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Class in America—2012

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There wasn't much attention given to America's class divide, at least not until a band of mostly young activists decided to occupy Wall Street in the fall of 2011 and in the process capture the media spotlight, add the word "99 percenters" to our lexicon, and change the national—and in many ways, the international—discourse. While there has been recent interest in the rising level of inequality, the class divide is anything but recent and its consequences remain severely understated in the mass media. Perhaps most importantly, the point that is missed is that inequality is persistent and structural—and it manifests itself in a multitude of cultural and social ways.

Americans, in general, 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 this language is 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," "capitalist 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. Neither are those at the upper end of the economic spectrum likely to use the word "class[1]." In her study of 38 wealthy and socially prominent women, 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 well-born."[2]

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 usually not in the domain of public conversation. 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 has been considered culturally unacceptable, unnecessarily combative, and even un-American. (See my essay "Media Magic: Making Class Invisible," on page 618 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, the term middle class appears to be acceptable precisely because it mutes 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 they also avoid any suggestion of conflict or injustice.

This leads us to a 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 trailer parks and the inside look at the rich and the famous serve as unique models, one to avoid and one to emulate. In either case, the two sets of lifestyles are presented as though they have no causal relation to each other: There is nothing to suggest that our economic system allows people to grow wealthy *at the expense of* those who are not.

Similarly, when politicians and social commentators 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 possible explanations for why Americans usually don't talk about class: Either 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's look at four common, albeit contradictory, beliefs about class in America that have persisted over time.

Myth 1: We are 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 2: Class really doesn't matter in the United States. Whatever differences do exist in economic standing, they are—for the most part—irrelevant. Our democracy provides for all regardless of economic class: Rich or poor, we are all equal in the eyes of the law.

Myth 3: We live in a land of upward mobility. The American public as a whole is steadily moving up the economic ladder and each generation propels itself to greater economic well-being.

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 billionaire; 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? Do class differences have a significant impact on the way we live? How much upward mobility is there in the United States? Finally, does everyone in the United States really have an equal opportunity to succeed and an equal voice in our democracy?

The Economic Spectrum

For starters, let's look at difference. An examination of available data reveals that variations in economic well-being are, in fact, dramatic. Consider the following:

- The richest 20 percent of Americans hold nearly 90 percent of the total household wealth in the country. The wealthiest 1 percent of the American population holds 36 percent of the total national wealth. That is, the top 1 percent own over one-third of all the consumer durables (such as houses, cars, televisions, and computers) and financial assets (such as stocks, bonds, property, and bank savings).[3]
- There are 323,067 Americans—approximately 1 percent of the adult population—who earn more than $1 million annually.[4] There are over 1,000 billionaires in the United States today, more than 70 of them worth over $10 billion each.[5] It would take the typical American earning $49,445 (the median income in the United States)—and spending absolutely nothing at all—a total of 202,240 years (or over 2,500 lifetimes) to earn $10 billion.

Affluence and prosperity are clearly alive and well in certain segments of the U.S. population. However, this abundance is in sharp contrast to the poverty that persists in America. At the other end of the spectrum:

- More than 15 percent of the American population—that is, 1 of every 7 people in this country—live below the official poverty line (calculated at $11,139 for an individual and $22,314 for a family of four).[6] In 2010, there were 42 million poor people in the United States—the largest number since the Census Bureau began publishing poverty statistics more than 50 years ago.[7]
- An estimated 3.5 million people—of whom nearly 1.4 million are children—are homeless.[8]
- The 2010 U.S. Census reported that more than 1 out of every 5 children under the age of 18 lives in poverty.[9]

Reality 1: The contrast between rich and poor is sharp, and with 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.

While those at the bottom of the economic ladder have fared poorly relative to those at the top, so too have those in the middle—and their standing relative to the top has been declining as well.

- The middle fifth of the population holds less than 4 percent of the national *wealth*.[10]
- The share of wealth held by the middle fifth 30 years ago was 5.2 percent of the total. Today's share held by the middle sector is 23 percent less than what it was 3 decades ago. [11]

Reality 2: The middle class in the United States holds a very small share of the nation's wealth and that share has declined steadily.

The gap between rich and poor—and between the rich and the middle class—leaves the vast majority of the American population at a distinct disadvantage.

