

# EVERYONE'S A WINNER

LIFE IN OUR  
CONGRATULATORY  
CULTURE



JOEL BEST



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*For Ryan*

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## LIFE IN AN ERA OF STATUS ABUNDANCE

I live surrounded by excellence. On a drive to our local shopping center, I find myself behind an SUV with a bumper sticker declaring the driver's pride in being the parent of a middle-school honor roll student. In the parking lot, I wind up next to a car bearing a red, white, and blue magnetic ribbon that says, "U.S.A.-#1." Several of the storefronts in the shopping center sport banners or other signs reporting that the stores have received statewide honors. I live in a small state, and I realize that it must be easier to be designated the "Best—in Delaware" than it would be elsewhere. Still, these signs tell me that our small shopping center contains a remarkable number of establishments that have been designated as offering outstanding services (our state's best preschool and its best veterinarian) or for selling terrific merchandise (Delaware's best Chinese take-out and burgers). The sandwich shop has its wall covered with framed certificates declaring that it has won various awards for serving the state's best cheesesteaks, hoagies, deli, etc., etc. Before the video store closed, it was filled with DVD boxes identifying movies that had received Oscars, film festival awards, or at the least "two thumbs up." At the newsstand, I can find magazines rating the best colleges, hospitals, high schools, employer places to live, places to retire, and on and on. The party store features an "Award Center" rack with an array of colored ribbons that can be awarded to a "Good Eater," a "Star Singer," or someone who has turned fifty or is having some other birthday evenly divisible by ten. Back home, when I log onto my computer, my university's home page features today's news items, a large share of which report that some professor or student on our campus has won a prize. And so on. Several times each day, I encounter claims that someone has been designated excellent by somebody else.

The fact that some third party has made these designations is key. If I own a pizza parlor and put up a sign declaring that I bake the best pizzas around, most customers will be skeptical of my self-serving claims. But, if after counting the ballots submitted by their readers, *Delaware Today* magazine or the *Wilmington News Journal* newspaper identifies the best pizza in Delaware, that information somehow seems a little more convincing, and a merchant who displays a banner announcing such an award seems to be doing more than just bragging. Somebody else—some third party, whether it be an expert judges or just whoever responded to some poll—has vouched for the excellence of the hamburger, that preschool, or whatever.

We pass out praise and superlatives freely. Americans have a global reputation for being full of ourselves. We chant, "U.S.A.—Number One! U.S.A.—Number One!" We confidently describe our country as the world's greatest, its sole superpower. But self-congratulation is far more than a matter of national pride. It is a theme that runs throughout our contemporary society.

The kudos begin early. These days, completing elementary school, kindergarten, even preschool may involve a graduation ceremony, complete with caps and gowns. Many children receive a trophy each time they participate in an organized sports program, beginning with kindergarten soccer or

ball, so that lots of third graders have already accumulated a dresser-top full of athletic trophies. Many elementary school classrooms anoint a “Student of the Week.” Experts justify this praise by arguing that children benefit from encouragement, positive reinforcement, or “warm fuzzies.” As the commentator Michael Barone sees it: “From ages six to eighteen Americans live mostly in what I call Soft America—the parts of our country where there is little competition and accountability.... So America coddles: our schools, seeking to instill self-esteem, ban tag and dodgeball, and promote ju about anyone who shows up.”<sup>1</sup>

But children aren't the only beneficiaries of our self-congratulatory culture. Awards, prizes, and honors go to adults—and to companies, communities, and other organizations—in ever-increasing numbers. It is remarkable how much of our news coverage concerns Nobel Prizes, Academy Awards, and other designations of excellence. And, at the end of life, obituaries often highlight the deceased's honors (“Bancroft Dies at 73. Won Oscar, Emmy, Tony”). Congratulatory culture extends nearly from the cradle to the grave.

This isn't how we like to think of ourselves. Michael Barone insists: “From ages eighteen to thirty Americans live mostly in Hard America—the parts of American life subject to competition and accountability.... Hard America plays for keeps: the private sector fires people when profits fall, and the military trains under live fire.”<sup>2</sup> The imagined world of Hard America is governed by impersonal market forces, and rewards don't come easily. There is stiff competition, and only the best survive and thrive. This vision begins American history with no-nonsense Puritans whose God expected them to work hard and receive their rewards in heaven. People were to live steady lives and gain the quiet admiration of others for their steadfast characters. Pride was one of the seven deadly sins. In this view, our contemporary readiness to praise—and to celebrate our own (or at least our middle schoolers') accomplishments—seems to be something new.

So what's going on? Why are contemporary Americans so ready to pass out prizes and congratulate one another on their wonderfulness? What are the consequences of this self-congratulatory culture? This book attempts to answer these broad questions by focusing on a few specific, yet telling, developments. It examines the trend toward awarding ever more prizes, as well as our school's struggles to define excellence. More generally, it looks at changes in the way Americans think about heroism, and at the causes and consequences of our eagerness to rate and rank.

First, however, we need to take a step back. Awards, prizes, and honors are forms of what sociologists call social status, and we need to begin by considering how status works.

## SOCIAL STATUS

The great German sociologist Max Weber argued that societies rank their members along economic, political, and social dimensions. We usually think of economic rankings in terms of *class*; belonging to a higher class means that you have more money, higher income, or greater wealth than those in lower classes. Similarly, political rankings involve differences in *power*—the degree to which you can compel others to do what you want them to do. Social rankings, the third dimension, concern *status*—how much prestige, esteem, respect, or honor one receives from others.<sup>3</sup>

For the most part, social scientists act as though class and power are more important than status. They write far, far more books and articles about class and power—and about race and gender, which also have come to be viewed as key bases for ranking people in our society—than about status. Class, power, race, and gender are treated as serious matters, and each receives extensive coverage even in introductory sociology textbooks. In contrast, status seems to be considered slightly silly, and attracts far less attention from analysts and textbook authors. For most people, the word “status” brings to mind *status symbols*—vain people driving fancy cars or wearing ostentatious jewelry

hopes of impressing others. It is easy to dismiss such bling—rapers sporting saucer-sized, bejeweled medallions and the like—as unimportant.

