An Issue We Cannot Ignore

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First Place Essay
High School Competition
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I am not sure just what category—social, political, or philosophical—encompasses the issue I intend to discuss, but that should not detract from the discussion. The issue is the growing division of classes in America. As far as I can tell from the media, my concerns are not shared by a significant portion of those who decide what is news and what is not. I am sure others recognize the problem and know more about it than I and are in a position to spread the information, but still, this issue receives little or no attention as far as the general public is concerned. It is my feeling that the growing division of the classes in America is a serious problem now and will become more of a problem in the immediate future.

First, I should clarify what I mean by the "growing division of classes in America." Every society in the history of the world has been divided into classes, usually along material lines (the more you have, the higher you are), but also along racial lines (the more rare you are, the lower you are), as well as hereditary lines (the higher your parents were, the higher you are). Usually, as they are in present-day America, all of these divisions have been evident in one degree or another. America is no different. But America, as we are constantly reminded, is not made up of distinctly different classes. Americans blur from the upper lower class to the lower middle class, and from the upper middle class to the lower upper class. America, as we picture it, is a blur. A person's station is what he/she earns. Anyone can become President. But as these classes become more distinct, the blur will disappear. The poor will be The Poor. The rich will be The Rich, and the middle will no longer connect the two. How will this happen?

It will happen in the future as it has in the past. All civilized societies since the dawn of history have been divided into classes as I stated earlier. Each society has also had its trends—trends in dress, trends in behavior, trends in politics. This is the key to the division. As trends sweep across our society, some classes are less able to follow them than others. The rich are able to change styles faster than the poor, so the rich move further ahead. This causes the poor to lose their influence on the trends, so the trends of the rich move away from the interests of the poor. The interests of the two move apart. The poor ideal and the rich ideal become totally unrelated. The classes watch each other and begin to see that they have nothing in common, except the fact that the rich control the government to which the poor pay taxes. The rich control the industries for which the poor work. The rich control nine-tenths of the media that the poor watch and read. The poor, in short, are the low pan of the balance on which the rich ride high. The poor are the first class to become aware of
this as the rich are content with their lot in life, and their media tells them they are in command. The other tenth of the media can, of course, be ignored as a bizarre minority. The class this minority represents is therefore also a minority—a minority that can be exploited. The rich control the laws and the industries and the enforcing arm of the law. The rich begin to seriously exploit their advantage. The physical gap widens. The rich are the smart, the beautiful, the easy-living. The poor are the stupid, the unwashed, the working peasantry. The classes no longer have a common ground other than the country in which they live and they know it.

A growing enmity appears between the two classes. The lines between rich neighborhoods and poor ones become no-man's land if the different communities are still that close. The conflict begins to be undeniably real. And then, an example of the power and indifference of the rich occurs that brings the conflict to head. The police savagely break up a peaceful demonstration. A epidemic of some fatal disease breaks out, and only the upper class can obtain the vaccine. A period of financial hard times leaves most of the lower class in the cold. Whatever the cause, talk of rebellion starts. If conditions do not improve sharply, the outraged poor become organized and militant, even easier than ever in our days of electronic communication. The upper class panics and does the wrong thing trying to use force. Now civil war starts, and the numeric superiority of the lower class becomes apparent. The upper class is toppled, a new order is set up in the place of the old, and the cycle starts anew.

While a few historic revolutions have been entirely caused by religion, the great majority have followed this path of separation of classes. The overthrow of the Russian czars, for example. Better yet, think of the bloody French Revolution. This is not to say, as many people like to believe, that all this violence is in the past—any number of South and Central American countries are right in the middle of such upheaval. Exactly what I have described recently ended in the Phillipines. Of course, the threat of being stomped on by the United States kept this case relatively bloodless, but a core of militant rebels was in action before Mrs. Aquino appeared on the scene. The revolution in the Phillipines would have been violent if U.S. attention had not made the peaceful way work. The point is, revolutions can still happen in 1987 or in 2000 or whenever (and wherever) conditions are right.

Can this happen in America? Perhaps the fact that our democracy was specifically designed so that "all men are created equal" will save us. Perhaps this will insure that the class boundaries in America will remain forever fuzzy so that the poor do not consider the rich their enemy. I certainly hope so.
But I can see with my own eyes that the son of a poor black man rarely wants to live the life of the son of a well-to-do white man. It is very unfortunate indeed that the concept of American and the concept of the clean-cut, Christian white have become so entwined. For the black, wanting no part of white society means rejecting American society. And so, the average black is less educated, poorer, less inclined to “make it” in a “white man’s world.” I can see this around me. We all can. We can see that the poor and the black are often in the same section of American cities, often working together to have their conditions improved, becoming allies as mutual need weakens racial distrust.

I do not know if this is the beginning of a division between the classes. Certainly I would be out of line to say it is the start of a revolution in America, the forerunner of a new Civil War. But to abandon the lower class to its own devices, to turn away, is a big step in the wrong direction. As I said at the beginning, I know there must be concerned authorities out there somewhere who recognize the problem. There is obviously no need for panic, but surely there is something that can be done, some way to bring the issue to light, before the possible problem becomes the definite problem. I just do not see how something this big and this dangerous can be ignored for very much longer.