

Excerpt from Barbara Ehrenreich, Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class (1989)

Like every other social group to rise to fleeting prominence, the yuppies were as much invented as discovered. The term was first employed in the press for the modest purpose of explaining Gary Hart's unexpected success in the 1984 presidential primaries. Someone had voted for him, someone young, urban, and professional, and there was brief hope that this new grouping would provide the Democrats with a much-needed new constituency. But what started as a neutral demographic category evolved with alarming speed into a social slur. Four years after their "discovery," Hendrik Hertzberg wrote in *Esquire*:

Yuppie is now understood almost universally as a term of abuse ..... You're a yuppie" is taken to mean not "you're a young urban professional" but rather "you have lousy values."

Yuppie is a hybrid category—a mixture of age, address, and class. Other social classes are, in the middle-class imagination, age address and class. Other social classes are, in the middle-class imagination, age groups too: the poor as children, blue collar workers as stern though somewhat pitiable fathers. But yuppies were by definition young adults, and thus subject to the moral judgments that older, 'and more established people routinely pass on the young. From one angle, yuppies were the good children so sorely missed by neoconservatives—like Midge Decter in the sixties and early seventies. They did not waste time "finding themselves" or joining radical movements. They plunged directly into the economic mainstream, earning and spending with equal zest. To *Newstveek*, the yuppie eagerness to "go for it" was a healthy sign of the "yuppie virtues of imagination, daring and entrepreneurship."

But they were also the very worst children, the apotheosis of middle-class forebodings about the corrupting effects of affluence. No one hurled the still-potent diagnosis of permissive-ness at them, perhaps because by the eighties the word referred to so much more than childraising practices. Yet here they were, displaying that dread trait customarily assigned to the poor—"inability to defer gratification"—and even the desperate "orality" Oscar Lewis had once detected in the culture of poverty. Yuppies did not devote their youth to "that patient overcoming and hard-won new attainment" that Decter had endorsed as the prerequisite to adult middle-class life. They did not study; they "networked." They did not save; they spent. And they did not spend on houses or station wagons, but on Rolex watches, Porsches, quick trips to Aruba, and, most notoriously, high-status foods. In its "Year of the Yuppie" cover story, *Newsweek* found them on "a new plane of consciousness, a state of Transcendental Acquisition."

Yuppies, of course, did not turn out to be a new constituency for liberalism. Their "virtues" of entrepreneurship and acquisition made them for the most part conservatives, though not in the fervid, ideological style of the neoconservatives or the New Right. Yuppies thought of themselves as members of an elite whose interests might naturally collide with those of the lower classes: They lived in gentrified neighborhoods from which the unsightly poor had been freshly cleared; they worked for firms intent on minimizing the "labor costs" of blue- and pink-collar workers; their lifestyle was supported by the labor of poorly paid, often immigrant, service workers—housekeepers, restaurant employees, messengers, and delivery "boys." Although they parted company with the New Right on the social issues, such as abortion and women's rights, self-interest kept them reliably Republican.

Yet, despite their political conservatism, everyone sensed that the yuppies were somehow connected to that last period of youthful assertiveness, the sixties. Some commentators presented them as grown-up radicals, covertly bearing the heritage of the sixties into the corporate rat race of the eighties. It was possible in fact to have been a radical in the first decade and a self-centered hustler in the second, as Jerry

Rubin's transformation from rebel to networking impresario illustrates. The very word yuppie had originally been coined in 1983 to describe Rubin's transition from a "yippie"-the acronym for the anarcho-hippie Youth International Party organized by Rubin and Abbie Hoffman-to prototypical young urban professional. *Newsweek* saw yuppies as the "vanguard of the baby-boom generation, which had "marched through the '60s" and was now speed[ing] toward the airport, advancing on the 1980s in the back seat of a limousine."

Actually, the stereotypical yuppie, who was about thirty in 1984, was more likely to have spent the sixties bicycling around the neighborhood than marching on Washington. With equal disregard for the normal length of generations, yuppies were sometimes presented as the rebellious children of sixties radicals, who, in a stunning reprisal, were now horrifying their parents with their self-centeredness and political conservatism. Actor Michael J. Fox, the only yuppie actually pictured in *Esquire's* "Days of Wine and Sushi" cover story, can ordinarily be found in a sitcom whose single sustaining joke is the clash between Fox and his gentle, sensitive, sixties-generation parents.

