 39 percent of U.S. workers in 1920 and employ 73 percent today, is one likely contributor. Despite its current reputation as the domain of hamburger flippers, the service sector created thousands of relatively high-paying jobs for educated workers—nurses, bankers, government bureaucrats, engineers. And, partly because high school enrollments swelled during the Depression and later, Americans became steadily more educated: By 1960, they possessed a median of 10.5 years of schooling (today, the median is 12.6 years), and nearly eight percent of the population held college degrees.

The Decline of the WASP

Progress was uneven. During the 1950s and into the 1960s, lingering social discrimination kept the rising generation of college-educated Dapolitos, Steins, O'Briens, and other descendants of recent white immigrants out of many places at the very apex of society, especially in the older precincts of the Northeast.

As late as 1964, E. Digby Baltzell of the University of Pennsylvania could still write about *The Protestant Establishment*. If well-to-do White Anglo-Saxon Protestants did not throw open the doors of their preparatory schools, Ivy League colleges, private clubs, and other institutions to more non-WASP men of achievement, he warned, the nation would lose its last chance to ensure the survival of a cohesive upper class of "real distinction and wide authority." Baltzell, no egalitarian, argued that a permeable but well-defined upper class was essential to the proper governance of a democracy.

As Baltzell conceded, the 1960 presidential election victory of John F. Kennedy, a Catholic, Harvard alumnus, and grandson of an Irish immigrant, suggested that half of Baltzell's argument might already have been all but won. The other half—preserving a cohesive national upper class—was already lost; America was now just too big and diverse.

Despite its symbolism, Kennedy's election represented, in large measure, a continuation of 1950s-style politics. "Soak the rich" rhetoric was out. Indeed, in 1962, when the young Democratic president proposed a tax cut to stimulate the economy, ultimately slashing the income tax rate on the nation's top earners from 91 percent (where it had been fixed during World War II) to 70 percent, he sounded for all the world like Calvin Coolidge. The existing tax structure, he told the New York Economic Club that December, "reduces the financial incentives for personal effort, investment, and risk-taking."

Thus, when Kennedy administration officials began planning what would eventually emerge as the core of Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty, the initial approach was also traditional. One early target: juvenile delinquency in the black ghettos. As Allen J. Matusow of Rice University writes, their diagnosis was simple: "Society encouraged slum kids to have high aspirations but provided few legitimate opportunities to satisfy them Temptation was great, therefore, to exploit 'illegitimate opportunities.'" Better schools and job-training were the solution. The slum kids would grow up and prosper.

By the time LBJ declared War on Poverty early in 1964, however, the Democrats' efforts had been transformed into a broad assault on economic, political, and racial inequality. A new kind of class politics had been born—not "soak the rich" but lift up the poor and the minorities. "The central problem," LBJ declared, "is to protect and restore man's satisfaction in belonging to a community where he can find security and significance." Ambitious programs designed to enhance the upward mobility of the poor, especially blacks—Head Start, Upward Bound, Job Corps—had been linked to the Community Action Program, an ill-fated effort to increase the political power of the poor in the cities and elsewhere. Meanwhile, many of the remaining legal props of racial discrimination were swept away by the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

The egalitarian spirit of the age may have peaked in 1969, when President Richard M. Nixon, a conservative Republican, backed the so-called Philadelphia Plan, which greatly expanded the scope of LBJ's 1965 "affirmative action" directive by requiring federal contractors to establish hiring quotas for blacks. In the space of five years, the federal government had shifted decisively from seeking equality of *opportunity* for racial minorities to promoting equality of *results*.

Trust Fund Hippies

One of the biggest efforts came in education. Local public school desegregation had mixed effects, including "white flight," and, in some cities, middle-class black flight. But federal money was pumped into private colleges and universities and into student grants, loans, and loan guarantees. Congress extended its largesse to the children of the middle class as well as to the poor. By 1970, two million college students were receiving some form of federal aid; by 1981, when Washington paid out nearly \$12 billion to assist higher education, more than eight million students were beneficiaries. During the 1970s, fostered by such subsidies, black enrollment in colleges nearly doubled, topping one million. Partly as a result of affirmative action, preparatory schools and elite colleges and universities opened their doors wider to minorities, including many who were "academically disadvantaged." At Harvard, blacks constituted 7.5 percent of the entering freshman class by 1975.

IS THE MIDDLE CLASS SHRINKING?

In one recent survey, 92 percent of Americans—rich, poor, and in-between—told pollsters that they were members of the “middle class.”

Such responses reveal more about individual psychology in this country than they do about the actual size of the “middle class.” Scholars, pundits, even politicians disagree over how to measure the “middle,” but, in recent years, many of them have come to the disturbing conclusion that it is shrinking. Warns U.S. Senator Tom Harkin (D.-Iowa): “Freedom and democratic institutions rest on the widest possible dissemination of wealth and power, and we’ve come to the point where too few people have too much and the rest of us have too little.”

Using one broad definition—the proportion of families with inflation-adjusted incomes of between \$15,000 and \$50,000—scholars have found that the “middle class” declined from 65 to 58 percent of the population between 1970 and 1985. Such data can be deceptive: For every family that dropped below the \$15,000 level, more than three rose above the \$50,000 level. Yet, the “shrinking middle” turns up “no matter what definition you use,” says James Smith, a Rand Corporation economist. Dividing the population into income quintiles, for example [see chart, p. 114], reveals that the *share* of all income received by the middle three-fifths of the population dropped from 53.8 percent in 1969 to 52 percent in 1985.

But it is not clear whether the recent shift is a statistical “blip” or an ominous trend.

