Chapter 18

THE AMERICAN STANDARD OF LIVING

INTRODUCTION

A man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

It's no disgrace to be poor, but it might as well be.

KIN HUBBARD

The most prosperous, the best housed, the best fed, the best read, the most intelligent and secure generation in our history, or all history, is discontent.

LYNDON B. JOHNSON

THE AMERICAN STANDARD OF LIVING was famous in "the Old Country" from colonial times on; indeed, long before the promise of potential abundance had been fulfilled in actual social and economic life. Even the religiously oriented Puritans were moved as much by the desire to find "a better and easier place of living," according to Governor William Bradford, as by the goal of religious liberty and the opportunity to set up a Bible Commonwealth. Among the economic motivations of the European settlement in America were not only the desire of business "adventurers" to make large gains but also the impulse of the European common man to go to a place where, in Bradford's words, he "might have liberty and live comfortably." Economic privation in Europe and economic opportunity in America — the chance to attain a higher standard of living — accounted for a large part of European immigration to the New World.

St. John de Crèvecoeur expressed this sense of contrasting standards of living shortly before the Constitution of the new republic was written. In America, he said in 1782, "the poor become rich; but by riches I do not mean gold and silver. . . . I mean a better sort of wealth, cleared lands, cattle, good houses, good clothes, and an increase of people to enjoy them." The ordinary man, he declared, "may procure an easy, decent maintenance by his industry. Instead of starving, he will be fed; instead of being idle, he will have employment; and these are riches enough for such men as come over here."

That this is what the higher standard of living meant at first to "voluntary Americans" — the immigrants — is indicated by the emphasis on good and plentiful eating in the early accounts. Crèvecoeur dwelt on "that plenty of provisions" that made American tables groan and European eyes glisten. He emphasized not merely being fed regularly, which in itself would have been a boon to Europe's poor, but being well fed — three square meals a day. "Tell Miriam there's no sending children to bed without supper" in America, a later British immigrant wrote to his family at home. Mouth-watering, if somewhat exaggerated, descriptions of the typical American meal — "tea, coffee, beef, fowls, pies, eggs, pickles, good bread" — flowed across the Atlantic to narrowly rationed relatives.

Accounts like these inspired historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., to write an essay in 1949 that viewed food as the central factor in the making of America. "The very discovery of the New World," he declared, "was the by-product of a dietary quest," since that epochal event resulted from upper-class European desires to find a new route to the spices of the Indies. Similarly, he suggested, the American Revolution arose from the British government's attempt to restrict "certain imported articles of diet to which the people had become attached," such as molasses and tea (and rum made from molasses). The great immigration of the Irish in the 1840s and 1850s resulted from a "dietary need" far more pressing than that of Europe's gentry in Columbus' time — the potato famine. "For the time being," Schlesinger said, "starvation overbore all other reasons for settling in the United States."

The Republican campaign promise of 1928 — A Chicken in Every Pot, A Car in Every Garage — though it proved ill-omened, had illustrious, traditional precedents. If America was promises, one of them, and probably the main one to prospective Americans, was that of a higher standard of living — in the very concrete sense of food, clothing, homes, and farms. It was this that Benjamin Franklin offered to prospective immigrants in the 1780s. This was an essential part of "the promise of American life" to which Herbert Croly referred in his famous work of that title published in 1909.

"To the European immigrant," said Croly, ". . . the Promise of America has consisted largely in the opportunity which it offered of economic independence and prosperity." If immigrants and their descendants did not escape the age-old "curse of poverty" and achieve "the highest possible standard of living," he declared, they might justly consider themselves cheated, whatever else they might have obtained in the New World.

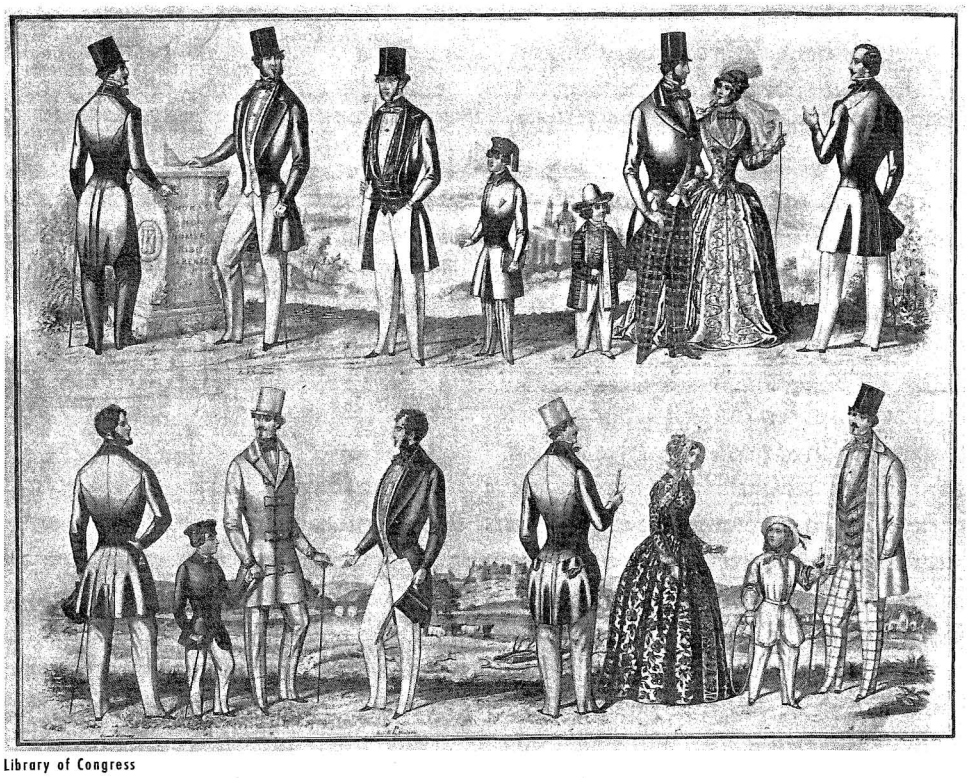
An old pioneer song spelled out the promise thus:

Come along, come along, make no delay,
Come from every nation, come from every way,
Our lands are broad enough, don't be alarmed,
For Uncle Sam is rich enough to give us all a farm.

1. THE ELEMENTS OF LIVING

INEVITABLY THE EMPHASIS in most accounts of the American standard of living has been on things — the things that labor and money can buy. But from a fairly early time, at least in the settled areas, a good many intangibles, beyond mere material necessities, have been valued as part of the American standard of living. Moreover, some things that were considered necessities by American standards were considered luxuries by Europeans.

