

Social Changes of Our Time

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Social Changes of Our Time

I

I AM very much flattered to be asked to speak to a gathering at which real historians are present, for I am a rank outsider. I hold no union card. And though I sometimes write about things that happened in the past, I prefer to describe myself as a retrospective journalist. If I have been brash enough to accept your invitation to come here tonight, it is only because I have thought you might perhaps be interested in some inquiring reflections upon a subject that is hardly a matter of precise historical measurement, of hard facts and comparative statistics, but more a matter of observation and hunch, upon which the amateur of history may possibly be permitted to measure impressions and estimates with the professional. I should like to throw out some ideas about what I think has been happening to the American social scene during the past generation or so.

A few weeks ago I spent part of an afternoon looking at old news-reel films of the 1920's. The people I saw in those pictures—politicians, businessmen, actors and actresses, athletes, fashion models, labor leaders, a wide variety of characters—looked very odd indeed as they appeared on the screen in 1949. Of course, the oddness was partly due to the speed with which the cameramen wound their cameras in the days of the silent picture—so that parading soldiers rushed down the street at what looked almost like a dogtrot, and romantic couples gesticulated at each other as if they had St. Vitus' dance, and expressions chased themselves across people's faces with an absurd rapidity. And then, of course, the clothes. . . . The men wore very narrow trousers, often wore Norfolk jackets, in their leisure moments preferred plus fours, and in business hours wore hard collars. The women of the early 1920's all seemed to be wearing dresses too large for them; those of the latter 1920's seemed to be wearing long-waisted little girls' dresses; and from one end of the decade to the other no woman's ears were visible—they were always concealed behind puffs of hair. But even when I made allowance for

the speed of the camera and for differences in costume, I had almost a feeling of looking at another race of beings from our own.

It was hard to believe that these pictures were taken at a time when I myself was grown up and married and holding good jobs and beginning to consider myself quite middle-aged, and when the times seemed indubitably very modern. I was reminded that all times are very modern when they are going on. And I found myself facing up once more to a question that always fascinates me: what have been the basic changes in the quality and flavor of American life during the past ten or twenty or twenty-five years?

Of course, one can answer such a question quickly in terms of major events and conspicuous facts. Since 1929 we have been through a Great Depression and a Second World War. We have seen great increases in the activity and scope of the federal government. The scale of government expenditures and of taxes has increased sensationally. (Have you noticed, by the way, that the annual federal budget is now larger than the entire national debt used to be when it caused such a shaking of heads during the early years of the New Deal?) We have seen the conditions of doing business altered by government regulation and by the growth of labor unions. We have watched the coming of air lines, electronics, atomic power. Most remarkably, perhaps, we have seen the United States change from an aloof and isolationist power into a power committed to playing a commanding part in international affairs. All these changes, however startling, have been pretty obvious. But I wonder if there have not been other changes, less obvious, in the terms of daily life and in the basic ideas and assumptions which determine the day-to-day behavior of the general run of Americans?

I want to direct your attention tonight to an area of imponderables, an area in which statistics give only secondary aid: to changes in the color of everyday living since those days of Calvin Coolidge and Jimmy Walker and Knute Rockne and Douglas Fairbanks—or, for that matter, since Pearl Harbor.

II

Two of these changes have been so widely noted that I shall mention them only briefly. First, most individual Americans have become much more uneasy about their personal security, and second,

most individual Americans have changed their attitudes on the role of the government in the national economy.

I remember a master at one of our leading private boarding schools telling me during the latter 1920's—I think it was at about the time of the Big Bull Market—that one day he asked the students of his graduating class to write, in the classroom, brief essays on what they would like to do with their lives if, through some change in the state of the country, there was no chance of making a million dollars. Most of the boys were paralyzed by the idea. They had assumed, without a second thought, that their aim in life would be to try to make money, and they were quite without ideas of any other sort. I should like to guess that the members of such a group today would think much less in terms of becoming rich, and much more in terms of protection against disaster and want. The Panic of 1929 and the Great Depression came as much more than an economic shock to a vast number of people; what dismayed them most deeply was the thought that the financial underpinnings of even the most industrious and thrifty family might give way. Thereupon a whole generation grew up with a new regard for security—for a safe job, for union guarantees, for seniority rights, for social insurance, for prices officially controlled in their interest, for being looked after or at least looking after themselves for safety's sake.

