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

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

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Class and Stratification

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American Nightmares

from K. Newman (1988)
Falling from Grace: the experience of downward mobility in the American middle class. Lond: MacMillan
NY: Free Press.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

In the public mind, downward mobility is easily confused with

poverty, and the downwardly mobile are mistaken for those who live below the poverty line. But the two groups are quite different. More than seven million American families are officially classified as poor, and they have been the subject of countless studies.[2] The poor *can* experience downward mobility—they can lose their hold on a meager, but stable existence and become homeless, for example—but many are at the bottom of the class hierarchy and some have been there for generations.[3]

The experience of the downwardly mobile middle class is quite different. They once "had it made" in American society, filling slots from affluent blue-collar jobs to professional and managerial occupations. They have job skills, education, and decades of steady work experience. Many are, or were, homeowners. Their marriages were (at least initially) intact. As a group they savored the American dream. They found a place higher up the ladder in this society and then, inexplicably, found their grip loosening and their status sliding.

Some downwardly mobile middle-class families end up in poverty, but many do not. Usually they come to rest at a standard of living above the poverty level but far below the affluence they enjoyed in the past. They must therefore contend not only with financial hardship but with the psychological, social, and practical consequences of "falling from grace," of losing their "proper place" in the world.

Besides confusing the downwardly mobile with the poor, Americans tend to overlook these refugees from the middle class because their experience flies in the face of everything American culture stands for. From our earliest beginnings, we have cultivated a national faith in progress and achievement. The emphasis on success has always made it difficult for Americans to acknowledge defeat: No one ever talks about the Pilgrims who gave up and headed back to England.[4] Our optimistic heritage stands in the way of recognizing how frequently economic failure occurs.

When academics study occupational mobility, most of the energy goes into trying to account for upward mobility. It is true that the majority of adults enjoy an upward trajectory in income and occupational status over the course of their working lives. Yet, despite the fact that a large number have the opposite experience, downward mobility is relegated to footnotes or to a few lines in statistical tables. Rarely is it treated as a topic in its own right.

When the media, in times of economic hardship, do touch on

the problem, they show sympathy for the victims but express bewilderment at their fate. The downwardly mobile are often portrayed as the exceptions that prove the rule. Occasional reminders of what can go wrong seem to strengthen the nation's assumptions about what constitutes the normal and positive course of events. Downward mobility appears, therefore, as an aberration.

What is worse, America's Puritan heritage, as embodied in the work ethic, sustains a steadfast belief in the ability of individuals to control the circumstances of their lives. When life does not proceed according to plan, Americans tend to assume that the fault lies within. We are far more likely to "blame the victim" than to assume that systemic economic conditions beyond the influence of any individual are responsible. This tendency is so pervasive that at times even the victims blame the victims, searching within to find the character flaw that has visited downward mobility upon them. Even they assume that occupational dislocation is somehow uniquely their problem. But the fact is, downward mobility has always been with us and exists in larger numbers than most of us realize.

American culture is rich in rituals and symbols that celebrate worldly success. The extravagant bar mitzvah, the debutante ball, the society wedding, and the lavish golden anniversary celebration all signal the value that Americans attach to economic achievement. Our symbolic vocabulary for failure is, by comparison, stunted. Downward mobility has virtually no ritual face. It is not captured in myths or ceremonies that might help individuals in its grip to make the transition from a higher to a lower social status—there is no equivalent to Horatio Alger stories for the downwardly mobile.

The fact that downward mobility happens so often, yet has not been institutionalized through social convention or public ritual, points to something very significant about the problem. Downward mobility is a hidden dimension of our society's experience because it simply does not fit into our cultural universe. The downwardly mobile therefore become an invisible minority—their presence among us unacknowledged.

This impoverishes public discourse about the problem. Even more important, it has a savage impact on the downwardly mobile themselves. Lacking social and cultural support, the downwardly mobile are stuck in a transitional state, a psychological no-man's-land. They straddle an "old" identity as members of the middle

class and a "new" identity as working poor or unemployed.[5] They are in suspended animation. The chaotic feeling of displacement creates confusion that can only be resolved through reintegration in a new capacity. Yet the downwardly mobile are unable to find a "new place" that satisfies their expectations. Hence they are left hanging, with one foot in the world of the professions, the corporate empire, the realm of the economically secure, and another in the troubled world of the financially distressed, the dispossessed, and the realm of low-level occupations.

Hanging between two worlds is a distressing state of existence, for the downwardly mobile individual has to juggle two incompatible senses of personhood. On the one hand, he or she is a well-educated, skilled professional, accustomed to power, to deference, to middle-class norms of consumption. Yet behind the facade of the split-level executive home, the wallpaper is peeling, appliances are breaking down, clothes and shoes are wearing thin, and adults are venturing out to work at low-level white- or blue-collar jobs which afford no authority, no autonomy, no sense of self-importance.