Zelotes Fuller, commenting on the prosperity of the "happy nation" of the 1820s,



Library of Congress

"Scott's fashions for the summer, 1847"; lithograph by F. Michelin

mentioned not only fields and herds, commerce and ships, but also the "colleges and seminaries of learning"; not only the "ample means of support for ourselves and our families" but also "the means of instruction for our children." And James Bryce included in "the external conditions of happiness" of the prosperous America of the 1880s not only "abundance of the necessaries of life" but also "easy command of education and books, amusements and leisure to enjoy them."

The standard of living in America, then, as in any other society, has included a minimum expectation of what are considered the material necessities and comforts. It also has included a system of values or preferences. Among the possible values, sociologist Hazel Kyrk has suggested, are "health and vigor, comfort, cleanliness, beauty, prestige, ostentation, play, knowledge, experience, self-expression, creation, social intercourse, propitiation, and recognition." In this sense, "standard of living" is primarily an ethical term, and it consists of those things that are considered to be the elements of happiness in a particular society.

What, then, are the main elements and emphases of the American standard of living that make it unique? First comes the quantitative emphasis. The accent in the United States is on "more" — more of the necessities and comforts of life. "Higher," as regards the standard of living, means, first and foremost, quantitatively higher. Commentators, domestic and foreign, have poked fun at this aspect of the American character. But, as someone once pointed out, the emphasis on quantity does not mean that the American does not make value judgments. It just means that he assumes the goodness of certain things — living space, automotive transport, well-fitting clothes, and so forth — and he thinks one cannot have too much of a good thing. The more the better is his attitude.

Second, the standard is a uniform one, to which all individuals and classes are sup-

posed to aspire. Unlike older societies, where distinctive class notions and standards continued after the breakdown of the feudal system, in America there was supposedly one standard for all. Differences were those of degree rather than of kind. Everyone had or hoped for different amounts or forms of the same things. Consumption, as well as politics, was democratized. With this literally standardized standard went a good deal of conformism and imitation — doing or having what "everyone" did or had at the time.

Another characteristic is the emphasis on a changing, constantly improving standard — in contrast with the unalterable standards of medieval societies and the relatively slow-changing ones of European countries until World War II. "In five years," Hazel Kyrk observed in 1953, "one must be living in a larger house, with better furniture, a better car, more laborsaving devices, and with more to spend for food and clothes. If not, the standard as a long-time pattern has not been attained. Simply to maintain the status quo is to fall short of the minimum essentials."

Not only a better, more expensive car may be indicated by the shifting standard of living but also a second or even a third car, then maybe a boat for summer recreation, and then a better boat, and so on. Merely sending the children to college may not satisfy the educational requirements of a changing standard of living; it may require sending them on to graduate school and professional occupations. "Keep moving" is the standard American motto. "Earn more and buy more next year than this year" is the American imperative.

To a moralist like Walter Lippmann, who approached the matter in 1941 from the traditional viewpoint of Western culture, such a standard of living (or "of life") was no standard at all. A standard, for him, meant a normative limit, which says thus far and no farther, so much of this and so much of that, and none of *that* at all. But in modern Western society, according to Lippmann, "there is always a more luxurious standard. No prosperity is rich enough. For the statistical curves on the charts might always go higher still." Modern Western secular man, of whom the American is the prime example, constantly looks forward to "becoming richer, more powerful, more famous, more glamorous, more irresistible."

Whether or not reliance on traditional virtues and restraints, as advocated by Lippmann, is the proper response to the allegedly unique conditions of the "affluent society" of mid-twentieth-century America has been the subject of controversy. So also has been the basic assumption that economic prosperity can buy happiness — an individual and social life that embodies the good, the true, the beautiful, or whatever other values are considered the elements of happiness. Finley Peter Dunne's Mr. Dooley, for example, discovered that he could not buy happiness, good health, friends, or "th' priceless gift iv laziness," although it was possible to "cash in" on them and have instead money and the things that money could buy.

In any case, by the 1960s, the undeniable abundance of the United States — the highest standard of living anywhere, anytime — had become a challenge as well as a blessing. It called for a reconsideration of the American purpose and a fresh decision regarding the basic goals and values that the economy was to serve in the years ahead. [For further discussion of some of the matters treated in these pages, see Chs. 1: NATIONAL CHARACTER, 2: FRONTIER, and 25: AMERICAN DESTINY.]

2. THE PURSUIT OF WEALTH, COMFORT, AND STATUS

AMERICA, according to the accounts of Franklin, Crèvecoeur, and many later observers, was the land where a man could rise to comfort and even affluence by his

labor, enterprise, and thrift. Here the ordinary farm laborer or craftsman could hope to earn enough by his toil to save the money to buy a farm or business of his own. And once arrived at that independent estate, however modest, he could, Crèvecoeur declared, form "schemes of future prosperity" on new lands and in new enterprises, for his own greater wealth and comfort and that of his children. A higher standard of living was attainable, according to such heralds of American plenty, if a man had the pluck, foresight, and luck to go out and get it. "Advancement — improvement in condition — is the order of things in a society of equals," said Abraham Lincoln.

Alexis de Tocqueville, the Frenchman who visited here in the 1830s, ascribed the bullish disposition of the typical American to the unlimited abundance, the still unappropriated resources of the new country. The situation, he said, called for "boldness of enterprise," for taking big chances in order to make big gains. This was not merely a matter of "commercial speculations" in the limited sense of city business and finance. The farmers, too, indeed they especially, gambled in land values, as George Washington and others noted with dismay. Farmers used the cash from the sale of their crops to invest in more lands, in order to rise, as historian Richard Hofstadter had observed, "above the hardships and squalor of pioneering and log-cabin life." The motto was "upward and higher" for the farmers and frontiersmen, too.

The self-sufficient yeoman of the early period of the republic might have remained satisfied with the independence and comfort provided by his homegrown foods and homemade articles. But even before economic developments forced him to become dependent on national and international market demands and prices, the whole spirit of his place and time called on him to take a chance in the lottery of American economic life — to try for more. Beyond mere creature comforts and household contentment, there opened up prospective vistas of affluence, security, and status. In an equalitarian order, as shrewd observers like Tocqueville noted, it was only money that distinguished men.

Americans were no different from other people in their love for money, said Scottish journalist Alexander Mackay in 1846, but their passion was more intense because there was a far greater chance that it would be satisfied. "America is a country in which fortunes have yet to be made," he wrote. "Wealth gives great distinction, and wealth is, more or less, within the grasp of all. Hence the universal scramble. All cannot be made wealthy, but all have a chance of securing a prize." In England, all that the common people could hope for was to make an adequate living, "and numbers fall short even of that." If there were any real chance for them to reap riches, Mackay declared, they would have "scrambled" just as fiercely as the Americans for the big prizes.

