

THE PEOPLE'S ENGLISH

a guide to the six
great social classes—
in the United States—
and, more particularly,
to their speech and
writing standards

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Full opportunity for full development is the unalienable right of all. He who denies it is a tyrant; he who does not demand it is a coward; he who is indifferent to it is a slave; he who does not desire it is dead.

—Eugene Debs, 1904

PREFACE

This book is far more composed than its author, who has spent twenty frustrating years trying, often clumsily and ineffectually, to improve college students' written composition and widen their understanding of English grammar, usage, and mechanics. I have decided the concepts herein have been tested long enough; these latter days occasionally bring gratifying results. My notions, moreover, seem to have acquired some solidity. This volume feels *right* to me, the way a good poker hand does. Of course, like most books, this is simply a reshuffled deck of borrowed ideas. And like most authors I must now try justifying the rearrangement.

The foundations, the deck's chief cards, are the beliefs (1) that, as many respected sociologists and economists have taught us, society is clearly class-structured; (2) that, driven by ambition, or something, representatives of all classes find their way these days to various kinds of colleges; (3) that society has a certain responsibility for each of these new students, despite the difficulties caused by their heterogeneity; (4) that this obligation requires multiple teaching and learning techniques in perhaps all fields, and (5) that this is certainly true in English composition classrooms, where there should be greatly expanded opportunities for individualized instruction and independent study.

The Table of Contents will give a hint of what's to come. About one-third, you'll find, is a sociological argument, a set of attempted solutions to rhetorical problems; about two-thirds is English handbook, with material arranged in order of increasing difficulty. The student is encouraged to go as far up the ladder as his ambition and talents will permit. The book is designed to help.

For the help I received in the idea-shuffling process, I wish to commend, first, my wife and sons, for their patience and understanding. To them the book is dedicated. Whenever I use "I" in these pages I'm forgetting their support: when I use "we" I'm remembering them.

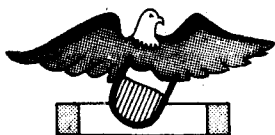
But I also wish to thank Dr. Phyllis Harris and Ms. Orabelle Connally, colleagues at Everett Community College, for their generous assistance in reading the manuscript. (Its remaining flaws are due chiefly to my obstinacy.) The proofreading of my wife, Anne, also caught many errors. For all of this aid I am very grateful.

J.E.H.
Everett, Wash.
1975

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Experience declares that man is the only animal which devours his own kind, for I can apply no milder term . . . to the general prey of the rich on the poor.

—Thomas Jefferson, 1787

CHAPTER 1

CLASS STRUCTURE IN AMERICA

The United States, some say, is virtually a classless society; it has escaped the fate of ancient cultures with entrenched hereditary aristocracies. According to this view, the nation was born democratic and class-free, and our yeasty social mobility has kept it that way—that is, much too fluid for classifications.

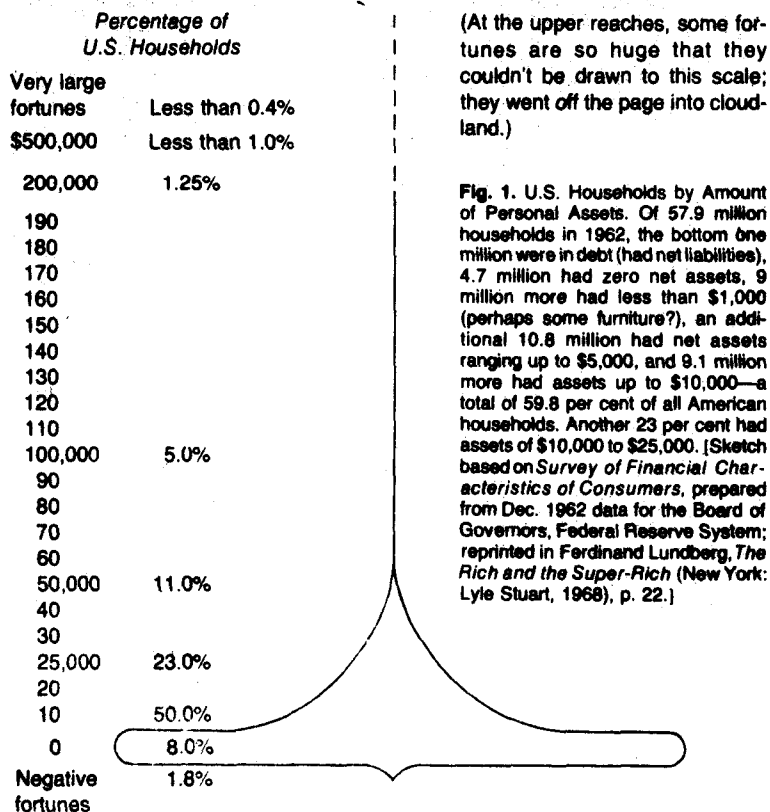
Now, it's possible that this squares with your thinking, too. Perhaps you've never thought of yourself as, say, middle class, or indeed a tenant of any class. For the purposes of this book, however, it's time to think it through.

