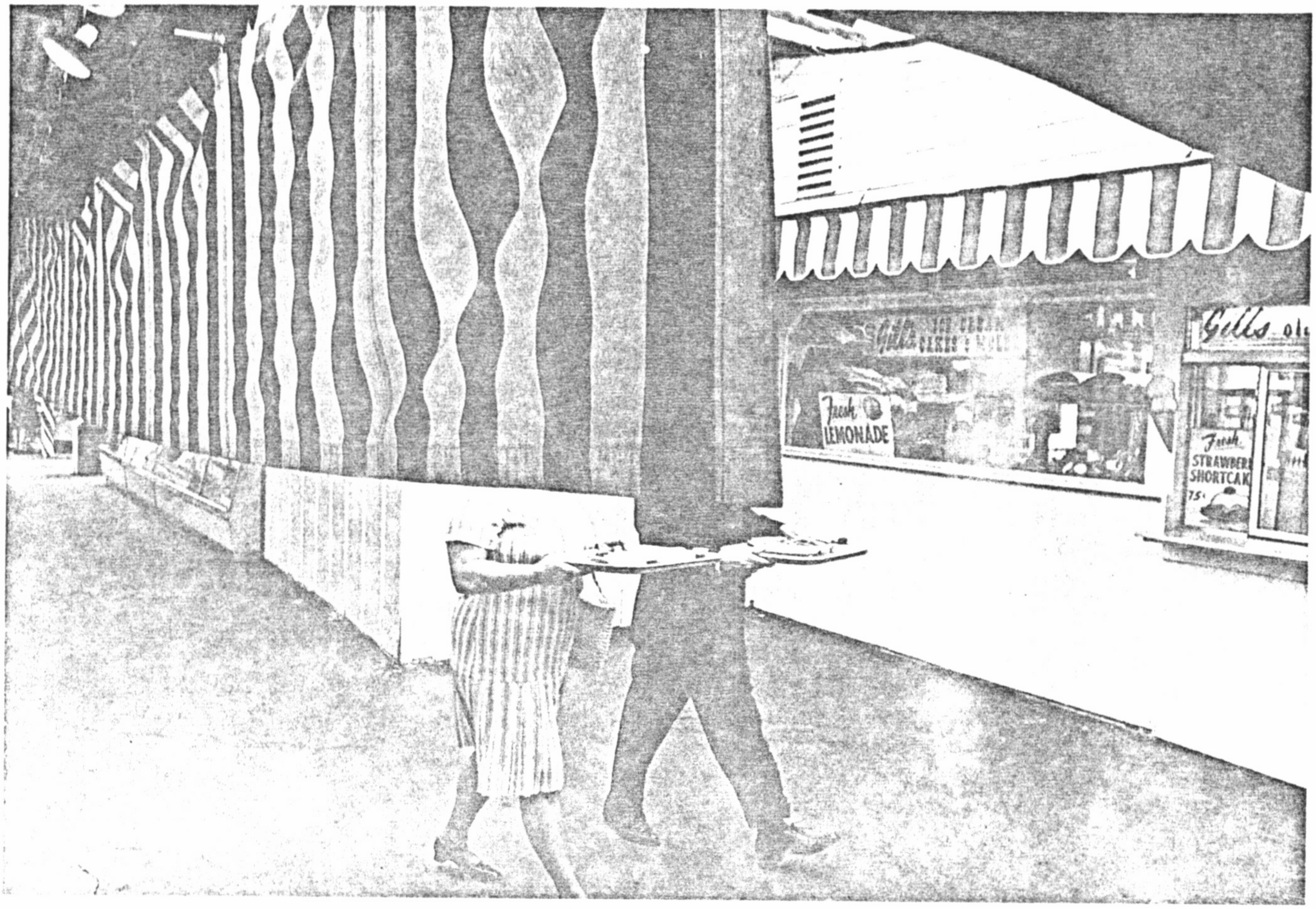

Hollywood Ranch Market

Ramparts Dec 1972

WHO GOES BEGGING IN AMERICA? THE MYTH OF THE MIDDLE CLASS

If you were living in America during the 1950s, there was a theme you heard endlessly repeated: America is the Affluent Society. Television showed it, professors lectured on it, advertising blared it, the government collected statistics to prove it. America—the Affluent Society.

