
Chapter 9

THE AMERICAN IDEAL OF EQUALITY

INTRODUCTION

It follows as a common law of nature that every man esteem and treat another as one who is naturally his equal or who is a man as well as he.

JOHN WISE

Equality, in a social sense, may be divided into that of condition and that of rights. Equality of condition is incompatible with civilization and is found only to exist in those communities that are but slightly removed from the savage state. In practice, it can only mean a common misery.

JAMES FENIMORE COOPER

We have talked long enough in this country about equal rights. We have talked for a hundred years or more. It is time now to write the next chapter, and to write it in the books of law.

LYNDON B. JOHNSON

EQUALITY, COUPLED WITH LIBERTY, has from the beginning constituted the promise of American life. It has been challenged by many thinkers as impossible of fulfillment, or undesirable if attained; yet there can be little doubt of the assertion by most Americans of equality as a value to be cherished and achieved. The American's love of equality, and his remarkable achievement of equality in fact, have been discussed by many foreign observers during the nation's history — by St. John de Crèvecoeur in 1782, by Alexis de Tocqueville in 1835, by

Lord James Bryce in 1888, and by various writers in our own time.

"Equality is nowhere laid down as a governing principle of the institutions of the United States," wrote James Fenimore Cooper in 1838. This may be literally true. But Abraham Lincoln, speaking at Gettysburg twenty-five years later, noted that the essential fact about the new nation brought forth in 1776 was that it had been conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. "Our forefathers" asserted as the justification for

their revolutionary new venture in human history the basic value of human equality. They held it to be a "self-evident truth" that all men are created equal, that is, are endowed with the same basic rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness — rights that no one may legitimately take away from them.

This idea of equal natural rights was not an American invention. In the century before the republic was founded, European, and especially English, political thinkers had increasingly affirmed it. Indeed, Richard Henry Lee charged that Thomas Jefferson, the chief author of the Declaration of Independence, had copied its essential phrases from John Locke's seventeenth-century work on civil government. As with so many other American "creations," the originality lay not in the conception but in the working out; the revolutionary aspect lay not in the theory but in the actual practice.

For the basic fact about European society was that, whatever political philosophers might think, human beings were treated as unequal, and inequality was sanctioned and even sanctified by law, custom, and tradition. The basic fact about American society — despite the European class attitudes and customs brought over by the immigrants and despite the caste and class distinctions prevalent in some regions — was that it fostered and encouraged an equality of rights and conditions for all white men and hence, by implication, for all human beings. Or so, at least, it seemed to most foreign observers of the American scene.

The discussion of human equality and inequality involves a basic distinction: the distinction between equality of *nature* and equality of *condition*.

When the authors of the Declaration of Independence asserted that all men are created equal, they were asserting that all men are equal insofar as they share a common human nature. Such natural equality does

not preclude the many and obvious natural inequalities that exist among men — all their inborn individual differences in physique, intelligence, talents, or capacities. Nor does it exclude the inequalities among them that result from their individual efforts — inequality of achievement — for even given equal capacity at the beginning, some may accomplish more than others. Nevertheless, according to those who maintain that all men are by nature equal, these inborn or acquired inequalities do not alter the fact that all men share alike in the dignity of being men — men, not brute animals; persons, not things. And, as the authors of the Declaration went on to say, this natural human equality carried with it the immediate corollary of an equality with respect to natural rights: since all men are equal as men, they are all equally endowed with the natural rights of man — the rights inherent in the very nature of being human, among which are the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Opposed to this view of a fundamental equality of men as human beings and as persons, there was the ancient doctrine that some men are by nature superior human beings and some by nature inferior, and that this natural inequality sharply divides men into classes. According to the Greek philosopher Aristotle, some men are by nature free and some are by nature slaves; hence, it would be unjust to give equal rights to those who are unequal by nature.

Writers in later centuries, retreating from this harsh doctrine that some men are by nature fit only to be used as tools and owned as chattels, still held to the same point when they insisted that men are divided into two classes — those who by natural inferiority cannot govern themselves and need to be ruled, and those whose natural superiority fits them to rule. This amounts to saying that some men are to other men as young children are to their parents: they remain children all their lives;

they are perpetually in need of control, guidance, and care.

As distinct from both equality and inequality of *nature*, there is the type of equality and inequality that Tocqueville so felicitously named equality and inequality of *condition*. When in any society we find men divided into a ruling and a subject class, into a socially privileged and a socially deprived class, into men of property, education, and leisure and men who are uneducated, propertyless toilers, or into economic "haves" and "have-nots," we find a basic inequality of condition: political, social, and economic. When, on the other hand, we look at a society in which there is a movement toward universal suffrage, in which special social privileges for some and social discrimination against others are being eradicated, and in which there is an effort to wipe out poverty or destitution and to secure a decent minimum of economic goods for all, we see a society tending toward political, social, and economic equality — and universal equality of condition.

Those who think that the many natural inequalities among men outweigh the single point that they are all born men tend to advocate only one equality of condition, namely, equality before the law. In their view, given equal and impartial treatment under the law, the natural inequalities among men will lead to inequality of condition in most other respects. Some men, by their superior endowments and efforts, will achieve more power, wealth, and position than others, and this, in their view, is as it should be.

Some who believe in natural inequality would restrict equality of opportunity to equality before the law. But those who believe that all men are by nature equal call upon society to move toward a universal equality of condition, to insure full "equality of opportunity." This phrase, for them, sums up all the things that a society must do to spread an equality of conditions among men whose individual endowments

and efforts may be unequal. For example, all men may never become equally learned or wise, but it is the duty of society to help each to become as learned or wise as he can be by giving all an equal educational opportunity.

In the following sections, we will deal, first, with the assertion and denial of natural equality and then examine the approval and disapproval of equality of condition, under three main heads: political, social, and economic. We will also consider the persistence of inequality of condition in modern America and the continuing controversy about problems of equality and inequality.

1. EQUALITY AND INEQUALITY OF NATURE

THE BELIEF that men are equal by nature goes back a long way in American history. John Wise, the famous Puritan champion of democracy in both church and state, affirmed that belief cogently and eloquently in 1717. Men are naturally equal, he said; hence, they must be treated as such by the state and by their fellowmen. "I am not a beast or a dog, but am a man as well as yourself," is the proper response, he maintained, to any demeaning of human dignity. Since we all have a common human nature, "it follows as a command of the law of nature," he declared, "that every man esteem and treat another as one who is naturally his equal or who is a man as well as he." These are the classical points, classically stated.