Let's begin with some basic economic facts. If you'll recall your U.S. history, you'll perhaps remember that indentured or bonded servants, some of them blacks and Indians and felons, were common in America from the earliest colonial days.¹ Maybe, as Crèvecoeur thought, the "rich and poor are not so far removed from each other as they are in Europe,"² but it wasn't really very difficult to tell an apprentice shoemaker from a prospering Boston tobacco merchant, and both from a well-to-do Maryland planter. Distinct socioeconomic classes did exist—topped by many of the Founding Fathers in their powdered wigs, silken breeches, and silver-buckled shoes. We can be grateful that not all of the Revolution's statesmen were rich and arrogant. Indeed, some, like James Madison of Virginia, had a sane suspicion of the aristocracy: "the most common and durable source of factions has been the various and unequal distribution of property. Those who hold and those who are without property have ever formed distinct interests in society. . . . A landed interest, a manufacturing interest, a mercantile interest, a moneyed interest, with many lesser interests"—all of them needing, said Madison drily, "regulation."³

But fortunately or unfortunately, depending upon your view, the rich and powerful have never been really regulated at all. The piling of wealth in the hands of a few Federalist plutocrats continued with, to them, gratifying speed during the early years of our nation. By 1810, according to economist Robert Gallman, the top one per cent of American families owned 21 per cent of its wealth.⁴ The expropriation of Indians, the horrors of cotton and sugar-cane Negro slavery, the degradations of the Industrial Revolution's factories and sweatshops, and the financial obscenities of the Robber Baron days—all of these 19th C. phenomena are too well known to require more than mention here. Suffice it to say that, by 1915, ownership of U.S. wealth was "concentrated to a degree which is difficult to grasp. The 'Rich,' two percent of the people, own 35 per cent of the wealth. . . . The largest private fortune in the United States, estimated at one billion dollars, is equivalent to the aggregate wealth of 2,500,000 of those who are classed as 'poor' . . ."⁵

Today's top one per cent owns perhaps an even greater share: an estimated 25 per cent of all personal assets, which is several times the wealth possessed by the bottom *half* of the populace.⁶ And if we focus only upon the juiciest goodies, income-producing wealth, the figures become really dramatic. According to one source, that top *one* per cent owns more than half of the nation's corporate stock, 47 per cent of its outstanding bonds (many of them tax-exempt), 24 per cent of its notes and mortgages, and 16 per cent of its real estate.⁷ This despite antitrust legislation, an (inefficient) income tax, the Great Depression of the 1930's, and various recessions—some of them, it is known, triggered by princes of finance. (See Figure 1.)