Forty years ago, on the eve of the greatest economic surge America has ever known, sociologist W. Lloyd Warner gloomily concluded that “there has been a steady decline of skilled jobs and a decrease in the worker’s chances to get ahead.” Today’s pessimists echo that fear, citing the long-term decline of both U.S. manufacturing employment and high-wage unionized jobs.

A 1986 study by the Joint Economic Committee of Congress, for example, detected an “alarming trend toward low-pay jobs.” Nearly 60 percent of all the new jobs created between 1979 and 1984, the study found, paid less than \$7,012 annually. Yet about 90 percent of the workers in these jobs worked only part-time or part of the year. And, as scholars note, the summary data in

However, there were limits to how far the American people were willing to go in the direction of egalitarianism and the new class politics.

In January 1972, Senator George McGovern (D.-S.D.) was on the presidential primary trail in Ames, Iowa, when he presented new proposals designed, as Theodore H. White wrote, to “gut the rich, comfort the middle class, and sustain the poor.” Among them were the now-famous “demogrant” (a \$1,000 federal grant to every man, woman, and child) and an astonishing new tax on inheritances: No individual would be allowed to inherit more than \$500,000. To the surprise of McGovern’s aides, the inheritance tax proposal was no less unpopular among working-class voters than was the demogrant idea. As McGovern’s spokes-

such studies varies depending on the time period covered, among other factors. For example, only six percent of the jobs created between 1981 and 1985 had yearly salaries of less than \$7,012.

Frank Levy, of the University of Maryland, argues that much of today's alarm over the state of the middle class reflects the fact that the total U.S. economic pie shrank after 1973. The sharp increase in oil prices imposed that year by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) triggered a recession in the United States, followed by a decade of domestic economic turmoil. The results were painful. Between 1973 and 1984, the median U.S. family income slipped (in 1984 dollars) from \$28,200 to \$26,400. It was the first such sustained drop since World War II.

The middle class "is not getting much smaller," Levy concludes, "but it is growing a little poorer."

At the same time, demographic and other changes have altered the position of various groups within the income distribution—heightening *perceived* inequality. In part because Congress indexed Social Security payments to the Consumer Price Index in 1972, just as inflation was beginning to outstrip wages, the elderly improved their lot relative to some young families. And more and more of these young families (21 percent by 1984) were headed by women; a majority of them wound up at the bottom of the economic heap.

The influx of the large "baby boom" generation (those born between 1946 and 1960) into the work force held down wages and salaries for younger Americans. But the effects are frequently overstated. For example, home ownership among married couples under age 35 is down from 62 percent in 1980 to 55 percent today. The drop seems significant to baby boomers, but only 43 percent of their parents owned homes when they were in their thirties.

Levy believes that many Americans have tried to maintain living standards by postponing marriage, keeping families small, and sending wives to work. Such adjustments, he warns, "can take us only so far." A healthy economy, Levy says, is the only way to sustain a prosperous American middle class. Fortunately, median family income has resumed its upward climb in recent years; it is now (in 1984 dollars) \$27,906, nearly what it was in 1973. Barring economic catastrophe, the middle-class "crunch" should ease.

man, Richard Dougherty, mournfully acknowledged, "it wipes out dreams."

The proposal also helped to wipe out McGovern, although many other factors contributed to Nixon's landslide re-election (61 percent of the popular vote) that November. Significantly, Nixon made inroads into the core of FDR's New Deal coalition—including blue-collar workers in the big cities of the North, many of whom had supported George Wallace's independent bid for the presidency in 1968.

As White observed, they "had fought their way up to the status, the comfort, the neighborhoods in which they now dwelt—and wanted to preserve their neighborhoods and way of life against the tide of change."

At the same time, paradoxically, many of the sons and daughters of affluent America were rejecting the "rat race" of acquisitive individualism. Many offspring of the rich became "trust fund hippies," going back to nature in rural Vermont, New Mexico, and other havens. Children of the respectable middle class joined the quest for personal "self-fulfillment," or at least some measure of felicity, via sex, group therapy, communal living, drugs, and other noneconomic pursuits. It was a much-publicized but short-lived trend.

As the 1970s progressed, severe economic recessions and chronic inflation led many more Americans to worry about advancing or preserving their standard of living. The national mood changed. Archie Bunker, TV's blue-collar bigot, faded from popularity, replaced by "Dallas" (which premiered in 1978) and other series that fed audiences' fascination, however ambivalent, with the rich. "Peasant" dresses were out; "status wear," such as "alligator" shirts, and, later, the "preppie" look, was in. Law, business, and medical schools expanded. Before long, the media gave birth to the Yuppie (Young Urban Professional). In California, Miss Lisa de Longchamps prospered by offering a new form of psychotherapy, which she described as a "divine plan of opulence" aimed at "getting rid of all that junk in our consciousness [e.g., money is the root of all evil] so that we can join the rich."

If the Great Depression of the 1930s had stirred resentment of the wealthy, the "stagflation" of the 1970s spurred many Americans to try harder to *become* rich (or, at least, well-to-do). The difficulties of the 1970s and early '80s, with their uneven impact, bred a popular desire to "level up," especially among younger couples, often putting wife as well as husband to work outside the home.

An Old Dream Revived

One explanation of the change lies in the U.S. tax code, which was to undergo two drastic and unprecedented overhauls during the 1980s. "Bracket creep," caused by affluence and the high inflation of the 1970s, meant that many more ordinary working people began to pay higher income taxes, and thus a larger share of the bill for the nation's modest program of income redistribution.

As a result, much of the electorate was receptive in 1980 when Ronald Reagan proposed a massive 30 percent cut in federal income tax rates. Now it was Big Government, not Big Business and Wall Street, that was to blame for the citizen's woes. "If there's one thing we've seen enough," Reagan declared, "it's this idea that for one American to gain, another American has to suffer If we put incentives back into society, everyone will gain. We have to move ahead. But we can't leave anyone behind."

