
Middle-Class Moralities

BY ALAN WOLFE

America was born the world's first bourgeois republic and has proudly defined itself ever since as, above all, a middle-class nation. Yet the 1992 election was the first in recent memory in which both parties wrapped themselves unambiguously in middle-class symbols. The Democrats, who once seemed to champion every group that was too poor (or too unconventional) to qualify as middle class, nominated a Southern Baptist of modest Arkansas beginnings for the presidency, and he, after carefully consulting with party elders, chose another Southern Baptist as his running mate. Neither, it seemed, was ever photographed without an American flag in the background. The Republicans, whose economic policies during the 1980s worked to the benefit of everyone above the middle class, fell into a Keystone Kops scramble to find an issue that would rally middle-class voters. And even as the two parties redoubled their efforts to woo the mighty middle, a Texas billionaire attracted millions of disaffected suburbanites to his quixotic campaign.

Middle-class anxieties about the economy, crime, and social issues seem certain to dominate American politics for years to come. Yet it has become very difficult to define clearly what it means to be middle class. The nation's images of bourgeois life are increasingly obsolete: yeoman farmer, small-town merchant, independent entrepreneur, male breadwinner, stay-at-home mom, well-paid factory worker, hard-working school teacher, self-employed lawyer, family physician. Is Zöe Baird, whose name was never mentioned without note of her \$500,000 income, middle class? Are the mostly blue-collar Reagan Democrats? Is a former executive

who is struggling to start a new business but in reality living on his wife's income as a social worker? Is anyone without health insurance, whatever his or her income? Are blacks who have made it to the suburbs? Korean grocers? Divorced mothers of small children? An assistant professor of anything? As we watch more Americans fall from the middle class, we ought to know at what point we should begin to roll out the nation's safety net. But even spelling out a formula in dollars and cents is nearly impossible. We cannot even decide at what point we consider people rich. Candidate Bill Clinton pledged to make the rich pay a larger share of the nation's taxes, but the definition of rich has bounced around. President Clinton's tax plan now calls for higher income taxes on couples earning more than \$140,000, and a special "millionaires'" surcharge on those earning more than \$250,000.

It may be hard to determine where the economic boundary lines of middle-class life should be drawn, but it is not that difficult to figure out what has happened to the core of the middle class during the 1980s and '90s. Most sensibly defined, a middle-class job is one that makes it possible to afford certain basics: a home of one's own, a car or two, and some child care. By this definition, middle-class jobs have most definitely disappeared over the past 15 years. There is much truth to the notion that the middle class, as economists Frank Levy and Richard J. Murnane write, has been "hollowed out": More people have moved to points where the middle class blends into the class above or the class below.

This change has its roots in the economic turmoil of the 1970s. In 1973, the year the first

oil crisis began, the country entered an era of slower economic growth, and in 1979 income inequality began a comparatively rapid increase. Because of this relatively clear turning point in time, one can picture two middle classes in America: one that rose to its status when economic growth was assumed and opportunity abundant, and one that achieved its status at a time when very little could be taken for granted. What divides these two groups is not how much money their members make but the different degrees of effort involved in making it. So different are the experiences of these two middle classes that, for all their economic similarity, they have little in common culturally or morally. There is no longer one thing called "the middle class" in America, and there is no longer a single middle-class morality. It is far more accurate to say that we have at least two middle-class moralities, each defined by different opportunities, expectations, and outlooks.

II

For those whose income and status began to rise in the 1950s, passage into the middle class was nearly as automatic as the progress through the seven ages of man. Each step seemed preordained: the breadwinner's income rose, the family moved to a larger apartment, then bought its first house, along with a car, a television, and a few other accouterments of the good life. The children were sent off to college, perhaps the first in their families to go, and the parents could look forward to spending their retirement years in Florida or Arizona. Dad might have been a middle manager with Prudential, the owner of a small business, a salesman, or a shopkeeper with an expanding clientele. He might have worked incredibly hard or he might have worked nine to five, but the robust economy guaranteed at

least minimal affluence. Mom stayed home, though after the kids were grown she might have taken a job as a receptionist or gone back to school. Many people in this generation became middle class simply by being there. To be sure, one had to be of the right race. At least some initiative and hard work were needed—everyone knew people who were left behind. But for more Americans than ever before, the goal was in reach, and never before had so many reached it.

Money, for this generation, was always an awkward proposition. With the Great Depression never far from consciousness, income was something to be saved, not spent. Yet this generation was willing to share with those left behind some of the surplus generated by the economy. The Democrats did rather well during the go-go years of the 1960s, in part because middle-class prosperity was compatible with, if not fueled by, activist government. In neither lifestyle nor politics did this generation flaunt its good fortune, understanding very well how unreal its prosperity was. Anything won with so little effort could be lost with even less. *Security* became the watchword for the first postwar middle class, as if the right combination of public policy and private behavior could make permanent what was too good to be true.

