
LABOR'S
LOVE
LOST

The Rise and Fall of the
Working-Class Family in
America

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Chapter 1 | Introduction

AMERICAN SOCIETY HAS now experienced the rise and fall of a distinctive kind of home life: the working-class family. It originated in the early 1800s when the industrialization of the American economy began, and it accelerated later in the century as the growing number of manufacturing jobs attracted millions of migrants from Europe and rural America. It centered on marriage and was, as historians and social scientists like to say, a deeply gendered form of family life. Husbands were expected to take factory jobs and to work full-time—which in the nineteenth century usually meant ten or twelve hours a day, six days a week—throughout adulthood. Wives were expected to focus on the home, managing a meager budget and meeting the day-to-day needs of husbands and children at a time when family sizes were larger and—with no gas, no electricity, no home appliances, no telephone, and often no running water or indoor plumbing—housework was far more arduous than today. Working-class wives also made important contributions to the family income in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by earning money at home. They took in boarders—unrelated individuals who paid to live in their home or just to eat meals with them—or did piecework such as assembling hats or shoes. Occasionally, they even worked for wages outside the home. Sons were expected to take jobs at an early age—twelve or fourteen before compulsory school attendance laws raised the age to sixteen—and to turn over their wages to their parents. Daughters were expected to either work for wages or help their mothers at home.¹

The fortunes of the working-class family crested during the thirty-year period that followed World War II, when incomes rose sharply and prosperity spread more broadly than ever before. The average manufacturing wage more than doubled in purchasing power from 1950 to 1970, allow-

ing, for the first time, large numbers of working-class families to attain the middle-class ideal of the male-breadwinner family: husbands doing most of the earning, and wives focusing on homemaking, child-rearing, and emotional support, with perhaps some part-time work mixed in. That period—and particularly the decade of the 1950s, which was at its heart—has held an outsized place in our collective memories of family life. But it was not in any sense a typical period for the American family; rather, it proved to be the historical exception. The post-World War II era, we now can see, constituted the peak years of American capitalism. It was a unique period in which income inequality was at a historic low and industrial workers' wages were high. In the immediate postwar years, the United States, which had emerged from the war victorious and unscathed, was the unchallenged economic power in the world. Rising productivity and dominance in world trade allowed employers to pay male breadwinners historically generous wages while still earning substantial profits. A surge in births—the baby boom—both reflected the optimism of young families and created a heightened demand for goods and services. Generally, a young man could walk out of high school and find a job at a decent wage with the expectation of job security. It is the only period in American history in which the nation's economy was able to support large numbers of working-class families almost solely on the wages of the husbands and the household work of their wives. It is the only time when a young working-class couple could expect to move up to the middle class almost as a matter of course.²

To be sure, the male-breadwinner family was a lesser part of the lives of African American families than it was among whites. The cultural ideal of the homemaker who devoted herself exclusively to household work and child care never really applied to African American women. Rather, they had always been expected to work outside the home: first in the fields as slaves, then as sharecroppers indebted to their landlords, then as domestic servants and washerwomen to white households. Moreover, marriage rates had long been lower for African Americans than for whites, and African American men had not been allowed to share fully in the wage gains that accrued to white men; manufacturing and crafts unions for the most part excluded them. Factory owners hired African American men for the least desirable jobs, if at all. This situation began to change after World War II, when the ranks of African American manufacturing workers rose markedly and African American women started to move out of domestic service and into clerical, sales, and service jobs. In 1960 about 45 percent of African American women with children were both married and not working outside the home. That was less than the 79 percent figure for comparable white women, but still a substantial change. And for both African

American and white women, the 1960 percentages for those who were married and not employed were much higher than they would be a generation later.³

At midcentury, social observers thought the good times would last indefinitely—that we had reached the end of history and with it, the highest form of family life. Influential sociologists such as Talcott Parsons argued that the male-breadwinner family was well suited to an industrial society: since only the husband had a job, and since occupational success was his goal, the family could easily move from place to place as the husband followed the needs of the labor market. But after the Arab members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries initiated an oil embargo in 1973, the economy began a prolonged slump and the postwar boom came to an end. In the 1980s and afterward, many of the manufacturing jobs that had sustained the working-class family moved to overseas factories or were computerized, and as the economy was transformed working-class young adults struggled to sustain the male-breadwinner marriage. Increasing numbers of working-class wives entered the labor force, usually part-time while their children were young and full-time when they were older; unlike some of their middle-class counterparts, they worked more for the money than for personal satisfaction.⁴

Yet even had the economy remained strong, it is likely that the working-class version of the male-breadwinner family would have eventually declined. It faced internal contradictions that the prosperity and optimism of the postwar years hid. For one thing, there was much less for the full-time homemaker to do. Even Parsons recognized that the role of the housewife "has declined in importance to the point where it scarcely approaches a full-time occupation for a vigorous person." Fertility had fallen from the six or seven children that women bore in the early 1800s to the four-child family in the late 1800s, to the three-child family at the peak of the 1950s baby boom. Births fell further after the 1950s as parents realized that the best family strategy was to have fewer children and to invest more time and resources in each of them. Modern utilities and conveniences such as electrically powered washers, dryers, stoves, refrigerators, and vacuum cleaners all became available on a mass scale for the first time and made keeping house more efficient. Granted, a consumer culture invented more work for the housewife—ever-cleaner homes and ever more elaborately prepared meals—but the long-term trend was to diminish the housewife's role.⁵

In addition, the demand for workers in the clerical and service sectors of the economy had begun to increase. Many of these occupations had become feminized during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From 1850 to 1880, for instance, only 10 percent of people employed

as stenographers, typists, secretaries, cashiers, bank tellers, or library attendants were women; by 1930, however, 87 percent were women. More women were obtaining high school and college degrees, which qualified them for the growing number of clerical jobs. The massive but temporary employment of married women during World War II had demonstrated to many women that paid work could be both economically valuable and personally satisfying. Overall, as the tasks of the housewife became less demanding, as the logic of childbearing shifted from quantity to quality, as labor market opportunities grew, and as women's educational levels increased, the restriction of married women to the home led to a particular unease that Betty Friedan famously called "the problem that has no name." In the 1970s, a feminist movement, building on the work of Friedan and others, would develop a sharp critique of the male-breadwinner family.⁶