But this ignores the central role status plays in our everyday lives. Oh, most of us may not go around flaunting pricey material goods, but we care—a lot—about whether others respect us. We think it is important to be well regarded. In extreme cases, status can become a matter of life and death. Think of innercity homicides that start with one youth “dissing” (disrespecting) another; think of duels between high-born gentlemen over points of honor. Those are lethal arguments about status.

But status concerns aren't limited to gangbangers and argumentative aristocrats. Most of us want to be well regarded by other people, and we try to behave in ways that will earn their respect. At least in the short run, there isn't much most of us can do to alter our social class or our power—let alone our race or gender—but we can always bid for more respect, for higher status. When we meet someone for the first time, we try to make a good first impression. When we go on a job interview, we show up clean, well groomed, neatly dressed, and speaking politely. When we say “please” and “thank you” we are demonstrating that we know how to observe the rituals of politeness. All of these efforts to make the best impression are attempts to gain others' respect, little moves in the everyday status games that we all play.

And we are sensitive to how others treat us. Are they according us the proper amount of respect? Or do they somehow convey that they look down on us, that they aren't that favorably impressed? Across time and space, we can find examples of societies where status differences were blatant. Feudal nobles could beat their vassals, and those vassals could not raise a hand in response. In the segregated South, there were countless ways of affirming the gulf in racial status: African-Americans were supposed to step aside, to use polite titles to address whites (“Mr. Strom”), while whites could call blacks by their first names, and so on. From our contemporary vantage point, such imbalanced status rituals strike us as wrong.

Our society operates along more democratic principles. Today's etiquette demands that all people receive a minimum level of courteous treatment, so that under ordinary circumstances we grant everyone some ritual respect. Of course, this hardly means that we all have the same status. Displaying a certain degree of courtesy to everyone is merely one of the most basic moves in the contemporary American status game. As we will see, things quickly get more complex.

American sociologists have tended to conflate status and class. They speak of “socio-economic status” (SES), and much of their research on status concerns occupational prestige (basically surveys used to rank the status of different occupations—studies showing that heart surgeons are looked up more than bootblacks). In this view, class and status are closely correlated. No wonder that we tend to equate status symbols with expensive material goods; people who have lots of money can afford to spend it on fancy cars and expensive jewelry as way of displaying their wealth.<sup>4</sup>

But there are two problems with conflating status and class. First, we need to realize that status symbols are not limited to expensive trinkets. There are all sorts of nonmaterial status symbols. Parents who correct their children's grammar (“Don't say ‘Me and Jim,’ say ‘Jim and I’”) or try to supervise their clothing and grooming choices are teaching status lessons. One's word choice, clothing, and grooming convey information about one's status. There are all sorts of status symbols that don't cost a dime (although they may require consciously learning what to do and how to do it). We can tell a lot about people's social class by listening to them talk (What do they choose to talk about? Which words do they choose? What sort of accent do they have?) or observing them in social situations (How do they behave?). A standard theme in social comedies is the person whose material and nonmaterial status symbols don't tell the same story: the newly rich individual who can afford to live in a mansion but doesn't observe upper-class customs (think *The Beverly Hillbillies*); or the

former aristocrat fallen on hard times who struggles to maintain a proud pose even in debased circumstances (such as the socialite turned soldier in *Private Benjamin*). Money can buy some status symbols, but not all.<sup>5</sup>

The second problem is that, while social class and occupation certainly involve status, so do aspects of social life far removed from economic life. Max Weber coined another important concept—lifestyle. He recognized that people belonged to all sorts of social groupings, and those groups had their own systems for allocating status and for making status claims. To understand lifestyle, imagine a suburban high school where all of the students come from middle-class homes. Even though a sociologist would classify them as members of the same social class, students within that high school are able to choose their place in the school's social system. Some will become heavily involved in athletics, others in academics, still others in social life, or rebellion, or whatever. That is, within the school setting, the students—who, remember, all come from middle-class families—can come to think of themselves and be considered by others to be very different sorts of people—jocks, nerds, stoners, whatever. Each of these identities comes with a lifestyle; that is, the members of each group tend to favor particular clothing and hairstyles, musical tastes, and patterns for alcohol and drug use, so that it is fairly easy for anyone familiar with the local status symbols to classify individuals into their different lifestyle groups. The distinctions between these categories aren't rigid; some talented athletes are excellent students, and so on. Yet each group assigns respect—status—to its members based on its own criteria for excellence, and everyone knows that the groups enjoy different relative status within the school as a whole.<sup>6</sup>

Adults can choose among far more status groupings, each with its associated lifestyle. Certainly class/money plays a role, but so do other factors—ethnicity, religion, age, education, hobbies, and so on. There are, for instance, lots of different middle-class lifestyles. What—if anything—you read or watch on television, what you eat, how you spend your free time, how you raise your children, and countless other choices reflect, not just your social class, but the particular status groups to which you belong.<sup>7</sup>

## SOCIAL WORLDS

Society, then, is composed of many small groups within which members assign and receive status. Sociologists disagree about the best name for these groupings; different terms emphasize different aspects of these groups. Calling them *status groups* plays up—and arguably exaggerates—the importance of status (the journalist Tom Wolfe coined the term *statuspheres*, which has the same quality). Another possibility is to speak of *subcultures* (which emphasizes each group's distinctive culture, its values and beliefs). Other sociologists favor *scenes* (a term that highlights social geography, the places where different groups congregate), *fields* (a concept that envisions social spaces where people compete for resources), or *tribes* or even *neo-tribes* (terms used to characterize heterogeneous groups that draw members from many different classes). Still another option—the one I prefer—is to speak of these groups as *social worlds*, a term that reminds us how people can become immersed—live much of their lives—within particular social groups.<sup>8</sup>