Crucial ethical and social problems arose as a result of this opportunity and the rush to grab it. Liberal clergyman Theodore Parker charged in 1859 that "sudden prosperity and a great increase of wealth" had made worshipers of money and sacrificers of men out of an originally virtuous people. "Covetousness is the great sin of America just now," he declared. Socialist Henry Demarest Lloyd observed in 1894 that the accumulation of wealth had become an end in itself, without any regard to productive service to society. "Getting capital," an achievement William Graham Sumner urged upon his students at Yale in the 1890s, centered as much on personal pleasure, power, and status as on producing goods and supplying services for others.

With the pursuit of wealth for its own sake, according to the critics, went the emphasis on mere show as opposed to real

Library of Congress

"The Smokers"; 1837 lithograph by H. R. Robinson

personal enjoyment. An editorial writer in the *American Whig Review* complained in 1845 that the well-to-do American home was somber, cheerless, and uncomfortable, save for the part that was occasionally used by strangers. "We love to appear comfortable rather than to be so. . . . We are ashamed of anything but affluence." The emphasis, he said, was on accumulation "for pride" and on having "the reputation of possessing" rather than on comfort, grace, and enjoyment.

This tendency toward what Thorstein Veblen was half a century later to call "pecuniary emulation" and "conspicuous consumption," or what was more popularly called "keeping up with the Joneses," became a characteristic even of the class with the most attachment to habits of frugality and simplicity — the farmers. "We find many farmers running into debt to 'keep even' with their neighbors," wrote a Pennsylvania farmer in 1890. "Because Jones who owns bank stock . . . has good machinery, fine musical instruments, fast horses, etc., they think they must have them too, if they have to mortgage the farm to get them."

A farm journal writer, noting the high cost of sociability among farm families in 1905, declared that "people want fine houses and furniture and expensive lighting and heating appurtenances; they want clipped horses and fine carriages, and they try to dress as near like the elite as possible, and to entertain their guests as sumptuously as those do who have thrice their wealth." In America everyone could not *be* wealthy, but they could make a strenuous attempt to *appear* so.

This stress on the American standard of living as something that one is required to achieve — or give the appearance of having achieved — caused a great deal of anxiety and dreary striving, according to some writers. "All strangers who come among us re-

mark the excessive anxiety written in the American countenance," the writer for the *American Whig Review* further declared. He attributed this to "the restless desire to be better off," without any standard or limit of "better off." "There is consequently no condition of hopes realized, in other words, of contentment." All classes and occupations were condemned to this dismal and futile "laboriousness," were "sufferers from the excessive stimulus under which everything is done," because such emulation was a universal custom or expectation of American society.

One of the most famous criticisms of the striving for substance and status was contained in Thoreau's *Walden,* published in 1854. "It is a fool's life," he wrote, "as they will find when they get to the end of it, if not before." In seeking to make a living — the kind of living modern civilized society demanded of them — men forgot to live, became mere machines, failed to be themselves. They led "mean and sneaking" lives in order to achieve worthless things that had nothing to do with them personally.

"The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation," Thoreau declared. "What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats. A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind. There is no play in them, for this comes after work. But it is a characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things."

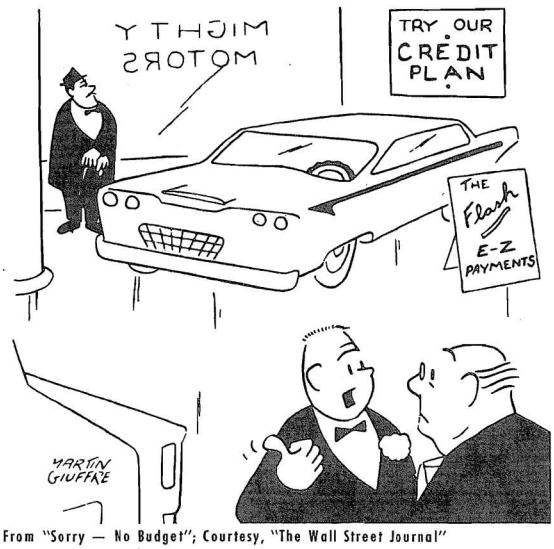
Yet all the time there was an opposing view of the results of the American standard of living for the mass of the people. Lord Bryce, for example, comparing in 1888 the condition of the ordinary American farmer and worker with that of his fellows in Europe, was overwhelmed by the impression of "comfort and plenty" and sheer contentment. "It is impossible not to feel warmed, cheered, invigorated by the sense of such material well-being all around one, impossible not to be infected by the buoyancy and hopefulness of the people. The wretchedness of Europe lies far behind." [For another discussion of some of the matters treated here, see Ch. 15: FREEDOM OF ENTERPRISE.]

3. LEISURE, AMUSEMENTS, AND CULTURE

IT WAS OFTEN CHARGED against Americans that they frowned on the very idea of free time or did not know what to do with it, so single-minded were they about gaining a good living or making a fortune. Certainly in early colonial times there were numerous injunctions against "idleness, gaming, drunkenness, and excess in apparel," both in New England and other areas. During the Jacksonian era, writers like James Fenimore Cooper and the *Whig Review* editor mentioned above declared that the old Puritan morality had had a lasting effect on the American mind, so that leisure was regarded as "misspent" time and relaxation and amusement were regarded as sinful, frivolous, and childish.

To this dour "fanatic" dogma Cooper attributed the "coarse indulgences" of the masses, in natural revolt against an unnatural repression. In the more permissive, Catholic countries, he said in 1838, public manners and tastes were elevated through the availability of operatic, dramatic, and other even more intellectual amusements. Similarly the *Whig Review* writer regarded the hostility to amusements among solid citizens as "one of the most serious evils to which our community is exposed," since it labeled natural impulses as sinful and thereby drove the young to real "vice."

Lord Bryce, however, concluded that the life of the average New England factory



From "Sorry — No Budget"; Courtesy, "The Wall Street Journal"

"How do I go about this? He wants to pay cash"

worker was "far more brightened by intellectual culture and amusements than that of the clerks and shopkeepers of England or France." And later observers commented on the plethora, rather than the scarcity, of amusements, distractions, and spectacles.