In a sense, to write about modern life for the American working-class family during the postwar peak is to tell a Dickensian tale of the best of times and the worst of times. The postwar peak was a time of job stability, economic security, and, at a personal level, devotion to home and family. More than nine out of ten young adults in the 1950s married; they did so at younger ages than at any other time in the twentieth century; and they had children quickly after marrying. The divorce rate was unusually stable throughout the 1950s and early 1960s. The industrial laborer took pride in getting up every morning and doing hard, manual work in support of his wife and children. All this was positive—or at least remembered as positive now that the era has passed. But it was also a time of male domination, alienation from work, and restricted horizons for women. Domestic violence was tolerated far more than today; husbands were unlikely to be arrested or prosecuted for beating their wives unless they caused serious injury. In large factories the drudgery of the assembly line was so severe that well-paid automobile workers were sometimes described as prisoners of prosperity. At home, working-class wives struggled with the expectation that they shouldn't work outside the home as well as the reality of tight budgets and unpaid bills. The upside of the working-class family at its height was substantial enough that we should appreciate its accomplishments. Its downside was severe enough that we should not mourn its recent demise. In either case, we are unlikely to see it in such numbers again.⁷

Today there is no doubt that the marriage-based working-class family, whether with one earner or two, is in decline. High school-educated young adults still believe that a young man must have steady earnings in order to be worthy of marriage. (They also think that it helps if a woman does too, but her employment is optional.) Because fewer and fewer men meet this criterion, high school-educated young adults are increasingly

postponing marriage altogether. But in a cultural shift from the values prevalent a half-century ago, when living together outside of marriage was shameful, they are instead forming short-term cohabiting relationships. In a further cultural shift, they are having children within these brittle unions—a style of life that would have shocked their grandparents. By the time they are in their late twenties, three-fourths of young mothers who have no bachelor's degree have had at least one child outside of marriage. It is now unusual for non-college-graduates to have all of their children within marriage. A substantial number go on to have children with a second partner, or even a third, creating complex and unstable family lives that are not good for children. The problem of the fall of the working-class family from its midcentury peak, then, is not that the male-breadwinner family has declined—it would eventually have collapsed under its own weight. The problem is that nothing stable has replaced it.⁸

CHARTING THE GROWTH AND DECLINE OF THE WORKING-CLASS FAMILY

To understand the working-class family today we first need to examine its origins and trace its path. The story begins with the start of the industrial revolution in Britain in the late 1700s and in the United States in the early 1800s. One might wonder why it began in Britain and why the United States followed so soon. One reason was the existence of a ready supply of labor for factory work. In what was known as the enclosure movement, large landowners had seized many of the open fields in the British countryside and much of the common grazing land, turning peasants into tenant farmers or hired workers who did not have a deep connection to the land. The hardships endured by these landless workers and smallholders led to a rural-to-urban migration stream that populated the new factories. In addition, Britain's dominance of the oceans provided factory owners with supply lines for raw materials, most notably cotton from the American South, and with markets for their finished products. When the United States later began to industrialize, it solved its labor problem not only by inducing rural people to move to the cities but also by welcoming millions of overseas immigrants. So central did industrial work become, and so stark was the contrast between workers and factory owners in the early stages of industrialization, that observers began to refer to industrial laborers as a class—the *working class*—even though what wives did, and for that matter what farmers and clerks and craftsmen had always done, certainly qualified as work. The historian Eric Hobsbawm dated the first use of the term "working class" in Britain to between 1815 and 1830. In the United States, the creation of a working class began in the early 1800s with

the establishment of textile factories in the Northeast, but the greatest expansion occurred after the Civil War.⁹

We can examine the broad historical sweep of the working-class family through a remarkable collection of U.S. Census Bureau records that allows us to chart the demographics of family life since 1880, which is the first time that the Bureau asked directly about marriage. The original handwritten records of the household interviews from the decennial censuses are preserved on microfilm at the National Archives going back to 1850 (with the exception of the 1890 census records, which were destroyed by fire). Demographers at the Minnesota Population Center have drawn random samples of the old manuscript records for each census year until 1930. They created machine-readable files of the forms and merged them with the Census Bureau's own publicly available samples from 1940 to the present. The result is a standardized set of census data files that allows anyone to easily create graphs that display over a century of demographic history.

We can use this extraordinary tool to examine the history of the working-class family—provided, of course, that we define what we mean by this concept. Many definitions are possible; I focus mainly on married-couple families who were raising children and in which the husband was employed in skilled or semiskilled manual work. I restrict my definition to families with children because the well-being of children is the main public concern about family life. Single-parent families were formed, of course, after the death of one of the spouses or, less commonly until the current era, as a result of divorce. But I concentrate on the married-couple family because it was both the numerically dominant unit for raising children from the 1800s through the postwar peak and also the unit around which the ideologies of family life and masculinity developed. I focus on husbands as earners because during that long stretch of time few wives worked for wages outside the home, although their labor inside the home was essential. Since the end of the postwar peak, however, cohabiting-parent and single-parent families have become much more common and, consequently, a marriage-based definition of the working-class or middle-class family is too narrow. So when I consider the recent history of the working-class and middle-class families, I broaden the scope of my inquiry to married and unmarried workers of both genders.¹⁰

With this definition in hand, let's turn to the database of census records. I first identified all married men between the ages of twenty and forty-nine who were living with a wife and at least one child under eighteen in each census year from 1880 to 2010. I then calculated the percentage who were engaged in manual work in one of three different industries: (1) what the census files call "manufacturing," a broad category that includes the

