The New Politics of Class in America

It is now such a cliché that America is a middle-class society that few stop to ask how it came to be one. Historian Gordon S. Wood of Brown University suggests in **The Radicalism of the American Revolution** (Knopf, 1992) that it was almost an accident. Wood argues that the Revolution was not only a war for independence but a radical attack on the social order inherited from England—a social order in which most colonists "still took for granted that society was and ought to be a hierarchy of ranks and degrees of dependency and that most people were bound together by personal ties of one sort or another." In place of this rigid society, the Founding Fathers proposed to create what Thomas Jefferson called a "natural aristocracy" of talented men like themselves—liberally educated gentlemen of the Enlightenment who had risen from modest circumstances yet had been excluded under the old order. "For many of the revolutionary leaders," Wood observes, "this was the emotional significance of republicanism—a vindication of frustrated talent at the expense of birth and blood."

But many of the Founding Fathers, including Jefferson, were dismayed by what the Revolution wrought. Americans took all too seriously the idea that they (or at least the white males among them) were free and equal, and in their egalitarian enthusiasm they blurred the once-vital distinction between gentlemen and plain people. By the 1820s, writes Wood, "in the North at least, already it seemed as if the so-called middle class was all there was. . . . By absorbing the gentility of the aristocracy and the work of the working, the middling sorts gained a powerful moral hegemony over the whole society."

It was easy for the middle class to dominate national life because the United States in its early years was spared the worst extremes of wealth and poverty. Industrialization changed that, especially as it accelerated after the Civil War, creating both vast fortunes and crushing poverty. The change is chronicled in **Three Centuries of Social Mobility in America** (Heath, 1974), an anthology edited by Edward Pessen, a sociologist at the City University of New York.

Out of middle-class anxieties about these developments, historian Richard Hofstadter argues in his classic study, **The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.** (1955), the Progressive movement grew. "The newly rich, the grandiosely or corruptly rich, the masters of great corporations, were bypassing the men of the Mugwump type—the old gentry, the merchants of long standing, the small manufacturers, the established professional men, the civic leaders of an earlier era," Hofstadter writes. Beginning in the 1870s, the old-stock Americans responded by taking up the reform cause, hoping to limit the power of the newcomers in the political and economic realms.

A slightly different tack is taken by E. Digby Baltzell, a University of Pennsylvania sociologist, in **Philadelphia Gentlemen: The Making of a National Upper Class** (1959; reprint, Transaction, 1989). Baltzell shows how local nouveaux riches and old families were cemented into a self-aware national upper class through marriage and various institutions created precisely for that purpose in the late 19th century, including New York's *Social Register* (1888) and prep schools such as Groton (1884).

An advocate, like Thomas Jefferson, of a "natural aristocracy" (though perhaps more willing than Jefferson to admit a hereditary factor), Baltzell harshly criticizes the WASP upper class of his day for succumbing to the temptation to act like a caste rather than an aristocracy, excluding Jews and other talented ethnics from the institutions it still controlled. "While the socialist faiths, on the one hand, have centered on the vision of equality of condition in a classless society," he writes in **The Protestant Establishment: Aristocracy and Caste in America** (1964; reprint, Yale, 1987), "our own best traditions have stressed equality of opportunity in a hierarchical and open-class, as opposed to a classless, society." In **The Protestant Establishment Revisited** (Transaction, 1991), a collection of essays, Baltzell reflects that within a few short years of his book's publication, not only the WASP establishment but the very idea of social author-

ity exercised by any group was all but gone.

It is a typically American irony that an era that gave birth to a cohesive upper class did little for the working class except increase its numbers. The absence of class consciousness among the American proletariat has puzzled observers for decades. In **Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?** (1906; reprint, Macmillan, 1976), German economist Werner Sombart tried out several of the now-familiar explanations—the availability of cheap western farmland, the relative affluence of American workers, the American belief in political and social equality—before settling on one that Americans themselves hold dear: American workers do not consider themselves a proletariat because they do not feel condemned to be workers forever. For "a far from insignificant number," Sombart observed, the rags-to-riches saga was no myth.

Subsequent research has shown, however, that by the late 19th century opportunity was about as abundant in Europe as in the United States. What explains the attitudes of U.S. workers, Seymour Martin Lipset and Reinhard Bendix write in **Social Mobility in Industrial Society** (1959; reissued, Transaction, 1992), is the fact that getting ahead is actively encouraged in America, while the country's democratic ethos prevents inequality in income from being directly translated into inequality in other areas of life.

In a fluid society such as the United States, the very idea of social class tends to make people uncomfortable. During the Great Depression, several public-opinion surveys showed what Americans deeply wanted to believe—that theirs was in effect a classless society—and a myth was born. Vast majorities—88 percent in one case—told pollsters that they considered themselves middle class. Some years later, Richard Centers pointed out in **The Psychology of Social Classes** (1949; reprint, 1961) that those polled were given only three choices: lower, middle, or upper class. Given the choice, Centers said, 51 percent of the people he surveyed in 1945 identified themselves as *working class*.

The nation's economic irregularity since 1973 has bred a whole new set of anxieties about class, expressed in a raft of articles and books on "the decline of the middle class," including **The Great U-Turn: Corporate Restructuring and the Polarizing of America** (Basic, 1988), by Bennett Harrison and Barry Bluestone; Frank Levy's **Dollars and Dreams: The Changing American Income Distribution** (Russell Sage, 1987); and Kevin Phillips's **Boiling Point: Democrats, Republicans, and the Decline of Middle-Class Prosperity** (Random, 1993). Interestingly, however, Americans queried about their class status over the years by the National Opinion Research Center seem to tell a different tale. The proportion calling themselves middle class has been on the rise since 1983, reaching a record-high 49 percent in 1991. The survey data appear in the *American Enterprise* (May/June 1993).

The woes of the great American middle will very likely prove to be momentary tribulations. A development of far greater import may be the discovery of an urban underclass. Although it has been scrutinized in volumes ranging from Ken Auletta's journalistic **The Underclass** (Random, 1982) to Christopher Jencks's **Rethinking Social Policy: Race, Poverty, and the Underclass** (Harvard, 1992), much about the underclass—how long it has existed, how big it is, whether it is growing larger—remains unknown or debatable. But the existence of a sizable group of Americans more or less permanently mired in poverty and perhaps passing its disabilities on to its children poses a monumental challenge to the ethos of opportunity that has from the beginning animated American life.