

# WHITE COLLAR

C. WRIGHT MILLS



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The American Middle Classes

by C. Wright Mills



A GALAXY BOOK

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## Introduction

**T**HE white-collar people slipped quietly into modern society. Whatever history they have had is a history without events; whatever common interests they have do not lead to unity; whatever future they have will not be of their own making. If they aspire at all it is to a middle course, at a time when no middle course is available, and hence to an illusory course in an imaginary society. Internally, they are split, fragmented; externally, they are dependent on larger forces. Even if they gained the will to act, their actions, being unorganized, would be less a movement than a tangle of unconnected contests. As a group, they do not threaten anyone; as individuals, they do not practice an independent way of life. So before an adequate idea of them could be formed, they have been taken for granted as familiar actors of the urban mass.

Yet it is to this white-collar world that one must look for much that is characteristic of twentieth-century existence. By their rise to numerical importance, the white-collar people have upset the nineteenth-century expectation that society would be divided between entrepreneurs and wage workers. By their mass way of life, they have transformed the tang and feel of the American experience. They carry, in a most revealing way, many of those psychological themes that characterize our epoch, and, in one way or another, every general theory of the main drift has had to take account of them. For above all else they are a new cast of actors, performing the major routines of twentieth-century society:

At the top of the white-collar world, the old captain of industry

hands over his tasks to the manager of the corporation. Alongside the politician, with his string tie and ready tongue, the salaried bureaucrat, with brief case and slide rule, rises into political view. These top managers now command hierarchies of anonymous middle managers, floorwalkers, salaried foremen, county agents, federal inspectors, and police investigators trained in the law.

In the established professions, the doctor, lawyer, engineer, once was free and named on his own shingle; in the new white-collar world, the salaried specialists of the clinic, the junior partners in the law factory, the captive engineers of the corporation have begun to challenge free professional leadership. The old professions of medicine and law are still at the top of the professional world, but now all around them are men and women of new skills. There are a dozen kinds of social engineers and mechanical technicians, a multitude of girl Fridays, laboratory assistants, registered and unregistered nurses, draftsmen, statisticians, social workers.

In the salesrooms, which sometimes seem to coincide with the new society as a whole, are the stationary salesgirls in the department store, the mobile salesmen of insurance, the absentee salesmen—ad-men helping others sell from a distance. At the top are the prima donnas, the vice presidents who say that they are 'merely salesmen, although perhaps a little more creative than others,' and at the bottom, the five-and-dime clerks, selling commodities at a fixed price, hoping soon to leave the job for marriage.

In the enormous file of the office, in all the calculating rooms, accountants and purchasing agents replace the man who did his own figuring. And in the lower reaches of the white-collar world, office operatives grind along, loading and emptying the filing system; there are private secretaries and typists, entry clerks, billing clerks, corresponding clerks—a thousand kinds of clerks; the operators of light machinery, comptometers, dictaphones, addressographs; and the receptionists to let you in or keep you out.

Images of white-collar types are now part of the literature of every major industrial nation: Hans Fallada presented the

Pinnebergs to pre-Hitler Germany. Johannes Pinneberg, a book-keeper trapped by inflation, depression, and wife with child, ends up in the economic gutter, with no answer to the question, 'Little Man, What Now?'—except support by a genuinely proletarian wife. J. B. Priestley created a gallery of tortured and insecure creatures from the white-collar world of London in *Angel Pavement*. Here are people who have been stood up by life: what they most desire is forbidden them by reason of what they are. George Orwell's Mr. Bowling, a salesman in *Coming Up for Air*, speaks for them all, perhaps, when he says: 'There's a lot of rot talked about the sufferings of the working class. I'm not so sorry for the proles myself. . . The prole suffers physically, but he's a free man when he isn't working. But in every one of those little stucco boxes there's some poor bastard who's never free except when he's fast asleep and dreaming that he's got the boss down the bottom of a well and is bunging lumps of coal at him. Of course the basic trouble with people like us is that we all imagine we've got something to lose.'