Among the girls of the 1930's and 1940's, for example, there has been, it seems to me, a new regard for the security of marriage as against the insecure excitement of a career. Not long ago my wife was talking with a recent graduate of a woman's college. My wife remarked that when *she* left Vassar she, of course, thought, as did many of her classmates, that in one way or another she would set the world on fire; and she asked her younger friend, "How many of *your* classmates expected to set the world on fire?" The answer was, "I think very few." In my own experience as an editor, it seems to me that among the girls who have an aptitude for journalism there are fewer than there were, say, twenty years ago, who want to make a name for themselves by free-lancing—a difficult gamble for high stakes, at least in prestige—and more who would like safe, salaried jobs as staff writers or researchers. And as for the older members of the community, I think of the remark made to me the other night by a woman in her fifties with whom I had been discussing the plight

of various friends of ours who in later life had run into financial adversity. "I used to think," she said, "that there was such a thing as having an assured income for the rest of one's life if one had saved enough money. Now I realize that there is no such thing. You just can't have any certainty about your financial future."

Perhaps the increased regard for financial security is less visible among the young men than among the young women; but certainly the men feel the full effect of the other great cause for personal uneasiness—the fact that we have had a second world war and are not sure that we shall not have a third one.

The net result of the Depression and of World War II has been, it seems to me, that the men and women of today are much less confident than were their counterparts in the 1920's that the world will offer them a stage on which they can play out ambitious and exciting parts, and much less confident than were their counterparts even in the 1930's that they will not be smashed to pieces in some world disaster. And so they look upon safety with a new respect, and wonder even if they will find it.

That they expect the government to help protect them is equally obvious. I have recently been doing some research which took me back into the 1890's and the early 1900's, and one of the hardest things to adjust myself to, as I read about the currency troubles of the nineties and the Panic of 1907, was the smallness and weakness of the role played by the federal government. It was odd to see President Cleveland, in 1895, turning to a private banker, Pierpont Morgan, to organize for the Treasury a purchase of gold which it was helpless to effect itself without his aid; it was odd to see this same Morgan, in 1907, acting as a sort of one-man Federal Reserve Bank, telling the leading New York bankers how to use their funds on one another's behalf, because there was then no federal machinery for mobilizing banking reserves in an emergency. It was strange to find a great many influential people scolding President Theodore Roosevelt for meddlesomeness when he proposed to try to settle the anthracite coal strike of 1902. It was curious to note, as well, that in those years there was almost no sense of what we have now learned to call the national economy; nobody figured out the national income; and not many people felt that when a man was in economic

trouble this was any concern of the federal government. Since then, as I hardly need to remind you, the change in the public's assumptions has been immense. It was not only greatly accelerated by the Depression and the New Deal, but was accelerated once more by the participation of the government in all manner of economic affairs in the Second World War.

Accordingly, most Americans seem now to feel, first, that the general prosperity of the country is definitely the government's responsibility; second, that the protection of various sectors of the economy—the farmers, let us say, or the coal miners, or this or that beleaguered industry—is likewise the government's responsibility; and, third, that the protection of the comparatively poor, at the expense if necessary of the comparatively rich, is the government's business, too. This change has been variously described—often with heat—as a trend toward socialism, or an undermining of free enterprise; it has also been described—often with fervor—as the inauguration of the century of the common man, or as the inauguration of the welfare state. Perhaps it will be less tendentious to speak of it as the advance of the idea of the benevolently protective state, whose leaders are expected, while constantly uttering paeans on behalf of freedom of enterprise, nevertheless to interfere with that freedom whenever it threatens to hurt anybody. However it is defined, this change in the public attitude—strikingly confirmed by the election last November—is unquestionably one of the obvious major phenomena of our times.

III

But what I want chiefly to discuss with you this evening is still another change which seems to have been much less noted and analyzed. It might be described as the progressive democratization of the American manner of life. My thesis is that the living habits and customs of Americans of all income levels have converged—have moved in the direction of equality—to an extent hardly dreamed of twenty years ago and not reached even ten years ago.