If we swing from imagined pools of accumulated *wealth* to the streams of annual *income*, we find the disparities of fortune still astonishing. "Studies back to the 1920s show that the richest fifth of the population has consistently received at least seven times as much annual income as the bottom fifth"; a 1972 Joint Economic Committee study revealed that the lowest stratum "took



home 5.6 per cent of America's before-tax earnings in 1969, while the top fifth garnered 41 per cent."⁸ In 1973, the Census Bureau reported, the rich and poor seemed to be growing even farther apart.⁹

How, you ask, can such a thing be in an ostensibly civilized nation? The fault lies in our tax procedures, chiefly. Peter Barnes, a *New Republic* editor, did an apparently careful analysis of our lopsided 1972 incomes situation. Like many professional economists, he concluded that our tax policy is mistaken. It "does virtually nothing to improve the American before-tax distribution, primarily because the mild progressivity of federal income taxation is all but cancelled by the regressivity of payroll, sales and property taxes."¹⁰ (A "progressive" tax system is one in which the rate increases as the taxable amount increases. "Regressivity" here refers to a flat or constant rate, or nearly so, which obviously hurts the poor man much more than the rich man. Many state legislatures, and many voters, for some reason seem fond of the flat rate.¹¹) Our income-tax deduction and exclusion policies are rigged to benefit the wealthy, as was revealed in, for example, Pres. Richard Nixon's tax returns. Indeed, some millionaires have in the past paid *no* income tax; since 1970 most have supposedly made token payments. Our regressive Social Security tax, from its inception, has penalized the poor. And, of course, there are currently several ways of evading inheritance taxes; all one needs is a competent attorney or accountant.

The 19th Century cynically understood it: "The rich get richer and the poor get poorer." In the 20th Century we seem to have slowed these tendencies, at least in some cases, but we have not yet learned to reverse them. The rich families stay rich, and the poor stay poor. See Figure 2.

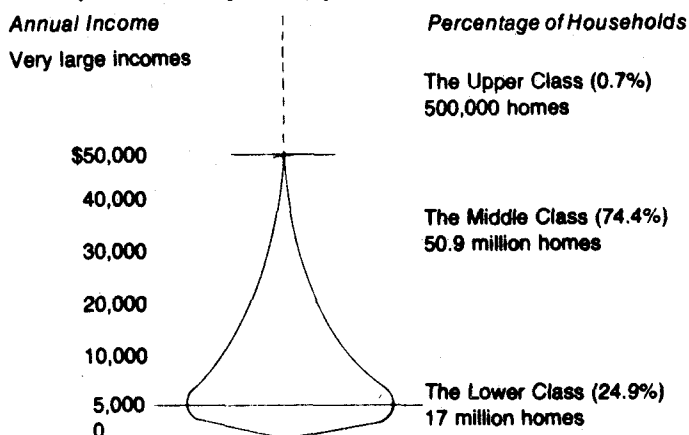


Fig. 2. shows in a crude way how our society might be pictured—somewhat like a tall, skinny Christmas tree—if we were to accept a simple three-class model based entirely on household income distribution. As in Fig. 1, the upper reaches are so high that they cannot even be drawn to this scale. (1972-73 data from Fabian Linden, "The Characteristics of Class," *The Conference Board Record*, Oct. 1973, p. 63.)

So much for "basic economic facts"; the United States was a class society from its earliest days, and remains one today. Indeed, Americans admit it when they (most of them) say they are "middle class." But what exactly do we mean by these notions? Do we estimate our social level solely in terms of wealth and income? I think not—or at least not quite.

It seems to me "social class" is an extraordinarily slippery concept to work with. How do we define it? Almost entirely in economic dimensions, with Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels? And like them do we focus upon only two classes, the propertied bourgeoisie and the bereft proletariat? Or do we set up models of many different groups, with shifting interrelationships—with, for example, the 19th C. sociologist Max Weber? Weber's pluralism is echoed in the work of many American sociologists, including for instance Joel B. Montague, Jr., who did a post-World War II study of "the working class." He announced later that it became "a problem in analyzing the existing relationships and interaction between *economic factors* (amount of real income in money and services, source of income, and patterns of consumption), *power factors*, and *status factors* (prestige, social honor, style of life, etc.)."¹² That "power factor" term "refers to the latent or actual ability to introduce force into social situations. Social classes may be power groups in this sense."¹³ As to the third concept: "Social status tends to rise with increased economic well-being and with the acquisition of power, but there is no one-to-one relationship. . . . Status and prestige tend to lag behind economic and power changes." The reason, he says, is that prestige is always linked to a person's support, or denial, of society's values.¹⁴ The renegade is usually an outcast. Countless others must patiently "prove themselves."