America had the world's largest Gross National Product. America had the world's highest per capita income. America had more cars, more televisions, more telephones than the rest of the world combined. Americans ate better, dressed better, received better educations and better medical care than any other people in the world. They lived in better homes in nicer communities, enjoyed more leisure, travelled more widely than anyone else. And as if this were not enough, life was going to become better still: automation would gradually take over more and more work, and gains in technology and management would remove the vestiges of burdensome responsibilities, leaving us all free to realize our creative potential as human beings.

Today, in the early 1970s, it is hard to find anyone who holds such a completely sanguine vision of America. The sixties reintroduced conflict on a massive scale: war, assassination, riot, and rebellion filled the pages of newspapers. The deaths of a president, a presidential candidate, and a major civil rights leader, plus the deaths of nearly 50,000 Americans in battle are landmarks of the last decade. Widespread poverty and even malnutrition has likewise been rediscovered, dealing a heavy blow to the image of homogeneous affluence. Important cities are said to be in a state of crisis, and there is dark talk of impending massive

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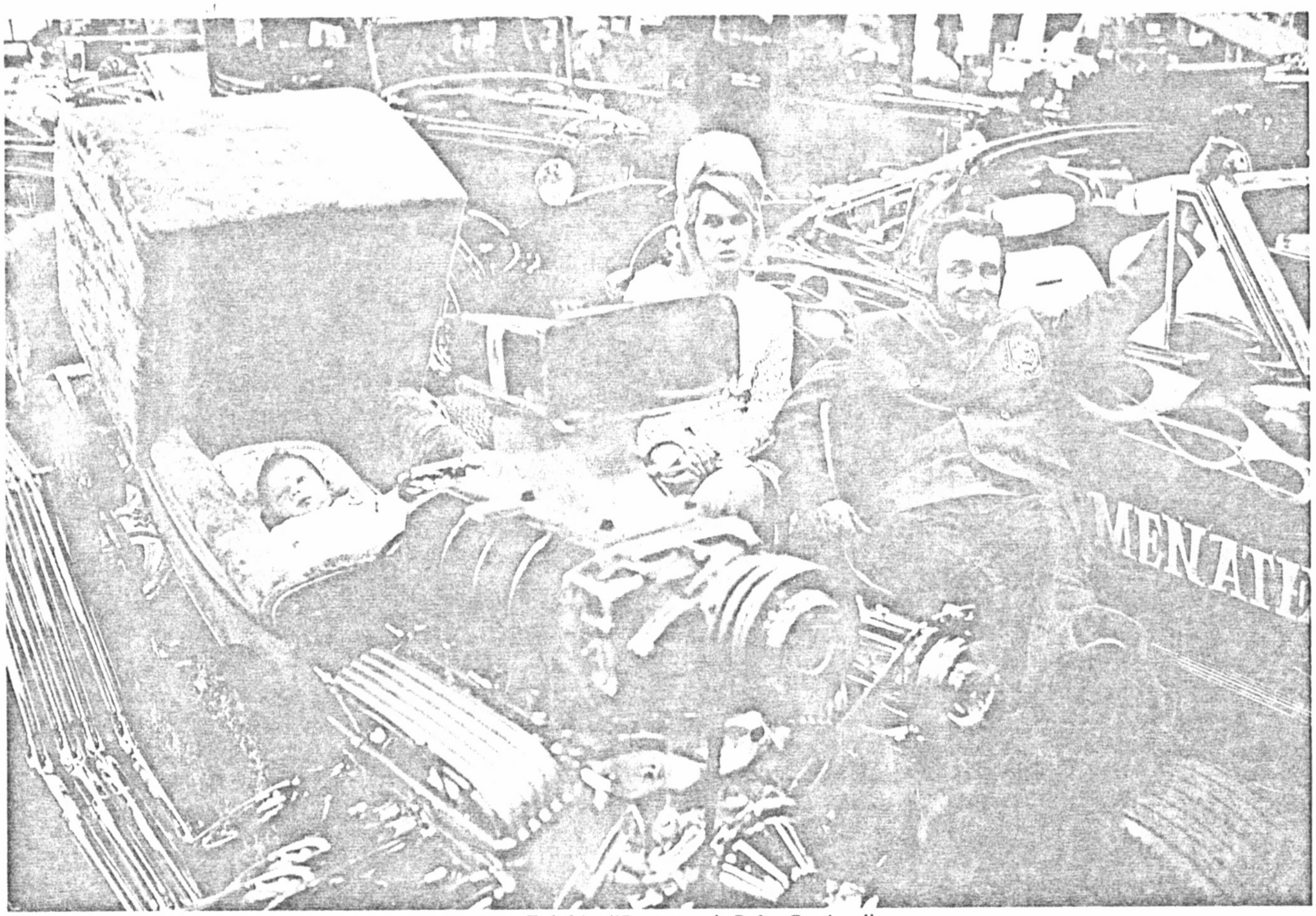
PHOTO ESSAY BY KEN GRAVES

