

# The Poor Rich\*

IN THE PAST, the operation of great wealth has often been to free its possessors from ignoble pursuits and low company and to impose on them a sense of public responsibility. Today that tendency has been reversed.

By far the majority of the rich are daily drudges in the same mills as the go-getters who are still on the make, and they work tirelessly at tasks which render the operation of their wealth and power as uncontrollable as that of any other marketeer. Thus, it may very well be that the effect of mass production and consumption is really to bring about a practical rather than a theoretic communism. When men and women have been transformed into replaceable parts by competitive success drives, and have become accustomed to the consumption of uniform products, it is hard to see where any individualism remains. Certainly the sense of personal or private property has become very weak in these circumstances. And the fanatic defenders of private enterprise are mainly those corporation bureaucrats who manipulate the savings of an anonymous crowd of invisible investors.

In practice, then, the very rich today are bureaucrats in their various monopolistic empires of soap, oil, steel, cars, movies, newspapers, magazines, and so on. And they have the minds of bureaucrats.

They are timid, cautious conformists. Like anybody else, they accept the doctrine that economic success is rewarded by the power to conform.

Playing the money for all the consumer goods, they have arrived. And at that point the success code plays them false. There are no more trees to climb. Having arrived at the top, they find no plateau on which to arrange a spacious and useful existence. As men at the top, they inherit a code of work and play no different from Tom's, Dick's, and Harry's down below them. The English or European businessman, once at the top, used to shift his mode of existence to the squirarchical in a generation or two. He could use his leisure in politics, scholarship, or in patronizing artists directly and personally. But not so today. For us it is the process of arriving that has meaning, not the positive content of possessing ourselves and of enriching our experience and that of others through our wealth and leisure.

This, then, is the dilemma of the behaviorist, the child of Calvinist forebears who saw not in wealth but in the process of acquiring wealth the surest means of defeating the devil's power over idle hands. (See II. H. Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*.) Having lost the Calvinist's motive, we are left only with his behavior patterns.

Consider the plight of the children of the rich. How can they go their parents one better and earn a good conscience for having come up the hard way? Life is dull for these children who cannot share the collective passion of

those who hope to be rich. The speed, the struggle, the one-man fury are not for them.

In *Time and Free Will*, Henri Bergson puts this question: Suppose some mischievous genius could so manage things that all the motion in the universe were doubled in speed, and everything happened twice as fast as at present? How could we detect this fraud by which we would be deprived of half our lives? Easily, said Bergson. We could recognize the impoverishment of our conscious lives. The contents of our minds would be reduced.

Apply that criterion to those caught in the success trap, where speed is of the essence. What is the state of their minds? What is the content of their lives? Do they not rather despise anybody who pauses long enough to acquire a mental content from reflection or to win a wisdom which will only

cut down his speed in making for the goal? And is it strange that those who travel so fast and so light should arrive in a nude and starving condition?

The very conditions of success render the rich suspicious of those failures whom they might be expected to assist. They have no training or taste which would enable them to select struggling artists or writers who might be worthy of aid, in these matters, therefore, they work through the dealers in old pictures or distribute many tiny gratuities through bureaucratic

foundations which are run on the most finicky, academic lines. This, of course, overlooks these endowments for hospitals and libraries which are intended as family monuments. And it is not true to say that the rich are 'parsimonious'. The point here is simply that they are timid and unresourceful in a way which stands in stark contrast to the zip and push that has put them where they are.

The relative helplessness, social isolation, and irresponsibility of the rich highlights the same situation among those who are striving toward that goal. The circumstances of the struggle insure that the winners will arrive in no condition to enjoy their advantages.

Except in an economic sense, the rich do not even form a class, as, for example, the "film colony" does. So that when distinguished foreigners come to America they naturally seek the company of movie stars rather than of the wealthy. The stars have a personal symbolic relation to the currents of national life which the remote and anonymous figures of celestial finance do not. The stars are distinct individuals wearing human masks that represent some aspect of the collective dream. But the rich are dim and obscure, sharing the tastes and make-up of the very people above whom they have risen, and yet deprived of the satisfactions of mass solidarity in an egalitarian society.  
-Herbert Marshall McLuhan

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