Let me make my position clear. I am not talking primarily about equalization of money incomes. To be sure, over the long run there has been a trend toward equalizing money incomes, with the aid of taxes—a trend which has hardly borne out the Marxian contention

that under capitalism the rich would get richer and the poor poorer. At the beginning of this century, for example, the average annual wage in the anthracite district was less than \$500, the average annual wage of unskilled workers generally was well under \$500, whereas Andrew Carnegie was simultaneously receiving an annual income of something like \$15,000,000—with no income tax to pay. (If my figuring is not wrong, today the federal income tax on a net income of \$15,000,000 would amount—if advantage were not taken of the community property amendment—to some \$13,806,820.) Yet even after taxes there is still a huge difference between what the rich and poor can command. What I am talking about, however, is not a converging of money incomes so much as a converging of ways of living. The essence of the change is this: that although the economically fortunate today have more things and in some respects better things than the less fortunate, the things they have more of tend to be the *same sort of things* that the less fortunate have less of; and that in terms of equipment, manner of living, and standards and ideas, there is less difference between rich and poor than there used to be.

Take, for example, the mere matter of personal appearance, and consider the following items, trivial though they may seem individually:

1. The great majority of American women—not just a privileged group—expect today to go periodically to the hairdresser's not only for the occasional permanent, but for the regular shampoo and set.

2. The difference between the millionaire woman's stockings and the poor woman's stockings today is virtually invisible to any but the expert eye, and it is a trifling difference compared with what it was even a dozen years ago. Recently I was looking at some advertisements of the 1920's, and noting the silk stockings with clocks which sold for two and a half to four dollars a pair, and the stockings with lace inserts which sold for much higher prices, ranging up to some in the advertisements of Peck & Peck which retailed at \$500 a pair. In those days the woman of wealth could set herself apart from the common run by her choice of stockings. Not so today. Nylons are great levelers.

3. There is no longer as large a visible gap as there used to be between the expensively dressed and the inexpensively dressed woman. Differences of cut and texture there are, of course, but they

are hardly so conspicuous as another difference which is not dependent upon income—the difference between good taste and bad taste. And the fact that the wealthy woman has thirty dresses to the poor woman's three is not visible on the street. Fashion used to be decreed by Paris, imported by the most expensive dress shops, then modified by the more expensive American dress manufacturers, and finally—after an interval of six months to a year—modified still further, almost beyond recognition, by the manufacturers of cheap dresses. The process is now quicker, and the contrast between what is offered in the more expensive shops and what is offered in quantity at low prices is much less conspicuous.

The great mail-order houses used to produce different types of clothes for different regions of the country. Nowadays they produce for the western farmer's wife dresses identical with those sold to the city woman in the East, and through their retail outlets they impose upon the market a uniformity unknown a generation ago. A friend of mine remarked the other day that when his railroad train stopped at an Oklahoma town, a group of girls on the platform were indistinguishable in appearance from girls on, say, Madison Avenue or Chestnut Street. The net of it is that the difference between the appearance of the colonel's lady and that of Judy O'Grady is today less likely to be a complete difference in aspect than a difference in quality of material and precision of cut—and, of course, in number and variety of costumes owned. It might almost be said that today the only clear symbol of affluence that a woman can put on her back is a mink coat.

4. Furthermore, the part played in the process of style formation by the well-dressed woman of wealth is smaller than it used to be. A generation ago the leading dress importers were powerfully influenced by what a few well-known women of wealth chose in Paris; now such women no longer call the tune. And clothes—and other goods too—are sold nowadays less and less by means of the snob appeal and more and more by means of the glamour appeal, it being assumed that glamour does not require wealth or fashionable status, but is a matter of what you have, what you choose to buy, and what you do with it.

