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# FALLING FROM GRACE

## THE EXPERIENCE OF DOWNWARD MOBILITY IN THE AMERICAN MIDDLE CLASS

KATHERINE S. NEWMAN

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VINTAGE BOOKS
A Division of Random House, Inc.
New York

First Vintage Books Edition, September 1989

 Published in the United States by Vintage Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York. Originally published, in hardcover, by The Free Press, A Division of Macmillan, Inc., New York, in 1988.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Newman, Katherine.

Falling from grace: the experience of downward mobility in the American middle class/Katherine S. Newman.—1st Vintage Books ed.

p. cm.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-679-72397-8: $9.95

1. Social mobility—United States. 2. Middle classes—United States. 3. United States—Economic conditions—1981– 4. United States—Social conditions—1980– I. Title.

HN90.S65N48 1989

305.5'13'0973—dc20 89-40151

CIP

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

# Preface

Hundreds of thousands of middle-class families plunge down America's social ladder every year. They lose their jobs, their income drops drastically, and they confront prolonged economic hardship, often for the first time. In the face of this downward mobility, people long accustomed to feeling secure and in control find themselves suddenly powerless and unable to direct their lives.

The experience of downward mobility may seem a strange subject of study for an anthropologist. The kind of data that researchers typically employ to chart patterns of mobility—statistics drawn from national surveys—are hardly the stuff of anthropology. However, on closer scrutiny, downward mobility is a subject crying out for anthropological analysis. It is an experience as foreign to many in the United States as the lives of exotic peoples in New Guinea. Most Americans do not see how a catastrophic loss of place changes the way that husbands, wives, children, kin, and friends behave toward each other. They have never questioned whether the values embedded in American culture help those in

trouble or make their lives more uncomfortable. And people who *have* lived through downward mobility are often secretive and cloistered or so bewildered by their fate that they find it hard to explain to themselves, let alone to others, what has befallen them.

In the midst of coping with an unexpected reversal in their material fortunes, the downwardly mobile must contend with the meaning of their fall, with the way it reflects on themselves and the larger society within which they live. Questions of meaning and interpretation occupy the heartland of anthropology. Hence, where other social scientists might be concerned mainly with the macroeconomic or statistical contours of downward mobility—its objective face—the anthropologist searches for the underlying cultural architecture that shapes the *experience* of "falling from grace." And when the topic is approached in this way, downward mobility emerges as much more than a collection of disturbing tales of outcasts from the middle class. It reveals a more general blueprint for American culture.

The downwardly mobile are a very special tribe. Some are heroes who find ways to rise above their circumstances; others are lost souls, wandering the social landscape without direction. But almost all are deeply sensitive to the lives they left behind. They spend hours reflecting upon what their old world meant and what the new one lacks. They therefore offer an unusual window on what it means to be middle class in America.[1] Yet, peering through that window, one discovers that middle-class culture is not uniform or monolithic. There are variations in the values and worldviews contained in the middle class, and they refract the experience of downward mobility in distinctive ways. Downward mobility brings these variations into sharp relief and focuses attention on the diversity of cultural forms that make up the American middle class.

My interest in downward mobility was inspired by several concerns—some worldly, some academic. The last decade has seen remarkable twists and turns in the ethos of American public life. The Carter years were suffused by the symbols of populism—the man of the people, dressed in a cardigan by the fireside, walking the streets of the capital during his inaugural parade. The 1980s brought stretch limousines and black tie back to Washington, symbols of a reawakened conservativism that emphasizes the individual over the community, laissez-faire over social compassion. With the refrain of Adam Smith's free-market economics

in the background, America is said to be making great strides toward prosperity.

Yet the promise of success appears to be out of reach for many. And I do not speak here of the urban poor, who have always been on the dark side of the American dream. The farmers in the Midwest, the oil workers in Texas, and a host of unpublicized members of the middle class are also losing their grip on prosperity. Downward mobility is touching the lives of many people who never expected to find they had anything in common with the poor. The 1980s are calling into question that article of faith so deeply embedded in our national consciousness: that our material lives just keep getting better every year.

An examination of outcasts from the American middle class affords the opportunity to bring the insights and understandings of the anthropologist back to our own shores. Cultural analysis in America is a time-honored tradition: Margaret Mead, Franz Boas, David Schneider, and Louise Lamphere are but a few of the anthropologists who have written about American culture. But in recent years anthropology has gained greater public recognition for studies of exotic peoples in foreign lands. These are crucial contributions to the understanding of humankind in all its variety and are the foundation of what anthropologists like to call our comparative mission. Yet it was always said that the study of other cultures would better equip us to study our own. Along with many other anthropologists who are studying American society, I take that dictum seriously and attempt to apply it here.

