

THE ORGANIZATION MAN

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People who have houses already—what's left for them? For us, though, there is always something that's coming up next. You couldn't exactly call it adventure, but it is a challenge."

Once adjusted to the mobile life, transients say, they find as much stability in the new kind of roots as in the old, geographical ones. "If you haven't been moving around before, a development like this makes you unsettled," an Army wife explains. "These places are not right for people who want to stay forever. But for people like us, who are already 'unsettled,' it makes you settled, if you know what I mean."

If one loses some old friends, there will always be comparable ones to replace them. Furthermore, because the old friends are being exposed to the same kind of environment, you can pick up with them where you left off when you meet again. "Even if you're separated by time and space, you know their thinking will be the same," says a transient. "It's the underlying values that count, and they'll stay the same."

CHAPTER 23 *Classlessness in Suburbia*

AS FAR AS SOCIAL VALUES ARE CONCERNED, SUBURBIA IS THE ULTIMATE expression of the interchangeability so sought by organization. It is classless, or, at least, its people want it to be. As in *The Organization*, so in its dormitories there has been a great broadening of the middle, and a sort of "declassification" of people from the older criteria of family background. But there is also another parallel. As in *The Organization*, the more that distinctions are broken down, the more exquisite they become. The suburbanites' impulse to the Social Ethic is understandable; to live without social class you must be socially skillful—consciously and continuously.

Like the office with no division between carpet and linoleum,

suburbia demands perception. How in the world, you wonder when you see Park Forest, can anyone tell rank—or, for that matter, pull it? To the stranger's eye the usual criteria of status are almost entirely absent. There are a few exceptions; in the rental area there are some duplex units situated on roads rather than grouped court fashion, and these, renting for \$117 (versus \$92 to \$104 for most court units) make something of a local Gold Coast. Similarly, though most homes are in the \$13,000 bracket, there are a few areas with houses around \$10,000, several in the \$17,000 to \$20,000 class, and a small area with "custom" houses ranging anywhere from \$17,000 to developer Klutznick's \$50,000 home. These differences, as I will touch on later, are not without significance. For the great bulk of residents, however, the houses are uniform enough in cost as to make them comparatively unimportant as a prestige factor, and physically they are so uniform that if it weren't for paint and trim, newcomers would have trouble finding their unit in the labyrinth.

Cars aren't much help, either. Of the thousands that lie in the parking bays, few are more expensive than the Buick Special, and rakish touches are not too frequent. Only in near-by industrial towns do people show exuberance in the captainship of the American car; foxtails and triumphant pennants, like Cyrano's plume, fly defiantly on cars there, and occasionally from the radiator a devil thumbs his nose at the passing mob. Not at Park Forest; whatever else it has, it has no panache.

Suburban residents like to maintain that their suburbia not only looks classless but is classless. That is, they are apt to add on second thought, there are no extremes, and if the place isn't exactly without class, it is at least a one-class society—identified as the middle or upper middle, according to the inclination of the residents. "We are all," they say, "in the same boat."

They are not. People may come out of the new suburbs middle class; a great many who enter, however, are not. Middle-class, college-educated organization people give the communities their dominant tone, but there are other residents for whom arrival in the Park Forests and Levittowns is, psychologically at least, a crossing of the tracks. This expansion of the lower limits of the middle class is happening in towns and cities as well, but it is so pronounced in the new suburbs that it almost seems as if they were made for that function.

They have become the second great melting pot. The organization man furnishes the model, and even in suburbs where he is a minority he is influential out of all proportion to his numbers. As the newcomers to the middle class enter suburbia, they must discard old values, and their sensitivity to those of the organization man is almost statistically demonstrable. Figures rather clearly show that people from big, urban Democratic wards tend to become Republican and, if anything, more conservative than those whose outlook they are unconsciously adopting. Pondering the 1952 Park Forest vote, the *Chicago Tribune*, with vengeful pleasure, attributed the large Republican majority to the beneficial influence of fresh country air on erstwhile Democrats. Whatever the cause, it is true that something does seem to happen to Democrats when they get to suburbia. Despite the constant influx of Democrats, the size of the Republican vote remains fairly constant from suburb to suburb. (The vote for Eisenhower in 1952: 66 per cent in Levittown, Long Island; 69.4 per cent in Park Forest.)