However, these remarks of Wise and of others like him should not be taken to imply that life in America in the seventeenth century had the same equalitarian "feel" that it does today. Recent scholarship has shown that not political restrictions but a habit of deference toward the gentry was the really significant dimension of inequality in early America. The breakdown of this traditional deference was initiated by the American Revolution and largely completed

(except in the Old South) by 1828, when the election of Andrew Jackson dramatized the extent of the change. We will return to consideration of this point in the following sections.

Wise noted that there was a contrary argument, namely, that men are not equal by nature and therefore should not be treated equally. He cited a contemporary version of Aristotle's doctrine: "Nothing is more suitable in nature than that those who excel in understanding and prudence should rule and control those who are less happy in these advantages." Similar statements were made by eminent American thinkers, especially in the nineteenth century.

John C. Calhoun, the renowned spokesman of the pre-Civil War South, asserted in 1849 (he had said many of the same things during the South Carolina nullification controversy twenty years earlier) that "the prevalent opinion that all men are born free and equal [is] unfounded and false." It assumed "a fact which is contrary to universal observation in whatever light it may be regarded." He included in the category of natural inequality elements such as "position and opportunity," as well as "intelligence, sagacity, energy, perseverance, skill, habits of industry and economy, physical power." Given the liberty to take advantage of such unequally bestowed qualities and chances, he declared, men must become unequal in social and material conditions — and the opportunity to become so is the main cause of human progress.

Similarly, James Fenimore Cooper, Calhoun's Northern contemporary, declared in 1838: "All men are not 'created equal' in a physical, or even in a moral sense, unless we limit the signification to one of political rights." The popular maxim that "one man is as good as another" is refuted, he said, by ordinary experience. Obviously some men are physically, mentally, or morally superior to others, "which, of course, establishes the fact that there is no natural equality." Our religious, moral, and legal doctrines assume



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"You don't want your daughter to marry one? But my dear man, they don't want to marry her! That's how insolent they've become."

that some men are morally better than others. Our electoral system assumes that some men are superior to others; otherwise we would pick our officials by lot. "Choice supposes a preference, and preference, inequality of merit or of fitness."

Granted such natural inequality, and granted equal civil and political rights for all citizens, Cooper argued, then "inequality of condition" must follow. "By possessing the same rights to exercise their respective faculties, the active and frugal become more wealthy than the idle and dissolute; the wise and gifted more trusted than the silly and ignorant; the polished and refined more respected and sought than the rude and vulgar."

Natural inequality is the basis of social inequality, which is the basis of progress and civilization — such, in sum, is the argument of Calhoun and Cooper. However, their "natural" inequality, more closely examined, seems to include what are usually considered "artificial" social distinctions and matters of chance — mere conditions or circumstances. Some are born rich, Cooper noted, and some are born without any civil or political rights, notably the Negro slaves of his time. When Calhoun spoke of "the

proceeds of our labor," he meant the labor of Negro slaves, and he considered such exploitation the basis of all advanced civilizations.

William Graham Sumner, writing after Darwin, put the argument for the natural basis of social and economic inequality in biological terms. Just as the unrestrained struggle for existence takes place in the animal kingdom, and only the fittest species survive, so in human society unrestricted competition brings economic and social rewards to the fittest individuals — fittest mentally and morally. "Industry, energy, skill, frugality, prudence, temperance, and other industrial virtues," he declared, bring individuals success in the competition for material goods. "Nature still grants her rewards of having and enjoying, according to our being and doing," he maintained, "but it is now the man of the highest training and not the man of the heaviest fist who gains the highest reward." [For another discussion of some of the points touched on here, see Ch. 1: NATIONAL CHARACTER.]

2. EQUALITY OF CONDITION: POLITICAL

THE IDEA that all citizens are equal before the law was generally agreed upon among Americans. To oppose it was to be "non-republican," "unconstitutional," and even "tyrannical." That there were certain limitations on this equality, in practice, was noted by Cooper, in whose time minors, Negroes, and women were not considered in the law courts to be the equal of white men. But the general principle held for adult white male citizens. "Equality of citizens, in the eyes of the law, is essential to liberty in a popular government," even Calhoun conceded. Equality in the abstract, formal, legal sense does not seem to have been a controversial problem during the history of the republic.

The same cannot be said for political equality in the concretely effective sense:

having a voice in one's own government. In the first fifty years or so of the nation's history, it was still questioned whether all men — even all adult white males — should be allowed to vote and hold office, and, if so, whether their votes should count equally. At the beginning it was agreed that women, minors, paupers, felons, vagrants, aliens, and slaves — and, in most states, also Negro freedmen — should not have these rights. It remained to be decided just how and to whom political rights should be allotted among the rest of the free, white, male citizens.

To make virtue and wisdom the requirement for such rights, as had been suggested by many eminent thinkers, would have entailed insoluble problems of determination as to who was truly qualified. "Who shall judge?" asked John Adams in 1813. "Who shall select these choice spirits from the rest of the congregation? Themselves? We must first find out and determine who themselves are."

A more easily measured basis of eligibility was social class or ownership of property, or some combination of the two. Political power in Puritan Massachusetts was vested in two social classes — the "gentlemen," and the "freeholders" owning a certain amount of property. (In the early years, however, it was primarily church membership rather than property that determined who should vote.) The governor was almost always chosen from among the "noble personages and worthy gentlemen," although there was actually no law requiring this. The gentlemen sat and voted personally in their own legislative chamber, while the freeholders elected deputies to represent them in another "house." Those without sufficient rank or property had no say.

Chancellor James Kent heartily approved a similar principle at work in New York State in the early nineteenth century. The Senate and the governor, he said in 1821, were elected "by the free and independent lords of the soil, worth at least \$250 in

freehold estate," while "our assembly has been chosen by freeholders, possessing a freehold of the value of \$50, or by persons renting a tenement of the yearly value of \$5, and who have been rated and actually paid taxes to the state." He argued that abolition of property qualifications would give political power to the irresponsible, corruptible, and inflammable masses of the unpropertied, and would threaten political and social stability.

In general, conservatives who believed in natural and social inequality opposed universal suffrage even for males and urged the retention of property restrictions. However, Cooper, who espoused social inequality and who took an unromantic view of man and society, nevertheless disapproved of property requirements for voting. "The pretense has been," he said, "that none but the rich have a stake in society. Every man who has wants, feelings, affections, and character has a stake in society. Of the two, perhaps the necessities of men are a greater corrective of political abuses than their surplus means." At the same time, Cooper opposed universal suffrage in towns and villages as upsetting to property rights, since local government is primarily concerned with the regulation and taxation of property.

