

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE YUPPIE STRATEGY

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 most 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 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

### THE YUPPIE STRATEGY

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 *Newsweek*, 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 permissiveness at them, perhaps because by the eighties the word referred to so much more than child-raising 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 subculture 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 "Beathniks, 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 mid-dling 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.

There is still a "middle class" in the statistical sense. At least, a graph of income distribution still comes out as a bell-shaped curve, with most people hovering near the mean income rather than at either extreme. (If the middle range of

income actually disappeared, the curve would have two humps, rather than one smooth peak in the middle.) But in the last decade the curve has slumped toward the lower end and flattened a little on top, so that it begins to look less like a weathered hill and more like a beached whale. To the untrained eye, the shift is not alarming, but income-distribution curves do not change capriciously. Any change commands attention.

The change is evident no matter how you slice up the population—whether you compare the top fifth to the bottom fifth, or the top 40 percent to the poorest 40 percent—and whether you look at individual earnings, household earnings, or employ-ment-sounding measures of inequality like the economists' "Gini coefficient." In 1985, for example, the top fifth of American families—those earning more than \$48,000 a year—took in 43 percent of all family income, a postwar high. The bottom fifth—families earning less than \$13,200 a year—got only 4.7 percent, their lowest share in twenty-five years. Families in a somewhat arbitrarily defined middle range (\$15,000 to \$35,000 a year) saw their share fall to 39 percent of total family income from 46 percent in 1970. According to the Census Bureau, the income gap between the richest and the poorest families was wider in the mid-eighties than at any time since the bureau began keeping statistics in 1946.

The widening gap between the extremes was in no small part the result of the conscious efforts of the Reagan administration. At the same time that the administration sliced viciously away at social programs designed to help the down-and-out, it rewarded Reagan's constituency of wealth with a series of generous tax reductions. The combination of spending cuts for the poor and tax cuts for the rich produced a massive, government-induced upward redistribution of wealth. Between 1980 and 1984 alone, the richest one-fifth of American families gained \$25 billion in income and the poorest one-fifth lost \$6 billion.

Meanwhile, income at the extremes was also diverging. The poor faced wages held down by that miserly standard, the minimum wage, which remained, throughout most of the

eighties, at \$3.35 an hour, or \$6,900 a year—more than \$4,000 less than what the federal government defined as the poverty level for a family of four. In early 1988, *U.S. News and World Report*, which had once questioned the very existence of "poverty" in the United States, acknowledged that there were now 9 million working American adults whose wages were not sufficient to lift them and their families above the poverty level:

They are people like Glen Whitbeck, a short-order cook whose \$8000 annual salary doesn't stretch to cover his two little girls' medical bills. Or like Charlie Scott, a construction worker whose money woes forced him and his wife into a shelter and then, most recently, provoked a separation. Or Pamela Kelley, a onetime airline-passenger screener who shifted to canned food at home because pot roast was too expensive for her and her two-year-old daughter.

As if rubbing its eyes in disbelief, *U.S. News* noted that the poor of the eighties did not fit the stereotype defined by the culture of poverty and the ideologues of the New Right. The concept of the poor as "shiftless, black urban males unable to hold jobs, or as inner-city mothers on welfare whose sole work experience is the repeated bearing and raising of illegitimate children," the magazine admitted, was "woefully overblown."

At the other extreme, where wages are known more elegantly as "compensation," there is of course no parallel to the minimum wage—no "maximum wage" to contain the greed of the already rich. In the eighties, while the median income of American families actually declined, the compensation of top executives rose dizzily. In 1986, top executives earned an average of \$679,000 a year, up 9 percent from the year before. Executive incomes over \$1 million (from salary and bonuses) became routine; only incomes over \$10 million raised eyebrows. Reporting on then-chairman of NCR Inc. William S. Anderson's annual compensation of \$13,229,000, the *New York Times* noted dryly:

The kind of salary reported for Mr. Anderson brings out strong feelings in those who believe that the men at the top of the corporate pinnacle are wildly overpaid, members of an elite that pretty much sets its own pay.

In this decade of political reaction, no conscience, no shame, or, more likely, no fear of the have-nots seemed to restrain the ultra-rich. Consider this society-page description of a party thrown by Malcolm Forbes of *Forbes* magazine ("The Capitalist Tool") in May 1987:

Mr. Forbes' latest Highland fling (the Forbes clan hails from Scotland) included a regiment of 140 tartan-clad bagpipers and drummers marching through simulated mist. There were baronial Scottish stage sets whipped up by a designer of opera sets. There were 11-foot-tall flower arrangements dense with onopordon thistle, Gnucchi fireworks, laser beams, and, as party favors, copies of "The Sayings of Chairman Malcolm" for the lads and inscribed Revere bowls from Tiffany for the lasses . . . .

Once there, the guests, seated at 106 tables, supped on a meal whose raw materials included 24 hams, 700 baby pheasants, 100 pounds of *foie gras*, 400 pounds of *haricots verts*, 1,500 pounds of Scotch salmon, 24 legs of lamb, 60 country pâtés, 3,000 artichokes, 720 pints of raspberries and strawberries, 150 quarts of cream and 15 gallons of butter-scotch sauce. . . . The Forbeses also let them eat "celebration cake" and "capitalist cookies."

No one could any longer imagine that America was the land of one vast, undifferentiated middle class. In cities like Los Angeles and New York, the contrasts in wealth and poverty scandalized European visitors: high-rise buildings where two-bedroom apartments cost more to rent than most Americans earn in a month, while at street level, makeshift cardboard structures sheltered the homeless. The streets carried fleets of stretch limos, their windows discreetly shaded to frustrate the curious, while on the sidewalk, beggars of all ages searched trash cans for edible crusts; breakdancers performed for quar-

ters; hawkers sold ballpoint pens, watches, used clothing, old magazines, drugs.

While these lurid, distinctly un-American images came to characterize the extremes of wealth and poverty, no less dramatic changes were taking place in the middle range of income. For one thing, a middle-level income no longer guaranteed such perquisites of middle-class status as home ownership. According to the National Association of Homebuilders, in 1984 a family needed an income of approximately \$37,000 to afford a median-priced home, but in the same year the median family income was only \$26,167—almost \$11,000 short. That gap marked a sharp deterioration in the prospects of middle-income, mostly working-class people. According to economists Frank S. Levy and Richard Michel, a typical wage-earner in the 1950s faced housing costs equivalent to about 14 percent of his gross monthly pay. In 1984, however, a thirty-year-old man who purchased a median-priced home had to set aside a staggering 44 percent of his income for carrying charges. For the first time in postwar America, a middle-level income no longer guaranteed what we have come to think of as a middle-class lifestyle.

But the big news was that the "middle class," or more precisely, the middle range of income, was becoming ever more sparsely inhabited. If the middle range was defined as lying between family incomes of \$20,000 and \$50,000, the fraction of families with middle-range incomes declined from 53 percent in 1973 to less than 48 percent in 1984. Some people were climbing out and up, but others were sinking down toward the bottom.\*

\* At this point, there does not seem to be a consensus as to whether more people moved downward from the middle range of income, or upward. Different studies offer different answers. Economist Stephen J. Rose reported in 1983 that three-fourths of those leaving the middle-income range in the late seventies and early eighties suffered decline. Likewise, economist Katherine L. Bradbury, studying middle-income shrinkage from 1979 to 1984, found most of those leaving the middle class heading downward. However, a recent Bureau of Labor Statistics study covering middle-class shrinkage between 1969 and 1986 found that, in that seventeen-year period, "most of the decline in the proportion of families in the middle has gone to the upper class, not the lower."

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*.

The corporate abandonment of manufacturing—or what economists Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison have called “the deindustrialization of America”—violently disrupted the life of the blue-collar working class. Between 1979 and 1984,

11.5 million American workers lost their jobs because of plant shutdowns or relocations. Only 60 percent were able to find new jobs, and nearly half of the new jobs were at lower pay than the lost jobs. One study found that laid-off steelworkers in Chicago saw their incomes fall, on the average, by one-half, from \$22,000 a year to \$12,500 a year, just slightly above the official poverty level.

Throughout America’s industrial “rust belt,” whole towns and neighborhoods fell into decline as factories shut their doors. There were plenty of alternative jobs in the service sector—as bank tellers, hotel clerks, fast-food workers—but these tended to be low-paid, nonunion, and otherwise foreign to men whose skills lay in working with things, not people. A laid-off copper miner in Butte, Montana, a huge man wearing cowboy boots, overalls, and a scruffy beard, told me indignantly that he had been offered retraining—as a nurses’ aide. Usually it was women or young, often black or Hispanic, men who took the proliferating service jobs; and one of the paradigmatic images of the eighties was that of the laid-off steelworker whose homemaker-wife has gone out to support the family on her wages at Burger King.

According to Harrison and Bluestone, though, the biggest reason for the declining fortunes of the working class was not job loss but wage loss. In every industry, employers launched a fierce initiative against labor costs: demanding wage concessions as the price of continued employment; instituting two-tier wage structures whereby the recently hired are paid on a vastly lower scale than those with seniority; replacing full-time workers with part-time employees who do not have to be offered benefits such as health insurance; and, of course, old-fashioned union-busting. In the eighties, law firms did a brisk business in union-busting services to employers, including public-relations drives to discredit the union and psychological methods of dividing and demoralizing the work force. More brutal, brass-knuckle approaches also flourished. Between 1986 and 1988, three New York-area union organizers of my acquaintance were beaten by company thugs, and two Queens factory workers who had participated in an organizing drive

were pistol-whipped, in front of their coworkers, by the factory owners.

The Reagan administration set the tone of labor relations in the 1980s by busting PATCO, the air traffic controllers' union, in 1981. The administration then proceeded to all but eviscerate the Occupational Safety and Health Administration and the National Labor Relations Board, which guarantee minimal legal protections to labor. While the ideologues of the New Right extolled the virtues of the working class, the government of the New Right abetted the worst capitalist assault on America's working people since the 1920s.