Reagan scored a remarkable election victory, receiving 50.7 percent of the popular vote to incumbent Jimmy Carter's 41 percent, and



Making it in America: Lee Iacocca, chairman of Chrysler, Roberto C. Goizueta, chairman of Coca Cola, and An Wang, chairman of Wang Laboratories. Iacocca is the son of Italian immigrants; Goizueta was born in Cuba, Wang in China.

independent John Anderson's 6.6 percent. Reagan's victory was decried by Democrats as a triumph of the "haves," but analysts searched in vain for a sharp pattern of class divisions. The well-to-do gave the majority of their votes to the Republicans, as they always have. But, while voters earning under \$10,000 had cast their ballots overwhelmingly for Carter (against Gerald Ford) in 1976, Carter garnered only 50 percent of the "poor" vote, Reagan, 41 percent, in 1980.

In short order, Congress adopted the Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981, slashing the top income tax rate to 50 percent. In 1985, Reagan proposed a sweeping new tax plan based on "freedom, fairness, and hope." Adopted by Congress the next year, it further cut rates, but closed many loopholes that had been available to businesses and the well-to-do. The top income tax rate was slated to drop to 28 percent.

In part because of these and other tax cuts (e.g., the 1978 reduction in taxes on capital gains), the entrepreneurial spirit flourished. In 1985, despite the long odds against success, Americans launched some 669,000 business enterprises, more than twice as many as they had in 1970. Most of the new ventures were small businesses. The old dream of independence, of being one's own boss, had not died.

Through all of this, and despite deep budget cuts in some federal programs for the poor (e.g., public housing and rent subsidies) and reduced rates of growth for many others, the less fortunate did not fade from public view, as they had during the 1950s. Indeed, political and scholarly discussion of the plight of the poor, especially the black poor, has revived and sharpened during the past half decade.

In a recent study of *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987), for example, sociologist William Julius Wilson notes that, overall, blacks have made significant economic progress since 1960. While only 10.4 percent of black families earned more than \$25,000 (in 1982 dollars) in 1960, nearly a quarter of black families did so by 1982. Especially among young, married, working couples, the white-black income gap shrank.*

It is unclear how much of this progress would have come about without federal intervention, how much was due to "color-blind" anti-bias laws, and how much was owed to "color-conscious" quotas and affirmative action programs. But it is plain, Wilson and others argue, that whatever gains individual blacks have made, thanks to affirmative action, have gone overwhelmingly to "advantaged" blacks—those who began with more income and education and higher occupational status than their fellows. "Class," Wilson once said, "has become more important than race in determining black life-chances."

For the black urban poor, many of them isolated in demoralized, crime-ridden ghettos, the disadvantages of social class today translate into serious handicaps—an astronomic high school dropout rate, teenage pregnancy, welfare dependency, semi-literacy, unemployment, drugs, the exodus of respectable blacks (and thus of local leadership and "role models"), a rising proportion of female-headed households. By 1984, 43 percent of black families (as compared to 13 percent of white families and 23 percent of Hispanic families) were headed by women. More than half of these women and their children were poor.

The X-Factor

Yet there is surprisingly high mobility among the poor of all races. "Only a little over one-half of the individuals living in poverty in one year are . . . poor in the next," concludes Greg J. Duncan, of the University of Michigan. This applies to Appalachian whites, to Hispanics in south Texas, to newly arrived Vietnamese. Even among the daughters of poor, black, single mothers, two-thirds manage to escape poverty when they leave home.

The antipoverty formula *for young people* seems simple. "To complete high school, to work consistently full-time year-round (even at a minimum-wage job), and to [marry] and to stay married are characteristics statistically correlated with avoiding poverty," concludes a panel of specialists headed by Michael Novak, of the American Enterprise Institute. But if, as some scholars fear, the *long-term* poor are increasingly concentrated in a "culture" that only perpetuates social pathologies, it may become increasingly difficult for the children to better themselves.

*Recently, David L. Featherman and Robert M. Hauser, both of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, found that in 1962, only 20 percent of the sons of "upper white collar" blacks managed to secure white-collar jobs themselves. By 1973, the proportion had jumped to 55 percent. For the male population as a whole, such white-collar "status inheritance" generally averages 60 to 70 percent.

(Estimates of the current size of the "underclass" vary, from roughly 1.6 million blacks, whites, and Hispanics, to more than five million.)

As Harvard's Edward Banfield observed in 1970, a willingness to delay gratification and an orientation toward the future are essential to getting ahead. Lacking such self-discipline, many younger members of today's underclass, black or white, may simply be unable to repeat the old American pattern, now seen among Asian and Cuban immigrants, of upward progress from father to son to grandson.

Broader research by sociologists into the sources of intergenerational upward mobility supports some of these worries. Having black skin still hinders an individual's chances to advance. But lack of schooling, a broken home, and a large number of siblings hurt as well.

The three most important *known* ingredients of "success" are education, one's father's occupation (and the advantages it may bring), and one's first job. A positive outlook (shown in work effort and strong career ambitions), high intelligence, and coming from a small, intact family also help, but they seem less significant than schooling. Education level matters most.

However, sociologists, using intricate computer formulas, have been able so far to account for only about half of the elements of any given individual's career success, or lack of it. Education and the other factors cited above usually pay off. But, there remains a mysterious "X" Factor; in the great Horatio Alger tradition, good luck and the ability to find one's proper niche, along with other intangibles (such as those attitudes which sociologists have *not* yet measured as well as they might) seem to matter a great deal.

