

Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class

Barbara Ehrenreich, Pantheon, 1989

Introduction: The Class in the Middle

... [I]t can be illuminating to trace ideas to the social milieu from which they arise. For example, many of our traditional ideas about the proper role of women were articulated by physicians and psychiatrists – men of a class (... the professional middle class) in which it has not usually been necessary, in an economic sense, for women to work outside the home. Similarly, the dilemma we so often read about today, over whether women can combine careers with childraising, is freighted with implicit class assumptions: that women have careers, as opposed to mere jobs, and that they have the wherewithal to abandon these careers without condemning their children to penury.

The ideas that set me off on this project were ideas about another kind of inequality, one shared by men as well as women – the economic inequality of class. While ideas about gender, and even race, have moved, however haltingly, in the direction of greater tolerance and inclusivity, ideas about class remain mired in prejudice and mythology. “Enlightened” people, who might flinch at a racial slur, have no trouble listing the character defects of an ill-defined “underclass,” defects which routinely include ignorance, promiscuity, and sloth. There is, if anything, even less inhibition about caricaturing the white or “ethnic” working class: Its tastes are “tacky”; its habits unhealthful; and its views are hopelessly bigoted and parochial.

These stereotypes are hurtful in many ways, not least because they imply that nothing can be done. Efforts to help the poor would only increase their fecklessness and childlike dependence; and the working class, as stereotyped, would be hostile to such efforts anyway.

Before this story can be told, I must first introduce its central character, the professional middle class. This class can be defined, somewhat abstractly, as all those people whose economic and social status is based on education, rather than on the ownership of capital or property. Most professionals are included, and so are white-collar managers, whose positions require at least a college degree, and increasingly also a graduate degree. Not all white-collar people are included, though; some of these are entrepreneurs and some are better classified as “workers.” But the professional middle class is still extremely broad, and includes such diverse types as schoolteachers, [news] anchorpersons, engineers, professors, government bureaucrats, corporate

executives (at least up through the middle levels of management), scientists, advertising people, therapists, financial managers, architects, and, I should add, myself.

So defined, the professional middle class is a distinct minority, composing no more than about 20 percent of the population. At the lower end there are hard-to-classify occupations like schoolteaching, which is certainly based on education, but which, despite its aspirations, falls short of the kind of income and prestige awarded to professions traditionally dominated by men. At the much more thinly populated upper end there are executives whose wealth, decision-making power, and ownership of stock surely place them in a higher class—the corporate elite that serves as an American ruling class.

If this definition seems insufficiently precise, all I can say, without getting into arcane arguments, is that class is a notion that is inherently fuzzy at the edges. ... But it should tell us something about the broad terrain of inequality, and about how people are clustered, very roughly, at different levels of comfort, status, and control over their lives.

In some ways, of course, the professional middle class *is* an elite. Compared to the poor and the working class, it certainly is. The difference is not only a matter of money but of authority, influence, and power. Yet the professional middle class is still only a *middle* class, located well below the ultimate elite of wealth and power. Its only “capital” is knowledge and skill, or at least the credentials imputing skill and knowledge. ... The “capital” belonging to the middle class is far more evanescent than wealth, and must be renewed in each individual through fresh effort and commitment. ...

If this is an elite, then, it is an insecure and deeply anxious one. It is afraid, like any class below the most securely wealthy, of misfortunes that might lead to a downward slide. But in the middle class there is another anxiety: a fear of inner weakness, of growing soft, of failing to strive, of losing discipline and will. Even the affluence that is so often the goal of all this striving becomes a threat, for it holds out the possibility of hedonism and self-indulgence. Whether the middle class looks down toward the realm of less, or up toward the realm of more, there is the fear, always, of falling. ...

Chapter One: Affluence, Dread, and the Discovery of Poverty

The “discovery” of poverty at the beginning of the 1960s was something like the “discovery” of America almost five hundred years earlier. In the case of each of these exotic terrains, plenty

of people were on the site before the discoverers ever arrived. The fact that they had to be found reveals less about them than it does about the delusions that guided their discoverers.

Columbus's discovery, for example, tells us something about the vantage point of fifteenth-century Europeans: Believing that the world was small and conveniently arranged for commerce in spice and gold, they misjudged the size of the earth by at least two continents and an ocean.

So, too, the discovery of poverty tells us something about the peculiarly limited vision of middle-class Americans at the middle of the twentieth century. Living in what they took to be the final stage of material affluence—defined by cars, television, and backyard barbecue pits—they believed that this *was* America. Looking out through their picture windows, they saw only an endless suburb, with no horizon, no frontier, in sight. They believed, almost, that America had stepped outside of history, and that the only changes to come would be the predictable improvements brought by technological progress: automation, space travel, a cure for cancer, more fidelitous hi-fi equipment.

