

opportunity to try to get into a position of dominance while denying that *systems* of dominance exist.

It seems to me that obliviousness about white advantage, like obliviousness about male advantage, is kept strongly inculturated in the United States so as to maintain the myth of meritocracy, the myth that democratic choice is equally available to all. Keeping most people unaware that freedom of confident action is there for just a small number of people props up those in power, and serves to keep power in the hands of the same groups that have most of it already.

Though systemic change takes many decades, there are pressing questions for me and I imagine for some others like me if we raise our daily consciousness on the perquisites of being light-skinned. What will we do with such knowledge? As we know from watching men, it is an open question whether we will choose to use unearned advantage to weaken hidden systems of advantage, and whether we will use any of our arbitrarily-awarded power to try to reconstruct power systems on a broader base.

## 9

## CLASS IN AMERICA—2006

Gregory Mantsios

People in the United States don't like to talk about class. Or so it would seem. We don't speak about class privileges, or class oppression, or the class nature of society. These terms are not part of our everyday vocabulary, and in most circles they are associated with the language of the rhetorical fringe. Unlike people in most other parts of the world, we shrink from using words that classify along economic lines or that point to class distinctions: phrases like "working class," "upper class," and "ruling class" are rarely uttered by Americans.

For the most part, avoidance of class-laden vocabulary crosses class boundaries. There are few among the poor who speak of themselves as lower class; instead, they refer to their race, ethnic group, or geographic location. Workers are more likely to identify with their employer, industry, or occupational group than with other workers, or with the working class.<sup>1</sup>

Neither are those at the other end of the economic spectrum likely to use the word "class." In her study of thirty-eight wealthy and socially prominent women,

<sup>1</sup>The author wished to thank Mark Major for his assistance in updating this article. From Gregory Mantsios, *Class in America: Myths and Realities*. Copyright © Gregory Mantsios, 2006. Reprinted by permission of the author.

Susan Ostrander asked participants if they considered themselves members of the upper class. One participant responded, "I hate to use the word 'class.' We are responsible, fortunate people, old families, the people who have something."

Another said, "I hate [the term] upper class. It is so non-upper class to use it. I just call it 'all of us,' those who are wellborn."<sup>2</sup>

It is not that Americans, rich or poor, aren't keenly aware of class differences—those quoted above obviously are; it is that class is not in the domain of public discourse. Class is not discussed or debated in public because class identity has been stripped from popular culture. The institutions that shape mass culture and define the parameters of public debate have avoided class issues. In politics, in primary and secondary education, and in the mass media, formulating issues in terms of class is unacceptable, perhaps even un-American. See my paper, "Media Magic: Making Class Invisible," Selection 7 in Part VIII of this volume.

There are, however, two notable exceptions to this phenomenon. First, it is acceptable in the United States to talk about "the middle class." Interestingly enough, such references appear to be acceptable precisely because they mute class differences. References to the middle class by politicians, for example, are designed to encompass and attract the broadest possible constituency. Not only do references to the middle class gloss over differences, but these references also avoid any suggestion of conflict or injustice.

This leads us to the second exception to the class-avoidance phenomenon. We are, on occasion, presented with glimpses of the upper class and the lower class (the language used is "the wealthy" and "the poor"). In the media, these presentations are designed to satisfy some real or imagined voyeuristic need of "the ordinary person." As curiosities, the ground-level view of street life and the inside look at the rich and the famous serve as unique models, one to avoid and one to aspire to. In either case, the two models are presented without causal relation to each other: one is not rich because the other is poor.

Similarly, when social commentators or liberal politicians draw attention to the plight of the poor, they do so in a manner that obscures the class structure and denies any sense of exploitation. Wealth and poverty are viewed as one of several natural and inevitable states of being: differences are only differences. One may even say differences are the American way, a reflection of American social diversity.

We are left with one of two possibilities: either talking about class and recognizing class distinctions are not relevant to U.S. society, or we mistakenly hold a set of beliefs that obscure the reality of class differences and their impact on people's lives.

