

# Rereading America

*Cultural Contexts for  
Critical Thinking and Writing*

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*Class in America: Myths and Realities (2000)*

GREGORY MANTSIOS

Which of these gifts might a high school graduate in your family receive—a corsage, a savings bond, or a BMW? The answer indicates your social class, a key factor in American lives that many of us conspire to ignore. The selection below, however, makes it hard to deny class distinctions and their nearly universal influence on our lives. The essay's title aptly describes its method: Mantsios (b. 1950) outlines four widely held beliefs about class in the United States and then systematically refutes them with statistical evidence. Even if your eyes are already open to the existence of classes in the United States, some of the numbers the author cites are likely to surprise you. Mantsios is director of the Labor Resource Center at Queens College of the City University of New York and editor of *A New Labor Movement for the New Century* (1998). The essay reprinted below appeared in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States: An Integrated Study*, edited by Paula S. Rothenberg (2001).

People in the United States don't like to talk about class. Or so it would seem. We don't speak about class privileges, or class oppression, or the class nature of society. These terms are not part of our everyday vocabulary, and in most circles they are associated with the language of the rhetorical fringe. Unlike people in most other parts of the world, we shrink from using words that classify along economic lines or that point to class distinctions: phrases like "working class," "upper class," and "ruling class" are rarely uttered by Americans.

For the most part, avoidance of class-laden vocabulary crosses class boundaries. There are few among the poor who speak of themselves as lower class; instead, they refer to their race, ethnic group, or geographic location. Workers are more likely to identify with their employer, industry, or occupational group than with other workers, or with the working class.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>See Jay MacLead, *Ain't No Makin' It: Aspirations and Attainment in a Lower-Income Neighborhood*, Boulder, CO, Westview Press, 1995; Benjamin DeMott, *The Imperial Middle*, New York, Morrow, 1990; Ira Katznelson, *City Trenches: Urban Politics and Patterning of Class in the United States*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1981; Charles W. Tucker, "A Comparative Analysis of Subjective Social Class: 1945-1963," *Social Forces*, no. 46, June 1968, pp. 508-514; Robert Nisbet, "The Decline and Fall of Social Class," *Pacific Sociological Review*, vol. 2, Spring 1959, pp. 11-17; and Oscar Glantz, "Class Consciousness and Political Solidarity," *American Sociological Review*, vol. 23, August 1958, pp. 375-382. [All notes are author's, except 18.]

Neither are those at the other end of the economic spectrum likely to use the word "class." In her study of thirty-eight wealthy and socially prominent women, Susan Ostrander asked participants if they considered themselves members of the upper class. One participant responded, "I hate to use the word 'class.' We are responsible, fortunate people, old families, the people who have something." Another said, "I hate [the term] upper class. It is so non-upper class to use it. I just call it 'all of us,' those who are well-born."<sup>2</sup>

It is not that Americans, rich or poor, aren't keenly aware of class differences—those quoted above obviously are; it is that class is not in the domain of public discourse. Class is not discussed or debated in public because class identity has been stripped from popular culture. The institutions that shape mass culture and define the parameters of public debate have avoided class issues. In politics, in primary and secondary education, and in the mass media, formulating issues in terms of class is unacceptable, perhaps even un-American.

There are, however, two notable exceptions to this phenomenon. First, it is acceptable in the United States to talk about "the middle class." Interestingly enough, such references appear to be acceptable precisely because they mute class differences. References to the middle class by politicians, for example, are designed to encompass and attract the broadest possible constituency. Not only do references to the middle class gloss over differences, but these references also avoid any suggestion of conflict or exploitation.

This leads us to the second exception to the class-avoidance phenomenon. We are, on occasion, presented with glimpses of the upper class and the lower class (the language used is "the wealthy" and "the poor"). In the media, these presentations are designed to satisfy some real or imagined voyeuristic need of "the ordinary person." As curiosities, the ground-level view of street life and the inside look at the rich and the famous serve as unique models, one to avoid and one to aspire to. In either case, the two models are presented without causal relation to each other: one is not rich because the other is poor. Similarly, when social commentators or liberal politicians draw attention to the plight of the poor, they do so in a manner that obscures the class structure and denies class exploitation. Wealth and poverty are viewed as one of several natural and inevitable states of being; differences are only differences. One may even say differences are the American way, a reflection of American social diversity.