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.

They didn't have to read Irving Kristol to know which way the wind was blowing. By the early seventies it was clear that the sixties boom in higher education had produced "too many" educated young Americans. In 1968 only 6 percent of new Ph.D.'s had been unable to find jobs; by 1974 that figure had jumped to 26 percent. One study found that among college graduates less than five years out of school only 62 percent had professional or managerial jobs in 1980, compared with 76 percent in 1970. As the *Boston Globe* reported in 1985:

Gary Rodgers, 44, is a PhD who has taught at Harvard and Yale and written books on Diderot. Unable to get tenure, he settled for a job teaching rudimentary English to Citibank employees. Marie Wellington, 32, is a Harvard PhD in romance languages who had hoped to teach (in a tenured position). Today, she is a Berlitz Language Co. manager in Chicago. . . . At Cambridge's Ambassador Cabs alone, there are six PhD's [as cab drivers].

While Ph.D.'s in literature went hungry or learned stenography, jobs for professionals were proliferating in that vast area of endeavor known as "business services." The expansion of government regulation in the sixties and seventies meant more jobs for corporate lawyers. The out-sourcing of manufacturing to the third world meant more, rather than fewer, jobs for American managers, as the United States became one of the great administrative headquarters of the "global assembly line." The shift in business emphasis from manufacturing and distribution to financial speculation created openings for whole armies of brokers, financial analysts, and bankers. Corporate recruiters brought the good news to campuses, where they found, according to one college president, "a new mood on campus": "In the 1960s, there were a lot of social concerns. Now . . . the students want to come to get a skill and have the resources to support a middle-class existence."

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 undergraduates 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.

#### FEMINISM AND CLASS CONSOLIDATION

In the late fifties, when our story began, marrying an economic equal was neither necessary nor possible. Most middle-class—or for that matter, blue-collar working-class—men could expect to earn enough to support a wife and children. Moreover, most women who intended to marry and have children did not invest their prime childbearing years in post-graduate education and professional advancement. In 1960, just over 30 percent of American women worked outside the home, and most of those did so because their husband's income was plainly inadequate or because their children had grown up, leaving the house quiet and eternally tidy.

A decade or so later, enough had changed so that the marriage of equals was both possible and, in most cases, necessary. Most American men no longer earned enough to support a family unassisted, and most American women—including wives and mothers—had gone out and gotten jobs. Many married women went to work simply to help compensate for their husbands' declining earning power. At the same time, later marriages and the 50 percent divorce rate guaranteed that the great majority of women would have to support themselves and possibly their children on their own earnings at some point in their lives. By the seventies, only the wives of the rich could imagine that employment was simply an option.

But in the professional middle class, women were working not only because they had to, not only because they feared not finding a suitable husband—or any husband at all—but because they wanted to. They were in fact not just "working"—a

part-time job while the children are at school, a stab at catering or some other expansion of a domestic skill—they were pursuing demanding, fast-track professional careers with at least as much energy and intensity as their male colleagues. And this was the result not merely of crude economic pressure but of feminism.

The feminist movement has of course affected the lives of women in all social classes, and it has changed women's lives in ways that have little to do with economics or the dynamics of any particular class. By abolishing the cruder forms of sex discrimination, the movement opened doors for women of all classes, races, and conditions. Women won the right to abortion, the right to equal pay for equal work, the right to equal educational opportunity. And feminists are still working to expand these rights and win new ones—such as subsidized child care, pay equity, and paid maternity leave. Perhaps above all, the feminist movement has won enormous gains for all women in the intangible areas of dignity and self-esteem. But for our story, what is important about feminism is that it helped save the professional middle class from economic decline and at the same time healed it of that subtler form of decline described two decades earlier by Betty Friedan as "progressive demoralization."

Among women's economic gains, perhaps the greatest single achievement of the feminist movement has been the opening up of formerly male professions, such as law, medicine, and management. For most of this century the professions have been the occupational fortress of the middle class, but until recently they were reserved for men. The very traits that early-twentieth-century reformers sought to attach to the professions—objectivity, scientific rationality, and a dispassionate concern for society—were conceived of as quintessentially masculine traits. In 1871, for example, the president of the American Medical Association had this to say on the subject of women in medicine:

Certain women seek to rival men in manly sports . . . and the strong-minded ape them in all things, even in dress. In doing

so, they may command a sort of admiration such as all monstrous productions inspire, especially when they tend towards a higher type than their own.

Throughout the twentieth century, women who aspired to a profession were directed toward those intellectually "softer" occupations—nursing, social work, teaching—that are deemed "semi-professions" by the sociologists and rewarded commensurately by employers. Those who persisted in trying to gain entrance to the top professions often faced harassment from professors and fellow students, followed by marginalization within their profession. Ellen Richards, for example, one of America's first female chemists, was segregated from the male students when she attended MIT in the 1860s, and eventually consigned to what was felt to be a more suitable "science" for a woman—home economics.

Feminism, when it reemerged in the 1970s, launched a two-pronged attack on the traditionally male professions. On the one hand, women demanded to be let in on an equal footing. On the other hand, they questioned the core assumptions of the professions—their exclusivity, their claims to scientific objectivity and public service. In medicine, for example, feminists simultaneously demanded that women be admitted to the profession and attacked it for its sexism, racism, and greed—qualities that seemed to betray any claims to objectivity and public service. Feminists wanted women to be doctors, but they also wanted to abolish medicine as an elite profession and encourage the skills and participation of more humble health workers, lay practitioners (such as the self-trained midwives who began practicing illegally in the seventies), and the "consumers" of health care. With all the professions, feminists wanted, paradoxically at times, to open them up—and close them down.

This ambivalence reflected a larger quandary. Did feminists want to overthrow what they recognized to be a "male-dominated, capitalist society"? Or did they simply want women to take their place within it? Did they want revolution, or assimilation? The radical answer had drawn confidence from the

student left and the black insurgency, but as those movements waned in the early seventies, assimilation began to look like the only practical strategy. I remember how betrayed many radical and left-leaning feminists felt at a 1975 conference held by the New York City chapter of the National Organization for Women, which featured, among the usual workshops on feminist political themes, sessions on how to "make it" in the corporate world. Surely the aim of the struggle was not to propel a few women to the top of a fundamentally unjust hierarchy, in which most women counted for little more than cheap labor. Yet as many quite radical feminists later came to realize, there is no way that an economically marginalized group can be expected to "wait for the revolution," letting moral purity compensate for certain poverty. Mainstream feminism came to stand unambiguously for assimilation, with the proviso or at least vague hope that women would somehow "humanize" the positions into which they were assimilated.

So, empowered by feminism—even if they did not always regard themselves as feminists—women poured into what had been almost exclusively male domains. In medicine, only 9 percent of first-year students were female in 1969; in 1987, 37 percent were female. In law, women had taken only 8 percent of the degrees awarded in 1973; ten years later women took 36 percent. In business, only 4.9 percent of the MBAs graduating in 1973 were women; ten years later 28.9 percent were women.

Not that women have achieved anything like full equality within these professions. A representation of 30 to 40 percent is far short of 50 percent. And within these areas of endeavor, women still find subtle barriers blocking the way to the top. Women doctors are likely to choose, or be channeled into, the relatively low-status field of pediatrics rather than, say, surgery. Women academics are well represented among the junior faculty, sparse among the tenured senior faculty. Businesswomen complain about the "glass ceiling" that stands between them and the boardroom, and feel blocked at all levels by the almost impenetrably masculine culture of the corporate world. But the fact remains that in little more than a decade women

increased their representation among the most prestigious and lucrative professions by 300 to 400 percent. As a change in the fortunes of women, that has to be counted somewhere up near the achievement of suffrage.

It was an achievement, however, that was sharply limited by class. The chief beneficiaries of the opening of the professions were women who already had the advantages of good schools, an encouraging home life, and the money and leisure for higher education. A 1976 study showed, for example, that the women clamoring into medical school were likely to come from the same class background as the men who were already there. Nor were there gains of comparable magnitude within the traditionally male blue-collar skilled occupations, in part because so many of these occupations were themselves in decline. While the percentage of women in professional training was rising from less than 10 percent up to 40 percent, the proportion of women construction workers and skilled craftspeople did not reach 10 percent.

So while some women moved into positions of visibility and even power, the average working woman, who is not a professional and not likely to be college-educated, is still pretty much where she always was: waiting on tables, emptying wastebaskets, or pounding a keyboard for \$5 or \$6 an hour. If the recent opening up of the professions has been feminism's greatest victory, it is a victory whose sweetness the majority of American women will never taste.

But it is the change within the professional middle class that concerns us here. The chasm that existed within that class—separating its achievers from its menial laborers, its husbands from its wives—was potentially bridged. A young woman no longer had to secure her membership in the middle class through the tenuous pact of marriage. She didn't have to marry a doctor; she could be one. It remained for the young men of this class to overcome their resentment of the new female competition and understand that they in turn could be married to doctors or lawyers instead of mere wives.

By the seventies this change was well under way. The old notion that a working wife was a sure sign of male inadequacy

was hard to find in any class. As I argued in an earlier book, *The Hearts of Men*, the traditional masculine ideal—husband, father, and sole breadwinner—had been going out of style for decades. The reasons for this had less to do with feminism, which did not become a mass movement until the early seventies, than with a consumer culture that was increasingly reaching out to men as consumers in their own right. In the words of the early *Playboy* magazine, which should be seen as a promoter of the new masculine ideology as well as of soft pornography, wives were “parasites,” trapping men into lives of perpetual toil to support *their* consumerism. Men earned the money, why shouldn’t they spend it on themselves?

