

CLASS

*A Guide Through
the
American Status System*

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A Touchy Subject

Although most Americans sense that they live within an extremely complicated system of social classes and suspect that much of what is thought and done here is prompted by considerations of status, the subject has remained murky. And always touchy. You can outrage people today simply by mentioning social class, very much the way, sipping tea among the aspidistras a century ago, you could silence a party by adverting too openly to sex. When, recently, asked what I am writing, I have answered, "A book about social class in America," people tend first to straighten their ties and sneak a glance at their cuffs to see how far fraying has advanced there. Then, a few minutes later, they silently get up and walk away. It is not just that I am feared as a class spy. It is as if I had said, "I am working on a book urging the beating to death of baby whales using the dead bodies of baby seals." Since I have been writing this book I have experienced many times the awful truth of R. H. Tawney's perception, in his book *Equality* (1931): "The word 'class' is fraught with unpleasant associations, so that to linger upon it is apt to be interpreted as the symptom of a perverted mind and a jaundiced spirit."

Especially in America, where the idea of class is notably embarrassing. In his book *Inequality in an Age of Decline* (1980), the sociologist Paul Blumberg goes so far as to call it "America's forbidden thought." Indeed, people often blow their tops if the

subject is even broached. One woman, asked by a couple of interviewers if she thought there were social classes in this country, answered: "It's the dirtiest thing I've ever heard of!" And a man, asked the same question, got so angry that he blurted out, "Social class should be exterminated!"

Actually, you reveal a great deal about your social class by the amount of annoyance or fury you feel when the subject is brought up. A tendency to get very anxious suggests that you are middle-class and nervous about slipping down a rung or two. On the other hand, upper-class people love the topic to come up: the more attention paid to the matter the better off they seem to be. Proletarians generally don't mind discussions of the subject because they know they can do little to alter their class identity. Thus the whole class matter is likely to seem like a joke to them—the upper classes fatuous in their empty aristocratic pretentiousness, the middles loathsome in their anxious gentility. It is the middle class that is highly class-sensitive, and sometimes class-scared to death. A representative of that class left his mark on a library copy of Russell Lynes's *The Tastemakers* (1954). Next to a passage patronizing the insecure decorating taste of the middle class and satirically contrasting its artistic behavior to that of some more sophisticated classes, this offended reader scrawled, in large capitals, "BULL SHIT!" A hopelessly middle-class man (not a woman, surely?) if I ever saw one.

If you reveal your class by your outrage at the very topic, you reveal it also by the way you define the thing that's outraging you. At the bottom, people tend to believe that class is defined by the amount of money you have. In the middle, people grant that money has something to do with it, but think education and the kind of work you do almost equally important. Nearer the top, people perceive that taste, values, ideas, style, and behavior are indispensable criteria of class, regardless of money or occupation or education. One woman interviewed by Studs Terkel for *Division Street: America* (1967) clearly revealed her class as middle both by her uneasiness about the subject's being introduced and by her instinctive recourse to occupation as the essential class criterion. "We have right on this street almost every class," she said. "But I shouldn't say class," she went on, "because we don't live in a nation of classes." Then, the occupational criterion: "But we have janitors living on the street, we have doctors, we have businessmen, CPAs."

Being told that there are no social classes in the place where the interviewee lives is an old experience for sociologists. "'We don't have classes in our town' almost invariably is the first remark recorded by the investigator," reports Leonard Reissman, author of *Class in American Life* (1959). "Once that has been uttered and is out of the way, the class divisions in the town can be recorded with what seems to be an amazing degree of agreement among the good citizens of the community." The novelist John O'Hara made a whole career out of probing into this touchy subject, to which he was astonishingly sensitive. While still a boy, he was noticing that in the Pennsylvania town where he grew up, "older people do not treat others as equals."

Class distinctions in America are so complicated and subtle that foreign visitors often miss the nuances and sometimes even the existence of a class structure. So powerful is "the fable of equality," as Frances Trollope called it when she toured America in 1832, so embarrassed is the government to confront the subject—in the thousands of measurements pouring from its bureaus, social class is not officially recognized—that it's easy for visitors not to notice the way the class system works. A case in point is the experience of Walter Allen, the British novelist and literary critic. Before he came over here to teach at a college in the 1950s, he imagined that "class scarcely existed in America, except, perhaps, as divisions between ethnic groups or successive waves of immigrants." But living awhile in Grand Rapids opened his eyes: there he learned of the snob power of New England and the pliability of the locals to the long-wielded moral and cultural authority of old families.

Some Americans viewed with satisfaction the failure of the 1970s TV series *Beacon Hill*, a drama of high society modeled on the British *Upstairs, Downstairs*, comforting themselves with the belief that this venture came to grief because there is no class system here to sustain interest in it. But they were mistaken. *Beacon Hill* failed to engage American viewers because it focused on perhaps the least interesting place in the indigenous class structure, the quasi-aristocratic upper class. Such a dramatization might have done better if it had dealt with places where everyone recognizes interesting class collisions occur—the place where the upper-middle class meets the middle and resists its attempted incursions upward, or where the middle class does the same to the classes just below it.

If foreigners often fall for the official propaganda of social equality, the locals tend to know what's what, even if they feel some uneasiness talking about it. When the acute black from the South asserts of an ambitious friend that "Joe can't class with the big folks," we feel in the presence of someone who's attended to actuality. Like the carpenter who says: "I hate to say there are classes, but it's just that people are more comfortable with people of like backgrounds." His grouping of people by "like backgrounds," scientifically uncertain as it may be, is nearly as good a way as any to specify what it is that distinguishes one class from another. If you feel no need to explicate your allusions or in any way explain what you mean, you are probably talking with someone in your class. And that's true whether you're discussing the Rams and the Forty-Niners, RVs, the House (i.e., Christ Church, Oxford), Mama Leone's, the Big Board, "the Vineyard," "Baja," or the Porcellian.

ignore In this book I am going to deal with some of the visible and audible signs of social class, but I will be sticking largely with those that reflect choice. That means that I will not be considering matters of race, or, except now and then, religion or politics. Race is visible, but it is not chosen. Religion and politics, while usually chosen, don't show, except for the occasional front-yard shrine or car bumper sticker. When you look at a person you don't see "Roman Catholic" or "liberal": you see "hand-painted necktie" or "crappy polyester shirt"; you hear *parameters* or *in regards to*. In attempting to make sense of indicators like these, I have been guided by perception and feel rather than by any method that could be deemed "scientific," believing with Arthur Marwick, author of *Class: Image and Reality* (1980), that "class . . . is too serious a subject to leave to the social scientists."

It should be a serious subject in America especially, because here we lack a convenient system of inherited titles, ranks, and honors, and each generation has to define the hierarchies all over again. The society changes faster than any other on earth, and the American, almost uniquely, can be puzzled about where, in the society, he stands. The things that conferred class in the 1930s—white linen golf knickers, chrome cocktail shakers, vests with white piping—are, to put it mildly, unlikely to do so today. Belonging to a rapidly changing rather than a traditional society, Americans find *Knowing Where You Stand* harder than do most

Europeans. And a yet more pressing matter, *Making It*, assumes crucial importance here. "How'm I doin'?" Mayor Koch of New York used to bellow, and most of his audience sensed that he was, appropriately, asking the representative American question.

It seems no accident that, as the British philosopher Anthony Quinton says, "The book of etiquette in its modern form . . . is largely an American product, the great names being Emily Post . . . and Amy Vanderbilt." The reason is that the United States is preeminently the venue of newcomers, with a special need to place themselves advantageously and to get on briskly. "Some newcomers," says Quinton, "are geographical, that is, immigrants; others are economic, the newly rich; others again chronological, the young." All are faced with the problem inseparable from the operations of a mass society, earning respect. The comic Rodney Dangerfield, complaining that he don't get none, belongs to the same national species as that studied by John Adams, who says, as early as 1805: "The rewards . . . in this life are *esteem* and *admiration* of others—the punishments are *neglect* and *contempt*. . . . The desire of the esteem of others is as real a want of nature as hunger—and the neglect and contempt of the world as severe a pain as the gout or stone. . . ." About the same time the Irish poet Thomas Moore, sensing the special predicament Americans were inviting with their egalitarian Constitution, described the citizens of Washington, D.C., as creatures

Born to be slaves, and struggling to be lords.

