

Lucinda Krieger

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The Attainability of Upward Mobility in America

America is commonly perceived as the symbolic ideal country of prosperity and equality. This is the reason why many immigrate to America, in the hopes to become successful. Although many would like to believe that America is a land of equal opportunity, that is not entirely true. Instead, there are social and economic boundaries that keep individuals confined to a predetermined destiny. The Director of Queens College Labor Resource Center and author of "Class in America—2012," Gregory Mantsios, introduces the idea that class in America can affect a person's life more than they would like to think. Mantsios believes that the socioeconomic background, or class, that a person is born into predicts their chances and degrees of success and survival. Contributing to this idea, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Studs Terkel published his oral history entitled, "C.P. Ellis". Terkel tells the story of a former Ku Klux Klan member named C.P. Ellis. Ellis shares how he grew up in the Great Depression severely impoverished, which led him to join the Klan. This oral history lends a perspective on how Ellis' journey of falling out of the Klan and growing economically and socially was a product of his class. The Pulitzer Prize finalist and author of "Life Along the 100th Meridian," Inara Verzemnieks, introduces the Budd family from Rushville, Nebraska. Verzemnieks' article highlights the barriers that many in the Midwest face due to the lack of upward mobility. While in today's society differences in class can be seen through any media outlet, many overlook the details of how these differences are manifested. **Societies are built on the framework of a social hierarchy, and those at the top use their power to restrain those below and limit their ability to attain upward mobility. As a result, those at the bottom face barriers that confine**

their destiny, and therefore cannot attain upward mobility as easily. Because destiny is not predetermined, an individual's ability to overcome this social hierarchy resides in their determination and fortune.

Families in America who suffer from economic or social distress fall victim to staying trapped in the cyclical nature of poverty. As a result, it becomes increasingly difficult to manifest their own destiny. In his essay, Mantsios introduces myths and realities about America's class system. Mantsios notices that American media have a tendency to exploit people's desire for wealth, portraying it as easy to move from "rags to riches." The truth is that upward class mobility in America is extremely rare and the glass barrier to the upper class is hardening. Mantsios mentions the research of David Leonhardt, who states that fewer than one in five men surpass the economic status of their fathers. Mantsios explains, "the bottom line is that very affluent families transmit their advantages to the next generation and poor families stay trapped" (392). Mantsios conveys the idea that those who are poor are more vulnerable to the cyclical nature of poverty. When impoverished members of society do not have the resources necessary to get out of poverty, such as financial capital, education, or connections, they are trapped in the cycle of destitution. And those who are rich are given an advantage that is passed on to the next generation. Terkel provides an example of an individual who is seemingly stuck in the cycle of poverty. He interviews ex-Klansmen C. P. Ellis about his experiences transitioning from Klan member to public servant. Ellis refers to growing up during the Great Depression under the wing of his father, who barely survived from paycheck to paycheck. Ellis' father never seemed happy and was in a constant state of stress, which resulted in him finding comfort in alcohol. In the hopes of reaching the happiness that his father was not able to experience, Ellis married and had children. Describing his current and previous work experience, Ellis elaborates, "All my life, I

had work, never a day without work, worked all the overtime I could get and still couldn't survive financially. I began to say there's something wrong with this country. I worked my butt off and just never seemed to break even" (201- 202). Similar to his father, Ellis works a blue-collar job and faces similar struggles that bind him to poverty. Ellis and his family are in a constant state of instability. While those with higher economic and social presence are thriving, he is falling further into destitution. Although the Ellis family can be an example that poor families stay trapped in the cyclical nature of poverty, they are also an example that upward mobility is possible through education and determination. It may seem that Ellis' predetermined fate is to follow his father into destitution, but he is able to grow economically and personally. Having previously attained only an eighth-grade education, Ellis later goes on to receive a High School education and become a public servant. Although it wasn't a "rags to riches" story, Ellis forged his own path by attaining a higher education and connections to his community. A person who lives by a lower income will not have the same opportunity and chances of becoming wealthy. Yet, another person in the other spectrum, who is born into a higher class, will most likely stay wealthy. When the cycle is not broken, this leads to an endless cycle of generations staying within one economic class.