Let us look at four common, albeit contradictory, beliefs about the United States.

**Myth 1:** The United States is fundamentally a classless society. Class distinctions are largely irrelevant today, and whatever differences do exist in economic standing, they are—for the most part—insignificant. Rich or poor, we are all equal in the eyes of the law, and such basic needs as health care and education are provided to all regardless of economic standing.

**Myth 2:** We are, essentially, a middle-class nation. Despite some variations in economic status, most Americans have achieved relative affluence in what is widely recognized as a consumer society.

**Myth 3:** We are all getting richer. The American public as a whole is steadily moving up the economic ladder, and each generation propels itself to greater economic well-being. Despite some fluctuations, the U.S. position in the global economy has brought previously unknown prosperity to most, if not all, Americans.

**Myth 4:** Everyone has an equal chance to succeed. Success in the United States requires no more than hard work, sacrifice, and perseverance: "In America, anyone can become a millionaire; it's just a matter of being in the right place at the right time."

In trying to assess the legitimacy of these beliefs, we want to ask several important questions. Are there significant class differences among Americans? If these differences do exist, are they getting bigger or smaller, and do these differences have a significant impact on the way we live? Finally, does everyone in the United States really have an equal opportunity to succeed?

## The Economic Spectrum

Let's begin by looking at difference. An examination of available data reveals that variations in economic well-being are, in fact, immense. Consider the following:

- The wealthiest 1 percent of the American population holds 34 percent of the total national wealth. That is, they own over one-third of all the consumer durables (such as houses, cars, and stereos) and financial assets (such as stocks, bonds, property, and savings accounts). The richest 20 percent of Americans hold nearly 85 percent of the total household wealth in the country.<sup>3</sup>
- Approximately 183,000 Americans, or approximately three-quarters of 1 percent of the adult population, earn more than \$1 million **annually**.<sup>4</sup> There are nearly 400 billionaires in the U.S. today, more than three dozen of them worth more than \$10 billion each. It would take the average American (earning \$35,672 and spending absolutely nothing at all) a total of 28,033 years (or approximately 400 lifetimes) to earn just \$1 billion.

Affluence and prosperity are clearly alive and well in certain segments of the U.S. population. However, this abundance is in contrast to the poverty and despair that is also prevalent in the United States. At the other end of the spectrum:

- Approximately 13 percent of the American population—that is, nearly one of every eight people in this country—live below the official poverty line (calculated in 2004 at \$9,645 for an individual and \$19,307 for a family of four).<sup>5</sup> An estimated 3.5 million people—of whom nearly 1.4 million are children—experience homelessness in any given year.<sup>6</sup>

- Approximately one out of every five children (4.4 million) in the United States under the age of six lives in poverty.<sup>7</sup>

The contrast between rich and poor is sharp, and with nearly one-third of the American population living at one extreme or the other, it is difficult to argue that we live in a classless society. Big-payoff reality shows, celebrity salaries, and multi-million dollar lotteries notwithstanding, evidence suggests that the level of inequality in the United States is getting higher. Census data show the gap between the rich and the poor to be the widest since the government began collecting information in 1947<sup>8</sup> and that this gap is continuing to grow. In 2004 alone, the average real income of 99 percent of the U.S. population grew by little more than 1 percent, while the real income of the richest 1 percent saw their income rise by 12 percent in the same year.<sup>9</sup>

Nor is such a gap between rich and poor representative of the rest of the industrialized world. In fact, the United States has by far the most unequal distribution of household income.<sup>10</sup> The income gap between rich and poor in the United States (measured as the percentage of total income held by the wealthiest 20 percent of the population versus the poorest 20 percent) is approximately 12 to 1, one of the highest ratios in the industrialized world. The ratio in Japan and Germany, by contrast, is 4 to 1.<sup>11</sup>

**Reality 1:** There are enormous differences in the economic standing of American citizens. A sizable proportion of the U.S. population occupies opposite ends of the economic spectrum. In the middle range of the economic spectrum:

- Sixty percent of the American population holds less than 6 percent of the nation's wealth.<sup>12</sup>
- While the real income of the top 1 percent of U.S. families skyrocketed by more than 180 percent between 1979 and 2000, the income of the middle fifth of the population grew only slightly (12.4 percent over that same 21-year period) and its share of income (15 percent of the total compared to 48 percent of the total for the wealthiest fifth) actually declined during this period.<sup>13</sup>
- Regressive changes in governmental tax policies and the weakening of labor unions over the last quarter century have led to a significant rise in the level of inequality between the rich and the middle class. Between 1979 and 2000, the gap in household income between the top fifth and middle fifth of the population rose by 31 percent.<sup>14</sup> During the economic boom of the 1990s, the top fifth of the nation's population saw their share of net worth increase (from 59 to 63 percent) while four out of five Americans saw their share of net worth decline.<sup>15</sup> One prominent economist described economic growth in the United States as a "spectator sport for the majority of American families."<sup>16</sup> Economic decline, on the other hand, is much more "inclusive," with layoffs impacting hardest on middle- and lower-income families—those with fewer resources to fall back on.

The level of inequality is sometimes difficult to comprehend fully by looking at dollar figures and percentages. To help his students visualize the distribution of income, the well-known economist Paul Samuelson asked them to picture an income pyramid made of children's blocks, with each layer of blocks representing \$1,000. If we were to construct Samuelson's pyramid today, the peak of the pyramid would be much higher than the Eiffel Tower, yet almost all of us would be within six feet of the ground.<sup>17</sup> In other words, the distribution of income is heavily skewed; a small minority of families take the lion's share of national income, and the remaining income is distributed among the vast majority of middle-income and low-income families. Keep in mind that Samuelson's pyramid represents the distribution of income, not wealth. The distribution of wealth is skewed even further.

**Reality 2:** The middle class in the United States holds a very small share of the nation's wealth and that share is declining steadily. The gap between rich and poor and between rich and the middle class is larger than it has ever been.

## American Life-Styles

At last count, nearly 37 million Americans across the nation lived in unrelenting poverty.<sup>18</sup> Yet, as political scientist Michael Harrington once commented, "America has the best dressed poverty the world has ever known."<sup>19</sup> Clothing disguises much of the poverty in the United States, and this may explain, in part, its middle-class image. With increased mass marketing of "designer" clothing and with shifts in the nation's economy from blue-collar (and often better-paying) manufacturing jobs to white-collar and pink-collar jobs in the service sector, it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish class differences based on appearance.<sup>20</sup> The dress-down environment prevalent in the high-tech industry (what one author refers to as the "no-collars movement") has reduced superficial distinctions even further.<sup>21</sup>

Beneath the surface, there is another reality. Let's look at some "typical" and not-so-typical life-styles.

### American Profile

|                                |                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Name:</b>                   | Harold S. Browning                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <b>Father:</b>                 | manufacturer, industrialist                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>Mother:</b>                 | prominent social figure in the community                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>Principal child-rearer:</b> | governess                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| <b>Primary education:</b>      | an exclusive private school on Manhattan's Upper East Side                                                                                                                                    |
|                                | <i>Note:</i> a small, well-respected primary school where teachers and administrators have a reputation for nurturing student creativity and for providing the finest educational preparation |

### Supplemental tutoring:

#### Summer camp:

### Secondary education:

### Family activities:

### Higher education:

### First full-time job (age 23):

### Subsequent employment:

### Present employment (age 38):

*Ambition:* "to become President"

tutors in French and mathematics  
sleep-away camp in northern Connecticut

*Note:* camp provides instruction in the creative arts, athletics, and the natural sciences

a prestigious preparatory school in Westchester County

*Note:* classmates included the sons of ambassadors, doctors, attorneys, television personalities, and well-known business leaders

*Supplemental education:* private SAT tutor

*After-school activities:* private riding lessons

*Ambition:* "to take over my father's business"

*High-school graduation gift:* BMW

theater, recitals, museums, summer vacations in Europe, occasional winter trips to the Caribbean