BY RICHARD PARKER



Auto Exhibit: "Rosemary's Baby Carriage"

ecological disasters. The tone of today's social commentators is one of gnawing doubt rather than unlimited hope.

But surprisingly this new tone of doubt does not represent a rejection or even a serious modification of the earlier hopeful vision of a homogeneously affluent America; instead it represents an amendment or deferment of that vision. The Vietnam War is viewed as an accidental involvement, unconnected to the structure of America. The crisis of the cities is seen as the result of rising expectations and the relative starvation of the public sector of the economy. The ecology crisis is thought to be a direct outgrowth of America's very affluence—that is, a crisis related to overabundant production and the rapacious consumption of natural resources. Even poverty, which would seem to contradict the notion of affluence most directly, is incorporated into the affluence consciousness by its popular acceptance as a crisis of racial minorities—of black, brown, and red Americans. Only racial discrimination excludes them from the general prosperity.

In other words, the basic image of the Affluent Society in the 1970s is still intact. A recent best seller, Charles Reich's *The Greening of America,* even goes so far as to reject issues of economics as passé, and to lump 80% of Americans into the category "Consciousness I," thereby suggesting the uniformity of both their consciousness and their material condition. Another best seller, Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock,* reasserts earlier postwar images of America by resting social analysis on issues of technology and science, and by arguing that the future requires maintaining and managing an already abundant society. (The fact that Toffler is more ambivalent about the future than many earlier writers does not lead him to challenge their basic attitudes.) In academic journals and textbooks one finds much the same thing: on the one hand, an attempt to reevaluate the goals and character of America, but on the other, an almost matter-of-fact acceptance of its middle-class well-being.

The tenacity of this vision is all the more remarkable because some very authoritative critics have rejected it. Paul Samuelson, Nobel laureate in economics, has warned against thinking that America's wealth is broadly shared by the majority. Displaying his special sense for graphic illustration, he observed of the present income structure: "If we made an income pyramid out of a child's blocks, with each layer portraying $1,000 of income, the peak would be far higher than the Eiffel Tower, but almost all of us would be within a yard of the ground."

Samuelson realized that his description ran counter to popular belief, and sought to buttress his position by further elaboration: "In the absence of statistical knowledge, it is understandable that one should form an impression of the American standard of living from the full-page magazine advertisements portraying a jolly American family in an air-conditioned mansion, with a Buick, a station wagon, a motor launch, and all the other good things that go to make up comfortable living. Actually, of course, this sort of life is

Supermarket

still beyond the grasp of 90 percent of the American public."