5. In men's clothes there has been a similar change. Some of us recall how, up to let us say the 1920's, the countryman—the "hay-

seed," as he was called—stood out conspicuously on a city street because his clothes were different. Do any of you remember the tight-waisted coats and bulbous-toed shoes that betrayed the buyer of cheap clothing? Nowadays this difference has almost disappeared. There was a time, at the close of this last war, when there seemed to be a similar phenomenon appearing. The enthusiasm of clothes manufacturers for producing jackets and slacks of new sorts which would not be subject to price regulations and thus could be sold at uncontrolled prices brought us a lot of strange pseudo-Hollywood part-colored coats which might have been considered as the equivalent of a new kind of hayseed costume. But these were not inexpensive: they were badges, not of poverty, but of desperation to find something to wear, or of peculiar taste, or both. In general, I think it is safe to say that today the young man who is earning twenty-five or thirty dollars a week and the young man with a millionaire family behind him wear clothes much less contrasting than twenty years ago; less contrasting, even, than ten years ago. And the trend toward uniformity has been accentuated as a result of war shortages, which have made the tail coat or even the dinner coat much less likely than in previous years to be in the wardrobe of a young man of means, and have virtually eliminated the cutaway—or confined its use to weddings, for which it can be rented. (Incidentally, I was amused to note last spring that at a wedding I attended, one of the duties of the groom and best man was to make arrangements for renting cutaways for the ushers, with no more embarrassment on anybody's part than would attend the hiring of a caterer to serve the wedding breakfast.)

Does the existence of these trends toward uniformity in clothes seem to you unimportant? I do not think it is. The consciousness that one is set apart by one's appearance is a great divider; the consciousness that one is not set apart is a great remover of barriers.

Let us proceed from clothes to the equipment we use for daily living. Automobiles, for instance. As Professor H. Gordon Hayes of Ohio State University pointed out in a recent article in *Harper's* (to which I am indebted for many of the ideas I am expressing tonight), the differences today between the automobile driven by the rich man and the automobile driven by the poor man are minor. Essentially they have similar engines, similar fittings. Do any of you remember

the hierarchy of automobiles in the days before and during and just after World War I? At the top, as marks of dashing wealth, were perhaps the finest imported cars such as the Rolls-Royce, Mercedes-Benz, and Isotta Fraschini. But there was also an American aristocracy consisting of the Pierce Arrow, Peerless, and Packard. Then came group after group, in descending scale, till you reached the homely Model T Ford. Today almost the only cars with distinctly patrician connotations are the few remaining Rolls-Royces of the old school, obstinately rectangular in defiance of the whole concept of streamlining, and manifestly intended to be driven by a chauffeur—and, I may add, to be entered and alighted from with dignity. With the possible exception of the Cadillac there is no American car today that conveys any of the sense of wealthy style that characterized, let us say, the Pierce Arrow of the last generation. There are more expensive cars and less expensive cars, but the resemblances between them are close.

“Yes,” you may say, “but at least the possession of a *new* car is a mark of means. You are forgetting that what the poor man buys nowadays is not a different sort of car, but a second- or third-hand car.” But we all have observed that many people of slender income adjust their budgets so as to be able to buy new cars. And this same generalization applies also to most of the modern mechanical household equipment; often families with a low overhead of expense go in for Buicks, Bendix washers, new refrigerators and television sets which people who have expanded their general scale of living to the limit of larger incomes feel they cannot afford. The net result is that a family’s equipment does not instantly betray its income level or social status.

And do I need to remind you of the social effects of the dwindling of the servant class? The change in living habits in this respect has been striking even since Pearl Harbor. Only those who are very well-to-do, or who are moderately well-to-do *and* lucky enough to find and hold good servants, *and* willing to give up all manner of gadgets and luxuries in order to be served, are freed—unless they choose to eat out in restaurants—from the chores of cooking and dishwashing and cleaning which a generation ago, in this part of the country at least, used to be the lot only of the comparatively poor. Thus the dividing line in ways of living between the servanted

and the unservanted, if it has not disappeared, has moved to such a point that it is no longer as effective a divider as it was—especially as it has become standard procedure for even the rather well-heeled young couple to live in a servantless apartment or house.

The virtual disappearance of the servant has had, incidentally, some rather entertaining by-products. Let me list some of them as my friends and I have noted them:

1. More young couples than a decade or two ago divide up the housework because both of them have jobs. I wish some statistician could find out how many young men of today know how to cook whose fathers could hardly scramble an egg.