We are left with one of two possibilities: either talking about class and recognizing class distinctions are not relevant to U.S. society, or we mistakenly hold a set of beliefs that obscure the reality of class differences and their impact on people's lives.

<sup>2</sup>Susan Ostrander, "Upper-Class Women: Class Consciousness as Conduct and Meaning," in G. William Dombhoff, *Power Structure Research*, Beverly Hills, CA, Sage Productions, 1990, pp. 78-79. Also see, Stephen Birmingham, *America's Secret Aristocracy*, Boston, Little Brown, 1987.

Let us look at four common, albeit contradictory, beliefs about the United States.

**Myth 1:** The United States is fundamentally a classless society. Class distinctions are largely irrelevant today, and whatever differences do exist in economic standing are, for the most part, insignificant. Rich or poor, we are all equal in the eyes of the law, and such basic needs as health care and education are provided to all regardless of economic standing.

**Myth 2:** We are, essentially, a middle-class nation. Despite some variations in economic status, most Americans have achieved relative affluence in what is widely recognized as a consumer society.

**Myth 3:** We are all getting richer. The American public as a whole is steadily moving up the economic ladder, and each generation propels itself to greater economic well-being. Despite some fluctuations, the U.S. position in the global economy has brought previously unknown prosperity to most, if not all, North Americans.

**Myth 4:** Everyone has an equal chance to succeed. Success in the United States requires no more than hard work, sacrifice, and perseverance: "In America, anyone can become a millionaire; it's just a matter of being in the right place at the right time."

In trying to assess the legitimacy of these beliefs, we want to ask several important questions. Are there significant class differences among Americans? If these differences do exist, are they getting bigger or smaller, and do these differences have a significant impact on the way we live? Finally, does everyone in the United States really have an equal opportunity to succeed?

### The Economic Spectrum

We will begin by looking at differences. An examination of available data reveals that variations in economic well-being are in fact immense. Consider the following:

- The wealthiest 20 percent of the American population holds 85 percent of the total household wealth in the country. That is, they own nearly seven-eighths of all the consumer durables (such as houses, cars, and stereos) and financial assets (such as stocks, bonds, property, and savings accounts).<sup>3</sup>
- Approximately 144,000 Americans, or 0.1 percent of the adult working population, earn more than \$1 million annually, with many of these individuals earning \$10 million and some earning over \$100 million annually. It would take the average American, earning \$34,000 per year, more than 65 lifetimes to earn \$100 million.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Jared Bernstein, Lawrence Hishel, and John Schmitt, *The State of Working America: 1998-99*, ILR Press, Cornell University Press, 1998, p. 262.

<sup>4</sup>The number of individuals filing tax returns showing a gross adjusted income of \$1 million or more in 1997 was 144,459 (Internal Revenue Service, *Statistics of Income Bulletin, Summer 1999*, Washington, DC, 1999, p. 268). The total civilian employment in 1997 was 129,588,000 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1997).

Affluence and prosperity are clearly alive and well in certain segments of the United States population. However, this abundance is in contrast to the poverty and despair that is also prevalent in the United States. At the other end of the spectrum:

- A total of 13 percent of the American population—that is, one of every eight<sup>5</sup>—live below the government's official poverty line (calculated in 1999 at \$8,500 for an individual and \$17,028 for a family of four).<sup>6</sup> These poor include a significant number of homeless people—approximately two million Americans.
- Approximately one out of every five children in the United States under the age of eighteen lives in poverty.<sup>7</sup>

The contrast between rich and poor is sharp, and with nearly one-third of the American population living at one extreme or the other, it is difficult to argue that we live in a classless society. The income gap between rich and poor in the United States (measured as the percentage of total income held by the wealthiest 20 percent of the population versus the poorest 20 percent) is approximately 11 to 1, one of the highest ratios in the industrialized world. The ratio in Japan and Germany, by contrast, is 4 to 1.<sup>8</sup>

**Reality 1:** There are enormous differences in the economic status of American citizens. A sizable proportion of the U.S. population occupies opposite ends of the economic spectrum.