Suburbanites make a great to-do about being independent—the 1952 plurality, they maintain, was due to their crusading spirit. Maybe so, but even without this extra stimulus they vote Republican just the same. In the 1950 senatorial election, Everett Dirksen—a Republican never accused of any great appeal for “independents”—polled 68.5 per cent of the Park Forest vote, only .9 per cent less than Eisenhower two years later. After a study of all the different election returns, local Democrats have concluded that the best they can hope for is a 14 per cent spread—30 per cent of the vote at worst; 44 per cent at best.

The social factor is only one of many in the making of converts to Republicanism, but it is a powerful one. “I’ll be frank about canvassing,” one Democratic precinct leader told me. “We’ve got to concentrate on people with foreign names and Jewish names.” He took out a voter list and showed me the check marks he had made. “I’ll try to concentrate on these people. On form, the Jews are more likely to be the intellectual type and the people with foreign names strong Democrats. But we’ve got to get to them quick.”

The conversion process can take place rather rapidly. A Democratic allegiance is part of an environment which the newcomers

wish to leave behind, and in attuning themselves to the values of the group they now wish to join, they soon find that “acceptance,” to use a favorite word of suburbia, is more difficult if one persists in obdurately sticking to what others regard as a lower-class habit. They should graduate, and though the gang may adopt a live-and-let-live attitude most of the time toward such idiosyncrasy, when election time comes near and morality complicates the issue, the pressure becomes intense. In desperation, local Democratic organizations have turned to fighting fire with fire. To counteract the social process, they have been giving a series of parties for newcomers; at these events they dress up the house with the most respectable Democrats available, command them to put on their best bib and tucker, serve tea, and in every way possible try to fortify potential waverers with the knowledge that they can have kindred souls just as chic and well educated as anybody else.

ACCLIMATION TO SUBURBIA ALSO STIMULATES SWITCHES IN RELIGIOUS affiliations, and the couple from, say, a small Ozark town is likely to discard their former fundamentalist allegiance to become Methodists or Presbyterians. So with personal tastes: wives are particularly quick to pick up the cues from the college-educated girls on the street, and their clothes, be they slacks or cardigans and pearls, begin to show it. Home furnishings are another symbol of emancipation. Merchants are often surprised at how quickly their former customers in city stores discard old preferences when they arrive in suburbia. “They won’t touch ‘Polish Renaissance’ any more,” the manager of a chain store in Levittown, Pennsylvania told me. “When I was over in the Trenton store I had to stock the most hideous stuff you ever saw. I couldn’t sell them a nice Lawson sofa; they’d go for borax and the purplest purples and pinkest pinks. When they get over here they want something plainer—exactly the same people who only a year or so ago would have wanted some overstuffed thing.”

Suburbanites are perfectly aware of this educating process, and though they may want to be egalitarian, they are not unconsciously so. They miss few of the clues to family background provided by slips in speech or peculiarities of taste, and in almost every block there is someone—to use a favored euphemism—who

the others say "has not had all the advantages some people have had." As the use of the word "advantages" implies, such a person is not snubbed; quite the opposite—the others will go out of their way to make him feel at home and, through a sort of osmosis, to educate him in the values of the group. There are, of course, failures; some newcomers are so shy, so sensitive about their background that they rebuff advances, and occasionally they see no reason to acclimate themselves at all. (One court was thoroughly confounded by the arrival of a housewife who was an ex-burlesque stripper and, worse yet, volubly proud of the fact. She never learned, and the collision between her breezy outlook and the family mores of the court was near catastrophic. "They're just jealous because I'm theatrical folk," she told an observer, as she prepared to depart with her husband in a cloud of smoke. "All these wives think I want their husbands. What a laugh. I don't even want my own. The bitches." The court has never been quite the same since.)

For newcomers, the teaching of sociability is perhaps the greatest achievement of suburban education. The newcomers need it. They are more lonely than the others, for they are strangers to this world, yet they markedly lack the social skills by which to overcome their loneliness. This is particularly apparent in a new block that does not have the leavening influence of one or two organization couples. Often it is months before the people even strike up a conversation with the neighbors about them. They don't know how, and they want so desperately to know that they will respond to any activity, no matter what the ostensible purpose, that furnishes a catalyst. This is one of the reasons for the popularity of the "home commercial parties" in such neighborhoods. In one small subdivision outside Hartford, Connecticut, it was not until ten months after everyone had moved in that they got to know one another, and a Stanley Home Party was the cause; the first party broke the ice, and in a surge of gratitude all of the wives pleaded to be hostesses in turn. It was the best way they knew of to get friendship started.