Each social world judges its members—that is, assigns them status—according to its own criteria. Often, the members' standards may strike people outside that social world as peculiar. Consider, for example, Civil War reenactors—those folks who wear Confederate or Union uniforms and meet to camp out, drill, and reenact battles. Reenacting is a hobby—something people do for fun—but it is also an elaborate social world that has its own organizations, magazines, websites, merchants, and so forth. In fact, there are significant social divisions within the reenacting world. Because reenactors seek to duplicate something of the past, many of them become concerned with historical authenticity

and over time their standards for what should be considered authentic have risen. Where one reenactor might have purchased outfits made with modern fabrics, the more serious reenactors can insist on more authentic cloth, assembled in more authentic ways. What might strike outsiders as trivial details—the nature of the buttons used, or the way the buttonholes were sewn—became ways of judging one's commitment to the reenactment project, symbols of status within the reenacting world. Of course, wearing authentic clothing is both more expensive and less comfortable, and the reenacting world has faced tensions between those deeply committed to authenticity (who describe themselves as “hardcore”) and those more concerned with enjoying the fun of reenacting than with achieving authenticity (dismissed by the hardcore reenactors as “farbs”). Hardcore reenactors try to distance themselves from farbs, so that what seems at first glance to be a single reenacting world can actually be subdivided into more-or-less distinct hardcore and farb worlds.<sup>9</sup>

Very similar tensions characterize the social world of barbershop quartets, where those committed to the traditional barbershop repertoire have found themselves in conflict with modernizers, who want to sing more contemporary songs and introduce various stylistic innovations. In this case, the traditionalists (known as “kibbers,” for “keep it barbershop”) tend to be older than the modernizers they warn against the “dangers of musical sophistication” and argue that modernization “emasculates barbershop music. After the modernizers took control of the Barbershop Harmony Society, the pastime's leading organization, traditionalists broke away to form their own Barbershop Quartet Preservation Association.<sup>10</sup>

For those of us who are neither reenactors nor barbershop singers, these struggles may seem strange. What does it matter whether a reenactor's uniform has buttons manufactured using traditional methods or whether a barbershop quartet wants to sing Beach Boys songs? But for members of those worlds these can become key status issues, determining who will and won't receive respect within the world. And, when a world's members cannot agree, the world often splits in two, so that separate worlds emerge—each with its own group, lifestyle, and status standards.

This process of division is fundamental and can be seen in all sorts of social worlds: a set of businesses come to define themselves as distinct and establish their own trade association, trade magazines, and so on; a group of researchers decide to organize their own scholarly society and publish their own journal to report work in their specialty; musicians who like to play in a particular style establish their own musical genre; and so on. In each of these cases, people who share a set of interests come to feel that they cannot get the respect they deserve in the larger, existing social world and they find advantages in setting up a league of their own, a separate world where they can recognize and reward what they view as appropriate behavior. Status concerns, then, are central to the establishment of these new social worlds.<sup>11</sup>

Recognizing the way that new social worlds are constantly being created in our society forces us to rethink some of sociologists' most basic assumptions about status. Their tendency to link status to the enduring edifice of social class ignores the relative ease with which status standards can be created and changed. It can be fairly difficult for individuals to move from one class to another; in contrast, the creation of new social worlds makes it quite easy for people to join new status systems. Employees who may look ahead to years in the same job with minimal opportunities to advance in social class find fewer obstacles to, say, becoming—and gaining status as—a hardcore Civil War reenactor. Status is more fluid, more easily changed than class or power.

This relates to a second assumption that underpins sociologists' thinking about status: that is, that status—like money or power—is a scarce resource. Many analysts assume that there is a limited amount of status, less than enough to go around. Its scarcity is what makes status valuable, so that people compete to gain status. If one person gains prestige, the thinking goes, it is to some degree



the expense of others. Some of the leading discussions of status involve quasi-economic reasoning arguing that market mechanisms govern the allocation of prestige.<sup>12</sup> Certainly, many people want more status, just as they want more money. In that sense, there will always be less status than people desire. The perceived shortage of status—insufficient respect being given to people like us—is one of the reasons disenchanted people form new social worlds. But the ability to establish a new social world means that folks aren't forced to spend their whole lives in circles where they inevitably lose to the competition for status. Rather, by creating their own worlds, they acquire the ability to mint status of their own. They can decide who deserves respect and why.

This process is one of the reasons that we live in a time of status abundance. Commentators have described post-World War II Americans as living in an affluent society, that is, in an era when many people enjoy very high standards of living, with large proportions of the population owning their own homes, cars, and so on.<sup>13</sup> This is economic affluence. In much the same way, we can think of contemporary America as experiencing an era of status affluence, when there are far more opportunities to gain status than in the past. As the commentator David Brooks notes: “Everybody gets to be an aristocrat now. And the number of social structures is infinite.... In this segmented world, everybody gets to be successful.”<sup>14</sup>

Of course people continue to desire more status, just as the economically affluent want more money, but the relative abundance of status is changing how we live.

## STATUS AFFLUENCE

Even under conditions of status affluence, people continue to act as though status is in short supply. The proud parents who display a bumper sticker announcing that their child is a middle-school honor roll student are declaring that their kid is an especially good student. Presumably, only some—not all—of the students at that middle school are on the honor roll. If every student in the school was to be designated an “honor roll student,” then the honor might seem meaningless. Similarly, when we see a banner announcing that this shop's sandwiches have been rated tops in Delaware, we assume that other places serving sandwiches didn't get that coveted top rating. Status depends upon making distinctions between those who deserve more respect and those who merit less.