In the middle range of the economic spectrum:

- Sixty percent of the American population holds less than 4 percent of the nation's wealth.<sup>9</sup>
- While the real income of the top 1 percent of U.S. families skyrocketed by 89 percent during the economic growth period from 1977 to 1995, the income of the middle fifth of the population actually declined by 13 percent during that same period.<sup>10</sup> This led one prominent economist to describe economic growth as a "spectator sport for the majority of American families."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Joseph Dalaker, U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Current Population Reports," series P60-207, *Poverty in the United States: 1998*, Washington, DC, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1998, p. v.

<sup>6</sup>"Preliminary Estimates of Weighted Average Poverty Thresholds in 1999," Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, 2000.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. v.

<sup>8</sup>See The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Economic Policy Institute, "Pulling Apart: State-by-State Analysis of Income Trends," January 2000, fact sheet; U.S. Department of Commerce, "Current Population Reports: Consumer Income," Washington, DC, 1993; The World Bank, "World Development Report: 1992," Washington, DC, International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 1992; The World Bank "World Development Report 1999/2000," pp. 238-239.

<sup>9</sup>Jared Bernstein et al., *op. cit.*, p. 262

<sup>10</sup>Derived from *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>11</sup>Alan Blinder, quoted by Paul Krugman, in "Disparity and Despair," *U.S. News and World Report*, March 23, 1992, p. 54.

The level of inequality is sometimes difficult to comprehend fully with dollar figures and percentages. To help his students visualize the distribution of income, the well-known economist Paul Samuelson asked them to picture an income pyramid made of children's blocks, with each layer of blocks representing \$1,000. If we were to construct Samuelson's pyramid today, the peak of the pyramid would be much higher than the Eiffel Tower, yet almost all of us would be within six feet of the ground.<sup>12</sup> In other words, the distribution of income is heavily skewed; a small minority of families take the lion's share of national income, and the remaining income is distributed among the vast majority of middle-income and low-income families. Keep in mind that Samuelson's pyramid represents the distribution of income, not wealth. The distribution of wealth is skewed even further.

**Reality 2:** The middle class in the United States holds a very small share of the nation's wealth, and its income—in constant dollars—is declining. 20

Lottery millionaires and celebrity salaries notwithstanding, evidence suggests that the level of inequality in the United States is getting higher. Census data show the gap between the rich and the poor to be the widest since the government began collecting information in 1947. Furthermore, the percentage of households earning between \$25,000 and \$75,000 has been falling steadily since 1969, while the percentage of households earning less than \$25,000 has actually increased between 1989 and 1997.<sup>13</sup> And economic polarization is expected to increase over the next several decades.<sup>14</sup>

**Reality 3:** The middle class is shrinking in size, and the gap between rich and poor is bigger than it has ever been.

### American Life-Styles

At last count, nearly 35 million Americans across the nation lived in unrelenting poverty.<sup>15</sup> Yet, as political scientist Michael Harrington once commented, "America has the best dressed poverty the world has ever known."<sup>16</sup> Clothing disguises much of the poverty in the United States, and this may explain, in part, its middle-class image. With increased mass marketing of "designer" clothing and with shifts in the nation's economy from blue-collar (and often better-paying) manufacturing jobs to white-collar and pink-collar jobs in the service sector, it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish class differences based on appearance.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Paul Samuelson, *Economics*, 10th ed., New York, McGraw-Hill, 1976, p. 84.

<sup>13</sup>Money Income of Households, Families, and Persons in the United States: 1992." U.S. Department of Commerce, "Current Population Reports: Consumer Income" series P60-184, Washington, DC, 1993, p. B6. Also, Jared Bernstein et al., op. cit., p. 61.

<sup>14</sup>Paul Blumberg, *Inequality in an Age of Decline*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1980.

<sup>15</sup>U.S. Census Bureau, 1999, op. cit., p. v.

<sup>16</sup>Michael Harrington, *The Other America*, New York, Macmillan, 1962, p. 12-13.

<sup>17</sup>Stuart Ewen and Elizabeth Ewen, *Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of American Consciousness*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1982.

Beneath the surface, there is another reality. Let us look at some "typical" and not-so-typical life-styles.