TO UNDERSTAND HOW SUBURBIA FILLS THIS KIND OF VOID, AN UNDERSTANDING of the nature of turnover within them is necessary. It is not a subject suburbanites like to talk about. When I first went

to Park Forest, I found the residents rather touchy about the fact that the turnover in the rental apartments was running at roughly 35 per cent annually, and in the homes area at about 20 per cent. Only temporary, many assured me. One man even went so far as to work up an ingenious mathematical formula to demonstrate the imminent decline of turnover. Of every 100 persons moving in, he argued, a given number will stay permanently; the more these people move in, accordingly, the fewer apartments and houses there will be on the market for the transient type—*ergo*, in time there should be practically no turnover at all.

Meanwhile, the turnover continues. In the rental courts a third of the tenants still move out every year. In 1954, out of 3,000 rental apartments there were 1,059 move-outs; in 1955, 1,100. As Park Foresters are quick to point out, some of these move-outs didn't leave the community but moved to the homes area, and this movement has lent a measure of stability to the community. Nonetheless, over-all turnover remains high. A comparison of the 1954 phone directory with the 1955 directory indicates that in one year's time 18 per cent of Park Foresters had moved on to other communities (948 families out of a total listing of 5,363). A closer check on one court shows that since 1953 all of the original thirty-nine couples had left save eight; of the couples who left, a third had moved to other parts of Park Forest, while the rest moved away.

It is a perfectly normal phenomenon. Some of the people who leave Park Forest do so because they want something "better," but most leave because they *have* to. In 1953, 44 per cent of the move-outs were corporation couples being transferred away from the Chicago area; 12½ per cent were Army and Navy couples assigned to new stations. Since then there has been little shift in this pattern and little shift in the kind of people who are moving in to fill up the vacancies. Periodic checks on the occupational breakdown of the rental people show that from year to year the proportion of engineers, junior executives, and such remains roughly the same.*

* As of April 1954, a check made by Thomas McDade of ACB of 700 rental families showed the following breakdown: business administration, 28.2 per cent; professional, 25.2 per cent; sales, 22.1 per cent. Of the remaining 24.5 per cent: supervisors, production workers, and independ-

This constant replenishing assures that, as the community ages, there will always be a cadre of young, middle-class organization people on the way up. People who stay are not necessarily less successful; Park Forest has a strong adhesive power for those who have become involved in its activities, and many people who ordinarily would have moved away to the North Shore or its equivalent have stayed on. But the transients are still the key. Whether they actually move or not, it is the people successful enough to have the option who set the dominant style of life in suburbia.

While it cannot be called a "class" division, there is an important difference in attitude between these transients and the others, and to explore it is to recognize the great amount of insecurity many of the latter have over their middle-class status. A resident's attitude toward the community is an index. The usual organization man tends to affect an attitude of fond detachment—swell place, lots of kicks, but, after all, the sort of place you graduate from. For others, however, such an attitude is impossible. It is most impossible of all for the man who has expected to go ahead in the organization world but finds that he will not. He dislikes thinking about turnover, not so much that he sees it as a slur on the community, but as a slur on himself. For him, the ever-present moving van is a standing rebuke—a reminder of an organization world to which he does not truly belong.

Then there are the people for whom suburbia is a social achievement. They are not envious, like the unsuccessful organization man, of those who leave; much as enlisted men feel toward a comrade who has won a bid to officer's training, they can speak quite equably, sometimes proudly, of ex-neighbors who have gone on to better things. But it is the permanence of the community, not its impermanence, that they wish to see. They cannot joke about it with detachment, and they can be extraordinarily sensitive about references that no one else would think invidious. When I first started interviewing, one of the women's magazines had just come out with a picture story on life in the homes area. It was a pleasant story, full of praise, but the housewives were very annoyed. "Those pictures they published are absolutely disgraceful,"

ents, 6.3 per cent; publicity, 4.2 per cent; retail workers, 5.7 per cent; transportation workers, 6.1 per cent; miscellaneous, 2.2 per cent.

one exclaimed to me. "Why did they have to take so many of back yards? The way they angled them makes it look like a development!"