*Note:* as members of and donors to the local art museum, the Brownings and their children attend private receptions and exhibit openings at the invitation of the museum director

an Ivy League liberal arts college in Massachusetts

*Major:* economics and political science

*After-class activities:* debating club, college newspaper, swim team

*Ambition:* "to become a leader in business"

assistant manager of operations, Browning Tool and Die, Inc. (family enterprise)

3 years—executive assistant to the president, Browning Tool and Die

*Responsibilities included:* purchasing (materials and equipment), personnel, and distribution networks

4 years—advertising manager, Lackheed Manufacturing (home appliances)

3 years—director of marketing and sales, Comerex, Inc. (business machines)

executive vice president, SmithBond and Co. (digital instruments)

*Typical daily activities:* review financial reports and computer printouts, dictate memoranda, lunch with clients, initiate conference calls, meet with assistants, plan business trips, meet with associates  
*Transportation to and from work:* chauffeured company limousine  
*Annual salary:* \$324,000  
*Ambition:* “to become chief executive officer of the firm, or one like it, within the next five to ten years”

**Present residence:** eighteenth-floor condominium on Manhattan’s Upper West Side, eleven rooms, including five spacious bedrooms and terrace overlooking river  
*Interior:* professionally decorated and accented with elegant furnishings, valuable antiques, and expensive artwork  
*Note:* building management provides doorman and elevator attendant; family employs au pair for children and maid for other domestic chores

**Second residence:** farm in northwestern Connecticut, used for weekend retreats and for horse breeding (investment/hobby)  
*Note:* to maintain the farm and cater to the family when they are there, the Brownings employ a part-time maid, groundskeeper, and horse breeder

Harold Browning was born into a world of nurses, maids, and governesses. His world today is one of airplanes and limousines, five-star restaurants, and luxurious living accommodations. The life and life-style of Harold Browning is in sharp contrast to that of Bob Farrell.

#### American Profile

**Name:** Bob Farrell  
**Father:** machinist  
**Mother:** retail clerk  
**Principal child-rearer:** mother and sitter  
**Primary education:** a medium-size public school in Queens, New York, characterized by large class size, outmoded physical facilities, and an

educational philosophy emphasizing basic skills and student discipline  
*Ambition:* “to become President”

**Supplemental tutoring:** none  
**Summer camp:** YMCA day camp  
*Note:* emphasis on team sports, arts and crafts

**Secondary education:** large regional high school in Queens  
*Note:* classmates included the sons and daughters of carpenters, postal clerks, teachers, nurses, shopkeepers, mechanics, bus drivers, police officers, salespersons  
*Supplemental education:* SAT prep course offered by national chain  
*After-school activities:* basketball and handball in school park  
*Ambition:* “to make it through college”  
*High-school graduation gift:* \$500 savings bond

**Family activities:** family gatherings around television set, softball, an occasional trip to the movie theater, summer Sundays at the public beach

**Higher education:** a two-year community college with a technical orientation  
*Major:* electrical technology  
*After-school activities:* employed as a part-time bagger in local supermarket  
*Ambition:* “to become an electrical engineer”

**First full-time job (age 19):** service-station attendant  
*Note:* continued to take college classes in the evening

**Subsequent employment:** mail clerk at large insurance firm; manager trainee, large retail chain

**Present employment (age 38):** assistant sales manager, building supply firm  
*Typical daily activities:* demonstrate products, write up product orders, handle customer complaints, check inventory  
*Transportation to and from work:* city subway

**Annual salary:** \$45,261  
*Ambition:* “to open up my own business”  
*Additional income:* \$6,100 in commissions from evening and weekend work as salesman in local men’s clothing store

**Present residence:** the Farrells own their own home in a working-class neighborhood in Queens, New York

Bob Farrell and Harold Browning live very differently: the life-style of one is privileged; that of the other is not so privileged. The differences are class differences, and these differences have a profound impact on the way they live. They are differences between playing a game of handball in the park and taking riding lessons at a private stable; watching a movie on television and going to the theater; and taking the subway to work and being driven in a limousine. More important, the difference in class determines where they live, who their friends are, how well they are educated, what they do for a living, and what they come to expect from life.