Which self is the real and which the artificial for the downwardly mobile? Some cling to the old persona for years. When asked, they claim their previous occupations as engineers, vice presidents of marketing, or sales managers. But even after hundreds of interviews fail to rescue them from a bottom-level job, after the family home has been sold to pay off debts, after the sense of self-assurance fades to be replaced by self-recrimination, the torture of two selves endures. For the kids' sake, for the wife's sake, or simply for the sake of one's own sanity, it is hard to ditch yesterday's honored identity in order to make room for today's poor substitute. And one never knows, perhaps tomorrow's mail will bring news of a job interview, a passport back to the only occupational reality that makes sense.

Without any guidelines on how to shed the old self, without any instruction or training for the new, the downwardly mobile remain in a social and cultural vacuum. And society looks the other way because, frankly, it is embarrassing to see someone in such a state, and it's disturbing to treat the situation as anything other than an aberration. Any closer scrutiny makes us squirm, for it jeopardizes our own comfort.

This is not to say that there is no template for failure in American culture. Indeed, there have been periods when images of downward mobility were fresh in America's mind. The massive wave of farm foreclosures in the 1930s had a quality of collective public mourning: groups of worn and dejected faces surrounding the old homestead or the last tractor. John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* memorialized the plight of the dispossessed Dust Bowl refugees. We remember the fate of the Joad family, ejected from their land by the nameless, faceless, hated bankers.[6] The devastation of the Great Depression lingers in our historical consciousness. When the 1980s saw the United States facing the worst rate of farm foreclosures since the depression, the specter of the 1930s was a constant subtext. The beleaguered Midwest, America's breadbasket, recalled an old calamity suffered by others in other times. The words "not since the 1930s" were repeated again and again as if to assure today's farmers that they are not the first to see their livelihoods destroyed.

Despite the cold comfort of history's example, farm foreclosures are not rituals: They do not happen regularly enough to have acquired the character of a culturally recognized transition from one status to another. They are catastrophes, extraordinary events. They remind us of the calamities that can befall the nation, but they cannot structure the experience of individuals whose descent down the status ladder takes place in ordinary times.

The absence of socially validated pathways for dealing with economic decline has important consequences for the downwardly mobile. They often mourn in isolation and fail to reach any sense of closure in their quest for a new identity. Their disorientation suggests how critical culture is in "explaining" to individuals the meaning of their fate.

To a certain extent, the experience of downward mobility in middle-class America is the same for all of its victims. Catastrophic losses create a common feeling of failure, loss of control, and social disorientation. Most people who experience downward mobility long for the "golden days" to return; some genuinely believe they will. Those who have sunk far below their original social status simply don't know where they belong in the world. This is the core of what it means to "fall from grace": to lose your place in the social landscape, to feel that you have no coherent identity, and finally to feel, if not helpless, then at least stymied about how to rectify the situation.

But beyond this the commonalities cease. Some downwardly mobile people feel alone, others are part of a group; some blame

themselves, while others point the finger elsewhere; some see their fate as capricious, while others find purpose in the midst of loss. These variations shape the "same" experience—that of economic dislocation—in different ways and suggest that while the downwardly mobile have all fallen from grace, the fall means different things to different people. Hence, to understand what the experience really means in American culture, we cannot simply focus on the David Pattersons. If the complexity of middle-class downward mobility is to be fully captured, the spectrum must be broadened beyond the archetypal white-collar manager.

The variation in subjective responses to dislocation is not random. The extent to which an individual feels isolated or blameworthy, rather than united in anger with others in similar straits, is not a function of individual personality. Americans experience downward mobility for a variety of reasons, and the reasons make a difference. The contexts or circumstances in which occupational displacement occurs influence how its victims understand their fate, how they explain it to their family and friends, and how they attempt to break out of it.

Collective Loss versus Individual Tragedy One critical contextual factor that shapes the interpretation of downward mobility separates those who have been cast down the occupational hierarchy as a result of a "mass loss" from those who find themselves in trouble individually. When the General Motors Corporation shuts down eleven plants across the country, idling 29,000 workers in one fell swoop (as was announced in the fall of 1986), the experience of the GM workers is quite different from that of an individual salesman who is fired for failing to sell his quota of widgets. The collective or mass experience of loss introduces a different dynamic of blame than the one that developed in David Patterson's mind. A single individual among the 29,000 can hardly hold himself responsible for plant shutdowns on such a scale.[7]

Collective loss focuses attention away from the individual largely because, in occupations where mass losses occur, work life has a collective rather than an individual character. Even in times of prosperity, the fate of most blue-collar workers is more a matter of their union's strength than it is one of individual behavior. Moreover, the organizations that bind workers into collectivities persist over time. People may groan over the ineffectiveness of unions, but the fact is that the United Auto Workers lives on

even as General Motors closes plants around our ears. The persistence of collective organizations sustains a "group psychology," even in the face of individual misery.