That is as it should be, for a society in which all individual prospects could be more or less calculated in advance would be extraordinarily dreary, and, almost inevitably, prone to harsh class conflict and other ills. In the imaginary hotel of the social classes that Joseph Schumpeter described back in 1926, it is never certain who will occupy the luxury suites, and who will inhabit the dingy lower floors—or for how long. That uncertainty, along with rising material well-being for all, has helped to keep the big American hotel a relatively peaceful establishment.

UPS AND DOWNS: THREE MIDDLETOWN FAMILIES

by Howard M. Bahr

Middletown, published in 1929 by Robert and Helen Lynd, was the nation's first sociological bestseller. Together with a sequel, *Middletown in Transition* (1937), written during the Great Depression, it secured a reputation for Muncie, Indiana, as the archetypal middle American city. Muncie, rhapsodized the editors of *Life* in 1937, was "every small U.S. city from Maine to California," a place where pollsters and market researchers could flock to take the pulse of America.

Life claimed more for Muncie than the Lynds did. They said only that Muncie was not demonstrably *atypical*. Their cautious proposition still holds: When compared to the national population, Middletown's people still turn out to be fairly average.

Middletown was about work and the way it defines one's life. Middletown, said the Lynds, had two relatively static classes. About two-thirds of its people were working-class, laboring with their hands and backs, while members of what the Lynds called the "business class" earned their livings as clerks, salesmen, managers, and teachers.

"The mere fact of being born upon one or the other side of the watershed roughly formed by these two groups," the Lynds wrote in 1929, "is the most significant single cultural factor tending to influence what one does all day long throughout one's life; whom one marries; when one gets up in the morning; whether one belongs to the Holy Roller or Presbyterian church; or drives a Ford or a Buick; . . . whether one belongs to the Odd Fellows or the Masonic Shrine; whether one sits about evenings with one's necktie off; and so on indefinitely throughout the daily comings and goings of a Middletown man, woman or child." When the Lynds revisited Middletown in 1937, they found that the Great Depression had nudged the classes even further apart.

Fifty years have wrought enormous changes in Middletown, and in the United States. The city's population has nearly doubled, to 74,000. Blue-collar work is cleaner, safer, and better paid; many married women have joined the labor force; and the economy has created whole new varieties of white-collar jobs, many of them highly paid.

Today, Middletown's traditionally black neighborhoods are still black, and the old South Side remains a working-class haven. But even Middletown's "better" neighborhoods now have at least a sprinkling of



A Middletown clan of the "business class" in 1924. One comfort enjoyed by such residents then, a short (40-45 hour) work week, is now nearly universal.

black residents, and a few homes there are owned by plumbers rather than doctors. We do not know whether, overall, upward *mobility* in Middletown has increased since 1929. But, partly because of the increasing affluence of wage earners, there are fewer social barriers between the classes and more social contacts across class lines than there were during the Lynds' time.

Consider, for example, the families of Henry Franklin and Robert Michaels,* two men whom the Lynds might have met 50 years ago. Henry Franklin was a crack salesman who sold paper during most of a long career. Robert Michaels worked as a farm-implement mechanic. His son, Tom, and Henry Franklin's daughter, Margery, both attended Central High. They dated, and in 1948, they married.

The marriage of Tom and Marge Michaels, now both in their late fifties, is a "mixed" marriage in several senses. She grew up in the business class, he in the working class; her family was Catholic, his Protestant; she has been a white-collar professional since 1975, while he has been a blue-collar worker during much of his working life.

Tom Michaels' career shows how misleading a simple answer to a social scientist's query—"Occupation?"—can be. He has often held two, sometimes three, jobs at a time, a burden imposed in part by the need to

*All names in this essay are pseudonyms.

support the eight children the couple raised together. He has hopped back and forth across the class divide several times. He drove a truck for a stock rendering plant, worked as a mechanic, owned his own service station, built and sold houses in a business with his father, ran a fleet of school buses, and, after 1960, served in the city police department. He now teaches at the state law enforcement academy.

Tom Michaels exemplifies the optimistic "Middletown spirit" described by the Lynds, the belief that "hard work is the key to success." The rewards for the Michaels are a big, rambling, white frame house in one of Middletown's respectable old neighborhoods, a late model Buick and a new Ford light truck, occasional dinners out, the prospect of retirement and travel, and the satisfaction of a close family, although the children now have families of their own.

Fathers and Sons

Like many American couples, the Michaels won their piece of the American Dream partly by means once considered unorthodox. During the 1920s, almost half of Middletown's working-class women had jobs, but other married women generally stayed home to look after their children and husbands. Today, in Middletown, as throughout the United States, women of all classes work—by 1980, almost half of the employed people were women. Like many women of her generation, Marge Michaels spent more than 20 years as a homemaker before returning to work part-time, later full-time, as a university librarian. She also returned to school, earning an undergraduate and a master's degree.

The Michaels' children and their spouses exemplify the progressive erosion of class divisions in Middletown. This single generation includes professionals and laborers, blue-, pink-, and white-collar workers. Overall, the story of the Michaels' family is one of upward mobility: salesman and mechanic in the first generation; police officer and university librarian in the second; and in the third, police officer, accountant, attorney, bank trust officer, technician, and warehouse worker.

There is also downward mobility in Middletown, but it is less common. Some movement upward has been built into the U.S. economic system: As the number of higher status jobs as clerks or service workers has grown, the fraction of the city's population employed as menial laborers and domestic help has shrunk.

Howard M. Bahr, 49, is professor of sociology at Brigham Young University. Born in Provo, Utah, he received a B.A. from Brigham Young University (1962) and a Ph.D. from the University of Texas, Austin (1965). He is co-author of Middletown Families (1982), Life in Large Families: Views of Mormon Women (1982), and All Faithful People (1983). Research for this article was conducted with the cooperation of the Center for Middletown Studies at Ball State University. The assistance of its director, Dwight W. Hoover, is acknowledged with thanks. Copyright © 1987 by Howard M. Bahr.