Yet, as dissimilar as their life-styles are, Harold Browning and Bob Farrell have some things in common; they live in the same city, they work long hours, and they are highly motivated. More important, they are both white males.

Let's look at someone else who works long and hard and is highly motivated. This person, however, is black and female.

#### American Profile

|                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Name:</b>                   | Cheryl Mitchell                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>Father:</b>                 | janitor                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>Mother:</b>                 | waitress                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| <b>Principal child-rearer:</b> | grandmother                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>Primary education:</b>      | large public school in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, Brooklyn, New York<br><i>Note:</i> rote teaching of basic skills and emphasis on conveying the importance of good attendance, good manners, and good work habits; school patrolled by security guards<br><i>Ambition:</i> "to be a teacher"                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>Supplemental tutoring:</b>  | none                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <b>Summer camp:</b>            | none                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <b>Secondary education:</b>    | large public school in Ocean Hill-Brownsville<br><i>Note:</i> classmates included sons and daughters of hairdressers, groundskeepers, painters, dressmakers, dishwashers, domestics<br><i>Supplemental education:</i> none<br><i>After-school activities:</i> domestic chores, part-time employment as babysitter and housekeeper<br><i>Ambition:</i> "to be a social worker"<br><i>High-school graduation gift:</i> corsage |
| <b>Family activities:</b>      | church-sponsored socials                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| <b>Higher education:</b>       | one semester of local community college<br><i>Note:</i> dropped out of school for financial reasons                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |

**First full-time job** (age 17):

**Subsequent employment:**

**Present employment** (age 38):

**Present residence:**

counter clerk, local bakery

file clerk with temporary-service agency, supermarket checker

nurse's aide at a municipal hospital

*Typical daily activities:* make up hospital beds, clean out bedpans, weigh patients and assist them to the bathroom, take temperature readings, pass out and collect food trays, feed patients who need help, bathe patients, and change dressings

*Annual salary:* \$15,820

*Ambition:* "to get out of the ghetto"

three-room apartment in the South Bronx, needs painting, has poor ventilation, is in a high-crime area

*Note:* Cheryl Mitchell lives with her four-year-old son and her elderly mother

When we look at the lives of Cheryl Mitchell, Bob Farrell, and Harold Browning, we see life-styles that are very different. We are not looking, however, at economic extremes. Cheryl Mitchell's income as a nurse's aide puts her above the government's official poverty line.<sup>22</sup> Below her on the income pyramid are 37 million poverty-stricken Americans. Far from being poor, Bob Farrell has an annual income as an assistant sales manager that puts him well above the median income level—that is, more than 50 percent of the U.S. population earns less money than Bob Farrell.<sup>23</sup> And while Harold Browning's income puts him in a high-income bracket, he stands only a fraction of the way up Samuelson's income pyramid. Well above him are the 183,000 individuals whose annual salary exceeds \$1 million. Yet Harold Browning spends more money on his horses than Cheryl Mitchell earns in a year.

**Reality 3:** Even ignoring the extreme poles of the economic spectrum, we find enormous class differences in the life-styles among the haves, the have-nots, and the have-littles.

Class affects more than life-style and material well-being. It has a significant impact on our physical and mental well-being as well.

Researchers have found an inverse relationship between social class and health. Lower-class standing is correlated to higher rates of infant mortality, eye and ear disease, arthritis, physical disability, diabetes, nutritional deficiency, respiratory disease, mental illness, and heart disease.<sup>24</sup> In all areas of health, poor people do not share the same life chances as those in the social class above them. Furthermore, lower-class standing is correlated with a lower quality of treatment for illness and disease. The results of poor health and poor treatment are borne out in the life expectancy rates within each class. Researchers have found that the higher your class

standing, the higher your life expectancy. Conversely, they have also found that within each age group, the lower one's class standing, the higher the death rate; in some age groups, the figures are as much as two and three times as high.<sup>25</sup>

**Reality 4:** From cradle to grave, class standing has a significant impact on our chances for survival.

The lower one's class standing, the more difficult it is to secure appropriate housing, the more time is spent on the routine tasks of everyday life, the greater is the percentage of income that goes to pay for food and other basic necessities, and the greater is the likelihood of crime victimization.<sup>26</sup> Class can accurately predict chances for both survival and success.