2. I have heard that in a New York suburb there are several families which had a servant or two before the war, groaned when in wartime servants became unobtainable, went back to hiring a servant after the war—and then let her go; they found they felt freer and less restricted when the kitchen was not the domain of a stranger.

3. There is more buffet entertaining than there used to be, as against the giving of sit-down-at-the-table dinner parties.

4. There is likely to be much more casualness about the hours of rising and hours of meals, except in families where there are children with fixed school hours or other fixed time requirements. This tendency reaches its extreme in the custom of a family I recently heard of who have a vacation shack on a lake in the Midwest—they have no meals at all: there is simply a hot plate on which anybody who feels the urge may cook himself whatever he wants, whenever he wants.

5. Combine the servantless house with the two-day week end, and you often find another new phenomenon: Friday evening, as like as not, takes the place of Saturday evening as the time for the big party which can last till a late hour because the next day you can sleep; and Saturday morning, as well as Sunday morning, becomes a time for prolonged slumber.

The changes in manner of living brought about by the shortage of servants have been much more readily accommodated here than in England, where a similar shortage has meant acute discomfort for a great number of people. For nearly all British houses except those of the very poor were built to be looked after by drudges who were not supposed to need either labor-saving machinery or comfortable work-

ing quarters. In many parts of this country—notably California—many if not most houses have long been designed for agreeable servantless living; and, anyhow, there has long been a booming sale in America for labor-saving equipment. Still, on the whole, and especially in the East, the design of our houses and apartments is not yet adjusted to the new dispensation. But, at any rate, it would seem safe to say that servantless living, with the aid of machinery, has become so standard that another gulf between the ways of the more prosperous and those of the less prosperous has been narrowed.

IV

Now we are used to hearing such changes explained in terms of money and of the improved status of labor—in terms, that is to say, of the income tax, the wage-hour and minimum wage laws, the increased strength of labor unions, the high wages commanded by skilled workers during the war, the shortages of workers generally, and the preference of workers for jobs which will give them independence. And surely these explanations are valid. (You can hear them amplified with endless evidence at any gathering at which conservative ladies and gentlemen get to grouching about the deplorable times we live in and the decay of the traditional decencies.) The graduated income tax in itself has become the most powerful leveler ever invented. During the war I wrote a magazine article called “Who’s Getting the Money?” in which I advanced the theory that most of the really lavish spending which went on in wartime resulted either from income tax dodging of one sort or another or from the use of company expense accounts, and I think that this is still to a considerable extent true. If there were no tax evasion at all, and if it became impossible to entertain lavishly at the expense of the company, and if no men or women of wealth ever went into their capital, we should realize even more sharply than we do now to what extent the difference between the spendable incomes of the tycoon and of the janitor has been narrowed.

But for the narrowing of the differences in *ways of living* there are other explanations, I think, than financial and political ones.

One of these explanations, emphasized by Professor Hayes in the article I referred to a moment ago, is the effect of mass production: the fact that it is more remunerative to produce goods for a mass

market than for a limited market, and that these goods can be so well made, and so comparatively low-priced, that they tend to drive out of business the makers of goods and gadgets intended for the rich only. I know a man in New York who in his youth never entered a store; he was visited by his tailor, his bootmaker, and his shirtmaker, and such other things as he needed could be bought for him by servants. I myself remember the day when if I bought a shirt, size 15, I had to take my chance on sleeve-length; now I just say 15-35 and get a shirt that is sure to fit. That sort of change has pretty well eliminated shirtmakers. Professor Hayes reminded us that nowadays the rich man not only drives a car which is basically similar to the poor man's, and wears very similar clothes, but smokes the same sort of cigarettes, shaves with the same sort of razor, uses the same sort of telephone, vacuum cleaner, and radio, has the same sort of lighting and heating equipment and plumbing in his house, and so on endlessly. We must all be acquainted with instances of the disappearance of special luxury goods because mass production scorns them. I, for instance, have a perverse liking for wearing dancing pumps with evening clothes. Of recent years they have been almost unobtainable, and last year I had to pay through the nose for a new pair. I shouldn't be surprised to find, the next time I want a pair, which would be in about 1960, that they are no longer made—that there has been no market for them that would justify making them. Mass production rules us, and makes all of us more alike.