LET US PAUSE BRIEFLY TO RETRACE THEIR STEPS BACK FROM SUBURBIA. It is important to remember that the move is not a sudden one from the lower to the middle class but rather the most critical of several moves. To a degree the people affected have been moving simultaneously with others—which is to say, the mobility hasn't been a case of the individual outracing the people he was brought up with, but a concurrent movement. Yet it is not so uniform a movement that some have not gone past others, and the awareness of this competition has produced some very powerful tensions.

This was brought home to me when I made a study of several new Philadelphia row-house neighborhoods of the kind that are the stepping stones to suburbia. There were many similarities to suburbia—the median income was only slightly beneath the Park Forest and the Levittowns; the population was predominantly a young one, and they give it the look of the new market wherever you see it: the great forest of television aerials, the hard-top convertibles, the housewives in blue jeans and plaid slacks *Kaffee-klatzsching* on the lawns, the hundreds of husbands stopping off at the giant supermarket to pick up the extra groceries on the way back home from work.

But there were differences, and if I had to single out the one that impressed me most, it would be, simply, the amount of plain, ordinary disagreeableness. Compared to the suburban communities, the tensions seemed much closer to the surface, the jealousies more intense. Nobody seemed to have settled down to take a long breath; the notion of survival of the fittest was omnipresent, and few blocks seemed to have the graces, the rules of the game that suburbia has acquired to muffle the conflict. These neighborhoods happen to be in Philadelphia, and there are factors peculiar to them. Yet I was persuaded by the talks I had there that this somewhat intangible atmosphere was a reality which all sensed and which had its roots in causes fairly universal.

As a check of former addresses indicated, these people are members of the great outward movement from the inner city wards—as

they have been moving geographically toward the suburbs, they have been moving socially as well. But it is a *transition*, and there is the rub, for though they have left one world—the close-knit society of the *padrone*, for example—they have not quite joined another, and the influx of Negroes into the houses they left behind is a specter they do not for a moment forget. Except for the older people, for whom such neighborhoods can be ideal, suburbia is the dream, and the neighbor who puts the “For Sale” sign up as he prepares to move to suburbia does so with a feeling that he has made it.

It is not stretching the sense of the word too much to say that he has not *made it* so much, but that he is *passing*. Still fundamentally urban and lower middle class in his reflexes, he has a long acculturation ahead of him, and if he is not entirely sure how it is going to end up, neither can we be. His social enfranchisement is a great tribute to the vigor of our democracy, but we would do well to recognize the pitfalls of this dynamic.

PSYCHOLOGICALLY AT LEAST, THE NEWCOMERS TO SUBURBIA ARE LIVING on the brink of a precipice. It is true that they are better buttressed than were their parents against a depression, but that much more have their expectations been raised. Broad as the middle class may be, there is a line, and a rather firm one, beneath which middle-class life is impossible. The line, suburbia would indicate, is somewhere between \$4,800 and \$5,200. It is not, furthermore, a static figure. It is constantly moving up as the couple ages, for while it may be all right to enter suburbia strapped for money, as time goes on it is abnormal for one's income not to rise, and this will be painfully evident to the family which cannot follow other contemporaries as they expand the little luxuries of their life.

When they studied Middletown of the depression years, the Lynds were struck by the way in which the blurring of class lines denied people a sense of “sheltered arrival.” “Democracy under private capitalism,” they wrote, “has shaved off the edges of these plateaus, and the whole population moves, according to the ethos of our culture, endlessly and breathlessly up one long, unbroken sandy slope of acquisition. . . . from every point on the unbroken incline one can look ahead and see others with more than one has oneself.”

But private socialism offers no resting place either. The upward struggle is easier now, or seems easier, and though the couple who move into suburbia may do so with a feeling of “we made it,” their satisfaction is quite temporary. The longer they stay the more they recognize subtle gradations that at first were not apparent. There is no plateau in front of them, only the rungs of a ladder.