*Kitty Foyle* is perhaps the closest American counterpart of these European novels. But how different its heroine is! In America, unlike Europe, the fate of white-collar types is not yet clear. A modernized Horatio Alger heroine, Kitty Foyle (like Alice Adams before her) has aspirations up the Main Line. The book ends, in a depression year, with Kitty earning \$3000 a year, about to buy stock in her firm, and hesitating over marrying a doctor who happens to be a Jew. While Herr Pinneberg in Germany was finding out, too late, that his proletarian wife was at once his life fate and his political chance, Kitty Foyle was busy pursuing an American career in the cosmetics business. But twenty-five years later, during the American postwar boom Willy Loman appears, the hero of *The Death of a Salesman*, the white-collar man who by the very virtue of his moderate success in business turns out to be a total failure in life. Frederic Wertham has written of Willy Loman's dream: 'He succeeds with it; he fails with it; he dies with it. But why did he have this dream? Isn't it true that he had to have a false dream in our society?'

The nineteenth-century farmer and businessman were generally thought to be stalwart individuals—their own men, men

who could quickly grow to be almost as big as anyone else. The twentieth-century white-collar man has never been independent as the farmer used to be, nor as hopeful of the main chance as the businessman. He is always somebody's man, the corporation's, the government's, the army's; and he is seen as the man who does not rise. The decline of the free entrepreneur and the rise of the dependent employee on the American scene has paralleled the decline of the independent individual and the rise of the little man in the American mind.

In a world crowded with big ugly forces, the white-collar man is readily assumed to possess all the supposed virtues of the small creature. He may be at the bottom of the social world, but he is, at the same time, gratifyingly middle class. It is easy as well as safe to sympathize with his troubles; he can do little or nothing about them. Other social actors threaten to become big and aggressive, to act out of selfish interests and deal in politics. The big businessman continues his big-business-as-usual through the normal rhythm of slump and war and boom; the big labor man, lifting his shaggy eyebrows, holds up the nation until his demands are met; the big farmer cultivates the Senate to see that big farmers get theirs. But not the white-collar man. He is more often pitiful than tragic, as he is seen collectively, fighting impersonal inflation, living out in slow misery his yearning for the quick American climb. He is pushed by forces beyond his control, pulled into movements he does not understand; he gets into situations in which his is the most helpless position. The white-collar man is the hero as victim, the small creature who is acted upon but who does not act, who works along unnoticed in somebody's office or store, never talking loud, never talking back, never taking a stand.

When the focus shifts from the generalized Little Man to specific white-collar types whom the public encounters, the images become diverse and often unsympathetic. Sympathy itself often carries a sharp patronizing edge; the word 'clerk,' for example, is likely to be preceded by 'merely.' Who talks willingly to the insurance agent, opens the door to the bill collector? 'Everybody knows how rude and nasty salesgirls can be.' Schoolteachers are standard subjects for businessmen's jokes. The housewife's opin

ion of private secretaries is not often friendly—indeed, much of white-collar fiction capitalizes on her hostility to ‘the office wife.’

These are images of specific white-collar types seen from above. But from below, for two generations sons and daughters of the poor have looked forward eagerly to becoming even ‘mere’ clerks. Parents have sacrificed to have even one child finish high school, business school, or college so that he could be the assistant to the executive, do the filing, type the letter, teach school, work in the government office, do something requiring technical skills: hold a white-collar job. In serious literature white-collar images are often subjects for lamentation; in popular writing they are often targets of aspiration.

Images of American types have not been built carefully by piecing together live experience. Here, as elsewhere, they have been made up out of tradition and schoolbook and the early, easy drift of the unalerted mind. And they have been reinforced and even created, especially in white-collar times, by the editorial machinery of popular amusement and mass communications.

Manipulations by professional image-makers are effective because their audiences do not or cannot know personally all the people they want to talk about or be like, and because they have an unconscious need to believe in certain types. In their need and inexperience, such audiences snatch and hold to the glimpses of types that are frozen into the language with which they see the world. Even when they meet the people behind the types face to face, previous images, linked deeply with feeling, blind them to what stands before them. Experience is trapped by false images, even as reality itself sometimes seems to imitate the soap opera and the publicity release.