- Eighty percent of the population—that is, four out of every five Americans, is left sharing a little more than 10 percent of the nation's wealth. [12]
- The income gap between the very rich (top 1 percent) and everyone else (the 99 percent) more than tripled over the past 3 decades, creating the greatest concentration of income since 1928. [13]

This level of inequality is neither inevitable nor universal. The income gap between rich and poor in a country is generally measured by a statistic called the Gini coefficient, which provides a mathematical ratio and scale that allows comparisons between countries of the world. The U.S. government's own reports using the Gini coefficient show that the United States ranked number 95 out of 134 countries studied—that is, 94 countries (including almost all the industrialized nations of the world) had a more equal distribution of income than the United States. [14]

The numbers and percentages associated with economic inequality are difficult to fully comprehend. 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 6 feet of the ground. [15] In other words, a small minority of families takes the lion's share of the 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 (accumulated resources). The distribution of wealth is skewed even further. Ten billion dollars of wealth would reach more than 1,000 times the height of the Eiffel Tower. [16]

Reality 3: Middle- and lower-income earners—what many in other parts of the world would refer to as the working class—share a miniscule portion of the nation's wealth. For the most part, the real class divide in the United States is between the very wealthy and everyone else—and it is a divide that is staggering.

American Lifestyles

The late political theorist/activist Michael Harrington once commented, "America has the best-dressed poverty the world has ever known."[17] Clothing disguises much of the poverty in the United States, and this may explain, in part, the country's 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. [18] The dress-down environment prevalent in the high-tech industry (what American Studies scholar Andrew Ross refers to as the "no-collar movement") has reduced superficial distinctions even further.[19]

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

American Profile

Name:	Harold S. Browning
Father:	Manufacturer, industrialist
Mother:	Prominent social figure in the community
Principal child-rearer:	Governess
Primary education:	An exclusive private school on Manhattan's Upper East Side *Note:* A small, well-respected primary school where teachers and administrators have a reputation for nurturing student creativity and for providing the finest educational preparation *Ambition:* "To become President"
Supplemental tutoring:	Tutors in French and mathematics
Summer camp:	Sleep-away camp in northern Connecticut *Note:* Camp provides instruction in the creative arts, athletics, and the natural sciences
Secondary education:	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
Family activities:	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
Higher education:	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"
First full-time job (age 23):	Assistant manager of operations, Browning Tool and Die, Inc. (family enterprise)
Subsequent employment:	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)
Current employment (age 38):	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"
Current 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 lifestyle 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 *Additional income:* $6,100 in commissions from evening and weekend work as salesman in local men's clothing store *Ambition:* "To open up my own business"
Current residence:	The Farrells own their own home in a working-class neighborhood in Queens, New York

Bob Farrell and Harold Browning live very differently: One is very privileged, the other much less so. The differences are class differences, which 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 lifestyles 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 importantly, 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

Name:	Cheryl Mitchell
Father:	Janitor
Mother:	Waitress
Principal child-rearer:	Grandmother
Primary education:	Large public school in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, Brooklyn, New York *Note:* 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 *Ambition:* "To be a teacher"
Supplemental tutoring:	None
Summer camp:	None
Secondary education:	Large public school in Ocean Hill-Brownsville *Note:* Classmates included sons and daughters of hairdressers, groundskeepers, painters, dressmakers, dishwashers, domestics *Supplemental education:* None *After-school activities:* Domestic chores, part-time employment as babysitter and housekeeper *Ambition:* "To be a social worker" *High-school graduation gift:* new dress
Family activities:	Church-sponsored socials
Higher education:	One semester of local community college *Note:* Dropped out of school for financial reasons
First full-time job (age 17):	Counter clerk, local bakery
Subsequent employment:	File clerk with temporary-service agency, supermarket checker
Current employment (age 38):	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:* $17,850 *Ambition:* "To get out of the ghetto"
Current residence:	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 Cheryl Mitchell, Bob Farrell, and Harold Browning, we see three very different lifestyles. 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.[20] Below her on the income pyramid are 42 million poverty-stricken Americans. Far from being poor, Bob Farrell has an annual income ($51,361) as an assistant sales manager that puts him above the median income level—that is, more than 50 percent of the U.S. population earns less money than Bob Farrell.[21] 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 323,067 Americans whose annual incomes exceed $1 million. Yet Harold Browning spends more money on his horses than Cheryl Mitchell earns in a year.

Reality 4: Even ignoring the extreme poles of the economic spectrum, we find enormous class differences in the lifestyles among the haves, the have-nots, and the have-littles.

