

The American Upper Class

G. William Domhoff

INTRODUCTION

If there is an American upper class, it must exist not merely as a collection of families who feel comfortable with each other and tend to exclude outsiders from their social activities. It must exist as a set of interrelated social institutions. That is, there must be patterned ways of organizing the lives of its members from infancy to old age, and there must be mechanisms for socializing both the younger generation and new adult members who have risen from lower social levels. If the class is a reality, the names and faces may change somewhat over the years, but the social institutions that underlie the upper class must persist with remarkably little change over several generations. . . .

TRAINING THE YOUNG

From infancy through young adulthood, members of the upper class receive a distinctive education. This education begins early in life in preschools that frequently are attached to a neighborhood church of high social status. Schooling continues during the elementary years at a local private school called a day school. The adolescent years may see the student remain at day school, but there is a strong chance that at least one or two years will be spent away from home at a boarding school in a quiet rural setting. Higher education will be obtained at one of a small number of heavily endowed private universities. Harvard, Yale,

Princeton, and Stanford head the list, followed by smaller Ivy League schools in the East and a handful of other small private schools in other parts of the country. Although some upper-class children may attend public high school if they live in a secluded suburban setting, or go to a state university if there is one of great esteem and tradition in their home state, the system of formal schooling is so insulated that many upper-class students never see the inside of a public school in all their years of education.

This separate educational system is important evidence for the distinctiveness of the mentality and lifestyle that exists within the upper class, for schools play a large role in transmitting the class structure to their students. Surveying and summarizing a great many studies on schools in general, sociologist Randall Collins concludes: "Schools primarily teach vocabulary and inflection, styles of dress, aesthetic tastes, values and manners."¹

The training of upper-class children is not restricted to the formal school setting, however. Special classes and even tutors are a regular part of their extracurricular education. This informal education usually begins with dancing classes in the elementary years, which are seen as more important for learning proper manners and the social graces than for learning to dance. Tutoring in a foreign language may begin in the elementary years, and there are often lessons in horseback riding and music as well. The teen years find the children of the upper class in summer camps or on special travel tours, broadening their perspectives and polishing their social skills.

The linchpins in the upper-class educational system are the dozens of boarding schools that

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be a quick fix, like welfare, but in the long run would create a society that offers better opportunities to a more diverse population.

were developed in the last half of the nineteenth and the early part of the twentieth centuries, with the rise of a nationwide upper class whose members desired to insulate themselves from an inner city that was becoming populated by lower-class immigrants. Baltzell concludes that these schools became "surrogate families" that played a major role "in creating an upper-class subculture on almost a national scale in America."² The role of boarding schools in providing connections to other upper-class social institutions is also important. As one informant explained to Ostrander in her interview study of upper-class women: "Where I went to boarding school, there were girls from all over the country, so I know people from all over. It's helpful when you move to a new city and want to get invited into the local social clubs."³

Consciously molded after their older and more austere British counterparts, it is within these several hundred schools that a unique style of life is inculcated through such traditions as the initiatory hazing of beginning students, the wearing of school blazers or ties, compulsory attendance at chapel services, and participation in esoteric sports such as lacrosse, squash, and crew. Even a different language is adopted to distinguish these schools from public schools. The principal is a headmaster or rector, the teachers are sometimes called masters, and the students are in forms, not grades. Great emphasis is placed upon the building of "character." The role of the school in preparing the future leaders of America is emphasized through the speeches of the headmaster and the frequent mention of successful alumni.* . . .

* The Episcopal priest who served as headmaster at Choate from 1908 to 1947 often exhorted his students: "Ask not what your school can do for you, but what you can do for your school." This line was adapted slightly by one of this students, John F. Kennedy, who in 1961 as president of the United States asked his fellow citizens in a stirring patriotic speech: "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country."

Whatever university upper-class students attend, they tend to socialize together as members of a small number of fraternities, sororities, eating clubs, and secret societies, perpetuating to some extent the separate existence of a day or boarding school. As sociologist C. Wright Mills explained, it is not merely a matter of going to a Harvard or a Yale but to the right Harvard or Yale.

That is why in the upper social classes, it does not by itself mean much merely to have a degree from an Ivy League college. That is assumed: the point is not Harvard, but which Harvard? By Harvard, one means Porcellian, Fly, or A.D.: by Yale, one means Zeta Psi or Fence or Delta Kappa Epsilon: by Princeton, Cottage, Tifer, Cap and Gown or Ivy.⁴

From kindergarten through college, then, schooling is very different for members of the upper class from what it is for most Americans, and it teaches them to be distinctive in many ways. In a country where education is highly valued and the overwhelming majority attend public schools, less than one student in a hundred is part of this private system that primarily benefits members of the upper class and provides one of the foundations for the old-boy and old-girl networks that will be with them throughout their lives.