In this climb the young management man who sets suburbia's styles can be a dangerous pace-setter. At a given time, his income and the income of the newly arrived white-collar man may be identical.* The potential rate of increase, however, is quite different. With much more safety can the organization man extend himself, for unless he does something extremely stupid in the company, his income will automatically increase by 30 per cent at the very least in the next three or four years. His white-collar neighbor is not in the same position, even though his salary be identical. This kind of disparity, however, is muffled by surface similarities, and many who will never enter management are stimulated to live as if they would. It is particularly hard for wives to grasp the fact, and husbands who are in a fairly static job are under constant pressure from them to keep up.

In those sections of the new suburbia where the houses are slightly less expensive than the norm, people are closest to the thin edge, and the social importance of small differences becomes assertive. The case of the Eastgate area is illustrative. Several years ago, the Park Forest developers decided to add a group of houses in the \$10,000 class. The difference between these houses, in either price or attractiveness, and the \$12,000 to \$13,500 houses is not great, but there has been enough to strain Park Foresters' pre-

* How illusory the “average” income of a community can be is apparent if you plot the rate of increase of its members' incomes. In 1953 we obtained financial data on every tenth rental family in Park Forest which included the husband's salary on entering the community and the periodic raises he may have obtained in succeeding years. At the end of their second year, most of the husbands were fairly near the median income of \$5,800, but their rates of ascent varied considerably. Salesmen, for example, went up only about \$150 a year, while chemists went up in \$500 to \$600 leaps, and lawyers raced past everybody. People in the latter categories could afford to mortgage themselves very heavily and they did. The others could not afford to, but they did too.

tensions of classlessness. (Asked to describe the kind of people living in Eastgate, Park Foresters grope with difficulty. No one can bring himself to say "working-class people"; the phrases are more likely to be "people who work with their hands more than their heads," "artisans," or, at worst, "blue collar.") The homes are nice—some think the design better than the more expensive ones—and they are well kept up. But both the Eastgaters and the others in the community sense that Eastgate is not quite a part of Park Forest. Many Eastgaters have moved to another sector at the first opportunity, and it will probably always remain a bit of alien soil in the one-class society.*

WHILE THE VULNERABILITY OF THE NEWCOMERS MAY NEVER BE PUT TO a large-scale test, the effect of several localized recessions is suggestive. Economically, the impact has not been serious; most of the plant layoffs have been temporary, and in the midst of a generally rising economy the families affected have been able to weather the squall through renegotiated loans. Psychologically, however, the effect has been considerable. The possibility of going much under \$4,800 does not threaten merely to rob a family of some luxuries; it threatens to take them away from a style of life. Suburbia does not condone shabby gentility. The amenities that a severe cutback in expenditures would put in jeopardy are not marginal; to the family on the edge of the middle class they are social necessities.

* The segregating effect even small differences can provoke has been well illustrated in the new towns of England. F. J. Osborn, in *Green Belt Cities* (London, 1946), tells how homes had been sited in the new towns of Letchworth and Welwyn Garden City so there would be much mixing of classes. At first they did seem fairly classless; their residents were caught up in the same wave of pioneer spirit that characterized Park Forest's early days. As in Park Forest, however, the unifying pressures slackened, and latent differences began to show up. "There is less segregation of the classes than in other towns," writes Osborn. "It has been found, however, that whatever the town planner may desire, people have a marked tendency to segregate themselves by class or income. . . . The better-off tenants (whether they are clerical workers or the more highly paid factory workers) spontaneously move to streets in which, even if the houses are no larger, the social atmosphere is regarded as superior." (Quoted from Harold Orlans, *Utopia, Ltd.*, New Haven, 1953, p. 89.)

Those who have counseled with people in such situations say that in almost every case the prime fear is the fear of "going back." Often it is an unreasoning fear—houses in suburbia, after all, are often the cheapest houses available—but it can be a tremendous one nonetheless to those who suffer it. They can feel so isolated. Back in the depression, millions were in a predicament not of their own making, yet social workers tell us that despite the generalness of the depression people had strong feelings of individual guilt. Today the feelings of guilt could be much more intense. Psychologically, they have more to lose than any other group in our society, and a turndown that would be moderate by the standards of two decades ago would place them in a perilous position. They are not going back, and if their fears were exploited, their discontent could become ugly indeed. If our economy has an Achilles' heel, this might be it.