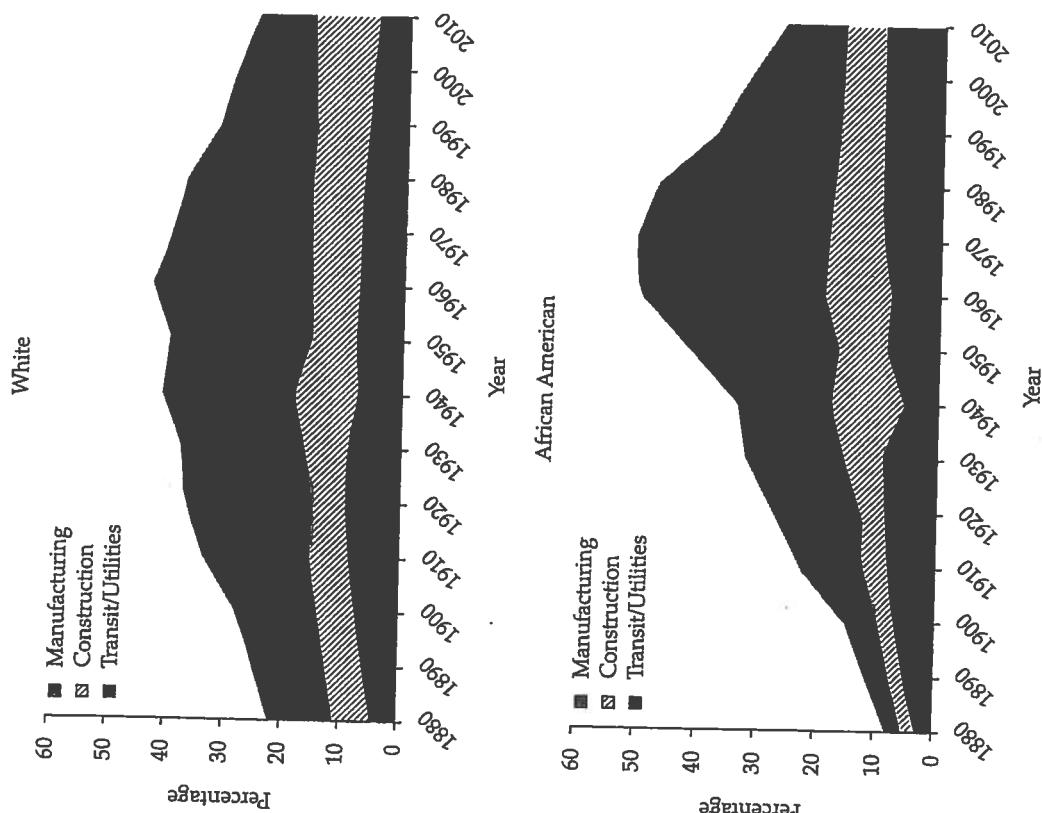
production of durable goods, such as furniture, steel, machinery, ships, railroads, and automobiles, and nondurable goods, such as meat products, baked products, clothes, shoes, and paper; (2) "transportation and utilities," which includes truck, bus, and taxi drivers, railroad porters, and power line workers; and (3) "construction workers," including carpenters, masons, and plumbers. I took the total percentage employed in these three forms of manual work as the best indicator of trends in the size of the working-class family. In other words, I asked the data this question: of all the married men in this age group who, along with their wives, were raising children, what percentage could be classified as "working-class" on the basis of their occupation?¹¹

The results are presented in the two charts that constitute figure 1.1. Think of each chart as a three-layer cake, one cake for whites and the other for African Americans. The bottom, dark layer represents transit and utilities employment; the middle, diagonally striped layer is construction employment; and the top, gray layer is manufacturing employment. The height of each layer is proportional to the percentage of all married men with children who are in that industry. These heights can change from decade to decade as new census information replaces the old. The total height of all three layers is the percentage of husbands employed in any of the three industries—my indicator of the prevalence of working-class families.

The story is easy to see. In 1880 the percentage of families that could be classified as working-class on the basis of the husband's job—the total height of the three layers—was about 22 percent for whites and 9 percent for blacks. The most intensive period of industrialization had just begun, and most Americans still lived in rural areas. In fact, 55 percent of white husbands and 83 percent of black husbands were working in agriculture in 1880—a huge layer not shown in the charts. But between 1879 and 1898, manufacturing output doubled, and it had doubled again by 1906, and again by 1917. You can see the percentage employed in manufacturing start to rise after 1880 and then rise further in the 1900s, reaching a peak in 1960 for whites and in 1970 for blacks. In addition, the construction layer gets a bit thicker for whites, and the transportation layer gets a bit thicker for blacks.¹²

At their respective peaks, 43 percent of white husbands and 51 percent of black husbands could be classified as working-class on the basis of being employed in one of these three industries. The rise was mainly due to the expansion of manufacturing, which was the predominant form of skilled or semiskilled manual labor in the early-to-mid-twentieth century. At the giant Sparrows Point steelworks established in 1889 just outside of Baltimore, where I live, employment peaked at 30,920 in 1959 and re-

Figure 1.1 Married Men Ages Twenty to Forty-Nine, with Children Under Age Eighteen, Who Were Employed in Manufacturing, Construction, or Transportation, by Race, 1880–2010



Source: Ruggles et al. (2010).

mained near that level throughout the 1960s. For blacks, the height of the gray layer is much lower than for whites until after World War II, which reflects the restricted opportunities blacks had for manufacturing employment until then. But note that by the 1960s the percentage of black husbands in manufacturing was *higher* than it was for whites (that is, the gray layer is thicker for them than it is for whites). During the peak years, black families were more dependent on manufacturing jobs than were whites.¹³

After the postwar peak, the heights of both cakes plunge, almost entirely because of a decrease in manufacturing employment. Indeed, had construction employment not increased for whites, and had transit and utility employment not increased for blacks, the fall would have been even greater. A profound restructuring of the American economy had begun. Advances in transportation and communication allowed companies to move production to countries where wage levels were much lower. Anyone driving through New England towns can see the red brick buildings that once produced the nation's textiles and shoes standing empty—or perhaps renovated into upscale apartments and boutiques. In North Carolina, one can see the shells of former furniture factories that once produced sofas and dining room sets for American homes. In addition, advances in computer processing allowed factory owners to automate production and to substitute machines for workers. Think of the rows of robots along today's automobile assembly lines. In the steel industry, countries such as Japan and Korea built more efficient plants based on new technologies that allowed them to produce steel at a lower cost. Large ocean-going ships reduced the cost of sending steel to the United States. As a result, it was often cheaper to import steel produced overseas than to buy American-made steel. Employment at Sparrows Point declined precipitously. The plant struggled for decades, and its workforce suffered several rounds of downsizing before Sparrows Point finally closed in 2012, its facilities sold for a pittance for spare parts. For the remaining manufacturing workers, employment was far more precarious than during the postwar peak. Foreign competition and automation, along with the efforts of corporate management and their political allies, had reduced the bargaining power of labor unions, and the percentage of wage and salary workers belonging to unions had declined. It stood at 11.3 percent in 2014. Job losses and job changes became more common because of layoffs and plant closings. The grand bargain of the midtwentieth century between workers and corporations—high wages and stable, long-term employment in return for hard, tedious, and sometimes dangerous work—fell apart.¹⁴