From this vantage point the jagged edges of inequality seemed to have disappeared, smoothed out by the affluence that had come to encase American society like middle-aged girth. There were no distinct social classes—only one vast middle class with no known boundaries. As Vance Packard, one of the few dissenters from the dogma of American classlessness, wryly reported in 1959:

A number of influential voices have been advising us that whatever social classes we ever had are now indeed withering away.... Some months ago, a national periodical proclaimed that the United States had recently achieved the “most truly classless society in history.” A few weeks later, a publisher hailed the disappearance of the class system as “the biggest news of our era.”

... [T]here was a general sense that America had finally been homogenized into a level mass. Blue-collar workers were reported to be buying houses in Levittown and sending their children to college; union leaders, as C. Wright Mills had shown, were becoming gray-flanneled executives like their corporate antagonists. “Negroes” were on the march, of course, but only for the apparently unobjectionable goal of sitting down at the same lunch counters and consuming the same good things available to white Americans. Wherever one looked, America seemed to

have risen above the hurts and injustices that kept less-favored nations febrile and restless. Nothing much would change because no important social group had a stake in making change. They were all happily joining the universal middle class.

The Sources of Dread

... Historians differ on when the consumer culture came to dominate American culture. Some say it was in the twenties, when advertising became a major industry and the middle class bought radios to hear the ads and cars to get to the stores. Some say it was in the late nineteenth century, when the first department stores appeared in American cities and a class of wealthy, idle women arose to shop in them. But there is no question that the consumer culture had begun to crowd out all other cultural possibilities by the years following World War II. The growth of the highway system promoted suburbanization; suburbanization necessitated a more expensive way of life than people had known in modest urban apartments; television told people what they needed to buy; and in the empty leisure left by equally empty work, buying itself became a way of life.

For many, the means to buy things seemed to have come a little too quickly and easily. The devastation of Germany, Japan, and the Soviet Union guaranteed American industrial preeminence and, with it, rising incomes for blue-collar union men as well as the growing army of white-collar executives and professionals. Big government helped too: building the highways that led to the suburbs, financing home purchases and, for veterans, college educations. For those who had grown up when discretionary spending meant a beer after work or an ice cream on Saturdays, the suddenness of affluence was itself unnerving. ...

At the same time, businessmen were consciously trying to wean Americans from the old habits of thrift and self-reliance. William H. Whyte quoted a “motivation researcher’s” advice to businessmen:

We are now confronted with the problem of permitting the average American to feel moral ... even when he is spending, even when he is not saving, even when he is taking two vacations a year and buying a second or third car. One of the basic problems of prosperity ... is to demonstrate that the hedonistic approach to his life is a moral, not an immoral one.

So it was not uncommon for Americans to express the vague feeling that they had been “suckered” into something: buying things they did not clearly need, and paying for them with jobs they did not wholly like. Moreover, the ensemble of commodities that defined a middle-class lifestyle did not exactly promise “hedonism.” The washing machine, the double-door refrigerator, the matched furniture sets – these may have saved labor and enhanced status, but they were not fun. Even the car, marketed as a ticket to adventure and guarantor of sex appeal, quickly settled into its functional role, like any other appliance. ... Anyone who believed that his or her life would be qualitatively transformed by a walnut television console or wall-to-wall carpeting, as the advertisements insisted, would have to confront the failure of these objects every day. They were the dead residue of ambition, hope, effort, hardened into lame, unloving objects.

Feminism and “Progressive Demoralization”

For thinking members of the middle class, the worst feature of affluence was not the things (often “trashy”) that had become so abundant, but the effects of that abundance on the mind itself. Professional and managerial people, whose livelihoods depend on some combination of intellect and drive, feared [the] possible psychological impact: One would get soft, one would cease striving

But the harshest indictment of the effects of affluence on the middle class was a book that is seldom associated with class at all, Betty Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique*. Critics within the women’s movement have often dismissed Friedan’s work for being limited to middle-class women. If this concentration weakened *The Feminine Mystique* as a feminist manifesto, though, it gave the book another dimension – as a class-conscious call to arms that only happens to be about women.