Yet in America to be middle class is to have "arrived" for the great majority. Few have the possibility of reaching beyond that point, and in a country specifically founded on the desirability of being middle class, few feel it necessary. However this description is appropriated by all sorts of very different people: those who earn $50,000 a year and those who earn $5,000 a year; by college teachers and corporate executives, and by day laborers and file clerks. The distance between these is obvious, but is daily obscured by the meaninglessness of the term itself. Being middle class can mean comfort bordering on opulence; but it can also mean outright poverty, or deprivation that is only one step removed from poverty.

[RICH AND POOR]

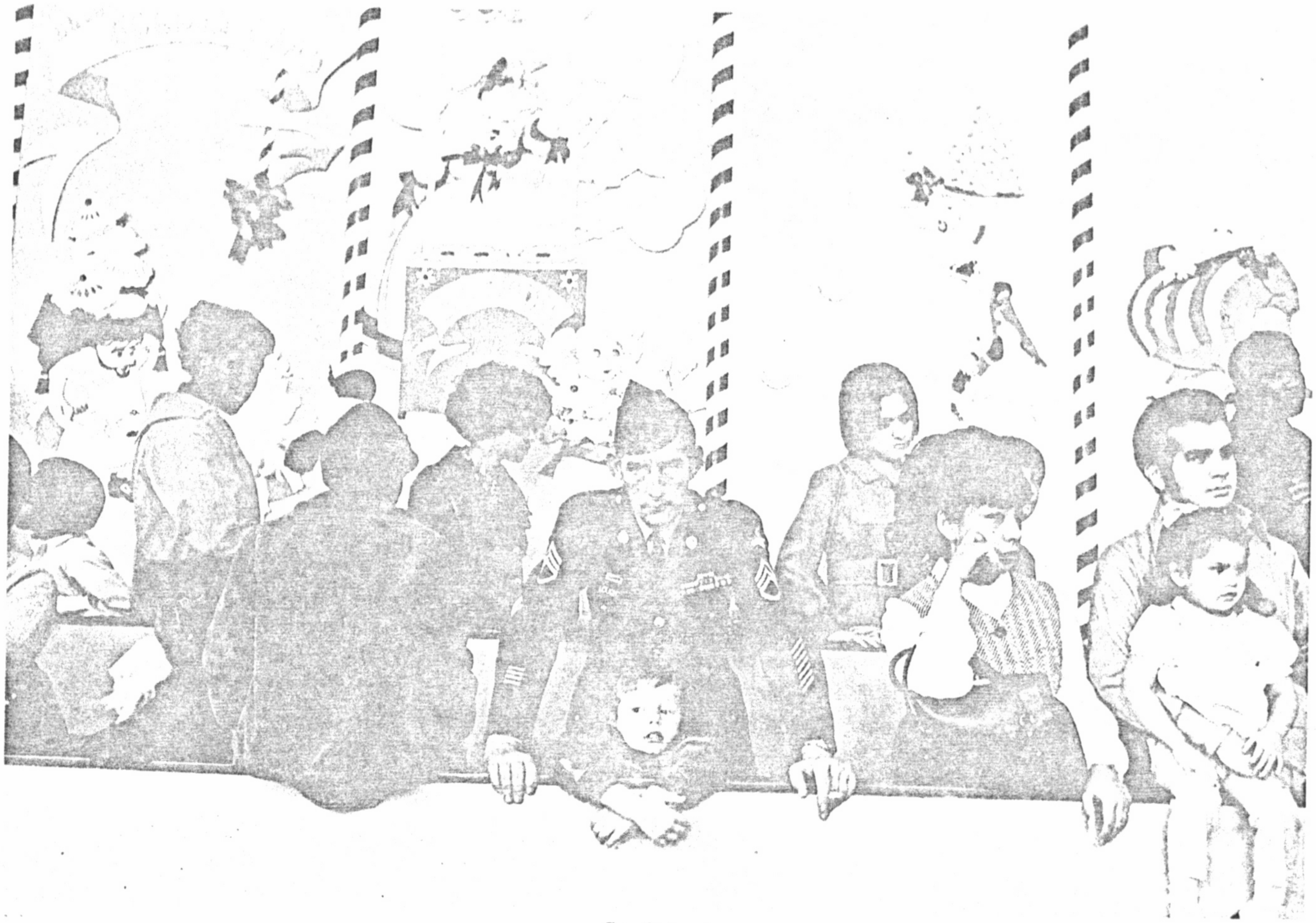
Today, the lower boundary of the American middle class is an income slightly below $4,000 a year, the federal government's definition of poverty for an urban family of four. The upper boundary is more difficult to locate because those who, on the basis of income, are rich compared to most Americans, rarely differentiate themselves. *Fortune* magazine illustrated the difficulty in defining the rich by observing that "a man earning, say, $40,000 a year may be hard to distinguish from a man earning $10,000 or $15,000 a year. He is rarely conspicuous in his consumption or ostentatious in his possessions." *Fortune* notwithstanding, a distinction still exists; whether immediately apparent in his spending patterns, life style, goals, or sense of security, the middle class man earning $40,000 is unalterably distinct from his middle class confrere earning $4,000.