Thirty years later, in *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville put his finger precisely on the special problem of class aspiration here. "Nowhere," he wrote, "do citizens appear so insignificant as in a democratic nation." Nowhere, consequently, is there more strenuous effort to achieve—*earn* would probably not be the right word—significance. And still later in the nineteenth century, Walt Whitman, in *Democratic Vistas* (1871), perceived that in the United States, where the form of government promotes a condition (or at least an illusion) of uniformity among the citizens, one of the unique anxieties is going to be the constant struggle for individual self-respect based upon social approval. That is, where everybody is somebody, nobody is anybody. In a recent Louis Harris poll, "respect from others" is what 76 percent of respondents said they wanted most. Addressing prospective purchasers of a coffee table, an ad writer recently spread before them this

most enticing American vision: "Create a rich, warm, sensual allusion to your own good taste that will demand respect and consideration in every setting you care to imagine."

The special hazards attending the class situation in America, where movement appears so fluid and where the prizes seem available to anyone who's lucky, are disappointment, and, following close on that, envy. Because the myth conveys the impression that you can readily earn your way upward, disillusion and bitterness are particularly strong when you find yourself trapped in a class system you've been half persuaded isn't important. When in early middle life some people discover that certain limits have been placed on their capacity to ascend socially by such apparent irrelevancies as heredity, early environment, and the social class of their immediate forebears, they go into something like despair, which, if generally secret, is no less destructive.

De Tocqueville perceived the psychic dangers. "In democratic times," he granted, "enjoyments are more intense than in the ages of aristocracy, and the number of those who partake in them is vastly larger." But, he added, in egalitarian atmospheres "man's hopes and desires are oftener blasted, the soul is more stricken and perturbed, and care itself more keen."

And after blasted hopes, envy. The force of sheer class envy behind vile and even criminal behavior in this country, the result in part of disillusion over the official myth of classlessness, should never be underestimated. The person who, parking his attractive car in a large city, has returned to find his windows smashed and his radio aerial snapped off will understand what I mean. Speaking in West Virginia in 1950, Senator Joseph R. McCarthy used language that leaves little doubt about what he was really getting at—not so much "Communism" as the envied upper-middle and upper classes. "It has not been the less fortunate or members of minority groups who have been selling this nation out," he said, "but rather those who have had all the benefits . . . , the finest homes, the finest college education. . . ." Pushed far enough, class envy issues in revenge egalitarianism, which the humorist Roger Price, in *The Great Rob Revolution* (1970), distinguishes from "democracy" thus: "Democracy demands that all of its citizens begin the race even. Egalitarianism insists that they all *finish* even." Then we get the situation satirized in L. P. Hartley's novel *Facial Justice* (1960), about "the prejudice against good looks" in a future society somewhat like ours. There, inequalities of ap-

pearance are redressed by government plastic surgeons, but the scalpel isn't used to make everyone beautiful—it's used to make everyone plain.

Despite our public embrace of political and judicial equality, in individual perception and understanding—much of which we refrain from publicizing—we arrange things vertically and insist on crucial differences in value. Regardless of what we say about equality, I think everyone at some point comes to feel like the Oscar Wilde who said, "The brotherhood of man is not a mere poet's dream: it is a most depressing and humiliating reality." It's as if in our heart of hearts we don't want agglomerations but distinctions. Analysis and separation we find interesting, synthesis boring.

Although it is disinclined to designate a hierarchy of social classes, the federal government seems to admit that if in law we are all equal, in virtually all other ways we are not. Thus the eighteen grades into which it divides its civil-service employees, from grade 1 at the bottom (messenger, etc.) up through 2 (mail clerk), 5 (secretary), 9 (chemist), to 14 (legal administrator), and finally 16, 17, and 18 (high-level administrators). In the construction business there's a social hierarchy of jobs, with "dirt work," or mere excavation, at the bottom; the making of sewers, roads, and tunnels in the middle; and work on buildings (the taller, the higher) at the top. Those who sell "executive desks" and related office furniture know that they and their clients agree on a rigid "class" hierarchy. Desks made of oak are at the bottom, and those of walnut are next. Then, moving up, mahogany is, if you like, "upper-middle class," until we arrive, finally, at the apex: teak. In the army, at ladies' social functions, pouring the coffee is the prerogative of the senior officer's wife because, as the ladies all know, coffee outranks tea.

There seems no place where hierarchical status-orderings aren't discoverable. Take musical instruments. In a symphony orchestra the customary ranking of sections recognizes the difficulty and degree of subtlety of various kinds of instruments: strings are on top, woodwinds just below, then brass, and, at the bottom, percussion. On the difficulty scale, the accordion is near the bottom, violin near the top. Another way of assigning something like "social class" to instruments is to consider the prestige of the group in which the instrument is customarily played. As the



U.S. Army scene: a senior officer's wife (note pseudo-upper-middle-class getup) pours coffee into cups of subordinates' wives

composer Edward T. Cone says, "If you play a violin, you can play in a string quartet or symphony orchestra, but not in a jazz band and certainly not in a marching band. Among woodwinds, therefore, flute, and oboe, which are primarily symphonic instruments, are 'better' than the clarinet, which can be symphonic, jazz, or band. Among brasses, the French horn ranks highest because it hasn't customarily been used in jazz. Among percussionists, tympani is high for the same reason." And (except for the bassoon) the lower the notes an instrument is designed to produce, in general the lower its class, bass instruments being generally easier to play. Thus a sousaphone is lower than a trumpet, a bass viol lower than a viola, etc. If you hear "My boy's taking lessons on the trombone," your smile will be a little harder to control than if you hear "My boy's taking lessons on the flute." On the other hand, to hear "My boy's taking lessons on the viola

da gamba" is to receive a powerful signal of class, the kind attaching to antiquarianism and museum, gallery, or "educational" work. Guitars (except when played in "classical"—that is, archaic—style) are low by nature, and that is why they were so often employed as tools of intentional class degradation by young people in the 1960s and '70s. The guitar was the perfect instrument for the purpose of signaling these young people's flight from the upper-middle and middle classes, associated as it is with Gypsies, cowhands, and other personnel without inherited or often even earned money and without fixed residence.

The former Socialist and editor of the *Partisan Review* William Barrett, looking back thirty years, concludes that "the Classless Society looks more and more like a Utopian illusion. The socialist countries develop a class structure of their own," although there, he points out, the classes are very largely based on bureaucratic toadying. "Since we are bound . . . to have classes in any case, why not have them in the more organic, heterogeneous and variegated fashion" indigenous to the West? And since we have them, why not know as much as we can about them? The subject may be touchy, but it need not be murky forever.

II

An Anatomy of the Classes

Nobody knows for sure what the word *class* means. Some people, like Vance Packard, have tried to invoke more objective terms, and have spoken about *status systems*. Followers of the sociologist Max Weber tend to say *class* when they're talking about the amount of money you have and the kind of leverage it gives you; they say *status* when they mean your social prestige in relation to your audience; and they say *party* when they're measuring how much political power you have, that is, how much built-in resistance you have to being pushed around by shits. By *class* I mean all three, with perhaps extra emphasis on *status*. I do wish the word *caste* were domesticated in the United States, because it nicely conveys the actual rigidity of class lines here, the difficulty of moving—either upward or downward—out of the place where you were nurtured.

How many classes are there? The simplest answer is that there are only two, the rich and the poor, employer and employed, landlord and tenant, bourgeois and proletariat. Or, to consider manners rather than economics and politics, there are gentlemen and there are cads. Asked by a team of sociologists what's involved in "social class," one respondent said, "Whether you have couth or are uncouth." And there's a "social" division distinguishing those who "entertain" in their domestic premises and those who wouldn't think of it. Paul Blumberg notes "a funda-

mental class cleavage" today between people who can afford to buy a house—any house—and people who can't, a fairly elevated version of the distinction down below between those who own cars and those who must depend on public transportation and who thus spend a great deal of their time waiting around for the bus to show up. In her book *Class* (1981), British humorist Jilly Cooper suggests a bipartite social scene in which the two parties are the Guilty and the Cross:

On the one side are the middle and upper classes, feeling guilty and riddled with social concern although they often earn less money than the workers. On the other are the working classes, who have been totally brainwashed by television and magazine images of the good life, and feel cross because they aren't getting a big enough slice of the cake.