SOCIAL CLUBS

Just as private schools are a pervasive feature in the lives of upper-class children, so, too, are private social clubs a major point of orientation in the lives of upper-class adults. These clubs also play a role in differentiating members of the upper class from other members of society. According to Baltzell, "the club serves to place the adult members of society and their families within the social hierarchy." He quotes with approval the suggestion by historian Crane Brinton that the club "may perhaps be regarded as taking the place of those extensions of the family, such as the clan and the brotherhood, which have disappeared from advanced societies."⁵ Conclusions similar to Baltzell's resulted from an interview study in Kansas City: "Ultimately, say

upper-class Kansas Citians, social standing in their world reduces to one issue: Where does an individual or family rank on the scale of private club memberships and informal cliques."⁶

The clubs of the upper class are many and varied, ranging from family-oriented country clubs and downtown men's and women's clubs to highly specialized clubs for yachtsmen, sportsmen, gardening enthusiasts, and fox hunters. Many families have memberships in several different types of clubs, but the days when most of the men by themselves were in a half dozen or more clubs faded before World War II. Downtown men's clubs originally were places for having lunch and dinner, and occasionally for attending an evening performance or a weekend party. But as upper-class families deserted the city for large suburban estates, a new kind of club, the country club, gradually took over some of these functions. The downtown club became almost entirely a luncheon club, a site to hold meetings, or a place to relax on a free afternoon. The country club, by contrast, became a haven for all members of the family. It offered social and sporting activities ranging from dances, parties, and banquets to golf, swimming, and tennis. Special group dinners were often arranged for all members on Thursday night, the traditional maid's night off across the United States. . . .

Initiation fees, annual dues, and expenses vary from a few thousand dollars in downtown clubs to tens of thousands of dollars in some country clubs, but money is not the primary barrier in gaining membership to a club. Each club has a very rigorous screening process before accepting new members. Most require nomination by one or more active members, letters of recommendation from three to six members, and interviews with at least some members of the membership committee. Names of prospective members are sometimes posted in the clubhouse, so all members have an opportunity to make their feelings known to the membership committee. Negative votes by two or three members of what is typically a 10-to-20 person committee often are enough to deny admission to the candidate.

The carefulness with which new members are selected extends to a guarding of club membership lists, which are usually available only to club members. Older membership lists are sometimes given to libraries by members or their surviving spouses, and some members will give lists to individual researchers, but for most clubs there are no membership lists in the public domain. Our request to 15 clubs in 1981 for membership lists for research purposes was refused by 12 of the clubs and left unanswered by the other three.

Not every club member is an enthusiastic participant in the life of the club. Some belong out of tradition or a feeling of social necessity. One woman told Ostrander the following about her country club: "We don't feel we should withdraw our support even though we don't go much." Others mentioned a feeling of social pressure: "I've only been to [the club] once this year. I'm really a loner, but I feel I have to go and be pleasant even though I don't want to." Another volunteered: "I think half the members go because they like it and half because they think it's a social necessity."⁷

People of the upper class often belong to clubs in several cities, creating a nationwide pattern of overlapping memberships. These overlaps provide further evidence for the social cohesion within the upper class. An indication of the nature and extent of this overlapping is revealed by our study of membership lists for 20 clubs in several major cities across the country, including the Links in New York, the Century Association in New York, the Duquesne in Pittsburgh, the Chicago in Chicago, the Pacific Union in San Francisco, and the California in Los Angeles. Using a clustering technique based on Boolean algebra, the study revealed there was sufficient overlap among 18 of the 20 clubs to form three regional groupings and a fourth group that provided a bridge between the two largest regional groups. The several dozen men who were in three or more of the clubs were especially important in creating the overall pattern. At the same time, the fact that these clubs often have from 1,000 to 2,000 members makes the percentage of overlap within this small number of clubs relatively small,

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ranging from a high of 20 to 30 percent between clubs in the same city to as low as 1 or 2 percent in clubs at opposite ends of the country.⁸

One of the most central clubs in this network, the Bohemian Club of San Francisco, is also the most unusual and widely known club of the upper class. Its annual two-week encampment in its 2,700-acre Bohemian Grove 75 miles north of San Francisco brings together the social elite, celebrities, and government officials for relaxation and entertainment. A description of this gathering provides the best possible insight into the role of clubs in uniting the upper class.⁹