Status affluence doesn't mean that everyone is of exactly equal status. Rather, it means that there are lots of opportunities to gain status, and those opportunities are increasing. The *Wilmington News Journal* only began polling readers to determine which preschool or Chinese take-out was considered the state's best about twenty years ago. When these rankings began, a whole new category of status came into being (and, over the years, the number of categories covered by the newspaper's poll increased, and *Delaware Today* magazine began running its own poll, so that the total number of “Best in Delaware” awards has grown and grown). Similarly, even if middle schools have placed students on honor rolls for some time, the practice of giving the students' parents bumper stickers began more recently. There are many signs that there is a lot more status to go around in today's self-congratulatory culture. What accounts for this development?

Status affluence is the result of three trends that characterized American society during the decades following World War II. During the long Great Depression that preceded that war, American society was characterized by scarcity: too many people had too little money, let alone status. The war put people back to work, but wartime rationing kept them from indulging themselves. However, the war's end launched a prolonged period of prosperity: standards of living rose as people bought houses in the suburbs and filled them with televisions and other consumer goods. This economic affluence, in turn, fostered three enduring social trends that continue to support status affluence: first, people could afford to join—and could choose among—a growing number of social worlds; second, they also had

more resources—more money, but also more leisure time and better information—to support those choices; and, third, those choices could be justified in multiple ways. These developments—more status-generating groups, more resources to support the groups' activities, and more ways to justify awarding status—created the conditions that allow status affluence to flourish.

### *1. The Growing Number of Groups Allocating Status*

There is a sense in which most status is local.<sup>15</sup> Even small social groupings assign some members more prestige than others; any group of young boys has its leader. These localized status rankings often go unstated—individuals look up to others without there being any sort of formal or even articulated ranking. But sometimes there are steps at formalization: the group names itself; perhaps it specifies leadership roles or offices and formally designates individuals to fill those positions; there may be a set of rules devised to govern the members' behavior. Even delinquent gangs sometimes adopt such formal trappings, as do all manner of more respectable clubs and other voluntary associations.

While it may be possible to live a life completely outside such formalized arrangements and remain totally within an informal world of family and friends, it is becoming less likely. Today parents “sign up” their children for soccer leagues and T-ball teams, band, Scouting, and so on.<sup>16</sup> High school students join athletic teams, the yearbook staff, orchestra, French Club, and other organized activities. As adults, people become members of religious congregations, officers in the PTA or the homeowners' association, or whatever. And, at every age group, local groups may have formal ties to citywide, statewide, even national organizations.<sup>17</sup>

All of these groups, simply by designating leadership roles, allocate a degree of status among their members. Note their diversity: these groups vary according to their members' race, class, gender, sexual orientation, occupation, ideology, religion, and all manner of other dimensions. It makes no difference: all sorts of people allocate status. But that is hardly the end of the matter. Some groups grow, and their organization tends to become more elaborate, with more officially designated positions that bring status to individuals. Often, the group sanctions more-or-less friendly competition: a kindergarten soccer league has a schedule of games, as do the teams in an adult slow-pitch softball league. Some people do well in these competitions and thereby earn more status. The group may also award prizes to those who embody whatever values the group considers important—yet another form of status. Over time, a group tends to evolve in ways that increase the number of people who derive status from the group. And, to the degree that this evolution improves the group's ability to communicate to both its members and those outside the group via such means as a newsletter or a website, information about the group's status attributions is likely to come to the attention of a growing number of people. Often, these developments pay off: the group's stature, its economic position, even its political influence may swell, reinforcing the links among status, class, and power.

Moreover, as we have seen in our discussion of social worlds, there is always the possibility that those members of a group who feel left out or underappreciated can split off and form their own group—a league of their own based on their vision of authentic reenacting or barbershopping or whatever. Each of those new groups becomes a new factory for manufacturing status. In short, the first cause of increased status affluence is the proliferation of groups within contemporary society, because each group becomes a source for the creation of additional status.

### *2. Increased Resources for Status Creation*

The increasing number of status-producing groups reflects the greater availability of resources needed to create and maintain such groups. Most obviously, economic affluence fosters status creation by generating *discretionary income*, so that after they cover their basic living expenses, individuals have money left over that they can choose to spend in different ways. To the degree that participation in hardcore reenacting and other social worlds costs money (and some reenactors purchase thousands of dollars' worth of gear), individuals can afford those costs. Affluence does not mean that every member of society can join just any social world; relatively few of us can afford to mingle among people who own large yachts. Still, most people find they have a choice of lifestyles available to individuals with about their amount of discretionary income.

This lifestyle diversity is supported by the media and merchants that serve particular social worlds. Immediately after World War II, many intellectuals worried about the emergence of mass society—a society in which individuals would be alienated members of a great undifferentiated mass that received the same messages from centralized mass media.<sup>18</sup> This Orwellian vision failed to materialize, because society was never a homogeneous mass; as we have already noted, society contains many social worlds, each with its own lifestyle and status system, and these are continually subdividing into ever more social worlds. Similarly, mass media—in the sense of media that sought to reach the great mass, *all* of society's members—proved to be a poor business model.

In one medium after another—movies, magazines, even eventually television—it became clear that it was more profitable to address specific, segmented audiences, defined by sex, age, ethnicity, lifestyle, and so on, rather than trying to capture and hold the attention of the mass. Thus, week-long general-interest magazines, such as *Life*, *Look*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*, became unprofitable precisely because they attracted huge numbers of diverse readers each week; advertisers found it was too expensive to reach the mass audience that read those magazines because most products tend to be purchased by particular sorts of people, and it was more efficient to advertise in magazines with smaller circulations, so long as their readers were concentrated in the demographic groups that offered the most likely customers. A glance at today's newsstands reveals that contemporary magazines target very specific groups of readers, whose interests often focus on particular lifestyle concerns. Such targeted media not only are more profitable but encourage membership in particular social worlds by keeping individuals apprised of those worlds' developments and status systems. And, of course, the Internet and other technological innovations have made it far easier for individuals with shared interests to contact one another, thereby fostering both the survival of existing social worlds and the possibility of creating new ones.<sup>19</sup>