Perhaps the most cherished national images are sentimental versions of historical types that no longer exist, if indeed they ever did. Underpinning many standard images of *The American* is the myth, in the words of the eminent historian, A. M. Schlesinger, Sr., of the ‘long tutelage to the soil’ which, as ‘the chief formative influence,’ results in ‘courage, creative energy and resourcefulness. . .’ According to this idea, which clearly bears a nineteenth-century trademark, *The American* possesses magical independence, homely ingenuity, great capacity for work, all of



which virtues he attained while struggling to subdue the vast continent.

One hundred years ago, when three-fourths of the people were farmers, there may have been some justification for engraving such an image and calling it *The American*. But since then, farmers have declined to scarcely more than one-tenth of the occupied populace, and new classes of salaried employees and wage-workers have risen. Deep-going historic changes resulting in wide diversities have long challenged the nationalistic historian who would cling to *The American* as a single type of ingenious farmer-artisan. In so far as universals can be found in life and character in America, they are due less to any common tutelage of the soil than to the leveling influences of urban civilization, and above all, to the standardization of the big technology and of the media of mass communication.

America is neither the nation of horse-traders and master builders of economic theory, nor the nation of go-getting, claim-jumping, cattle-rustling pioneers of frontier mythology. Nor have the traits rightly or wrongly associated with such historic types carried over into the contemporary population to any noticeable degree. Only a fraction of this population consists of free private enterprisers in any economic sense; there are now four times as many wage-workers and salary workers as independent entrepreneurs. 'The struggle for life,' William Dean Howells wrote in the 'nineties, 'has changed from a free fight to an encounter of disciplined forces, and the free fighters that are left get ground to pieces. . .'

If it is assumed that white-collar employees represent some sort of continuity with the old middle class of entrepreneurs, then it may be said that for the last hundred years the middle classes have been facing the slow expropriation of their holdings, and that for the last twenty years they have faced the spectre of unemployment. Both assertions rest on facts, but the facts have not been experienced by the middle class as a *double crisis*. The property question is not an issue to the new middle class of the present generation. That was fought out, and lost, before World War I, by the old middle class. The centralization of small properties is a development that has affected each generation back to our great-grandfathers, reaching its climax in the Progressive Era.

It has been a secular trend of too slow a tempo to be felt as a continuing crisis by middle-class men and women, who often seem to have become more commodity-minded than property-minded. Yet history is not always enacted consciously; if expropriation is not felt as crisis, still it is a basic fact in the ways of life and the aspirations of the new middle class; and the facts of unemployment *are* felt as fears, hanging over the white-collar world.

By examining white-collar life, it is possible to learn something about what is becoming more typically 'American' than the frontier character probably ever was. What must be grasped is the picture of society as a great salesroom, an enormous file, an incorporated brain, a new universe of management and manipulation. By understanding these diverse white-collar worlds, one can also understand better the shape and meaning of modern society as a whole, as well as the simple hopes and complex anxieties that grip all the people who are sweating it out in the middle of the twentieth century.

The troubles that confront the white-collar people are the troubles of all men and women living in the twentieth century. If these troubles seem particularly bitter to the new middle strata, perhaps that is because for a brief time these people felt themselves immune to troubles.

Before the First World War there were fewer little men, and in their brief monopoly of high-school education they were in fact protected from many of the sharper edges of the workings of capitalist progress. They were free to entertain deep illusions about their individual abilities and about the collective trustworthiness of the system. As their number has grown, however, they have become increasingly subject to wage-worker conditions. Especially since the Great Depression have white-collar people come up against all the old problems of capitalist society. They have been racked by slump and war and even by boom. They have learned about impersonal unemployment in depressions and about impersonal death by technological violence in war. And in good times, as prices rose faster than salaries, the money they thought they were making was silently taken away from them.

The material hardship of nineteenth-century industrial workers finds its parallel on the psychological level among twentieth-century white-collar employees. The new Little Man seems to have no firm roots, no sure loyalties to sustain his life and give it a center. He is not aware of having any history, his past being as brief as it is unheroic; he has lived through no golden age he can recall in time of trouble. Perhaps because he does not know where he is going, he is in a frantic hurry; perhaps because he does not know what frightens him, he is paralyzed with fear. This is especially a feature of his political life, where the paralysis results in the most profound apathy of modern times.