The transplanted Austrian, Francis J. Grund, was one of the first to observe that in the United States "business constitutes pleasure, and industry amusement." Americans got their satisfaction, he observed in 1837, out of just those very activities that the *Whig Review* writer regarded as dull, dry, and dreary. It was free time — with the "horrors of idleness" — that was the source of unhappiness in America, in contrast with Europe, which valued "sociable idleness" and the cultivated life of leisure.

This view of the American as a man who derives his greatest or even his sole joy from economic pursuits was a common one down to the twentieth century. But by that time, because of the increasingly mechanical nature of industrial production, it was usually only the men at the top who were receiving any satisfaction from playing the game of business competition. The masses of machine tenders were generally anxious to get away from "the grind" to their beer, bowling, and commercialized amusements.

Caspar W. Whitney wrote disarmingly in 1894 of the dogged efforts of the top-drawer American businessmen of the Gilded Age to learn how to enjoy "the leisurely side of life." So ingrained was the taste for work, he asserted, that the tired businessman was likely to take with him on his vacation "a portmanteau filled with work to do at odd moments," and usually succumbed to that temptation after the first day or two of his holiday.

"The American defect of not being able or at least not willing to stop work and enjoy ourselves," Whitney declared, had to be remedied for successful businessmen by that typically American institution, the country club. It combined the convenience of the city "club" and its air of a more luxurious home away from home with the advantages of country life as enjoyed by England's upper classes. Country-club membership became a mark of status, as well as a means of gracious leisure living, among the well-born and successful.

Ordinary men and women in America also enjoyed recreational opportunities in increasing numbers and in various forms. One of the most accessible forms of recreation was participation in physical sports. As early as 1858, according to a writer in the *Atlantic Monthly,* the descendants of frontiersmen and farmers had become physically soft. "Who, in this community, really takes exercise?" he asked. He called on his effete contemporaries to undertake a rigorous program of physical activities in order to regain their muscular vigor. And he reminded them of the sheer enjoyment of physical exercise and games, of "the wild joys of living" in their boyhood outdoor activities — skating, sailing, climbing trees, playing football or cricket, "the gallant glories of riding, and the jubilee of swimming."

The true "national game," the authentic

American form of sport, was baseball, according to Albert G. Spalding's panegyric on the subject in 1911. Baseball had become the American game, declared Spalding, because it was "the exponent of American Courage, Confidence, Combativeness; American Dash, Discipline, Determination; American Energy, Eagerness, Enthusiasm; American Pluck, Persistency, Performance; American Spirit, Sagacity, Success; American Vim, Vigor, Virility." It also demanded "Brain and Brawn," which were in abundant supply among U.S. manhood. Moreover, it was democratic and combative, unlike Great Britain's genteel game of cricket.

However, according to William Henry Nugent, writing in 1929, it was nineteenth-century British immigrants who "helped to break down the wall of puritanical prejudice against organized play." Americans owed the modern sporting spirit, sports slang, and journalism, as well as athletic "commercialism, faking, and publicity," to their British cousins.

One of the major American sports in the 1920s (and even more so today) was college football, which seems to have called for all the "American" attributes listed by Spalding. According to Willard Sperry, dean of the Harvard Divinity School, it had become a devout religion, celebrated each Saturday afternoon during the fall by awed college students (as well as alumni, and others untouched by higher learning). John R. Tunis wrote scathingly in 1928 about "the great god, football," which got the lion's share of college budgets and prestige. But obviously it was a spectator sport, and the "congregation" of worshipers occupied benches in the stands, leaving the actual exercise to the "acolytes" on the playing field.

And in 1937 Tunis noted that Americans were "the greatest nation of sportsmen on earth," if sports-watching is considered sportsmanship. "Rather than play," he said, "the American of 1937 finds it easier to watch someone else play for him, or else, worse still, he will snap on the nearest station and listen to the game described over the air." After World War II he could also "see" the game on television, a form of even more vicarious sportsmanship, with his exercise limited to brief trips to the kitchen or bathroom during commercials.

Two developments were apparent during the thirty-year period after Tunis penned his warning against "a nation of onlookers." There was a marked increase in participation by ordinary Americans in golf, tennis, bowling, boating, and camping. Yet, according to athletic trainers speaking at a national physical therapy conference in 1966, the youngsters born in 1945, 1946, and 1947 were soft-muscled and stooped because of their use of power appliances and motor transport, and because of television watching. The war between exercise and flabbiness was still going on in the 1960s and was marked by an official presidential crusade during the Kennedy administration.

The most notable development in this era, from the viewpoint of standards of consumption, was the increasing availability of commercialized amusements. The old Puritan abhorrence of nonproductive, frivolous activities was on the wane; and if it was ever any longer expressed, it was regarded as comically anachronistic or despicably fanatical. The things that had been banned in colonial America — "stage plays, masks, revels," as well as "mixed dancings," card playing, dice throwing, and "unprofitable" books — were essential components of the "amusement industry" at mid-twentieth century, a respectable and significant part of the economy.

There were many precedents for this development, and some of them have become part of American memory and folklore — the Mississippi River showboats, the minstrel shows, the giant traveling circuses, burlesque, the Wild West shows, the (Ziegfeld) Follies, and the movies. On the whole,

however, these were merely respites in lives almost wholly devoted to hard work or to the accumulation of riches, and were not as central in the American way of life as later became the case. The connotations of place-names like Miami Beach and Las Vegas in the 1960s signified the shift from a predominantly toil-and-production to a fun-and-consumption culture, at least for a considerable favored minority.

One of the most evident examples of this shift was the new respectability and economic importance of gambling — the diabolical activity par excellence from a Puritan point of view. "Although it never showed up in the gross national product," wrote sociologist Daniel Bell in 1953, "gambling in the last decade was one of the largest industries in the United States." An estimated 50 million Americans were betting tens of billions of dollars a year on horse races and other sporting events, or at the tables in gambling casinos. Gambling — big-time, organized gambling — had become, said Bell, "a basic institution in American life," beside which the moral indignation of Senator Charles Tobey of New Hampshire was mere wind — "the old New England Puritan conscience poking around in industrial America, in a world it had made but never seen."

"People who do not know how to spend their time," Lewis Mumford had noted in 1922, "must take what satisfaction they can in spending their money." Simone de Beauvoir, viewing the American scene in 1948, saw in freetime activities a desperate attempt to escape the dreary boredom of life by means of gadgets, hobbies, sports, movies, and comic strips — a futile attempt to escape from the loneliness of undeveloped selves. Her comment is amazingly similar to that of Thoreau a century before on the "stereotyped but unconscious despair" underlying "the games and amusements of mankind."