Class affects more than lifestyle 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 with higher rates of infant mortality, eye and ear disease, arthritis, physical disability, diabetes, nutritional deficiency, respiratory disease, mental illness, and heart disease.[22] In all areas of health, poor people do not share the same life chances as those in the social class above them. Furthermore, low income correlates 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 one's class standing is, the higher one's life expectancy is. 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 higher. [23]

It's not just physical and mental health that is so largely determined by class. The lower a person's class standing is, the more difficult it is to secure 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, health care (which accounts for 23 percent of spending for low-income families)[24] and other basic necessities; and the greater is the likelihood of crime victimization. [25]

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 in 1978, 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."[26] Today, more than 30 years after the release of the Carnegie report, College Board surveys reveal data that are no different: test scores still correlate with family income.

Average Combined Scores by Income (400 to 1600 scale)[27]

Family Income	*Median Score*
More than $200,000	1721
$160,000 to $200,000	1636
$140,000 to $160,000	1619
$120,000 to $140,000	1594
$100,000 to $120,000	1580
$80,000 to $100,000	1545
$60,000 to $80,000	1503
$40,000 to $60,000	1461
$20,000 to $40,000	1398
less than $20,000	1323

These figures are based on the test results of 1,647,123 SAT takers in 2010–2011.

In another study conducted 30 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." [28]

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 4-year college degree for those who are poor are extraordinarily low compared to the chances for those who are rich. Researchers estimate college completion is 10 times more likely for the top 25 percent of the population than it is for the bottom 25 percent. [29]

Reality 5: From cradle to grave, class position has a significant impact on our well-being. Class accurately predicts chances for survival, educational achievement, and economic success.

Media-induced excitement over big payoff reality shows, celebrity salaries, and multimillion-dollar lotteries suggests that we in the United States live in a "rags to riches" society. So too does news about dot-com acquisitions and initial public offerings (IPOs) that provide enormous windfalls to young company founders. But rags-to-riches stories notwithstanding, the evidence suggests that "striking it rich" is extremely rare and that class mobility in general is uncommon and becoming increasingly so.

One study showed that 79 percent of families remained in the same quintile (fifth) of income earners or moved up or down only one quintile. (Of this group, most families did not move at all). [30] Another study showed that fewer than one in five men surpass the economic status of their fathers. [31] Several recent studies have shown that there is less class mobility in the United States than in most industrialized democracies in the world. One such study placed the United States in a virtual tie for last place. [32] Why does the United States occupy such a low position on the mobility scale? Several explanations have been offered: The gap between rich and poor in the United States is greater; the poor are poorer in the United States and have farther to go to get out of poverty; and the United States has a lower rate of unionization than other industrialized nations.

The bottom line is that very affluent families transmit their advantages to the next generation and poor families stay trapped.[33] 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.[34]

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.[35]

Reality 6: All Americans do not have an equal opportunity to succeed, and class mobility in the United States is lower than that of the rest of the industrialized world. Inheritance laws provide built-in privileges to the offspring of the wealthy and add to the likelihood of their economic success while handicapping the chances for everyone else.

One would think that increases in worker productivity or a booming economy would reduce the level of inequality and increase class mobility. While the wages of workers *may* increase during good times—that is, relative to what they were in the past—the economic advantages of higher productivity and a booming economy go disproportionately to the wealthy, a factor that adds still further to the level of inequality. For example, during the period 2001 to 2007, the U.S. economy expanded and productivity (output per hours worked) increased by more than 15 percent. During that same period, however, the top 1 percent of U.S. households took two-thirds of the nation's income gains, their inflation-adjusted income grew more than ten times faster than the income of the bottom 90 percent, and their share of the national income reached its highest peak. At the same time, the inflation-adjusted weekly salary of the average American during that 6-year economic expansion declined by 2.3 percent.[36] Observing similar patterns in U.S. economic history, one prominent economist described economic growth in the United States as a "spectator sport for the majority of American families."[37] Economic decline, on the other hand, is much more "participatory," with layoffs and cuts in public services hitting middle- and lower-income families hardest—families that rely on public services (e.g., public schools, transportation) and have fewer resources to fall back on during difficult economic times.

Reality 7: Inequality in the United States is persistent in good times and bad.