Once intrigued by the issue of downward mobility, I began to see it everywhere, including in my own family. My grandfather worked for thirty years as a traveling salesman for a company that sold household appliances in northern California. He made the rounds of the retail stores that purchased the company's product line. His customers and the neighborhoods of the San Francisco Bay area he traveled were the core of his universe. The company was sold when my grandfather was sixty; he was soon fired, along with the other older salesmen. He lost his center of gravity, his feeling of worth. He died not long thereafter, a much sadder man than he had been during his working life.

His was not a tale of the Great Depression: It happened in 1959, an economic boom period in the United States. The more I looked, the more people like my grandfather I found hanging

from the branches of middle-class family trees. It occurred to me that despite the tendency to think of these unfortunates as oddities, they might not be so exceptional. And I realized how very damaging the ideology of exceptionalism can be where downward mobility is concerned, for it can lead those who have suffered tremendous disappointment into debilitating self-blame, and it bequeaths to their children a host of anxieties about their own competence and security.

My analysis of the downward mobility experience is based upon more than 150 in-depth interviews of the sort anthropologists often call "focused life histories."[2] As is customary, I have concealed the identities of the people who shared their lives with me, changing their names, the cities in which they live, and other details necessary to protect their anonymity and privacy.

***Acknowledgments***

It has taken nearly four years to hammer these concerns into the shape of a book. Much of that time was spent in the company of my computer, but I was fortunate to have the help of many people as well, only a few of whom can be acknowledged here. First and foremost, I owe a great debt to the people who spent hours in front of my tape recorder, delving into aspects of their lives that were often stressful to discuss. They cannot be acknowledged by name, but I can thank them collectively, as well as the several organizations who helped me find them, including the Forty Plus Club of New York City, PATCO Lives, and the leadership of the International Electrical Workers Union local that represented the Singer Company workers in Elizabeth, New Jersey.

The Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, provided a congenial atmosphere for my research in 1982–1983. The American Association of University Women awarded me a postdoctoral research grant that enabled me to pursue this research full-time for one year. Columbia University's Department of Anthropology, Council for Research in the Social Sciences, and Junior Faculty Development Program facilitated this research in a variety of ways, not the least of which was their generous funding of summer grants and research leaves.

A number of my colleagues listened patiently while I thought aloud, and the truly hardy among them put in hours reading

drafts of the manuscript. Robert Murphy, whose own research on the disabled is a model of anthropological scholarship on American culture, read every line despite his own busy schedule. Herbert Gans, whom many anthropologists would claim as one of their own although he is a well-known figure in American sociology, read and criticized my work in its early stages. Paula Rubel and Abraham Rosman took valuable time out from their sabbatical year to read the manuscript in full. Michael Kimmel dropped everything on short notice to give the book a thoughtful reading. I remain very much in debt to these colleagues, who contributed their own intellectual insights to my analysis. I have incorporated their ideas shamelessly here.

Many others read or discussed parts of this work and were unfailing in their help and support, including Elaine Combs-Schilling, David Schilling, David Halle, Louise Mirrer, Arlene and Jerome Skolnick, Philip Selznick, Doris Fine, Stephen O'Connor, Helen Benedict, Louise Lamphere, Carol Stack, Glen Elder, Jr., Judith Small, Bob Fitzgerald, Jill Suitor, Scott Feld, Eviatar and Yael Zerubavel, Alexander Alland, Jr., Elliot Skinner, and Myron Cohen. Professors Greg Duncan of the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan, Suzanne Keller of the Department of Sociology at Princeton University, and Michael Merrill of the Rutgers University Center for Labor Education generously contributed research materials. Bill Taylor, the director of PATCO Lives, proved to be a mine of information and assistance, as was Arthur Shostak of Drexel University.

I gratefully acknowledge three journals that published articles derived from this research: *American Ethnologist, Cultural Anthropology,* and *Urban Anthropology.* The editors of these journals—Professors Shirley Lindenbaum, George Marcus, and Jack Rollwagen—and several anonymous reviewers made valuable conceptual and editorial suggestions and enabled me to put some of these ideas before my professional colleagues.