These developments had their greatest effect on moderately educated young men—those with a high school degree but not a bachelor's de-

gree—who came of age after the mid-1970s. They were the ones who would have taken manufacturing jobs in large numbers had they been born a generation earlier. Occupying the medium-skilled center of the labor market, they watched their opportunities contract as the kinds of manual jobs that high school-educated young men used to take moved overseas or were automated. At the bottom of the labor market, in contrast, the demand for low-skill jobs that could not be exported (such as restaurant and hotel workers) continued to expand, but these jobs paid poorly and had little security. At the top, opportunities for professional, technical, and managerial jobs increased, but they required a bachelor's degree or more. Labor economist David Autor and others have called this phenomenon the "polarization," or "hollowing-out," of the American labor market. Others have written about the "hourglass" economy.¹⁵

These metaphors can be taken too far: there are some occupations in the middle of the labor market, such as medical technicians, that are growing. But overall it seems undeniable that the kinds of well-paying, secure manual jobs that were available in the 1960s are much less plentiful today. Consequently, high school-educated young men have less opportunity than did the previous generation. The wages of men without bachelor's degrees have fallen since the early 1970s. As the economic foundation of factory work waned, so did the percentage of married-couple families with children that could be classified as working-class on the basis of the husband's employment. By 2010, as figure 1.1 shows, the percentage of white husbands with a working-class occupation had fallen to levels not seen for over a century. The fall was even steeper for African Americans. The figure makes clear that black workers, whose opportunities were restricted for so long, had finally caught up with white workers in the percentage employed in manufacturing by the 1960s, only to see the bottom fall out of the manufacturing sector. In 1974 there were 38,096 black steelworkers in the nation, but by 1988 the number had dropped to 9,958. Overall, then, the figures show that among married couples with children, manufacturing employment for the husband became common in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, peaked at midcentury, and then declined to the present day.¹⁶

INDUSTRIALIZATION AND THE FAMILY

There is a long debate among intellectuals about whether a true working class ever existed in the United States. Yes, there were millions of workers who earned wages in factories and in other manual occupations. But was there a coherent group that had a common set of experiences and political interests? Large-scale, organized action by workers was less common in

the United States than in Europe, except at a few points in time such as the Great Depression. No political organizations comparable to the powerful European labor parties ever emerged. I cannot resolve that great debate; but I argue, along with scholars who came before me, that industrial wage labor produced a distinctive pattern of family life. I am interested in this type of family not just as an economic arrangement but also as a social phenomenon. I'm a sociologist, and this book is primarily a work of sociology. I draw heavily on scholarship in history and economics, but my objective is to tell the story of a singular form of the social institution we call the American family. It is a story of parents and children working together to make ends meet and, for a brief period in the twentieth century, of upward mobility. It is also a story of common conceptions of masculinity and femininity, the social forces that sustained them, and what happened when these social supports weakened. For men, masculinity was connected to physically demanding manual work done in the service of supporting one's family. For women, femininity involved a curious mixture of down-to-earth household labor and rarefied emotional support. At its high point and in the early stage of its decline, before anyone realized how far it would fall, the working-class family became a central part of American culture through vivid metaphors (blue collar), political debates (busing children to integrate school districts), and images in the media (*All in the Family*). It contained internal contradictions that were temporarily surmounted by the prosperity of the postwar peak but soon reemerged and led to its decline.¹⁷

In fact, the growth of industrial wage labor profoundly affected family life in several ways. First, it moved the primary place of men's work out of the home and separated the work worlds of husbands and wives. Because of the prevailing notions of the proper roles for men and women, married men took the growing number of factory jobs, and married women, though with some exceptions, did not. Instead, married women contributed to the family economy through work done largely in the home. An unmarried young woman might work in a textile mill from an early age, but once she married she was likely to withdraw into the home. Thus, the industrial workplace became largely a world of men. At Sparrows Point, steelworkers did not allow women to enter certain parts of the plant; having a woman appear was considered bad luck—it might portend injuries to the men managing cauldrons of molten metal. The separate work worlds of men and women contrasted with the lives of farming families, whose husbands and wives had worked together. They might have done different tasks—men plowing the fields, women tending the vegetable garden—but their work was interdependent. Among urban craftsmen, the shop was sometimes located next to the home. Factories, however, were cen-

trally located in cities and set, in the early years, next to rivers that provided water power. The husband's journey to work and his long hours away from home became part of family life.¹⁸

Second, industrial wage labor transformed the relationship between parents and children. In the early decades of industrialization, a large percentage of factory workers were immigrants—in 1900, for instance, 36 percent of all married men with children who were employed in manual occupations were immigrants—and parental authority was still unchallenged. Many immigrants held ideas about child-rearing that had been formed in the old country, such as the need for children to strictly obey parents and contribute to the family economy from a young age. Working-class children attended school only until their early teenage years, after which they took jobs. Parents and children sometimes worked in the same plant; textile mills were known to advertise for families rather than individual workers. Children were expected to turn over their pay packets to their parents unopened; their earnings could mean the difference between subsistence and abject poverty.¹⁹