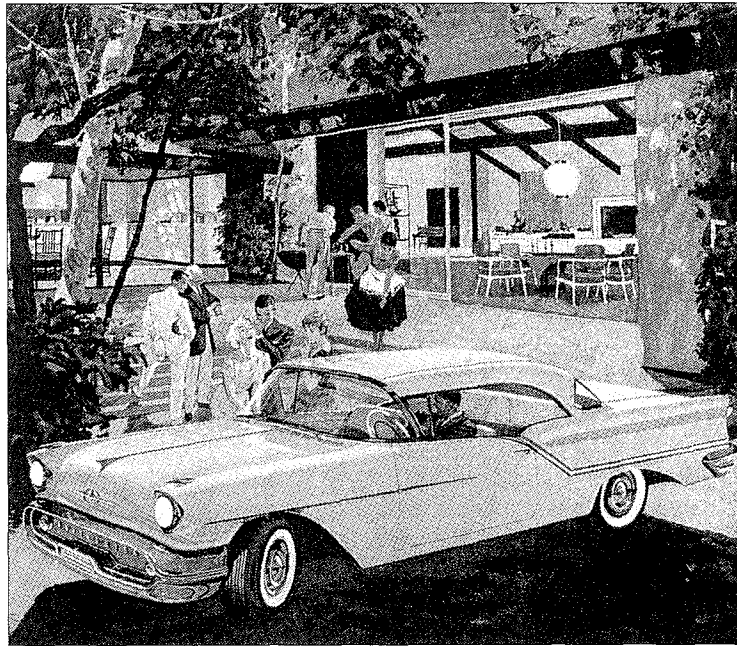
The postwar generation maintained its liberalism through old age; the elderly living in Florida still vote on the basis of who will best protect the government programs that will guarantee them economic security until they die. At the same time, this generation passed on some aspects of its liberalism to its children. Although all of America turned more conservative in the 1980s, young urban professionals—those whose privileged educations or first home purchases were made possible by the advantages of their parents—remained culturally liberal. More tolerant than their parents—they came of age, after all, in

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the 1960s and after—the children of the immediate postwar bourgeoisie reacted against what they saw as the overly materialistic concerns of their parents' generation. What eventually became support for multicultural education, instinctive identification with feminism, and tolerance of diverse lifestyles had its origins in the committed cultural libertarianism of the 1960s. It was not that the younger generation's views on religion, the family, or love of country were well thought out. It was more that to many of its members, these were issues that never arose. One of the things that made being middle class so delightful during the 1960s was that you never had to think much about the obligations of community or the need to contain the libido for the sake of civilization.

The long national economic downturn that began around 1973 did not destroy the middle class, but it did halt the postwar escalator that automatically carried millions of fortunate Americans upward into affluence. Everyone knew someone who was no longer assured of the house in the suburbs, the new car, the good schools. Downward mobility was no longer merely a term in sociology textbooks. But just as large numbers of people saw the American Dream slip away, a surprising number of newcomers grabbed onto it. Some were urban white ethnics—policemen, civil servants, unionized blue-collar workers whose jobs were spared—who were driven from the cities by crime and who, with the aid of a second paycheck from the wife's new job, moved out beyond the established suburbs in search of a middle-class lifestyle they could afford. Others were freshly minted

graduates of the state universities and community colleges—vastly expanded during the good years—who took jobs in engineering, insurance, and other flourishing service industries. An unprecedented number of African Americans joined the middle class. The tide of upward mobility was powerful enough to transform neighborhoods and regions. In New York City, Asians pushed out into urban neighborhoods beyond Manhattan, bringing new vibrancy to once-thriving Jewish neigh-



For two decades after World War II, America's vision of the good life was a palpable dream accessible to all, and the struggle to "keep up with the Joneses" was the only major social conflict most Americans experienced.

borhoods such as Flushing. The middle-class accent of Miami became Spanish, while Iranians installed themselves in the tonier sections of Beverly Hills. The second postwar middle class, though smaller than the first, was certainly more diverse.

Middle-class status, when no longer automatic, became more of a commodity, something one purchased through hard work and sacrifice. The new arrivals came to see merit, rather than position on a growth curve, as the

prerequisite for a middle-class lifestyle. Under such competitive conditions, money moved to the center of people's consciousness. A class once known for saving began to spend. Often there was little choice. Even with the two (often rather high) incomes needed just to purchase a house with access to decent schools, there was little left over to put away for the future. In some major cities, even people with six-figure incomes and boasting only the normal trappings of suburban life learned to live with a certain sense of precariousness about their existence. With less of the security that comes from having money in the bank, the middle class became much more wary of government-led altruism. The tax revolts and attacks on waste in government that began in the late 1970s were symptoms of a new politics of increased self-concern. It had taken some time, as well as a shift in generations, but finally the middle class was living up to the cliché that money breeds increased conservatism.

This second middle class, like its predecessor, is moved by considerations of security, but its concerns are more psychological than economic. They try to save moral capital rather than economic capital. Uncertain that they can maintain their economic privileges, these newcomers to the American Dream are determined to hold on to their social and cultural ones. They look to government not to intervene in the economy to help workers and minorities get ahead but to reinforce the rules of civil order. The control of crime becomes more important than the control of business. Government, they believe, ought to regulate sexuality (teen access to abortion, for example) and the display of dirty pictures, and it ought to keep its own house in order as well. Even if families have trouble balancing their budgets, government should balance its own, and politicians had better not get the idea that they are better than the people who elected them or they will be humbled.

For those who achieved middle-class sta-

tus the hard way, the cultural enemy is the old middle class already encamped in the tonier inner suburbs, and especially those of its descendants in the baby-boom generation who have embraced far more liberal and culturally libertarian views: the "new class" of attorneys, journalists, managers, and other professionals who make their living by manufacturing and manipulating information. For its part, this more cosmopolitan middle class looks down its collective nose at the tastes and sensibilities of the newcomers in the tract homes and townhouses on the fringes of suburbia.

Hence ariseth the new class war.