My editor at The Free Press, Joyce Seltzer, pushed me mercilessly to express my ideas in an accessible form. If I have had any success in that endeavor, it is due largely to her efforts. She was, from the beginning, committed to the larger vision of the book, and her confidence in it kept me on track when the task seemed quite unmanageable.

I was able to secure the help of several outstanding doctoral students in the anthropology department at Columbia University

who worked with me as research assistants. Anastasia Karakasidou devoted several years of her own time to this book, remaining throughout the most dependable and intelligent colleague one could hope for. A number of others scoured the libraries for documentary materials, including Deborah Blincoe, Bill Bushell, Kate Dudley, Lawrence Hammar, and Andrea Pellegram.

I have saved two crucial people to the end. It would be nearly impossible to thank my colleague and husband, Paul Attewell, in a fashion that genuinely reflects his contribution. He read every draft of every chapter many times over. He argued the ideas, pored over the writing, and pushed me to keep going. He lived this book just as I did, and it would not exist were it not for his intellectual commitment to the enterprise. Our son, Steven Newman Attewell, endured a distracted mother through much of his infancy and emerged with a cheerful disposition that continues to amaze his parents.

New York City
October 1987

# Contents

# 1

# American Nightmares

DAVID PATTERSON was a practical man. All his life—from his youth in a run-down working-class district of Philadelphia to his adulthood in the affluent suburbs of New York—he had made rational decisions about the future. David had a talent for music, but he studied business. He had a flare for advertising, but he pursued a job in the computer industry. He wore his rationality proudly. Having steered clear of personal indulgence, he had a lot to show for his efforts: a beautiful home, two luxury cars, a country club membership, a rewarding executive job, and a comfortable, stable family. The Philadelphia slums seemed a million miles away and a million years ago.

When David's boss left frantic messages with the secretary, asking him to stay late one Friday afternoon, his stomach began to flutter. Only the previous week David had pored over the company's financial statements. Things weren't looking too good, but it never occurred to him that the crisis would reach his level. He was, after all, the director of an entire division, a position he had been promoted to only two years before. But when David

saw the pained look on the boss's face, he knew his head had found its way to the chopping block.

He was given four weeks of severance pay, the use of the company telephone credit card, and a desk in a remote part of the building for the month. Despite these assurances, the credit card was canceled a week later. The company made good on the severance pay agreement, but David was made to feel increasingly uncomfortable about the desk. So he cleared out and went home.

Wasting no time, he set to work on the want ads every morning. He called all his friends in the business to let them know he was looking, and he sent his resume out to the "headhunters"—the executive search firms that match openings to people. David was sure, in the beginning, that it wouldn't be long before a new position opened up. He had some savings put aside to cushion the family in the meanwhile. He was not worried. By the third month of looking, he was a bit nervous. Six fruitless months down the line he was in a full-fledged panic. Nothing was coming through. The message machine he had bought the day after losing his job was perpetually blank.

After nine months, David and his wife Julia were at a crossroads. Their savings eroded, they could not keep up the mortgage payments on their four-bedroom neocolonial house. Julia had gone back to work after a two-year hiatus, but her earnings were a fraction of what David's had been. His unemployment compensation together with her paycheck never amounted to more than 25 percent of the income they had had in the old days. The house, their pride and joy and the repository of virtually all their savings, went up for sale. They reasoned that if the house sold, at least they could salvage some cash to support the family while David continued to look for a job. But their asking price was too high to attract many qualified buyers. Finally it was sold for a song.

Broke and distressed beyond imagining, the family found a small apartment in a modest section of a nearby town. David continued to look for an executive job, but the massive downturn of the mid-1980s in the computer industry virtually ensured that his search would bear no fruit. From Silicon Valley to Boston's Route 128, the shakeout in his field was stranding hundreds of equally well-qualified men. David could not get past the personnel offices of firms in other industries. He was not given the chance to show how flexible he could be, how transferable his managerial experience was to firms outside the computer field.

After a while David stopped calling his friends, and they ceased trying to contact him. Having always been sociable people, David and Julia found it hard to cope with the isolation. But with no good news to share, they didn't really feel like seeing old acquaintances. Friendship in their social circles revolved around outings to fancy restaurants, dances at the country club, and the occasional Broadway show or symphony in New York City. The Pattersons' budget simply could not sustain these luxuries anymore. For a time their friends were understanding, inviting them to dinner parties in their homes instead of excursions to places the Pattersons could not afford. But eventually the unspoken rules of reciprocity put an end to that. The Pattersons couldn't issue return invitations, and the potluck dinners of their youth were not a viable alternative.