Feminism, when it came along, offered a socially conscious rationale for this somewhat churlish attitude. It allowed men, especially young, middle-class men, to insist that they were not fleeing from their traditional responsibilities but joining in the general effort to overcome obsolete and restrictive sex roles. As psychologist and men’s liberation advocate Herb Goldberg argued in the 1970s, if women were tired of being sex objects for men, men were equally weary of being “success objects” for women. Besides, quite apart from the men’s liberationists, the old pressures on men to “prove their masculinity” by marrying young and singlehandedly supporting a family were relaxing. By the eighties, no one thought it odd if a man of thirty or so remained single, apportioning his earnings among the products advertised in such places as *Gentleman’s Quarterly*, *Metropolitan Home*, and *Connoisseur*.

The women’s magazines complained that men—meaning eligible men with attractive incomes—were suffering from a “fear of commitment.” Many men, however, were displaying a justifiable fear of making the wrong commitment. The young men—stereotypical yuppies, although the word had not yet come into widespread use—who were interviewed for a 1984 article I wrote on the “new man” did not rule out marriage, but they were concerned with finding a mate who could “pull her own weight,” who “would not be a burden”—as if they were selecting a companion for an upstream rafting trip. And while this is hardly scientific evidence, I have often polled college lecture audiences, first asking the women how many of them

would like to be full-time homemakers. One or two brave hands go up for this unstylish option. But when the young men are asked how many of them would be willing to support a full-time homemaker wife, the response is a few snickers, and no hands.

Women had once married men who looked as though they would be reliable breadwinners, and men had once married women who simply looked good. But now both sexes were determined to find proven wage-earners. As Harvard economics professor David Bloom told *Time* in 1986: “A pairing-off based on economics is occurring. Higher-income men and higher-income women are tending to find each other.” Mimi Lieber, a New York-based marketing consultant, told me in a 1986 interview:

We’re seeing a changing pattern of marriage. It used to be that looks determined how well a woman married. But today the little dime-store girl is not being picked up by the college student. The doctor isn’t marrying a nurse, he’s marrying another doctor.

The frequency with which college men once married pretty dime-store clerks should probably not be exaggerated. College itself, as a social experience, helped ensure that young middle- or upper-class men would end up with young women of similar backgrounds. But marriage had provided at least a limited avenue of upward mobility for young women of humble origins, and that avenue was now all but closed. In the fifties, for example, an office romance meant the occasional dalliance between a boss and his secretary. Thirty years later, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, office romance was “flourishing” because “women routinely work beside men as professional and managerial peers.”

Besides, a certain social opprobrium now attaches to the man who socializes with women far below him in the occupational hierarchy. Just as a professional woman who fell in love with a blue-collar male would be a subject of wonder and scorn, the executive who dallies with a pink-collar worker would be revealed today as insecure and lacking in judgment.

In the 1988 movie *Working Girl*, an ambitious secretary pretends to be an upper-level executive in order to carry out a major deal. In the process she becomes romantically involved with an attractive male executive from another firm. When he finds out about her deception, she challenges him: Would you have fallen in love with me if I were just a secretary? He is abashed, because the answer, of course, is no.

It is as if, in climbing into the middle class on the strength of their own achievements, the new executive and professional women had pulled up the ladder behind them. Of course, they had not done so themselves. Men were choosing to marry for money, as well as for love or for looks. But upwardly mobile young professional women had much to gain from the tightened "pattern of marriage" within the class. Seen as economic partners as well as helpmates, women are more likely to be equals within their marriages. They are also less likely than in the past to be displaced by any of the far more numerous women—secretaries, flight attendants, cocktail waitresses—who lack professional credentials and impressive resumé's.

Viewed from outside and "below," then, the professional middle class has simply become a more impregnable fortress. Once only men had had to scale its walls, devoting their youth and young adulthood to preparation and apprenticeship. Women could drift in on the strength of their charm or of so slight a credential as a bachelor's degree in French literature or art history. Today, however, almost no one gets in—male or female—without submitting to the same discipline and passing the same tests that were originally designed to exclude intruders from below.

Almost as soon as the class consolidated itself through its new androgyny, an unaccountable weariness seemed to overcome middle-class feminism. In 1963 Betty Friedan had blamed the "feminine mystique" for the "progressive demoralization" of the professional middle class—men, women, and children. The full-time housewife, she argued, had become a menace. Bored, tranquilized, suffering from "housewife's syndrome," she was not even up to the one job assigned to her—raising children to be ambitious, disciplined members of the middle class. Excluded from the "battle with the world," she

had no way of transmitting the skills required for that battle. The "wasted energy" of housewives, Friedan predicted, would continue "to be destructive to their husbands, their children, and to themselves until it is used in their own battle with the world."

Two decades later, no one could complain that women were insufficiently engaged in the "battle," dazed noncombatants in the world of men. A new problem had arisen in the middle class: whether anyone would have children at all. To the individual professional woman, the problem was experienced as the inexorable ticking of the "biological clock": How would she find a husband before her fertile years ended, and find time from her career for childbearing? To conservative intellectuals, it was the problem of the "birth death." There was no shortage of population globally, nor even a shortfall among Americans in general. But the birthrate among the educated, affluent, white population had fallen drastically. If there had been a question in the early sixties of whether the middle class could reproduce itself as a class, there was now a question of whether its members would reproduce at all.

At the same time, *raising* the children began to loom as a bigger challenge than ever. In the early seventies, ambitious middle-class mothers counted themselves lucky to find a day-care center or a reliable baby-sitter to mind the children while they rushed off to work. But a decade later, with mounting competition for admission to the "good" private colleges—and even to the first-rate urban nursery schools—women were thinking twice about paid child care.

The concern was expressed in various ways: "I don't want to miss the early years"; or "I don't want to leave my child with just *anyone*." But the real issue was the old middle-class dilemma of whether "anyone"—such as a Jamaican housekeeper or a Hispanic day-care worker—was equipped to instill such middle-class virtues as concentration and intellectual discipline. For many young middle-class couples the choice was stark: Have the mother work and risk retarding the child's intellectual development, or have the mother stay home, build up the child's IQ, and risk being unable to pay for a pricey nursery school or, later, private college. Unfortunately, femi-

nism had not advanced to the point where these were a *fait accompli* for these women.

Attuned to the new doubts among middle-class women, Betty Friedan announced in 1981 a "second stage" for American feminism. In the first stage, she wrote, "Our aim was full participation, power and voice in the mainstream, inside the party, the political process, the professions, the business world"—in short, assimilation. But where once women had been stymied by the feminine mystique, she wrote, they were now afflicted by a "feminist mystique" which required them to be brittle, masculinized strivers. Just as she had once quoted dozens of frustrated housewives, Friedan now cited battle-weary career women, anguished over their desire to have children before their childbearing years ran out. Thus the second stage would suspend hostilities between men and women. It would "involve coming to new terms with the family" and must be launched "so we can live a new 'yes' to life and love, and can choose to have children."

Many feminists found Friedan's proposed truce premature. She did not claim that the struggle for equality was over, but she now saw many familiar forms of sexism as "first stage problems"—as if they required little more than a mop-up operation. For many middle-class women there was some truth to this. Problems of sheer economic injustice, of stinging discrimination, were not looming as large as the problem of when and how to start a family. But a far larger number of women remained, as always, in stereotypically female jobs, paid far less than men in jobs requiring similar levels of skill and responsibility. For these women, Friedan's announcement that feminism had moved on to a less militant second stage was, at the very least, insensitive.

Friedan was only one sign of the new quietism of middle-class feminism. In academia, women's studies—long the most reliable reproductive organ of middle-class feminism—began in some quarters to take on a detached and esoteric air. Reviewing an important new anthology of highbrow feminist scholarship in 1987, Catherine Stimpson—herself a leading pioneer of women's studies—found the contributions

strangely "eccentric in focus, uneasy in spirit." On the campuses, the mood among young career-oriented women was reportedly "post-feminist" and dominated by the conviction that, whatever indignities women had suffered in the remote past (say, 1970), the way was now open for any young woman of spirit to rise straight to the top of whatever lucrative and rewarding field she might choose.

Middle-class feminism is not, of course, all there is to American feminism. A 1986 Gallup poll found that a startling 56 percent of American women considered themselves to be "feminists," and the degree of feminist identification was, if anything, slightly higher as one descended the socioeconomic scale. Black women, for example, who are economically disadvantaged relative to white women, professed to be feminists at the rate of 65 percent. But middle-class white women provide the public face of feminism; they direct and staff its major institutions. And by the late eighties, middle-class feminism seemed, even to many of its own stalwarts, to be tired: tired of defeat at the hands of the New Right over issues like the Equal Rights Amendment, but also exhausted from its own successes.

Even in the face of the new problems confronting working women, however, few are likely to trade in the "feminist mystique" for the old feminine one. For above all, the assimilation of women has almost doubled the economic resources of the middle class, helping save it from the decline experienced by the working class and lifting it, in fact, well out of the middle range of income. The \$60,000-plus a year that a professional couple can expect to earn by pooling their incomes puts them financially well ahead of over 80 percent of American families. By assimilating women, what we have called the middle class became, in strictly economic terms, the upper middle class.

#### THE CONSUMER BINGE

The hallmark of the yuppie—male or female, married or single—was consumption. The yuppie of stereotype drove a \$40,000 foreign car, vacationed vigorously in all seasons, and

aspired to a condominium with an intimidating address. Even those who could not afford the big-ticket items—condos and Porsches—infused their daily lives with extravagant details: salad dressings made of raspberry vinegar and walnut oil, imported mineral water, \$100 sneakers, \$50 meals at the restaurant of the moment. Yuppie spending patterns represented a new, undreamed-of level of capitulation to the consumer culture: a compulsive acquisitiveness bordering on addiction, a mental state resembling the supposed “present-orientation” and “radical improvidence” of the despised underclass.