Workplace versus Family Although downward mobility often comes about in the context of the workplace, it visits other locales as well. Financial disaster often follows on the heels of changes in family composition.[8] Divorce is a primary cause of downward mobility for millions of American families. Women, many of whom have built careers as homemakers, find themselves suddenly displaced, pushed into the work force to support themselves and their children. The weak position of women—especially "displaced homemakers"—in the labor market translates divorce into downward mobility for many women: They cannot secure jobs that pay well enough to stave off financial hardship. But the locus of disaster in divorce cases is not the workplace per se. It is the family. When blame is assigned and fault is found, it is of a qualitatively different character than that which emerges from failures in the workplace. Occupational breakdown may be interpreted as a failure of the head; divorce is seen as a failure of the heart. As tragic as the latter may be, our culture teaches us that hearts can be fickle.

Hence divorce-induced downward mobility—which is primarily a woman's fate—is wrapped up in social conceptions of gender roles, the appropriate relations between parents and children, and the fate of the kids as innocent victims in a precipitous slide out of the middle class. Of course, these cultural dynamics can be affected even where downward mobility is not the product of a family breakup. But they take center stage when it is. Experiencing the loss of financial stability therefore becomes inseparable from a divorcée's perspective on marital relations and sex roles.

Arbitrary Fates, Intentional Actions With hindsight, most people can construct a series of events that led up to their fall from grace. Even those who professed surprise when the disaster first struck often claim that, in retrospect, they should have seen it coming. This does not mean, however, that every victim of downward mobility believes that he or she could have intervened to reverse the situation. Nor does it mean that they accept the view that their own actions are responsible for, or related to, their

demise. However, some groups *do* place themselves at the center of the drama, while others see themselves as sideline observers who were run down by a juggernaut not of their own making.

One might assume that the downwardly mobile who had a central role in their own fall from grace would be inclined toward self-blame, while those victimized by the arbitrary actions of others would be less so. This contrast holds true in some instances but not in others. When downward mobility results from the actions of a group committed to a cause, that group and its principles take the center stage, but the dynamic of blame shifts to "the enemy."

Strikes can potentially be interpreted in this way, since in addition to the pecuniary issues at stake, they may also be moral struggles. Individuals band together into picket lines, mass together in union halls, and engage in intensive, often heady debate over appropriate tactics. Brotherhoods of the embattled emerge out of these shared experiences. When strikes fail and strikers forfeit their jobs, they clearly cannot view themselves as innocent bystanders. But other meaning-systems are often invoked. Participants may walk a fine line between blaming themselves (or their leadership) for miscalculation and casting themselves as noble victims, sacrificing themselves for a cause.

Occupational Status The higher one climbs the ladder of occupational prestige, the greater the distance one can fall. At the same time, the more prestigious and highly paid an individual's job, the greater his resources to cushion the fall. These include everything from savings accounts and houses to skills, licenses, work histories, and support networks. Possession of and access to these resources affects the timing of downward mobility. For those who live close to the margin, the loss of a job can push the family into the abyss within a matter of weeks. For those whose lives are "padded," the transition can be staved off for years. Clearly, the cushions are not evenly distributed throughout the middle class. Those at the upper end are generally (but not always) blessed with backstops that can protect them, provide them with greater options, or allow them to be pickier about their occupational choices. Those at the lower end often find themselves on a one-way ticket out of the middle class within weeks. They do not have the luxury of waiting to find out whether they'll be able to find new jobs equivalent to their old ones.

Thus, in order to understand the variation in downward mobility within the middle class, we must consider a range of occupational "niches." For the middle class is a category so broad that it encompasses everyone from white-collar executives to elite unionized labor (sometimes called the labor aristocracy). Production workers in New Jersey's chemical plants may be working men on the job, but they are indistinguishable in many respects from their middle-class neighbors at home—neighbors who are teachers, policemen, or clerical workers.[9] Blue-collar workers who have "arrived" in the middle class by virtue of the life-style their incomes sustain have as much to lose when downward mobility strikes as do their white-collar neighbors.

A second, and growing, group in the middle class is the "new-collar" or "knowledge" workers. These people are not as affluent or as privileged as Yuppie lawyers or stockbrokers, but they are much more important in numerical terms.[10] Computer programmers, air traffic controllers, and lab technicians can be classified as knowledge workers. Their work is highly technical, they have skills and some credentials, but they often lack autonomy on the job. They are the kinds of workers Daniel Bell had in mind when he described the changing nature of the American labor force in his classic treatise, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society.*

Professionals and managers are the occupational cream of the middle class. They are at the higher end of the middle-class continuum in terms of both income and prestige. Accustomed to being in control of others, the loss of authority is particularly hard to take. For them, moving down the occupational ladder often means becoming subject to the decision-making power of others.