In 1813, in a letter to John Adams, Thomas Jefferson wrote that "there is a natural aristocracy among men," based on "virtue and talents," and that the best system of government is one that assures that these natural *aristoi* ("best") will be selected for office. But he still believed with his old democratic fervor that ordinary citizens could be trusted to select the true *aristoi* of virtue and talents, in preference to the false *aristoi* of wealth and birth. "In general they will elect the real good and wise," he assured Adams.

Adams readily agreed that it was desirable for the good and wise to govern, and he too opposed an aristocracy based on birth and wealth alone. But he insisted that the facts of political life in the past had



Courtesy, Hugh Hutton, "The Philadelphia Inquirer"

"Rich man, poor man —"; cartoon by Hutton, 1940

demonstrated that the masses would choose the rich, the handsome, and the well-born, in preference to the wise and good. Moreover, he maintained that the word "talents" should be interpreted to include "education, wealth, strength, beauty, stature, birth, marriage, graceful attitudes and motions, gait, air, complexion, physiognomy . . . as well as genius, science, and learning." The less serious and more "cosmetical" talents, such as eloquence and geniality, swung votes too, Adams argued, more so indeed than the serious talents. Moreover, birth and wealth are natural characteristics, too, and Jefferson's "artificial" aristocracy was founded on a prior natural aristocracy of virtues and talents.

The actual course of history in America reduced most of this discussion of natural and artificial aristocracy to mere speculation and antiquarianism. With the Jacksonian era it became plain (it had been clear to a few astute observers even before) that the right

to vote would eventually be extended equally to all white adult male citizens. The principle of "one man, one vote" was gradually realized through a series of legislative enactments, constitutional amendments, and judicial decisions. Even the traditional practice in many states of giving a disproportionate share of representation to agricultural districts was countermanded by the Supreme Court decision in *Baker v. Carr*, in 1962. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, followed by a special enforcement act in 1965, promised to remedy the political inequality of Negroes in the Southern states, which had persisted despite the legal guarantee of the right to vote proclaimed by the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution a century before.

Thus the prediction of political equality made by Charles Pinckney in 1787 gradually proved true in the ensuing generations, always with the glaring exception of the Negroes, which Pinckney, as a South Carolinian, might have foreseen. "Every member of the society almost," he prophesied, "will enjoy an equal power of arriving at the supreme office and consequently of directing the strength and sentiments of the whole community. None will be excluded by birth, and few by fortune, from voting for proper persons to fill the offices of government." [For further discussion of the qualifications for suffrage, see Ch. 4, GOVERNMENT BY THE PEOPLE.]

3. EQUALITY OF CONDITION: SOCIAL

"HERE ARE NO aristocratical families," wrote Crèvecoeur, the French-American farmer, in 1782, "no courts, no kings, no bishops, no ecclesiastical dominion, no invisible power giving to a few a very visible one, no great manufacturers employing thousands, no great refinements of luxury." This equality of condition — the absence of a formal, overt hierarchy of rank and social orders — struck several generations of European visi-

tors who found America, in comparison with the Old World, a relatively classless society.

However, America did not start out with such apparent equality of condition, nor did it accept it without controversy and struggle. We have already noted the existence of the two orders of "gentlemen" and "freeholders" in Puritan New England. Indeed, John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, ascribed the distinction between rich and poor, high and low, honorable and mean, to Divine Providence. Social and economic inequality, in this view, is the result of unquestionable divine decree.

Whether for similar religious reasons or because of the more unconscious, and perhaps more weighty, influence of custom and tradition, the early settlers brought with them typically English or European class attitudes and aspirations. There was an attempt to duplicate the hierarchical order of the Old World, presided over by country gentlemen and city merchants; the plantation aristocrats of the South were matched by the merchant princes of the Northern cities in colonial America. However, most of the settlers came from the lower classes of European society, and they found here conditions that facilitated their rise and independence. The open land and the frontier experience gradually wore away the European attitudes and fostered an egalitarian system of social relations.

New England was one of the centers of resistance to the new leveling trend. Jefferson twitted Adams about "a traditionary reverence for certain families which has rendered the offices of government nearly hereditary" in Massachusetts and Connecticut, and claimed there was no such "canonization" in Virginia. Adams, while conceding the favored position of such clans as the Winthrops, Bradfords, and Saltonstalls, insisted that plantation oligarchs such as the Randolphs and Carters in Jefferson's state occupied a similar social position.



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"The George Washington Jones family en route for Paris"; drawing for "Harper's Weekly" by A. B. Frost, 1870s

From these "well-born," favored classes and intellectual spokesmen came vehement resistance to the growing egalitarianism in American life. It was a resistance that failed, and apparently was bound to fail, under the physical, social, and historical conditions of the new republic. It eventually failed in all sections, including the South, the supposed seat of the romantic, aristocratic, "cavalier" ideal, where the white lower classes took an increasingly active role even before the Civil War.

The classic statement on social equality as the central, pervasive characteristic of American life was made by the French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville in 1835. His great work, *Democracy in America*, it has often been noted, might better have been entitled *Equality in America*, for that is its central theme. "Among the novel objects that attracted my attention during my stay in the United States," he began, "nothing struck me more forcibly than the general equality of conditions." This general equality of condition — of social rank or state — he saw

as the basic factor that determined all aspects of American society and government.

The alleged social equality has raised and still raises two basic issues. First, does it actually exist? And, second, is it desirable? The answers to both questions are greatly influenced by the meaning attributed to the term.

If we assert that social status is primarily a consequence of property, then we must agree that there never has been an equality of condition in the United States, for there has never been an equality of property ownership in the country.

If social inequality, however, means formal hereditary privileges sanctioned by law or tradition, then it can be said that, on the whole, and leaving aside the special case of Negro Americans, social equality has prevailed. Hereditary ranks and prerogatives have been notably absent. Moreover, few voices have been raised in defense of social inequality in this sense. Americans have sometimes called for an aristocracy of virtue, of talents, or even of wealth, but rarely

for an aristocracy of birth. However, realistic social critics, such as Adams and Cooper, noted that in actual fact birth does make a difference: it bestows special social advantages on the children of the wealthier, the better educated, and the better placed.

If social inequality means rigidly, clearly separated, and fixed classes or castes from the top to the bottom, America has always been a classless society, with the exception of the pre-Civil War South — in the view of almost all eminent commentators. From the beginning, all visitors observed that there was much more social equality than in Europe, and that there was far greater mobility from one social level to another.

"In a social sense," Cooper wrote in 1838, "there are orders here as in all other countries, but the classes run into each other more easily, the lines of separation are less strongly drawn, and their shadows are more intimately blended." Indeed, the key factors of "indistinction" and "mobility" in the American social structure have been noted by a long line of commentators from Crèvecoeur down to contemporary behavioral scientists. "Indistinction" is a far more accurate term than "equality" for the American social scene, the British essayist G. Lowes Dickinson asserted in 1905, "for the word 'equality' is misleading, and might seem to imply, for example, a social and economic parity of conditions which no more exists in America than it does in Europe."