It is still fairly common for sons to grow up to do the same work their fathers did. But sometimes a closer look reveals that the nature of the job has changed, even when the title remains the same, or that a father and son who do the same job differ sharply in educational achievement or general outlook.

Take, for example, the Winslows. Great-grandfather Winslow worked in Middletown's factories, rising to foreman in an auto parts company. Grandfather Winslow followed him, eventually becoming a supervisor in a plant that made tire recapping equipment. His three sons are all blue-collar workers. Two are skilled tool and die makers, and one, Duane, is a welder at Middletown's Westinghouse plant.

Duane Winslow, now 53, grew up on Middletown's South Side, at a time when working-class families were separated from those of the business class by the great gulf the Lynds described. He attended the prestigious Burriss High School, but as one of only three boys from blue-collar families in his class, he chafed at his inferior status. "It was a stigma in my life when I was young, up until I graduated," he says, and his account of a recent 30-year class reunion demonstrates that his sense of injury lingers. Most of his classmates, he says, are now college-educated, professional, even prominent men. And yet, "I'm as good as any of 'em," he says. "I'm as wealthy as any of 'em . . . I live *here*."

"Here" is a fashionable West End area. When he was growing up, it was among the most affluent neighborhoods of the city. By 1935, the Lynds said, subdivisions like his had supplanted the "aristocratic old East End" in prestige, and the "ambitious matrons of the city" were moving their families there. When Duane was in high school, many of the boys who snubbed him lived there. If the neighborhood is less distinguished today, it retains enough of its eminence to give him a sense of personal progress. The Winslows live in a brick ranch-style home, unassuming on the outside, well furnished within.

No 'Working Stiff'

"Back when I was a kid," Duane says. "I used to think, 'I'll never live here. I could never attain that.' But I live in a country, and work for a corporation that thought enough of me that I could do it."

After graduating from high school, Duane followed his father to the firm that made recapping equipment, and, in 1960, moved to Warner Gear, a plum of a job in Middletown's manufacturing economy. It did not last long. After the company laid him off during a business downturn, he sold insurance for a year. He liked the work but not the travel, so, in 1962, he jumped at the chance to join Westinghouse. He has worked there ever since, in a variety of shopfloor and management positions, and will retire in five years, at 58, as a supervisor of welders.

"As a working man," Duane says, "I am proud of what I have attained. I'm not a poor man. My wife [who also works at Westinghouse]

and I live here, and my home is paid for. I have money in the bank.”

Duane calls himself a “working man,” like his father, but when asked if that means he identifies with blue-collar workers or labor unions, he is adamant: “I’m middle-class.” Trim and energetic, he jogs, plays racquetball, and reads three newspapers a day, including the *Wall Street Journal*. He is not a stereotypical “working stiff.”

Like many fathers of his generation, Duane worries that his children have had it too easy. Duane’s daughter, 24, is married to a house painter and works as a receptionist; his bachelor son Don, at 27, recently landed a job as a tool and die maker at Warner Gear but still lives at home. “Don looks at what I’ve attained, and thinks, ‘Why in the hell can’t I do that?’ Well, I didn’t have that when I was 27 either. That’s what I try to get through to him [but] it’s never sunk in.”

Where the Grass Is Greener

Don meanwhile, is trying to “get his time in” (i.e. six months without a layoff) so that he can gain a measure of job security under the union contract. He first applied for a job at Warner Gear nine years ago, and was hired at last, he thinks, because he “knew someone.” The money is good (about \$23,000 annually) and “the job’s not all that hard.” He hopes to stay at Warner Gear until he retires.

Duane admits that his son faced a far more difficult job market than he did. During the recession of the early 1980s, many local plants closed or cut back, and unemployment rates soared to half again as high as the national average, peaking at 14 percent in 1982. By 1985, Middletown’s jobless rate was still nine percent.

Reflecting a growing skepticism among Middletowners, Duane does not have much faith that a college education would have been the answer for his son. “Many people I work with have college educations. They have master’s degrees, they have B.A. degrees . . . and they cannot find a job in their field.”

In contrast to Tom Michaels, Duane is gloomy about the future. He hopes above all that his son will secure a safe berth at Westinghouse or Warner Gear: In the end, security and stability mean more to Duane than upward mobility.

For one group of Middletown workers, opportunities clearly have blossomed since the Lynds’ time. “The cleft between the white and the Negro populations of Middletown,” they wrote in 1937, “is the deepest and most blindly followed line of division in the community.”

Before 1950, blacks were almost entirely excluded from Middletown’s business class; racial discrimination was overt. By 1980, however, one-sixth of Middletown’s employed black men and half the working black women held sales, clerical, managerial, or professional positions. Still, the black-white split is closing much more slowly than the class divide. In Middletown, it appears that bridging the gap will be a matter



A crowd gathers downtown to cheer the 1986 Veteran's Day Parade. Despite Middletown's appearance of settled contentment, more than half of its citizens move every decade, often to seek opportunities in other cities.

of six generations, or perhaps nine, rather than three.

"Across the tracks," in southeast Middletown, is one of the city's two black districts. Ada Jackson and many of the other black domestic servants who served what the Lynds called the "ambitious matrons" of the West End used to live there. Now their children and grandchildren do. Ada cleaned house for white people for over 40 years. Her husband, Lucas, had a good job as a wire drawer at Indiana Steel and Wire, but even during the best of times the family needed both incomes to make ends meet.