III

At a time when America lacks visible symbols of an upper class—who can believe that third- and fourth-generation Rockefellers embody monied evil?—it is not a struggle between classes over economics that shapes American politics but a struggle within one class over morality. The cultural war that now dominates American politics is a civil war within the middle class. This cultural war has become the defining feature of American political life. If the political parties at one time in the recent past took the middle class for granted, now they find themselves trying to appeal to one of its wings without alienating the other. As bourgeois prosperity wanes, bourgeois morality grows in importance. Each wing has a stake in defining membership in the middle class as a belief in its morality. This is what makes American politics in the 1990s so unforgiving. The economic surplus can always be divided up, but the moral symbols of society tend to be indivisible. The older middle class is tolerant of everything except the moral views of the newer middle class. And the moral views of the newcomers leave little room for the kind of relativism and skepticism that leads the older middle class to become Unitarians or to enlist in the American Civil Liberties Union.

Each middle class is moved by moral symbols, but each attaches dramatically differ-

ent meanings to them. The following six symbols are hardly exhaustive, but they starkly illustrate how completely the middle-class worldview has been cut in two.

1. *Productivity.* Work is not only a way of making things but a way of making meaning. At least since the early 19th century, but probably originating some time before that, Americans have been attracted to ideologies of production as much as to production itself. In making things, they came to believe, people made themselves.

Classical republican ideals about production are the heart of the moral worldview of the more newly arrived middle class in America, an ideal strengthened, rather than weakened, by the increasing difficulty its members have in finding productive work. For those who believe in the sanctity of work, morality is defined by the perception that those who do not make things—lawyers, stockbrokers, “bureaucrats”—deserve a lower place in the moral hierarchy. This is as it has always been, but with one crucial difference: For over a century, the foil that helped define middle-class ideas about the importance of work was the idle rich, with their coupon-clipping frivolity and conspicuous consumption. Now that high society has all but disappeared from America’s consciousness, the urban underclass increasingly bears the burden of comparison. There, bourgeois propriety finds the same defining symbols: uncontrolled sexuality, flamboyant spending, money without work, and the appearance of government protection. Nothing is more certain to arouse the fury of the new middle class than the “welfare mother,” whose seemingly irresponsible behavior not only goes unpunished but is in fact rewarded with money taken from the pockets of hard-working taxpayers like themselves.

If one middle class believes in work, the other believes in career. These contrasting beliefs also imply different ways of thinking about time and space. Because work involves producing things, it takes place within boundaries. Not only is it tied to a specific neighbor-

hood, employer, or industrial quarter, it is time-bound and regulated by hours or weeks. Careers, by contrast, tend to be loosened from the constraints of space and time. People who have careers are prepared to move anywhere in search of the next stage, either within the firm or within the country. They are not, however, prepared to punch a clock. Process, not output, counts as the measure of success. Those who follow careers manage rather than produce. Indeed, one of the things they devote a great deal of time to managing is the transition to an economy that produces less.

Career-followers tend to view those bound to specific hours and places as slow-moving and backward, “time-servers” lacking in cosmopolitan sophistication. They work at jobs that pollute the environment and belong to hidebound unions that are bastions of conservatism and special privilege. Working people vote against the higher taxes needed to keep the local schools in the right loops for the right colleges. From the perspective of the wealthier middle class, Americans who produce things put tacky sculptures on their front lawns, ice cubes in their (sweet) white wine, pictures of their children on their walls, sugar in their (disgustingly weak) coffee, cigarettes in their ashtrays, and dirt bikes in their driveways. The career-followers are undisturbed by the decline of industrial America—old factories can be converted into attractive shopping malls and offices, after all—and tend to believe that given a choice the country would turn every industrial community into a Silicon Valley. Visions of postindustrial society may no longer preoccupy social scientists, but they lie behind the dreams of the older, more entrenched, middle class.

Unappreciative of productive work, this middle class is hardly prepared to insist that the underclass be required to submit to its rigors. Unlike the more recently arrived middle class, which tends to move to the outer suburbs, the older middle class lives closer to the city and even, on occasion, “gentrifies”

urban neighborhoods in the city itself. From this position of greater proximity to the poor, being unproductive is seen not as a sin but as a condition. It can even, in more sophisticated understandings, be seen as a kind of career. Youngsters in the gang business, for example, work pretty hard at what they do. They, too, are liberated from the constraints of space and time—they certainly keep irregular hours—and often possess an entrepreneurial flair. Even welfare can be understood as a career. Welfare recipients, like many urban professionals, are creatures of the bureaucracy. And while they may not be producing anything at the moment, welfare is something like a career interlude, necessary before work can be resumed.

The virtue of productivity, once a crucial American symbol, is now contested. For those wishing no more than to say good-bye to all that, unproductive behavior, while not necessarily appealing, is also not especially threatening. But to those who labor in traditional jobs, urban loitering, always unforgivable, approaches anathema. The more Americans are forced to compete for a diminishing number of good jobs, the more they will also differ over the meaning of jobs themselves.

2. *Saving.* The Protestant ethic—the package of psychological and cultural attributes associated with the rise of capitalism—was long ago split along two often-conflicting dimensions. Nearly a century ago, Max Weber described the classic dispositions associated with early capitalism: hard work, a willingness to forego pleasure in the short run, and a focus on long-term results. But as capitalism matured, shifting its focus from production to consumption, a new set of values emerged, brilliantly analyzed by sociologist Daniel Bell in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976). An economy that required mass consumption in order to grow, Bell observed, fostered a new emphasis on immediate gratification, hedonistic pleasures, and short-term outlooks. A scholar looking for signs of the old Protestant rectitude today would have better luck looking at museum walls in New En-

gland than in the board rooms of Dallas and Los Angeles.