#### American Profile No. 1

<b>Name:</b>	Harold S. Browning
<b>Father:</b>	manufacturer, industrialist
<b>Mother:</b>	prominent social figure in the community
<b>Principal child-rearer:</b>	governess
<b>Primary education:</b>	an exclusive private school on Manhattan's Upper East Side <i>Note:</i> a small, well-respected primary school where teachers and administrators have a reputation for nurturing student creativity and for providing the finest educational preparation <i>Ambition:</i> "to become President"
<b>Supplemental tutoring:</b>	tutors in French and mathematics
<b>Summer camp:</b>	sleep-away camp in northern Connecticut <i>Note:</i> camp provides instruction in the creative arts, athletics, and the natural sciences
<b>Secondary education:</b>	a prestigious preparatory school in Westchester County <i>Note:</i> classmates included the sons of ambassadors, doctors, attorneys, television personalities, and well-known business leaders <i>After-school activities:</i> private riding lessons <i>Ambition:</i> "to take over my father's business" <i>High-school graduation gift:</i> BMW
<b>Family activities:</b>	theater, recitals, museums, summer vacations in Europe, occasional winter trips to the Caribbean <i>Note:</i> as members of and donors to the local art museum, the Brownings and their children attend private receptions and exhibit openings at the invitation of the museum director.
<b>Higher education:</b>	an Ivy League liberal arts college in Massachusetts <i>Major:</i> economics and political science <i>After-class activities:</i> debating club, college newspaper, swim team <i>Ambition:</i> "to become a leader in business"
<b>First full-time job</b> (age 23):	assistant manager of operations, Browning Tool and Die, Inc. (family enterprise)

- Subsequent employment:** 3 years—executive assistant to the president, Browning Tool and Die  
*Responsibilities included:* purchasing (materials and equipment), personnel, and distribution networks  
 4 years—advertising manager, Lackheed Manufacturing (home appliances)  
 3 years—director of marketing and sales, Comerex, Inc. (business machines)
- Present employment** (age 38): executive vice president, SmithBond and Co. (digital instruments)  
*Typical daily activities:* review financial reports and computer printouts, dictate memoranda, lunch with clients, initiate conference calls, meet with assistants, plan business trips, meet with associates  
*Transportation to and from work:* chauffeured company limousine  
*Annual salary:* \$315,000  
*Ambition:* "to become chief executive officer of the firm, or one like it, within the next five to ten years"
- Present residence:** eighteenth-floor condominium on Manhattan's Upper West Side, eleven rooms, including five spacious bedrooms and terrace overlooking river  
*Interior:* professionally designed and accented with elegant furnishings, valuable antiques, and expensive artwork  
*Note:* building management provides doorman and elevator attendant; family employs au pair<sup>18</sup> for children and maid for other domestic chores
- Second residence:** farm in northwestern Connecticut, used for weekend retreats and for horse breeding (investment/hobby)  
*Note:* to maintain the farm and cater to their needs when they are there, the Brownings employ a part-time maid, groundskeeper, and horse breeder

Harold Browning was born into a world of nurses, maids, and governesses. His world today is one of airplanes and limousines, five-star restaurant, and luxurious living accommodations. The life and life-style of Harold Browning is in sharp contrast to that of Bob Farrell.

<sup>18</sup>au pair: A young woman from another country who works for a family, typically caring for children in exchange for room and board.

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## American Profile No. 2

- Name:** Bob Farrell  
**Father:** machinist  
**Mother:** retail clerk  
**Principal child-rearer:** mother and sitter  
**Primary education:** a medium-size public school in Queens, New York, characterized by large class size, outmoded physical facilities, and an educational philosophy emphasizing basic skills and student discipline.  
*Ambition:* "to become President"
- Supplemental tutoring:** none  
**Summer camp:** YMCA day camp  
*Note:* emphasis on team sports, arts and crafts
- Secondary education:** large regional high school in Queens  
*Note:* classmates included the sons and daughters of carpenters, postal clerks, teachers, nurses, shopkeepers, mechanics, bus drivers, police officers, salespersons  
*After-school activities:* basketball and handball in school park  
*Ambition:* "to make it through college"  
*High-school graduation gift:* \$500 savings bond
- Family activities:** family gatherings around television set, bowling, an occasional trip to the movie theater, summer Sundays at the public beach
- Higher education:** a two-year community college with a technical orientation  
*Major:* electrical technology  
*After-school activities:* employed as a part-time bagger in local supermarket  
*Ambition:* "to become an electrical engineer"
- First full-time job** (age 19): service-station attendant  
*Note:* continued to take college classes in the evening
- Subsequent employment:** mail clerk at large insurance firm, manager trainee, large retail chain
- Present employment** (age 38): assistant sales manager, building supply firm  
*Typical daily activities:* demonstrate products, write up product orders, handle customer complaints, check inventory  
*Transportation to and from work:* city subway  
*Annual salary:* \$39,261