Ada and Lucas were high school graduates, and their daughter Lila, now in her sixties, remembers that they valued education. "There was always books, there was always newspapers," she says. But Lila only got as far as the 10th grade before, in 1937, she dropped out, married, and began working as a part-time domestic. Her husband was an auto body mechanic, and also a high school dropout. In 1945, he left Lila and their four children, and she began working full-time as a maid. Lila had two more children under circumstances she does not discuss.

During the mid-1960s, both of Lila's parents and one of her grown daughters died within two years. It was a turning point. "I went back to school and went back to church," Lila says. In 1967, three decades after dropping out, she graduated from high school.

Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty was in full swing, and Lila was hired under the auspices of her Methodist church, as a federally funded outreach "volunteer with a stipend" while she continued to work part-time as a maid. Finally, in 1971, she was able to quit cleaning houses for good. Ever since, she has been a full-time counselor to adult university students and to young blacks seeking schooling. She has also found time to help herself by working toward a bachelors degree in political science and social work at Ball State University, a thriving (enrollment: 17,513) branch of the state system in Middletown. She will graduate this year.

Despite her own success, Lila does not believe that Middletown's blacks have made much progress during her lifetime, and her negative view is widely shared among the city's blacks. "Most black people who are educated have to leave," Lila says. "The opportunities just aren't here for black people."

Lila will admit to slight local gains. But she is sure that the prospects for Middletown's blacks are worse now than they were during the late 1970s, when there seemed to be many more local blacks attending Ball State. (Partly as a result of federal budget cutbacks, black enrollment fell from 808 in 1977 to 621 last year.)

Backing Into the Future

Lila is a great-grandmother now, and she speaks from the experience of kin as well as clients. The jobs of her children and in-laws, now in their thirties and forties, support her dim view of the pace of black progress in Middletown: two males unemployed, the rest blue-collar workers, with the exception of a daughter-in-law who is an accountant.*

In part, the fate of Lila's family, especially her sons, is a reminder of a larger social problem—the rise of female-headed families, especially among blacks. Hence, in Middletown, as in other American cities, black women bear heavier family burdens than white women, and the children suffer. In 1980, 34 percent of Middletown's black families were headed by women without husbands, compared to 14 percent of its white families. Middletown's black women are almost as likely to be employed as are the men. (In 1980, 44 percent of black women and 51 percent of black men were employed, compared to 44 and 62 percent, respectively, among whites.) The women tend to have higher status jobs.

While Lila's family may not appear to be an example of great occupational upward mobility, there are signs of progress. Lila's eldest daughter, May, 47, represents the third generation of Jackson women in domestic work, but she served as a maid for only two years. Over the years, she supplemented her husband's factory paychecks with various

*The occupations of Lila's children and their spouses: 1.) May, a homemaker, married to a factory worker; 2.) Dolores, a utility company teller, married to a factory worker; 3.) Sandra (now deceased), was a hospital x-ray technician; 4.) William, a former bartender, now unemployed; 5.) Samuel, a factory worker; 6.) Edward, a former hotel clerk, now unemployed, married to an accountant.

other part-time jobs. The couple stayed together. In 1980, she passed the high school equivalency exam, and enrolled as a social work major at her mother's alma mater, Ball State. She will graduate this year.

Three of May's six children are grown. One daughter manages a public housing project in Middletown. Her first and second sons, both in their mid-twenties, have degrees from Ball State in telecommunications. They are, in part, victims of their own high expectations. "Neither one . . . wanted to work in the factory," May says. "They said the work was too hard. They had seen my husband drag in after work The children do have more alternatives than I had." One son is now an enlisted man in the Air Force; the other works in a fast food restaurant while he looks for another job.

Because of discrimination, May is not sure that education will be a key to the local job market for her family. But she has worked hard to get her own university degree, and has pushed her children to finish high school and go on to college. Unlike many of Middletown's whites, she remains convinced that education ultimately will make things better.

The Michaels, Winslows, and Jacksons have all "moved up" since the Lynds studied Middletown, but they have advanced unequally, and in different ways.

Only the Michaels followed the stereotypical path of fairly steady generation-to-generation improvement in income and status. But the Winslows seem equally satisfied, even though their gains have come chiefly through a rising standard of living. Crumbling class barriers have allowed Duane Winslow and his family to feel that they have moved up to become a part of the vast American "middle class," even though they remain, after three generations, a blue-collar family. By contrast, the Jacksons have, in a sense, come further than the Winslows, but they are still cut off from the larger community. And, despite their gains, they remain near the bottom of the economic ladder. Yet, as their commitment to education suggests, they are also aiming somewhat higher than some of their white counterparts.

To the Lynds, all of this might seem quite astonishing. By 1937, when they published *Middletown Revisited*, they had moved sharply to the political left, partly in reaction to the Great Depression. By then, they were impatient with Middletown's working class, unable to understand why widening inequality did not foster greater class consciousness and activism. They concluded their book with a quotation from R. H. Tawney, which seemed to apply to Middletowners: "They walked reluctantly backwards into the future, lest a worse thing should befall them." Viewed in retrospect, that walk has moved Middletown's people a considerable distance up the incline to "success."

BACKGROUND BOOKS

SOCIAL MOBILITY IN AMERICA

Unlike many European writers, the American novelist rarely speaks of class. As Lionel Trilling once observed, "the great characters of American fiction, such, say, as Captain Ahab and Natty Bumppo, tend to be mythic . . . and their very freedom from class gives them a large and glowing generality." In the United States, he believed, "the real basis of the [English] novel has never existed—that is, the tension between a middle class and an aristocracy."

American novelists were more interested in the frontier; their protagonists fled from civilization on whaling ships, on the open road—even on river rafts, as in Mark Twain's **Adventures of Huckleberry Finn** (1885). Yet Huck and Jim's escape from St. Petersburg, Missouri, floating down the Mississippi on a raft, and their encounters with "white trash," scoundrels, and local gentry also say a lot, in passing, about class sensibilities and social mobility.

