

# Introduction:

## Middle-Class Blacks and the American Dream

Progress remained an elusive goal for all but a few blacks in America for almost a century following emancipation. In a country where progress is measured by movement up the class ladder, blacks found themselves trapped on the ladder's lower rungs. During the nineteenth century, first as slaves and then as freedmen, black workers formed the backbone of the southern agricultural economy but were denied a role in the industrializing North. The millions of jobs being created in the automobile factories, the steel and textile mills, the mines, and the slaughterhouses went to white immigrants from Europe who came to America seeking a better life. The plight of black workers throughout the North was poignantly expressed in the lament of a Detroit whitewasher in 1891:

First it was de Irish, den it was de Dutch, and now it's de Polacks as grinds us down. I s'pose when dey (the Poles) gets like de Irish and stands up for a fair price, some odder strangers'll come over de sea 'nd jine de faimily and cut us down again.<sup>1</sup>

Only after passage of a restrictive immigration bill in 1924 and the First World War combined to shut off

immigration from Europe did black workers get an opportunity to move into the industrial economy of the North in meaningful numbers. Opportunity, however grudgingly afforded, was at last knocking at the doors of blacks. And they responded enthusiastically, migrating in the millions to the industrial centers of the North. Had it not been for their willingness to do so, American industry would certainly have suffered a serious setback.

While this chance to enter America's industrial economy represented significant progress for blacks, they nevertheless found themselves displaced by white workers whenever possible and barred from the skilled trades. Blacks also found they were denied the opportunity to join the white middle class in supplying the brain power and intellectual skills of the nation as scientists, researchers, academicians, writers, and even as clerical workers. About the only middle-class occupations accessible to blacks were those that served the needs of the black community—they could be teachers, ministers, social workers, and, occasionally, doctors and lawyers. George Washington Carver, W. E. B. Du Bois, Ralph Bunche, Thurgood Marshall, and others who made important contributions had to do so against tremendous odds. These black men, however, signaled that many thousands more were waiting to make their contributions to the life of the nation but could not do so because of discrimination. Such restrictions severely limited the upward mobility of blacks so that at midcentury only 10 percent of all black workers held middle-class jobs compared to 40 percent of white workers.

Once again, a national upheaval was required to enable blacks to climb to the next rung of the ladder. First it was the Civil War, followed by a major restrictive immigration bill and two world wars; now it was the civil rights movement and a booming economy in the 1960s. As a result of these last two events, the black

middle class doubled in size during the 1960s, encompassing 27 percent of all black workers by 1970. Though blacks still lacked an upper class, they finally had a middle class freed from the past legal strictures of discrimination and found for the first time a wide variety of occupations opened to them.

For these reasons, I call the black middle class of the 1960s a *new* black middle class. Its emergence marked a major turning point in the life of black people in the United States. New opportunities at this level of the class structure gave renewed hope to the aspirations of working-class black parents. No longer were the doors of many colleges and universities closed to them. And a college degree need not automatically mean preparation for a career teaching black children or as a social worker in the black community. Now there was the chance that their sons and daughters could also aspire to become accountants, lawyers, engineers, scientists, and architects. This was a significant development both for the nation and for the black community itself. For the former, it meant a broadening of the pool of talent from which to draw for its development; for the latter, it represented fuller participation in society and more leadership and economic resources.

What life is like for this new black middle class and what the future holds is the subject of this work. The first chapter traces the historical events leading up to this point, from a small mulatto elite in postemancipation decades, through an old black middle class in the first half of the twentieth century to the new black middle class in the 1960s. Chapter 2 analyzes the dynamics of events in the 1960s that created favorable conditions for the emergence of the new black middle class. In addition, the new black middle class is compared to the old, and the question of the significance of race—a topic frequently returned to in subsequent chapters—is taken up. Chapter 3 examines the mobility experiences