*Ambition:* "to open up my own business"  
*Additional income:* \$6,100 in commissions from evening and weekend work as salesman in local men's clothing store

**President residence:** the Farrells own their own home in a working-class neighborhood in Queens

Bob Farrell and Harold Browning live very differently: the life-style of one is privileged; that of the other is not so privileged. The differences are class differences, and these differences have a profound impact on the way they live. They are differences between playing a game of handball in the park and taking riding lessons at a private stable; watching a movie on television and going to the theater; and taking the subway to work and being driven in a limousine. More important, the difference in class determines where they live, who their friends are, how well they are educated, what they do for a living, and what they come to expect from life.

Yet, as dissimilar as their life-styles are, Harold Browning and Bob Farrell have some things in common. They live in the same city, they work long hours, and they are highly motivated. More important, they are both white males.

Let us look at someone else who works long and hard and is highly motivated. This person, however, is black and female.

### American Profile No. 3

**Name:** Cheryl Mitchell  
**Father:** janitor  
**Mother:** waitress  
**Principal child-rearer:** grandmother  
**Primary education:** large public school in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, Brooklyn, New York  
*Note:* rote teaching of basic skills and emphasis on conveying the importance of good attendance, good manners, and good work habits; school patrolled by security guards  
*Ambition:* "to be a teacher"  
**Supplemental tutoring:** none  
**Summer camp:** none  
**Secondary education:** large public school in Ocean Hill-Brownsville  
*Note:* classmates included sons and daughters of hairdressers, groundskeepers, painters, dress-makers, dishwashers, domestics

*After-school activities:* domestic chores, part-time employment as babysitter and house-keeper

*Ambition:* "to be a social worker"  
*High-school graduation gift:* corsage

**Family activities:** church-sponsored socials

**Higher education:** one semester of local community college

*Note:* dropped out of school for financial reasons

**First full-time job**  
 (age 17): counter clerk, local bakery

**Subsequent employment:** file clerk with temporary service agency, supermarket checker

**Present employment**  
 (age 38): nurse's aide at a municipal hospital  
*Typical daily activities:* make up hospital beds, clean out bedpans, weigh patients and assist them to the bathroom, take temperature readings, pass out and collect food trays, feed patients who need help, bathe patients, and change dressings

*Annual salary:* \$14,024

*Ambition:* "to get out of the ghetto"

**Present residence:** three-room apartment in the South Bronx, needs painting, has poor ventilation, is in a high-crime area  
*Note:* Cheryl Mitchell lives with her four-year-old son and her elderly mother

When we look at the lives of Cheryl Mitchell, Bob Farrell, and Harold Browning, we see life-styles that are very different. We are not looking, however, at economic extremes. Cheryl Mitchell's income as a nurse's aide puts her above the government's official poverty line.<sup>19</sup> Below her on the income pyramid are 35 million poverty-stricken Americans. Far from being poor, Bob Farrell has an annual income as an assistant sales manager that puts him in the fifty-first percentile of the income distribution.<sup>20</sup> More than 50 percent of the U.S. population earns less money than Bob Farrell. And while Harold Browning's income puts him in a high-income bracket, he stands only a fraction of the way up Samuelson's income pyramid. Well above him are the 144,000 individuals whose annual salary exceeds \$1 million. Yet Harold Browning spends more money on his horses than Cheryl Mitchell earns in a year.

<sup>19</sup>This is based on the 1999 poverty threshold of \$13,290 for a family of three.

<sup>20</sup>Based on a median income in 1998 of \$38,885.

**Reality 4:** Even ignoring the extreme poles of the economic spectrum, we find enormous class differences in the life-styles among the haves, the have-nots, and the have-littles. 30

Class affects more than life-style and material well-being. It has a significant impact on our physical and mental well-being as well.