But industrialization eventually led to an erosion of parental authority. Compulsory schooling laws restricted the ability of parents to send their children to work, and rising incomes reduced their motivation to do so. Moreover, attendance at public school, even for a limited duration, taught children to respect sources of authority beyond parents, including the school itself and the state. In 1892 a Baptist minister, Francis Bellamy, wrote "The Pledge of Allegiance," and soon millions of schoolchildren were reciting their loyalty to the flag and to the republic for which it stood—without regard to whether their parents approved of all for which it stood. During the Progressive Era (1890–1920), activists from the child-saving movement successfully pushed for legislation that raised the minimum age at which children could leave school and limited the number of hours that children could work. The child-savers' view of childhood as a time of education and protection from the adult world clashed with the view of the immigrant working class, and the child-savers prevailed. Nevertheless, change was gradual: in the 1920s, many parents still needed their teenage children to earn money and only 43 percent of nineteen-year-olds had completed high school. Yet by the 1960s, school attendance until age sixteen was mandatory, most parents had sufficient income to keep their children in school until high school graduation, and three-fourths of nineteen-year-olds had graduated. What is more, when teenagers worked, they no longer turned over their entire paycheck to their parents; rather, they began to consume on their own.²⁰

Third, the growth of industrial wage labor altered the sense of time that the factory worker and his family had. In the preindustrial era, people's

concept of work time centered on how long it took to do a particular task—plowing a field or feeding the animals. Task-oriented time did not depend on the clock; in fact, in the American colonies in 1700 only one in fifty white adults kept a watch, and only one in thirty-two had a clock. Rather, the markers of time were sunrise and sunset, calendars, and almanacs. With industrial labor, however, work began and ended on a schedule announced by the boss. On the assembly line, "scientific management" broke down tasks into short, repetitive movements measured to the second. The sense of time at the workplace shifted, in the terms of the historian E. P. Thompson, from "task orientation" to "timed labor." Time at home, however, was not as rigidly scheduled; wives who were caring for young children, for instance, were still oriented to tasks such as feeding and bathing. But timed labor intruded into the home as the family's daily routines accommodated the schedule of the factory. At Sparrows Point, as in many large enterprises, the plant operated twenty-four hours per day using a day shift, a night shift, and a 3:00 PM to 11:00 PM swing shift. Many workers were required to rotate among these shifts, often with little advance notice, and these changing routines disrupted family life.²¹

Finally, industrialization shaped how workers saw themselves—what we would call today their self-identities. Rather than defining their self-worth in terms of income, a domain in which they could never match professionals and managers, white industrial workers increasingly defined it in terms of morality, a domain in which they could surpass those above them. They were proud of their ability to perform demanding, repetitive industrial labor day after day and to support their families through their work—an identity that the sociologist Michèle Lamont calls the "disciplined self." This sense of self was focused on the workplace. To be sure, the disciplined worker felt responsible for his family's well-being, but once he was home his work was done. Until recently at least, he did not put one foot in front of the other and slog through the assembly line of dinner, dishes, baths, and bedtime stories. Instead, he relaxed. His worldview did not encourage him to spend lots of quality time with his children or to share intimacies with his wife. His hard work was done *for* the family but not *with* the family. Thus, the moral world of the working-class husband encouraged a very gender-segregated style of family life, with little overlap between what the husband and wife did.²²

Yet by the 1960s, substantial numbers of working-class wives were combining domestic work with working for pay outside the home, often part-time, creating daily schedules that required organization and effort to manage. Wives had to cope with the constraints of their husbands' employment, which could include mandatory overtime, shift work, or worse yet, strikes and layoffs. Wives, however, did not aspire to the disciplined

self. Their primary role was widely seen as supporting and comforting husbands and children. Paid work was seen as secondary and had to be coordinated with the time schedules of factory and school. Sometimes husbands objected to their wives taking jobs because it contradicted their sense of themselves as good providers. At first, the conflicts and double burdens that employed wives faced were theirs alone to bear and to resolve. But as their attachment to the workforce grew, and as feminist ideas began to diffuse, wives began to demand that their husbands alter their routines to help with housework and child care. The paid work that wives performed outside the home gave them a more independent sense of self. A renegotiation of marital roles began, and it is still in progress.

In all these ways—the movement of work to the factory, the restriction of wives to work that could be done at home, the lessening control over children, the pervasive influence of timed labor, and the importance of a disciplined sense of self—industrialization created and sustained the working-class family. Nevertheless, these families were not all the same. There were overlapping variations by place of birth, religion, and race. The values of the large number of immigrant families were influenced by the moral order in their countries of origin. Race also played a major role: until late in the story of industrialization, African American men and women faced very limited opportunities. Sparrows Point was one of the few steel mills to hire substantial numbers of black men for low-level positions (as opposed to relying on recent immigrants), but they were restricted to the dirtiest, hottest, and most dangerous jobs and blocked from moving to better positions. Blacks were also paid less than whites and, until the 1960s, lived in segregated communities near the plant. They did, however, out-earn most of their black friends and neighbors with the help of their wives, who worked outside the home more often than did the wives of white workers.²³

Consequently, when I write about “the working-class family” in this book, I do not mean to suggest that all such families are alike. I use the term as what sociologists, after Max Weber, call an “ideal type”: a description comprising the most important and visible aspects of a phenomenon, even if not every case has all of these aspects. Think of it as a conceptual model that helps us to understand the similarities and differences among the families of industrial workers over time. I make no restriction with respect to whether wives are working outside the home. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, few of them would have been, but most were making financial contributions from inside the home. As we approach the present day many more of them would have been working for wages, although in the clerical and service sectors rather than in manufacturing.

CULTURAL SHIFTS

After 1975, as job opportunities in manufacturing and related industries declined relative to opportunities at the top and bottom of the labor market, important cultural changes occurred as well. Support for the male-breadwinner family plummeted. In the 1977 General Social Survey (GSS), 63 percent of women agreed that “it is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family.” By 2011, only 26 percent agreed. Men were a bit more conservative, but their support dropped from 69 percent to 38 percent. Attitudes toward cohabitation have become much more favorable. When a national sample of high school seniors was asked in 1976 and 1977 whether they agreed that “it is usually a good idea for a couple to live together before getting married in order to find out whether they really get along,” 33 percent of girls and 47 percent of boys agreed. When the question was asked of high school seniors in 2011, 67 percent of girls and 72 percent of boys agreed. Attitudes have also become more favorable to having children outside of marriage; in the 1950s and 1960s, it was a shameful event, but a few decades later it has become largely acceptable.²⁴