Two classes only were in the consciousness of the British Eighth Army infantryman in North Africa during the Second World War who delivered this eloquent account of them:

Sir, this is a fine way for a man to spend his fucking life, isn't it? Have you ever heard of class distinction, sir? I'll tell you what it means, it means Vickers-Armstrong booking a profit to look like a loss, and Churchill lighting a new cigar, and the *Times* explaining Liberty and Democracy, and me sitting on my arse in Libya splashing a fainting man with water out of my steel helmet. It's a very fine thing if only you're in the right class—that's highly important, sir, because one class gets the sugar and the other class gets the shit.

A way of bringing home that soldier's conclusion is to realize that all work everywhere is divided into two sorts, safe and dangerous. Every year 100,000 workers are killed or die of work-related accidents or disease; 400,000 are disabled; 6 million are hurt at work. In *The Working-Class Majority* (1974), Andrew Levinson says, "All the clichés and pleasant notions of how the old class divisions . . . have disappeared are exposed as hollow phrases by the simple fact that American workers must accept serious injury and even death as part of their daily reality while the middle class does not." And he goes on:

Imagine . . . the universal outcry that would occur if every year several corporate headquarters routinely collapsed like mines, crushing sixty or seventy executives. Or suppose that

all the banks were filled with an invisible noxious dust that constantly produced cancer in the managers, clerks, and tellers. Finally, try to imagine the horror . . . if thousands of university professors were deafened every year or lost fingers, hands, sometimes eyes, while on their jobs.

And speaking of death and injury, probably the most awful class division in America, one that cuts deeply across the center of society and that will poison life here for generations, is the one separating those whose young people were killed or savaged in the Vietnam War and those who, thanks largely to the infamous S-2 deferment for college students, escaped. Anyone uncertain about class consciousness in this country should listen to a working-class father whose son was killed:

I'm bitter. You bet your goddam dollar I'm bitter. It's people like us who give up our sons for the country. The business people, they run the country and make money from it. The college types, the professors, they go to Washington and tell the government what to do. . . . But their sons, they don't end up in the swamps over there, in Vietnam. No, sir.

And a mother adds: "We can't understand how all those rich kids—the kids with beads from the suburbs—how they get off when my son had to go."

The two-part division has the convenience of simplicity as well as usefulness in highlighting injustice and registering bitterness. A three-part division is popular too, probably because the number three is portentous, folkloristic, and even magical, being the number of bears, wishes, and Wise Men. In Britain three has been popularly accepted as the number of classes at least since the last century, when Matthew Arnold divided his neighbors and friends into upper, middle, and lower classes, or, as he memorably termed them, Barbarians (at the top, notice), Philistines (in the middle), and Populace. This three-tiered conception is the usual way to think of the class system for people in the middle, for it offers them moral and social safety, positioning them equally distant from the vices of pride and snobbery and waste and carelessness, which they associate with those above them, and dirtiness, constraint, and shame, the attendants of those below. Upper, middle, and lower are the customary terms for these three groups, although the British euphemism *working class* for *lower class* is now making some headway here.

If the popular number of classes is three, the number sociologists seem to favor is five: 5

Upper
Upper middle
Middle
Lower middle
Lower

And trying to count the classes, some people simply give up, finding, like John Brooks in *Showing Off in America* (1981), that "in the new American structure there seem to be an almost infinite number of classes," or like the man in Boston asked about class there who said, "You have too many classes for me to count and name. . . . Hell! There may be fifteen or thirty." (He then added, like a good American, "Anyway, it doesn't matter a damn to me.")

My researches have persuaded me that there are nine classes in this country, as follows: 9

Top out-of-sight
Upper
Upper middle

Middle
High proletarian
Mid-proletarian
Low proletarian

Destitute
Bottom out-of-sight

One thing to get clear at the outset is this: it's not riches alone that defines these classes. "It can't be money," one working man says quite correctly, "because nobody ever knows that about you for sure." Style and taste and awareness are as important as money. "Economically, no doubt, there are only two classes, the rich and the poor," says George Orwell, "but socially there is a whole hierarchy of classes, and the manners and traditions learned by each class in childhood are not only very different but—this is the essential point—generally persist from birth to death. . . . It is . . . very difficult to escape, culturally, from the

class into which you have been born." When John Fitzgerald Kennedy, watching Richard Nixon on television, turned to his friends and, horror-struck, said, "The guy has no class," he was not talking about money.

Anyone who imagines that large assets or high income confer high class can take comfort from a little book titled *Live a Year with a Millionaire*, written by Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney and distributed by him (free) to his friends for Christmas 1981. Not to put too fine a point on it, the banality, stupidity, complacency, and witlessness of this author can remind a reader only of characters in Ring Lardner or in such satires by Sinclair Lewis as *The Man Who Knew Coolidge*. "They are a cosmopolitan group," says Whitney of people he meets at one party. "Come from places all over the States." The more he goes on, the more his reader will perceive that, except for his money, Whitney is a profoundly middle-class fellow, committed without any self-awareness to every cliché of that social rank.

And down below, the principle still holds: money doesn't matter that much. To illustrate the point, John Brooks compares two families living in adjoining houses in a suburb. One man is "blue-collar," a garage mechanic. The other is "white-collar," an employee in a publishing house. They make roughly the same amount of money, but what a difference. "Mr. Blue" bought a small, neat "ranch house." "Mr. White" bought a beat-up old house and refurbished it himself. Mrs. Blue uses the local shops, especially those in the nearby shopping center, and thinks them wonderful, "so convenient." Mrs. White goes to the city to buy her clothes. The Blues drink, but rather furtively, and usually on Saturday night with the curtains closed. The Whites drink openly, often right out in the backyard. "The Blues shout to each other, from room to room of their house or from corner to corner of their lot, without self-consciousness; the Whites modulate their voices to the point where they sometimes can't hear each other." As household objects, books are a crucial criterion. There's not a book in the Blues' house, while the Whites' living room contains numerous full bookshelves. Brooks concludes: "Here, in sum, are two families with hardly anything in common . . . , yet their . . . incomes are practically identical." Likewise, it was Russell Lynes's awareness that it's less money than taste and knowledge and perceptiveness that determine class that some years ago prompted him to set forth the tripartite scheme of



A high prole regarding a destitute with disdain, but less for his poverty than for his style

highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow.

Not that the three classes at the top don't have money. The point is that money alone doesn't define them, for the way they have their money is largely what matters. That is, as a class indicator the amount of money is less significant than the source. The main thing distinguishing the top three classes from each other is the amount of money inherited in relation to the amount currently earned. The top-out-of-sight class (Rockefellers, Pews, DuPonts, Mellons, Fords, Vanderbilts) lives on inherited capital entirely. No one whose money, no matter how copious, comes from his own work—film stars are an example—can be a member of the top-out-of-sight class, even if the size of his income and the extravagance of his expenditure permit him to simulate identity with it. Inheritance—"old money" in the vulgar phrase—is the indispensable principle defining the top three classes, and it's best if the money's been in the family for three or four generations. There are subtle local ways to ascertain how long the money's been there. Touring middle America, the British traveler Jonathan Raban came upon the girl Sally, who informed him that "New Money says Missouri; Old Money says Missouri."

"When I think of a really rich man," says a Boston blue-collar, "I think of one of those estates where you can't see the house from the road." Hence the name of the top class, which could

just as well be called "the class in hiding." Their houses are never seen from the street or road. They like to hide away deep in the hills or way off on Greek or Caribbean islands (which they tend to own), safe, for the moment, from envy and its ultimate attendants, confiscatory taxation and finally expropriation. It was the Great Depression, Vance Packard speculates, that badly frightened the very rich, teaching them to be "discreet, almost reticent, in exhibiting their wealth." From the 1930s dates the flight of money from such exhibitionistic venues as the mansions of upper Fifth Avenue to hideways in Virginia, upper New York State, Connecticut, Long Island, and New Jersey. The situation now is very different from the one in the 1890s satirized by Thorstein Veblen in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. In his day the rich delighted to exhibit themselves conspicuously, with costly retainers and attendants much in evidence. Now they hide, not merely from envy and revenge but from exposé journalism, much advanced in cunning and ferocity since Veblen's time, and from an even worse threat, virtually unknown to Veblen, foundation mendicancy, with its hordes of beggars in three-piece suits constantly badgering the well-to-do. Showing off used to be the main satisfaction of being very rich in America. Now the rich must skulk and hide. (It's a pity.)