David and Julia were almost relieved by the ensuing isolation. It had been a strain to put on a calm countenance when, in fact, they felt that life was falling apart. At the same time, however, they interpreted the sounds of silence as abandonment. When friends ceased to call, David was convinced this meant that they no longer cared what happened to him. At least they should try to help him, he thought.

Like many other executive families, they were newcomers to suburban New York. Only two years before, David's firm had transferred him from its California branch to its New York headquarters. The move east held the promise of a more important executive job for David and a taste of real affluence. The transition had not been easy, since the social barriers of suburban society were hard to penetrate. Making new friends was no small accomplishment, and after two years there were only a few they could count as close. But they weren't the kind of old friends one could lean on in a crisis, and this surely was a crisis.

Their two teenage children were equally disoriented. Like most kids, they had opposed moving away from the place where they had grown up. They made no secret of their fury at being disrupted in the middle of high school, exiled to a new state where they knew no one. The girl had become rather withdrawn. The boy had worked hard to make new friends, leaning on his father's prestige as a company executive as an avenue into the status-conscious cliques of the local high school. When the son first arrived, as David put it, "No one would even talk to him. He was looked upon as a transient. Everyone else in his school had been in the same area since grammar school." The son's efforts to break into the networks met with only mild success, and even

then, it took nearly the entire two years before he felt on solid social ground. He had finally reached a comfortable plateau when David lost his job. The whole family was thrown into turmoil, and the prospect of moving surfaced once again.

This was too much. David's teenagers unleashed their fury: How could he do this to them? The whole move to New York had been his idea in the first place. Now he was going to drag them through another upheaval! How dare he interfere with their lives so drastically once again? How were they supposed to explain to their friends that their father-the-executive was unemployed? Conformity was the watchword in their friendship circles. Not only did they have to look right and act right, they had to come from acceptable backgrounds. An unemployed father hardly fit the bill. In fact, it threatened their standing altogether because it made it impossible for them to buy the clothes and cars that were commonplace in their social set.

David was accustomed to the normal tensions of life with teenagers. But in his shaken condition, he felt guilty. In retrospect, he agreed with his kids that the move to New York had been ill advised. But it wasn't as if he had had any warning of the debacle when they left the familiar comforts of California. He was simply doing what any intelligent man in his position would do: pursue every opportunity for upward mobility, even if the family is disrupted in the process.

Harder to contend with was the strain on his wife. Julia had long dabbled as a receptionist in art galleries, but her work had been more of a hobby and occasional supplement to the family budget than a mainstay. It had not been easy for her to pick up where she left off when the family moved to New York. Eventually, she found a part-time receptionist position, but her wages could not begin to cover the family's expenses. The move had bequeathed the Pattersons a staggering mortgage for a house twice as expensive as their old one. They could manage the bills as long as David was employed. But with his job gone, Julia's earnings could not stretch far enough. In one fell swoop, Julia found herself the major breadwinner in the family. Though she tried to find a job that would pay more, she had never thought of her work as a "career." She lacked the experience and stable employment history needed to land a better position.

It was the uncertainty of the situation that Julia found hardest to bear. She just could not tell when it would end or where they

might land. It was difficult enough to batten down the hatches, cut purchases, and figure out a way to keep the credit cards from sliding too far into arrears. The family did not venture into the shopping malls any more, although this had once been a major form of weekend recreation. If she could figure out when things were going to bottom out, at least she would know what standard of living they had to adapt to. But, lacking any concrete sense of destination, Julia did not know how to begin the adjustment. Adjust to what?

Little help was forthcoming from the suburban matrons in the neighborhood, who—it appears—had never faced anything even remotely resembling this crisis. Where Julia expected to find sympathy and even offers of assistance, she found disbelief and not a little finger pointing. David could sense the damage this was doing:

> Since becoming unemployed there's really nothing, especially for my wife—no place where a woman can talk about things. There are no real relationships. She's hurt. People say to her, "With all the companies on Long Island, your husband can't find a job? Is he really trying? Maybe he likes not working." This really hurts her and it hurts me. People don't understand that you can send out 150 letters to headhunters and get 10 replies. Maybe one or two will turn into something, but there are a hundred qualified people going after each job. The computer industry is contracting all over the place and as it contracts, my wife contracts emotionally.