These two ethics describe rather well the cultural divide of the middle class with respect to saving and spending. Old-fashioned ideas about creating and preserving wealth no longer have much currency in the politically liberal mainline Protestant churches of the old middle class, which seem to view the making of money more as a source of shame than of virtue. Yet if mainline Protestants no longer sustain the Protestant ethic, some Protestant evangelicals do, as well as other recent arrivals to the middle class—including Catholics, Buddhists, and Muslims. The fact that the Protestant ethic flourishes today among Korean shopowners and merchants makes many white Americans ask why it is not as strong among inner-city blacks.

Homeownership has always been the most significant symbol of thrift, one more sign that it is not how much you make but what you do with your money that matters. Renting is understood as a temporary state, an impermanent and unfortunate condition. Yet homeownership is declining in America. Although mortgage rates have recently come down to levels not seen in decades, high prices and high taxes still make it difficult for young couples to purchase their first home. In the affluent suburbs of Westchester County near New York City or in DeKalb County outside Atlanta, no amount of scrimping and saving seems sufficient to accumulate a down payment. The loan provided by affluent (old middle class) parents has become the norm. The new middle class, which cannot obtain such help or can obtain only relatively small sums, must look elsewhere for its first homes, including places 60 to 100 miles from the cities they surround: Orange County (New York, not California), Prince William County, Virginia, near Washington, D.C., or Simi Valley, California, site of the first Rodney King trial. Time spent commuting to and from work can be used as a rough guide to the dividing line

between America's two middle classes—although the standard has been reversed since the days when wealthier Americans were the ones who traveled great distances to the ex-urbs beyond the suburban fringe.

The symbols of saving are closely linked to those of productivity. Saving, like work, is time-bound; a certain amount per pay period adds up to a larger amount over time. Only one middle class in America uses such time-bound forms of saving as Christmas club accounts, U.S. savings bonds, and ordinary pass-book savings accounts. Traditionally one saved knowing full well that there were other ways of investing money that paid higher returns but also carried greater risks. Now the once-firm line between saving and speculation has been breached. Banking deregulation, by allowing banks to take greater risks with the money of depositors, has confused the moral compass of the more conservative middle class. America is awash with schemes to get rich quick, from Publishers Clearinghouse sweepstakes to state-sponsored numbers rackets. Convinced that the inner-city poor spend every cent that comes into their hands, the hard-working middle class now finds itself tempted by its own forms of speculation, hoping that a down payment might fall from the sky. Watching the loss of jobs, members of this class also watch the loss of savings accounts; both the Protestant ethic as they understand it and the economy that supported it seem to them to be giving way to a new economy and a new ethos, each of which seems alien to them. And, as in the case of the decline of productive work, the psychology

works in the opposite direction from the economics, intensifying the moral importance of precisely those economic practices that are disappearing.

3. *Children.* Thinking about the long-run is inevitably connected to children. It is for them that we save. Helping them grow up is the closest we mortals come to immortality. For as long as anyone can remember, middle-class morality has been about raising a family.

There have been two significant changes in the symbols associated with childhood in America during the past 30 years. One is that a large family is no longer the norm. Technology has made it possible to regulate family size, with the result that some families choose



Vietnam and the counterculture split the middle class. In 1970, New Yorkers angered by antiwar protests staged a demonstration of their own.

to have many children while others choose to have few. The split runs right through the middle class.

The career-minded tend to find the Clintons an attractive role model. Having one child enables them to join the American mainstream, while not having too many children permits careers to go forward without interruption, and even leaves enough money (and time) left over for evenings out, a cleaning woman, and possibly a February dash down to a sunny spot, as well as the usual August stay in the Vineyard. For those who want to find them, there are an unusually large number of practical reasons to limit family size: housing prices, the high cost of private school and college, balancing two careers, long working hours, delayed marriages, and the always-looming possibility of divorce. As often happens, a symbolic code emerges to rationalize the practical. Having too many children seems untidy—all those runny noses and scraped knees—and tacky, like linoleum floors or a Florida room. People should learn to control themselves better.

America's other middle class perceives the obstacles facing large families as another symptom of the decline of middle-class morality, similar to the disappearance of jobs and savings accounts. No matter how large their families eventually become, they nearly always seem too small. There are limits in the symbolic world of these people as well, for they react instinctively against those who have more children than they can support. Still, larger families ensure that life, like work, has a structured course, organized around the development of each child. Although the economic costs of large families are great, the psychological rewards more than compensate.

Public life for such people is organized around the schools. All politics for them is local because all schools are local. Civic activity means participation in little leagues and PTAs, not voting in elections or contributing to candidates for the state legislature. Except for

Catholics and some Jews, most members of the late-arriving middle class would like to keep their children in public schools; the option of buying out of inferior education through private schools is often not available to them. They worry more about crime, drugs, and sex in the schools than they do about declining academic standards, although they connect the latter with the former. (When it is their own boys who are found to be sexually active in school, however, often in ways that resemble the gang behavior they associate with the underclass, they tend to rally to the defense of their children.) Moving as far away from the city as possible vastly increases the time and money spent commuting, but it cuts the costs of schooling relative to private schools. Yet the fact that even as simple a matter as sending one's child to school is now filled with moral dilemmas and difficult choices is one more piece of evidence that the world is not like it was in the good old days.

Besides the large family's loss of status, at least one other significant change has occurred in the symbolic world of children. Homosexuality, once barely mentionable, now is routinely discussed on the evening news and in newspapers. As it is, middle-class Americans are asked virtually every day to reflect on whether the world can properly be understood to revolve around the needs of children anymore. Gays tend to be as middle class as anyone—indeed they are more likely to be middle class if income is the definition of class status. And there are, of course, many gay parents—even if it is not generally as parents that gays demand political and civil rights. Despite all of these considerations, however, gay liberation challenges bourgeois propriety at its most essential point: that marriage is about restraining desire for the sake of the next generation. No wonder gay rights is an issue that divides the middle class.