And it's not just that the individual houses and often the persons of the top-out-of-sights are removed from scrutiny. Their very class tends to escape the down-to-earth calculations of sociologists and poll-takers and consumer researchers. It's not studied because it's literally out of sight, and a questionnaire proffered to a top-out-of-sight person will very likely be hurled to the floor with disdain. Very much, in fact, the way it would be ignored by a bottom-out-of-sight person. And it's here that we begin to perceive one of the most wonderful things about the American class system—the curious similarity, if not actual brotherhood, of the top- and bottom-out-of-sights. Just as the tops are hidden away on their islands or behind the peek-a-boo walls of their distant estates, the bottoms are equally invisible, when not put away in institutions or claustrated in monasteries, lamaseries, or communes, then hiding from creditors, deceived bail-bondsmen, and gulled merchants intent on repossessing cars and furniture. (This bottom-out-of-sight class is visible briefly at one place and time, muttering its wayward fancies on the streets of New York in the spring. But after this ritual yearly show of itself it retreats

into invisibility again.) In aid of invisibility, members of both classes feel an equal anxiety to keep their names out of the papers. And the bottoms—"the lower or spurious leisure class," Veblen calls them—share something more with the top-out-of-sights. They do not earn their money. They are given it and kept afloat not by their own efforts or merits but by the welfare machinery or the correctional system, the way the tops owe it all to their ancestors. And a further similarity: members of both classes carry very little cash on their persons. We can say, in summary, that the virtual identity, in important respects, of top- and bottom-out-of-sights is a remarkable example of the time-proven principle that Extremes Meet.

The next class down, the upper class, differs from the top-out-of-sight class in two main ways. First, although it inherits a lot of its money, it earns quite a bit too, usually from some attractive, if slight, work, without which it would feel bored and even ashamed. It's likely to make its money by controlling banks and the more historic corporations, think tanks, and foundations, and to busy itself with things like the older universities, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Foreign Policy Association, the Committee for Economic Development, and the like, together with the executive branch of the federal government, and often the Senate. In the days when ambassadors were amateurs, they were selected largely from this class, very seldom from the top-out-of-sight. And secondly, unlike the top-out-of-sights, the upper class is visible, often ostentatiously so. Which is to say that the top-out-of-sights have spun off and away from Veblen's scheme of conspicuous exhibition, leaving the mere upper class to carry on its former role. When you pass a house with a would-be impressive façade visible from the street or highway, you know it's occupied by a member of the upper class. The White House is probably the best example. Its residents, even on those occasions when they are Franklin D. Roosevelts or even John F. Kennedys, can never be designated top-out-of-sight but only upper-class. The house is simply too showy, being pure white and carefully positioned on high ground, and temporary residence there usually constitutes a come-down for most of its occupants. It is a hopelessly upper-class place—or even lower than that, as when the Harry Trumans lived there.

Of course no person is located within one of these class categories exclusively. Consider William Randolph Hearst and his

establishment at San Simeon. The location is in a way top-out-of-sight, for the "house" isn't visible from the highway, the nearest public access. But the façade of the main building, once you penetrate through the miles of outdoor park and "zoo," is designed to evoke respect, or rather awe, in the breast of the apprehender, and that indicates how very un-top-out-of-sight Hearst remained despite his pseudo-aristocratic airs. He cared too much what effect he was having on people. His using paper napkins at his sumptuous and pretentious dinner parties is a promising sign of a genuine aristocratic eccentricity, but his care that his place should look impressive from the front—it looks like the Cathedral of Avila, among other similar structures—gives him away. Merely upper-middle-class stumbling around in a boy's understanding of showing off.

Like all the classes, the upper class has its distinct stigmata. It will be in the *Social Register*, for example, whereas the mere upper-middle class will not be, although it will slaver to get in. Having streets named after you is a signal that you are probably upper-class. At least if the street name's your surname: if it's your first name (like *Kathy Street*), you are middle-class or worse. Speaking French fluently, even though French is irrelevant to one's actual life, business, interests, and the like, is an upper-class sign, although it's important not to speak it with anything resembling a correct, or "French," accent.

Not smoking at all is very upper-class, but in any way calling attention to one's abstinence drops one to middle-class immediately. The constant coming and going of "houseguests" is an all but infallible upper-class sign, implying as it does plenty of spare bedrooms to lodge them in and no anxiety about making them happy, what with all the drinks, food, games, parties, etc. It is among members of the upper class that you have to refrain from uttering compliments, which are taken to be rude, possessions there being of course beautiful, expensive, and impressive, without question. The paying of compliments is a middle-class convention, for this class needs the assurance compliments provide. In the upper class there's never any doubt of one's value, and it all goes without saying. A British peer of a very old family was once visited by an artistic young man who, entering the dining room, declared that he'd never seen a finer set of Hepplewhite chairs. His host had him ejected instantly, explaining, "Fellow praised my chairs! Damned cheek!" Dining among the uppers,

one does not normally praise the food, because it goes without saying that the hostess would put forth nothing short of excellent. Besides, she's not cooked it. Likewise, if you spill a glass of wine, don't fret: the staff will clean it up.

Although not an infallible sign, because the upper-middle class has learned to ape it, devotion to horses—owning them, breeding them, riding them, racing them, chasing small animals while sitting on them—is, the way backgammon was before it became popular and lost caste, a fairly trustworthy upper-class mark. But it is, finally, by a characteristic the American upper class shares with all aristocracies that ye shall know them: their imperviousness to ideas and their total lack of interest in them. (A mark of the top-out-of-sights too, as Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney's literary performance attests.) Their inattention to ideas is why Matthew Arnold calls them Barbarians, and he imputes their serenity specifically to their "never having had any ideas to trouble them." Still, they are a nice class, and the life among them is comfortable and ample and even entertaining, so long as you don't mind never hearing anyone saying anything intelligent or original.

We now come to the upper-middle class. It may possess virtually as much as the two classes above it. The difference is that it has earned most of it, in law, medicine, oil, shipping, real estate, or even the more honorific kinds of trade, like buying and selling works of art. Although they may enjoy some inherited money and use inherited "things" (silver, Oriental rugs), the upper-middles suffer from a bourgeois sense of shame, a conviction that to live on the earnings of others, even forebears, is not quite nice.

Caste marks of the upper-middles would include living in a house with more rooms than you need, except perhaps when a lot of "overnight guests" are present to help you imitate upper-class style. Another sign of the upper-middle class is its chastity in sexual display: the bathing suits affected by the women here are the most sexless in the world, Britain and Canada included. They feature boy-pants legs, in imitation of the boxer shorts favored by upper-middle-class men. Both men's and women's clothes here are designed to conceal, rather than underline, anatomical differences between the sexes. Hence, because men's shoulders constitute a secondary sexual characteristic, the natural-shoulder jacket. Epaulets emphasize the shoulders. They are thus associated with the lower classes, whose shoulders are required

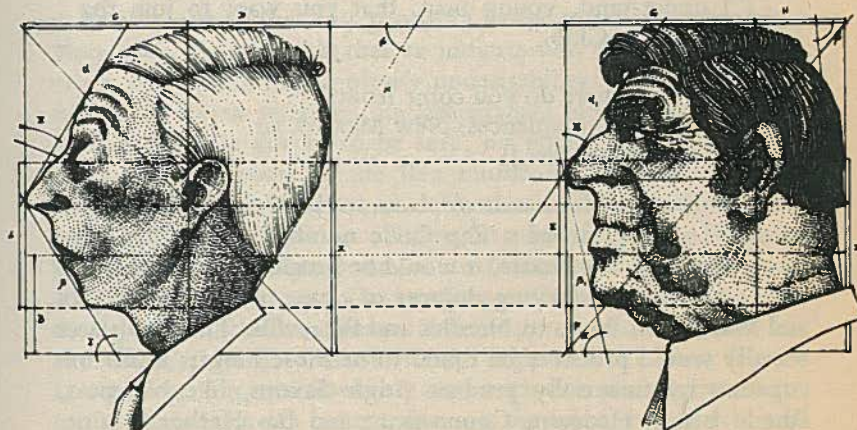
for physical work. The military makes much of epaulets, betraying instantly its prole associations. If you know someone who voted for John Anderson at the last presidential election, ten to one she's (or he's) upper-middle. This class is also the most "role-reversed" of all: men think nothing of cooking and doing housework, women of working out of the house in journalism, the theater, or real estate. (If the wife stays home all the time, the family's middle-class only.) Upper-middles like to show off their costly educations by naming their cats Spinoza, Clytemnestra, and Candide, which means, as you'll have inferred already, that it's in large part the class depicted in Lisa Birnbach and others' *Official Preppy Handbook*, that significantly popular artifact of 1980.