The meaning of downward mobility for the American middle class can only be understood if the variations in attitudes and responses of each of these occupational groups are taken into account.

Tribes of the Downwardly Mobile

As members of the "middling classes," the people represented in this book have much in common: They share certain aspirations; they are one in their bitter disappointment and disillusionment at their fate; they must confront some painful realities in their own lives and those of their children.[11]

Survey data can document the incidence and economic impact of downward mobility.[12] But the *subjective interpretation* of the experience—what it means to those caught in its grip—is a matter of culture. The "worldview" of the American middle class is uniform in some respects, but it is cross-cut and internally differentiated in others. I have already suggested some sources of variation: mass versus individual loss, arbitrary action versus commitment-related dislocation, workplace versus familial breakdown, and the "wrinkles" introduced by occupational gradations within the middle class. The point is made more concrete in the chapters that follow, which examine four different groups of downwardly mobile, middle-class Americans: former managers and executives, air traffic controllers fired in the wake of a disastrous national strike, blue-collar workers caught in a plant shutdown, and divorced mothers.

White-collar managers are the highest-status group of the four discussed in this book. Although they were often sent packing as the result of corporate restructuring, they were more likely than the others to experience downward mobility as an "individual" plight.

The air traffic controllers are prototypical knowledge workers, whose technical training enabled them to secure high-paying, relatively prestigious jobs but whose lack of transferable credentials locked most of them into downward mobility. Unique among the four groups, the controllers took actions that led directly to their downward mobility.

The controllers confronted downward mobility as a collectivity, but not as one rooted in a residential community. By contrast, blue-collar workers caught in the shutdown of a 100-year-old Singer sewing machine factory in New Jersey exemplify the dilemmas of mass loss that are inseparable from a physical community. Finally, downwardly mobile divorced women provide a "familial" and a female perspective on economic dislocation.

Each of these groups affords an occasion to analyze aspects of American culture that go deeper than the experience of middle-class downward mobility. White-collar executives are creatures of meritocracy, who embrace the view that those who are worthy are rewarded and those who fail to reap rewards must also lack self-worth.

In undertaking a dramatic, illegal, and ultimately fatal national strike, the air traffic controllers demonstrate the importance of

Table 1.1. Dimensions of Group Comparison

	White-Collar Managers	*Air Traffic Controllers*	*Singer Company Workers*	*Divorced Women*
Status	upper-middle-class professionals	"new-collar" or knowledge workers	blue-collar middle class	white-collar middle-class during marriage
Individual vs. collective loss	individual	collective	collective	individual
Arbitrary vs. intentional loss	arbitrary	intentional commitment led to firings	arbitrary	mainly arbitrary
Arena of loss	workplace and occupational identity	workplace and occupational identity	workplace and residential community	family

principles, causes, and commitment in American life. Despite public rejection, the controllers became true believers in a cause, a cause that has sustained many of them through a skidding descent down the occupational hierarchy since 1981.

Blue-collar workers in Elizabeth, New Jersey, connect themselves to a tradition of craftsmanship and pride in product. For them, downward mobility is embedded in the decline of craft traditions that have been replaced by impersonal, instrumental relations between workers and management.

Finally, divorced women place the family and changing nature of gender roles on center stage in the experience of downward mobility. Their subjective responses to dislocation also focus attention on the importance of "generational cultures" in our rapidly changing, complex society. For although these women all suffered downward mobility, their reactions can only be understood against the backdrop of the generations they belong to. History marks each cohort with particular memories and values, and the lives of these divorcées testify to the folly of describing American culture (or any culture, for that matter) as a timeless entity.

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Meritocracy, commitment, tradition, and generational culture are intellectual girders that connect the lives of these four groups of downwardly mobile people to larger challenges and concerns in American society. But these are particularly salient themes for those who have slipped from the ranks of the middle class. In the midst of the daily struggle to keep their heads above water, to provide some sense of hope and continuity for their children, and to fight off the depression that comes from relentless bad news, the downwardly mobile try to salvage a sense of honor. This is no easy task in a culture that measures its men by occupation and its women by family roles (and increasingly by occupation as well).

The salvage process does not occur in a vacuum. The tools we use to make meaning out of an unexpected event are those bequeathed to us by our culture. Human beings are meaning makers who inhabit symbolic worlds that give form to experience.[15] Much of the symbolic universe is taken for granted; it is second nature. But when confronted with jarring realities, cultural assumptions—both shared and divergent—become somewhat clearer. Downward mobility means a great deal to people who

live in a society that so closely connects occupation to self-worth. It might take on a different shape in cultures where kinship or descent from royal blood confers rank and a sense of self. The American dilemma is not necessarily shared around the globe. When we face it, we do so from the vantage point of our own culture, which provides an architecture of interpretation.