## Class and Educational Attainment

School performance (grades and test scores) and educational attainment (level of schooling completed) also correlate strongly with economic class. Furthermore, despite some efforts to make testing fairer and schooling more accessible, current data suggest that the level of inequity is staying the same or getting worse.

In his study for the Carnegie Council on Children nearly thirty years ago, Richard De Lone examined the test scores of over half a million students who took the College Board exams (SATs). His findings were consistent with earlier studies that showed a relationship between class and scores on standardized tests; his conclusion: "the higher the student's social status, the higher the probability that he or she will get higher grades."<sup>27</sup> Almost thirty years after the release of the Carnegie report, College Board surveys reveal data that are no different: test scores still correlate strongly with family income.

Average Combined Scores by Income (400 to 1600 scale)<sup>28</sup>

| Family Income         | Median Score |
|-----------------------|--------------|
| More than \$100,000   | 1119         |
| \$80,000 to \$100,000 | 1063         |
| \$70,000 to \$80,000  | 1039         |
| \$60,000 to \$70,000  | 1026         |
| \$50,000 to \$60,000  | 1014         |
| \$40,000 to \$50,000  | 996          |
| \$30,000 to \$40,000  | 967          |
| \$20,000 to \$30,000  | 937          |
| \$10,000 to \$20,000  | 906          |
| less than \$10,000    | 884          |

These figures are based on the test results of 987,584 SAT takers in 2005.

A little more than thirty years ago, researcher William Sewell showed a positive correlation between class and overall educational achievement. In comparing

the top quartile (25 percent) of his sample to the bottom quartile, he found that students from upper-class families were twice as likely to obtain training beyond high school and four times as likely to attain a postgraduate degree. Sewell concluded: "Socioeconomic background . . . operates independently of academic ability at every stage in the process of educational attainment."<sup>29</sup>

Today, the pattern persists. There are, however, two significant changes. On the one hand, the odds of getting into college have improved for the bottom quartile of the population, although they still remain relatively low compared to the top. On the other hand, the chances of completing a college degree have deteriorated markedly for the bottom quartile. Researchers estimate the chances of completing a four-year college degree (by age 24) to be nineteen times as great for the top 25 percent of the population as it is for the bottom 25 percent.<sup>30</sup>

**Reality 5:** Class standing has a significant impact on chances for educational achievement.

Class standing, and consequently life chances, are largely determined at birth. Although examples of individuals who have gone from rags to riches abound in the mass media, statistics on class mobility show these leaps to be extremely rare. In fact, dramatic advances in class standing are relatively infrequent. One study showed that fewer than one in five men surpass the economic status of their fathers.<sup>31</sup> For those whose annual income is in six figures, economic success is due in large part to the wealth and privileges bestowed on them at birth. Over 66 percent of the consumer units with incomes of \$100,000 or more have inherited assets. Of these units, over 86 percent reported that inheritances constituted a substantial portion of their total assets.<sup>32</sup>

Economist Harold Wachtel likens inheritance to a series of Monopoly games in which the winner of the first game refuses to relinquish his or her cash and commercial property for the second game. "After all," argues the winner, "I accumulated my wealth and income by my own wits." With such an arrangement, it is not difficult to predict the outcome of subsequent games.<sup>33</sup>

**Reality 6:** All Americans do not have an equal opportunity to succeed. Inheritance laws ensure a greater likelihood of success for the offspring of the wealthy.