What yuppies and yuppies did share was their class. Despite the frequent confusion of yuppies and baby-boomers in general, yuppies-defined by lifestyle and income-made up only about 5 percent of their generation. They were exemplars not of their generation but of their class, the same professional middle class that had produced the student rebels. Like the sixties rebels, the yuppies were at the cutting edge of their class, a kind of avant-garde, charting a new direction and agenda. They were also, in their own way, rebels. Both radicals and yuppies rejected the long, traditional path to middle-class success, but the defining zeal of the yuppies was to join another class-the rich.

The actual number of demographically official yuppies- people born between 1945 and 1959, earning over \$40,000 a year in a professional or managerial occupation, and living in urban areas-was only about 1.5 million, hardly enough to warrant excitement. If yuppies were further defined as greedy, shallow people prone to burble about the joys of real estate investment, like those depicted in *Newsweek's* cover story, then, as a commentator in the *New Republic* observed, there were probably no more than 113 of them nationwide. But there was certainly a yuppie style of work and consumption, as well as what could be called a yuppie strategy for success, and these embraced, to a greater or lesser extent, many thousands of middle-class people beyond the demographic category. Here I will use yuppie in a loose, rather than demographically precise, sense, for someone who adopted the strategy and more or less fit the style. Hardly anyone, of course, deserves to bear the full burden of the stereotype.

But even the stereotype plays an important role in our chronicle of emerging class awareness. With the image of the yuppie, the normally invisible, normally "normal" middle class finally emerged in the mass media as a distinct group with its own ambitions, habitats, and tastes in food and running gear. The class usually privileged to do the discovering and naming of classes had itself been discovered by the media and, with scant respect for its dignity, named with a diminutive that rhymes with puppy.

Of course, those who followed the yuppie strategy did not represent all of their class. They were a select segment, just as the right's version of the New Class had been a selected subset of the larger professional middle class. In fact, the two groups -yuppie and New Class-are, technically speaking, complementary. The New Class, as defined by the neoconservatives, was that part of the professional middle class that finds an occupational home in the media, in the public sector, and in the nonprofit world exemplified by the university, the foundation, the social-welfare agency. And the New Class, by the right's definition, was solidly and unrepentantly liberal.

The yuppies, on the other hand, represented the more than 60 percent of the middle class that earns its living in the direct service of corporate power, as executives, corporate lawyers, and other sorts of

business-employed professionals, consultants, or brokers. They were the fulfillment of the neoconservatives' dream that "intellectuals," or at least members of the professional middle class, might abandon any remaining concerns for the lower classes and become the trusted courtiers of the corporate elite.

But the very frivolity of yuppies-and hence of the very *subject* of yuppies-was a distraction from the deeper changes their appearance signaled. In the eighties, the class contours of American society were undergoing a seismic shift. The extremes of wealth and poverty moved further apart, and, as if stretched beyond the limit of safety, the ground in the middle began to tremble and crack. Whole occupational groups and subpopulations-farmers, steelworkers, single mothers- began to tumble toward the bottom. Other groups-lower- level white-collar employees, schoolteachers, even higher- status professionals and their families-found themselves scrambling to remain in place.

In the confusion, only one group, outside of the very rich, seemed to have a clear strategy for success. And perhaps it was because that strategy involved such a betrayal of traditional middle-class values-such a wholesale surrender to the priorities of profit and the pleasures of consumerism--that the media turned so quickly against those who followed it. Implicit in the media's half-mocking, half-indulgent "discovery" of yuppies was the incipiently liberal understanding that their strategy might not, after all, be the way to go.

### The Polarization of America

It was possible, until the eighties, for a comfortable American to think of class as a form of cultural diversity, parallel to ethnicity or even "lifestyle." The emphasis had been on the culture of poverty, or of the supposedly parochial sub- culture of the working class. In the mass media, class often appeared to be a way of life, even a set of options adding color and texture to an otherwise increasingly homogeneous America. In 1985, for example, a sidebar in *U.S. News and World Report* titled "Beatniks, Preppies, and Punks: The Love Affair with Labels" juxtaposed, as "categories" of Americans, both faddists and economic groups:

VALLEY GIRLS, 1981 ... fun-loving teens with materialistic values and their own style of dress (leg warmers, cut-out sweatshirts) ...

UNDERCLASS, 1982 ... a part of the American population seemingly mired in poverty.

YUPPIES, 1984. . . "young urban professionals" . . . [known for their] consumerist lifestyle.