The more liberal wing of the American middle class understands such demands as the logical next step in an expansion of civil

rights that began with the legislation of the 1960s. America is a big enough place for all kinds of people, lifestyles, and choices. Besides, gay people are suffering from a horrendous pandemic and are entitled to all our altruism and support.

Not so fast, one can hear America's other middle class saying. We never voted on whether homosexuals deserve special protection against discrimination. Civil rights for racial and ethnic minorities is something else. To be sure, we have our reservations there too, but we have accepted the idea that America should strive for colorblindness. (That is why we have our doubts about affirmative action.) But homosexuals choose their lifestyle. The idea that what they do is sinful is not one we are fully prepared to dismiss, in part because we want to retain at least some religious ideas in an overwhelmingly secular age. We do not want to have our young children taught about sex at all, let alone about sodomy. Like everyone else, we are moved deeply by the tragic deaths of so many young people, which is why we have allowed our tax dollars to be spent in surprisingly generous amounts on AIDS treatment and research. But when we are forced to make a choice, we think families with children should stand higher in the moral hierarchy than gay couples living in New York and San Francisco.

Increasingly, even the middle-class idea of the family, once incontestable, seems under siege. The American middle class is asked to give recognition not only to homosexual couples but to step-families of every shape and description. The federal government, meanwhile, grants more of its largesse to the elderly, who stopped caring for children long ago, than to hard-working middle-class parents with small children, and it steps in and provides welfare when fathers in poor families fail to live up to their responsibilities. This middle class agrees that abortion ought to be permitted under some circumstances, but it views the broad acceptance of abortion as one more sign

of how we devalue children. More traditional families are not viewed by those who live within them as one alternative among many. From their point of view, economics, culture, and moral relativism have ganged up to make the traditional family seem obsolete. America's moral world will not be made right again, they believe, until a place is found within it for children to be children.

4. *God.* According to some interpreters, such as sociologist James Davison Hunter of the University of Virginia, America's cultural wars are at bottom religious wars of a new kind. Once Americans fought over doctrine: Protestants, Catholics, and Jews each had a different vision of humanity's relationship with God. Now the battle lines cross theological boundaries, as liberal Protestants join liberal Catholics and Jews in contests with their more conservative brethren. And these new religious fault lines, it turns out, closely parallel the divisions between the two middle classes.

God remains a meaningful symbol for both groups, but in different ways. Those who moved to the suburbs in the 1950s and '60s did not so much give up religion as they gave up orthodoxy. They still wanted to have their children experience the structure that organized religion can provide, but they also wanted the advantages of secular modernity. Fortunately for them, America pioneered "lite" religion: quasi-secular beliefs that merged ideas born in sectarian quarters with a generalized belief in America, modernity, and progress. The God that was produced by this mixture was not an especially fearsome one. His teachings constituted a set of moral beliefs rather than a moralistic code, the "10 suggestions" rather than the 10 commandments, as fundamentalists like to charge. Growing up at a time when theology was on the backburner, the fortysomethings of the liberal middle class believe that people of different faiths can live together, which makes America different from the rest of the world.

Old-time religion, by contrast, conveys all the distasteful symbolic imagery of the world

left behind in the quest for middle-class status. From the standpoint of those who rose into the middle class in the 1950s and '60s, neither the Lubavitchers nor the Bakkers are the kind of people one would want as neighbors. They are both, in their own ways, stamped with the features of a specific place: the Lubavitchers with the city neighborhoods from which escape to the suburbs became necessary, the Bakkers with a distinct regionalism that is at odds with the homogenized mobility of American middle-class life. Fundamentalists, moreover, are too literal-minded to understand the moral ambiguities that make middle-class life tolerable. They take their religion too seriously. How, after all, can one bring up children to respect their parents but also to be popular among their friends without recognizing that a little hypocrisy can go a long way? The thing about religion is to take its commands seriously in public while ignoring them in private, a balancing act the overly devout consistently fail to appreciate.

Beyond the comfortable inner suburbs, however, religion lives a very different life. While fundamentalist churches sprout along the roads where the new malls go up, Korean Baptists have converted former synagogues into churches and Protestant evangelicals have found new converts among the Hispanics of Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York. Newer arrivals to the middle class are far less likely to view fundamentalism as antagonistic to their moral objectives. They may even be willing to be led by fundamentalist activists on some issues, as were the opponents of the plan by New York City schools chancellor Joseph Fernandez to teach greater tolerance of homosexuality as part of a new "rainbow curriculum." The newer middle class is quite disturbed by what it perceives to be the immorality of secular humanism run rampant. Religion, for it, is only partly a matter of personal belief; it is also about the character of American life. If the schools paid a little more attention to God, there would be less criminality

and homosexuality, two trends vaguely linked in their minds. The troubles of the inner city are surely due to lack of faith. A more God-fearing society would pay more attention to hard work and its rewards.

While this longing for a little more religious backbone in American life persists, passage to middle-class status, even today, means leaving behind unforgiving moral strictures and increasingly awkward rituals. This middle class is uncertain about whether it would want America to be a theocracy; most of its members, to the degree that they reflect on this issue, believe it should not be. Its alliance with fundamentalism, then, is most likely a temporary one that could easily fall apart once a proper balance between faith and freedom is re-established.

Neither middle class has yet found the right line between church and state. The ways in which each balances the spiritual and the secular are not dissimilar in principle; each simply prefers to draw the line in a different place. It is even possible to imagine that the distance between these lines will shrink at some point. But there are still two lines; God remains real for one of America's middle classes, even while He is understood more symbolically by the other.