Social scientists, having generally conceded the myth by accepting both men as middle class, have however gone on to differentiate between "upper" and "lower" middle classes. This avoids the awkwardness of using a single term to describe two very divergent kinds of lives. But what exactly is a *lower* as opposed to an *upper* middle class, and how do these two very crudely defined groups relate to the rich and poor who constitute the rest of our society?

For the sake of argument let us presume the following: that the poor constitute the bottom fifth, and the rich, the upper tenth of the population.

Accepting the simple division between the upper and the lower middle class, let us assign the seventy percent by a simple halving. In 1968—the last year for which statistics are available—the upper middle class received 46% of the nation's total money income. In the same year, the lower middle class received 22% or, in other words, less than half the amount received by the upper group.

The situation becomes even more striking if we incorporate the data for rich and poor. According to the Census Bureau, the richest tenth of the country in 1968 received 27% of the money income, while the poorest *fifth* got only



Goodieland

5%. Stated slightly differently this means that the richest 10% of Americans in 1968 received more money income than the entire bottom half of the population. Clearly, economic equality is not a prominent characteristic of contemporary American society.

But inequality of income is only one part of the problem in the myth of the middle class in America. For example, liquid assets–checking and savings accounts, shares in saving-and-loan banks, credit unions, and government savings bonds–are strong measures of a family's cushion against disaster and its ability to plan major investment for the future (such as college education for the children). But in 1969, one fifth of the population owned no liquid assets whatsoever, and nearly half of the population had less than $500. Less than a third had more than $2,000. If a father was suddenly put out of work, if a family member suffered injuries requiring longterm care, or if a child won admission to a prestigious college or university, the carefully gathered savings of a lifetime could be quickly wiped out.

For those who survived the Depression, figures like these may not seem shocking. But few people judge their present prosperity by the standards of thirty years ago. What these figures mean is that for the poor, life is marginal, and for the lower middle class, danger is never far away. Income is annual, and is spent heavily for the day-to-day maintenance of life; liquid assets and debt purchasing are the chief means for the accumulation of comforts, such as additional appliances, a car, or a college education. And debt purchasing, whatever its popularity, can impose not only exorbitant costs in the form of inflated interest charges, but a heavier psychological burden in the loss of a sense of freedom.

[BLUE COLLAR ON THE EDGE]

In the fifties, a great deal of attention was paid to the transition from the primacy of blue-collar work to white-collar work. Sociologists and popular magazines considered it the harbinger of a great social revolution, the movement to the "postindustrial" society. Theorists saw the growth of the service industries as an early sign of the leisure society that was supposed to be just over the horizon. As automation increased, the number of blue-collar jobs would continue to decline, and the service sector would continue to grow.

The thesis was correct as far as it went, but it overlooked two important facts: even if both automation and services continue to expand, there is no way to imagine the disappearance of blue-collar workers in this century; more ominously, income for service workers as a whole is lower than income for blue-collar workers, and by a sizeable amount. In many cases, transition from an industrial to a postindustrial economy may mean not an advance for the lower middle class worker, but simply a lateral movement symbolized by a change in the color of his uniform.