All Americans did not devote their free time solely to gambling, hobbies, and passive entertainment. According to some writers the United States experienced a "cultural explosion" after World War II — the participation of millions of new consumers in fields that had formerly been the preserve of a small cultural elite. Alvin Toffler's study of the "culture consumers" and the new "culture industry" in 1964 showed estimated private expenditures of $3 billion on cultural products in 1960, projected to $7 billion by 1970. The rate of increase in the purchase of books, classical records, artworks, musical instruments, and so forth was three to four times the population growth during the years studied.

Who were the people — the "culture consumers" — who contributed to what the National Book Committee called the "cultural fever," to the so-called democratization of the arts? According to Toffler, the cultural splurge came from a new "comfort class" — a group somewhere between the rich and the middle-income groups. They were well-educated, with a high proportion of professionals, technicians, and executives, on the young side (thirtyish or under), and highly mobile. Unlike earlier eras of American culture, men were just as enthusiastic as women. Ethnically this group was almost entirely white, with a disproportionately high percentage of Jews. Thus the new culture consumers seemed to come from an emergent new class in American society, rather than from a broad cross-section.

For this group, books, records, high-fidelity equipment, concerts, plays, paintings, sculpture, and all the other forms of cultural artifacts and events were part of their standard of living — or mode of life — in addition to the appliances, automobiles, and liquors that they also demanded. Moreover, according to Toffler, the members of the group were not only enthusiastic consumers of art but also took an energetic and increasingly important role in the sponsorship and management of artistic activities

— in the "plant" and direction of enterprises such as symphony orchestras and repertory groups, as well as in ticket sales.

From this group also came the hundreds of thousands of amateur actors, painters, musicians, and other artists who embodied the new cultural explosion in their own performances as well as in their appreciation of professionals. *Variety,* the house organ of the entertainment business, estimated that in the early 1960s there were 5,000 independent amateur theater groups, in addition to the 20,000 theater groups in schools, colleges, and churches. In a supposed "nation of onlookers," with its eyes and minds fastened passively on the "idiot-box," there was, according to observers like Toffler, a sizable group of Americans who were using their intellectual, imaginative, and sensory capacities in a creative, active manner. The American ability for local, self-starting, autonomous organization and association was being displayed, it seemed, on a really new frontier.

However, a study of the performing arts in the United States, published by the Twentieth Century Fund in 1966, declared that the "cultural explosion" was mostly a myth in that department of culture. Actually, the same 11 cents out of $100 personal income was spent on live performances in 1963 as in 1946, as compared with the doubling of consumer and educational expenditures during the same period. Indeed, in 1929, Americans had spent proportionately about a third more on live performances — 15 cents out of $100 income. In the 1960s only 4 percent of the American people paid admissions to the theater, opera, concerts, dance, and other performances. The greater attendance compared with previous eras was owing simply to the increase in total population.

The hard economic facts, according to this study, were that the performing arts operated at a deficit and in order to survive had to be supported by the well-to-do, by foundations, and by speculative "angels." As for standard of living, that of the performing artists was quite low, since employment was uncertain and salaries low for most of them. In the list of 49 professional occupations in the 1960 census, actors ranked 34th, musicians and music teachers 40th, and dancing teachers 48th in earned income. Salary levels in the performing arts were described as "still scandalously low" in the 1966 study. [For another treatment of some of the points discussed here, see Ch. 23: The Arts.]

4. POVERTY IN THE MIDST OF PLENTY

The United States in the 1950s and 1960s was an affluent society, beyond the most extravagant expectations of former ages. It had attained the highest standard of living of any people in history; not only were the necessities of food, clothing, and shelter easily attainable by the average American, but also conveniences of modern appliances and transportation, and even luxuries formerly available only to small elites, such as participation in the arts and venturing one's gold (now silver) on the gaming tables. It was an actual, empirical, social fact that nobody had ever had it so good.

But a specter was haunting America, that comfortable, affluent land. It was not the specter of communism, with which Karl Marx had threatened comfortable, middle-class Europe a century before, and with which ambitious politicians threatened America in the post-World War II era. It was the specter of poverty in the midst of plenty. "Everybody," it became clear, did not have it so good.

"Poverty in the midst of plenty," John F. Kennedy declared in 1963, "is a paradox that must not go unchallenged in this country. Ours is the wealthiest of nations, yet

Library of Congress

"Suffer little WHITE children to come unto me"; cartoon by Thomas Nast for "Notes from Kentucky" by Petroleum V. Nasby, 1868

one-sixth of our people live below minimal levels of health, housing, food, and education — in the slums of cities, in migratory labor camps, in economically depressed areas, on Indian reservations." His successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, accepted the challenge that the paradox posed to American democracy and launched a "War Against Poverty" in 1964, assigning one of his most trusted aides, R. Sargent Shriver, as its director.

Visible America was affluent, but there was another America that was poor and deprived, that had existed for a long time as an invisible enclave within but also without the privileged and comfortable society of the majority. How had this come to be, and how did it affect the traditional idea of America as the land of opportunity and plenty — "the happy republic"?

Actually, poverty had long been a recognized social evil in the United States, obscured though it might have been from time to time during eras of general prosperity. One of the counterbalancing disadvantages of the free enterprise system had been the frequent economic depressions — beginning in 1819 and recurring with a painful cyclic regularity every twenty years or so. By the time of the Civil War the problems of the destitute unemployed or semiemployed, augmented by the increasing waves of poor immigrants who flooded the labor market, were apparent to many observers.

After the war, with the increasing complexity and centralization of industry, the economic dislocations became more cataclysmic and the human distress more acute. Vast numbers of immigrants arrived at Ellis Island and disappeared, often for an entire generation, in the teeming ghetto slums of New York and the other large cities of the country. And poverty was not only in the cities, among the urban proletariat. There

was also the long-enduring depression of the farmers, which lasted from the 1880s to World War I and reduced to near pauper status large numbers of the independent yeoman class that was supposed to be the backbone of American democracy.

Various attitudes toward the problem of poverty have been voiced in different eras of our history. Perhaps the most basic and traditional attitude toward fortune — good or bad — has been that a man receives in this life what his skill and industry deserve. In a country like America, according to this view, if a man is poor it is probably his fault — the result of laziness, shiftlessness, or some other defect of character. "Failure is more frequently from want of energy," as Daniel Webster put it nearly a century and a half ago, "than from want of capital." Russell Conwell, in his famous sermon "Acres of Diamonds," was certain of the point. "I won't give in but what I sympathize with the poor," he said, "but the number of poor who are to be sympathized with is very small. To sympathize with a man whom God has punished for his sins, thus to help him when God would still continue a just punishment, is to do wrong, no doubt about it."