The concept of status or of social class, we see, becomes complicated by these side glances at interlocking economic structures and other centers of "power," however defined. But in 1957 a noted journalist, Russell Lynes, managing editor of *Harper's* magazine, managed to sketch out a somewhat simplified picture of our national life—a set of pyramids containing major occupational categories. "In America," he noted, "we are far more likely to judge a man by the position he occupies . . . than by the social level he thinks of himself as belonging to."¹⁵ And again:

Instead of being divided horizontally into levels and strata, as we are used to thinking of it, our society has increasingly become divided vertically. Instead of broad upper, middle, and lower classes that cut across the society of the nation like the clear but uneven slices on a geological model, we now have a series of almost free-standing pyramids, each with its several levels and each one topped by an aristocracy of its own. It is a far cry from the top of one of these pyramids to the next, and communication between the members of the aristocracies is occasionally difficult, for they not only speak different languages, but their minds are on quite different things. They have different notions of what constitutes success (though they all like money, of course), and their "status symbols," to use a sociologist's term, are as unlike as, say, a swimming pool and an academic hood.¹⁶

There are, said Lynes, pyramids for big businessmen (and for small), for the communications field, for entertainers, for the underworld, for intellectuals,

labor, politics, and sports. Each has its own tycoons and moguls, beaming contentedly atop the scramble.

A refined and more sophisticated statement of this concept came in 1963 in Suzanne Keller's *Beyond the Ruling Class*. She pointed to the tips of a handful of giant pyramids ("strategic elites") but also to a swarm of lesser ones ("segmental elites").

Whereas all elites are important in some social and psychological contexts, only some are important for society as a whole. . . . There is, in effect, a hierarchy among elites; some elites are more elite than others. Beauty queens, criminal masterminds, champion bridge players, and master chefs all hold top rank in certain pyramids of talent or power, but not all are equally significant in the life of society. Certain elites may arouse momentary attention, but only certain leadership groups have a general and sustained social impact. . . . We refer to these groups as strategic elites, distinguishing them from segmental elites.

Her "strategic" elites included leaders in six broad fields—the political, economic, military, moral, cultural, and scientific aspects of our societal life.¹⁷

Whereas Lynes had apparently assigned equal elevations to his pyramids, creating a mountain range of uniform heights, Dr. Keller's panorama is different. Not only does she distinguish between mountains and mere hills, but she can accommodate different measurement scales. Marx, for instance, argued that those who control the means of production bulk largest on the horizon, since they really control all major institutions. Others have had their own villains, or heroes; "a single elite has frequently been elevated to permanent stardom—be it the technological elite of Veblen, the managerial elite of Burnham, or the moral elite of Toynbee. . . ."¹⁸ But circumstances, Dr. Keller says, alter cases, and societies have had different, shifting, transient criteria in distributing power and prestige.¹⁹

A further refinement: the social topography should clearly show, I think, that not all peaks rise directly from the plains. Some large social pyramids, to be sure, do contain representatives of all skill levels, all prestige strata, all income positions, even the very lowest in society. In the sports world, for example, there are no doubt hundreds of underemployed bush-league baseball players—many for each nationally known star. In politics, the same. But I doubt seriously that Professor Keller, in surveying her segmental elites, would find a "champion bridge player" or "master chef" below what we call the middle class. Perhaps some unfortunate person who has come upon evil times and now, as the French say, *déclassé*. But surely he is only a *former* bridge champion; his current bout with alcoholism disqualifies him, at least for the present, from his earlier honors and perquisites.