Thus, American novelists, especially between the Civil War and the 1950s, did not *ignore* such matters. Indeed, after the turn of the century, many of them illuminated (variously) American visions of success and failure, tensions between classes, and the continuing drama of individual strivings to move up the socioeconomic ladder.

No writer spread the American gospel of success more widely than Horatio Alger (1832–1899). Beginning with **Ragged Dick** (1867), Alger wrote some 130 novels, which preached that hard work and cheerful perseverance would put "a young gentleman on the way to fame and fortune." His tales influenced several generations of young readers, future achievers, and memoir-writers, from Andrew Carnegie to Malcolm X.

Most serious writers, however, dismissed the Alger stories as fantasy. And William Dean Howells and Theodore

Dreiser, among others, saw a dark side to the American Dream. In **The Rise of Silas Lapham** (1885), Howells tells the story of a Vermont farmer who becomes a wealthy paint manufacturer. Lapham moves his family to Boston, where he builds a mansion and expects to take his rightful place in Boston's high society. But he mismanages his money, and his wife and children fail to impress the Brahmins. Lapham turns down an opportunity to pass on his financial woes to someone else. In the end he returns to Vermont, sadder, poorer, but wiser.

Clyde Griffiths, the amoral protagonist in Theodore Dreiser's long-popular **American Tragedy** (1925), is eager to rise in life—by any means. He is a poor but handsome lad living in upstate New York. Employed in his uncle's collar factory, Clyde enters into a liaison with a working-class girl, Roberta Alden. Shortly thereafter, he starts to court Sondra Finchley, the daughter of a wealthy local notable. Roberta informs Clyde that she is pregnant, and she demands that he provide for her. To free himself for Sondra and his dreams of a brighter future, Clyde plans to kill Roberta; she drowns in an apparent accident, but Clyde is tried for murder and condemned to death.

In their fiction, Dreiser and Howells blamed human failure on personal weaknesses. But other writers, such as socialist Jack London, saw working-class people as victims of society; in London's view, their difficulties stemmed not only from upper-class *hauteur* but also from the capitalist system.

As an oysterman in San Francisco Bay, and as a miner in the Klondike, London came to know the harsh life of the manual laborer. His hero in **Martin Eden** (1909) is a sailor who becomes a writer in order to win the love of Ruth Morse, a well-to-do college graduate.

A BRIEF SAMPLING OF THE RESEARCH

Of the many historical studies of social mobility in the United States, the best is Stephan Thernstrom's **Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis, 1880-1970** (Harvard, 1973). Edward Pessen's anthology of scholarly essays, **Three Centuries of Social Mobility in America** (Heath, 1974), is illuminating but marred by some contributors' determination to depict the United States as a land of intractable inequality. Useful as an overview of research is **Social Mobility in the 19th and 20th Centuries: Europe and America in Comparative Perspective** (Berg, 1985), by Hartmut Kaelble.

Thomas Kessner's **Golden Door: Italian and Jewish Immigrant Mobility in New York City, 1880-1915** (Oxford, 1977) is among the most vivid chronicles of the immigrant struggle to "make it" in the United States. For a general survey of immigrant group experiences, readers may consult **American Ethnic Groups** (Urban, 1978), edited by Thomas Sowell.

Scholarly interest in mobility blossomed during the 1950s. In **Social Mobility in Industrial Society** (Univ. of Calif., 1959), Seymour Martin Lipset and Reinhard Bendix inaugurated several debates, arguing, for example, that industrialization had equalized opportunities on both sides of the Atlantic.

In recent years, scholars have returned to the subject, producing landmark studies such as **Opportunity and Change** (Academic Press, 1978), by David L. Featherman and Robert M. Hauser. Unfortunately, few laymen will be able to decipher the jargon, regression analyses, and loglinear models now employed in this and other academic studies in this field.

An exception is Greg J. Duncan's **Years of Poverty, Years of Plenty** (Univ. of Mich., 1984). Based on a study of 5,000 families, he concludes that about 25 percent of all Americans slip into poverty at some point in their lives, but seldom for long. Other scholars contend that, for various reasons, a large number of today's poor are unable to progress out of poverty. In his once-controversial **The Unheavenly City** (Little, Brown, 1970), Harvard's Edward Banfield argued that the new urban "lower class" simply lacked key "attitudes, motivations, and habits" of respectable working-class people. In effect, **The Underclass** (Random, 1982), by journalist Ken Auletta popularized Banfield's thesis, while William Julius Wilson and Charles Murray analyzed it in **The Declining Significance of Race** (Univ. of Chicago, 1980) and **Losing Ground** (Basic, 1984), respectively.

The American ideal of upward mobility pervades the discussion of many social issues. In the *Wilson Quarterly*, relevant background books essays include "Money and the Pursuit of Plenty in America" (Autumn 1977), "The Public Schools" (Autumn 1979), "Jobs in America" (Winter 1980), "Immigration" (New Year's 1983), "Teaching in America" (New Year's 1984), "Blacks in America" (Spring 1984), "The War on Poverty: 1965-1980" (Autumn 1984), "The Irish" (Spring 1985), "Miami" (Winter 1985), and "The Struggle for Literacy" (Spring 1986).

But no magazines will agree to buy Martin's writing; at her parent's instigation, Ruth deserts him. The young man eventually writes a book which wins him wealth and fame (of course), and she returns. But his love for her fades when he realizes that she is only "worshipping at the shrine of the established."