of middle-class blacks and whites, the paths followed by each, and the effort required to reach the middle class. Chapter 4 compares the occupational and financial achievements of blacks and whites who have reached the middle class so as to understand the degree to which middle-class blacks have attained parity with whites—or still fall short. In chapters 5 and 6, the standards of living of middle-class blacks and whites are analyzed in depth, including an assessment of the extent to which black and white families depend on the economic contribution of wives, the amount and sources of middle-class wealth, and the quantity and quality of material goods possessed. The life style of the new black middle class will be the subject of chapter 7, with comparisons made between the old and new black middle classes as well as between middle-class blacks and whites. Chapter 8 examines the effects of the changed economic conditions of the 1970s and 1980s on the new black middle class to discover how it fared in this period of recessions, high inflation, and high unemployment. I will also attempt to forecast the prospects of the black middle class from an analysis of societal trends and forces affecting its growth and economic position.

It is an irony of history that at the point when blacks developed a viable middle class, economic conditions that had been transforming the United States into a middle-class society and had promised unlimited growth changed abruptly. So profound are these changes in the 1970s and 1980s that it now appears it is a tarnished dream to which the black middle class has awakened. The results of this study should provide a comprehensive picture of the new black middle class that emerged during the 1960s as compared to its white counterpart and some clues to what lies ahead in the rest of this decade and even into the 1990s. In doing so, it should also contribute importantly to the debate over the significance of race for the black middle class and

provide some insight into the respective roles of class and race in the United States today.

### DEFINING THE BLACK MIDDLE CLASS

Two of the most frequent questions that arise about my research are, "How do you define class?" and "How do you define middle class?" Most laymen and not a few scholars tend to define class in terms of income; some scholars include education in the definition. While it is difficult to resist placing greatest importance on income, there are no sound criteria for establishing class boundaries defined by it. Is the lower boundary the population's median income? Is it \$20,000 or \$30,000? What is the upper boundary, \$50,000 or \$60,000? How is one to decide? And how much education qualifies one for the middle class—an undergraduate degree? What about those who have completed two or three years of college? Are they middle class? As I will explain below, from a Weberian point of view, education is a *cause* or *source* of an individual's class position rather than a defining characteristic, and income is *one* of the many rewards resulting from one's class position. Neither income nor education, therefore, are part of the definition of class.

From a Marxian perspective, classes are bonded, categorical groups whose identity derives from their different relationships to the means of production. In other words, the meaning of class revolves around the ownership and use of capital. In his scheme, Marx tended to contrast those who owned the means of production (large corporations and banks) with those who made a living by working for these owners. This is not a distinction between "haves and have-nots" but a more fundamental one between those who hire and those who are hired. Marx called the owners of large businesses the bourgeoisie. Today we are more

likely to refer to them as the "upper class." However, Marx called those entrepreneurs who owned small businesses, hiring only a few workers or none at all, the *petite bourgeoisie* and predicted that they would eventually be forced out of business by large corporations. This was, of course, before the existence of antitrust laws and small business loans. But even today, the difficulty small enterprises have competing and surviving in a corporate economy is well known.

With a few exceptions, Marx classified all those who were nonowners as "workers." Whether unskilled, skilled, or educated, those who depended on others to hire them were workers. While we must admit this argument possesses a certain cogency, we feel some reluctance in placing all workers in the same amorphous class. There must be some difference between an engineer and a taxicab driver. It is here that the ideas of Max Weber, one of Marx's chief critics, prove useful.

While recognizing the basic class division between those who hire and those who are hired, Weber also allowed for class distinctions among the hired, the propertyless. These distinctions result from the different levels of education and skill workers bring to trade for positions (occupations) in the marketplace. The more education and skills, the better the position secured. Historically, those individuals with more education have been able to enter occupations that bring greater economic rewards in terms of income, mobility, fringe benefits, and stability as well as more intangible rewards such as degree of control over one's work situation, independence, and prestige.

In time, this approach led to the recognition of a major class cleavage between nonmanual and manual workers, or—to use the more modern terminology—between white-collar and blue-collar workers. As the number of nonmanual workers increased during the

latter stage of Western industrialization, another term came into use: "middle class." Poised between the owners of corporations and banks and manual workers, nonmanual workers came to be viewed as relatively well-off in the class structure. Compared to blue-collar workers, they did clean work, did not punch a clock, enjoyed greater prestige, and, especially, earned higher incomes and received better fringe benefits. Resulting differences in life chances and life styles were striking.