As both the economy and the culture changed, so did the ways in which young adults formed families. In the midtwentieth century, marriage was the first step into adulthood. Couples did not live together until after their weddings. If a pregnancy occurred, it usually led to a marriage before the child was born, and if it did not, the child was seen as “illegitimate.” In 1960, 95 percent of all children were born to married women; by the early 2000s, in contrast, the figure had dropped to 59 percent. Currently, marriage is often the last step into adulthood—something that one does after moving in with a partner, getting a job, renting an apartment, and even having a child. The belief has spread among all social classes that people should only marry when they have a steady income and maybe some savings. But most people think that it’s okay to live with a partner until the relationship gets to the point where a marriage is viable.²⁵

Here, however, the paths divide: college-educated young adults commonly postpone marriage and live with a partner while they go to graduate school or invest in careers, but they wait until after they marry to have their children. Only 6 percent in the mid-2000s were unmarried when they had a child. In contrast, high school-educated young adults are increasingly having children outside of marriage, the majority of them in cohabiting unions. In reality, amid all the concern about “out-of-wedlock births,” it is not widely known that since the early 1980s the percentage of children born to women living alone has hardly increased. Rather, most of the growth in the share of children born to unmarried women has been among

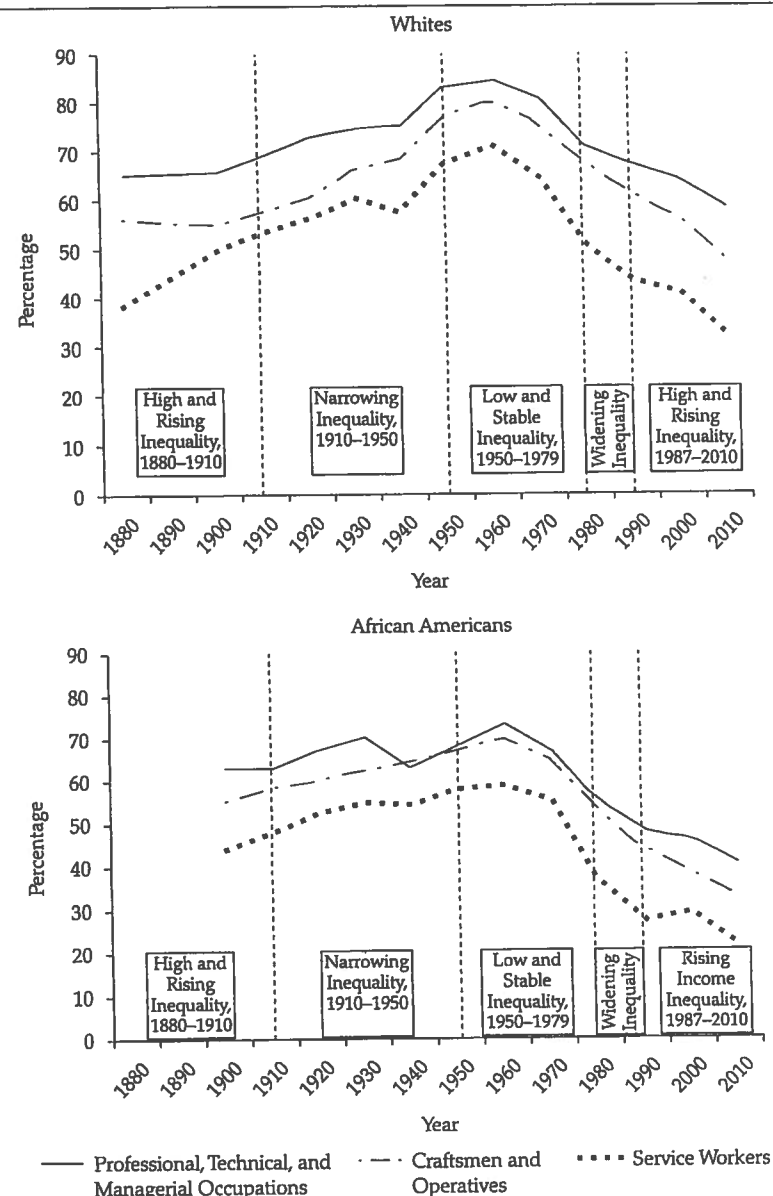
women who are in cohabiting relationships. And the biggest rise in births to cohabiting women has been among young adults who have a high school degree but not a bachelor's degree. Moreover, a substantial share of these cohabiting unions do not begin until after the woman gets pregnant. The grandchildren of the high school-educated couples who married in the 1950s because they got "caught" would today, upon learning of a pregnancy, either remain single or move in together.²⁶

MARKETS AND CULTURE

The political scientist Charles Murray, in his widely read book *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010*, surveys this landscape and argues that the decline of marriage and steady employment among the white working class has been solely due to cultural change. The globalization of the economy and the computerization of production, he declares, has had nothing to do with it. The problem, he concludes, is a decline in traditional values, most notably industriousness. Young men, he states, are not as industrious in seeking employment and sticking with it as were past generations. The percentage of men with no more than high school educations who are working or looking for work has declined, and applications for government disability benefits have greatly increased. Yet there are jobs out there, notes Murray, even if they do not pay as much as they used to, and young men should take them. He links the cultural decline to the expansion of the welfare state in the 1960s—his book begins with a description of November 21, 1963, the last sunny day in America, after which Kennedy was assassinated, Johnson became president, and the War on Poverty began. The enlargement of the welfare state that began under Johnson, Murray claims, encouraged people to depend on government benefits instead of working hard and made it easier for poor women to receive benefits from programs such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)—which Americans call "welfare"—and to therefore become more economically independent from men.²⁷

Yet by 1996, the average thirty-year-old man with a high school degree earned 20 percent less than a comparable man in 1979, and the Great Depression aside, he belonged to the first generation of American young men to earn less than their fathers did. More important, the long historical view demonstrates that class differences in marriage have been tied to the extent of economic inequality in American society—closely for whites and to a lesser degree for African Americans—for at least 130 years. That is apparent in figure 1.2, which shows trends in the percentage of men in each of three occupational groups who were married in every census from 1880 to 2010 for whites and from 1900 to 2010 for African Americans. Unlike the

Figure 1.2 Married, U.S.-Born Men Ages Twenty to Forty-Nine, by (Nonfarm) Occupational Group, 1880–2010 (Whites) and 1900–2010 (African Americans)



Source: Ruggles et al. (2010).

charts in figure 1.1, which were restricted to married men, these charts include men of all marital statuses and show the percentage of those who were currently married. I have excluded men with farm occupations and immigrants, and I have restricted the chart to men who were between the ages of twenty and forty-nine.²⁸

Let's begin with the chart for whites, the group on which Murray focuses. Notice that, at all times, the highest percentage of married men are those with professional, technical, and managerial occupations (physicians, executives); men in service occupations (janitors, waiters) have the lowest percentage who are married, and craftsmen and operatives (electricians, machinists) occupy an intermediate position. Now let's look at the spread between the highest and lowest groups in each census year. In 1880 the difference between the highest and lowest line is twenty-seven percentage points. The spread then narrows and is at a minimum in the post-World War II period, following which it widens again. It does not again exceed twenty-seven percentage points until 2010.