And it is the class celebrated also in the 1970 Ivy-idyllic film *Love Story*. The vast popularity of these two products suggests the appeal of the upper-middle style to all Americans who don't possess it. Indeed, most people of the middle classes and below would rather be in the upper-middle class than even the upper or the top-out-of-sight. A recent Louis Harris poll showed that when asked what class they'd like to be in, most said the middle class, and when asked what *part* of the middle class they'd like to be in, most said the upper-middle class. Being in the upper-middle class is a familiar and credible fantasy: its usages, while slightly grander than one's own, are recognizable and compassable, whereas in the higher classes you might be embarrassed by not knowing how to eat caviar or use a finger bowl or discourse in French. It's a rare American who doesn't secretly want to be upper-middle class.

We could gather as much, if in a coarser way, from a glance at two books by John T. Molloy, *Dress for Success* (1975) and *Molloy's Live for Success* (1981). Molloy, whose talents are not at all contemptible, designates himself "America's first wardrobe engineer," in which capacity he is hired by businesses to advise them on principles of corporate dress. The ideal is for everyone in business to look upper-middle-class, because upper-middle-class equals Success. As he puts it with significant parallelism, "Successful dress is really no more than achieving good taste and the look of the upper-middle class." Even executives' offices can be tinkered with until they too emit an air of habitual success, which means, as Molloy says, that "the successful office exudes the qualities of the upper-middle class." That is, "It is (or looks)

spacious and uncrowded. It is rich. It is well kept. It is tasteful. It is impressive. It is comfortable. It is private." And the waiting room too: it, "like the rest of your office, must immediately spell 'upper-middle class' to every visitor."

For Molloy, it's not just people's clothes and offices and waiting rooms that can be cosmetized toward the upper-middle look. It's their faces, bodies, gestures, and postures as well. In *Molloy's Live for Success*, by the aid of line drawings he distinguishes between the male profile of the prole and the male profile of the upper-middle class. The prole either has his jaw set in bitterness and defiance or his mouth open in doltish wonder. The upper-middle-class male, on the other hand, has his mouth closed but not too firmly set, and his shoulders avoid the hangdog, whip-me-again-master slouch Molloy finds characteristic of the unsuccessful. "Upper-middle-class and lower-middle-class people not only stand and sit differently," Molloy points out, "they move differently. Upper-middle-class people tend to have controlled precise movements. The way they use their arms and where their feet fall is dramatically different from lower-middle-class people, who tend to swing their arms out rather than hold them in closer to their bodies."



Upper-middle and prole profiles
(after Molloy)

There's little doubt that instructors like Molloy—and Michael Korda, author of *Success! How Every Man and Woman Can Achieve It* (1975)—can teach aspirants to simulate the upper-middle look. It's less certain that they can ever teach what goes with it and might be understood to cause it, the upper-middle-class sense of relaxation, play, and, to a degree, irony. In any other class we can imagine people contriving euphemisms for "Let's fuck." We can imagine, indeed, members of any other class coming up with the colorful invitation "Let's hide the salami." But it's unlikely that any but the upper-middle class would say, as *The Official Preppy Handbook* records, "Let's play hide the salami" and then affectionately abbreviate *salami* to *salam*, the way it abbreviates Bloody Marys to Bloodys and gin and tonics to G&T's. It's all a game (in fact, "the game of life") with the upper-middle class, and hence its natural leaning toward frivolities like golf and tennis and yachting. Who wouldn't want to be in a class so free, secure, and amusing?

Before proceeding downward from these three top classes, we must pause to consider the importance of geographical place in defining them. People from the middle and prole classes will be tempted to imagine that place has little to do with class, that you can belong to the top classes just anywhere. Nothing could be more wrong.

"I understand, young man, that you want to join the Cosmopolitan Club."

"Yes, sir."

"Tell me, where do you come from?"

"Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, sir."

"I see." [Averts eyes.]

There are tens of thousands of places in the United States grand enough to have earned a Zip Code number. Given sufficient knowledge and a fine taste, it would be possible to rank them all according to their varying degrees of class, from Grosse Point and Watch Hill down to Needles and Pikesville. The best places socially would probably be found to be those longest under occupation by financially prudent Anglo-Saxons, like Newport, Rhode Island; Haddam, Connecticut; and Bar Harbor, Maine. Los Angeles would rank low less because it's ugly and banal than because it was owned by the Spanish for so long. A similar fact explains why St. Louis outranks San Antonio, Texas.

It's ultimately impossible to specify exactly what gives a place class. Fifty years ago H. L. Mencken, in *The American Mercury*, tried to create a trustworthy gauge by developing a hundred "social indicators" like the number of people in a given place who are listed in *Who's Who*, or who subscribe to *The Atlantic*, or who use up lots of gasoline. Today one would probably want to rank well up there a place that has experienced no dramatic increase in population since Mencken's time. This, at least, we can infer as a criterion from the fact that since 1940, the population of so awful a place as Miami has increased from 172,000 to 343,000; of Phoenix, from 65,000 to 683,000; and of San Diego, from 200,000 to 840,000. Another sign of class desirability might be the absence of facilities for bowling. I say that because Richard Boyer and David Savageau, in their *Places Rated Almanac* (1981), have found that the following places provide the best access to bowling alleys, and we can't fail to note what regrettable places they are:

Billings, Montana
Owensboro, Kentucky
Midland, Texas
Peoria, Illinois
Dubuque, Iowa
Odessa, Texas
Alexandria, Louisiana

As I've just shown, it's probably easier to tell what makes a place socially impossible than to indicate why it's desirable. Another way to estimate a place's undesirability is to measure the degree to which religious fundamentalism is identified with it. Akron, Ohio (a dump, to be sure, by other criteria), is fatally known as the home of the Rex Humbard Ministry, the way Greenville, South Carolina, is known as the seat of Bob Jones University, and Wheaton, Illinois, is identified with Wheaton College and remembered thus as the forcing ground of the great Billy Graham. Likewise Garden Grove, California, locus of the Rev. Robert Schuller, famous for his automatic smile and his cheerful Cathedral of Glass. Can a higher-class person live in Lynchburg, Virginia? Probably not, since that town is the origin of Dr. Jerry Falwell's radio emissions, the site of his church, and the mailing address for free-will offerings. Indeed, it seems a general principle that no high-class person can live in any place associated with religious prophecy or miracle, like Mecca, Beth-

lehem, Fatima, Lourdes, or Salt Lake City. It's notable that the most civilized places—London, Paris, Antibes, and even New York—pass safely through this test, although by the strictest application of the rule, Rome is a little doubtful. Still, classier than Jerusalem.