But if there are actual, effective differences in social circumstances in the United States — however indistinct the lines of separation, and however open to the upward and downward movement of individuals — in what sense can it be called a classless or equal society? Apparently many of those who have dubbed it so have based their claim on the absence of the external marks that characterize social distinctions in other cultures. "There is no rank in America," Lord Bryce declared in 1888, "that is to say, no external and recognized stamp,

marking one man as entitled to any social privileges, or to deference and respect from others."

In America, he said, there are distinctions based on birth, wealth, official position, and intellectual or artistic attainment, as anywhere else, but no one is allowed to put on any airs in general social intercourse about his special fortune or achievement. The distinctions of occupation, education, manners, income, and so forth, he noted, are overborne by the "equality of estimation" that prevails among men generally. "In America, men hold others to be at bottom exactly the same as themselves." Great wealth or great achievements may make a man "an object of interest, perhaps of admiration, possibly even of reverence. But he is deemed to be still of the same flesh and blood as other men."

Bryce saw clearly the combination of an emphasis on basic human equality and on unequal achievement in the American system of values — an emphasis that has been recognized by contemporary social scientists. On the one hand, there was the "equality of estimation," going back to the belief in natural human equality voiced early in American history. On the other hand, there was the basic distinction in achievement (sometimes handed-down achievement) among individuals. "Someone has said that there are in America two classes only, those who have succeeded and those who have failed," Bryce remarked. The observation was frequently repeated in the following decades.

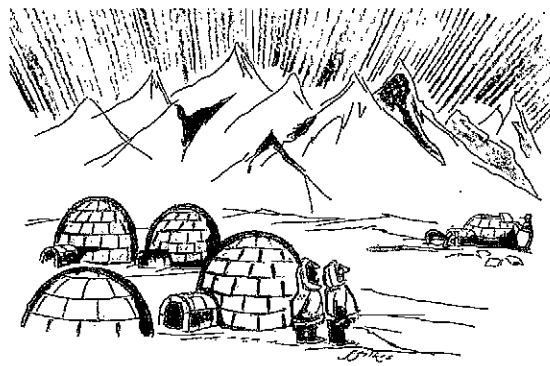
This key theme of success is aptly suggested by the image of a "ladder" or slope, which all Americans are called upon to ascend. Most people, in theory, try to climb up the ladder, to the top if possible. Others, through faults of character or plain bad luck, move down it. Proverbially, a family might go "from shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves," or overalls to overalls, in a mere three generations. American society was mobile both "horizontally" (geographically) and "verti-

cally" (socially), according to this view of the social scene.

The impulse to climb, to move upward, and to rely on one's own industry and character, as well as a bit of luck, instead of on inherited position and prerogatives, was typical of the rising middle class in Europe in the centuries when America was being settled. American society, almost from the beginning, was constituted by the emigration of a fragment of European bourgeois society, which found in the New World, with its open land, potential abundance, and lack of feudal orders, full scope for its aspiration and activity. Americans, therefore, have tended to see themselves as a middle-class, indeed, as a one-class country, as compared with societies where the middle class stood between the nobility at the top and the peasants or the proletariat at the bottom. This was, moreover, a country where physical labor did not degrade a person, where middle-class youths could work at domestic tasks and factory jobs in the summer to help pay their way through college without suffering odium.

Yet some analysts of American society in the 1930s and 1940s, such as W. L. Warner, concluded that class lines were becoming more rigid and predicted that the upper echelons of America's corporate economy would be restricted predominantly to members of upper-class families. One study showed six different classes, quite distinct and separate, all the way from "upper upper" to "lower lower." Later studies, however, seemed to indicate that this fear was premature, that American class lines were still quite flexible, and that there was still room at the top for ambitious, capable, and fortunate Americans of the middle and lower classes. Indeed, Warner's later research indicated that there was an even better chance to rise in the corporate structure in the 1950s than in the 1920s.

Nevertheless, the charge of rigid social stratification was made again in the 1950s and the 1960s, notably by E. Digby Balt-



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"This will bring local property values crashing down"

zell. His studies of business aristocracy and caste in the United States showed that the nation had always been run by a predominantly white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) elite, which had been open, however, to a few rising individuals from other backgrounds. By the mid-twentieth century, according to Baltzell, this elite had become a tight corporation, exclusive, inbred, and closed to new talents. Men who possessed superior administrative, technical, or commercial ability but who lacked the proper "background" usually were automatically excluded from membership in upper-class clubs, and consequently were handicapped in rising to high corporate positions. Even in firms owned or founded by Jews, for example, non-Jews were often preferred to Jews for top executive positions, since they could more easily associate with other top executives.

At the same time, however, a very large proportion of white Americans were at or near the middle or median income levels, and most of them thought of themselves as middle class, or as undefined by class, according to public opinion studies. The attitudes and often the voting patterns of American workingmen, on the whole, were usually lower middle class rather than "proletarian."

Yet, although as a general thing employees have never doffed their hats to employers in this society, American workers, as a group, have contended with other groups

in the economy. It is appropriate, therefore, to turn now to the consideration of economic equality — or inequality — in America. [For further discussion of some of the matters treated in this section, see Ch. 11: INDIVIDUALISM.]

4. EQUALITY OF CONDITION: ECONOMIC

WHEN PINCKNEY, Crèvecoeur, Benjamin Franklin, and other early commentators remarked on the unique equality of condition to be found in America, they pointed to the "immense tracts of uncultivated lands" as an assurance to the propertyless that they might become propertied, and as the main source of economic equality in the new republic. There were few very rich and few very poor in the European sense. Jefferson successfully advocated the removal of the feudal customs of entail and primogeniture in order to keep landed property more equitably divided, and also, a century before its time, urged a system of graduated taxation. He wanted to obtain a greater economic equality in order to assure the political and social equality that he deemed necessary in a democracy.

Other forms of economic inequality besides land ownership that might threaten America's distinctive political and social equality became evident within the next fifty years. Calhoun, speaking in 1828 for the planter class and against the tariff system, declared that "after we are exhausted, the contest will be between the capitalists and operatives; for into these two classes it [the tariff] must, ultimately, divide society." The manufacturing class, he held, would get richer and richer, and the working class — "the operatives" — poorer and poorer, until a social collision ensued. Calhoun — whom historian Richard Hofstadter has called "the Marx of the master class" — hoped to establish an alliance between planters and manufacturers against the laboring classes. However, many Northern

working-class leaders proved more responsive than Northern manufacturers to Southern speeches against "wage slavery" in the North, and favored a coalition of planters and industrial workers against the "capitalists."