Figure 1.2 therefore provides the important information that the current era is not the first time that white people in the United States have experienced a large marriage gap; rather, it is the *second* time. The first marriage gap occurred in the late nineteenth century, decades before the American welfare state was born during the Great Depression and a lifetime before Johnson expanded it in the 1960s. What these two eras have in common is that economic inequality was high and rising during both of them. To illustrate this point in figure 1.2, I have labeled five periods since 1880 in terms of trends in economic inequality. The periods are drawn from the work of the economists Claudia Goldin, Lawrence Katz, Robert Margo, and their associates, who have written widely about American economic history. It is common knowledge that economic inequality has increased in the most recent periods; the earnings gap began to widen after 1979 and then began to polarize—that is to say, the white-collar group atop the income distribution began to pull away from both the middle and the bottom—after about 1987. But the top was also pulling away from the middle and bottom during the first period, from 1880 to 1910.²⁹

During this first period, the white-collar professional class solidified its gains in the labor market. For instance, the growth of the industrial economy increased the number of managers and executives; the extension of schooling increased the demand for teachers; and rising newspaper circulation (which quadrupled between 1880 and 1900) increased the demand for editors and reporters. The wages of the growing white-collar workforce rose relative to those below them. At the same time, the fortunes of independent craftsmen declined in manufacturing as large-scale factory production replaced their small operations. Master craftsmen of all kinds

—cabinet makers, shoe makers, candle and soap makers—either went out of business or hired more workers, produced larger quantities of goods, and turned into managers. Younger men who would have found positions as skilled apprentices and journeymen instead became factory workers. As a result, the share of workers in the middle of the manufacturing sector declined relative to the shares at the top and bottom. At the very top were “the captains of industry”—some of whom were referred to less flatteringly as “the robber barons.” This was, after all, the era that Mark Twain called the Gilded Age. A century later, in a period that some are calling the New Gilded Age, we see a similar phenomenon. Economic inequality has widened as workers with bachelor’s degrees have consolidated their positions in the knowledge industries and increased their earnings faster than those with less education. The middle of the labor market has hollowed out owing to technological change and the offshoring of production; low-skilled service work has expanded; and an elite—“the 1 percent”—has captured an increasing share of all income gains.³⁰

What figure 1.2 demonstrates, then, is a strong association between the extent of economic inequality and the extent of marriage inequality among whites for more than a century. The marriage gap has varied directly with the earnings gap. In periods when earnings were more unequal, such as the first and last periods shown in the figure, the lines representing the percentage married for each occupational group are farther apart. When inequality was narrowing, as in the 1910–1950 period, so does the spread between the lines. When inequality was low and stable in the 1950–1979 period, the lines are bunched closest together and the proportions married reach their historical highpoints. During both Gilded Ages, young men with moderate skills may have had a harder time finding the kinds of occupations that could support marriage. In contrast, it was much easier in the low-inequality 1950s and 1960s for a young man in the middle of the labor market to land a job that could provide the foundation for family life.

To be sure, the parallel movements of economic inequality and marriage inequality do not prove that the former causes the latter. But it is hard to look at this chart and conclude that the state of the labor market has had nothing to do with the marriage gap among the middle class, the working class, and the poor in American history. To rescue Murray’s contention that a lack of industriousness explains class gaps in marriage, one would have to come up with a plausible cultural story that fits not only the current gap but also the wide gap that existed in 1880. Yet no one would argue that men in the 1880–1910 period lacked industriousness and were unwilling to take low-wage work. To the contrary, they worked long hours for wages so low that families were often able to subsist only be-

cause of the economic contributions of wives and children. Moreover, the government social welfare programs that, according to Murray, create dependency among the poor, such as cash assistance for single parents, unemployment benefits, and food stamps, did not begin until the 1930s and therefore cannot be blamed for the differences that existed before then. What other, solely cultural explanations could be developed is difficult to fathom.

Murray's response to this line of criticism is, in part, to argue that the causes "don't make much difference anymore" in thinking about class differences in family life because they have been overtaken by changing cultural norms. It is true that by 2010 the spread of the lines, at twenty-nine percentage points, had surpassed the 1880 mark, suggesting that economic inequality is not the only influence on marriage inequality. In addition, by 2010 almost all of the lines had shifted downward compared to their 1880 values, suggesting a general decline in marriage. I would grant that, in a different sense, Murray is correct that cultural change has played an important role in working-class family life: even if it has not been the major determinant of class differences in marriage, cultural change has influenced what young men and women *who are not married* are doing. Single men and women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries rarely lived with each other without marrying, and relatively few had children. They were much more likely to be living with their parents or to be boarding with other families. The norms against cohabitation and childbearing outside of marriage were too strong. But over the past several decades, these sentiments have weakened. Had norms not changed, the growth of childbearing outside of marriage that we have recently seen among today's unmarried low-educated and moderately educated young adults would not have occurred, even given the rise in income inequality. Moreover, these cultural changes, even if influenced by employment opportunities, could be deep enough to take on a life of their own, and they might not immediately respond to improvements in the economy. Certainly, cultural change is part of the story—but it's not the whole story by any means.³¹

We have seen, rather, an example of what social scientists call an interaction effect (or a synergistic effect): two factors uniting to produce an effect that is larger than either could have produced alone. The consequences of one potential cause—say, one's attitudes toward marriage and childbearing—depend on the level of another, such as the strength of one's labor market position. Childbearing outside of marriage has recently risen mainly among less-educated young adults who have experienced *both* a weakening job market *and* a growing acceptance of cohabitation and non-marital childbearing. Among the college-educated, who have experienced

the same cultural changes but have not seen a decline in career opportunities, no significant increase in childbearing outside of marriage has occurred. In interpreting this interaction effect, liberals may give more weight to the globalization and automation of production, which they see as the driving forces in the hollowing-out of the labor market. Conservatives, on the other hand, may give more weight to changing social norms, which they see as the major influence on nonmarital births. I cannot think of a feasible study that could definitively tell us how much importance to place on each of these two factors. But we can safely conclude that intellectual purists who insist that family changes are wholly a matter of cultural shifts, or conversely a matter of economics alone, are very likely wrong.