The Reverend Henry Ward Beecher made the same point even more emphatically. "Looking comprehensively at the matter," he said, ". . . the general truth will stand, that no man in this land suffers from poverty unless it be more than his fault — unless it be his sin." And in 1877, a year of depression and of a particularly bloody strike of railroad workers, Beecher stated his belief that a dollar a day was plenty to live on for a man and his wife "and five or six children" — that is, if the man did not smoke or drink beer. "Is not a dollar a day enough to buy bread with? Water costs nothing; and a man who cannot live on bread is not fit to live. What is the use of a civilization that simply makes men incompetent to live under the conditions which exist?" At the time, Beecher enjoyed an income of about $20,000 a year.

The notion that the poor are poor through their own fault was often expressed in the last thirty years or so of the nineteenth century. But the notion has also been expressed in the 1960s — though perhaps with less conviction — and indeed statements of this sort can be found in all eras of our past.

As the economic potential of America became more and more obvious, however, the idea began to be accepted that poverty was something abnormal and unnatural, and that it was owing to defects in social and economic arrangements, not in the character of individuals. Some of the most eloquent discussions both of the fact and of the needlessness of wide-scale poverty came from leaders of the classes most adversely affected by the economic ups and downs of boom and bust.

The Mechanics' Union of Trade Associations, for example, a Philadelphia federation of trade unions, called as early as 1827 for a "full and fair share" of the wealth its members produced, including "every comfort, convenience, and luxury," to the end that happiness and leisure, instead of "poverty and incessant toil," might be the lot of the most useful members of society. The main premise underlying this demand, it should be remarked, was that "wealth is so easily and abundantly created" in the modern world owing to "the continual development and increase of scientific power." Hence "the day of human emancipation from haggard penury and incessant toil is already dawning"; and a more equitable distribution of wealth would, besides alleviating distress, produce the purchasing power required to keep the wheels of the economy turning and thereby abolish depressions.

The idea that it was the unjust distribution of wealth that was the basic cause of

poverty recurred as a more or less constant theme from the depression of the 1820s to that of the 1930s, and beyond. The monopolists, financiers, factory owners, and capitalists, it was claimed, had usurped the "paradise" (in the words of the anarchist August Spies) that belonged to all mankind, and above all to the workers and farmers who had created it. This conception of poverty as produced by human greed and injustice was shared by such solid, conservative, middle-class spokesmen as President Grover Cleveland. And Henry George, an ardent proponent of free and unrestrained competition, nevertheless asserted that poverty was unnatural and shameful in the midst of the plenty of nineteenth-century liberal society. It could be abolished, he felt sure, by the simple reform of confiscating the unearned increment in the value of land. George's portrait of poverty against the background of plenty and even luxury was as graphic and moving as any penned in the 1930s and the 1960s.

The sociologists and economists of the latter part of the nineteenth century had another important insight that smacks, as does the one mentioned above, of modernity. Men's expectations, it was often asserted, are relative to their own time and place, not to the conditions of another era or country. Thus, according to writers like John R. Commons and Josiah Strong, the average American in 1890 or 1900 expected more as his due than his predecessor even one generation before; and, moreover, the poor in America felt their poverty much more painfully than the poor anywhere else in the world. Herman Melville had given the reason as early as 1854 in describing the unique agony of the American poor, because of "the smarting distinction between their ideal of universal equality and their grindstone experience of the practical misery and infamy of poverty."

Men like Commons and Strong insisted that a person's expectations — the justified, customary, and relevant expectations of his own time and place — determine whether he is poor and is seen as poor by the society in which he lives. "It is not the man who has little, but he who desires more who is poor," the ancient Roman Seneca had observed. But a man is also poor because he is viewed as poor by his own society, sociologists noted eighteen centuries later. "The working people" of the late nineteenth century, historian Robert Bremner wrote, "were unwilling to live out their days in the social steerage," because they no longer saw a need to do so.

Many writers conveyed the anguish of the poverty-stricken Americans of the time. "To live miserable we know not why, to have the dread of hunger, to work sore and gain nothing — this," said Robert Hunter in a paraphrase of some famous lines of Thomas Carlyle, "is the essence of poverty." Workingmen, according to Hunter, dreaded public pauperism and charity and strove to avoid it — through alcoholism, insanity, and suicide, as well as in other ways — and once they became paupers, completely "dependent upon alms," they lived a kind of vegetable existence, thereby avoiding the mental agony and shame of the poor who were not yet "paupers."

Hunter estimated that there were about 10 million persons living in poverty in the early 1900s, about one-eighth of the U.S. population at the time — "underfed, underclothed, and poorly housed" — and that nearly half the families in the country were propertyless. A generation later, during the Great Depression of the 1930s, Franklin D. Roosevelt spoke in similar terms of one-third of a nation in poverty — "ill-fed, ill-clothed, ill-housed." And Ferdinand Lundberg lamented in 1937 that in "the richest nation ever fashioned in the workshop of history . . . most of its people are, paradoxically, very poor; most of them own noth-

ing beyond a few sticks of furniture and the clothes on their backs." He might have added that in many cases the clothes were full of holes.

Only the proportions had changed when Lyndon Johnson spoke in 1964 of the "one-fifth of our people who have not shared in the abundance which has been granted to most of us, and on whom the gates of opportunity have been closed." Johnson's estimate was based on a report of his Council of Economic Advisers, which asserted that about 30 million persons were then living below a minimum standard, which was defined as requiring a family income of at least $3,000 a year. While the top fifth of America's families was receiving over two-fifths of the nation's total annual personal income, the bottom fifth was receiving only one-twentieth, or 5 percent.

Several incisive analyses of U.S. poverty in the twentieth century were published during the "affluent" period after World War II. John Kenneth Galbraith dealt with the economics of poverty as well as of opulence in his study, *The Affluent Society*, which appeared in 1958. Galbraith's main point was that poverty for the first time had become the *exceptional* rather than the *general* condition, and that it was therefore all the more degrading and indecent. He was nevertheless hopeful that the individual as well as the environmental causes of poverty could be in large part overcome through education, psychotherapy, and physiotherapy, and other measures — through "investing in persons," not things.

Galbraith sketched the "profile" of traits, disabilities, and social characteristics shared by the poor, a profile that was filled in by writers such as Michael Harrington, the eloquent spokesman of "the other America" during the 1960s. The poverty class, in this view, had a set of characteristics opposite to those of the new "comfort class." The new poor had only minimal schooling, no marketable skills, family heads who were uemployed or otherwise disabled; were immobile (attached to their home-area "poverty pocket"), suffered from dietary and other physical deficiencies, were preponderantly rural; and included a high percentage of Negroes and other minorities. They also tended to be apathetic, hopeless, and unmotivated.