Tocqueville in the 1830s was apprehensive about the possible effect on American democracy of wealthy and powerful manufacturers, removed from the mass of their employees in interests and ways of life. He also perceived a deep antagonism to democratic government and a resentment of the political power of the common people on the part of the more affluent classes of American society, but he predicted that popular democracy would triumph. "Can it be believed," he asked, "that the democracy which has overthrown the feudal system and vanquished kings will retreat before tradesmen and capitalists?"

Others were less sanguine. It was just at this time, when the battle for political equality was being waged, that complaints began to be voiced against the growing disparity of condition between the rich and the poor. William M. Gouge, the Jacksonian economist, in 1833 looked forward with dread to an increase of the opulently rich, on the one hand, and of the destitute, on the other hand. George Henry Evans, the workingmen's spokesman, predicted in 1844 that America would become "a nation of dependent tenants" unless the public lands were thrown open to free settlement.

Throughout the rest of the century, writers continued to point out the growing gulf between the rich and the poor. Henry George in 1879 produced a classic commentary on the paradox of the growth of poverty in the midst of a society that was becoming more and more prosperous. The greater the material progress, the greater the poverty, was the conclusion of his *Progress and Poverty*. Amid the magnificent new products of modern technology walked the new hordes of tramps, beggars, unemployed, paupers, and charity clients. "This



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Turn of the century pen and ink drawing

association of poverty with progress," he declared, "is the great enigma of our times." And Bryce observed in 1888 that the century had seen great changes in the United States, "from the equality of material conditions, almost universal," to a situation in which there was "some poverty . . . many large fortunes, and a greater number of gigantic fortunes than in any other country of the world." He predicted that the future would see a class of the very rich and one of the very poor at opposite ends of the scale.

Later reformers, such as Henry Demarest Lloyd and Herbert Croly, held that a shockingly inequitable distribution of wealth had resulted from unrestricted competition among individuals. Out of freedom had come inequality and a threat to democracy — "the prodigious concentration of wealth," as Croly put it, "and of the power exercised by wealth, in the hands of a few men." Writers like Lloyd and Croly called for a cooperative, rather than competitive, endeavor, on behalf of a social or national, rather than purely private, purpose.

"If the integrity of a democracy is injured by the perpetuation of unearned economic distinctions," Croly wrote in 1909, "it is also injured by extreme poverty, whether deserved or not. A democracy can no more be indifferent to the distribution of wealth than it can to the distribution of the suffrage. Not only does any considerable amount of grinding poverty constitute a grave social danger in a democratic state, but so, in general, does a widespread condition of partial economic privation. The individuals constituting a democracy lack the first essential of individual freedom when they cannot escape from a condition of economic dependence."

Much the same point was made by Theodore Roosevelt. "No man can be a good citizen," he declared in 1910, "unless he has a wage more than sufficient to cover the bare cost of living and hours of labor short enough so that after his day's work is done he will have time and energy to bear his share in the management of the community, to help in carrying the general load. We keep countless men from being good citi-

zens," he added, "by the conditions of life with which we surround them." These conditions were, he made clear, primarily economic; without economic equality, he was saying in effect, political equality becomes meaningless.

The ideas of these late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century spokesmen for economic equality bore fruit during the Depression of the 1930s. At a time when, according to Ferdinand Lundberg, the United States was "owned and dominated . . . by a hierarchy of sixty of the richest families," most Americans owned "nothing beyond a few sticks of furniture and the clothes on their backs," and there was "an immense, possibly permanent, army of paupers — the unemployed." The estimates of the latter ran as high as 20 million — half the labor force — at one time.

Franklin D. Roosevelt told Congress in 1938 that wealth and economic power had become even more concentrated in a smaller number of corporations, and that a preponderantly large portion of the income went to a mere 1½ percent of the people at the top. He warned that democratic liberty is not safe if private power is allowed to grow stronger than the popular government, or if the economic system cannot provide employment, goods, and "an acceptable standard of living" for all the people.

Proposed remedies for this striking inequality came from all sides during the Depression. Marxist and other programs of European origin received little attention save among the urban intellectuals and a minority of workers. However, homegrown radicals and social healers such as Huey Long, Dr. Francis Townsend, and Upton Sinclair caused a considerable stir in the early years of the Roosevelt administration with their calls to "Share the Wealth," provide "Sixty Dollars Every Thursday," and "End Poverty in California."

These movements soon petered out, and

F.D.R.'s "New Deal" proceeded with more moderate and systematic measures to try to solve the problem of economic inequality. It initiated an era in the treatment of economic inequality that was, historically, as significant as the Jacksonian era in regard to political equality. Aside from welfare and relief measures and new regulations of industry and finance, the new policy consisted mainly in a taxing and spending program, minimum wage legislation, and encouragement of labor unions. The aim was a comfortable standard of living for all; the emphasis was on the increased purchasing power of the masses.

Whatever the general merits or demerits of the New Deal philosophy of government, statistical evidence seems to indicate that some redistribution of wealth and income was effected during those years, and continued in the ensuing era. The top 5 percent dropped considerably in their share of the national wealth and income in the years 1929-1949, and the lower 40 percent gained in wealth, income, and comforts.

Nevertheless, some economists maintain that no drastic redistribution of wealth and income actually occurred in the second third of the twentieth century. They point out that the share of the total income for the *poorest fifth* of the population increased only one percentage point in the 1929-1960 period, while that of the *richest fifth* declined only eight percentage points, with a vastly increased total income. Moreover, all marked changes in distribution of wealth seem to have ceased after 1944, and some trends, such as the relative decline of the share of the wealthiest 5 percent of the population, were reversed.

The continued existence of a poverty-stricken class — indeed, what almost seemed to be the emergence of a new one — troubled the equanimity of many observers in the affluent postwar society of the 1950s and 1960s. Poverty was a characteristic of families hampered by certain condi-

tions, such as being nonwhite, fatherless, rural, headed by unemployed, uneducated, or older persons, and living in the South or in certain depressed areas. These people constituted what Michael Harrington in 1962 called "the other America" — another nation, in effect, with another kind of life and expectation, shut off from participation in the larger, affluent society, and hardly, if at all, noticed by it. The new poor did not show the mass misery of older, traditional societies or the obvious, large-scale hardship of Depression America. They were, for the most part, hidden from the view of wealth-producing and wealth-enjoying Americans.

