

Social Class in America (1957)

Voice-over Narrator: Newborn American babies, newborn citizens of these United States, free and with rights guaranteed by the Constitution. But let's take a closer look at these new arrivals in a typical American town.

They have equal legal rights, [but] in class they are not equal at all. Each has a social status added on to him by his family ascribed to him at birth.

Meet Guilford Ames the Third, the latest addition to one of the town's upper-class families. Guilford Ames the Second is the wealthiest man in town. He owns a large factory. The Ames is one of the oldest families in the community and so it represents prestige as well as wealth. This is where the Ames family has lived for the last 100 years and this is where Guilford Ames the Third will live.

Like most of the babies here, this one, Theodore Eastwood by name, has an ascribed status of middle class. His father is Joseph Eastwood, high school educated and a white-collar worker in the Ames Factory. He has a steady skillful job and is comfortably off but the chances are that he will not advance much beyond his present status. The mortgage on his house is on its way to being paid and someday, it undoubtedly will be.

Well, although young Ted Eastwood has been ascribed the status of middle-class, the status he could achieve during his lifetime may be higher than the one he was born with. It could be true, too, for another baby.

David Benton, whose ascribed status is lower class. David's father is Michael Benton, an unskilled factory worker who has a meager education. Mr. Benton rents the upper floor of a two-family house in a run-down section of town.

The ability to rise from ascribed status to an achieved one is called **vertical mobility** and is particularly characteristic in the United States there are class lines within each general group and these vary geographically and in relation to nationality, religion, and race. Class exists in the United States as it does everywhere and it plays a vital part in the life of every community.

Let us follow the lives of these three babies and see how class affects them.

Eighteen years later, Gil, Ted, and Dave are in the graduating class of the town's high school after the commencement exercises. The three boys, who were good friends, need to say goodbye. Next fall, Gil Ames is going to attend an Ivy League university. Ted, who took a commercial course in high school

plans to get a white-collar job like his father's. Dave is going to work, too, so that he can add to his family's income.

Friends forever, they've said. Well, maybe in a way, but these boys come from families of different classes and the lines of social class are real here in America as they are everywhere in Europe, in Asia, and even in the Soviet Union. As the years pass, class boundaries will separate Gil and Ted and Dave more and more. The boundaries between Ted's middle-class parents and Dave's lower-class parents are as important as those that lie between the upper and middle classes. Even the simple event at graduation from high school has a different significance for the boys and their families.

For Gil, it is only a milestone in his formal education. Later that night, Mr. Ames has a serious talk with his son. Mr. Ames tells Gil that he sent him into public high school so that he could gain a democratic background. But now he's about to enter environment more in keeping with his social position at college he will meet many of his own kind. Gil understands because already, he has developed an awareness of his class its patterns and its rules.

In another part of town, the Eastwoods have just finished dinner and Mr. Eastwood is talking with Ted about his plans for the future. Ted's record in high school was generally good but there was one subject in which he excelled: drawing. Ted would like to do something professionally in the art field but his father discourages him. In the light of Mr. Eastwood's own experience, security lies in business and white-collar work. Ted sees his father's point of view and agrees that the commercial courses he took in high school have prepared him for office work. And so that's the kind of job he'll look for.

In the Benton household, graduation from high school is an event worthy of celebration and the family party in Dave's honor is in progress Mr. Benton proudly announces to the guests that Dave has already gone out and found himself a job. In the Benton family and among their neighbors, economic pressures are important. Dave's initiative in finding work is highly regarded by all of them and his parents are justifiably proud.

[Music]

Four years later, Dave is 22 now and has a job at a local gas station. Although he's still only a gas station attendant, he's studying to be an automobile mechanic.

The driver of the car is his old friend of high school days, Gil Ames! Gil has graduated from college now and is on his way to start work in his father's factory.

Dave is going to be married just as soon as his job as an auto mechanic comes through.

Gil's first day of work in his father's factory turned up still another familiar face: Ted Eastwood has a job in the bookkeeping department.

Mr. Ames is taking his son on a tour of all the departments of the factory. Someday Gil will take over the business and today, he's beginning to learn about it. [Inaudible], didn't it?

Gil Ames with his future all laid out for him, but you, you're Teddy Eastwood stuck in a job you'll be in all your life. Why don't you get out? What's keeping you here anyway?

Mary Blakeslee? You thought you'd marry her, but remember what she said that day in the car—her car, of course.

Mary Blakeslee Voice-over: Can't you see it's just impossible, Ted? It's not just the money! We live in different worlds.

Voice-over Narrator: Sure, different worlds inside this town but there are other worlds, bigger town—you've got some money saved. Go to New York. Give it a try for six months, and if you fail... Only you're not going to fail!

And Ted didn't fail. He had talent and the ability to work hard. He started with a job in the art department of a large advertising agency. They called him a production assistant, but actually he was a sort of glorified errand boy.

But at least he was through with bookkeeping and close to the kind of work he liked. At night, he took courses in commercial art and advertising and spent a good deal of his free time working and studying at home.

In the years that followed, Ted gained a thorough technical knowledge of his field.

[Music]

By the time he was 30 years old, he was the head of the art department of an advertising agency, Horizontal Mobility. Moving from one place to another has resulted in vertical mobility for Teddy's good; a movement upward from his ascribed status to an achieved status that is largely the result of his professional standing.

Class lines are drawn differently in a large city like New York. Although they are still there, here professional standing power and wealth are great importance. It is possible for members of socially

prominent family, theater people who may have come from the lower class, and successful businessmen up the middle class to mix socially and Ted is an accepted member of the group.

But when Ted returns to his hometown on a vacation, how does he fare? Has he achieved new status back there, too? When he meets the girl he wanted to marry, have things changed? The town is small enough so that Mary has heard about Ted's success in New York, but this isn't New York. Mary is married to Gil now and although they are friendly enough toward Ted, he still isn't part of their world and he never will be.

In this town, the ascribed status of his parents is still the class to which he belongs. Ted's mother brings them up to date on all the town gossip but he only half-hears her. The meeting with Mary has stirred old memories in him and he's remembering what she said to him about different worlds. He knows now that to her and Gil, he's still the nice kid from the wrong side of the railroad tracks, no matter how successful he is. His achieved status is higher than that of his father's because he has a profession, but that status depends on a place; in this case, New York.

Dave Benton, on the other hand, has changed his status hardly at all. He's now a skilled auto mechanic and although he has achieved status, is not much better than the one ascribed to him by his family. Financially, he will be able to provide better for his wife and children. His third child, a son, was born in the local hospital just yesterday.

This new Benton baby has the ascribed status given him by his family. He may, as he grows up, reach a higher achieved status as Ted Eastwood did, or he may, as his own father did, stay in the class into which he was born. His vertical mobility will depend greatly upon him: his character, his talents and abilities. It will possibly depend, too, upon geographic mobility because the criteria from vary from place to place.

And so it will be for all these babies. All citizens, all equal before the law. But not the same by the standards of class.

[Theme music]

The End.