The new poor lacked what was considered in their society to be the minimum of "the necessary, the decent, the tolerable," which, in Hazel Kyrk's words, comprise the bare essentials of the American standard of living. They also lacked all those attendant qualities and intangibles that were mentioned in the previous section — comfort, beauty, status, creative leisure, and opportunities for personal and mental development.

It was no help, as sociologist Ben H. Bagdikian pointed out, to remind the poor of the 1960s that the Emperor Charlemagne had had no flush toilet or central heating in ninth-century Europe, or that a successful, well-to-do man like John Jacob Astor had been nearly illiterate in the nineteenth century. This was twentieth-century America, and they would be judged and would judge themselves by its standards of comfort and decency.

"An affluent society that is both compassionate and rational would, no doubt, secure to all who need it the minimum income essential for decency and comfort," Galbraith had declared in 1958. Yet Gunnar Myrdal, the Swedish observer of American affairs, still noted in 1963 the apparent lack of concern of the great mass of well-off Americans about domestic poverty at a time when they were contributing billions to the development of foreign "backward" economies. And David Riesman, the next year, observed the paradoxical fact that "slums and levels of misery exist in the United States that European countries with lower

per capita levels of living would not tolerate."

Various reasons were adduced for this alleged callousness; for example, that most Americans had no immediate experience of poverty even as observers, that it was "invisible," or that the poor were a politically weak and insignificant minority that promised no reward or power to would-be reformers or tribunes of the people, as in other eras. Nevertheless, as the social necessity for doing something about the poor became more and more evident during the 1960s to economists and government officials alike, a rising tide of moral concern was expressed. President Johnson, a most astute politician, made the solution of the problem of poverty a major goal of his first full term in office — "because it is right that we should" and "because helping some will increase the prosperity of all."

The grim prospect arose, however, that an irreducible minimum number of families and their descendants would be so indelibly molded by the "culture of poverty" that they would neither desire nor be able to emerge from it. The culture of poverty, according to anthropologist Oscar Lewis, engendered certain values and attitudes that inhibited even the desire to participate in the American middle-class standard of living and to share in the constant upward striving. Nonparticipation in the institutions and benefits of American life led to permanent attitudes of helplessness and fatalism among some of the poor, particularly among minority ethnic groups and the lowest-income whites.

The point had been made in the 1890s by such acute students of poverty as Commons. "The individual, if his lot be in the unpropertied class," he had written, "is destined, as a rule, to remain there." But men like Lewis saw the problem in a different light. "It is much more difficult to eliminate the culture of poverty," he said in *La Vida* (1966), "than to eliminate poverty per se." The culture of poverty was based on small expectations and short-term satisfactions, which, he suggested, might remain long after economic or physical poverty had been conquered and a minimum family income secured. Hope for the future, in his view, rested on the relatively high level of aspiration among the American poor, as compared with the poor in undeveloped countries, and on the fact that perhaps only one-fifth or less of the poor had as yet embraced the culture of poverty as a permanent way of life.

The problems of this relatively small proportion of the population as a whole — perhaps 5 percent or less — nevertheless loomed large as the 1960s wore on, partly because the poor were beginning to find a voice and partly because they were concentrated in the cities, which were experiencing other kinds of distress as well. There were those, indeed, who seemed to feel that the problem of the urban poor was the most pressing one facing the nation, and that if it was not solved, and solved soon, by imaginative and far-reaching programs, not only the cities themselves but also the whole American Democratic venture was doomed if not to failure at least to a long period of anguished striving — in the midst of plenty. [For further discussion of some of the topics treated here, see Chs. 19: RURAL AND URBAN and 20: FAMILY.]

5. ABUNDANCE FOR WHAT?

DISCUSSION OF THE STANDARD OF LIVING of any society involves discussion of its basic values and preferences — even of its prejudices. Those things that a people regard as the bedrock essentials are a matter of group or individual judgment; and the judgments cannot be understood without reference to a concrete material and social situation.

Courtesy, Vaughn Shoemaker, "Chicago's American"

"Oh, no, not higher!"; Shoemaker cartoon, late 1950s

This is all the more so when it comes to the goods and services that are regarded as optional — the prized rewards of "surplus" time, labor, and money. High-fidelity sets, station wagons, and season tickets to the opera or ball game are considered just as essential to good living as steak and potatoes — and vegetables — among certain groups. It is probably true that both categories — the necessary and the optional — "represent social and aesthetic and not biological values," as economist Frank Knight wrote in 1925.

Standards also vary from time to time and place to place. The American standard of living has been both praised and blamed for its stress on comfort, cleanliness, physical health, labor- and time-saving devices, mobility, and mass styling. This American way — with its emphasis on economic growth and a constantly higher standard of living — became the model for the whole Western world in the twentieth century. Until fairly recently, however, the American standard did not include privacy, quiet, beauty, leisure pursuits, individual discrimination, or intellectual culture (save for formal education) among its prime values, either essential or optional. Thus, for example, at mid-twentieth century the value of mobility, as expressed in the automobile, was still regarded as of higher worth than fresh, smog-free air, uncongested thoroughfares, and unfretted tempers and nerves.

The new abundance or affluence, with all its paradoxes, problems, and inequities, raised anew the question of social ends. Economist Robert Theobald viewed 1960 as a year memorable for the beginning of a great debate on "the national purpose," the culmination of a decade-long "groping search" for the right and proper goals of the "new high-production, high-consumption economy." He shared the basic assumption of Galbraith, Myrdal, and other economists that most of the technical problems of production — man's age-old quest to produce enough for all men to live on — had been solved, at least theoretically, and that the traditional principles for dealing with economic problems had therefore been rendered obsolete. Habits of thought and even some of the virtues that were necessary or salutary in the old scarcity economies were anachronistic or even harmful, Theobald asserted, in an age of abundance.

One of the instances of this new way of thinking was its handling of the problems of poverty and "structural" unemployment (unemployment resulting from automation). In traditional capitalist economics it has been regarded as right and proper for a man to be paid the market value for his labor, skills, and services. But some of the new economists advocated paying people for "nonproductive" activities that could not be valued in cash terms. "It is possible," said Theobald, "that society should subsidize the student, the artist, the dreamer, the visionary, and perhaps even the writ-

er," and grant paid "sabbatical years" for cultural development to people in the business and professional world.