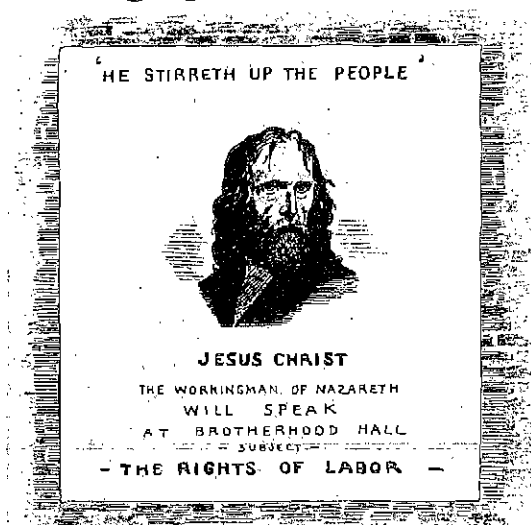
These people — this one-fifth, or one-quarter, or even one-third of a nation, depending on one's criteria of poverty and point of view regarding it — were effectively shut out, not only from the material blessings but also from the hope and dignity of American life. They existed, some thought, in what was obviously a chronic, and in what was in danger of becoming a permanent, exclusion. "Looking back over a number of years," labor leader Ralph Helstein declared in 1964, "I see what I call a culture of poverty developing, in which people are increasingly outside of what we normally think of as our social structure. . . . Right now, probably this minute, a child is being born in Chicago who will be the third generation living on relief. The whole pattern of existence of these people has been at relief levels, relief standards. . . . This is a complete denial of democracy because these people have no sense of freedom."

Indeed, whether America could continue to exist as the land of equal opportunity with a permanent pauper class in its midst was questionable. A "War Against Poverty" was initiated during the Johnson administration, in 1965, to deal with the causes — economic, social, and psychological — of indigenous poverty. And in 1964 even such a conservative economist as Milton

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Cover for the Christmas issue of "The Masses," 1913

Friedman had suggested an outright money grant of as much as \$3,000 per year per family to bring these people into the American scheme of life. This concept of a "negative income tax," whereby government would pay needy citizens a yearly stipend, was considered seriously in the late 1960s as a practicable method of meeting the problem of poverty in the midst of plenty. [For further discussion of the problems of, and the remedies for, economic inequality, see Chs. 5: GENERAL WELFARE, 17: WORK AND WORKERS, and 18: STANDARD OF LIVING.]

5. THE PERSISTENCE OF INEQUALITY IN AMERICA

IT HAS BEEN SUGGESTED that what Americans have meant by the various types of equality is "equality of opportunity" — the equal chance for all to be and to do, as individu-

als and as members of the community. Equality in this sense has been challenged from the beginning by attitudes, practices, and even by laws that directly flouted it. The outstanding example, of course, has been the position of the Negro in our society. "American equalitarianism is, of course, for white men only," sociologist Seymour Lipset observed in 1963.

The position of the Negro throughout American history — in all eras and all sections — demonstrates vividly the existence of inequality in America. Almost all Negroes were brought here against their will, as slaves. The equal rights to liberty and the pursuit of happiness promised to "all men" by the Declaration of Independence obviously did not apply to them, and their right to life was not worth very much. The Constitution, that great monument to human rationality and political prudence, counted a Negro as only three-fifths of a person for the purpose of determining representation in Congress — but did not give him even three-fifths of a vote.

The Negro lacked all types of equality before the Civil War — legal, political, social, and economic. His supposed natural inequality "justified" this inequality of condition. He was regarded and treated as an inferior being, as less than human. Constitutional amendments in the 1860s gave him, in principle, legal and political equality, but the amendments were largely ignored for a hundred years. In the South, various legal devices, customs, and practices substituted a new freedman's inequality for the old chattel-slave inequality — Negroes were not full citizens there and could not act politically. In the North, they were shunted aside into racial ghettos and treated unequally in the social and economic worlds, when they were not entirely ignored as "invisible men," in Ralph Ellison's phrase. If to all this is added unequal schooling, in both the North and the South, it is clear that inequality of opportunity has been the contin-

uing lot of a large segment of the American people.

John Dollard's classic study, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (1937), showed how caste, based on racial criteria, barred Southern Negroes from "social advancement" and "the highest prestige prizes," thereby denying the democratic promise of "equal opportunity and equal recognition of social merit." Looking back in 1957, Dollard saw basically the same situation and the same dilemma — the opposite pulls of egalitarian American values and discriminatory social practices and attitudes — in the South, and sought a solution in moving "larger and larger numbers of Negroes into the middle class of their caste," which was still separate and segregated. At the same time, Dollard was firmly convinced that "Americans instinctively hate the caste system and will not long abide it," even where traditional regional culture demands it.

Other ethnic groups have also suffered unequal treatment, though not so severely or traumatically as the Negroes. Orientals were discriminated against on the West Coast and even forbidden to own property in certain areas. Jews were and are subject to exclusion from job opportunities ("Gentiles Only" or "Christians Only"), to quota systems in certain university departments and professional schools, and to residential and social restrictions. Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and other groups have also been subjected to severe social and economic inequality.

The bias in favor of northern and western European ethnic, and Protestant religious, groups was written into national immigration laws in the early 1920s, which, in effect, said to the world that, whatever its original principles had been, the nation no longer believed that all men were equal, or equally fit to live in America. In 1783 George Washington had declared that the United States would welcome "the oppressed and persecuted of all nations and re-

ligions . . . to a participation of all our rights and privileges." This policy prevailed, by and large, until World War I. But with the wave of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, and with the incursion of great numbers of Orientals to the West Coast, attitudes changed. Laws limiting immigration from less "desirable" areas were passed; and a quota system was instituted whereby Italians and Slavs, for example, sometimes had to wait years to come to the United States. As late as 1952 Congress, by a two-thirds vote, and over a presidential veto, passed an immigration bill that reaffirmed, and even intensified, the unequal treatment of new Americans, favoring "Nordies" over ethnic stocks deemed less worthy.

A presidential commission in that year declared that such laws, "which deny the inherent dignity and worth of the individual, which deny the equality of man, and which embody discrimination based on race, creed, color, and national origin, have no place on our statute books, and are a denial of all we profess to be and believe." Official statements such as this, along with strong pressure from liberal as well as ethnic political groups, had their effect. In 1965 a new immigration bill was passed that abolished many of the discriminatory provisions of the old laws and promised to inaugurate a new and more equalitarian immigration policy.

For a time, women presented another exception to the American ideal of equality. The Declaration of Independence seemed to mean that only white males were created equal, when it said "all men." Women were not among the governed whose political consent was required; if white, they were regarded as fully human, but as equivalent to minors, in not being allowed to sue in court or to vote. Their legal inequality reflected the opinion that they were intellectually not quite equal to men and that they were too delicate to become involved

in the coarse realm of politics. In any event, by the twentieth century, impelled by their increasing participation in economic life, they had arrived at a position of legal and political equality in America, some time before such equalization occurred in England and Europe.