5. *Politics.* The political differences between the two middle classes can be only partly understood in the conventional sense of Left versus Right. The more important political division between the two occurs not over questions of government regulation or economic policy but over the purpose and meaning of politics itself.

Many of those who move to the far suburbs are fleeing crime, crowding, poverty, and the other dangers and irritants of the city. One of those other irritants is politics. Traditionally, city neighborhoods were organized by party machines that provided favors in return for various tokens of obligation from citizens, from voting to illegal contributions. While the machines today are largely defunct, their legacy remains powerful. As corrupt as they may have been, such organizations provided

a public structure that complemented private life. Urban life brought people together for the expression of collective purpose. So long as America was chiefly an urban nation, it was also a political nation: People voted and candidates mattered.

The escape from the public is one of the great temptations of middle-class life in America, and the two middle classes have dealt with it differently. Suburban politics is diffused and irregular. It does not ask for support in return for favors. The favors—good schools, pothole-free roads, regular trash collection, sewers—are viewed as entitlements, irrespective of whether people vote or even pay taxes. In a suburban world, therefore, individuals can easily elevate the private over the public. So long as they can drive to work, educate their children, and afford occasional vacations, the political system works for them. They tend to be unconcerned with what happens in other parts of the country, let alone in Bosnia or Somalia. If Jefferson once opined that government is best that governs least, many Americans believe that politics is best when it politicizes least.

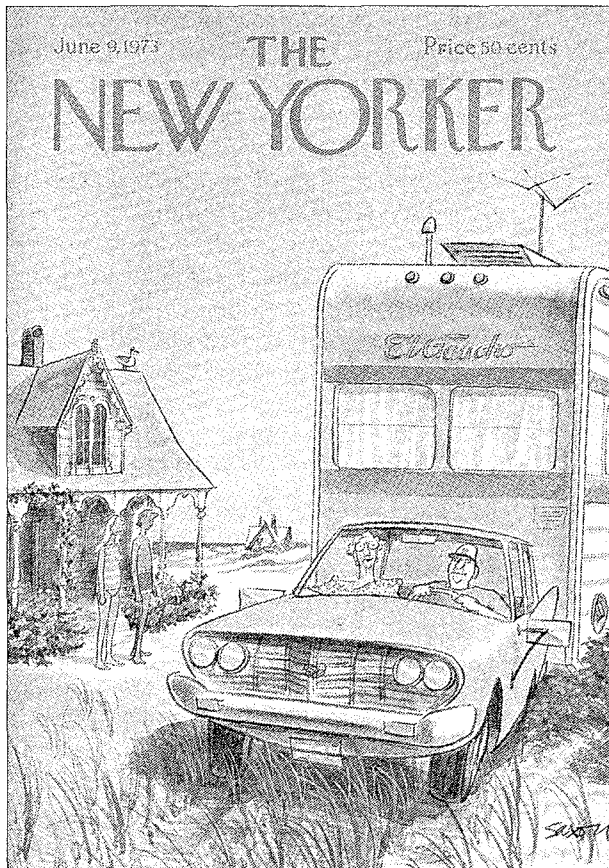
By and large, these apolitical Americans are members of the new middle class. To them, political activists and ideologues look much like fundamentalists do to the old middle class: They seem to take their beliefs too seriously. Political “causes” of any sort, conservative or liberal, are suspect. One gets one’s political cues as well as one’s ideas and the language for expressing those ideas from television. The mass media are an almost perfect invention from the standpoint of middle-class privatism. They offer an opportunity to feel as if one is in touch with the world without ever leaving one’s couch—a truly irresistible combination. People who leave politics behind therefore do not necessarily leave political opinion behind. Indeed, they may have stronger opinions the more removed they are from political realities—much as immigrants often hold more violent opinions about poli-

tics in their native country than those who stayed behind. When they feel moved to express themselves, they expect a political system to be in place to respond to their views. Otherwise, they generally fail to pay much attention to the civic virtues, including active involvement with issues once thought essential to the cultivation of a healthy political system.

The inner suburbs of the old middle class tend to be not only more liberal, but also more politically active and concerned. In his important book, *The United States of Ambition* (1991), journalist Alan Ehrenhalt points out that many conservative states contain some remarkably liberal counties. Politicians in these areas are often single or have grown children. Policy wonks fascinated by the techniques of getting things done, they provide in time what they often lack in personal fortune. As Ehrenhalt points out, those who believe in using government to promote the good life have an advantage in politics. They win elections, even when their neighbors may be more conservative than they, because they outhustle everyone else. It is as if their political zeal is a by-product of energy displaced from their private dissatisfactions. If one wing of the middle class finds happiness in private life and the public realm a chore, the other finds liberation in the public sphere and private existence confining.

These differences over the meaning and purpose of politics give politics a liberal bias. Noting the result, conservatives have begun to mobilize around causes that move their particular middle-class constituency, especially opposition to gay rights. Yet conservative activists probably face a more uphill struggle, for their middle class wants above all else to be left alone, and joining together with others in order to be left alone is a difficult contradiction to overcome. One form of middle-class morality will always tend to view politics apolitically, the other professionally. The differences between them are unlikely to be overcome soon.

6. *Country*. Since everything associated



Worlds in collision: The New Yorker, long the arbiter of old-middle-class taste, is one of the few places in America where class differences (and biases) are allowed out of the closet.

with what it means to be a middle-class American seems to be up for grabs, it can hardly be surprising that the meaning of America itself is too. Loyalty to country and its duties inevitably means very different things to people whose fundamental perspectives on place and time are as different as those of the careerist old middle class and work-oriented new bourgeoisie are. Loyalty means above all else the acceptance of spatial constraints. This is where we are. This place has meanings that no other place has. To be loyal to it means that we cannot wish we were somewhere else, nor can it mean that we bring somewhere else here. The only alternative to liking it is to leave it.