Yuppie consumerism was not simply a distortion built into the stereotype. America was on a consumer binge, or as some economists put it, in a new stage of “hyperconsumption.” Someone was spending, and it was not the laid-off industrial worker or unemployed woman on a dwindling welfare allowance. In fact, even during the recession of 1982–83, even after the stock-market crash of 1987, sales of luxury goods boomed. The truly rich—roughly the 5 percent of Americans who hold over 50 percent of the nation’s wealth—accounted for a disproportionate share of the boom, particularly in the markets for yachts, gems, jets, real estate, and such collectibles as classic cars. But at the low end of luxury—which includes vacation trips, restaurant meals, and sports cars—America’s newly rich, double-income business professionals were holding up their share of the binge.

In defense of yuppie spending habits—and it is a tribute to the enduring anxiety of the middle class that they still needed any defense at the height of Reagan-era profligacy—*New Republic* editor Michael Kinsley described the yuppies as engaged in a kind of compensatory spending. The \$40,000 or so that a young business person might earn did not, after all, measure up so well when compared to the purchasing power enjoyed by his or her parents a few decades ago. It would hardly be enough to cover the house, station wagon, stay-at-home spouse, and three children that the white-collar man of the fifties expected as a matter of right. So, in Kinsley’s argument, the raspberry vinegar, *crème fraîche*, and so forth had to be seen as “affordable luxuries”:

They serve as consolation for the lack of unaffordable luxuries like a large house. You may not have a dining room, but you have a dining room table, and everything on it can have a complicated explanation involving many foreign words.

## THE YUPPIE STRATEGY

But the compensatory-spending argument misses the profound change in middle-class attitudes toward consumption. In a previous generation, a young couple who lacked the money for a house and other family-oriented purchases would simply have skipped the raspberry vinegar (or its fifties equivalent) and saved their pennies. Spending was the reward for saving; and “leisure products,” which include all the yuppie favorites, took second place to the moral solidity represented by a house and heavy appliances. The profligacy of the yuppies, which set a standard for all the middle class as a whole, was the surrender to hedonism that middle-class intellectuals had been warning against for over thirty years.

The consumer binge of the eighties is all the more startling when contrasted to the trend that immediately preceded it—the fashionable austerity of the seventies, symbolized by Jimmy Carter’s low-budget 1976 inauguration and the popularity of E. F. Schumacher’s *Small Is Beautiful*. “Voluntary simplicity,” as this brief interlude of abstemiousness has since been termed, gave concrete expression to the middle-class fears of affluence that had been voiced since the fifties. The counterculture and student movement of the sixties were its immediate inspiration; the oil shortage of the early seventies and the new environmentalism imbued it with a high sense of moral purpose. A 1977 Harris poll found Americans increasingly concerned with “learning to get our pleasure out of non-material experiences,” rather than “satisfying our needs for more goods and services.” According to a study by the Stanford Research Institute, this attitude was particularly strong among young, educated, middle-class people, who were no longer likely to be political activists but at least tended “to prefer products that are functional, healthy, nonpolluting, durable, repairable, recyclable or made from renewable raw materials, energy-cheap, authentic, aesthetically pleasing, and made

through simple technology." These preferences easily accommodated the new marketing emphasis on "leisure products," such as sports equipment, cameras, and stereos. The requirements of being functional and healthy did not, however, extend to such eighties favorites as *crème fraîche* and Beluga caviar.

Voluntary simplicity echoed the "simplicity movement" of the emerging middle class in the Progressive Era. Both movements sought a way to express middle-class political aspirations in the form of personal behavior, or, in seventies terminology, "lifestyle." In the early twentieth century, middle-class simplicity had meant fewer and plainer items of furniture, looser clothes, and lighter meals. In the 1970s, the trend was to minimalist (or high-tech) decor, blue cotton work shirts, "health foods," and a horror of strong drink and cigarette smoke. Both movements embodied a principled rejection of the endlessly wasteful, endlessly seductive, capitalist consumer culture. And both movements ended by trivializing that rejection as a new set of consumer options: in the 1970s, natural fiber over polyester, whole-grain bread over white, plain oak furniture over high-gloss department-store maple.

No one in the 1970s expected voluntary simplicity to fade with the mere turn of a decade. It was a "quiet revolution," according to the Harris poll summary, a "major transformation of Western values," according to the Stanford Research Institute. Moreover, voluntary simplicity seemed to have become the very hallmark of middle-class existence—not only an ethic but a set of behavioral cues that distinguished the middle class from those both above and below it. The poor and the working class smoked and ate cheeseburgers; the middle class carved out nonsmoking environments for itself and eschewed red meat, American cheese, and grease in all forms.

So entrenched were the new middle-class tastes that it began to appear as if the classes could no longer coexist in the same physical space. I recall the dilemma faced by a group of young doctors in Chicago who wanted to invite other hospital workers—aides, orderlies, technicians, nurses—to a party. The doctors, friends of mine and dedicated reformers of the medi-

cal system, hoped to celebrate in the most generous and egalitarian fashion possible. But, they agonized, would their working-class co-workers submit to the obvious (middle-class) rules: no smoking, no hard liquor, and no junk food? The doctors finally realized that they would have to make a sacrifice, at least for one evening, of their values and possibly their health.

But it was more common for middle-class practitioners of the new simplicity to simply retreat from the challenge of mixed environments. Health was usually the immediate rationale, but health had become a nebulous metaphor for other distinctions, and disguised a growing disdain for the white working class. In the early sixties, middle-class commentators had, perversely enough, seen the poor as the victims of a consumerist mentality, the slaves of sensation and impulse. As the seventies wore on, the blue-collar working class began to take the place of the poor in the moral hierarchy of the middle class. The poor themselves once again dropped from view, leaving the working class—with its tasteless home furnishings, high-fat diet, and unwholesome addictions—to serve as an object lesson in the perils of succumbing to the consumer culture.

So how was the middle class able, within a few short years, to throw itself into the consumerist binge without losing its sense of identity—its fragile autonomy from the leveling force of the consumer culture? The short answer is that it was not able to. The binge was experienced as a capitulation every bit as profound as the switch from relatively autonomous careers in the professions to get-rich-quick trajectories in the business world. But the short-term answer was that the middle class was able to construct a new identity around conspicuous consumption, redefining it not as surrender but as a pious form of work.

#### THE EMBRACE OF AFFLUENCE

One of the unappealing features of 1950s-style mass-marketed affluence, from a middle-class point of view, was that it allowed for only "minute distinctions" between the middle



class and those immediately below, the working class. One might have more and better, but "better" was not distinctively different: thicker carpets, a car with more options, museum prints rather than dime-store reproductions on the walls. In the eighties this problem was decisively resolved. The mass market disappeared and was replaced by two markets, which we know as "upscale" and "downscale." The change reflected the growing middle-class zeal to distinguish itself from the less fortunate, and at the same time it made such distinctions almost mandatory for anyone hoping to inhabit the social and occupational world of the successful and "upscale."

Everywhere in the retail industry there were signs of the new market polarization. Department stores, for example, faced the choice of specializing in one end of the class spectrum or the other—or else going out of business. Undifferentiated chains, like Korvette's and Gimbel's, which had aimed at both blue- and white-collar middle-income consumers, were forced to close, while Sears and J. C. Penney anxiously tried to "reposition" themselves to survive in the ever more deeply segmented market. The stores and chains that prospered were the ones that learned to specialize in one extreme of wealth or the other: Bloomingdale's and Neiman-Marcus for the upscale; K-Mart and Woolco for those constrained by poverty or thrift.

Inside the stores there was hardly any product that could not be found in up- and downscale versions, as if even lifeless commodities were being asked to take sides in an undeclared class war. Beer divided between the familiar American brands and dozens of expensive imports—Beck's, Corona, Heineken, Kirin. Food, of course, divided and subdivided frenetically, but the broad contours of change were reflected in Pillsbury's restaurant strategy: Burger King for the proletariat; Bennigan's well-appointed, trendily stocked restaurants for the yuppies. The auto industry had always had its Cadillacs and Chevys, but now there was a fresh segmentation among the imports, with Mercedes and Audis for the affluent, Toyotas for the masses. Even the most phlegmatic commodities, home appliances, began to sort themselves out as manufacturers added high-tech features to create an upscale line. According to a market analyst for the Bear Stearns brokerage firm:

## THE YUPPIE STRATEGY

There is a consumer out there who doesn't want chain-store labels on things they buy. Kenmore [the Sears brand of appliances] is a good name but not a yuppie name. When they have friends over, these people do not want those friends to see names like Sears or Kenmore. They want people to see names like Sony or Kitchen Aid.

The split in the mass market followed the deepening fault lines within American society and was a response to those underlying shifts. Downwardly mobile people have little choice but to go for the discount goods, while the upwardly mobile are eager to transform their money into the visible marks of status. No doubt, too, the pressure to consolidate one's financial position through marriage heightened the importance of small and subtle class cues. A "nice guy" or a "good-looking gal" would no longer do, and since bank accounts and resumes are not visible attributes, a myriad of other cues were required to sort the good prospects from the losers. Upscale spending patterns created the cultural space in which the financially well matched could find each other—far from the burger-eaters and Bud-drinkers and those unfortunate enough to wear unnatural fibers. In fact, upscale department stores found a new use as cruising grounds for affluent singles. At the height of the consumer binge, a popular dating activity was a joint mission to a high-priced store like Bloomingdale's.

Whatever the reasons, the yuppie spending pattern, (whether indulged in by demographically official yuppies or not) represented a frantic positioning—an almost desperate commitment to the latest upscale fad. In the fashionable intellectual discourse of the time, possessions were important only as "signifiers," elements of an ever-shifting language that spoke of wealth and promise. The trick was to understand the language as it changed from month to month, leaving behind the ignorant and the less than affluent. As soon as an affordable fad—the example is often given of pita-bread sandwiches—sedimented down to the general public, it would be rendered useless as a mark of status and abandoned by the cognoscenti.