But there is another, much dryer and less judgmental way of thinking about class: as an index defined solely by money- who has it and who doesn't. In the 1980s, this grimmer view of class became harder than ever to avoid. Those who "had" had more than ever, and those who "had not" were more numerous, and more undeniably miserable, than at any time since poverty was "discovered."

Sometime in the late sixties American society had begun to lurch off the track leading to the American dream of affluence and equality. No one could have known it at the time, but those were the last years in which economic inequality among Americans declined. Since then, in a sharp reversal of the equalizing trend that had been under way since shortly after World War II, the extremes of wealth have grown farther apart and the middle has lost ground. Some economists even began to predict that the middle class-defined simply as those with middling amounts of money-would disappear altogether, leaving America torn, like many third-world societies, between an affluent minority and an army of the desperately poor. . . .

Many arbitrary factors determined whether a given family moved up or down: Had they purchased a house before the real estate boom of the seventies? Had they refrained from having too many children? Were they able to get help from their parents? By and large, though, the new cleavage in the middle range of income followed familiar class lines. The blue-collar working class was skidding downward, while the professional middle class was holding its own or gaining ground: In 1987 the median income for men with five or more years of higher education was \$34,731, and that for women with the same education was \$26,399-or \$61,130 for a couple. A high-school-educated working-class couple earned a total of \$36,888, more than a third less.

The phrase *the disappearing middle class*, which I, among others, used to describe the enormous changes of the eighties, in some ways missed the point. It was the blue-collar working class that was "disappearing," at least from the middle range of comfort. In the New Right's imagination the working class was a precious avatar of "traditional values," a human bulwark against permissiveness. But to the business interests that commanded the New Right's deepest loyalties, the American blue-collar working class-with its once-strong unions and real tradition of workplace defiance-had become a burden.

Beginning in the seventies, the corporate elite did everything possible to shake this burden loose. They "out-sourced" their manufacturing jobs to the lower-paid and more intimidated work force of the third world. They shifted their capital from manufacturing to the quick-profit realm of financial speculation-corporate mergers, leveraged buyouts-leaving American plants and technology to decay. And they led a brutal assault on the wages and living standards of those who still had jobs to cling to. For it is well to remember that what we call the working class, and picture as people striving to make a living, exists in the business literature only as *labor costs*. . .

Middle-class people, professionals and managers, also suffered in the economic dislocations of the eighties. They too lost jobs when plants closed or when government-financed social-welfare agencies shut down their services. They too experienced the stresses of a polarizing society\*, in which the poor were becoming ever more desperate and the rich were becoming more numerous and brash. While the poor were increasingly to be avoided for safety's sake, the rich presented a different kind of threat to people in the middle: bidding up the cost of real estate to astronomical values and uncomplainingly accepting college tuitions in the range of \$20,000 a year. If staying in the economic and social middle ground had become impossible for much of the working class, it had also become a challenge for those whose education and occupation entitled them to believe they were the middle class.

But the professional middle class is more resilient than those below it. A laid-off manager is more likely to find a decent-paying job than a laid-off assembly-line worker. Public-sector professionals, like doctors, social workers, and administrators, can switch over to the private sector when the funds for public services are cut. And compared to blue- or pink-collar workers, white-collar professionals are in a better position to negotiate higher pay to meet the rising costs of housing and education. Above all, the young of the professional middle class are flexible. Starting in the seventies, they began to abandon the long, penurious path leading to professional status, and to go for the money. . .

The first element of what might be called the "yuppie strategy" was to choose a college major that corporate recruiters would look favorably upon. In one short decade, American campuses went from being hotbeds of dissent to hothouses for the production of corporate cadres. Between the early seventies and the early eighties, the number of students receiving bachelor's degrees in English fell by almost 50 percent, while the number graduating with degrees in business nearly doubled. The social sciences also took an almost 50 percent cut, and mathematics and the natural sciences-which presumably are essential for the

future technological competitiveness of the United States-could together claim fewer than 4 percent of the college seniors graduating in 1983.

Students were also choosing to avoid the prolonged deprivations associated with graduate study. In the sciences, for example, the share of doctorates awarded to American students by U.S. institutions fell from 76.3 percent in 1978 to 63 percent in 1986. In that year, for the first time, U.S. universities awarded more Ph.D.s in engineering to foreigners than to Americans. The Americans had, so to speak, a better offer. They were skipping graduate school in favor of corporate jobs offering high starting salaries. As an engineering graduate student explained to the *New York Times*:

One of the big things is being poor for a long period of time. If you can get a bachelor's and go out and make \$30,000 or \$40,000 a year, why get \$10,000 a year as a graduate student?