One signal of desirability is the quality of a city's best newspaper. The class inferiority of Washington, despite all its pretenses to high status, with its embassies and all, can be sensed the minute you open the *Washington Post*, which on Sunday provides its readers (high proles?) with not just a horoscope but lengthy plot summaries of the TV soaps, together with the advice of Ann Landers. In the same way, you can infer that Indianapolis carries little class clout by noticing that the *Indianapolis Star* offers its readers all these features, plus "Today's Prayer" on the front page. Both Florida (except perhaps for Palm Beach) and Southern California (except perhaps for Pasadena) have been considered socially disastrous for decades. As if the facts were well known, the vilest nightclubs abroad, especially in gotten-up new places like West Germany, are likely to be named Florida. One reason no civilized person could think of living near Tampa is that during the 1970s this sign was visible there, advertising nearby Apollo Beach: "Guy Lombardo Wants You as a Neighbor." In the same way, retired persons are solicited to share some of the magic of their musical hero by buying into the Lawrence Welk Country Club Mobile Estates in Escondido, California. In the classified section of a recent issue of the prole *National Enquirer* there were four ads offering fraudulent university degrees: all four listed California addresses. And some events seem class perfect: how right that the derelict *Queen Mary* should end as a piece of junk in precisely so witless a place as Long Beach, California, or that St. Petersburg, Florida, should find itself the site of the Dali Museum, or that Fort Lauderdale should be the headquarters of the STP Corporation.

In the face of this, the question arises, "Where then may a member of the top classes live in this country?" New York first of all, of course. Chicago. San Francisco. Philadelphia. Baltimore. Boston. Perhaps Cleveland. And deep in the countryside of Connecticut, New York State, Virginia, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts. That's about it. It's not considered good form to live in New Jersey, except in Bernardsville and perhaps Princeton, but any place in New Jersey beats Sun-

nyvale, Cypress, and Compton, California; Canton, Ohio; Reno, Nevada; Cheyenne, Wyoming; Albuquerque, New Mexico; Columbus, Georgia, and similar Army towns; and Parma, Ohio, a city of 100,000 without a daily newspaper, bus system, hotel, or map of itself. Impossible also are Evergreen, Colorado, because John Hinckley came from there, and Dallas, because—among many other good reasons—Lee Harvey Oswald lived there. It is said that experts on the subject regard Las Vegas as "the world capital of tacky," and I suppose you could get some idea of the height of your social class by your lack of familiarity with it. And Acapulco as well?

Back, now, to the classes. The middle class is distinguishable more by its earnestness and psychic insecurity than by its middle income. I have known some very rich people who remain stubbornly middle-class, which is to say they remain terrified at what others think of them, and to avoid criticism are obsessed with doing everything right. The middle class is the place where table manners assume an awful importance and where net curtains flourish to conceal activities like hiding the salam' (a phrase no middle-class person would indulge in, surely: the fatuous *making love* is the middle-class equivalent). The middle class, always anxious about offending, is the main market for "mouthwashes," and if it disappeared the whole "deodorant" business would fall to the ground. If physicians tend to be upper-middle-class, dentists are gloomily aware that they're middle, and are said to experience frightful status anxieties when introduced socially to "physicians"—as dentists like to call them. (Physicians call themselves *doctors*, and enjoy doing this in front of dentists, as well as college professors, chiropractors, and divines.)

"Status panic": that's the affliction of the middle class, according to C. Wright Mills, author of *White Collar* (1951) and *The Power Elite* (1956). Hence the middles' need to accumulate credit cards and take in *The New Yorker*, which it imagines registers upper-middle taste. Its devotion to that magazine, or its ads, is a good example of Mills's description of the middle class as the one that tends "to borrow status from higher elements." *New Yorker* advertisers have always known this about their audience, and some of their pseudo-upper-middle gestures in front of the middles are hilarious, like one recently flogging expensive stationery, here, a printed invitation card. The pretentious Anglophile spelling of the second word strikes the right opening note:

In honour of
 Dr and Mrs Leonard Adam Westman,
 Dr and Mrs Jeffrey Logan Brandon
 request the pleasure of your company for
 [at this point the higher classes might say *cocktails*, or, if
 thoroughly secure, *drinks*. But here, "Dr." and Mrs. Bran-
 don are inviting you to consume specifically—]

Champagne and Caviar
 on Friday, etc., etc.
 Valley Hunt Club,
 Stamford, Conn., etc.

The only thing missing is the brand names of the refreshments.

If the audience for that sort of thing used to seem the most deeply rooted in time and place, today it seems the class that's the most rootless. Members of the middle class are not only the sort of people who buy their own heirlooms, silver, etc. They're also the people who do most of the moving long-distance (generally to very unstylish places), commanded every few years to pull up stakes by the corporations they're in bondage to. They are the geologist employed by the oil company, the computer programmer, the aeronautical engineer, the salesman assigned a new territory, and the "marketing" (formerly *sales*) manager deputed to keep an eye on him. These people and their families occupy the suburbs and developments. Their "Army and Navy," as William H. Whyte, Jr., says, is their corporate employer. IBM and DuPont hire these people from second-rate colleges and teach them that they are nothing if not members of the team. Virtually no latitude is permitted to individuality or the milder forms of eccentricity, and these employees soon learn to avoid all ideological statements, notably, as we'll see, in the furnishing of their living rooms. Terrified of losing their jobs, these people grow passive, their humanity diminished as they perceive themselves mere parts of an infinitely larger structure. And interchangeable parts, too. "The training makes our men interchangeable," an IBM executive was once heard to say.

It's little wonder that, treated like slaves most of the time, the middle class lusts for the illusion of weight and consequence. One sign is their quest for heraldic validation ("This beautiful embossed certificate will show your family tree"). Another is their custom of issuing annual family newsletters announcing the most recent triumphs in the race to become "professional":

John, who is now 22, is in his first year at the Dental School of Wayne State University.

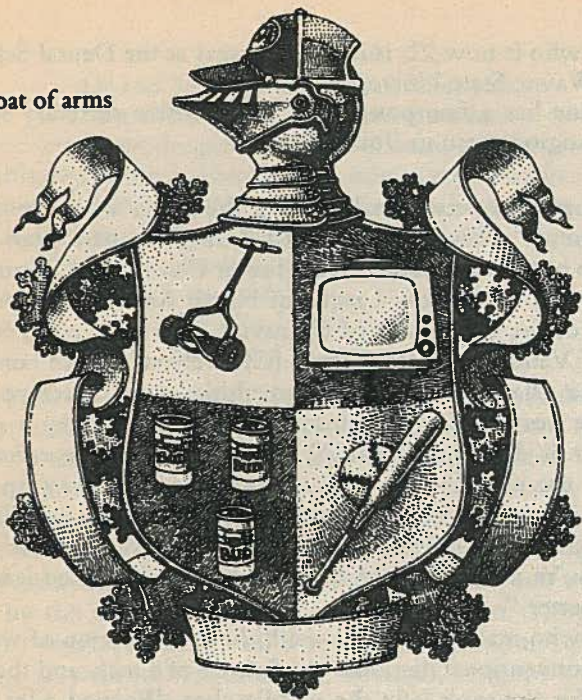
Caroline has a fine position as an executive secretary for a prestigious firm in Boise, Idaho.

Sometimes these letters really wring the heart, with their proud lists of new "affiliations" achieved during the past year: "This year Bob became a member of the Junior Chamber of Commerce, the Beer Can Collectors League of North America, the Alumni Council of the University of Evansville, and the Young Republicans of Vanderburgh County." (Cf. Veblen: "Since conservatism is a characteristic of the wealthier and therefore more reputable portion of the community, it has acquired a certain honorific or decorative value.") Nervous lest she be considered nobody, the middle-class wife is careful to dress way up when she goes shopping. She knows by instinct what one middle-class woman told an inquiring sociologist: "You know there's class when you're in a department store and a well-dressed lady gets treated better."

"One who makes birth or wealth the sole criterion of worth": that's a conventional dictionary definition of a *snob*, and the place to look for the snob is in the middle class. Worried a lot about their own taste and about whether it's working for or against them, members of the middle class try to arrest their natural tendency to sink downward by associating themselves, if ever so tenuously, with the imagined possessors of money, power, and taste. "Correctness" and doing the right thing become obsessions, prompting middle-class people to write thank-you notes after the most ordinary dinner parties, give excessively expensive or correct presents, and never allude to any place—Fort Smith, Arkansas, for example—that lacks known class. It will not surprise readers who have traveled extensively to hear that Neil Mackwood, a British authority on snobbery, finds the greatest snobs worldwide emanating from Belgium, which can also be considered world headquarters of the middle class.

The desire to belong, and to belong by some mechanical act like purchasing something, is another sign of the middle class. Words like *club* and *guild* (as in Book-of-the-Month Club and Literary Guild) extend a powerful invitation. The middle class is thus the natural target for developers' ads like this:

Prole coat of arms



You Belong
in Park Forest!
The moment you come to our town you know:
You're Welcome.
You're part of a big group. . . .