White-collar workers historically have included five occupational groups: (1) professionals, (2) managers (nonowners), (3) sales workers, (4) clerical workers, and (5) small businessmen.<sup>2</sup> Each group has its own history as well as a distinct position and role in the class structure. Within industrial societies, entrepreneurs have played the major catalytic role in developing the economy, with the most successful becoming owners of the means of production (large corporations and banks) in the classical Marxian sense and forming an upper class. The thousands of small businessmen who are neither part of the upper class nor salaried workers occupy an ambiguous position. The tendency has been to see them as a separate class positioned between the upper class and all salaried and wage workers or as part of a middle class. I take the position that they are part of the middle class.

Studies have shown that all ethnic groups in the United States have produced a stratum of small entrepreneurs whose principal market—at least initially—was composed of members of their own group. Eventually, many small businesses, such as Chinese laundries and restaurants, succeeded in enlarging their markets and appealing to a more general population. It is in terms of this phenomenon that I will evaluate attempts by blacks to enter the world of business and measure their success. While blacks became entrepreneurs as

early as before emancipation, I am interested in them as an important stratum of an emerging black middle class in the twentieth century.

Like entrepreneurs, professionals also have a long history, at least as represented by a segment of that group, that is, doctors and lawyers. They too had an ambiguous position in the class structure during the early development of Western capitalism. Marx was inclined to see at least some professionals, particularly lawyers, as part of the upper class since they often worked in the service of that class. In time, professionals in other occupations, such as engineers, scientists, teachers, and social workers, began to grow in number and in importance. Though the early professionals were usually self-employed, these new professionals, and increasingly, many doctors and lawyers, worked for fixed salaries. While Marxians may yet debate their position in the class structure, Weber and subsequent scholars would place them in the middle class, which is the approach I take here. It will become clear in the course of this study that the entrance of blacks into professional occupations during the first half of the twentieth century was entirely a factor of the black community's need for certain basic services such as health care, religion, education, and, to a more limited extent, legal aid. When direct service to the black community was not involved, blacks were usually barred from entering a professional field, thus distorting their role in the class structure.

Managerial, clerical, and sales jobs were the latest white-collar occupations to appear in industrial societies; in Marx's day, such positions were few. Their appearance and growth in number paralleled a later stage of industrialization, as capitalism shifted more and more to medium-size and large firms and corporations. As this movement progressed, there was an increasing need for owners of growing businesses to hire man-



agers to help with the day-to-day operations. At the same time, a growing number of clerical positions were created to assist owners and managers, and retail outlets grew from "mom and pop" stores to department stores requiring larger sales staffs. The class position of managers has been a subject of considerable debate recently, with some scholars arguing that they constitute a separate class, others locating them in the upper class of owners, and still others seeing them as members of the middle class.<sup>3</sup> The class position of clerical and sales workers is also being debated, even among Weberians, but the tendency has been to see this group also as a stratum within the middle class—although the least prosperous of all.

At the heart of this latter debate are changes in the economy generally and in the working conditions of clerical workers particularly. On the one hand, there were those who began arguing in the 1950s that the rapid rise in postwar living standards was placing formerly luxury consumer goods in the homes of manual workers and transforming the country into a middle-class nation (a point to which I return in chap. 2).<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, some have argued that the deskilling of clerical work through office automation is transforming such work into manual labor. There is no doubt that clerical workers no longer resemble the once important and powerful office clerk. It should not be forgotten, however, that as recently as forty or fifty years ago, clerical and sales work represented significant upward mobility from the drudgery of manual labor. In the United States, it was work reserved for native-born whites and was not penetrated by immigrants to any significant degree until the second and third generations. Blacks found themselves completely shut out of these jobs until the 1960s.