Researchers have found an inverse relationship between social class and health. Lower-class standing is correlated to higher rates of infant mortality, eye and ear disease, arthritis, physical disability, diabetes, nutritional deficiency, respiratory disease, mental illness, and heart disease.<sup>21</sup> In all areas of health, poor people do not share the same life chances as those in the social class above them. Furthermore, lower-class standing is correlated with a lower quality of treatment for illness and disease. The results of poor health and poor treatment are borne out in the life expectancy rates within each class. Researchers have found that the higher your class standing, the higher your life expectancy. Conversely, they have also found that within each age group, the lower one's class standing, the higher the death rate; in some age groups, the figures are as much as two and three times as high.<sup>22</sup>

**Reality 5:** From cradle to grave, class standing has a significant impact on our chances for survival.

The lower one's class standing, the more difficult it is to secure appropriate housing, the more time is spent on the routine tasks of everyday life, the greater is the percentage of income that goes to pay for food and other basic necessities, and the greater is the likelihood of crime victimization.<sup>23</sup> Class can predict chances for both survival and success.

### Class and Educational Attainment

School performance (grades and test scores) and educational attainment (level of schooling completed) also correlate strongly with economic class. Furthermore, despite some efforts to make testing fairer and 35

<sup>21</sup>E. Pamuk, D. Makuc, K. Heck, C. Reuben, and K. Lochner, *Socioeconomic Status and Health Chartbook, Health, United States, 1998*, Hyattsville, MD, National Center for Health Statistics, 1998, pp. 145-159; Vincente Navarro "Class, Race, and Health Care in the United States," in, Bersh Berberoglu, *Critical Perspectives in Sociology*, 2nd ed., Dubuque, IA, Kendall/Hunt, 1993, pp. 148-156; Melvin Krasner, *Poverty and Health in New York City*, United Hospital Fund of New York, 1989. See also U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, *Health Status of Minorities and Low Income Groups*, 1985; and Dan Hughes, Kay Johnson, Sara Rosenbaum, Elizabeth Butler, and Janet Simons, *The Health of America's Children*, The Children's Defense Fund, 1988.

<sup>22</sup>E. Pamuk et al., op. cit.; Kenneth Neubeck and Davita Glassberg, *Sociology: A Critical Approach*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1996, pp. 436-438; Aaron Antonovsky, "Social Class, Life Expectancy, and Overall Mortality," in *The Impact of Social Class*, New York, Thomas Crowell, 1972, pp. 467-491. See also Harriet Duleep, "Measuring the Effect of Income on Adult Mortality Using Longitudinal Administrative Record Data," *Journal of Human Resources*, vol. 21, no. 2, Spring 1986.

<sup>23</sup>E. Pamuk et al., op. cit., fig. 20; Dennis W. Roncek, "Dangerous Places: Crime and Residential Environment," *Social Forces*, vol. 60, no. 1, September 1981, pp. 74-96.

schooling more accessible, current data suggest that the level of inequity is staying the same or getting worse.

In his study for the Carnegie Council on Children fifteen years ago, Richard De Lone examined the test scores of over half a million students who took the College Board exams (SATs). His findings were consistent with earlier studies that showed a relationship between class and scores on standardized tests; his conclusion: "the higher the student's social status, the higher the probability that he or she will get higher grades."<sup>24</sup> Fifteen years after the release of the Carnegie report, College Board surveys reveal data that are no different: test scores still correlate strongly with family income.

Table 1 Average Combined Scores by Income (400 to 1600 scale)<sup>25</sup>

FAMILY INCOME	MEDIAN SCORE
More than \$100,000	1130
\$80,000 to \$100,000	1082
\$70,000 to \$80,000	1058
\$60,000 to \$70,000	1043
\$50,000 to \$60,000	1030
\$40,000 to \$50,000	1011
\$30,000 to \$40,000	986
\$20,000 to \$30,000	954
\$10,000 to \$20,000	907
less than \$10,000	871

These figures are based on the test results of 1,302,903 SAT takers in 1999.

A little more than twenty years ago, researcher William Sewell showed a positive correlation between class and overall educational achievement. In comparing the top quartile (25%) of his sample to the bottom quartile, he found that students from upper-class families were twice as likely to obtain training beyond high school and four times as likely to attain a postgraduate degree. Sewell concluded: "Socioeconomic background . . . operates independently of academic ability at every stage in the process of educational attainment."<sup>26</sup>

Today, the pattern persists. There are, however, two significant changes. On the one hand, the odds of getting into college have improved for the bottom quartile of the population, although they still remain relatively low compared to the top. On the other hand, the chances of completing a col-

<sup>24</sup>Richard De Lone, *Small Futures*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978, pp. 14-19.