The selfish pursuit of opulence in the upper class leads to a life of restriction and constraint for the lower class. As wealth becomes the only goal through the narrative of the upper class, this leaves those below them to suffer through tribulation. More affluent members of society maintain the barriers between class and limit the possibility of upward mobility. Mantsios refers to two types of wealth, one that comes from salaries and the other from accumulated wealth. Separating these forms of income is opportunity. The financial system limits opportunities for wealth to the upper class, leaving lower class individuals to succumb to

poverty. Mantsios reveals, “The privileges that accrue to the wealthy are tied to the worlds of capital and finance – worlds whose good fortune are often misfortune for the rest of the population” (393). The wealthy manipulate the economic system according to their will, allowing themselves to get richer and leaving the poor to get poorer. This ideology separates individuals, making it increasingly difficult for the poor to grow beyond their socioeconomic status. As an example, Verzemnieks tells the story of the Budd family who reside on the 100th meridian in the town of Rushville, Nebraska. Rushville is described as an “unfit residence for any but nomad population,” this of course lends to its downsides. Due to the harsh conditions of Rushville land the Budd’s barn and fences are withering away and the family’s debt is ever present. The frugality that his family is forced to live in reminds Budd of his paternal grandmother from Czechoslovakia, who immigrated to America and viewed indoor plumbing and electricity as luxuries. Her thriftiness stunned Budd as she kept her life savings in mason jars thoughtfully scattered along her property. The Budd family’s wealth comes from “249 Black Angus calves [taken] to auction, an autumn ritual that determines most of the money we see all year [...] each missing steer or heifer knocking about a thousand hypothetical dollars from this year’s paycheck” (2). The Budd family accrues their wealth from their livestock, property, and their expertise in ranching. Unlike the rich, the Budd’s aren’t able to transform their assets into a higher education and opportunities. As a result, the Budd’s destiny is tied to their property and specialty in ranching. Thus, making it increasingly difficult to diversify their assets into opportunity and attain upward mobility.

Labels and perceptions based on socioeconomic status dehumanize and undermine the power of an individual’s potential. In the beginning of his essay, Mantsios observes that many feel uncomfortable and avoid using their class to define who they are. He elaborates,

“Americans, in general, don’t like to talk about class. [...] We don’t speak about class privileges, or class oppression, or the class nature of society” (378). The truth of the matter is that social status does not define who we are; our goals, character, and beliefs do. Mantsios’ need to create a label for every individual lends to a faceless society. The aspects of an individual’s life define them: upbringing, family, race, heritage, and gender. Maybe some of those things shape an individual, maybe all of them do, or maybe none of them do. The problem doesn’t come from how an individual defines themselves. The problem is that other people are so fast to use these labels to make judgments: often wrong ones. Due to Ellis’ determination to create change in the community, he ran for the school board. His competitor’s resources seemed daunting as he spent thousands of dollars on his campaign, whereas Ellis spent eighty-five dollars. Ellis was invited to the Democratic women’s social hour as a candidate to discuss his proposals. Ellis was worried that he was wearing an aged suit, the only one he owned, and after some time, Ellis began to notice the interactions between himself and those of higher economic and social status seemed a bit standoffish. He recalls, “I know I’m a low-income person. I know I’m not wealthy. [...] Yet they had to smile and make sure they were glad to see me” (209). As his competitor openly introduced his presence as a rich male, Ellis immediately felt intimidated as a low-income individual. To add to his intimidation, those who attended the Democratic women’s social hour labeled Ellis as an unfit candidate due to his appearance and investment into his campaign. Ellis is an example that a person’s socioeconomic status has an influence on how others perceive him. In contrast, the Budd family resides on an open swath of land that has few homes or other buildings, and not very many people. Budd describes the culture surrounding his home to be based on the value of an individual rather than social status. He recounts, “We don’t make much distinction between the land and the people who live on it around here” (2).

Due to his lack of experience with diversity Budd's perspective on labels are limited. In Rushville those in surrounding ranches are also most likely white and from similar economic backgrounds. Rather than focusing on what makes people different from each other, he embraces the belief that class is irrelevant. It is easier to value individuality in settings where people are viewed as more equal. That's why Budd doesn't worry much about class, but Ellis does. Even though Ellis and Budd share opposing experiences, they are an example that class is a label. Although class may be a part of what shapes an individual, the perception that the label is a person's identity ultimately hinders individual progress and opportunities for upward mobility.

Whether people admit it or not, the issue of categorizing people according to their socioeconomic class is a reality at the heart of American society and should be addressed. The desire to attain upward mobility derives from the American Dream. Most associate the American Dream with the fantasy of owning a house with a white picket fence accommodated by the perfect family and job. Through home ownership and entrepreneurship, immigrants have helped to grow the U.S. economy to where it is today. An article by Elsa Núñez entitled, "Dreamers' Are at the Heart of the American Dream" confirmed my thoughts. This article addresses the DREAM Act that was passed under Barack Obama's presidency. The ideal of the American Dream has inspired "more than 740,000 Dreamers that have been given Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status." This allows them to receive a renewable two-year period of deferred action from deportation and eligibility for a work permit. Dreamers of this country are granted scholarships, are attending college, and certainly making a difference. This difference is possible through the drive of the American Dream otherwise known as "hard work and determination" to prove others wrong. Those who pursue the American Dream can never truly be satisfied, because the Dream entails always striving for more than what we already have. The

ideal of the American Dream is instilled into the “determined” to motivate, not to promise. While many argue that the American Dream is on its deathbed, I believe that in all actuality, it is the work ethic of the American people that is ailing.

Works Cited

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