The uneasiness, the malaise of our time, is due to this root fact: in our politics and economy, in family life and religion—in practically every sphere of our existence—the certainties of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have disintegrated or been destroyed and, at the same time, no new sanctions or justifications for the new routines we live, and must live, have taken hold. So there is no acceptance and there is no rejection, no sweeping hope and no sweeping rebellion. There is no plan of life. Among white-collar people, the malaise is deep-rooted; for the absence of any order of belief has left them morally defenseless as individuals and politically impotent as a group. Newly created in a harsh time of creation, white-collar man has no culture to lean upon except the contents of a mass society that has shaped him and seeks to manipulate him to its alien ends. For security's sake, he must strain to attach himself somewhere, but no communities or organizations seem to be thoroughly his. This isolated position makes him excellent material for synthetic molding at the hands of popular culture—print, film, radio, and television. As a metropolitan dweller, he is especially open to the focused onslaught of all the manufactured loyalties and distractions that are contrived and urgently pressed upon those who live in worlds they never made.

In the case of the white-collar man, the alienation of the wage-worker from the products of his work is carried one step nearer to its Kafka-like completion. The salaried employee does not make anything, although he may handle much that he greatly desires but cannot have. No product of craftsmanship can be his to contemplate with pleasure as it is being created and after it

is made. Being alienated from any product of his labor, and going year after year through the same paper routine, he turns his leisure all the more frenziedly to the *ersatz* diversion that is sold him, and partakes of the synthetic excitement that neither eases nor releases. He is bored at work and restless at play, and this terrible alternation wears him out.

In his work he often clashes with customer and superior, and must almost always be the standardized loser: he must smile and be personable, standing behind the counter, or waiting in the outer office. In many strata of white-collar employment, such traits as courtesy, helpfulness, and kindness, once intimate, are now part of the impersonal means of livelihood. Self-alienation is thus an accompaniment of his alienated labor.

When white-collar people get jobs, they sell not only their time and energy but their personalities as well. They sell by the week or month their smiles and their kindly gestures, and they must practice the prompt repression of resentment and aggression. For these intimate traits are of commercial relevance and required for the more efficient and profitable distribution of goods and services. Here are the new little Machiavellians, practicing their personable crafts for hire and for the profit of others, according to rules laid down by those above them.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, rationality was identified with freedom. The ideas of Freud about the individual, and of Marx about society, were strengthened by the assumption of the coincidence of freedom and rationality. Now rationality seems to have taken on a new form, to have its seat not in individual men, but in social institutions which by their bureaucratic planning and mathematical foresight usurp both freedom and rationality from the little individual men caught in them. The calculating hierarchies of department store and industrial corporation, of rationalized office and governmental bureau, lay out the gray ways of work and stereotype the permitted initiatives. And in all this bureaucratic usurpation of freedom and of rationality, the white-collar people are the interchangeable parts of the big chains of authority that bind the society together.

White-collar people, always visible but rarely seen, are politically voiceless. Stray politicians wandering in the political arena without party may put 'white collar' people alongside business-

men, farmers, and wage-workers in their broadside appeals, but no platform of either major party has yet referred to them directly. Who fears the clerk? Neither *Alice Adams* nor *Kitty Foyle* could be a *Grapes of Wrath* for the 'share-croppers in the dust bowl of business.'

But while practical politicians, still living in the ideological air of the nineteenth century, have paid little attention to the new middle class, theoreticians of the left have vigorously claimed the salaried employee as a potential proletarian, and theoreticians of the right and center have hailed him as a sign of the continuing bulk and vigor of the middle class. Stray heretics from both camps have even thought, from time to time, that the higher-ups of the white-collar world might form a center of initiative for new political beginnings. In Germany, the 'black-coated worker' was one of the harps that Hitler played on his way to power. In England, the party of labor is thought to have won electoral socialism by capturing the votes of the suburban salaried workers.