There had been a time when ambitious students saw corporate employment as an option for the intellectually handicapped. Now it was the professions that seemed like a dull, low-paid backwater compared to the brisk world of business.

The choice of a pragmatic, business-oriented major was not always made happily. Many of the college students I talked to in the mid-eighties were suffering from what might be called "premature pragmatism." They were putting aside, at far too early an age, their idealism and intellectual **curiosity** in favor of economic security, which was increasingly defined as wealth. A young woman interviewed by *Newsweek* had switched from social work to sales because "I realized that I would have to make a commitment to being poor to be a social worker." Similarly, a Smith student, who happened to be one of few activists on that campus at the time, told me she had given up her ambition to be a psychiatric social worker because she "couldn't live on that." Instead, she said wryly, she would be going into banking.

To an adult who might have defined social work as an eminently respectable middle-class career, decisions such as these seemed either ill-informed or childishly greedy. But in the shifting economic landscape of the eighties, what had once been a secure middle-class occupation might no longer provide the necessities, such as home ownership, of middle-class life. All over the country, students who had started out wanting to be environmental chemists, special-education teachers, public administrators, or novelists redirected their aspirations to business or law. They did so, in most cases, out of a sullen sense of necessity, trading off personal autonomy, idealism, and creativity for what they hoped would be safety and possibly comfort.

With nineteen-year-olds redirecting their energies from sociology to spreadsheets, a negative, self-centered mood settled over the campuses. UCLA's annual survey of undergraduate attitudes found a steady rise in avarice and a decline in "altruism and social concern." In 1987, for example, a record 73 percent of students reported "being very well off financially" as their top goal, compared to 39 percent in 1970. Only 16 percent were interested in doing something to preserve the environment, compared to 45 percent in 1972. In other areas, students were now at least as conservative as the general public: Only 21 percent favored legalizing marijuana in 1987, compared to 53 percent in 1977. In 1984, only 49 percent believed abortion should be available to married women, down from 68 percent in the seventies. Peter Carlson, a former sixties radical, returned to his old dorm room at Boston University in 1986 to find posters of Miss Piggy, Sesame Street's Bert and Ernie, Kermit the Frog ... a mural-sized photo of a bottle of Cordon Rouge champagne popping its cork, a poster of elegant sushi arrangements ... and a cartoon captioned, "Shop till you drop." Almost lost amid this collage of cuteness, I spied a postcard of Ron and Nancy atop a desk. I wondered: Is that a genuine homage or some sort of

ironic protest?

It was a genuine homage.

A lucky, highly publicized minority of the new generation of pragmatists leaped directly from the academy to instant wealth. Beginning in the late seventies, graduates of Harvard Law School and a few other elite, business-oriented institutions could expect to be courted with starting salaries above \$40,000 a year. In Wall Street's bustling money factories, the goal of amassing a million by age thirty was neither uncommon nor entirely unrealistic. Baby high-rollers were proliferating, and New York's \$50-a-lunch restaurants were jammed, by the late eighties, with fresh-faced young people barely above drinking age. These financial prodigies were, in at least one sense, the true descendants of the sixties radicals: They had scorned the arduous apprenticeship traditionally required for middle-class membership-scorned, in fact, the middle class itself.

Most young graduates, however, could expect to attain eventual incomes only in the modest \$30,000 to \$40,000 range. For the majority who did not enter adult life with a legacy of Manhattan real estate, or who lacked the sangfroid for investment banking, the second rule of the yuppie strategy applied: Marry a financial equal. A 1976 ad for *Psychology Today* laid out the possibility of upward mobility through a new, more androgynous, approach to marriage. The ad, which ran full-page in the *New York Times*, shows a smiling young couple wearing identical pin-stripe jackets. The text begins in large bold letters, our bank can't *tell us apart*," and continues:

Which one of us makes \$20,000? We both do. And we like to spend it on the same kinds of things, too ...

Now that we're' married, we have twice as much money and twice as much savings. We'll be traveling farther. And a lot more often.

We'll also get to play more tennis. Spend more weekends skiing. **Or** camping.

And, now, we can have our once-a-month wine and cheese party, once-a-week.

I guess we know what we want from life.

And with twice as much money we not only can put more into it, we can get more out of it.