Hence that favorite magazine and newspaper filler in the mid-eighties, the list of what's in and what's out, calculated to both mock and alarm the status-conscious reader. For example,

in 1985 the *Miami Herald* published a largely predictable list of what's "hot" and "not hot": Conservatives, dinner parties, and gilt were hot; liberals, cookouts, and minimalism were not. The joke was at the end of the long lists, where, under *hot*, one found *what's not hot*, and under *not hot*, of course, *what's hot*.

But there was a certain consistency to the dominant upscale tastes. Conservatism had triumphed over liberalism, gilt over minimalism, expensive over modestly priced. The obvious impetus was the sudden visibility of the truly rich, who reentered public consciousness with the triumphal display of the 1981 Reagan inauguration. The rich, of course, are always with us. But throughout most of the postwar period they had not been too eager to announce their presence, as a class, to the potentially resentful public. All this changed with the ascent to power of the New Right, whose populist language conflicted openly with its aristocratic allegiances. According to historian Deborah Silverman, the Reagan era introduced a "new cultural style" consistent with right-wing politics:

A style aggressively dedicated to the cult of visible wealth and distinction, and to the illusion that they were well earned; a style that adopted the artifacts of Chinese emperors, French aristocrats, and English noblemen as signs of exclusivity and renunciation; a style of unabashed opulence, whose mixture of hedonism, spitefulness, and social repudiation was captured in the slogan "Living well is the best revenge."

Not to mention the even nastier and more popular slogan "He who dies with the most toys wins."

What was pathetic and ultimately embarrassing about the stereotypical yuppie was that he or she was such a poor copy of the truly rich. People who have yachts and private jets do not have to agonize over "what's hot" and "what's not." People who employ their own chefs do not have to engage in yuppie-style "competitive eating" to establish their place in the world. In moving from minimalism to gilt, from voluntary simplicity to a parodic profligacy, the upwardly mobile middle class

began to lose its own fragile sense of dignity. The rich can surrender to hedonism because they have no reason to remain tense and alert. But the middle class cannot afford to let down its guard; it maintains its position only through continual exertion—through allegiance to the "traditional values" of hard work and self-denial. In the eighties, the middle class came dangerously close to adopting the presumed wantonness of the poor—that is, the actual wantonness of the very rich.

#### THE WAR AGAINST SOFTNESS

The big difference is that young business and professional people *work*. The truly rich, like the courtiers who surrounded Nancy Reagan, do not work but drift easily from fashion show to award dinner, from winter townhouse to summer home, from one vaguely "cultural" entertainment to another. But those who wish to succeed in such richly remunerative fields as corporate law and finance banking must work, at least in their early years, seventy or so hours a week. Most of those who merely wish to participate in the consumer binge must also work beyond the required eight hours a day. And those who only want to *look* as if they hold important positions in lucrative fields must at least *look* as if they are overworked. Work was essential to the yuppie style, not only as the means to wealth and hence indulgence but as the moral antidote to indulgence.

If one side of the yuppie style was conspicuous, status-oriented consumption, the other side was conspicuous and no less status-conscious work—or if not work, the appearance of work, even in leisure. Social commentator Benita Eisler has described what she calls the "New Upper Classes" in America as the "deserving rich" because they work—steadily and compulsively—and have in the process been "morally regenerated." Certainly the more affluent participants in the yuppie style fit this category. Work gave them back the dignity they lost, if only subconsciously and spiritually, in the conformity

of yuppie consumption. In fact, any extravagance could be justified as a form of psychological renewal required by the excessively hardworking. *Newsweek* described a twenty-eight-year-old Denver lawyer who had once studied to be a regional planner (and whose life would surely have been simpler if he had pursued his original goal):

He would like to marry someday, but he is in the Yuppie bind of having to work hard to afford the kind of luxuries that make hard work possible: a Saab, vacations in the Orient, *carte blanche* at all the top health clubs in town. He has a feeling that if he had to spend his leisure hours cleaning out the basement instead, his 12-hour days at the office would seem a lot less bearable.

In daily life, the hallmark of the yuppie style was a frenetic busyness. Traditional aristocracies are conspicuously idle; the upwardly mobile middle class was conspicuously busy. Those who wished to appear successful ordered their lives by their appointment books, budgeting even social interactions down to the minute. One of the young, urban, professional men interviewed in 1984 by my research assistant, Harriet Bernstein, boasted of having reduced the time it took for him to arrange his evening date to five minutes a day, and for most practitioners of the yuppie style, even courtship had to double with some equally worthy pastime—shopping, jogging, or eating dinner. The long three-martini business lunch of a previous generation gave way to briefer encounters—the business breakfast or the phone call by appointment.

Naturally, anyone who in the course of a day shops, jogs, holds down a demanding job, and engages in eating as a form of display will feel pressed for time. Anyone who does all these things while trying to sustain a courtship—or worse, raise a child—will be frantic. But busyness was not only an objective condition, it became an essential insignia of status—and a not entirely ineffective one. To have time and attention for others is to concede their importance. The upwardly mobile professional, rushing from one appointment or deadline to another, concedes nothing to those who are less harried and hence, obviously, less important.

If work was central to the yuppie search for expiation, so too was the simulation of work—exercise. In the eighties, *exercise* itself became a hopelessly generic term, covering proliferating possibilities of exertion: “toning,” aerobics, Nautilus workouts, weight training, running, jogging, power walking. The “fitness craze,” as trend-watchers termed it, began in the late seventies and soon generated new products and booming new industries: health spas and gyms, exercise classes and videotapes, home exercise equipment, fancy leotards and shoes specialized for running, aerobic dancing, and even walking. Although the craze drew recruits from all classes, it was centered in the upwardly mobile middle class, which quickly turned fitness—or the effort to achieve it—into another insignia of social rank.

Almost by definition, the true work or paid employment of this class does not involve physical exertion. In fact, exemption from manual labor is the most ancient privilege of the “mental worker,” from village scribe to Madison Avenue copywriter. He or she does not bend, lift, scrub, shovel, haul, or engage in other potentially damaging exertions for a living. Freed from external command, the body becomes a seemingly autonomous realm, the one zone in which the mental worker feels entirely free to exert his or her own will. Within the scope of the body, particularly the musculature and digestive system, one is safe from the encroachments of meaningless work and joyless acquisition. Inner standards can be met, high goals achieved, all within this one small realm where discipline and purity still have their clear rewards.

In earlier decades, the middle class had also sought redemption through the body. Dieting became a middle-class preoccupation in the fifties, when it was linked to the rejection of suffocating, mass-marketed affluence. In the seventies, dieting was eclipsed by the new health consciousness, which operated as a kind of internal environmentalism: toxins like cigarette smoke and liquor were to be avoided. “Good” foods—natural, unprocessed, usually vegetarian and appallingly bland—could be indulged in quantity. In many ways, both medical and cultural, “high fiber” became the designated antagonist of saturated fat. Fat was greasy and supine; fiber dry and stiff. It could

be counted on to scrub the body's interior clean of lipogenous and toxic residues from the outer world. If you could not defend yourself against addictive consumerism or wanton indulgence, you could at least keep your body slim, detached, and clean.

In contrast to dieting and health-foodism, fitness was exuberantly pro-capitalist. It accepted pollution, metaphorical and real (except in the case of cigarette smoke, which remained a major middle-class concern, even a cause). It accepted consumerism. In fact, the pursuit of fitness could hardly be disentangled from the business of consumption. There had of course been diet foods and health foods, but it was not really necessary to spend more in order to get less (fat, calories, additives). Diets and healthy eating could be pursued cheaply enough as alternatives to conventional consumption. But fitness was a commodity itself, from the health-club membership (several hundred dollars a year for a well-equipped but unpretentious club) to the shoes (easily \$100 for an impressive pair) and the various optional paraphernalia (hand weights, stationary bicycle for home use, etc.). To be fit in the fullest sense—which involved cardiovascular capacity, muscle tone, flexibility, and strength—one had to spend money, one had to indulge.

But this was a form of consumption in which indulgence was perfectly matched, second by second, with obvious, visible effort. It was consumption made strenuous and morally renewing, "working out" as a balletic imitation of true work, in which the hedonism of consumption could be confronted head-on and vanquished with the slow burn of pyruvic acid in the muscles. In the words of Jane Fonda, "No pain, no gain," and, what was equally important, the certainty that no gain would be made except through the redemption of pain.

In a practical way, too, the fitness craze balanced the extravagant oral indulgence of upscale, middle-class life. The dieters of the past had not eaten, or had eaten only tasteless, punitive substances such as cottage cheese and dry toast. Health foodists had transformed eating into a ritual of purification, in which brown rice and bean sprouts symbolized autonomy from an overbearing urban-industrial society. The yuppie style, in contrast, was one of aggressive, infantile orality. Nouvelle cui-

sine, with its tiny portions of blanched vegetables and fish, provided continuity with earlier concerns about body weight and purity. But after nouvelle cuisine faded, food lost its moorings in nutrition and its ancient links to health. Food became edible status. And since symbols of status are all-too-quickly publicized through television, food became fad, nimbly outrunning the tastes of the masses: from austere nouvelle cuisine to thick, creamy sauces, from Continental-style foods to the "new American cuisine," from fancy to Tex-Mex, from the exotic to meatloaf.

Dieters were not welcome at this feast. The only way to keep ahead—to eat significantly, impressively, competitively—was to keep in shape. If fitness was consumption, it was also penance, a continual balancing of calories ingested with calories expended, a socially acceptable equivalent of bulimia. But fitness not only looked backward at the last meal, it looked ahead to the next. Fitness literature emphasized that regular, strenuous exercise made for a more manageable appetite and efficient metabolism. In a very real sense, eating was what one got in shape *for*. The fit could eat more without the usual depressing, funny, and of course downscale results. And, in a society that associates obesity with gluttony, the fit are also *permitted* to eat more without exciting disgust.