Today there are approximately thirty-five million blue-collar workers in America. As a group they have made

The Great Escape

significant gains since the beginning of this century, gains that have won widespread applause from social reformers and political theorists. But how substantial and enduring are these gains? Industrial sociologist Arthur Shostak, in his recent study *Blue-Collar Life,* has suspicions about the working man's economic status:

> *On a first reading the record encourages admiration for the progress apparently made by blue-collarites. . . . On a second and more careful reading, however, admiration for these gains gives way to concern for their durability.*

Shostak concludes that blue-collar prosperity is precariously supported by heavy installment debt and rapidly declining purchasing power. (The take-home pay of a factory worker was smaller in 1970 than in 1965, because of inflation.) The husband's job is uncertain because of technological displacement and stiffer educational requirements. The wife's role is also unstable, because she frequently has had to enter the labor force in order to provide for the family, and finds the dual life of worker and wife-mother difficult to manage. Even the children, who are supposed to have benefitted from increased educational opportunity, have not been as successful as imagined. "Blue-collar children may spend more years in school," Shostak dourly observes, "but high-quality educational content and not time alone influences postschool achievement."

For the blue-collar worker over forty, there is also the nagging memory of the Depression. Many workers feel equally pressured by unending alterations in their own work. Shostak says that "a vast majority of all manual workers are reveling in their persistent fantasies about escaping the factory, and in their hope that their sons will not follow them into blue-collar work." For those who dwell in the larger cities and in adjoining suburbs, there is the further tension of "encroaching" blacks or other nonwhites. Many times the single debt-free possession of any consequence is the worker's home, and in it he has invested not only his labor but a major portion of his psychic status. To feel constantly pressured from "below," to be constantly reminded of the world from which many came and to which one might so easily return, can be a traumatizing experience for those living on the edge as so many blue-collarites do.

This continuous tension shows itself in many ways. The blue-collarites have a high separation and divorce rate. Their children have high dropout rates and high arrest records. They labor under the weight of "an alarming incidence of little-treated physical and mental illness."

Shostak's study is doubly disturbing not only because it excludes both women and nonwhites—who in general do worse than white male workers economically but also because, as Shostak himself admits, "these observations . . . refer only to the unique situation of the minority of better-off, modernistic, suburban dwelling blue-collarites. The vast

(Continued on page 55)

MIDDLE CLASS *(From page 29)*

majority of Caucasian male blue-collarites and their dependents are still less well-off on all counts." And in case anyone has misunderstood Shostak's message, he concludes:

> *With respect to most blue-collarites, one comes finally to admire not so much accomplishment as endurance and to envy not so much achievement as persistence. Pathos and "affluence" to the contrary, blue-collarites today in America are* not *especially well-off. Many know this and vaguely sense that somehow things ought to "feel" better. How to make things better eludes almost all of them.*

[MIDDLE-CLASS POVERTY]

But if the lower middle class is to be characterized by endurance, the upper middle class is definitely not. The upper middle class may at one time have merely endured; today it has conquered.

For those families earning between $10,000 and $25,000, life displays many of the accoutrements of affluence that many believe to be the property of all. Just as the lower middle class is dominated by the blue-collar and service worker, so the upper middle class is dominated by professionals and managers. One-quarter of the U.S. labor force is made up of professional and technical workers, managers, officials, and proprietors. At first glance this is not at all remarkable: the professionals and managers have dominated the upper segment of the income scale for decades. Nor is it remarkable, because of all the discussion about it, that the professionals and managers have been steadily increasing in number. This increase has in fact been the subject not so much of discussion as of constant praise. It has provided the foundation for feverish speculation about postindustrial life, and as depicted in *The Organization Man* and other such books, has been used as a paradigm of that future life.

But the speculation has been too naive and too optimistic. It overlooks the fact that all men cannot be managers or professionals, and that the upper middle class, instead of merging into a hazy continuum with the lower middle class, has accentuated its differences and raised its admission standards. It would probably be more accurate to say that the professionals and managers display a closer identification with the rich than with the old middle class, and that they see each other as self-conscious members of Galbraith's New Class.