The huge forest retreat called the Bohemian Grove was purchased by the club in the 1890s. Bohemians and their guests number anywhere from 1,500 to 2,000 for the three weekends in the encampment, which is always held during the last two weeks in July, when it almost never rains in northern California. However, there may be as few as 400 men in residence in the middle of the week, for most return to their homes and jobs after the weekends. During their stay the campers are treated to plays, symphonies, concerts, lectures, and political commentaries by entertainers, musicians, scholars, and government officials. They also trapshoot, canoe, swim, drop by the Grove art gallery, and take guided tours into the outer fringe of the mountain forest. But a stay at the Bohemian Grove is mostly a time for relaxation and drinking in the modest lodges, bunkhouses, and even teepees that fit unobtrusively into the landscape along the two or three macadam roads that join the few "developed" acres within the Grove. It is like a summer camp for the power elite and their entertainers.

The men gather in little camps of about 10 to 30 members during their stay. Each of the approximately 120 camps has its own pet name, such as Sons of Toil, Cave Man, Mandalay, Toyland, Owl's Nest, Hill Billies, and Parsonage. A group of men from Los Angeles named their camp Lost Angels, and the men in the Bohemian chorus call their camp Aviary. Some camps are noted for special drinks, brunches, or luncheons, to which they invite members from other camps. The camps are a fraternity system within the larger fraternity.

There are many traditional events during the encampment, including plays called the High Jinx and the Low Jinx. But the most memorable event, celebrated every consecutive year since 1880, is the opening ceremony, called the Cremation of Care. This ceremony takes place at the base of a 40-foot Owl Shrine constructed out of poured concrete and made even more resplendent by the mottled forest mosses that cover much of it. The Owl Shrine is only one of many owl symbols and insignias to be found in the Grove and the downtown clubhouse, for the owl was adopted early in the club's history as its mascot or totem animal.

The opening ceremony is called the Cremation of Care because it involves the burning of an effigy named Dull Care, who symbolizes the burdens and responsibilities that these busy Bohemians now wish to shed temporarily. More than 60 Bohemians take part in the ceremony as priests, acolytes, torch bearers, brazier bearers, boatmen, and woodland voices. After many flowery speeches and a long conversation with Dull Care, the high priest lights the fire with the flame from the Lamp of Fellowship, located on the "Altar of Bohemia" at the base of the shrine. The ceremony, which has the same initiatory functions as those of any fraternal or tribal group, ends with fireworks, shooting, and the playing of "There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight." The attempt to create a sense of cohesion and solidarity among the assembled is complete.

As the case of the Bohemian Grove and its symbolic ceremonies rather dramatically illustrate, there seems to be a great deal of truth to the earlier-cited suggestion by Crane Brinton that clubs may have the function within the upper class that the clan or brotherhood has in tribal societies. With their restrictive membership policies, initiatory rituals, private ceremonials, and great emphasis on tradition, clubs carry on the heritage of primitive secret societies. They create within their members an attitude of prideful exclusiveness that contributes greatly to an in-group feeling and a sense of fraternity within the upper class. . . .

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY CONTINUITY

The institution of marriage is as important in the upper class as it is in any level of American society, and it does not differ greatly from other levels in its patterns and rituals. Only the exclusive site of the occasion and the lavishness of the reception distinguish upper-class marriages.

The prevailing wisdom within the upper class is that children marry someone of their own social class. The women interviewed by Ostrander, for example, felt that marriage was difficult enough without differences in "interests" and "background," which seemed to be the code words for class in discussions of marriage. Marriages outside the class were seen as likely to end in divorce.¹⁰ . . .

The general picture for social class and marriage in the United States is suggested in a statistical study of neighborhoods and marriage patterns in the San Francisco area. Its results are very similar to the Philadelphia study using the *Social Register*. Of 80 grooms randomly selected from the highest-level neighborhoods, court records showed that 51 percent married brides of a comparable level. The rest married women from middle-level neighborhoods; only one or two married women from lower-level residential areas. Conversely, 63 percent of 81 grooms from the lowest-level neighborhoods married women from comparable areas, with under 3 percent having brides from even the lower end of the group of top neighborhoods. Completing the picture, most of the 82 men from middle-level areas married women from the same types of neighborhoods, but about 10 percent married into higher-level neighborhoods. Patterns of intermarriage, then, suggest both stability and some upward mobility through marriage into the upper class.¹¹ . . .