Oddity, introversion, and the love of privacy are the big enemies, a total reversal of the values of the secure upper orders. Among the middles there's a convention that erecting a fence or even a tall hedge is an affront. And there's also a convention that you may drop in on neighbors or friends without a telephone inquiry first. Being naturally innocent and well disposed and aboveboard, a member of the middle class finds it hard to believe that all are not. Being timid and conventional, no member of the middle class would expect that anyone is copulating in the afternoon instead of the evening, clearly, for busy and well-behaved corporate personnel, the correct time for it. When William H. Whyte, Jr., was poking around one suburb studying the residents, he was told by one quintessentially middle-class woman:

"The street behind us is nowhere near as friendly. They knock on doors over there."

If the women treasure "friendliness," the men treasure having a genteel occupation (usually more important than money), with emphasis on the word (if seldom the thing) *executive*. (As a matter of fact, an important class divide falls between those who feel veneration before the term *executive* and those who feel they want to throw up.) Having a telephone-answering machine at home is an easy way of simulating (at relatively low cost) high professional desirability, but here you wouldn't think of a facetious or eccentric text (delivered in French, for example, or in the voice of Donald Duck or Richard Nixon) asking the caller to speak his bit after the beeping sound. For the middle-class man is scared. As C. Wright Mills notes, "He is always somebody's man, the corporation's, the government's, the army's. . . ." One can't be too careful. One "management adviser" told Studs Terkel: "Your wife, your children have to behave properly. You've got to fit in the mold. You've got to be on guard." In *Coming Up for Air* (1939) George Orwell, speaking for his middle-class hero, gets it right:

There's a lot of rot talked about the sufferings of the working class. I'm not so sorry for the proles myself. . . . The prole suffers physically, but he's a free man when he isn't working. But in every one of those little stucco boxes there's some poor bastard who's *never* free except when he's fast asleep.

Because he is essentially a salesman, the middle-class man develops a salesman's style. Hence his optimism and his belief in the likelihood of self-improvement if you'll just hurl yourself into it. One reason musicals like *Annie* and *Man of La Mancha* make so much money is that they offer him and his wife songs, like "Tomorrow" and "The Impossible Dream," that seem to promise that all sorts of good things are on their way. A final stigma of the middle class, an emanation of its social insecurity, is its habit of laughing at its own jests. Not entirely certain what social effect he's transmitting, and yet obliged, by his role as "salesman," to promote goodwill and optimism, your middle-class man serves as his own enraptured audience. Sometimes, after uttering some would-be clever formulation in public, he will look all around to gauge the response of the audience. Favorable, he desperately hopes.

The young men of the middle class are chips off the old block. If you want to know who reads John T. Molloy's books, hoping to break into the upper-middle class by formulas and mechanisms, they are your answer. You can see them on airplanes especially, being forwarded from one corporate training program to another. Their shirts are implausibly white, their suits are excessively dark, their neckties resemble those worn by undertakers, and their hair is cut in the style of the 1950s. Their talk is of *the bottom line*, and for *no* they are likely to say *no way*. Often their necks don't seem long enough, and their eyes tend to be too much in motion, flicking back and forth rather than up and down. They will enter adult life as corporate trainees and, after forty-five faithful years, leave it as corporate personnel, wondering whether this is all.

So much for the great middle class, to which, if you innocently credit people's descriptions of their own status, almost 80 percent of our population belongs. Proceeding downward, we would normally expect to meet next the lower-middle class. But it doesn't exist as such any longer, having been pauperized by the inflation of the 1960s and 1970s and transformed into the high-proletarian class. What's the difference? A further lack of freedom and self-respect. Our former lower-middle class, the new high proles, now head "the masses," and even if they are positioned at the top of the proletarian classes, still they are identifiable as people things are done to. They are in bondage—to monetary policy, rip-off advertising, crazes and delusions, mass low culture, fast foods, consumer schlock. Back in the 1940s there was still a real lower-middle class in this country, whose solid high-school education and addiction to "saving" and "planning" maintained it in a position—often precarious, to be sure—above the working class. In those days, says C. Wright Mills,

there were fewer little men, and in their brief monopoly of high-school education they were in fact protected from many of the sharper edges of the workings of capitalist progress. They were free to entertain deep illusions about their individual abilities and about the collective trustworthiness of the system. As their number has grown, however, they have become increasingly subject to wage-worker conditions.

Their social demotion has been the result. These former low-

white-collar people are now simply working machines, and the wife usually works as well as the husband.

The kind of work performed and the sort of anxiety that besets one as a result of work are ways to divide the working class into its three strata. The high proles are the skilled workers, craftsmen, like printers. The mid-proles are the operators, like Ralph Kramden, the bus driver. The low proles are unskilled labor, like longshoremen. The special anxiety of the high proles is fear about loss or reduction of status: you're proud to be a master carpenter, and you want the world to understand clearly the difference between you and a laborer. The special anxiety of the mid-proles is fear of losing the job. And of the low proles, the gnawing perception that you're probably never going to make enough or earn enough freedom to have and do the things you want.

The kind of jobs high-prole people do tempt them to insist that they are really "professionals," like "sanitation men" in a large city. A mail carrier tells Studs Terkel why he likes his work: "They always say, 'Here comes the mailman.' . . . I feel it is one of the most respected professions there is throughout the nation." Prole women who go into nursing never tire of asserting how professional they are, and the same is true of their daughters who become air stewardesses, a favorite high-prole occupation. Although Army officers, because they are all terrified of the boss, are probably more middle-class than high-prole, they seem the lower the more they insist that they are "professionals," and since their disgrace in Vietnam, and their subsequent anxiety about their social standing, that insistence has grown more mechanical. An Army wife says, "Some like to speak of doctors, lawyers, etc., as professionals. All [Army] officers are professionals." And then, a notable deviation from logic: "Who could be more professional than the man who has dedicated his whole life to the defense of his country?"

One way to ascertain whether a person is middle-class or high-prole is to apply the principle that the wider the difference between one's working clothes and one's "best," the lower the class. Think not just of laborers and blue-collar people in general, but of doormen and bellboys, farmers and railway conductors and trainmen, and firemen. One of these once said: "I wish I was a lawyer. Shit, I wish I was a doctor. But I just didn't have it. You gotta have the smarts."

But high proles are quite smart, or at least shrewd. Because

often their work is not closely supervised, they have pride and a conviction of independence, and they feel some contempt for those who have not made it as far as they have. They are, as the sociologist E. E. LeMasters calls them and titles his book, *Blue-Collar Aristocrats* (1975), and their disdain for the middle class is like the aristocrat's from the other direction. One high prole says: "If my boy wants to wear a goddamn necktie all his life and bow and scrape to some boss, that's his right, but by God he should also have the right to earn an honest living with his hands if that is what he likes." Like other aristocrats, says LeMasters, these "have gone to the top of their social world and need not expend time or energy on 'social climbing.'" They are aristocratic in other ways, like their devotion to gambling and their fondness for deer hunting. Indeed, the antlers with which they decorate their interiors give their dwellings in that respect a resemblance to the lodges of the Scottish peerage. The high prole resembles the aristocrat too, as Ortega y Gasset notes, in "his propensity to make out of games and sports the central occupation of his life," as well as in his unromantic attitude toward women.

Since they're not consumed with worry about choosing the correct status emblems, these people can be remarkably relaxed and unself-conscious. They can do, say, wear, and look like pretty much anything they want without undue feelings of shame, which belong to their betters, the middle class, shame being largely a bourgeois feeling. John Calvin, observes Jilly Cooper, is the prophet of the middle class, while Karl Marx is the prophet of the proles, even if most of them don't know it.