For several years immediately after World War II, optimism was generated by statistics showing a merging of workers' and professionals' incomes. In general, lower groups of workers seemed to be making much faster gains than income groups above them. In some circles, this tendency was even seen as a harbinger of declining income inequality on a vast scale. But what such optimism failed to take into account were the unusual circumstances under which such gains had been made. Wartime conditions, the scarcity of labor, and fat government contracts all accelerated the lower wage levels; once the war was over, however, normal relations began to reassert themselves, and the tendency of lower-paid workers to make more rapid gains than managers and professionals reversed itself by the mid-fifties. Thus, for example, between 1950 and 1960 the median wages for service workers and laborers rose 39%, while for professionals and managers the median rose 68%.

We can see the consequence of these statistics in a different way if we consider the expected earnings of a high school versus a college graduate. In 1968, the median annual income of high school graduates was slightly over $8,000; college graduates, on the other hand, had a median income of nearly $13,000. Projected over a lifetime, this means that the family of a high school graduate will enjoy $230,000 less income than the family of a college graduate. When measured in terms of housing, clothing, education, medical care, or any other index, this is an enormous sum.

The knowledge that his income will continue to rise substantially and evenly allows the upper-middle-class professional or manager to do things which, in lower-middle-class households, would cause financial havoc. For instance, indebtedness has become a crucial way of obtaining the necessities of modern civilization—a house, a car, most major appliances, even health care involves a willingness and ability to sustain long-term indebtedness. For families earning between $10,000 and $15,000 in 1962, fully 55% had debts totalling more than $5,000. By contrast, among those families earning between $3,000 and $5,000 (remember that in 1962 the dividing line between poor and lower middle class was $3,000), two-thirds did not even have liquid assets over $500, and hence could not even afford to contemplate indebtedness on the scale of the upper middle class.

There is a further point to be made about the income of the upper middle class. An income that is, say, X dollars above the national median is very different from an income which is X dollars below it. Living decently requires basic expenditures which consume a large and relatively constant amount of income, varying with the size of a family, the age of its members, its locale, etc. Thus for an urban family of four (considered average by the government), the Bureau of Labor Statistics computes an income of $10,700 as necessary for a "moderate," intermediate standard of living. This sum allows for food, clothing, housing, furnishings, transportation, medical care, household operation, reading, recreation, tobacco, education, gifts and contributions, and miscellaneous expenses. The BLS (a division of the Department of Labor) determined the amounts in each category by examining studies of consumer expenditures that are made every ten years. Examination of the amounts used in the "moderate" budget shows that they are less than extravagant. Clothes are replaced over a period of two to four years and furniture over a longer period. Transportation is by used car unless the city has a well-developed transportation system. The recreation allowance allows a movie every two or three weeks. The education allowance covers only the day-to-day expenses, such as books and paper—it does not include savings for higher education.

This "moderate" budget represents what is felt to be reasonable comfort in America today. It is obviously much higher than the government's definition of poverty, but still short of the two-car-in-every-garage, swimmingpool-in-every-backyard image of affluence that often passes for the norm. One can build upon it with additional income to provide for discretionary tastes, but to subtract from it immediately forces cutbacks in what is surely a modest life. The family would not starve, find itself in tatters, or be forced into a rat-infested tenement, were its income cut back by one or two thousand dollars. But it would find itself deprived of simple comfort, it would begin to detect imbalances in its meals—perhaps a marked absence of meat, or an overabundance of potatoes—it might find itself living in a "deteriorating" neighborhood where crime is a constant problem.

Yet one-half of American families live *below* the Bureau of Labor Statistics' definition of a "moderate" life.

[EXPOSING THE MYTH]

We have seen the wide disparity between the lower and upper middle classes; there are even greater disparities between rich and poor. Why is it, then, that Americans think of their country as an Affluent Society? How can we speak of America as egalitarian and democratic, when such antitheses contradict equality and endanger democracy?