Secretly David worried whether Julia didn't share just a bit of her friends' attitudes. He could see the despair on her face when he would come home with no news to report. But on too many occasions, it seemed that her rage over the unfairness of his plight was mixed with doubt. She would bombard him with questions: Did you follow up on this lead? Did you call your cousin Harry about another? What did the headhunter tell you about that job downtown? David had few satisfying answers and after a while he began to resent the questions. Couldn't Julia see he was doing his best? It got to the point where he preferred taking a train into the city to look for work to riding with her in the car. Two hours together in the car with nothing but a bleak future to talk about was sometimes more than he could face.

The whole situation left David at a loss. No one was playing by the rules. He had credentials; he had experience; he was in a

high-tech field that was touted as the wave of the future. Every time he turned on the news he would hear commentators lament the closing of the steel plants, the auto plants, and the coal mines. This was to be expected in an era when the United States no longer seemed able to compete in the world of heavy industry. But computers? They were supposed to be our salvation, and as a man who always kept one eye on the future, David had aggressively and successfully pursued a career in the field. How could he have gotten into such a quagmire?

The truth is, the computer industry was taking a bath in the mid-1980s. Thousands of employees had been turned out from Atari, Honeywell, Apple. Even IBM, the giant of the industry, had had to tighten its belt. David's entire division had been closed down: fifty people axed in one stroke. The industry shakeout was headline news in the *Wall Street Journal* and on the business pages of the major dailies. But it was only slowly seeping into general public consciousness, where computers still hold a special place as the glamour industry for the twenty-first century. The news had clearly failed to reach the Pattersons' friends. They were dumbfounded by David's disaster. High tech was the answer to the country's economic ills; computers were booming. How could David be having so much trouble finding a job? And what was the *real* reason he had lost his old one?

David could recite the litany of problems in the computer business so familiar to insiders. He could understand completely why his division, located at the market research end of the company, had been targeted as "nonessential" to its survival. In the beginning he told himself that his personal situation could be explained logically. Market forces had put pressure on the company, and it responded, as any rational actor in a competitive capitalist economy would, by cost cutting, aiming first at those activities that were most remote from the nuts and bolts of production and sales. Indeed, had David been at the helm, he argued, he would have made the same decision. For David Patterson is no rebel. He is a true believer in the American way of doing business. Up until now, it had satisfied his every ambition. Hence there was no reason to question its fundamental premise: In economics, as in life, the strong survive and the weak fall by the wayside.

But after months of insecurity, depression, and shaking fear, the economic causes of his personal problems began to fade from view. All David could think about was, What is wrong with me?

Why doesn't anyone call me? What have I done wrong? He would spend hours bent over his desk, rubbing his forehead, puffing on his pipe, examining his innermost character, wondering whether this or that personality flaw was holding him back. Could people tell that he was anxious? Were people avoiding him on the street because they couldn't stand to come face to face with desperation? Was he offending potential employers, coming on too strong? With failure closing in from all directions the answer came back "It must be me." The ups and downs of the computer industry and the national economy were forgotten. David's character took center stage as the villain in his own downfall.

*

David Patterson has joined the ranks of a little-known group in America, a lost tribe: the downwardly mobile. They are men and women who once had secure jobs, comfortable homes, and reason to believe that the future would be one of continued prosperity for themselves and their children. Longtime members of the American middle class, they suddenly find everything they have worked to achieve—careers, life-styles, and peace of mind—slipping through their fingers. And despite sustained efforts to reverse the slide, many discover there is little they can do to block their descent.

The lack of attention downward mobility receives—from policymakers, scholars, and the public—has little to do with its actual incidence. Its low visibility is hardly a product of size: About one in five American men skid down the occupational hierarchy in their working lives.[1] In recessions and depressions, their numbers grow at a particularly rapid rate. But downward mobility is not simply an episodic or unusual phenomenon in this country. It is a regular feature of the economic landscape that has been with us for many years.

Yet we hear very little about the downwardly mobile. Magazine covers and television programs focus attention on upward mobility, the emergence of the Yuppies, the exploits of the rich and famous, and in less dramatic terms, the expectation of ordinary Americans that from one year to the next, their lives will keep getting better. But many middle-class families are headed in the opposite direction—falling on hard times—and relatively little systematic attention is paid to their experience.

In the public mind, downward mobility is easily confused with