## Spheres of Power and Oppression

When we look at society and try to determine what it is that keeps most people down—what holds them back from realizing their potential as healthy, creative, productive individuals—we find institutional forces that are largely beyond individual control. Class domination is one of these forces. People do not choose to be poor or working class; instead, they are limited and confined by the opportunities afforded or denied them by a social and economic system. The class structure in the United States is a function of its economic system: capitalism, a system that is based on private rather than public ownership and control of commercial enterprises. Under capitalism, these enterprises are governed by the need to produce a

profit for the owners, rather than to fulfill societal needs. Class divisions arise from the differences between those who own and control corporate enterprise and those who do not.

Racial and gender domination are other forces that hold people down. Although there are significant differences in the way capitalism, racism, and sexism affect our lives, there are also a multitude of parallels. And although class, race, and gender act independently of each other, they are at the same time very much interrelated.

On the one hand, issues of race and gender cut across class lines. Women experience the effects of sexism whether they are well-paid professionals or poorly paid clerks. As women, they are not only subjected to catcalls and stereotyping, but face discrimination and are denied opportunities and privileges that men have. Similarly, a wealthy black man faces racial oppression, is subjected to racial slurs, and is denied opportunities because of his color. Regardless of their class standing, women and members of minority races are constantly dealing with institutional forces that are holding them down precisely because of their gender, the color of their skin, or both.

On the other hand, the experiences of women and minorities are differentiated along class lines. Although they are in subordinate positions vis-à-vis white men, the particular issues that confront women and people of color may be quite different depending on their position in the class structure.

Power is incremental, and class privileges can accrue to individual women and to individual members of a racial minority. While power is incremental, oppression is cumulative, and those who are poor, black, and female are often subject to all of the forces of class, race, and gender discrimination simultaneously. This cumulative situation is what is meant by the double and triple jeopardy of women and minorities.

Furthermore, oppression in one sphere is related to the likelihood of oppression in another. If you are black and female, for example, you are much more likely to be poor or working class than you would be as a white male. Census figures show that the incidence of poverty varies greatly by race and gender.

Chances of Being Poor in America<sup>34</sup>

| White<br>male/<br>female | White<br>female<br>head* | Hispanic<br>male/<br>female | Hispanic<br>female<br>head* | Black<br>male/<br>female | Black<br>female<br>head* |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 in 10                  | 1 in 5                   | 1 in 5                      | 1 in 3                      | 1 in 4                   | 1 in 3                   |

\*Persons in families with female householder, no husband present.

In other words, being female and being nonwhite are attributes in our society that increase the chances of poverty and of lower-class standing.

**Reality 7:** Racism and sexism significantly compound the effects of class in society.

None of this makes for a very pretty picture of our country. Despite what we like to think about ourselves as a nation, the truth is that opportunity for success and life itself are highly circumscribed by our race, our gender, and the class we are born into. As individuals, we feel hurt and anger when someone is treating us unfairly; yet as a society we tolerate unconscionable injustice. A more just society will require a radical redistribution of wealth and power. We can start by reversing the current trends that further polarize us as a people and adapt policies and practices that narrow the gaps in income, wealth, and privilege.

## NOTES

1. See Jay MacLead, *Ain't No Makin' It: Aspirations and Attainment in a Lower-Income Neighborhood* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995); Benjamin DeMott, *The Imperial Middle* (New York: Morrow, 1990); Ira Katznelson, *City Trenches: Urban Politics and Patterning of Class in the United States* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981); Charles W. Tucker, "A Comparative Analysis of Subjective Social Class: 1945–1963," *Social Forces*, no. 46, June 1968, pp. 508–514; Robert Nisbet, "The Decline and Fall of Social Class," *Pacific Sociological Review*, vol. 2, Spring 1959, pp. 11–17; and Oscar Glantz, "Class Consciousness and Political Solidarity," *American Sociological Review*, vol. 23, August 1958, pp. 375–382.

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3. Lawrence Mishel, Jared Bernstein, and Sylvia Allegretto, *The State of Working America: 2004–2005* (Ithaca: ILR Press, Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 282.

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