All did not accept this radical departure. Lyndon Johnson, in his call for a war against poverty, was still thinking in terms of "new jobs" as providing the "new exits from poverty." This was what individual dignity and self-respect had always meant in America — the development and use of one's faculties in socially approved, productive work. And eminent contemporary economists of various schools continued to view new jobs and increased purchasing power as the main solution for poverty.

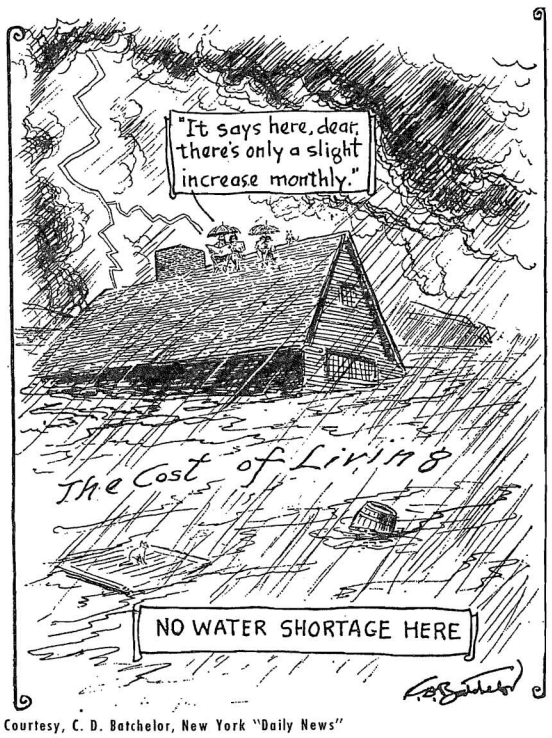
However, writers like W. H. Ferry were beginning to suggest that the only solution of the paradoxical situation of poverty and unemployment in a land of plenty was to pay people *not to work.* Like Galbraith, Ferry contended that the production of material goods was not to be considered the sole or highest end of human striving, and that people and their development as human beings must be the main "resources" and prime objects of "investment" in an affluent society. Thus automation and the resulting structural unemployment — which might well be permanent and would affect increasing numbers of workers — could be viewed as a social and ethical opportunity instead of a disaster.

"We shall have to find means, public or private, of paying people to do no work," Ferry declared in 1962. Like Theobald, he recommended that industry and government provide people with an abundance-level income for full-time intellectual and artistic activities. Such leisure-type "work," in his view, contributes as much to the common good as materially productive activities; indeed, even more, if the ultimate goals of human life and the human community are taken into consideration. The world-famous American standard of living would be thus directed to serve the goal of a higher standard of life itself — of the good life. "In an abundant society," said Ferry, "the problem is not an economic one of keeping the machine running regardless of what it puts out, but a political one of achieving the common good."

It is certainly true that if the problem of the maldistribution of wealth and income were solved, and if America reached its material goal of providing the "necessaries and comforts" of life for all, the philosophical and spiritual problems raised by Theobald and others would become more urgent — the questions of ultimate, or penultimate, goals and satisfactions. However, according to Theobald, the dynamic growth in the gross national product in the years from 1945 to 1960 was attended by shoddy workmanship, needless waste and repetition, boredom both with the work process and freetime amusements, and a lack of commitment to any directing value or purpose. The attitudes that contribute to a rise in the GNP, he said, "are not those which encourage a meaningful life for the individual or a valid sense of community."

Knight, an economist of a somewhat older school, had made similar observations on "the ethics of competition" as long ago as 1923. "There is a fairly established consensus," he observed, "that happiness depends more on spiritual resourcefulness and a joyous appreciation of the costless things of life, especially affection for one's fellow creatures, than it does on material satisfaction." Progress, he said, is measured by the gratification of aesthetic and spiritual, not "biologically utilitarian" needs, by qualitative, not quantitative standards.

Against this there sounded the counternote of Knight's contemporary, Francis Hackett, who affirmed a hedonistic materialism that continued to be affirmed in American society for the next half century. "I believe in all the proceeds of a healthy materialism," Hackett declared in 1920,



Courtesy, C. D. Batchelor, New York "Daily News"

"good cooking, dry houses, dry feet, sewers, drain pipes, hot water, baths, electric lights, new ideas, fast horses, swift conversation, theaters, operas, orchestras, bands — I believe in them all for everybody. The man who dies without knowing these things may be as exquisite as a saint, and as rich as a poet; but it is in spite of, not because of, his deprivation."

Hackett wrote at a time when the conquest of scarcity was a relatively novel idea, when such things really held vital joys for those who had long desired them and for whom they were new. At any rate, Riesman suggested in 1957 that once people grow used to an abundance level of living, they tend "to lose zest for bounteous spending on consumer goods" and adopt a discriminatively "ascetic" mode of life, concentrating on qualitative satisfactions and on the experience of treasured values. Thus as more individuals and groups advance to this stage of goods-surfeit, it may be possible for them to achieve a new kind of freedom, as Theobald saw it — "the possibility to make meaningful choices." This is the freedom to say yes or no to things and activities, on the basis of a personally affirmed set of values, even against the temper of the times, or the consensus of one's suburban neighborhood, or the "decisions" of computers.

There are striking paradoxes in such a concept of freedom in the modern age. For example, it involves the assumption that individuals, or relatively small groups, can and will refuse to conform to the standardized standard of living of a mass-consumption society, and one, moreover, in which the central government plays an increasingly directive role. The dominant trend in twentieth-century American society has been toward more uniformity and standardization, not less.

But perhaps the entrance of Americans into a new era of abundance — for all, or nearly all — means a whole new social situation and disposition. Perhaps where there is an abundance of necessities and conveniences and, most of all, of free time to pursue culture of all kinds, men will feel free to discriminate in matters of consumption and modes of life. Perhaps the acceptance of limits in needs and satisfactions will become more possible in a generation that has grown up with abundance. Just as the "new rich" individuals and classes of the past were able, in many cases, to develop the desire for quality rather than quantity, for "better" rather than "more," the newly rich economies and peoples of the twentieth century may in time develop a new kind of taste and desire.

"The simplicity of ignorance of need and the simplicity of indifference to purely external standards are two very different things," social worker Mary K. Simkhovitch observed of the modes of living of the city workers of 1917. "One is at the beginning and the other at the end of a long chain of experiences. . . . We learn to dis-

card rather than to do without."

Thus the possibility is being held out to the producers (and nonproducers) and consumers of twenty-first century America that abundance, far from stifling individual freedom of choice, will, on the contrary, strengthen it and enrich its content. It is something to look forward to and to hope for in the coming era. [For discussion from another point of view of many of the matters treated in this chapter, see Ch. 9: EQUALITY.]