<sup>25</sup>Derived from The College Entrance Examination Board, "1999, A Profile of College Bound Seniors: SAT Test Takers," [www.collegeboard.org/sat/cbsenior/yr1999/NAT/natbk499.html#income](http://www.collegeboard.org/sat/cbsenior/yr1999/NAT/natbk499.html#income)

<sup>26</sup>William H. Sewell, "Inequality of Opportunity for Higher Education," *American Sociological Review*, vol. 36, no. 5, 1971, pp. 793-809.

lege degree have deteriorated markedly for the bottom quartile. Researchers estimate the chances of completing a four-year college degree (by age 24) to be nineteen times as great for the top 25 percent of the population as it is for the bottom 25 percent. "Those from the bottom quartile of family income . . . are faring worse than they have at any time in the 23 years of published Current Population Survey data."<sup>27</sup>

**Reality 6:** Class standing has a significant impact on chances for educational attainment.

Class standing, and consequently life chances, are largely determined at birth. Although examples of individuals who have gone from rags to riches abound in the mass media, statistics on class mobility show these leaps to be extremely rare. In fact, dramatic advances in class standing are relatively few. One study showed that fewer than one in five men surpass the economic status of their fathers.<sup>28</sup> For those whose annual income is in six figures, economic success is due in large part to the wealth and privileges bestowed on them at birth. Over 66 percent of the consumer units with incomes of \$100,000 or more have some inherited assets. Of these units, over 86 percent reported that inheritances constituted a substantial portion of their total assets.<sup>29</sup>

Economist Harold Wachtel likens inheritance to a series of Monopoly games in which the winner of the first game refuses to relinquish his or her cash and commercial property for the second game. "After all," argues the winner, "I accumulated my wealth and income by my own wits." With such an arrangement, it is not difficult to predict the outcome of subsequent games.<sup>30</sup>

**Reality 7:** All Americans do not have an equal opportunity to succeed. Inheritance laws ensure a greater likelihood of success for the offspring of the wealthy.

### Spheres of Power and Oppression

When we look at society and try to determine what it is that keeps most people down—what holds them back from realizing their potential as healthy, creative, productive individuals—we find institutionally oppressive forces that are largely beyond their individual control. Class domination is one of these forces. People do not choose to be poor or working class; instead, they are limited and confined by the opportunities afforded or denied them by a social and economic system. The class structure in the United States is a function of its economic system—capitalism, a system that is

<sup>27</sup>The Mortenson Report on Public Policy Analysis of Opportunity for Postsecondary Education, "Postsecondary Education Opportunity," Iowa City, IA, September 1993, no. 16.

<sup>28</sup>De Lone, op. cit., pp. 14-19.

<sup>29</sup>Howard Tuchman, *Economics of the Rich*, New York, Random House, 1973, p. 15.

<sup>30</sup>Howard Wachtel, *Labor and the Economy*, Orlando, FL, Academic Press, 1984, pp. 161-162.

## Troubletown

BY LLOYD DANGLE



based on private rather than public ownership and control of commercial enterprises, and on the class division between those who own and control and those who do not. Under capitalism, those enterprises are governed by the need to produce a profit for the owners, rather than to fulfill collective needs.

Racial and gender domination are other such forces that hold people down. Although there are significant differences in the way capitalism, racism, and sexism affect our lives, there are also a multitude of parallels. And although race, class, and gender act independently of each other, they are at the same time very much interrelated.

On the one hand, issues of race and gender oppression cut across class lines. Women experience the effects of sexism whether they are well-paid professionals or poorly paid clerks. As women, they face discrimination and male domination, as well as catcalls and stereotyping. Similarly, a black man



faces racial oppression, is subjected to racial slurs, and is denied opportunities because of his color. Regardless of their class standing, women and members of minority races are confronted with oppressive forces precisely because of their gender, color, or both.

On the other hand, class oppression permeates other spheres of power and oppression, so that the oppression experienced by women and minorities is also differentiated along class lines. Although women and minorities find themselves in subordinate positions vis-à-vis white men, the particular issues they confront may be quite different, depending on their position in the class structure. Inequalities in the class structure distinguish social functions and individual power, and these distinctions carry over to race and gender categories.