Indiana's Booth Tarkington wrote less about Americans who were struggling up the social ladder, than about those who were sliding down it. Tarkington's best-selling **Magnificent Ambersons** (1918) chronicles the gradual decline of a prominent midwestern family. In **Alice Adams** (1921), Tarkington tells the story of a girl who falls in love with the wealthy Arthur Russell. To attract him, she fabricates a web of lies to suggest that her family is well-off too. But Arthur discovers on his own that Alice, her father (who runs a small glue-making factory), and the rest of the Adams clan are faring badly, and he leaves her.

Elsewhere, writers dwelt on other tensions in American life—between Northerners and Southerners, between city folk and country folk, and between the intellectual and the money-minded middle class, what Baltimore columnist H. L. Mencken called the "booboisie."

Sinclair Lewis's **Babbitt** (1922) assailed the small-town, materialistic mentality. Lewis's "extremely married and unromantic" George F. Babbitt was the kind of fellow who worshipped "Modern Appliances" but "disliked his family." And Nathanael West's **Cool Million** (1934) presented "Shagpoke" Whipple, ex-president of the Rat River National Bank. Shagpoke, as another character described him, "ain't no nigger-lover, he don't give a damn for Jewish culture, and he knows the fine Italian hand of the Pope when he sees it."

Several generations of American writers drew portraits of the robber baron, a favorite villain during the country's late

19th-century industrial surge. Dreiser did so in his three-part fictional biography of Frank Cowperwood, **The Financier**, **The Titan**, and **The Stoic** (1912, '14, '47), based on the life of Charles T. Yerkes, the Chicago traction [streetcar] magnate. And F. Scott Fitzgerald described Nick Carraway's fascination with bootlegger Jay Gatsby in **The Great Gatsby** (1925).

Yet Cowperwood and Gatsby, like many businessmen in American fiction, were tragic figures. Gatsby had started life as a poor North Dakota farm boy, and wound up as proprietor of a Long Island estate. He made the mistake of thinking that his (ill-gotten) riches would win him true happiness, in the person of lovely, upper-class Daisy Fay. In pursuing "the green light, the orgiastic future," Gatsby learned, he had "committed himself to the following of a grail."

The Depression years saw the first novels that presented, often in vaguely Marxist colors, distinct classes in American life. In his mammoth, kaleidoscopic **U.S.A.** trilogy (1930-36), which covered the first 30 years of this century, John Dos Passos saw two Americas: one privileged, rich, and corrupt, the other poor and powerless.

A genteel Harvard graduate, Dos Passos sympathized with his more optimistic characters. In **The Big Money**, Charley Anderson returns to New York as a World War I hero. He first plans to organize workers in an airplane factory, but ends up getting corrupted by booze, gambling, women, and shady business deals. More than anything, as Alfred Kazin has written, **U.S.A.** sought to show that "the force of circumstances that is twentieth century life is too strong for the average man."

A number of new writers described the working class from the inside looking out. Some of their novels rank among the better examples of modern American literature. These include Abraham Cahan's **Rise of David Levinsky**

(1917), about the Americanization of a Jew living on the East Side of New York; Henry Roth's **Call It Sleep** (1934), a portrait of Manhattan's slum dwellers; and James T. Farrell's Studs Lonigan trilogy (1932-35), the story of a poor Irish Catholic boy growing up on the South Side of Chicago.

American writers paid some attention to the other side of the tracks too. John Marquand, for example, slyly poked fun at the Anglophile snobbism of moneyed Bostonians in **The Late George Apley** (1937). The shrewd efforts of shipping magnate Moses Apley, George's grandfather, have made the family rich—and, rather quickly, “old Boston.”

Inherited wealth eases George's path through life, from Hobson's School on Marlborough Street (where he meets “the scions of his own social class”), to Harvard College and Harvard Law, to the gentle wooded slopes of Pequod Island, Maine. “Nothing is more important than social consideration,” writes George's father to his son, summing up the acquired Apley sensibility.

John O'Hara detailed Americans' social life in a more dramatic vein. A Manhattan newspaperman-turned-novelist from Pottsville, Pennsylvania, O'Hara reported on the manners and morals of lower-, middle-, and upper-class Americans in the Northeast.

In his “Gibbsville” novels, such as **Appointment in Samarra** (1934), **A Rage to Live** (1949), and **Ten North Frederick** (1955), O'Hara's perceptions of small-town life were particularly acute. “The small town, like my invention Gibbsville,” O'Hara observed, “has it all; the entrenched, the strivers, the

climbers, the rebellious . . . they interest me so much, it's hard for me to know when to stop.”

For the most part, however, the post-World War II American novel has said little about upward (or downward) mobility or class friction. One reason may be that the increasing material well-being of middle- and upper-middle class Americans, as Wesleyan's Richard Ohmann said, has led to “a truce in class conflict,” if not an end to Getting Ahead.

Moreover, movies and television have taken over much of the contemporary story-telling function. Significantly, John Sayles, the author of **Union Dues** (1977), and one of the most promising young writers of working-class life, has turned his talents to writing and directing films such as *Matewan* (1987), which chronicles the West Virginia coalmine wars of the 1920s.

Today's serious novels, for the most part, are written by and for college-educated people. And, perhaps reflecting the current *Zeitgeist*, most of the critically acclaimed novels by writers such as Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, J. D. Salinger, and John Updike focus not on money, status, work, or ambition, but on the personal problems of educated, often affluent Americans: sex, love, marriage, the meaning of life.

Lionel Trilling, it seems, saw the trend coming nearly four decades ago. “I think it is true to say,” he observed in 1948, “that money and class do not have the same place in our social and mental life that they once had. They have certainly not ceased to exist, but [not] . . . as they did in the nineteenth century, or even in our own youth.”

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Michael Denning, assistant professor of American studies at Yale University, suggested several ideas and book titles for this essay.*