BUT IF RETURN SEEMS A SPECTER, LET US REMEMBER, IT IS BECAUSE there is advance, and on balance it is the dynamic of this forward movement rather than the danger of it that seems most impressive. There must be a thin edge, for we cannot expect to celebrate the gains of a rising standard without bearing this price. The fruits of social revolution are always more desirable in anticipation than fact, and the pink lamp shade in the picture window can be a sore disappointment to those who dreamed that the emancipation of the worker would take a more spiritual turn.* It is a sight,

* This kind of disappointment has been very strong in England. For years liberal intellectuals fought to extend middle-class security to the workers, and now that they are succeeding they are discomfited. Writing in *The Spectator* (January 20, 1956), Charles Curran talks of life in the vast municipal housing estates where so many workers now live. He speaks of how they read the tabloids exclusively because the tabloids "offer a simple, cheerful, manageable universe, a warm, cozy place of sex, excitement, triviality and fantasy . . . the daydream heaven of wealth, luxuries, and sexual attraction to which the football-pool coupon will one day provide a ticket of admission. An interior life of this kind and on this scale is something that has not previously existed in England. It contrasts sharply with the expectations that buoyed up the social reformers—that once the manual worker was free from the clutches of poverty and insecurity, he would begin to participate in our social heritage. Nothing of the kind has happened."

however, that we can well endure. The phase in which people stand poised on the brink of the middle class is not a pretty one, but it is a phase. In somewhat the same way that Americanization affected succeeding waves of immigrants, acclimatization to the middle class will lessen the feeling of social vulnerability that can turn these newcomers ugly.

THE MELTING-POT ANALOGY IS STILL APROPOS. FOR ALL THE DIFFERENCES in background, no fixed class structure has congealed in places like Park Forest. Occupation and family background have provided a certain kind of status—but for individuals, and the individuals have not jelled into groups on this basis. Similarly, while many people get together according to common interests—interest in world politics, for example, or in gardening—these are only part-time associations and they are so fluid that they carry few overtones of social status. The same is true of religion: vigorous as church activity is, religious allegiances have far less of the clan effect than they have in traditional communities. Not so incidentally, many mixed-marriage couples have come to Park Forest, for here, they have correctly sensed, is a refuge from the conflicting loyalties that would beset them elsewhere.

The nearest thing to an upper class are the remaining pioneer settlers who are still active in the village government. Interestingly, this group has a heavy representation of Democrats of the egghead kind, for though the Democratic leaders can't get much support during national elections, as private citizens and "independents," they virtually run the place. To some intellectuals this has been something of a cruel blow; for those who like to feel themselves embattled against the forces of Philistinism, it has been almost embarrassing to be so powerful, and a few, almost eager to see the hopelessness of it all, have left lest they compromise their idealism. Most are quite happy, however, and though they speak harshly of the anti-intellectualism of suburbia, they are—aside from the developer's people they so regularly combat—the nearest thing to fat cats Park Forest has. Because of the fact of their having been there quite some time, most of them are now in the income bracket which can support one of the more expensive houses (the block in which they are concentrated is called "Government Row").

But though the civic leaders have prestige, they are not, in any customary sense, an upper class. An elite, perhaps, but not a social one. Their cohesion is functional; they are not, like the upper class of Newburyport, members of a primary group which envelops most of one's allegiances and kinship ties. True, they tend to come from a middle-class background, but this is a corollary, not a cause, of their situation. Like the national elite of which they are fractions, their prestige is a sort of ex-officio prestige, awarded for performance and function and revocable for lack of it. And they do not want for people eager to do the revoking. By reflex, the new suburbanites are stringently anti-cabal, and indignant letter writers to the newspapers habitually refer to "self-appointed" leaders, "so-called" saviors, and similar threats to the open utopia.

When the current "Aquacenter" pool was a-building, there was resistance to the idea and, significantly, the principal basis was the fear of people that this might be a first step toward stratification. Instead of there being a municipal pool, as many had hoped, a private organization was set up to undertake the business. "The town pool that was originally planned was right," says one resident, "but then we would have had to admit Chicago Heights people and some of our 'democratic' people wouldn't like that at all." Modest as the family expenses are (\$100 bond plus usage fees), many believe that it is just high enough to keep many of the marginal-income people in Park Forest away from the pool and the result will be the formation of a "country-club set."