Power is incremental, and class privileges can accrue to individual women and to individual members of a racial minority. At the same time, class-oppressed men, whether they are white or black, have privileges afforded them as men in a sexist society. Similarly, class-oppressed whites, whether they are men or women, have privileges afforded them as white in a racist society. Spheres of power and oppression divide us deeply in our society, and the schisms between us are often difficult to bridge.

Whereas power is incremental, oppression is cumulative, and those who are poor, black, and female have all of the forces of classism; racism, and sexism bearing down on them. This cumulative oppression is what is meant by the double and triple jeopardy of women and minorities.

Furthermore, oppression in one sphere is related to the likelihood of oppression in another. If you are black and female, for example, you are much more likely to be poor or working class than you would be as a white male. Census figures show that the incidence of poverty varies greatly by race and gender.

In other words, being female and being nonwhite are attributes in our society that increase the chances of poverty and of lower-class standing.

**Reality 8:** Racism and sexism compound the effects of classism in society.

Table 2 Chances of Being Poor in America<sup>31</sup>

WHITE MALE/ FEMALE	WHITE FEMALE HEAD*	HISPANIC MALE/ FEMALE	HISPANIC FEMALE HEAD*	BLACK MALE/ FEMALE	BLACK FEMALE HEAD*
1 in 10	1 in 4	1 in 4	1 in 2	1 in 4	1 in 2

\*Persons in families with female householder, no husband present.

<sup>31</sup>Derived from Census, 1999, op. cit., p. vi.

### ENGAGING THE TEXT

1. Reexamine the four myths Mantsios identifies (para. 9–12). What does Mantsios say is wrong about each myth, and what evidence does he provide to critique each? How persuasive do you find his evidence and reasoning?
2. Does the essay make a case that the wealthy are exploiting the poor? Does it simply assume this? Are there other possible interpretations of the data Mantsios provides? Explain your position, taking into account the information in "Class in America (2000)."
3. Work out a rough budget for a family of four with an annual income of \$17,000. Be sure to include costs for food, clothing, housing, transportation, healthcare, and other unavoidable expenses. Do you think this is a reasonable "poverty line," or is it too high or too low?
4. Imagine that you are Harold S. Browning, Bob Farrell, or Cheryl Mitchell. Write an entry for this person's journal after a tough day on the job. Compare and contrast your entry with those written by other students.
5. In this essay, Mantsios does not address solutions to the problems he cites. What changes do you imagine Mantsios would like to see? What changes, if any, would you recommend?

### EXPLORING CONNECTIONS

6. Working in small groups, discuss which class each of the following would belong to and how this class affiliation would shape the life chances of each:
  - Gary Soto in "Looking for Work" (p. 26)
  - George in "Serving in Florida" (p. 317)
  - The narrator of "An Indian Story" (p. 109)
  - Stephen Cruz (p. 348)
  - Miss Moore in "The Lesson" (p. 404)
  - Cora Tucker (p. 353)
  - C. P. Ellis (p. 591)
  - Mike Rose (p. 182)
  - Richard Rodriguez (p. 214)
7. Although Mantsios does not focus on the Horatio Alger myth as does Harlon Dalton (p. 303), both authors concern themselves with seeing beyond myths of success to underlying realities. Compare the ways these two writers challenge the American mythology of success. Do the two readings complement one another, or do you see fundamental disagreements between the two authors? Whose approach do you find more persuasive, insightful, or informative, and why?
8. Compare this essay by Mantsios to the selections from *Changing American Families* by Judy Root Aulette (p. 64). What similarities or differences do

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you see in the ways they understand and write about social class, wealth, and poverty?

#### EXTENDING THE CRITICAL CONTEXT

9. Mantsios points out that "inheritance laws ensure a greater likelihood of success for the offspring of the wealthy" (para. 42). Explain why you think this is or is not a serious problem. Keeping in mind the difference between wealth and income, discuss how society might attempt to remedy this problem and what policies you would endorse.
10. Skim through a few recent issues of a financial magazine like *Forbes* or *Money*. Who is the audience for these publications? What kind of advice is offered, what kinds of products and services are advertised, and what levels of income and investment are discussed?
11. Study the employment pages of a major newspaper in your area. Roughly what percentage of the openings would you consider upper class, middle class, and lower class? On what basis do you make your distinctions? What do the available jobs suggest about the current levels of affluence in your area?