

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:

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:

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 Missoura."

"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 claustered 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

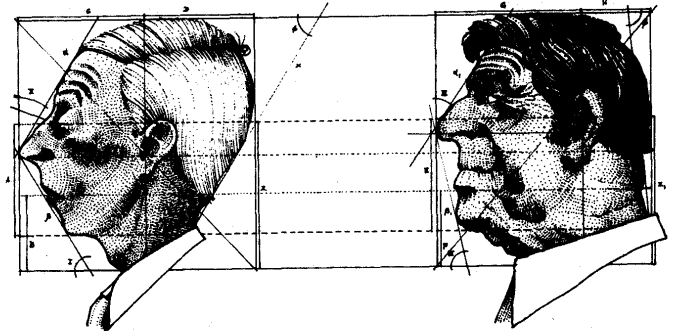
for physical work. The military makes much of epaulets, betraying instantly its prole associations. If you know someone who voted for John Anderson at the last presidential election, ten to one she's (or he's) upper-middle. This class is also the most "role-reversed" of all: men think nothing of cooking 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)