But the fitness craze was not solely penance. The mental/manual division of labor is hurtful to those who must sit as well as to those who must lift and strain for a living. For young office workers, exercise was not only simulated work but simulated play. Ordinarily, only children are permitted to move their bodies freely and vigorously in public. The regimented exercise class, the clothes that distinguish a runner from a fugitive, the cruel resistance of a Nautilus machine—all these things allow adults to regain the lost muscular license of childhood. For a generation that had, all too early, renounced the dreams of youth for the sober detail of the balance sheet, fitness was fun—a covert extension of childhood.

Fitness, or the effort to achieve it, was also instrumental to grown-up purposes. It quickly became, like tastes in food, another class cue. Being fit in the fullest sense was a proof of having money and, beyond that, almost certain proof that one

had not earned that money through manual labor or muscular exertion. As a twenty-four-year-old banker told *Newsweek*, "Fitness is another way of signaling to people that you are serious." The fit or soon-to-be-fit matched money with work (or its public representation, the workout), indulgence with discipline, intake with output. They could be found in health clubs and spas, at marathons or on jogging trails. In the eighties, these venues replaced the singles bar as the reliable place to meet suitable members of the other sex. In an exercise class or in the lineup to use a Nautilus machine, good looks were restored to their place in the rituals of mating—but only as the hard new appearance of fitness, and then only as clue to deeper things, such as income and occupational rank.

Finally there was the observable goal of fitness. Dieters sought thinness; weight lifters, who were often of dubious background and occupation, sought the menace of bulk. But those who pursued fitness aimed at a new kind of outcome, known as "definition": The outline of the body had to become more clearly enunciated in hard, though not exaggerated, curves of muscle. For women as well as men, the standard of beauty moved away from mere slimmess. Legs that were too thin could be as unsightly as legs that were too fat; beauty lay in the clear line of muscle, precisely nurtured by the right balance of toning, weight training, and aerobics. To achieve definition was to present a hard outline to the world, a projection of self that was not sensitive and receptive—as therapies in the seventies had aimed at—but tough and contained. Definition offered proof that one could hold one's own against the encroaching hedonism—that one could eat, gorge, binge without the horror of dissolving into softness.

---

YUPPIE GUILT

---

The term *yuppie* disappeared from the media almost as swiftly as it had appeared. In 1986 the editor of a major monthly magazine told me she found the term "tiresome" and

never wanted to hear it again. Apparently many other editors felt the same way, and editors are in a position to decide which words the rest of us will hear, or at least see. In England, the editor of the *Daily Telegraph* ordered a "complete ban" on the word itself. The rise and fall of the word could be followed in the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*, which listed nineteen entries under *yuppies* in 1984. For 1985 there were twenty-six entries. By 1987 the number of entries had sunk back to nineteen. Today the term is as out of style as nouvelle cuisine and sushi, the yuppie food fads which faded in the mid-eighties, to be replaced by heartier fare. Other groups have seen their stereotypes stick for decades; not so the middle class, which was able to take the first clear caricature to come its way and render that caricature useless as cliché.

For the professional middle class, which had both coined the term and then retracted it, the lifespan of the yuppie label represented a moment of unaccustomed self-exposure. A 1985 Roper poll found that 60 percent of adult Americans knew what yuppies were (compared, for example, to the only 34 percent who could name the Secretary of State). No other term describing the educated middle class, in whole or part, had ever earned such widespread usage. The *New Class*, for all that it exercised the New Right, remained a recondite notion, and even its more colloquial versions, like *liberal elite*, never managed to conjure up a clear and definite imagery.

But the yuppie—perhaps especially the female yuppie whose odd uniform of skirted suit and sneakers symbolized the compromise between capitalism and feminism—was as familiar a caricature as the Bud-drinking worker in a T-shirt. Americans knew, roughly, how yuppies looked. And they did not like what they saw. In the Roper poll, the great majority found yuppies "overly concerned with themselves." In a 1987 *Newsweek* poll, yuppies placed third among "things the respondents said were losing favor." Stockbrokers placed second, beaten only narrowly by "drugs."

Not that the media coverage had been all bad. (At least not until the stock-market crash of November 1987, for which yuppies were unfairly blamed.) *Newsweek's* cover story had found

yuppies an energetic, sober lot, and only occasionally lapsed into sarcasm, as in this description of yuppie courtship: "It's important to know that someone shares your taste in tableware, and it's better if you both jog than if one of you bikes instead."

By and large, the tone of the early coverage was that yuppies, with their predictable obsessions with food, money, and fitness, were cute. And that may be what hurt the most: The idea that the professional middle class, or at least some significant segment of it, could be so easily labeled and patronized. *Other* people occupied definable social classes, and these classes could be readily caricatured as welfare mothers or "hard-hats." But the middle class still fancied itself a set of self-determining individuals, not a group driven by common interests and instincts. Probably very few people read about yuppies and thought, "Oh my god, that's me!" But many in the middle class could see some part of themselves, some emerging constellation of tastes (for coarse-grain mustard, linen suits, or frequent workouts), and realize that they themselves had been labeled, caricatured, and fingered as part of some larger conformity emanating from beyond their individual will and judgment.

It hurt even more that this pattern of conformity could be almost entirely defined by material goods, purchases, brand names. A half-indulgent, half-mocking article in *Metropolitan Home* offered a simple quiz to determine whether the reader was a yuppie:

Do you currently own or covet:  
 A BMW, Saab, Volvo, or Mercedes.  
 A Krups coffeemaker, Braun juicer, or Terrillon kitchen scale . . .  
 Anything designed by Perry Ellis, Ralph Lauren, Issey Miyake, Merona Sport, Calvin Klein, or L.L. Bean . . .  
 Canned pâté for a real emergency.

The unpleasant implication was that *things* had more power than one knew: the power to speak for one, to announce one's social name or type. In some curious way, the ownership had

reversed, and the coveted, upscale brand name had migrated from the thing to the person.

There were defensive reactions to what was quickly denounced as "yuppie-bashing." A self-described "young urban professional writer" in the *New Republic*, which normally sets somewhat higher standards for invective, was reduced to calling the *Newsweek* cover story on yuppies "ultra-stupid," and asking rhetorically whether we are "possibly talking here about the worst cover story of the decade?" A writer in *Glamour* complained that, as a result of the "negative assessment of yuppies . . . a growing number of my peers feel compelled to apologize for their life-styles." Yuppies were not as materialistic as they had been depicted, she insisted, citing the example of a young New York attorney who had taken a pay cut so that he could now work two days a week at "a center for spiritual growth." But such excursions from the life of getting and spending should hardly be necessary. "Isn't it time," she asked, "to stop putting ourselves down for being what we are: people who have usually earned the right to enjoy a few material comforts?"

Some of the coverage of yuppies had the quality of a debate, and indeed there was more than one vantage point within the class that produced the yuppie style. Older people (that is, people born before 1945) resented yuppies for their youth, for their refusal to follow the usual arduous path to middle-class membership. "They have no concept that you ought to spend your younger years scraping along and saving," a middle-aged economist remarked to me. "They want to start life with everything their parents had in middle age, only more of it." There was even deeper resentment from those elements of the professional middle class who had not followed the "yuppie strategy." To those who remained in such traditional middle-class occupations as teaching, research, and journalism, yuppies were an abomination, like a younger brother turned criminal. The harshest anti-yuppie sentiments I heard were not from blue-collar workers but from a group of midwestern college teachers, still earning sub-yuppie salaries of around \$30,000 a year.

But in the end there was no real debate. The yuppie style was an embarrassment, even to its most ardent practitioners. It was too conformist, too anxiety-ridden, and, in an America increasingly polarized by class, not even cute. In the years of yuppie excess, the poor had become visible again. It is a sad testimony to the middle-class solipsism of the eighties that the poor had literally to go outdoors to make their presence known. The homeless, who captured media attention in the middle of the decade, are not a special breed, as they are sometimes presented, but only the unluckiest of the poor. Their own homes had been torn down, or renovated and gentrified to make room for the rising corporate-administrative stratum represented by the yuppies. Or they had been driven out by skyrocketing real estate prices, bidded up by the rich and nearly rich. The homeless stood—literally, on so many city streets—as a shocking refutation of the ongoing consumer binge: the other side of the story.

There was also something exhausting about the yuppie way of life, with its neurotic layering of “compensatory spending” and compensatory suffering. The strategy had been to renounce the usual perquisites of middle-class life—an interesting, prestigious profession at a middling income—for quick money. But the strategy necessitated the style: The loss of an intrinsically rewarding profession had to be compensated for by strenuous consumption, and the strenuous consumption had to be compensated for by equally strenuous exertion—five-mile runs, ninety-minute workouts. The middle class does not make large amounts of money easily or endure their effects with a clear conscience and glad heart. It would have been easier and more satisfying, as many college students may now be beginning to see, to be a “poor” social worker or regional planner and achieve at least the traditional dignity of the middle-class professions.

No small part of that dignity derives from the intellectual commitment—no matter how attenuated or pretentious—of the middle class. It is, after all, the *professional* middle class that concerns us here, people whose bid for comfort and respect is based on their claims to some special knowledge.

Even the most philistine young finance banker must have a college degree or more, and hence some rudimentary exposure to a tradition of critical inquiry and aesthetic appreciation.

But the yuppie style was totally indifferent to that tradition. It had its own system of snobbery: not books and theater but food and restaurants. The student rebels of the sixties had been accused by their academic critics of being anti-intellectual; the yuppies were simply *unintellectual* (and interestingly, the neoconservatives have not risen up in condemnation). With a workday devoted to the “bottom line” and a leisure life divided between consumption and penance, the yuppie style was—to borrow a yuppie word—*ultra-stupid*.

In an article titled “Confessions of a Reluctant Yuppie,” Peter Baida, a young hospital administrator, related the following story:

A couple of years ago . . . my wife and I gave what might be called a Yuppie dinner party. All six of our guests were young professionals with degrees in law or business from top-ranked schools. At one point I mentioned that my wife recently had finished reading Proust and that now I had begun. “Who is Proust?” one of our guests asked. I thought someone else would answer, but all eyes turned toward me. Suddenly I realized that not one of our guests knew who Proust was.