Symbols of national unity are far more

important to those who believe that loyalty is a pre-eminent moral virtue. No other conflict could have posed more clearly for them the stakes in the cultural war than the issue that bedeviled the Clinton administration during its first 100 days: the question of gays in the military. The military remains for many Americans the unique symbol that makes all other symbols possible, and one therefore that ought to remain above conflict. In their mind, the controversy over homosexuals in the military is not really about fighting ability, AIDS, or the seduction of innocent teenagers. It is about the future of the one institution that ought to remain immune to divisiveness, for if the symbol of unity is divided, then everything else must be as well.

Ethnic allegiances throw an interesting twist into the idea of loyalty. Loyal members of middle-class America think they take their ethnicity seriously, making a great show of how proud they are to be Italian or Irish or Polish. But sociologists know better. Extraordinarily large numbers of Italian Americans cannot even speak a complete sentence in Italian. These Americans become Italian or Irish only when

it is convenient. Chicago's fiercely anticommunist Polish-American enclaves, after all, did not empty out when communism fell, nor is it likely that Miami will become a ghost town when Cuba is out from under Fidel Castro.

Because their ethnicity is more symbolic than real, these members of the American middle class are not being hypocritical when they express opposition to bilingualism and some of the more exotic forms of multiculturalism favored by the Left. Only they know whether in their heart of hearts their opposition to Spanish-language instruction and Afrocentric curricula are inspired by racism. They would like to believe otherwise. Their Irish, Italian, and Jew-

ish parents and grandparents were not taught by teachers who were Irish, Italian, and Jewish. They did not insist that the schools teach about what they left behind—why come to America just to get Jewish history? Learning English was often the crucial rite of passage that defined the family's new loyalties. Dual loyalty is, simply put, something such people cannot understand. If you are no longer living in Mexico or Puerto Rico, why do you think about going back? If you are black, would you not rather learn what it takes to make it here? We are not being racist, they proclaim. We would welcome black Americans who share our point of view; it is not our fault that there are so few who do. And we take pride in those minorities, especially those from Asia, who understand the struggle to become American the way we do.

If anything, the more established and more liberal middle class is even less ethnic than the one that came after it. Its ethnic identity, in fact, is so weak that it broadens into a lack of any identity at all, save for being middle class. When identity is relatively unimportant, one can, paradoxically, be more sympathetic to those who are asserting their identity. For the more liberal middle class understands that the struggles of gays, blacks, and others for public recognition is a cry of pain over exclusion, a demand to be acknowledged.

Not terribly concerned about symbols of national unity, this more-established group sees little wrong with allowing homosexuals to serve in the military. On the one hand, the military is not really a symbol of national unity at all; it is simply a large bureaucracy, even a source of possible careers. On the other hand, gays are anything but a symbol of disunity, and their agenda does not amount to a demand for special privileges. They are merely asking for their rights. Politics ought to be about rights, not about symbols. The trouble with loyalty is that its demands can trample on individual rights. By insisting on the right of gays to serve in the military, we are defending the rights of all people to be treated as

autonomous individuals by the institutions that frame their lives.

In a similar way, demands for recognition by the nation's ethnic and racial groups are not seen as especially troublesome symbolic attacks on national unity. If America is politically and economically pluralistic, why can it not be culturally pluralistic as well? No one is harmed if Hispanic children are taught in Spanish as well as English. If learning more about Africa instills pride in inner-city youth, who can object? America is capacious enough to include equal time for all. All this talk about symbols, from this modern and progressive point of view, sounds suspiciously anachronistic. And the last thing we should do at a time when we are about to enter a world in which capital and labor will flow freely across borders is to argue over the symbols that distinguish those on one side of a border from those on the other.

Some of America's cultural wars are struggles over the meaning of particular symbols. Both sides claim to believe in family, for example, but disagree over what a family is. But the struggle over country is a struggle over symbols themselves: how compelling they should be, how much they should override rational action, how inclusive or exclusive should be their meaning. The great sociologist Emile Durkheim once wrote that the soldier who dies for the flag is literally dying for the flag, not for the country the flag represents. The major difference between America's two middle classes is that one believes, like Durkheim's soldier, that symbols become synonymous with the things they represent, while the other believes that symbols are constructions to be accepted when convenient and replaced when obsolete.

IV

Although both the Democrats and the Republicans have recognized that they can no longer afford to ignore the middle class, both have adopted flawed strategies for responding to

middle-class moral concerns. Democrats seek the votes of people hurt by Reaganomics, but, if President Clinton's actions on gays in the military are any indication, they do not want to take the moral views of these people too seriously. Republicans, on the other hand, respond to the middle-class morality of the newly arrived but pursue economic policies that heighten their material insecurities.

Believing that economics still matters most, both parties try to rationalize away the moral views that stand in inconvenient opposition to their economic programs—the Democrats through what might be called an ideology of modernization, the Republicans through a variety of populism.

Modernizers believe that history moves ineluctably toward greater enlightenment and that enlightenment is invariably associated with material prosperity. The politically incorrect moral views of the recently arrived middle class are, to them, unfortunate by-products of the incomplete transition from working-class or immigrant status to second- or third-generation suburbanite. People who think that homosexuality is a sin simply have not matured in their views. As they learn more about the world, they will come to see that all forms of bigotry are irrational prejudices. Time often takes care of such prejudices, and even if people do not themselves change, their children tend to be more liberal. Of course, we cannot rely only on time, for some forms of discrimination are so invidious that it is unjust to wait. We ought, therefore, to use the schools and, on occasion, the courts, to teach a more elevated morality. (When all else fails, there are always sensitivity groups.) But we can be fairly certain that views that strike us as racist, homophobic, sexist, or just plain backward will fall before the pressure of progress.