Point No. 1 here is that in their models Mr. Lynes and Ms. Keller err, I believe, in ignoring or obliterating the familiar lines of economic strata. Lynes boldly announces, "Now we have only a middle class,"²⁰ but soon recognizes that he has to hedge a bit. Ms. Keller also has to testify, here and there in her work, to "the tenacity of privilege."²¹ Point No. 2 is that if one circumscribes and limits a pyramid very narrowly, as Ms. Keller herself has done, that status ladder has a tendency to float to its natural class level, rather than being anchored

at the society's bottom. Unless, of course, its class is already at society's bottom. We can think of criminal hierarchies—pickpockets, muggers, and some others—that operate chiefly or entirely below the middle class, no matter how that term is defined. We can also conceive of upper-class pyramids: university presidents? federal judges? It is relatively easy to create tiny pyramids which are very tightly class-oriented. It is also a simple matter to create some which span two classes but not the third. Bridge players and skiers, for instance, are in the middle and upper classes but not lower class. Bowlers, though, are middle and lower class but not, ordinarily, upper class.

To accommodate these "mini-pyramids" I should like you to consider a new conceptual model, one that combines horizontal with "vertical" stratification. Figure 3 shows one version of it. The society retains roughly the tree shape given it in Figure 2, along with the bands indicating three classes. Superimposed thereon is a representation of a few of society's many status heaps, some large and anchored, some smaller and "floating" at their appropriate class level or levels.

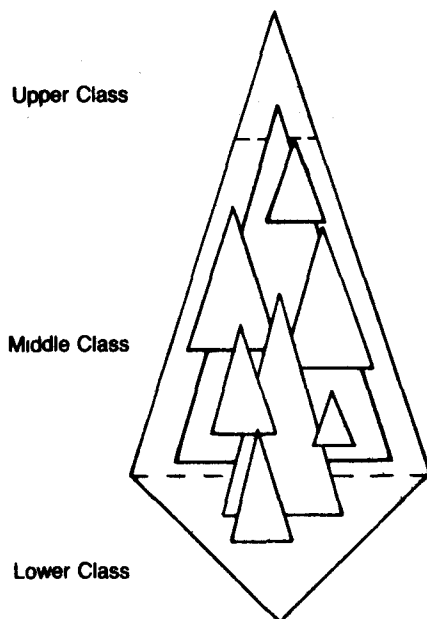


Fig. 3. A Crude Conception of Socioeconomic Relationships in American Society.

What I am arguing, you see, is that we need both concepts. We should try to fuse our folk understandings of social and economic "classes" with this useful model of occupational "pyramids." Each concept modifies and helps to explain

the other. Neither alone provides enough sociological answers; taken together they may be of real help.²²

There is one matter more, however; our model needs more stripes. In much of the sociological "literature" there is agreement that the folk concept of *three* classes is much too crude. It just won't discriminate properly among the various status strata of a complex industrial society. Some say there are five socio-economic levels now; some say ten. For the sake of an elegant simplicity, let's work with a set that is quite well known, a six-class model used by W. Lloyd Warner and others.²³

In his "Yankee City" studies Warner and his co-workers simply divided each of the three classes into an upper and lower level. Or, rather, the town's populace made that the logical choice. Here's the picture, somewhat updated for our purposes:

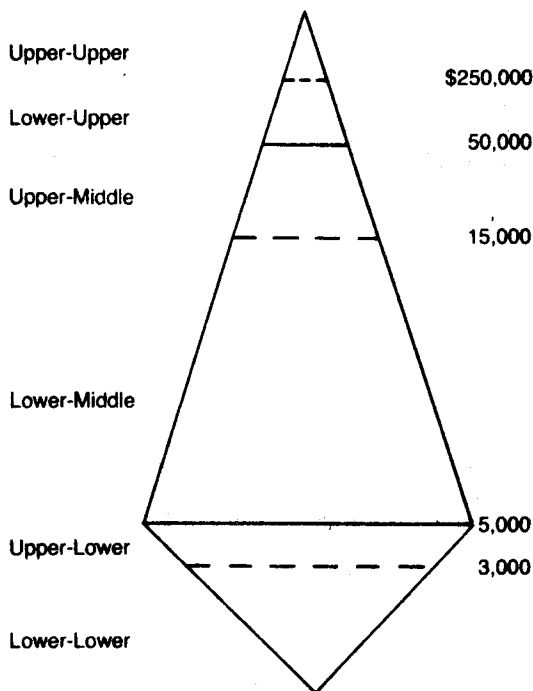


Fig. 4. A Conception of Socioeconomic Classes in American Society (based on approximate 1972 household income, but subject to various modifying factors—among them language skills).

