

May 30, 2005

Class and the American Dream

Is the American dream that people can rise from rags to riches with a little grit and imagination - or fall from the top rungs to lesser positions if they can't cut it - mostly a myth? A [series in The Times called "Class Matters"](#) has found that there is far less mobility up and down the economic ladder than economists once thought or than most Americans believe. Class based on economic and social differences remains a powerful force in American life and has come to play a greater, not lesser, role over the last three decades.

A parallel series in The Wall Street Journal found that as the gap between rich and poor has widened in America, the odds that a child will climb from poverty to wealth, or fall from wealth to the middle class, have remained stuck, leaving Americans no more likely to rise or fall from their parents' economic class than they were 35 years ago.

What fools many Americans is the sight of high achievers vaulting from poor or obscure backgrounds to positions of power and wealth. Witness Bill Clinton, who rose from a humble background to the presidency, or Bill Gates, who rose from the upper middle class to become the world's richest person. Witness all the self-made billionaires and corporate titans. But beneath this veneer of super-achievers, recent scholarship shows, many Americans find themselves mired in the same place as their parents, with profound implications for their health and education, as well as other aspects of their lives. Those in the upper middle classes enjoy better health and live longer than those in the middle classes, who live longer and better than those at the bottom. That's partly because money, good jobs and connections help the better-off get the best medical care. Education, supposedly the key to advancement in a meritocratic society, is also heavily dependent on wealth and class. It is thus extremely disheartening to learn that at 250 of the most selective colleges, the proportion of students from upper-income families has actually grown over the past two decades, despite financial aid programs.

There is no sure-fire way to mitigate the deep-seated, multifaceted impact of class. Stronger affirmative-action programs to bring low-income students into colleges would surely help. So, too, would stronger anti-poverty and early-education programs. Tax cuts would be better targeted at the middle class and below, not at the wealthy who already have more than enough advantages. The goal should be a truly merit-based society where class finally fades from importance.