The same process is replicated in our shopping malls, where most vendors are branches of national chains calculated to serve particular lifestyles. Thus, adolescents can shop in Hot Topic for punk merchandise, or Pacific Sunwear for skater/surfer styles, and so on. Consumer affluence leads to a consumption-centered economy in which media address segmented audiences in order to attract merchants who hope to sell to those markets. A visit to any supermarket reveals commercialized diversity: Coca-Cola is now Classic Coke, just one of an array of Cokes, sugared and diet, caffeinated or not, flavored with lemon, cherry, vanilla, and so on; just as Crest toothpaste is available in multiple flavors with various health and beauty additives. These consumer choices allow people in different social worlds to equip themselves differently and, in the process, display their engagement with distinctive lifestyles.<sup>20</sup>

There is a long intellectual tradition denouncing these developments and arguing that people cannot find authentic meaning in the pursuit of consumer goods associated with different lifestyles. Perhaps not, but economic affluence certainly supports people's efforts to establish distinct social worlds and thereby fosters the growth of status—and the attendant status symbols—associated with



different lifestyles and social worlds.

In addition to economic affluence, time and information are key resources in fostering the expansion of status. Contemporary society is awash in news; it has never been easier to gather and spread information. Modern technologies link most American households to dozens, even hundreds of cable and satellite television networks, to the Internet, to e-mail, and to ever fancier phones. Great amounts of information travel farther and faster than ever before, and this means that it is easier to learn about status—and a remarkably large share of news communicates information about status. Some of this information interests very large audiences, such as the folks who follow the status contests televised on *Survivor* or *American Idol*, but much of it is interpersonal, such as gossipy text messages or e-mail sent to friends. And, of course, it helps that people have enough free time to stay on top of at least some of the current shifts in status. We live in a society where many people have enough money, information, and time to pay attention to status concerns.

### 3. *Multiple Popular Justifications for Awarding More Status*

Within each social world, status is a claim of distinction, of relative superiority. Each world's members say, in effect: "Our way represents a better way of reenacting [or barbershopping or whatever]; other ways are inferior." When sociologists analyze status, they often fix on these claims of distinction; further, they argue that, to the degree lifestyles require money or other scarce resources, status reinforces class differences. That is, people with more money are often able to command more status and look down on those of lower class and, therefore, lesser status.<sup>21</sup>

However, our society celebrates, not just distinction, but democracy and equality. While we might imagine that these values would translate into a suspicion of status as anti-egalitarian, they actually serve to support the expansion of status. Instead of leading to proposals to eliminate status distinctions, the recognition that some people have higher status than others often leads to calls for leveling, for awarding more status for those currently receiving less recognition. It is usually difficult to convince a social world that is already awarding status to stop doing so, particularly if those calling for reform do not belong to that world. Such outsiders lack much influence within the group. For one thing, they lack status within the world they're criticizing, and it is often easy for a world's members to discount their critics as motivated by sour grapes. In contrast, it is usually much easier to convince those currently cut off from a group's respect that they, too, deserve to gain status. If nothing else works, they can break off into a new social world where they can establish their own status system.

For instance, if a university honors professors who make noteworthy contributions, and if someone notices that the winners tend to be white males, it is easy to suggest that there ought to be one or more special awards for outstanding female or non-white faculty. That is, groups that find themselves disadvantaged in existing status competitions may establish their own competitions that their members can win. It is easy to justify this as a way of celebrating the many different sorts of excellence in different groups. And, of course, the growing number of social worlds means that new groups are particularly likely to feel that they need to allocate status to their members, so as to make participation in their world as rewarding as involvement in established groups.

There are several justifications for expanding the supply of status—beyond straightforward claims that members of other groups are receiving status, and therefore our members ought to receive status too. For instance, status often opens doors that allow people to get ahead. High school students who have distinguished themselves (by, say, winning competitions for musical proficiency or whatever) improve their prospects of gaining admission to more selective colleges. Therefore, increasing the number of ways students can gain such distinctions raises the number of students whose chances for

admission can be improved. Note that it is not just the individual who stands to gain. The high school wants as many of its students to do as well as possible; if a high school sends its students to selective colleges, that speaks well of the school. Therefore, a high school that offers students many arenas for exhibiting excellence (such as academics, athletic teams, musical programs, clubs, and on so) gives them more chances to gain status, and thereby helps launch them into desirable slots in the larger world, in the process cementing its own reputation as an excellent school.

There is also the assumption that status recognition will inspire those who receive it. This is particularly true when people talk about children and adolescents. Our culture no longer subscribes to the notion that beatings are the best way to encourage good behavior by the young. Rather, we emphasize the importance of rewards—of positive reinforcements. For example, DARE—the most popular drug education program, usually taught around fifth grade—involves classroom sessions followed by a ceremony marking the students' new status as trained drug resistors. DARE graduates receive various trinkets—T-shirts, plastic wristbands featuring anti-drug slogans, or school supplies bearing the DARE logo—presumably on the theory that these will serve as status symbols and reminders of the program's message.

Providing status enhancements to the young is also one way of enhancing self-esteem, one of the key pop-psychology concepts in recent decades. Its advocates argue that most social ills are rooted in people's failure to think sufficiently well of themselves. Why do some kids use drugs? They have low self-esteem. Why do some teenagers get pregnant? Same answer. You get the idea. If low self-esteem is at the root of most social problems, the argument goes, we might inoculate young people against those problems by enhancing their self-esteem. And one way to encourage people to think better of themselves is to tell them that they are well regarded by others. Thus, advocates argue, enhancing people's status can be an important force for social good.<sup>22</sup>

One of the key patterns in social life is that advantages tend to be cumulative. Students from higher-income homes tend to receive higher grades in school—probably for all sorts of reasons (e.g., their parents tend to be better educated and to emphasize the value of education, their families tend to be more stable, and so on). Those high-income, good-grade students tend to get more than their share of the status rewards their schools offer. But, the self-esteem argument goes, it is the low-income, low-status kids who could really benefit from status enhancements; they are the ones who, if only they felt better about themselves, might be steered away from drugs, dropping out, and other social problems. Since most of these students lack the advantages of their high-income classmates in the competition for good grades, other sorts of status need to be made available to recognize their worth and improve their self-esteem.