How did Warner *et al.* distribute their status labels among the citizenry? Did money talk, again? Well, yes, it *shouted*—but the investigators were

ordinarily more interested in the *source* of the income than in the raw amount. A much better indicator of social prestige, they said. As a yardstick they created a multi-layer scale, recording income derived from (1) inherited wealth, (2) "earned" wealth, (3) profits and fees, (4) salaries, (5) wages, (6) private relief and, at the bottom of the ladder, (7) public relief and such unrespectable income as that from gambling, prostitution, and bootlegging. (It is unrespectable, we might observe, unless it is made in very great sums.) People on pensions, incidentally, were given the rank they held during their active years.

Most prestigious, let's note, is that kind of good fortune which allows the recipient to escape altogether the rigors of honest labor. The masses may hold the "idle rich" in occasional contempt—but they more often suffer, quietly or no, from a gnawing envy.

Also weighted heavily by the Warner group were the things money can buy—in particular an impressive residence at an impressive address, where, amid park-like surroundings, every prospect pleases. The house types, for instance, ranged from a low of "very poor" dwellings (not repairable) upward to a high of "excellent" (very large, with spacious, well-groomed lawns).

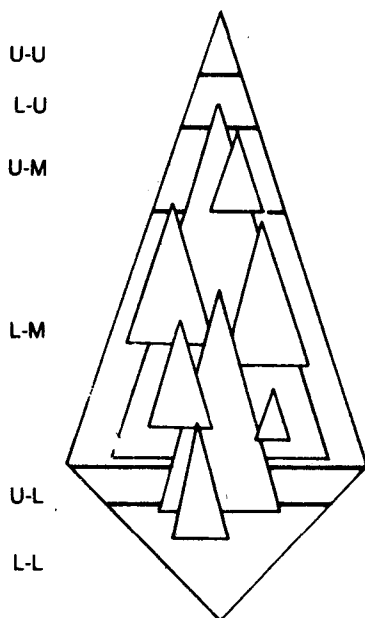
Rounding out this set of objective or easily measurable criteria was, once again, a record of the subject's occupation, with results that are perhaps predictable. (There is a notable consensus about status-giving positions.) Scoring high were big businessmen, lawyers, doctors, and some other professional people; scoring low were those with hard, sweaty, dirty jobs—scrubwomen, miners, migrant farm laborers. We shall consider the spectrum of jobs further in later chapters.

Added to these objective data were mountains of subjective reports from the townspeople themselves. The residents of "Yankee City" and, later, "Jonesville" in the Midwest, had an uncanny knack for assigning status to their fellow citizens. But they had their idiosyncrasies; they seemed to regard well-placed families with an awe that gave status even to many a black sheep. Conversely, if a lad's family lived on the wrong side of the tracks, that stigma had persistence; "blood will tell."

There were, however, ways of escaping the mold, or of settling in it ever more deeply. "The clique ranks next to the family in contributing to the placement of individuals in the class order."²⁴ Similarly, certain associations "such as discussion groups, dining clubs, and the like, are organizations which emphasize class distinctions."²⁵ Veterans groups (e.g., the American Legion) tended to be much more democratic; "lower-class people maintain membership because they derive more satisfaction out of patriotic organizations."²⁶ And although churches are class-oriented, they lack absolute precision: "The church is not very reliable for exact placement of an individual because it spreads through too many social levels."²⁷

In any event, in one way or another the community managed to assign prestige-ranking to all its members, and the Warner group recorded it painstakingly. These data were matched with the wealth-and-position findings and, with great regularity, the correlations were remarkable. Out of it all came a picture of six more or less distinct social classes.

This six-class system will do, I think. We are ready now to draw our conceptual model in its final form.



Once again, U-U stands for Upper-Upper Class, L-U for Lower-Upper, U-M for Upper-Middle, L-M for Lower-Middle, U-L for Upper-Lower, L-L for Lower-Lower.

Fig. 5. A Revised Conception of Socioeconomic Relationships in American Society.