Social equality does not seem to have been much of a problem for them, since a woman's social status is usually that of her husband or family, and since, according to the reports of foreign observers, American women of all classes were treated with unusual respect and courtesy. The struggle for economic equality, however, continued into the final third of the twentieth century, with the plea for "equal pay for equal work," and for equal admittance to all occupations and professions. Even the liberal idealist Herbert Croly had limited his demand in 1909 for "a certain minimum of economic power and responsibility" to "every male adult." By the 1960s, however, civil rights legislation extended equal employment opportunities to women, as well as to Negroes and other groups subject to discrimination.

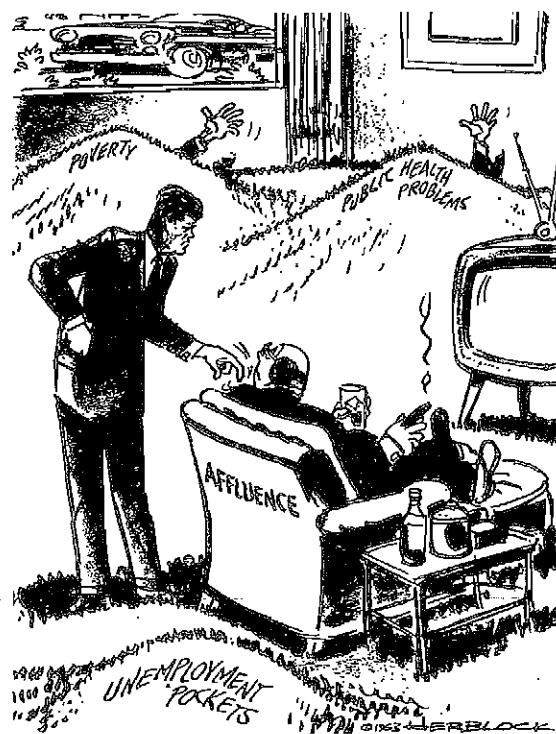
The position of women in America has reflected, by and large, the position of women generally in Western culture. American social and political ideals were asserted within this general pattern of custom and tradition, which was taken for granted. As late as the 1840s, most believers in constitutional democracy still thought it quite right that a woman's male relatives should represent her interests and that it was good for society to exclude half its members from political rights. Margaret Fuller, however, in 1845, demanded that the doctrine of natural equality be applied to women too, and that they no longer be treated as children or slaves. "Inward and outward freedom for Woman as much as for Man shall be acknowledged as a *right*, not yielded as a concession," she declared. "Man cannot by right lay even well-meant restrictions on

Woman. . . . There is but one law for souls." [For further discussion of matters treated in this section, see Chs. 12: MINORITIES and 20: FAMILY.]

6. EQUALITY, LIBERTY, AND PROGRESS

WE DEALT EARLIER with opposing views on the question of natural equality, and we have just reviewed differing opinions about the extent to which an inequality of conditions has prevailed and still persists in American life. We will now consider the fundamental opposition between those who think that equality of condition promotes individual liberty, human excellence, and social progress, and those who deny this, holding on the contrary that the more a society tends toward political, social, and economic equality for its people, the more it endangers liberty, impairs the achievement of excellence, and impedes the march toward progress.

The latter view is summed up for us in some memorable statements. In the debates in the New York Constitutional Convention of 1821, Chancellor Kent, speaking against expansion of the suffrage and an equalization of political power among the propertied and unpropertied classes in the population, declared: "The tendency of universal suffrage is to jeopardize the rights of property and the principles of liberty." Thirty years later, in his *Disquisition on Government*, Calhoun called it "a great and dangerous error to suppose that all people are equally entitled to liberty." While he conceded that "equality of citizens, in the eyes of the law, is essential to liberty in a popular government," he insisted that "to go further and make equality of *condition* essential to liberty would be to destroy both liberty and progress. The reason," he asserted, "is that inequality of condition, while it is a necessary consequence of liberty, is at the



Courtesy, Herblock, "The Washington Post"

"Wall-to-wall under-the-carpeting"; Herblock, 1963

same time indispensable to progress."

As late as the end of the nineteenth century, the same warning against equality as the enemy of liberty and progress was repeated by William Graham Sumner. "Let it be understood," he declared, "that we cannot go outside of this alternative: liberty, inequality, survival of the fittest; not-liberty, equality, survival of the unfittest. The former carries society forward and favors all its best members; the latter carries society downward and favors all its worst members."

In his great work on *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville celebrated the movement toward an equality of condition in which America was leading the rest of the world. But at the same time he expressed his grave concern about the possibility of adverse consequences for individual liberty and the achievement of excellence. Unlike Kent, Calhoun, and Sumner, Tocqueville did not regard liberty as totally irreconcilable with the prevalence of a universal equality of condition. In a letter to a friend about his

book, he wrote: "I have tried to show that under a democratic government the fortunes and the rights of society may be respected, liberty preserved, and religion honored; that though a republic may develop less than other governments some of the noblest powers of the human mind, it yet has a nobility of its own; and that after all it may be God's will to spread a moderate amount of happiness over all men, instead of heaping a large sum upon a few by allowing only a small minority to approach perfection."

These remarks might well have been an answer to a statement by John Adams, who warned in 1787 that if the power of the people were not restricted, "the rich will never enjoy any liberty, property, reputation, or life, in security." Tocqueville did not go nearly so far. Nevertheless, he emphasized the dangers to individual liberty in a universal equality of conditions. Where such equality prevails, he maintained, individuals tend to become weak. "The independence of private persons" is nullified, and, hence, democracies tend "to despise and undervalue the rights of private persons." Furthermore, Tocqueville remarked, in egalitarian societies there tends to be an insidious tyranny of public opinion, which compels individuals to give up their opinions and even the desire to think for themselves. Thus freedom of thought in a democracy, in this view, threatens to be — though it need not be — the freedom merely to think as the majority, as the "public" does. It is the freedom to conform, not to be different.

The notion, hinted at by both Adams and Tocqueville, that the rights of property tend to be infringed in a democracy underlies other expressions of the conflict between liberty and equality. Fear of leveling or expropriating tendencies, or simply of tax policies and other government regulation that might restrict business enterprise — all in

the name of an aggressive egalitarianism — have stimulated outcries against such measures throughout our history. For example, an organization formed by big businessmen during the 1930s to protest against the New Deal policies of Roosevelt called itself, in that tradition, the Liberty League. And Republican Party candidates for the presidency, from Herbert Hoover in 1932 to Barry Goldwater in 1964, often based their campaigns on this idea.