While most Americans rely on their wages or salaries to make ends meet, the rich derive most of their wealth from such income-producing assets as stocks, bonds, business equity, and non-home real estate. This type of wealth is even more highly concentrated than wealth in general. Over 89 percent of all stocks in the U.S., for example, are owned by the wealthiest 10 percent of Americans.[38] This makes the fortunes of the wealthy (whether they are corporate executives, investment bankers, or not) closely tied to the fortunes of corporate America and the world of finance. While defenders of capitalism and the capitalist class argue that what's good for corporate America is good for all of America, recent economic experience has raised more doubts than ever about this. Putting aside illegal manipulation of the financial system, the drive to maximize corporate profit has led to job destruction (as companies seek cheaper labor in other parts of the world and transfer investments off shore); deregulation (e.g., so environmental protections don't inhibit corporate profit); and changes in tax policy that favor corporations (through loopholes) and those who rely on corporate profit for their wealth (by taxing their capital gains at lower rates).

Reality 8: The privileges that accrue to the wealthy are tied to the worlds of capital and finance—worlds whose good fortune are often the misfortune of the rest of the population.

Government is often portrayed as the spoiler of Wall Street—and at times it is. There are certainly examples of the government imposing fines for environmental violations, establishing regulations that protect consumers and workers, restrict corporate conduct, etc. But government as the "great equalizer" often isn't what it appears to be. In 2010, for example, when the federal government concluded a fraud case against a major investment bank (Goldman Sachs), it touted the case as one of the largest settlements in U.S. history—a whopping $550 million dollars. It turns out that $550 million was less than 4 percent of what the bank paid its executives in bonuses that year.

Similarly, changes in policy that reduce taxes are often touted as vehicles for leveling the playing field and bringing economic relief to the middle class. But at best, these do little or nothing to help middle- and low-income families. More often than not, they increase the level of inequality by providing disproportionate tax benefits to the wealthy while reducing public budgets and increasing the costs of such public services as transportation and college tuition. For example, changes in tax policy over the last five decades—especially those during the 1980s—have favored the wealthy: Federal taxes for the wealthiest 0.1 percent have fallen from 51 to 26 percent over the last 50 years, while the rate for middle income earners has risen from 14 to 16 percent.[39]

It's not just that economic resources are concentrated in the hands of a few; so too are political resources. And it is the connection between wealth and political power that allows economic inequality to persist and grow. Moreover, as the costs of political influence rise, so does the influence of the "monied" class. Running for public office has always been an expensive proposition, but it's become increasingly so: It now costs on average, $1.4 million in campaign funds to win a seat in the House of Representatives and $7 million to win a seat in the U.S. Senate.[40] Most politicians rely on wealthy donors to finance their campaigns. Alternatively, wealthy individuals who want to make public policy often underwrite their own campaigns.* The average wealth of U.S. senators, for example, is $12.6 million.[41]

High-priced lobbyists also ensure that the interests of the wealthy and of corporate America are well represented in the halls of government. Not surprisingly, organizations that track the connection between political contributions and votes cast by public officials find a strong correlation between money and voting.[42] It's not that the power of the economic elite is absolute; it's not. The power of the wealthy is often mitigated by social movements and by grassroots organizations that advocate on behalf of the poor and working class. The Occupy Wall Street movement—like movements that came before it—changed not only the public debate, but led to policy reforms as well. The power of the rich, however, remains so disproportionate that it severely undermines our democracy. Over three-quarters of a century ago, such an assault on democratic principles led Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis to observe, "We can have democracy in this country or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can't have both." Talking about the power elite or the ruling class may put people off, but there is no doubt that the interests of the wealthy predominate in American politics.

Reality # 9: Wealth and power are closely linked. The economic elite have a grossly disproportionate amount of political power—more than enough power to ensure that the system that provides them such extraordinary privileges perpetuates itself.

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.

* Over the course of three elections, Michael Bloomberg spent more than $261 million of his own money to become mayor of New York City. He spent $102 million in his last mayoral election alone—more than $172 per vote.

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 stereotyping and sexual harassment, they 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 hold 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 sometimes referred to as the double and triple jeopardy of women and people of color.

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[43]

White male/ female	*White female head**	*Hispanic male/ female*	*Hispanic female head**	*Black male/ female*	*Black female head**
1 in 14	1 in 4	1 in 4	1 in 2	1 in 4	1 in 2

* 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 10: 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 the qualities of our lives and the opportunities for success are highly circumscribed by our race, our gender, and the class we are born into. As individuals, we feel hurt and angry 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 polarize us as a people and adapt policies and practices that narrow the gaps in income, wealth, power, and privilege. That will only come about with pressure from below: strong organizations and mass movements advocating for a more just and equitable society.

NOTES

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