To those unfamiliar with sociological jargon, rattling off that set of terms, out loud, will seem not just awkward and embarrassing; it will sound ludicrous. But, with a little practice, you will get better at it, and even come to take the whole matter seriously.

For, in fact, it is a serious matter. A man of more sober mien than Marx (or, indeed, his disciples and followers) would be hard to imagine, and *he* regarded the problem of social inequality with the utmost gravity and earnestness. Marx, you will recall, saw in 19th C. capitalism some few virtues, but mainly boom-and-bust, the capitulation of governments to the richer bourgeoisie, and the increasing misery of the poor. He was suspicious of capitalist "progress"—as in the advance of technology and the accumulation of capital—because in a capitalistic society "all means for the development of production transform themselves into means of domination over, and exploitation of, the producers; they mutilate the labourer into a fragment of a man, degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, destroy every remnant of charm in his work and turn it into a hated toil . . ." Worse still, such advances all "drag his wife and children beneath the wheels of the Juggernaut of capital." Bourgeois accumula-

tion of wealth, he concluded, is "accumulation of misery, agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation."²⁸

But the 19th C. capitalistic system also had its supporters, and they too were earnest men. Some of them had recently been impressed—nay, mesmerized—by the new doctrine of natural selection (the "survival of the fittest"), as enunciated by evolutionists Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer in one of history's most dazzling intellectual displays. To American business it was clear almost immediately: evolutionary progress for man depended upon a rugged individualism in all matters, including economic ones. "Although the natural law of competition is sometimes hard on the individual, wrote Andrew Carnegie in 1889, it is best for the race, since it insures the survival of the fittest in every department. The laws of economic individualism and of competition, he argued, bring wealth to those with the superior energy and ability to produce it, and keep it from the drones, the weak, the incompetent."²⁹ The economic life, with its bustling temples, was "an arena in which men met to compete. The terms of the struggle were established by the market. Those who won were rewarded with survival and, if they survived brilliantly, with riches. Those who lost went to the lions."³⁰ This wisdom, known as Social Darwinism, is still enshrined in the hearts of conservatives more than a century later.

Now, as we have already seen, it came to pass that great heaps of wealth were indeed created—although the Social Darwinists tended to overlook the role of inheritance in the whole glittering process. Russell Lynes wrote a wryly amused account of upper-class life at the close of the 19th Century:

They built tremendous marble "cottages" at Newport or Lenox which they ornamented with furnishings from European palaces; they built vast greenhouses in which tropical trees produced exotic fruits and flowers for their tables. Terraced lawns stepped down to artificial lakes where swans floated. . . . Streams of water splashed from the bronze mouths of satyrs into wide marble basins . . . men with rakes smoothed the pebbled driveways after each visiting carriage.³¹

And he told a little story about the depression of the 1890's, amid which the Bradley Martins of New York decided to give a costume ball "to give impetus to trade." Mrs. Bradley Martin was "the wife of a man of leisure. Her husband had inherited a more than considerable fortune from his father, a self-made lawyer and shrewd investor." They were socially acceptable "even in Mrs. Astor's circle of 'four hundred.'" Thus they were in a position to stage a ball which cost them and their guests \$369,200 (about a million "if equated with the current dollar") and which gave employment to "dressmakers, costumers, hairdressers, headwaiters, caterers" and others. The party was held in the ballroom of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, transformed for the night into a replica of a gleaming Versailles hall. One New York newspaper, the following day, devoted its first five pages to the affair.³²

Meanwhile, back at the tenement and out on the prairie, the depression of the Nineties was dragging along through painful months and grim, dreary years. Depressions weren't uncommon in America; there had been severe ones

as early as 1720 and 1730.³³ But this one was a lulu. The unemployed and their families existed, frequently, on one or two scanty meals a day. In 1897 Theodore Roosevelt sounded a gloomy note: "The rich have undoubtedly grown richer; . . . there has been a large absolute, though not relative, increase in poverty and . . . the very poor tend to huddle in immense masses in the cities."³⁴

And, if you will take the time and trouble, you will discover these extremes of fortune, in the richest nation on earth, to this very day.