It seems likely, then, that the American upper class is a mixture of old and new members. There is both continuity and social mobility, with the newer members being assimilated into the lifestyle of the class through participation in the schools, clubs, and other social institutions described in this chapter. There may be some ten-

sions between those newly arrived and those of established status, as novelists and journalists love to point out, but what they have in common soon outweighs their differences. This point is well demonstrated in the social affiliations and attitudes of highly successful Jewish businessmen who become part of the upper class as they rise in the corporate community.¹²

THE PREOCCUPATIONS OF THE UPPER CLASS

Members of the upper class do not spend all their time in social activities. Contrary to stereotypes, most members of the upper class are and have been hardworking people, even at the richest levels. In a study of the 90 richest men for 1950, for example, Mills found that only 26 percent were men of leisure.¹³

By far the most frequent preoccupation of men of the upper class is business and finance. This point is most clearly demonstrated through studying the occupations of boarding school alumni. A classification of the occupations of a sample of the graduates of four private schools—Saint Mark's, Groton, Hotchkiss, and Andover—for the years 1906 and 1926 showed that the most frequent occupation for all but the Andover graduates was some facet of finance and banking. Others became presidents of medium-size businesses or practiced corporation law with a large firm. Only a small handful went to work as executives for major national corporations. Andover, with a more open curriculum and a far greater number of scholarship students at the time, produced many more people who ended up in middle management, particularly in 1926, when 44 percent of the graduates were in such positions. The second area of concentration for the Andover alumni was as owners or presidents of medium-size businesses. Only 8 percent went into banking and finance, and only 4 percent into law.¹⁴ . . .

Although finance, business, and law are the most typical occupations of upper-class males, there is no absence of physicians, architects, museum

officials, and other fact was demonstrated by Baltzell's study *Who's Who in Philadelphia* and *Who's Who for the Philadelphia Register*, as well as for officials. These figures included lawyers and though they were bankers, clear Philadelphia at

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officials, and other professional occupations. This fact was demonstrated most systematically in Baltzell's study of the Philadelphians listed in *Who's Who in America* for 1940; 39 percent of the Philadelphian architects and physicians listed in *Who's Who* for that year were also listed in the *Social Register*, as were 35 percent of the museum officials. These figures are close to the 51 percent for lawyers and the 42 percent for businessmen, although they are far below the 75 percent for bankers, clearly the most elite profession in Philadelphia at that time.¹⁵

Less systematic studies also suggest this wide range of professional occupations. Our classification of the occupations listed by Saint Paul's alumni in the spring 1965 issue of the alumni journal found 7 physicians, 7 academic scholars, and 4 authors in addition to the 20 financiers and 16 businessmen, which were once again the most frequent occupations. The remainder of the sample was divided among small numbers of ministers (5), government officials (4), private school teachers (4), military officers (2), architects (2), playwrights (1), and lawyers (1). Although this study can be considered no more than a set of examples, it is consistent with the findings of Baltzell on Philadelphia 25 years earlier.

The feminine half of the upper class has different preoccupations than those of men. Our study of a large sample of the upper-class women included in *Who's Who in American Women* for 1965 showed the most frequent activity of upper-class women to be that of civic worker or volunteer, which includes a wide range of welfare, cultural, and civic activities. Second on the list was author or artist followed by a career in journalism, where upper-class women are involved in both the management and writing of newspapers and magazines. Finally, women of the upper class were found in academic positions as teachers, administrators, and trustees at leading boarding schools and colleges for women.¹⁶

The most informative and intimate look at the preoccupations of the feminine half of the upper class is provided in Ostrander's interview study. It

revealed the women to be people of both power and subservience, playing decision-making roles in numerous cultural and civic organizations, but also accepting traditional roles at home vis-à-vis their husbands and children. By asking the women to describe a typical day and to explain which activities were most important to them, Ostrander found that the role of community volunteer is a central preoccupation of upper-class women, having significance as a family tradition and as an opportunity to fulfill an obligation to the community. One elderly woman involved for several decades in both the arts and human services explained: "If you're privileged, you have a certain responsibility. This was part of my upbringing; it's a tradition, a pattern of life that my brothers and sisters do too."¹⁷ . . .

Despite this emphasis on volunteer work, the women placed high value on family life. They arranged their schedules to be home when children came home from school (30 of the 38 had three or more children), and they emphasized that their primary concern was to provide a good home for their husbands. Several of them wanted to have greater decision-making power over their inherited wealth, but almost all of them wanted to be in the traditional roles of wife and mother, at least until their children were grown. . . .