No doubt they knew what Brie was, or pesto or Chardonnay, but this “reluctant yuppie” had expected the dinner table conversation to rise above the level of the dinnerware and what was on it. “I don’t hate yuppies,” he concluded, affirming that he himself was “right to go to business school.” But “they—we—make me sad.”

The stock-market crash of 1987 did not spell the end of yuppiehood or, as some excited commentators believed, the end of “the world as we know it.” The consumer binge continues, though with less fanfare and more restrained advertising. On campuses, young people are still shelving their more idealistic aspirations for careers of corporate servitude or self-seeking entrepreneurship, though in slightly fewer numbers than be-

fore. On downtown streets, young people in expensive clothes still stroll on mild evenings, talking of leveraged buyouts and good things to eat.

But the crash did signal a turning point in middle-class consciousness—a moment of revulsion, however fleeting, against the materialism and greed now localized in “yuppies.” A few months after the crash, *Newsweek*, which had practically defined yuppies in its 1984 cover story, announced that they were now in “disgrace.” More decisively, the *Wall Street Journal* declared that “conspicuous consumption is passé”; it had in fact sunk to the lowest level of middle-class opprobrium, normally occupied by white bread and polyester, to become “tacky”:

Yuppies have become a bore and, under the circumstances, something of an embarrassment. Thus, Madison Avenue is trying to wipe them out . . . yuppies are now to be replaced in Madison Avenue’s eyes by stay-at-home “couch potatoes” or some other group with similar buying characteristics but better values than yuppies exhibited.

Advertising would continue, of course, to promote upscale consumption and to seek out people whose “buying characteristics” were thoroughly yuppified. But the message would change. As one ad man told the *Wall Street Journal*, “It was as if people were saying it’s OK to be greedy. That now is definitely déclassé.”

There were even signs, in the late eighties, of a search for “better,” and possibly more liberal, values. *New York* magazine, a reliable purveyor to yuppie tastes, ran a 1986 cover story on the novel possibility of “Doing Good.” Or as the headline put it more aggressively: “HAD IT WITH PRIDE, COVERTOUSNESS, LUST, ANGER, GLUTTONY, ENVY, AND SLOTH? IT’S TIME TO START DOING GOOD.” *Newsweek* found “signs of increased altruism” in the land, and announced, two years in advance, that the eighties—the decade most frequently likened to the fifties—were over.

So, in some sense, our story has come full circle. We began

in the late fifties, when affluence had suddenly become tedious and the joys of materialism had begun to pale. Then too, middle-class commentators sought new “values”—which meant, at the time, new challenges to revive a stagnant liberalism. They found them in the gross inequalities of class and race that had somehow survived the general “affluence.” They discovered the poor—that is, the most visibly miserable Americans—and found in them a new mission for liberalism. To Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who led the search for issues and challenges in the fifties and early sixties, a “cycle” is about to begin again: “There is a lot of pent-up idealism. That will increase, and in the 1990s we’ll enter a phase that will be much like the 1930s and the 1960s.” The possibility remained, of course, that the repudiation of greed would be as transient and superficial as the yuppies that immediately preceded it.



- 190 *The immediate, net effect of Reaganomics and only 60 percent of the money required*: "Poverty: Toll Grows Amid Cutbacks," *Los Angeles Times*, July 31, 1985.
- 190 As Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward have shown: Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *The New Class War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982).
- 191 "Democrats will be as reflexive": Morton Kondracke, "A Doubtful New Order," *New Republic*, November 15, 1980, pp. 11-13.
- 191 "The most striking aspect": Randall Rothenberg, *The Neoliberals: Creating the New American Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), p. 17.
- 192 "Historic, bipartisan breakthrough": Robert Kuttner, "The Welfare Strait," *New Republic*, July 6, 1981, pp. 20-25.
- 192 Describing the "repackaged": "post-industrial" liberal: Dennis Farney and Jeffrey H. Birnbaum, "Democrats Repackage Liberalism," *Wall Street Journal*, April 25, 1988.
- 192 "The last official count": Russell Baker, "Some Liberal Thinking," *New York Times Magazine*, January 12, 1986, p. 14.
- 192 A 1985 New York Times/CBS News Poll: "A Liberal by Any Other Name May Get More Votes," *New York Times*, November 24, 1985.
- 193 Ronald Reagan: Sar Levitan, quoted in "A Defender of the Welfare System," *New York Times*, July 31, 1985.
- 193 "Dilemma of liberalism": Fred Siegel, "Populism, Persuasion, and Accountability," *Present Tense*, Winter 1986, pp. 28-33.
- 194 Charles Murray, for example, was nurtured: Chuck Lane, "The Manhattan Project," *New Republic*, March 25, 1985, pp. 14-15.
- 195 "The ideological spoilsman": Sidney Blumenthal, *The Rise of the Counter-Establishment: From Conservative Ideology to Political Power*, (New York: Times Books, 1986), p. 7.
- FIVE: THE YUPPIE STRATEGY**
- 196 "Yuppie is now understood": Hendrik Hertzberg, "The Short Happy Life of the American Yuppie," *Esquire*, February 1988, p. 100.
- 197 *the yuppie eagerness*: "The Year of the Yuppie," *Newsweek*, December 31, 1984, p. 14.
- 198 Only about 5 percent of their generation: "The Big Chill (Revisited), or, Whatever Happened to the Baby Boom?" *American Demographics*, vol. 7, September 1985, pp. 22-25.
- 199 A commentator in the New Republic: Alex Heard, "Yuppie Love," *New Republic*, January 28, 1985, p. 10.
- 201 "categories" of Americans: "Beatniks, Preppies, and Punks: The Love Affair with Labels," *U.S. News and World Report*, September 16, 1985, p. 63.
- 201 Since then, in a sharp reversal: See Bennett Harrison and Barry Bluestone, *The Great U-Turn: Corporate Restructuring and the Polarizing of America* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), p. 5. See also Stephen J. Rose, *Social Stratification in the U.S.* (Baltimore: Social Graphics, 1983).
- 202 *the top fifth of American families*: David Wessel, "U.S. Rich and Poor Increase in Numbers: Middle Losses Ground," *Wall Street Journal*, September 22, 1986, p. 1. See also Barbara Ehrenreich, "Is the Middle Class Doomed?" *New York Times Magazine*, September 7, 1986, p. 44.
- 202 Upward redistribution of wealth: Ehrenreich, "Is the Middle Class Doomed?" See also Isabel V. Sawhill and Charles F. Stone, *Economic Policy in the Reagan Years* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 1984).
- 203 "They are people like Glen Whitbeck": "American's Hidden Poor," *U.S. News and World Report*, January 11, 1988, p. 18.
- 203 *Top executives earned*: "Best-Paid Executive: \$12.7M," *Newsday*, April 26, 1986, p. 9.
- 204 "The kind of salary reported": Daniel F. Cuff, "Those Well-Paid Executives," *New York Times*, May 2, 1984.
- 204 *a party thrown by Malcolm Forbes*: Patricia Leigh Brown, "By Air and Land, They Got to the Forbes," *New York Times*, May 30, 1987.
- 205 *A sharp deterioration in the prospects*: See Phillip Longman, "The Mortgaged Generation: Why the Young Can't Afford a House," *Washington Monthly*, April 1986, pp. 11-15.
- 205 "a typical wage-earner": Frank S. Levy and Richard C. Michel, "The Economic Future of the Baby Boom," report prepared for the Joint Economic Committee of the U.S. Congress, December 7, 1985.
- 205 *The big news*: The first article to make this point was Robert Kuttner's "The Declining Middle," *Atlantic Monthly*, July 1983, p. 60.
- 205 *The fraction of families with middle-range incomes*: Katherine L. Bradbury, "The Shrinking Middle Class," *New England Economic Review*, September/October 1986, p. 41.
- 205n economist Stephen J. Rose: Robert Pear, "Middle Class Shrinks as Poverty Engulfs More Families, Two Studies Show," *New York Times*, December 11, 1983. Katherine L. Bradbury: "The Shrinking Middle Class," p. 45, *Bureau of Labor Statistics*: "The Middle Class Moves Higher Up the Economic Ladder," *Newsday*, June 21, 1988.
- 206 *The blue-collar working class was skidding*: See "The Debate Is On: Does College Pay?" *USA Today*, November 29, 1984.
- 206 *The gap is almost as large*: Louis Uchitelle, "Making a Living Is Now a Family Enterprise," *New York Times*, October 11, 1987.
- 206 "the deindustrialization of America": Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, *The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industry* (New York: Basic Books, 1982).
- 207 Only 60 percent were able to find new jobs: Kenneth B. Noble, "Millions Who Lost Plant Jobs Lose Pay in Shift to Services," *New York Times*, February 7, 1986.
- 207 laid-off steelworkers in Chicago: "Former Steelworkers' Income Falls by Half," *New York Times*, October 31, 1984.
- 207 Throughout America's industrial "rust belt": See David Bensman and Roberta Lynch, *Rusted Dreams* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1987).
- 207 Employers launched a fierce initiative: See Harrison and Bluestone, *Great U-Turn*, p. 113.
- 207-8 *Two Queens factory workers*: Personal communication from Gary Stevenson, Director of Organizing, AFSCME, District Council 1707.
- 209 In 1968, only 6 percent of new Ph.D.'s: Richard B. Freeman, cited in Thomas A. Lyson and Gregory D. Squires, "Some Planned to Be Sociologists: The Changing Fortunes of New Ph.D.'s in Today's Academic Labor Market," paper presented at the 29th Annual Meeting of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, Boston, September 1979.
- 209 "Gary Rodgers, 44, is a Ph.D.": "A Warning to Academia," *Boston Globe*, March 30, 1985.
- 209 *More . . . jobs for American managers*: This is true at least in the industries studied by Saskia Sassen-Koob in New York City. See *The Mobility of Labor and Capital* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 150-52.
- 209 "A new mood on campus": Bernard Wysocki, "A Corporate Recruiter Searches the Campuses for 'The Right People,'" *Wall Street Journal*, March 27, 1979.
- 210 *The number of students receiving bachelor's degrees in English*: Gene I. Maeroff, "Shifting Away from the Liberal Arts," *New York Times*, March 26, 1985.