But the changes in our mores are also powerfully influenced, I believe, by changes in the patterns of emulation. And these are powerfully influenced by our mechanisms of mass communication and entertainment—by magazines with circulations in the millions, of which there are many more now than there used to be even a decade ago; by the radio; and even more by the movies, which present for us heroes and heroines who engage our sympathy and admiration through qualities of character and bearing which have little relation to wealth or position. Take the movies alone, and consider, let us say, such admired performers as Clark Gable, Spencer Tracy, Gary Cooper, Bing Crosby, Humphrey Bogart, Bob Hope, Frank Sinatra and Van Johnson. They may play the parts of people who are supposed to be rich and stylish, or of people who are at the end of their economic rope, but essentially their popularity has little

to do with the status they assume. Many years ago, in an article on Hollywood gods and goddesses, Ruth Suckow remarked that the vast popularity of Clark Gable was due to the fact that he might just as well be the nice grocer's boy or filling-station attendant that we all knew and at the same time was an exceptionally attractive young man. He represented, in other words, a kind of charm that almost any young American male could at least approach. The same thing holds true for most of the gods and goddesses of today; they have helped to set for America what old-fashioned people would call middle-class standards of behavior and middle-class ideals of charm—standards and ideals which it would perhaps be more accurate to call classless.

I have heard it said that one of the weaknesses of British film-making today is that almost all British actors have been so schooled in West End speech that it is hard to find one who can portray a truck driver who sounds nearly as persuasive to the general audience in a British village as would, say, Humphrey Bogart in the same part. There is no such difficulty in Hollywood. Humphrey Bogart can play a truck driver or a young man of means and social position and remain Humphrey Bogart, tough, casual of speech, and all-American in quality.

And notice this. Both the truck drivers' sons and the millionaires' sons who admire his ways will try to behave like him. Your polite Main Line family will perhaps think it unfortunate that their son and heir, aged fourteen, shows Bogartian manners; but they can't keep the boy away from the movies, and he will probably grow up to behave more like Bogart—or, if you prefer, Bing Crosby or Van Johnson—than he would have if he had not been subject to the influence of such enforcers of the common denominator in behavior as the movies and the radio.

Among the women of Hollywood the tendency toward the classless manner is perhaps not so striking; I doubt, for instance, if Rita Hayworth could ever successfully take the part of a patrician, or if Katharine Hepburn can successfully take anything else. But another powerful influence upon American women today is the photographer's model, and it is a striking fact that within the past generation not only has modeling become an occupation in which young women who have had, as we say, "advantages" are very welcome,

and which they frequent, but they along with girls from less sophisticated backgrounds have succeeded, in their modeling of clothes, in setting standards of gracious appearance which both the girl from the Main Line and the girl from the dreariest suburb try to approximate. In those newsreels of the 1920's of which I spoke a moment ago the fashion models all looked like cheapskates, no matter how fine the clothes they wore. I will admit that even today the girls shown in newsreel fashion exhibits sometimes look like cheapskates, the newsreels being an oddly backward part of the news industry, and that those shown in almost all Florida beach shots do; but even so I am sure there has been a change. In the newspaper and magazine advertisements, in the store catalogues, and in the shopwindow exhibits, most of the girls who are shown have a kind of innate style—what might be called an unprovincial look—sometimes even what an old-fashioned person would call an air of breeding—which their counterparts certainly did not have twenty-five years ago, and which they hardly had even ten or fifteen years ago. I think one could fairly say that the kind of glamour with which mass advertising tries to invest the products of mass production is not only classless but also possesses style.

V

One could mention other equalizing forces, such as the enormous increase in the number of Americans who have had high school and college educations; or such as the war, which sent several million young men on foreign travels, gave the teachable ones remarkable chances to learn about other modes of life, and gave some of them—such as flying officers—chances to learn how to live on a scale more lavish than they had ever before known. I remember during the war going to a shabby little photographer's shop to get a passport picture taken, and falling into conversation with the proprietor, and comparing notes about our sons in the Army, and hearing that his son was a navigator flying planes across the South Atlantic. What an opportunity, I thought, to become a citizen of the world!