“All social classes,” Russell Lynes observed, “are divided down the middle by a line which, however classless we may think we are, maintains a state of social tension. On one side of the line are men; on the other, women.” ... Within the professional middle class, ... [t]he young of both sexes were pushed into an educational track that was designed to lead to the professions or higher management. Increasingly, middle-class girls were even going to, and finishing, college along with the boys. But then, in adulthood, a vast divide opened up. Middle-class men became

the professionals or managers they were trained to be; middle-class women for the most part became housewives

The absence, or unpopularity, of domestic servants heightened the almost class-like difference between middle-class men and women. ... [N]o matter how vigorously promoted by the *Ladies' Home Journal*, the ideology that claimed homemaking as a kind of profession could not upgrade the actual tasks: wiping counters, folding laundry, searching for missing socks, cleaning toilets. The middle-class male spent his working day telling other people what to do ... ; his wife spent her working day doing the kind of tasks he would never have been aware of, in his place of work, unless the janitorial staff had been on strike. There is a reason why America produced the most vigorous feminist movement in the world: We were one of the only countries in which the middle class (which is wealthy by world standards) customarily employed its own women as domestic servants.

This arrangement was, in some ways, supremely wasteful. For one thing, it is far more expensive to maintain a wife at a middle-class standard of living than to pay an actual servant wages commensurate with her social class. The fact that so many men could afford to do so reflected the genuine affluence of the middle class at mid-century, when one (male) income still sufficed to support a family at a middling level of comfort. ...

... In Friedan's analysis, the only real economic function of the middle-class housewife was to consume. This was not a "traditional" role but a requirement of the voracious consumer culture, which demanded that one-half the adult population specialize, not in any useful profession, but in shopping. ...

Poverty Discovered

If the poor had to be "found" [in the 1960s], how had they been "lost" in the first place? Poverty had been undeniable in the thirties and remained a vivid fact of life in the forties. But suburbanization, probably more than any other single factor, hid the poor from view. Between 1950 and 1960, in one of the largest internal migrations of the century, millions of middle-class Americans moved from cities to the suburbs. In the cities, the poor might live only blocks away, and share the same sidewalks and public spaces. But in the monochromatic world of the suburbs, where everyone was at least a homeowner, it was easy to believe there were no classes.

Suburbanization nourished the solipsism of the middle class, which had looked around its new environment and concluded, shortsightedly, that it was alone in America. ...

The discovery of poverty gave middle-class liberalism the grit and definition it had been seeking. ... [W]ith the discovery of poverty, the liberal agenda could be expanded beyond such innocuous postwar goals as “growth.” Henceforth, middle-class liberalism had a mission, and a “middle-class liberal” would be defined as someone who—however vaguely or remotely—“cared about” the poor and their condition. ...

Infantilizing the Poor

... [But the] middle-class conception of the poor bore little resemblance to any actual group of people – certainly not the insurgent African American poor, and not even the sad collections of case studies lumped together by the newsmagazines. The invented poor were a reflection of middle-class needs and a projection of middle-class anxieties. They were, first of all, “others,” aliens inhabiting a world of their own that might as well have lain outside the national boundaries. Michael Harrington, who was certainly one of the most committed advocates of the poor, set the tone when he wrote:

There is, in short, a language of the poor, a psychology of the poor, a world view of the poor. To be impoverished is to be an internal alien, to grow up in a culture that is radically different from the one that dominates society.

That culture was the “culture of poverty,” and no matter how diverse the actual poor might be – senior citizens, sharecroppers, bohemians, laid-off blue-collar workers - most middle-class poverty experts believed they were all citizens of a single invisible nation, the culture of poverty. ...

The notion of a distinct culture of poverty was in part simply an extension of the prejudices against the lower classes that could be found in any sociology text. The phrase came from anthropologist Oscar Lewis’s 1959 study of impoverished Mexican families, which he found lacking in drive, depressed, and apathetic. As he defined it, the culture of poverty was a mind-set characterized by feelings of “fatalism, helplessness, dependence and inferiority.” Or, in psychiatric terms,

a high incidence of weak ego structure, orality and confusion of sexual identification, all reflecting maternal deprivation; a strong present-time orientation with relatively little disposition to defer gratification and plan for the future, with a high tolerance for psychopathology of all kinds.

... The idea that the poor were victims of some shared character defect seemed to be supported by a number of studies in the late fifties and early sixties that found more actual, diagnosable mental illness among the poor than among the more comfortable classes. ... But the studies did not find that all the poor were mentally ill, or that all the poor who were mentally ill suffered from the same syndrome. The poor had a variety of mental disorders, as did the middle class, only the poor had more, just as they had more, and more serious, physical ailments. One reason is that people who become ill, physically or mentally, tend also to lose their jobs and become poor. The other, numerically more significant, explanation is that poverty is unbearably stressful: to live in poverty is to live with constant uncertainty, to accept galling indignities, and to expect harassment by the police, welfare officials, and employers, as well as by others who are poor and desperate.