We have already noted that social worlds tend to create status recognition for their members so that, as the number of social worlds grows, the amount of status also rises. This process is complemented by a range of ideological justifications for adding status rewards. Thus, there may be calls to recognize excellence, to single out those who perform especially well. But rewarding one form of excellence invites other, democratizing justifications for allocating additional status. Aren't there other sorts of excellence that also deserve recognition? And shouldn't we also encourage those who have not achieved excellence to do better? Shouldn't status be allocated so as to rectify inequalities, enhance self-esteem, and so on? The range of ideological rationales for awarding status, like the diversity of social worlds in which status can be earned, encourage expanding the overall amount of status.

Note, too, that establishing a new social world with its attendant status system allows further claims of distinction. Each world is able to declare its own superiority. As David Brooks observed, “[In] this country..., everybody can kick everybody else's ass. The crunchies who hike look down on the hunters who squat in the forest downing beers, and the hunters look down on the hikers who per-

on logs smoking dope.... Nobody in this decentralized, fluid structure knows who is mainstream and who is alternative, who is elite and who is populist.”<sup>23</sup> So long as each world's members talk chiefly among themselves, its status can be valued.

Status abundance goes unnoticed precisely because we tend to focus on status within particular worlds rather than on the total supply of status throughout society.<sup>24</sup> Every world's members are likely to agree that some people within that world deserve respect, recognition, and appreciation for their accomplishments and contributions. Gaining such status recognition seems special, a mark of distinction. The implication is that not everyone attains this status. Within a particular world's confines, status may seem rare and valuable. But, when we step back enough so that we can see society as a whole, we discover that supposedly special marks of status are becoming increasingly widespread. Is it possible that the trend toward status affluence cheapens the value of these marks of status?

## STATUS INFLATION

We have already noted some ways in which status resembles money. Both are scarce resources, although we live in a period of both economic and status affluence. And, just as economists worry about monetary inflation, there are critics who argue that status, like money, is vulnerable to inflation.<sup>25</sup>

Because contemporary society makes it very easy to manufacture status, so that more people receive more status than in the past, the overall supply of status is growing. But this means, the critics of status affluence argue, that status is less scarce than it once was and, because it is less scarce, it is therefore less valuable. If a high school that used to single out the graduating student with the highest grade point average to be its valedictorian now designates dozens of valedictorians in each graduating class, then, these critics insist, the prestige of being named valedictorian—the value of the status associated with the honor—has to be diminished. Just as printing millions of new dollar bills leads to economic inflation—that is, increasing the supply of money leads to higher prices, so that a dollar buys less than it used to—so increasing the supply of status (by, say, naming more valedictorians) causes status inflation.

Critics of status inflation worry about the causes of status affluence, that is, the reasons that the supply of status has been increasing in contemporary America. They resist efforts to distribute more awards by warning that this only makes the various honors worth less. They complain that when once rare distinctions become more common, they don't mean as much as they once did. They sneer at the status grubbing apparent in other social worlds, where honors seem to be distributed too widely. Thus, members of one branch of the military will deride a rival service's tendency to award medals for what seem to be marginal accomplishments, or Phi Beta Kappa faculty at one college, who carefully limit the percentage of students on their campus who are admitted to the elite honor society, complain about the PBK chapter at a nearby college rumored to admit a higher proportion of its students.

Such complaints don't seem to do much good. Oh, it may be possible for critics to set firm limits on the amount of status awarded within some particular social world that they control (“On our campus, no more than X percent of students will be admitted to Phi Beta Kappa!”). But those critics' voices have very little effect on status-awarding practices in other social worlds; they cannot control others' decisions to manufacture more status. In particular, those who try to fight status inflation risk accusations that they are haves who seek to block the status opportunities of have-nots (“Those critics don't want folks in our group to get the sorts of recognition people in their group are already getting.”). The critics may be able to convince themselves that their own world's honors have not been debased and retain their original high value (“At our high school, there can be only one valedictorian”).

so that the honor really means something.”). But the larger society probably doesn't keep track of the distinctions between social worlds; most people are likely to assume that a valedictorian is a valedictorian, that a medal awarded by one armed service (or a Phi Beta Kappa key from one college) is equivalent to similar awards from other social worlds.

This means that status inflation is likely to continue, and not only because other social worlds will—for all of the reasons discussed in the previous section—be quite willing to honor more of their members. Even within social worlds where people agree that status inflation is a danger, there may be the sense that our world's members will be disadvantaged in the larger society if the honors produced by other social worlds are not recognized as debased. One country's central bank can pursue anti-inflationary monetary policies, reasonably confident that the larger market should adjust exchange rates so that its uninflated currency will become worth more than the debased currency of a neighboring country that allows inflation in its economy. But there are no central markets regulating the relative value of different types of status. Rather, the larger society is unlikely to carefully weigh the value of honors in different social worlds—it is likely to consider all valedictorians or Phi Beta Kappa members equal. And if that's the case, we only hurt our social world's members if we limit status while other social worlds manufacture it more freely. The difficulty of achieving general agreement to limit the production of status makes status inflation highly likely.