To the question, what political direction will the white-collar people take, there are as many answers as there are theorists. Yet to the observer of American materials, the political problem posed by these people is not so much what the direction may be as whether they will take any political direction at all.

Between the little man's consciousness and the issues of our epoch there seems to be a veil of indifference. His will seems numbed, his spirit meager. Other men of other strata are also politically indifferent, but electoral victories are imputed to them; they do have tireless pressure groups and excited captains who work in and around the hubs of power, to whom, it may be imagined, they have delegated their enthusiasm for public affairs. But white-collar people are scattered along the rims of all the wheels of power: no one is enthusiastic about them and, like political eunuchs, they themselves are without potency and without enthusiasm for the urgent political clash.

Estranged from community and society in a context of distrust and manipulation; alienated from work and, on the personality market, from self; expropriated of individual rationality, and politically apathetic—these are the new little people, the unwilling vanguard of modern society. These are some of the circum-

stances for the acceptance of which their hopeful training has quite unprepared them.

What men are interested in is not always what is to their interest; the troubles they are aware of are not always the ones that beset them. It would indeed be a fetish of 'democracy' to assume that men immediately know their interests and are clearly aware of the conditions within themselves and their society that frustrate them and make their efforts misfire. For interests involve not only values felt, but also something of the means by which these values might be attained. Merely by looking into himself, an individual can neither clarify his values nor set up ways for their attainment. Increased awareness is not enough, for it is not only that men can be unconscious of their situations; they are often falsely conscious of them. To become more truly conscious, white-collar people would have to become aware of themselves as members of new strata practicing new modes of work and life in modern America. To know what it is possible to know about their troubles, they would have to connect, within the going framework, what they are interested in with what is to their interest.

If only because of its growing numbers, the new middle class represents a considerable social and political potential, yet there is more systematic information available on the farmer, the wage-worker, the Negro, even on the criminal, than on the men and women of the variegated white-collar worlds. Even the United States census is now so arranged as to make very difficult a definitive count of these people. Meanwhile, theorizing about the middle class on the basis of old facts has run to seed, and no fresh plots of fact have been planted. Yet the human and political importance of the white-collar people continues to loom larger and larger.

Liberalism's ideal was set forth for the domain of small property; Marxism's projection, for that of unalienated labor. Now when labor is everywhere alienated and small property no longer an anchor of freedom or security, both these philosophies can characterize modern society only negatively; neither can articulate new developments in their own terms. We must accuse both John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx of having done their work a

hundred years ago. What has happened since then cannot be adequately described as the destruction of the nineteenth-century world; by now, the outlines of a new society have arisen around us, a society anchored in institutions the nineteenth century did not know. The general idea of the new middle class, in all its vagueness but also in all its ramifications, is an attempt to grasp these new developments of social structure and human character.

In terms of social philosophy, this book is written on the assumption that the liberal ethos, as developed in the first two decades of this century by such men as Beard, Dewey, Holmes, is now often irrelevant, and that the Marxian view, popular in the American 'thirties, is now often inadequate. However important and suggestive they may be as beginning points, and both are that, they do not enable us to understand what is essential to our time.

We need to characterize American society of the mid-twentieth century in more psychological terms, for now the problems that concern us most border on the psychiatric. It is one great task of social studies today to describe the larger economic and political situation in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of the individual, and in doing this to take into account how the individual often becomes falsely conscious and blinded. In the welter of the individual's daily experience the framework of modern society must be sought; within that framework the psychology of the little man must be formulated.

The first lesson of modern sociology is that the individual cannot understand his own experience or gauge his own fate without locating himself within the trends of his epoch and the life-chances of all the individuals of his social layer. To understand the white-collar people in detail, it is necessary to draw at least a rough sketch of the social structure of which they are a part. For the character of any stratum consists in large part of its relations, or lack of them, with the strata above and below it; its peculiarities can best be defined by noting its differences from other strata. The situation of the new middle class, reflecting conditions and styles of life that are borne by elements of both the new lower and the new upper classes, may be seen as symptom and symbol of modern society as a whole.

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