The classlessness also stops very sharply at the color line. Several years ago there was an acrid controversy over the possible admission of Negroes. It threatened to be deeply divisive—for a small group, admission of Negroes would be fulfillment of personal social ideals; for another, many of whom had just left Chicago wards which had been "taken over," it was the return of a threat left behind. But the people who were perhaps most sorely vexed were the moderates. Most of them were against admission too, but though no Negroes ever did move in, the damage was done. The issue had been brought up, and the sheer fact that one had to talk about it made it impossible to maintain unblemished the ideal of egalitarianism so cherished.

But the force of the ideal should not be deprecated. Let me make perverse use of the concept of those who believe we are

highly stratified: if one holds that class divisions exist because people think there are class divisions, to be consistent one would have to concede that they do not exist when people think they do not exist. The new suburbanites do indeed obscure some harsh realities when they talk of their democratic ideals, yet their unwillingness to concede class divisions is itself a very powerful factor in keeping the divisions from crystallizing. I am not trying to argue that paradise is imminent; the breakdown of the old divisions of class has left people vulnerable to other kinds of webs, and these too have their tyrannies. But they are not tyrannies fixed upon the individual, like class; they are self-imposed, and the individual has at least the choice of declining them.

CHAPTER 24 *Inconspicuous Consumption*

IN DEFINING THE GOOD LIFE, THE SUBURBANITES HAVE TO GET DOWN TO cases, and when they do these social pressures can become highly visible. On the one hand, suburbanites have a strong impulse toward egalitarianism; on the other, however, they have an equally strong impulse to upgrade themselves. Somewhere in the middle lies the good life, but like that elusive plateau they seek in *The Organization*, it vanishes as quickly as one finds it.

In an environment that seems so homogeneous, one might think there were few distinctions one would have to worry about. To the practiced eye, however, there is much more diversity in the scene than the bystander sees, for the more accustomed one becomes to the homogeneity, the more sensitized is he to the small differences. At Levittown, Pennsylvania, residents are very much aware of who has what "modification" of the basic ranch-house design, and one house on which the owner mounted a small gargoye became so famous a sight that many residents used to drive out of their way to show it to visitors. People have a sharp eye

for interior amenities also, and the acquisition of an automatic dryer, or an unusually elaborate television set, or any other divergence from the norm is always cause for notice. Those who lack such amenities, conversely, are also noted. In one suburb, to cite a rather extreme example, a wife was so ashamed of the emptiness of her living room that she smeared the picture window with Bon Ami; not until a dinette set arrived did she wash it off.

Necessity has been buttressed with ideology. It's inconspicuous consumption now, and suburbanites are quite articulate about it. One of the most frequent observations they will volunteer is that "there's no keeping up with the Joneses here," and they protest it with unwonted frequency. The precept does more than condone their lack of money to do anything else; it praises the behavior as ultimately ethical. It is a social compact they are voicing. Openly stated, the reasoning would go something like this: Most of us are at a pretty critical stage in our careers; it is just about now that we will realize that some of us are really going to go ahead and some of us aren't. If you find you're going ahead, it's rubbing it in unfairly to make it obvious to the others who aren't. You have broken the truce.

The job, then, is not to keep up with the Joneses. It's to keep down with them.^o Even those sophisticated enough to talk, albeit a trifle nervously, about "other-directed" consumption of their group see a valid reason for it. When they see a neighbor vaunting worldly goods, they can see this is an offense—not to them individually, mind you, but to the community. When people comment unfavorably about conspicuous display, they usually stress that they themselves see nothing wrong with it, *but that other people might*; and the purchase, therefore, was ill advised.

The group has always conditioned purchases, of course, and the

^o Ad in *The New York Times*, January 10, 1954: "Gimbel's takes note of a new trend in American living. The 'Booming Middle Class' is taking over—and no longer are we living up to the Joneses (Chauncey Montague Jones et familia)—we're living down to the Joneses (Charlie Jones and the wife and kids). It's bye-bye, upstairs chambermaid—ta, ta, liveried chauffeur—good riddance to the lorgnette, limousine, and solid-gold lavatory. The new Good Life is casual, de-frilled, comfortable, fun—and isn't it marvelous. Gimbel's is all for the bright, young, can't-be-fooled Charlie Joneses."