The problem with this point of view—which is to say one of the chief problems that has faced the Democratic Party since the 1960s—is that it can convey an unrelenting smugness and elitism. Dismissive of the

deeply held beliefs of large numbers of people, Democrats impose antidemocratic solutions, seeking to cut off debates about divisive moral issues and refusing to recognize that people can quite legitimately disagree over, say, whether condoms should be given out in schools or whether affirmative action is the best way to integrate society. When modernizers are unable to get what they want through undemocratic means, such as court orders or administrative decrees, they tend to lose, especially in popular referenda. It is always instructive when the majority votes against them to watch modernizers account for their defeat; they tend to blame everything but their own ideas.

Populists approach the problem of middle-class morality from the opposite point of view. Populists and pseudopopulists—George Bush eating pork rinds, Rush Limbaugh talking about anything—strive to convey the notion that they possess a gritty, reality-based morality. The views of ordinary people are genuine, from their perspective, precisely because they violate the conventions of what we are “supposed” to think and express what, in the privacy of their homes, people really do think. The populist sees human nature through a glass darkly: People are selfish, shortsighted, sometimes mean. The world is a Hobbesian battleground pitting us against them. The liberal elitists may not like it, but you cannot really change human nature. Those who manage to tap public anger, therefore, are not demagogues but practitioners of true democratic politics.

The modern Republican Party owes its success, at least in presidential elections, to its adoption of full-blown moral populism. Yet the populists' understanding of middle-class morality is no less flawed than the modernizers'. They do not, for example, understand their constituents as well as they claim to. Surely Patrick Buchanan and Marilyn Quayle thought they had the American people on their side during the Republican convention of 1992, yet they barely had their own party on their side. Populists think of themselves as tell-



Some of America's newest arrivals are now the staunchest guardians of its oldest values. Among Asian Americans, the "model minority," many now enjoy far incomes above the U.S. average.

ing it like it is, when in fact their politics are as artificially constructed as those of the modernizers. Despite Ronald Reagan's message of restraint and responsibility, the 1980s were years of free-spending hedonism. And most people know there are two sides to most issues. They feel that political leaders who speak as if there is only one are patronizing and not worthy of their trust, even when they lean toward the leader's views. Populists can only repeat what they think people want to hear, but not everyone wants to look in a mirror all the time.

Confronted by two antagonistic world views, one might be tempted to find ways to reconcile them. Perhaps this temptation should be resisted, at least for a while. It is best if we face up to the major political and moral issues before us. We ought to do so not by siding with one side in its dismissal of the other but instead by stressing the importance of the processes and institutional arrange-

ments that can permit individuals with strong differences of opinion nevertheless to feel as if they belong to the same political system. The battle over middle-class morality presents a good opportunity to remember the importance of the rules that make politics possible.

One such rule is that neither side in the struggle is allowed to trump the other by appealing to fundamental constitutional principles. This is a rule that immediately suggests its own exceptions, for surely it would violate the Constitution to forbid one group to express its point of view. But with a new administration in power, we have a chance to stop using the Constitution as a weapon in the hands of one or the other side in our cultural wars. This will not be an easy task for Bill Clinton. Because the Republicans made opposition to abortion a litmus test for Supreme Court membership, for example, Democrats may well be tempted to turn the tables now that they have a chance. They should not. When public opinion is deeply divided on moral questions, the Supreme Court cannot make up

our moral minds for us. It can, and should, set the standards that enable a fair debate to take place. But if it tries to resolve the debate, it will only engender the kind of furious and determined opposition that arose after *Roe v. Wade*.

Second, we ought to experiment a bit more with moral federalism. Both sides in our moral debates want to universalize their positions: Condoms should be distributed to teenagers in each and every school or they should be distributed in none. In reality, different localities and different states will try different approaches, and this is how it should be. There was no reason why all New York City children needed to be instructed under the controversial "Curriculum of the Rainbow" favored by the head of the city's school system. Let Queens keep it out and Manhattan keep it in. A policy of encouraging particular rather than universal moralities violates consistency and philosophical principle. It also makes a good deal of political sense. Ultimately, universal moral principles may even emerge as people learn that their particular moralities are more problematic than they had realized.

Finally, both sides in the war over middle-class morality have to recognize that politics is a two-way street. Liberals cannot expect government to be in the business of helping people without recognizing that the beneficia-

ries have an obligation to behave responsibly. Conservatives cannot go around telling people how to behave if they are unwilling to make the plight of the unfortunate their business. Liberals are surely correct when they remind us that without rights we lose our freedom. But conservatives are also correct when they point out that without obligations, we have no rights. Thinking about politics as the art of balancing rights and obligations does not tell us what to do in situations of moral complexity, but it does at least force us to consider the positions of those with whom we disagree.

No one expects the war between the head and the heart of the American middle class to end soon. To be middle class in America is to reap all the satisfactions of making it while simultaneously assuming the obligations that come with success. Middle-class Americans ought to be generous to those who have been left behind. But it is foolish in this less-benign economic era to expect them to gloss over the increasing importance of the hard work involved in becoming middle class. It is impossible to predict the next step in American politics, but it does seem plausible that our public life over the next few decades will be preoccupied with watching the middle class make up its mind.