Moreover, because there are often ideological justifications—democratization, self-esteem, and so on—for increasing the amount of status, critics who warn about status inflation are vulnerable to charges that they are elitists, people who already have easy access to existing status awards, and therefore a vested interest in limiting others' opportunities for those benefits. They are too easily portrayed as spoilsports, already well positioned at the status trough, who seek to block disadvantaged others' opportunities to achieve recognition. The result? Even when status inflation's critics retain firm control within their own social worlds, they are likely to have far less influence in other social worlds where they can be criticized for failing to acknowledge the real contributions of other sorts of folks.

## SELF-CONGRATULATORY CULTURE

I began this chapter by noting the frequency with which announcements of awards and high rankings occur in contemporary American life. And I have tried to argue that social developments in contemporary American society—including greater economic affluence, the increased availability of leisure time, improved communication, the creation of independent social worlds, and the availability of multiple supportive ideologies—foster the expansion of status, so that more status is being awarded to more people for more reasons and warnings of status inflation tend to be ineffective.

The point is not that the trend toward increasing status is good or bad, but that it has been largely unrecognized. Critics occasionally grumble about this or that instance of status inflation, but the larger phenomenon—growing status affluence—has not received much attention. This book is my effort to describe how and why status is increasing and to assess the consequences of this development.

Are these developments unique to the United States? Is there something about American character or our culture, or our institutions that encourages making status more abundant? Or are the developments found in other countries? Because I am an American sociologist who is most familiar with what's been happening in my own country, I have written a book that concentrates on developments in the United States. However, there are indications that similar processes are in fact occurring elsewhere. When I have talked about this topic with sociologists in Canada, Japan, and Western Europe, they've acknowledged that they see parallels in their own societies, and some of the studies that I cite refer to developments elsewhere. I suspect that self-congratulatory culture may be

particularly well developed in the United States, but that other countries don't lag far behind.

~~The remaining chapters of this book focus on specific aspects of this self-congratulatory culture.~~  
[Chapter 2](#) examines the trend toward prize proliferation—the general increase in awards and honors. [Chapter 3](#) explores the dynamics of self-congratulation within schools and higher education. [Chapter 4](#) considers our increased readiness to identify heroes. And [Chapter 5](#) looks at the spread of rankings and ratings. Finally, the concluding chapter considers the consequences and the larger significance of these developments.

## PRIZE PROLIFERATION

“Everybody has won, and all must have prizes.”

The Dodo; Lewis Carroll,  
*Alice in Wonderland*

In 1946, the Mystery Writers of America (MWA) began awarding Edgar Awards (named for Edgar Allan Poe); these seem to have been the first annual prizes for outstanding mystery or detective fiction. Britain's Crime Writers' Association (CWA) began offering its own awards in 1955. (The initial prize, the Crossed Red Herrings Award for the best mystery novel, was renamed the Golden Dagger in 1960.) Today, the award programs for both the MWA and the CWA are more than fifty years old, and both have expanded a good deal during that period. In both cases, the categories for which awards are given have shifted but generally increased. For example, the MWA had only four Edgar categories in 1946, but currently awards Edgars in twelve categories, as well as five other special achievement awards. (Meanwhile, other Edgar awards—e.g., Best Radio Drama, one of the original categories—have been dropped.) As late as 1968, the CWA had only a single award, but the Silver Dagger (for the runner-up) was added in 1969, and the CWA now presents about a dozen awards, including one for lifetime achievement and prizes for the best thriller, the best historical mystery, and so on.<sup>1</sup>

More recently, other annual mystery awards have appeared. These include the Nero Wolfe Awards (presented by the Wolfe Pack, a society of fans of that detective; begun in 1979—three categories in recent years); the Shamus Awards (Private Eye Writers of America; begun in 1982—six categories in recent years); the Macavity Awards (Mystery Readers International; begun in 1987—four categories); the Agatha Awards (Malice Domestic, a Washington, D.C., fan organization; begun in 1989—five categories); the Anthony Awards (Bouchercon World Mystery, a major fan convention; begun in 1980—five categories); the Hammett Award (North American Branch of the International Association of Crime Writers; begun in 1992—one category); and the Derringer Awards (Short Mystery Fiction Society; begun in 1997—four categories). There are others. [Figure 1](#) documents the growth in the number of U.S. and U.K. mystery prizes. (The figure does not include awards from other English-speaking countries, such as Canada's Arthur Ellis Awards [seven categories, since 1984] or Australia's Ned Kelly Awards [four categories, since 1996].)<sup>2</sup>

Obviously, there has been a striking increase in the annual number of awards for outstanding mystery fiction. As late as 1985, there were no more than twenty-five prizes awarded each year, whereas in recent years, the total has been about four times that number. Moreover, this is hardly an atypical example. Other popular fiction genres, such as science fiction and romance novels, display the same pattern—a marked increase in the number of prizes in recent decades. The same pattern exists for scholarly books; within my discipline of sociology, for example, the number of prizes given each year for excellent books has grown from one in 1956 to fourteen in 1989 to more than fifty today. Nor is the trend confined to book awards. The number of film prizes awarded worldwide has grown



the point that there are now nearly twice as many awards as there are full-length movies produced. For both books and films, the number of prizes has grown at a far faster clip than the numbers of new books or movies.<sup>3</sup>