Though clerical and sales work has become increasingly fragmented and feminized today, there remain a

great variety of positions, including highly paid executive secretaries and secretaries in small businesses who often perform managerial tasks. Often overlooked in this debate is the fact that male clerical and sales workers frequently occupy the higher paid positions. In sales, they are most often found in the more lucrative areas of durable goods and furniture or as representatives for industrial and pharmaceutical products; among clerical workers, they are often in supervisory positions. These males earn salaries comparable to or higher than those of skilled manual workers, and they have the added advantage of potential mobility into management careers. Skilled blue-collar workers earn high wages but cannot penetrate the ranks of management beyond the position of foreman.

While some clerical and sales jobs held by women have experienced deskilling and a corresponding weakening of their economic position, it is not at all clear that clerical and sales occupations *taken as a group* are economically weaker than those of skilled blue-collar workers. Most research comparing blue-collar workers with clerical workers has concluded that the manual/nonmanual dichotomy is still valid.<sup>5</sup> And there is to date relatively little research on the economic position of female clerical and sales workers.<sup>6</sup> In this study, then, I follow the traditional Weberian position, which includes clerical and sales workers in the middle class. Frequently, however, the analysis will be reported separately for the professional-managerial stratum and the sales-clerical stratum, often referred to as upper middle class and lower middle class, respectively. The professional-managerial stratum includes professionals, managers, and small businessmen; the sales-clerical stratum is made up of all sales and clerical positions plus firemen and policemen.

To summarize my position on the composition of the middle class, I include all white-collar workers and small

businessmen plus a number of service occupations that I consider on a par with sales and clerical work, such as firemen, policemen, and dental assistants. These service occupations require a period of training before admission and may even attempt to maintain professional standards. Of these latter occupations, however, only policemen and firemen appear in my sample.

This minor reclassification is not meant to be exhaustive. The problem with reclassification of occupations is that so many positions with the same job title vary tremendously in responsibilities, wages, and working conditions. Secretaries range from those in mechanized typing pools to prestigious and sometimes powerful assistants to top corporate executives. "Clerical worker" includes those requiring only knowledge of the alphabet to perform their duties as file clerks as well as a variety of postal clerks and those with statistical training. Any list of occupations included in the middle or working class, or strata of these classes, will inevitably have limitations. However, the concept of class does not rest so much on the development of an infallible list of occupations for each class as on the existence of overall, gross differences in the real economic rewards received by individuals in different occupational groups.

## THE WORKING CLASS AND THE UNDERCLASS

To the extent that the working class is touched upon in this study, it too is divided into two strata. One stratum, which includes skilled and semiskilled workers, is referred to by the shortened form, "skilled working class"; the other, which includes unskilled workers, is referred to as "unskilled working class." I prefer "unskilled working class" to "lower class" because of the pejorative status connotation of the latter term. "Upper working class" and "lower working class" were also considered.

The advantage of the term "unskilled working class" is its explicit designation of the group of workers in whom I am most interested and among whom blacks are disproportionately concentrated. These include laborers such as construction workers, garbage collectors, and longshoremen as well as domestic workers and many in the hotel and restaurant industries. These jobs require such low-level skills that they can be learned in a few weeks. They are the most disposable of all workers, many earning minimum wage except in cases where they are unionized.

As will become clear in this study, it is as much the overconcentration of black workers in the unskilled working class as the slow growth of the black middle class that has distinguished the black class structure from that of whites. While the white unskilled working class declined steadily as the white middle class grew, the black unskilled working class remained the single largest group of black workers until about 1978. As late as 1986, it still represented over 25 percent of all black workers compared to 17 percent of all white workers. By 1990, the unskilled working class is still likely to contain one-fourth of all black workers. Any study of the black middle class would do well, therefore, to at least make a passing acknowledgment of this fact for the sake of perspective.