- 210 *The social sciences*: Andrew Hacker, "The Decline of Higher Learning," *New York Review of Books*, February 13, 1986, p. 35.
- 210 *An engineering graduate student*: "More Foreigners Are Seeking Ph.D.'s in the U.S.," *New York Times*, July 20, 1988.
- 210 *A young woman interviewed by Newsweek*: "The Year of the Yuppie," p. 19.
- 211 *A record 73 percent of students*: "More College Freshmen Plan to Teach," *New York Times*, January 12, 1987.
- 211 *Only 49 percent believed abortion*: "Students Are Taking Care of Business," *USA Today*, December 10, 1984.
- 211 "posters of Miss Piggy": Peter Carlson, "Getting High on Miss Piggy and Lee Iacocca," *Washington Post Magazine*, December 7, 1986, p. 36.
- 212-13 *Ad for Psychology Today*: *New York Times*, September 24, 1976.
- 213 *Most American men no longer earned enough*: Alvin L. Schorr, "Family Wage: Gone," *New York Times*, December 12, 1983.
- 214 *Objectivity, scientific rationality*: Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts' Advice to Women* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor/Doubleday, 1978), chapter 3.
- 214-15 *The president of the American Medical Association*: Quoted in Richard Harrison Shryock, *Medicine in America: Historical Essays* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), p. 185.
- 215 *Ellen Richards*: Robert Clarke, Ellen Swallow: *The Woman Who Founded Ecology* (Chicago: Follert, 1973).
- 215 *Feminists simultaneously demanded*: See Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers* (New York: Feminist Press, 1972) and *Complaints and Disorders: The Sexual Politics of Sickness* (New York: Feminist Press, 1973).
- 216 *In medicine, only 9 percent*: Perri Klass, "Are Women Better Doctors?" *New York Times Magazine*, April 10, 1988, p. 32.
- 216 *In business, only 4.9 percent*: Cathy Trost, "The New Majorities," *Wall Street Journal*, March 24, 1986.
- 217 *A 1976 study*: Grace Kleinbach, "Social Class and Medical Education," Department of Education, Harvard University, 1976; and quoted in Vicente Navarro, *Medicine Under Capitalism* (New York: Prodist, 1976), p. 144.
- 217 *The proportion of women construction workers*: See Molly Martin, ed., *Hard-Hatted Women* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1988).
- 218 *the traditional masculine ideal*: Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (New York: Doubleday/Anchor, 1983).
- 218 *if women were tired*: Herb Goldberg, *The New Male: From Self-Destruction to Self-Care* (New York: Morrow, 1979).
- 218 *the "new man" did not rule out marriage*: interviews conducted for Barbara Ehrenreich, "Is There a New Man?" *New York Times Magazine*, May 15, 1984. I thank Harriet Bernstein for conducting most of the interviews for this article.
- 219 "A pairing-off": David Bloom, quoted in "Is the Middle Class Shrinking?" *Time*, November 3, 1986, p. 55.
- 219 *office romance was "flourishing"*: Ellen Graham, "My Lover, My Colleague," *Wall Street Journal*, March 24, 1986.
- 220 "progressive democratization": Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963) p. 377.
- 221 *the birthrate among the educated*: Ben J. Wattenberg, *The Birth Dearth* (New York: Pharos, 1987).
- 221 *But the real issue*: For a story of a journalist who abandoned her career because a child was doing poorly in school, see Mary Fay Bourgoignie, "You Can't Be a Mother and 'Have It All,'" *Washington Post*, November 27, 1983.
- 222 "Our aim": Betty Friedan, *The Second Stage* (New York: Summit Books, 1981), pp. 27-28.

- 222 *A far larger number of women remained*: See Ruth Sidel, *Women and Children Last: The Plight of Poor Women in Affluent America* (New York: Viking Press, 1986), chapter 3.
- 222-23 "eccentric in focus": Catherine R. Stimpson, "Fretting Together," *Notion*, February 7, 1987, pp. 149-50.
- 223 *On the campuses*: Suzy Bolohn, "Voices from the Post-Feminist Generation," *New York Times Magazine*, October 17, 1982.
- 223 *a startling 56 percent of American women*: Barbara Ehrenreich, "The Next Wave," *Ms.*, July/August 1987, p. 166.
- 224 *Sales of luxury goods boomed*: "Despite Collapse of Stocks, Luxury Sales Bounce Back," *New York Times*, June 7, 1988.
- 224 *The 5 percent of Americans*: Stephen J. Rose, *Social Stratification in the U.S.*, pp. 35-36.
- 225 *compensatory spending*: Michael Kinsley, "Arise, Ye Yuppies!" *New Republic*, July 9, 1984, p. 4.
- 225 *A study by the Stanford Research Institute*: Quoted in David E. Shi, *The Simple Life: Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 269.
- 226 *Voluntary simplicity*: See T. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), chapter 2.
- 226 "quiet revolution": Quoted in Shi, *Simple Life*, pp. 268-69.
- 228 *The mass market disappeared*: Bruce Steinberg, "The Mass Market Is Splitting Apart," *Fortune*, November 28, 1983, p. 76.
- 229 "There is a consumer out there": "Where Sears Has Stumbled," *New York Times*, June 5, 1986.
- 230 *a largely predictable list*: "What's Hot, What's Not," *Miami Herald*, January 13, 1985.
- 230 "new cultural style": Deborah Silverman, *Selling Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), p. 11.
- 231 "New Upper Classes": Bennis Eisler, *Class Act* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1983), p. 274.
- 232 "He would like to marry someday": "The Year of the Yuppie," p. 18.
- 233 *centered in the upwardly mobile middle class*: See Barbara Ehrenreich, "Is There a New Man?"
- 237 *The rise and fall of the word*: Hertzberg, "Short Happy Life," p. 101.
- 237 *A 1985 Roper poll*: Cited in Hertzberg, "Short Happy Life," p. 102.
- 237 *yuppies placed third*: Bill Barol, "The Eighties Are Over," *Newsweek*, January 4, 1988, p. 44.
- 238 *a simple quiz*: Stevie Pierson, "Are You a Yuppie?" *Metropolitan Home*, April 1985, p. 60.
- 239 *A self-described "young urban professional writer"*: Heard, "Yuppie Love," p. 10.
- 239 *a writer in Glamour*: Janice Harayda, "It's Time People Stopped Putting Down Yuppies," *Glamour*, October 1987, p. 40.
- 241 "A couple of years ago": Peter Baida, "Confessions of a Reluctant Yuppie," *American Scholar*, Winter 1985-86, p. 45.
- 242 "conspicuous consumption is passé": Joanne Lipman, "The Going Gets Tough and Madison Avenue Dumps the Yuppies," *Wall Street Journal*, December 9, 1988.
- 242 "Had it with pride": Pete Hamill, "Doing Good," *New York*, October 13, 1986, p. 35.
- 242 "signs of increased altruism": Barol, "The Eighties Are Over," p. 48.
- 243 "There is a lot of pent-up idealism": Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., quoted in Barol, "The Eighties Are Over," p. 48.

## SIX: THE NEXT GREAT SHIFT

- 244 *My wife and I are baby-boomers*: Paul S. Hewitt, "Something's Gone Terribly Wrong with Being Rich," *Los Angeles Herald Tribune*, January 7, 1989.
- 245 *A young family earning \$600,000*: Brooke Kroeger, "Feeling Poor on \$600,000 a Year," *New York Times*, April 26, 1987.
- 246 *A growing cadre of celebrity pundits*: James Fallows, "The New Stars of Washington," *New York Review of Books*, June 12, 1986, p. 41.
- 249 *the Democratic Party*: Thomas Byrne Edsall, *The New Politics of Inequality* (New York: Norton, 1984), pp. 60-62.
- 251 *a weird pile of liberal shit*: Mark Rudd, quoted in Barbara Ehrenreich and John Ehrenreich, "The Professional-Managerial Class," in Pat Walker, ed., *Between Labor and Capital* (Boston: South End Press, 1979), p. 38.
- 253 *they are sanctified*: George Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).
- 254 *a casino society*: Anthony Bianco, "Playing with Fire: As Speculation Replaces Investment, Our Economic Future Is at Stake," *Business Week*, September 16, 1985, pp. 78-90.
- 254 "Rarely, have so few": Robert B. Reich, "Leveraged Buyouts: America Pays the Price," *New York Times Magazine*, January 29, 1989, p. 32.
- 255 *A few recent books*: See Lewis H. Lapham, *Money and Class in America: Notes and Observations on a Civil Religion* (New York: Weidentfeld and Nicholson, 1987); and Vance Packard, *The Ultra-Rich: How Much Is Too Much?* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1989); Nelson W. Aldrich, Jr., *Old Money: The Mythology of America's Upper Class* (New York: Knopf, 1988).
- 257 *the decline of labor coverage*: See Jo-Ann Mort, "The Vanishing Labor Beat," *Nation*, November 21, 1987, pp. 588-90.
- 258 *A kind of language barrier*: See, for example, Michael Harrington, *The Long-Distance Runner* (New York: Henry Holt, 1988). College-educated left-wing intellectuals, he writes, have little trouble conversing with self-taught "labor intellectuals," who often turn out to be labor leaders. However, in his own experience, "that same ease did not exist with the rank and file, and particularly the black rank and file. . . . [I]n most cases, there is simply not that shared language" (p. 49).
- 259 "critical discourse": Alvin Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals and the New Class* (New York: Seabury Continuum, 1979), p. 29.
- 261 "For some": John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), pp. 341-42.