And I think now—when I consider the sum of all these various equalizing forces of which I have been speaking—I think of a mechanic who sometimes comes to make repairs in my office, and of his son, whom I met recently. That mechanic's boy is of the teachable sort, and highly intelligent. During the war he became a captain. He

is now working at mechanical repairs with his father by day and taking courses at night in engineering. He is also something of an amateur musician and artist. His speech is so agreeable, his social manner so pleasant, that I should think he could comport himself easily and acceptably in almost any social group. No foreigner, meeting him, would find it easy to believe that he is the son of a mechanic.

Well, the existence of such people has always been one of the American things that we have been proudest of. There has always been, in America, a chance for people to rise in the world; we have had a peculiarly fluid society. I am not sure that it is not today less fluid than it used to be—that the chance of a man's rising from the bottom rank of industry to the top is not smaller. The point I am making is simply that today the social distance that has to be traveled by such a young man from one part of that fluid society to another is shorter than it ever has been before. He doesn't, like Eliza Doolittle, have to remake his speech entirely; if he has a reasonably good ear, and some sense, the radio and the movies can show him how to remove any local crudities. In his appearance, in his knowledge of the equipment of civilized living, in his knowledge of how to behave at, let us say, a restaurant or a cocktail party, he has little to learn; and whenever he may be in doubt, he has only to ask himself, "How would Jimmy Stewart do it?"

VI

It must have been clear, as I have discussed this trend toward uniformity of behavior in America, that I do not view it with alarm. There are those who do, and their apprehensions should be treated with respect. There are those, for example, who think that it is caused by, and also results in, a feeling that everybody has a right to everything, regardless of the quantity and quality of his contributions to the economic welfare; that this means penalizing the winners in the competitive race; and that this in turn means destroying the incentive to invent and to build and to manage great enterprises. That may be so. There are also those who think that this feeling that everybody has a right to everything will cause the protective state to surround so many people with so many safeguards, at a cost—price guarantees, wage guarantees, medical services, pensions, and so on—that there will not be enough production to pay the bill. That may

be so. There are those who feel that in a land in which the pattern of living approaches uniformity there will be quantities of people whose ambitions will be unlimited, and that when they are unable to reach the top—to reach those key positions which in any community are few—they will become frustrated neurotics. That may be so. On the cultural side, there are those who fear that what is happening is a sort of triumph of mediocrity, a universal acceptance of the second-rate. That, too, may be so; in fact, from where I stand it seems to me a greater danger than the others.

Are we approaching, these latter people ask, a state of affairs in which no one will know anything—except perhaps through Hollywood costume movies—of the beauty of a fine dinner discreetly served on an old mahogany table, with fine linen, with old silver and candlelight? Are we approaching a time when no poetry will be published because it can't be sold to super-book-clubs in lots of a million, and because what sells best in lots of a million is something like *Forever Amber*? When no serious art can flourish because the Federal Commissioner of Arts prefers Norman Rockwell to Picasso? When everybody will have a fine car and a perfected television set, and also plenty of vitamins, and the nearest thing to an exponent of man's finest aspirations will be some latter-day Dale Carnegie? Maybe so; all I can say is that I myself don't lie awake with nightmares of this particular sort. Perhaps I think that taste and discrimination and fastidiousness and the spiritual qualities of mankind are not dependent, as many have said they are, upon the existence of a leisure class or of an aristocracy set apart in its ways of living from the common herd; perhaps I have a hunch that the capacity for these things is innate, and that the urge to make the most of this capacity is bound to crop out in some people and will not be standardized out of existence. At any rate, it is only occasionally that I fear the final triumph of the second-rate. Otherwise the trend toward equalization in ways of living in the United States seems to me a pretty inspiring phenomenon.

But I did not intend this evening to burden you unduly with my personal opinions of what is happening. What I have been trying to do has been to explain, with reasonable objectivity, a trend which I think is actual. When a retrospective journalist talks to historians, he had better learn to stick to the facts.

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