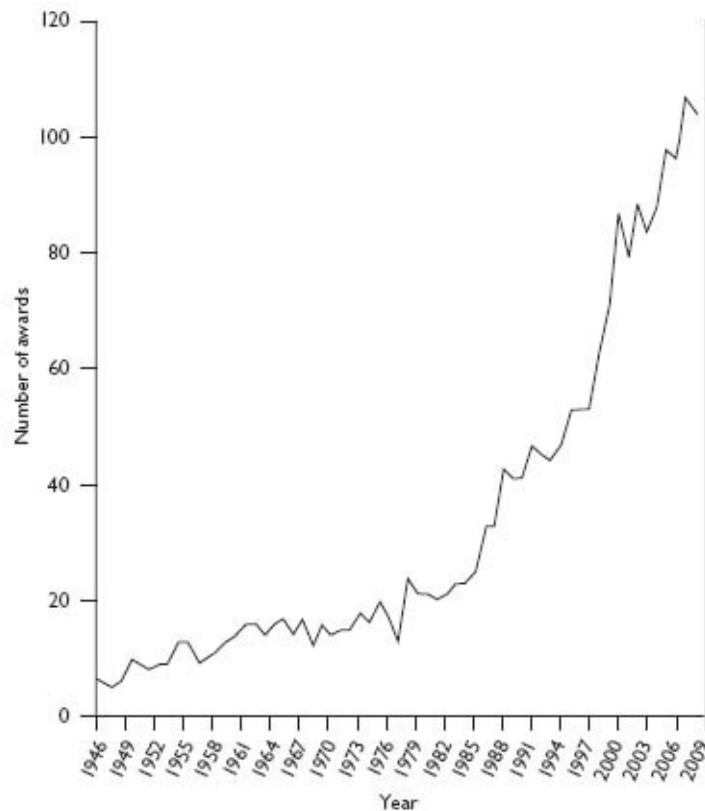


Figure 1. Awards for mysteries in the United States and United Kingdom, 1946–2008.

Or take major league baseball. Although it has been a well-established institution for many decades, it has seen a similar pattern of increasing numbers of awards for players. For a long time there was a gradual trend: the Cy Young Award honoring the game's best pitcher began in 1956, but since 1967 each league has had its own Cy Young winner; similarly, there was one Rookie of the Year in 1947, but one for each league beginning in 1949. But during the twenty-first century, awards have multiplied at a rapid clip: 2001 introduced the Rookie of the Month Award (really twelve awards, one for each league for each of the six months of the regular season); 2002 brought the This Year in Baseball Awards (online voting by fans for about ten awards); 2003 started the Player of the Week Awards (more than fifty awards each season: twenty-five weeks times two leagues, with frequent ties); 2005 offered several new prizes—the Comeback Player of the Year Award (two—one for each league), the Delivery Man of the Month Award (six awards per season), and the Delivery Man of the Year Award (one award each year); while 2007 added prizes for the Clutch Performer of the Month (six awards) and the Clutch Performer of the Year (one award). That's around ninety new awards added in a decade for a sport in which awards were already fairly plentiful—for instance, each league has awarded nine Gold Glove Awards, one for each position, since 1957, as well as nine Silver Slugger Awards since 1980.<sup>4</sup>

And we see the same process at work in all sorts of other social sectors. Universities are awarding more honorary degrees than ever before. The number of medals presented to members of the Marine Corps increased during the peacetime interval between Vietnam and the Gulf War. The Army displays a similar pattern: “In 1988, one in four soldiers was recognized for distinguished achievement in service by receiving a Legion of Merit, Meritorious Service Medal, Army Commendation Medal or

Army Achievement Medal. Ten years later: one in every 2.2 soldiers.” In 1985, the Iowa State Fair held cooking contests in 25 divisions; less than twenty years later, there were 168 divisions, which were further subdivided into about nine hundred classes (each of which awarded a blue ribbon for the best dish). The number of college football bowl games grew from twenty-three at the end of the 1990 season to thirty-four ten years later, enough so that more than half of the teams in the top division could play in a bowl game. And, of course, many parents have experienced “trophy creep”—the practice of having ever-younger children bringing home athletic trophies awarded for participation on a team. Nor is the trend restricted to the United States; for instance, recent decades saw a rapid growth in Malaysian literary prizes, as well as significant increases in philanthropists in various countries offering prizes for scientific innovations.<sup>5</sup> There is, in short, a widespread trend: awards, prizes, and other honors are becoming more common.

This is the process of *prize proliferation*, whereby the number of public awards grows. Observers have been commenting on this trend for several decades. In 1978, the sociologist William J. Goode noted “the contemporary proliferation of prizes and awards in almost all kinds of activities.” (The number of mystery prizes had risen from five in 1946 to twenty-four in 1978.) A book published in 2005 speaks of “the unrelenting proliferation of prizes across all the many fields of culture” (that year there were ninety-eight mystery prizes).<sup>6</sup>

Prize proliferation occurs throughout our society: government agencies, private businesses, schools, and other organizations all seem to be presenting growing numbers of awards; these prizes may honor either the group's own members or outsiders, and they recognize all manner of accomplishments by all sorts of people. It is impossible to calculate the total number of prizes given, let alone measure year-to-year fluctuations in that overall total. But, when we think about all of the Boy Scout merit badges, all of the student-of-the-week / employee-of-the-month designations, all of the elementary school athletic participation awards, and on and on, it is easy to estimate that there must be tens—perhaps hundreds—of millions of awards, prizes, and honors distributed in the United States each year. What accounts for this dramatic rise in public appreciation?

## WHO BENEFITS?

Understanding prize proliferation requires that we take a step back and consider prize giving as a ceremonial occasion, a drama involving actors playing three roles: (1) the people giving the award; (2) the award recipients; and (3) the audience that observes the prize being given. These dramas occur all the time. At the grandest level, we have occasions like the Academy Awards ceremony, when the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (the prize givers) awards Oscars to those who receive the most votes in their categories (the prize recipients) before television viewers around the world (the audience). But there are countless, more mundane versions of these dramas, as when a Boy Scout troop holds a court of honor in a church basement, and the Scoutmaster (prize giver) distributes merit badges to the Scouts who have earned them (prize winners) before the other troop members and some of the boys' parents (audience). In order to understand prize proliferation, it helps to consider the viewpoints of each of the three types of actors in these dramas.

### *Award Givers*

Award giving is a process involving three stages: establishment, selection, and presentation. *Establishment* includes such preliminaries as inventing the award and announcing its availability, defining the terms under which it will be awarded, providing sponsorship to cover the costs, and so on. *Selection* is the process of choosing who will receive the award, and includes identifying prospective



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