From numerous interviews, and from cursory observation, it is clear that a majority of Americans publicly identify themselves as middle class (as compared to England, for example, where a majority still identifies itself as working class). Given the fact of this general self-identification, how are we to say that Americans are not middle class without the most patent contradiction?

Part of the answer to these questions lies in the way Americans talk about "the middle class." The American middle class is synonymous with the word majority. To Americans, to be middle class to to stand literally in the middle, to be average, to be the typical man in the street, the Good Joe. The idea of a minority middle class is about as ludicrous to an American as its antithesis was to a European.

Modern social science has reinforced the American notion by incorporating the American concept as part of its analysis. By *assuming* the existence of a broad middle class, and treating it as homogeneous, social scientists have frequently aggregated social economic data in a way that ignores the differences between upper and lower segments of that supposedly unitary class. By stressing the ideal of the middle class's homogeneity over the fact of its diversity, they have assumed that the ideal would appear as fact.

But none of this is new; American usage is buried deep in the history of America and in the character of the men and women who founded it. America was born in an age of Rationalist idealism, when the new ideal of equality was sharply contradicted by the reality of European society and, to a lesser extent, by the reality of colonial life as well. It was the hope of many of the Founding Fathers that in America, at least, the ideal would eventually defeat the reality. But instead the idealism of the Founding Fathers launched the country on a wave of anticipation that economic and political institutions were ill equipped to fulfill. Even today it is hard to see how the economic and political systems of America can possibly achieve the ideals which in our rhetoric too often pass for the norm.

It is not hard to see how the myth of the middle class has persisted over time. For lower-middle-class blue-collar and white-collar workers, it removes the sting that a more rigid class structure brings, and gives the workingman the feeling of fraternity in a larger world of equals. For upper-middle-class professionals, managers, and skilled workers, the myth sanctifies above-average wages and privileges on the ground that these are actually available to everyone.

Finally the myth has been enshrined because, over the past two decades, it has helped an elite of the upper middle class to achieve a substantial hegemony over the rest of the community, a hegemony that rarely is challenged successfully because of the New Class's claim to act in the interest of the whole. It is doubtful whether America has even been the fully participatory democracy claimed by its rhetoric; since World War II, however, this elite of managers and professionals has been able to operate with a freedom that has been only weakly opposed, and then for the wrong reasons.

Their hegemony might not be so bad, were it not for the simple fact that they have misperceived America and perpetuated myths which sustain the inequalities of American life. By naively assuming (or deliberately pretending) that their affluence, advantages, and comforts are universal, instead of unique, and that the middle class includes nearly everyone, they have continued the myth without considering the consequences, neither the injustice which they perpetuate, nor the justice which they promise, but cannot fulfill.

In establishing this hegemony, they have been aided by the traditional American rejection of class terminology. To be sure, there *is* affluence in America, but it is sharply limited for the vast majority. Surveying the extent and level of wealth in this country lends credence to Fitzgerald's famous claim that the very rich are different from you and me. And, scrutinizing the unique well-being of the upper-middle class, one can see why many of its New Class members believe that the Affluent Society is now being transcended by the Opulent Society. What one cannot see, however, is how this new opulence will ever reach those below.

Since America, in fact, is not an Affluent Society, let alone an opulent one, since malnutrition and poverty coexist with enormous wealth, and since the middle class is a term which may describe a family that is only one step ahead of poverty or a family one step short of riches, the question of economic equality remains as crucial today as it was to Jefferson and Paine in the early years of the Republic.

Exposing the myth of the middle class does not show how we may achieve that equality, but it does support what stands in its way. A solution is lacking because it requires not new ideas, but new will, and that will must come from the majority itself. Returning equality to the vocabulary of Americans is only the first step; whatever further steps are taken, only the American people may decide.

The preceding article excerpted and adapted from The Myth of the Middle Class: Notes on Affluence and Equality, *by Richard Parker (Liveright, $7.95).*