Yet in the theorizing that accompanied the discovery of poverty, the causality was often reversed: The poor lacked money because they suffered from a collective disorder which had been identified as the “culture of poverty.” In fact, it was hard for the antipoverty experts to know what to deal with first, poverty or its culture, an economic condition or a mental illness.

The peculiar psychopathology, or “culture,” of the poor was (and still is) thought to be defined by two related traits: “present-time orientation” and an insufficiently developed “deferred gratification pattern” (or “DGP,” as some sociologists put it handily). In simpler words, the poor person lived for the moment, unable to think ahead, to save or plan for the future. These were the very opposite of the traits the middle class liked to ascribe to itself – self-discipline, a strong superego, an ability to plan ahead to meet self-imposed goals, and so forth. ...

Leaving aside the psychiatric jargon, a person who lives entirely in the present, unable to wait for the next anticipated pleasure, is, of course, a child. The conceit of the poor as children has an ancient, aristocratic lineage. In mid-century America, it was bolstered by the perception of poverty as a vestigial condition, something “left over” that did not really belong in the affluent,

modern world. ... The invented poor, the inhabitants of the culture of poverty, were not so much “present-oriented” as trapped in the past, unable or unwilling to “grow up,” as the middle class had, into the ever-available, up-to-date affluence.

But the invented poor were not only children. They had come to represent what the middle class feared most in itself: softening of character, a lack of firm internal values. Two contemporary critics of the “culture of poverty” notion, S. M. Miller and Frank Riessman, pointed out that the self-image the middle class derived from its reflections on the poor was unduly flattering to the middle class and probably out of date. In contrast to the poor, they wrote, the middle class liked to characterize itself as “delighting in hard work...abjuring debt, and constantly forgoing the indulgence of present gain in order to reap future rewards.” But these were exactly the traits the middle class feared it was losing

What the middle class saw in the poor – or, more accurately, projected onto the poor – were the dreaded effects of affluence on the middle class. The poor did not participate in affluence themselves, but, strangely, they came to represent its worst effects on the human character. What kind of personality developed in the culture of poverty if not that of the ideal consumer? Historian Donald Meyer has described the consumer personality as ... “passive,”

weaned from saving and hoarding so that he [the consumer] might spend, weaned from piling up possessions in order to expedite planned obsolescence, weaned from ascetic discipline so that he might respond to every innovation, weaned from work-identities so that he might have the time for consumption.

The ideal consumer, like the denizen of the culture of poverty, is hedonistic, impulsive, self-indulgent. Nothing could better serve the consumer-goods industries than for everyone to abandon their “capacity for deferred gratification” and become as suggestible and addicted to sensation as the poor were said to be. These were the traits that marketing men hoped to inculcate in all Americans, and especially those who had money to spend. And they were the same traits, more or less, that intellectuals such as David Riesman and Betty Friedan found spreading throughout the middle class. With the discovery of poverty, the threat could be externalized: Someone else had succumbed to the softening effects of the consumer culture, someone so alien, so aberrant, as to dwell outside of affluence itself.

... The problem, then, [was] to make the lower class more normal – that is, not less poor but less present-oriented. Poverty itself [was] not [seen as] an issue, since “the lower-class forms of all problems are at bottom a single problem: the existence of an outlook and style of life which [are] radically present-oriented.”

... [T]he middle-class view of the poor guaranteed that, whatever else they got – multiservice centers, area-redevelopment programs, community-action projects – they would not get money. In fact, the one clear policy implication of the “culture of poverty” was that the poor could not be trusted with money. And as the view of people who had money ... there could hardly have been a more brazen defense of the status quo.

Thus the middle class discovered it was not alone. There were “others” in America, people who were unfortunate, downtrodden, needing help. But it was the further misfortune of the poor to be discovered by a middle class that was tormented by the prospect of its own decline. In all the debate and discussion that surrounded the beginning of the War on Poverty – and later, in the endless evaluations of it – the poor had no voice. In fact, their principal virtue, as opposed to the African American insurgency, was that they were so agreeably silent. The ... invented poor came to serve as a mirror for the middle class, reflecting its own dread submission to the imperatives of consumption, the tyranny of affluence. More than that, the poor became the scapegoats for an affluence they alone were fully excluded from and fully innocent of.