Numerous anecdotal examples also show that some members of the upper class even lead lives of failure, despite all the opportunities available to them. Although members of the upper class are trained for leadership and given every opportunity to develop feelings of self-confidence, there are some who fail in school, become involved with drugs and alcohol, or become mentally disturbed. Once again, however, this cannot be seen as evidence for a lack of cohesion in the upper class, for there are bound to be individual failures of this nature in any group.

Deviants and failures do exist within the upper class, then, but it seems likely that a majority of its male members are at work in business, finance, and corporate law, and that most of the female members are equally busy as civic volunteers and homemakers. Members of both sexes

have plenty of time for clubs, vacations, and party going, but their major preoccupations are in the world of work. . . .

CONCLUSION

The evidence [here] suggests that there is an interacting and intermarrying upper social stratum or social elite in America that is distinctive enough in its institutions, source and amount of income, and lifestyle to be called an "upper class." This upper class makes up about 0.5 percent of the population, a rough estimate that is based upon the number of students attending independent private schools, the number of listings in past *Social Registers* for several cities, and detailed interview studies in Kansas City and Boston.¹⁸

Not everyone in this nationwide upper class knows everyone else, but everybody knows somebody who knows someone in other areas of the country thanks to a common school experience, a summer at the same resort, or membership in the same social club. With the social institutions described in this [article] as the undergirding, the upper class at any given historical moment consists of a complex network of overlapping social circles that are knit together by the members they have in common and by the numerous signs of equal social status that emerge from a similar lifestyle. Viewed from the standpoint of social psychology, the upper class is made up of innumerable face-to-face small groups that are constantly changing in their composition as people move from one social setting to another.

Research work in both sociology and social psychology demonstrates that constant interaction in small-group settings leads to the social cohesion that is considered to be an important dimension of a social class.¹⁹ This social cohesion does not in and of itself demonstrate that members of the upper class are able to agree among themselves on general issues of economic and governmental policy. But it is important to stress that social cohesion is one of the factors that makes it possible for policy coordination to

develop. Indeed, research in social psychology demonstrates that members of socially cohesive groups are eager to reach agreement on issues of common concern to them. They are more receptive to what other members are saying, more likely to trust each other, and more willing to compromise, which are no small matters in any collection of human beings trying to get something accomplished.²⁰

The more extravagant social activities of the upper class—the debutante balls, the expensive parties, the jet-setting to spas and vacation spots all over the world, the involvement with exotic entertainers—are often viewed by pluralists and Marxists alike as superfluous trivialities best left to society page writers. However, there is reason to believe that these activities play a role both in solidifying the upper class and in maintaining the class structure. Within the class, these occasions provide an opportunity for members to show each other that they are similar to each other and superior to the average citizen. As political scientist Gabriel Almond suggested in his 1941 study of the New York upper class and its involvement in city politics: "The elaborate private life of the plutocracy serves in considerable measure to separate them out in their own consciousness as a superior, more refined element."²¹ Then, too, the values upon which the class system is based are conveyed to the rest of the population in this conspicuous consumption. Such activities make clear that there is a gulf between members of the upper class and ordinary citizens, reminding everyone of the hierarchical nature of the society. Social extravaganzas bring home to everyone that there are great rewards for success, helping to stir up the personal envy that can be a goad to competitive striving.

In sociological terms, the upper class comes to serve as a "reference group." Sociologist Harold Hodges, in a discussion of his findings concerning social classes in the suburban areas south of San Francisco, expresses the power of the upper class as a reference group in the following way: "Numerically insignificant—less than one in every 500 Peninsula families is listed in the pages of the

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Social Register—the upper class is nonetheless highly influential as a 'reference group': a membership to which many aspire and which infinitely more consciously or unconsciously imitate."²²

Exhibiting high social status, in other words, is a way of exercising power. It is a form of power rooted in fascination and enchantment. It operates by creating respect, envy, and deference in others. Considered less important than force or economic power by social scientists who regard themselves as tough-minded and realistic, its role as a method of control in modern society goes relatively unnoticed despite the fact that power was originally in the domain of the sacred and the magical.²³

Whatever the importance that is attached to prestige and social status as mechanisms of power, this [reading] has demonstrated the power of the upper class through the disproportionate amount of wealth and income that its members possess. As [has been] argued [elsewhere] . . . such disparities are evidence for class power if it is assumed that wealth and income are highly valued in American society. However, the case for the hypothesis that the American upper class is a ruling class will not rest solely on reference group power and inequalities in the wealth and income distributions.

NOTES

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From: Diane Dujon
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 (Boston: South End I

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