There are certain more or less infallible marks by which you can identify high proles. They're the ones who "belong" to Christmas and Channukah Clubs at banks, and they always buy big objects on installments. High proles are likely to spend money on things like elaborate color TVs, stereos, and tricky refrigerators, unlike the middles, who tend to invest in furniture of "good taste" to display in the living and dining room. Riding in sedans, high-prole men sit in front, with their wives planted in back. (As you move up to the middle class, one couple will be in front, one in back. But among upper-middles, you're likely to see a man and woman of different couples sharing a seat.) High proles arrive punctually at social events, social lateness of twenty minutes or so being a mark of the higher orders. If you're in a bar and you want to estimate the class of a man, get him, on some pretext, to

take out his wallet. The high-prole wallet always bulges, not just with snaps of wife, children, and grandchildren to exhibit when the bearer grows maudlin, but with sentimental paper memorabilia like important sports-ticket stubs and letters and other documents which can be whipped out to "prove" things. The definitive high-prole wallet has a wide rubber band around it.

All proles have a high respect for advertising and brand names. By knowing about such things you can display smartness and up-to-dateness, as well as associate yourself with the success of the products advertised. Drinking an identifiable bottle of Coca-Cola outside on a hot day is not just drinking a Coke: it's participating in a paradigm deemed desirable not just by your betters—the Cola-Cola Company—but by your neighbors, who perceive that you are doing something all-American and super-wonderful. John Brooks has observed that the graffiti inscribers in the New York subway cars tend to write everywhere but on the advertising cards, "as if advertising were the one aspect of . . . society that the writers can respect." Philip Roth's Sophie Portnoy hovers between middle-class and high-prole. If her habit of vigorous self-praise is middle, her respect for advertised brand names and her acute knowledge of prices is high-prole. "I'm the only one who's good to her," she tells her son, referring to the black cleaning woman. "I'm the only one who gives her a whole can of tuna for lunch, and I'm not talking dreck either, I'm talking Chicken of the Sea, Alex . . . 2 for 49!" *True Story*, aimed at "blue-collar women," assures its advertisers, doubtless correctly, that its readers are "the most brand-loyal group there is." If you're a high prole you do the things a commercial society has decreed you're supposed to do. In the Southwest, a place whose usages all of us are apparently expected to embrace in order to avoid "elitism," a popular high-prole family entertainment in the evening is going out to the car wash, with a stop-in at the local franchised food establishment on the way home. Or you might go to the Ice Show, titled, say, "Bugs Bunny in Space."

High proles are nice. It's down among the mid- and low proles that features some might find offensive begin to show themselves. These are the people who feel bitter about their work, often because they are closely supervised and regulated and generally treated like wayward children. "It's just like the Army," says an auto-assembly-plant worker. "No, it's worse. . . . You

just about need a pass to piss." Andrew Levison, author of *The Working-Class Majority* (1974), invites us to imagine what it would be like to be under the constant eye of a foreman, "a figure who has absolutely no counterpart in middle-class society. Salaried professionals do often have people above them, but it is impossible to imagine professors or executives being required to bring a doctor's note if they are absent a day or having to justify the number of trips they take to the bathroom." Mid- and low proles are perceived to be so because they perform the role of the victims in that "coercive utilization of man by man" that Veblen found so objectionable. (Imposing the coercion, instead of having it imposed on you, is the prerogative of the more fortunate: managers, teachers, writers, journalists, clergy, film directors.)

The degree of supervision, indeed, is often a more eloquent class indicator than mere income, which suggests that the whole class system is more a recognition of the value of freedom than a proclamation of the value of sheer cash. The degree to which your work is overseen by a superior suggests your real class more accurately than the amount you take home from it. Thus the reason why a high-school teacher is "lower" than a tenured university professor. The teacher is obliged to file weekly "lesson plans" with a principal, superintendent, or "curriculum coordinator," thus acknowledging subservience. The professor, on the other hand, reports to no one, and his class is thus higher, even though the teacher may be smarter, better-mannered, and richer. (It is in public schools, the postal service, and police departments that we meet terms like *supervisor* and *inspector*: the prole hunter will need to know no more.) One is a mid- or low prole if one's servitude is constantly emphasized. Occupational class depends very largely on doing work for which the consequences of error or failure are distant or remote, or better, invisible, rather than immediately apparent to a superior and thus instantly humiliating to the performer.

Constantly demeaned at work, the lower sorts of proles suffer from poor morale. As one woman worker says, "Most of us . . . have jobs that are too small for our spirit." A taxi driver in St. Louis defended the Vietnam War by saying, "We can't be a pitiful, helpless giant. We gotta show 'em we're number one." "Are you number one?" Studs Terkel asked him. Pause. "I'm number nothin'," he said. There's a prole tendency to express class disappointment by self-simplification, and when examining proles

it's well to be mindful of the observation of British critic Richard Hoggart: "There are no simple people. The 'ordinary' is complex too." Robert Bly would agree, as his poem "Come with Me" suggests:

Come with me into those things that have felt this
despair for so long—
Those removed Chevrolet wheels that howl with a
terrible loneliness,
Lying on their backs in the cindery dirt, like men
drunk, and naked,
Staggering off down a hill at night to drown at last
in the pond.
Those shredded inner tubes abandoned on the
shoulders of thruways,
Black and collapsed bodies, that tried and burst,
And were left behind;
And the curly steel shavings, scattered about on
garage benches,
Sometimes still warm, gritty when we hold them,
Who have given up, and blame everything on the
government,
And those roads in South Dakota that feel around in
the darkness . . .

"A click": that's who runs things, say mid- and low proles, retreating into their private pursuits: home workshops and household repairs, washing and polishing the car; playing poker; fishing, hunting, camping; watching sports and Westerns on TV and identifying with quarterback or hero; visiting relatives (most upper-middles and uppers, by contrast, are in flight from their relatives and visit friends instead); family shopping at the local mall on Saturday or Sunday.

At the bottom of the working class, the low prole is identifiable by the gross uncertainty of his employment. This class would include illegal aliens like Mexican fruit pickers as well as other migrant workers. Social isolation is the norm here, and what Hoggart says of the lower working class in Britain applies elsewhere as well: "Socially . . . each day and each week is almost unplanned. There is no diary, no book of engagements, and few letters are sent or received." Remoteness and isolation, as in the valleys of Appalachia, are characteristics, and down here we find

people who, trained for nothing, are likely out of sheer wayward despair to join the Army.

Still, they're better off than the destitute, who never have even seasonal work and who live wholly on welfare. They differ from the bottom-out-of-sights less because they're much better off than because they're more visible, in the form of Bowery bums, bag ladies, people who stand in public places lecturing and delivering harangues about their grievances, people who drink out of paper bags, people whose need for some recognition impels them to "act" in front of audiences in the street. When delinquency and distress grow desperate, you sink into the bottom-out-of-sight class, staying all day in your welfare room or contriving to get taken into an institution, whether charitable or correctional doesn't matter much.

Thus the classes. They are usefully imagined as a line of theaters running side by side down a long street. Each has a marquee and lots of posters on the front. Plays about self-respect are running constantly in all of them, from the most comfortable to the barest and meanest. But the odd thing is that there's no promotion from one theater to the next one up. And the important point is this: there's no one playing in any of these theaters, no matter how imposing, who isn't, much of the time, scared to death that he's going to stumble, muff his lines, appear in the wrong costume, or otherwise bomb. If you find an American who feels entirely class-secure, stuff and exhibit him. He's a rare specimen.

III

Appearance Counts

How is it that if you're sharp, you're generally able to estimate a person's class at a glance? What caste marks do you look for?

Good looks, first of all, distributed around the classes pretty freely, to be sure, but frequently a mark of high caste. Prudent natural selection is the reason, as Jilly Cooper perceives. She notes that if upper-class people marry downward, they tend to choose beauty only, and concludes: "In general, good-looking people marry up . . . and the insecure and ugly tend to marry down." Smiling is a class indicator—that is, not doing a lot of it. On the street, you'll notice that prole women smile more, and smile wider, than those of the middle and upper classes. They like showing off their pretty dentures, for one thing, and for another, they're enmeshed in the "have a nice day" culture and are busy effusing a defensive optimism much of the time. And speaking of dentures, I witnessed recently an amazing performance in which a prole man in a public place dropped his top plate into a position where he could thrust it forward with his tongue until, pink and yellow, it protruded an inch or so from his mouth. The intent seemed to be to "air" it. Now one simply can't imagine the middle or upper-middle classes doing that sort of thing, although you'd not be surprised to see an upper-class person, utterly careless of public opinion as he'd be, doing it.

Sheer height is a more trustworthy sign of class in England