There is yet another group within the class structure that has received increased attention from both scholars and the press: the underclass. Most similar conceptually to Marx's *lumpenproletariat*, the underclass includes those without steady employment, unskilled day workers, the long-term unemployed, discouraged workers who have dropped out of the labor force, unemployed youth who have dropped out of school, individuals on permanent welfare, and those living off illegal activities such as prostitution and drugs. This "fallout" group is an important one within the class structure as it repre-

sents those who have failed to get a foothold even at the level of the unskilled working class. They deserve the attention accorded them today because of their significance for the entire class system in the United States and the overconcentration of blacks among them. They are not discussed in this study, however, except in passing and do not appear in the statistical analysis. "Poor" includes most of the underclass as well as much of the unskilled working class. Although a popular concept, it lacks sufficient precision from a class perspective and will not often appear in these pages.

One other decision taken in this study which is related to definition should be clarified. In the past, researchers have assigned to families the class position of husbands under the assumption that a family's class position is determined by the husband as principal breadwinner. With the increased involvement of females (both married and single) in the labor force, it is difficult to see how this practice can be justified today. In 1980, 58.9 percent of black women with husbands present and 49.9 percent of white women with husbands present were in the labor force, a large proportion of them full-time. In view of this, there is a need for a measure of class position that is a function of the combined class positions of husbands and wives rather than of husbands alone. After some experimentation, the approach taken here was to assign a family the class position of the spouse with the *highest* individual class, provided he or she was a full-time worker. This means that a family in which the husband worked as a salesman and the wife as an elementary schoolteacher was classified by the wife's occupation—upper middle class—instead of the husband's—lower middle class. Likewise, if the wife worked as a nurse and the husband as an assembly line worker, the family was considered middle class rather than working class. There was one exception to this rule: in cases where the husband was

a skilled worker and the wife was in a clerical or sales occupation, the family was classified as skilled (therefore, working class) because of the assumed superior market position of skilled males over many female clerical or sales workers.

The implications of this approach to family class are significant. In a group such as blacks in which females have had greater access historically to white-collar occupations and have been employed full-time at higher rates than in other groups, women contribute relatively more to the economic well-being of the family. When translated into a class dimension, as in this study, it becomes apparent that the class position of black families is more frequently determined by wives than is the case in white families, a point I will touch on in chapter 5.

## DATA USED

Several types of data were used in this study. The first chapter draws on E. Franklin Frazier's works and other case studies of black communities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to piece together the early history of the black mulatto elite and the old black middle class up to 1960. Most of this book focuses on a detailed analysis of the *new* black middle class in the mid-1970s based on a national representative survey. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with both middle-class blacks and middle-class whites in twenty-one Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas (SMSAs) of the northeastern, north-central, and southern regions of the United States in spring 1976. The West was excluded because the additional cost could not be justified given the small proportion of the black population residing there. The sampling design followed the standard multistage probability type, with units to be included at the

SMSA level selected proportional to the distribution of middle-income blacks (\$8,000 or more in 1976) within SMSAs (of each region) having populations of ten thousand or more. To maximize comparability, the sample of whites was selected from the same SMSAs as that of blacks; however, within SMSAs, the white and black samples were drawn proportional to the unique distribution of each. Blacks were selected randomly within census tracts and quotas filled at the household level with callbacks. Respondents were selected in such a way as to yield roughly an equal division of females and males. To ensure a high proportion of middle-class black and white households in the final sample, households were screened, and only those were interviewed which had both spouses present, had family incomes of \$12,000 or above in 1976 (in 1986, equivalent to \$23,008), and where the respondent was less than 65 years old. The final tally of usable interviews was 556 blacks and 600 whites.

To obtain information on the neighborhood environment of the black and white middle classes, housing, education, income, and occupational characteristics of each census tract sampled were computerized and appended to the record of each respondent. This information was used in the discussion of the life style of the black middle class (chap. 6).

The fourth data source is census data from the 1970s and 1980s (used extensively in chap. 8). Much of these data were drawn from unpublished tables supplied to me by the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics and represent the most up-to-date information available on occupation and income.

Some limitations of the data, particularly the survey data, should be pointed out. The decision to include only households in which both spouses were present was made to ensure the greatest number of usable cases possible. Had single-parent families been included,