Figure 1.2 also displays the same information for African Americans, starting from 1900 rather than 1880 because so few African American men worked in higher occupations before then. The chart shows similarities with, and differences from, the trends among whites. As was the case for whites, the higher the occupation they filled, the greater was the percentage of African American men who were married throughout most of the period, though there were exceptions in some years; also as with whites, the percentages married were highest in the post–World War II period. But prior to 1950, the spread of the lines is smaller for African Americans—in other words, there was less difference before 1950 in the percentages of married African American men holding different occupations than there was among comparable whites. This smaller difference probably reflects the lack of opportunity for black men to attain truly middle-class occupational status. Black men classified as professionals and managers were more likely to have been funeral directors—one of the few professions open to blacks living in segregated communities—than corporate executives, and those classified as craftsmen and operatives were more likely to have been locomotive firemen who shoveled coal into steam engines than electricians or plumbers.

Moreover, as can be seen in the chart, African Americans also differ from whites in that the percentage married did not rise as high during the 1950s and 1960s and has fallen further in the most recent period, so that the proportions of married African Americans are now at historic twentieth- and twenty-first-century lows. The percentage married in the highest occupational group in 2010 was comparable to the percentage married in the lowest occupational group in 1900. Marriage rates have declined for whites too, but not to the same degree, and this difference has created the sharpest racial differences to be seen during the entire period. I have suggested elsewhere that African Americans have responded to the declining employment prospects of the most recent era by drawing more on ex-

tended family ties and relatively less on marriage than whites have done—a response that would be consistent with the greater strength of kinship ties among slaves (who were not allowed to legally marry) and in West African family structure.³²

WHY IS THE MARRIAGE GAP A PROBLEM?

Some observers might say that there is nothing alarming about the working class's retreat from marriage. It's true that not everyone wishes to marry and that there is nothing wrong with family diversity. Moreover, we have seen that the United States experienced a large marriage gap in the late nineteenth century, only to see the gap narrow during the first half of the twentieth century. But the nineteenth-century gap did not lead to widespread cohabitation and childbearing outside of marriage, whereas the late-twentieth-century gap did. In some European countries, long-term cohabiting unions with children have come to function equivalently to marriages. (François Hollande, the president of France in the early 2010s, cohabited for nearly three decades with Ségolène Royal, a former presidential candidate, with whom he had four children before the couple separated in 2007.) But that is not the kind of cohabitation that is common in the United States, at least not yet. The United States has the shortest average duration of cohabiting unions of any Western country. Within five years after having a child, about half of urban cohabiting parents are no longer living together (whether or not they married in the interim). That is about twice the breakup rate experienced by children born to married parents. These breakups are often followed by another cohabiting union and perhaps another disruption. As a result, the children of cohabiting couples can see a bewildering number of parents, parents' partners, and stepparents enter and exit their homes in succession.³³

The young adults without bachelor's degrees who are the heirs of the industrial working class today are not a cultural vanguard confidently leading the way toward a postmodern family lifestyle. Rather, they are a group making constrained choices. For the most part, these are people who would like to marry before having children but who think they are not economically ready. In contrast, college-educated Americans—the winners in our globalized and computerized economy—are still waiting until they marry to start having children. Consequently, one need not think that the working-class family was flawless in the past to be troubled by the existence today of a large group of moderately educated Americans who are increasingly disconnected from steady, decent-paying jobs and from marriage. Over the past few decades, as the social capital theorist Robert Putnam has noted, the social ties of the working class have de-

clined as union membership has dropped and political parties have become less powerful. Now there is even less glue bonding them to the rest of society. As far back as the colonial era, marriage has been the traditional way in which individuals are connected with civil society. College-educated Americans remain tied into society in these and other ways, such as professional networks and memberships in clubs and organizations, but working-class Americans have fewer other sources of social ties.³⁴

Both economic and cultural changes have been so great, and the diversity of pathways to family building have become so diverse, that it is doubtful that a coherent working-class family pattern exists anymore. In truth, it is doubtful that an industrial working class exists anymore, in the sense of a clear-cut group identifiable by the color of their shirts, the caluses on their hands, and the union cards in their wallets—or by their marriage to such workers. The best present-day analogues to the working class are men and women with a high school degree but no bachelor's degree because these are the people who, two generations ago, would have taken the industrial jobs that were plentiful. Their numbers are large: 55 percent of Americans between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-four have a high school degree but not a bachelor's degree. They constitute the vast middle of the American social hierarchy—trying to stay employed as the labor market changes, having an easier time when the economy is hot, as it was in the late 1990s, and a harder time when the economy is cold, as it was during the Great Recession of the late 2000s.³⁵

What happens when the conditions that allowed most high school-educated Americans to connect to the rest of society through hard work and marriage no longer exist? The successful attainment of the disciplined self required not just an attitude but also a job—one that paid well enough and promised enough security that one could support a family through it. What happens when the disciplined self can no longer be attained? The successful assumption of the homemaker role required a husband with adequate, steady earnings. What happens when young women must enter the workforce while still retaining the primary responsibilities for the care of children? Will we see labor's love lost as the people we used to call the working class begin to devalue stable family ties? Will their multiple cohabiting unions and marriages affect their children's development? And what can be done to support a viable family system to supersede the old one?

These are the kinds of questions that American society is facing owing to the economic and cultural gap between a college-educated middle class that is managing to prosper in good times and tread water in bad times and a would-be working class that is declining in both good times and bad. These are also the questions that we examine in this book.