One answer to such assertions is that in fact government regulation and control have not tended to infringe private rights and endanger individual liberties. Jefferson, for one, pointed to past experience in state and colonial governments to refute the charge that the power of the people is opposed to the freedom of the individual. The British conservative Peregrine Worsthorne, looking back over 150 years of our history, came to the same conclusion. Democracy, meaning political and social equality, and free enterprise have thrived as partners in America, he declared; neither has hindered the other. The ordinary American, he observed, does not want to restrict the freedom of others to gain and hold wealth; on the contrary, he supports that freedom, because he wants it for himself. And the historian David M. Potter asserted in 1954 that in America "liberty" and "equality" mean the same thing: "freedom to grasp opportunity."

Another answer to the charge that liberty and equality are unalterably opposed is contained in the notion that the political and economic threat to freedom comes not from the people in general but from the moneyed interests — the rich, who alone, according to this theory, have privileges that are likely to be infringed if an equality of conditions obtains. Such was the cry of liberal spokesmen in the Jacksonian period, in the last years of the nineteenth century — the Gilded Age — and in the New Deal era. Indeed, according to Henry George, inequali-

ty, not equality, leads to despotism, and to "despotism of the vilest and most degrading kind." The degradation of democracy that is implicit in inequality of economic and other conditions was, for him, the ultimate tragedy of political man.

Nevertheless, Tocqueville's view that equality, with all its social benefits, stands in the way of excellence raises serious questions for a democracy. The question of whether they could be "equal and excellent too" has troubled many Americans. Croly declared in *The Promise of American Life* that the development of modern industrial America had produced a society marked by severe inequality of conditions among various social classes. He proposed to deal with this situation by a program combining equalitarian and hierarchical features. Society having become so complex, he maintained, it was now the expert, and not the untrained "common man," who would have to direct it. In this respect — that of training and knowledge — every man is obviously *not* as good as another, and the difference between individuals must be recognized. "Individual distinction," he observed, "resulting from the efficient performance of special work, is not only the foundation of all genuine individuality but is usually of the utmost social value."

At the same time, Croly emphasized cooperation as against competition, a constructive and participative individuality as opposed to a self-serving individualism, with excellence as the goal instead of position or power. Those on the lower levels, he maintained, must enjoy an increasing share of the material benefits of American industry. He and other Progressives wanted a democratic society that would provide a good life — cultural as well as material — for all of its members, even if it was run, as it had to be, by the most able.

As for progress, the classic American position that equality and social advance are opposed is, as we have seen, that of Calhoun,

who held that inequality of conditions is indispensable to progress. The equally classic opposing stand is to be found in Henry George's *Progress and Poverty*. Not only are progress and equality not in conflict, in his view, but equality is one of the two fundamental sources of progress. "Association in equality is the law of progress. Association frees mental power for expenditure in improvement, and equality, or justice, or freedom — for the terms here signify the same thing, the recognition of the moral law — prevents the dissipation of this power in fruitless struggles." "Men tend to progress," he went on to say, "just as they come closer together, and by cooperation with each other increase the mental power that may be devoted to improvement, but just as conflict is provoked, or association develops inequality of condition and power, this tendency to progression is lessened, checked, and finally reversed."

Viewing the prospect from the vantage point of the year 1963, Seymour Lipset saw America — as so many had seen it before him — at the crossroads and torn between the equalitarian and anti-equalitarian or elitist forces that have opposed each other throughout our history. Siding with the equalitarians, he called on Americans to respond constructively to the social problems of their time and to fulfill and realize the ideals of the Declaration of Independence. Otherwise, he warned, the privileges of a wealthy and powerful elite would become fixed and rigid, and "then America will become a different nation in terms of its values." It might, he suggested, become a military-industrial hierarchical society, in defensive response to international tensions.

He concluded with these words: "To build and maintain a free and equalitarian society is the most difficult task political man has ever set himself. There are tendencies inherent in human social organization which seek to destroy freedom and to foster inequality. Hence the effort to prevent them

from dominating must be a constant one. It must be directed against poverty and its related evils at one hand, and against ascription [class or race bias] and elitism at the other. Most efforts to erect or continue democratic polities have disintegrated. The American experiment may very well fail. On the other hand, the fact that this New Nation has succeeded in fostering economic growth and democracy under the aegis of equalitarian values holds out hope for the rest of the world. For prosperity, freedom, and equality cannot be for [some] men only. If they are, then they will prove to have been as illusory and impermanent as the slave-based democracies of ancient Greece."

Lipset was perhaps speaking for the majority of Americans, but there were in the 1960s, as in previous eras, other voices and other views concerning the right ordering of American society. For example, the "new conservatives" of the post-World War II era, such as Clinton Rossiter and Russell Kirk, argued against equality of condition as unrealistic, unjust, and not conducive to the best interests of the nation. They upheld Calhoun's thesis in a new way in a new time.

Digby Baltzell, speaking as a "realistic" sociologist, declared that "all complex societies — aristocratic, democratic, or totalitarian — are oligarchical in that the few rule the many." In a democracy, he contended, we cannot demand that there be no elite — which is in his view impossible in an ordered society — but we must see to it that it remains open to rising members of the community. Hence, his opposition to the "Protestant Establishment" in the 1960s was not because it was an elite but because

it was a closed elite, and moreover was failing to do a proper job in leading society.

The truth, no doubt, is that the question of human equality and inequality is an enormously complex one, stemming from the ambiguities of the human situation, in any polity. Equalitarian and elitist tendencies within a society or an individual inevitably counter one another. People demand a free and open society, careers open to talents, a land where any boy may become President or a millionaire; and yet they fear the prizes and privileges that go with fame and wealth. At the same time, there is an inevitable desire on the part of the persons of high achievement who lead society to hand down their power to their descendants, such as in the old families of Massachusetts and Virginia, and even to whole classes or subclasses. The position occupied by the Roosevelts, Harrimans, Rockefellers, and the newcomer Kennedys in the second third of the twentieth century showed that leadership by the rich and well-born was by no means a thing of the past in America.

The whole problem of social class, elite leadership, and equality of condition still remained unresolved as the United States approached the 200th anniversary of its proclamation that all men are created equal — along with the more basic problem of what it meant to be an American, or of what the American way of life really was. All of these problems would have to reach some definite solution if America was to go forward with a unified mind and character and an integrated purpose in the era that lay ahead. [For further discussion of some of the points raised in this section, see Chs. 1: NATIONAL CHARACTER and 25: AMERICAN DESTINY.]