The New York Times

Arts

THINK TANK; Snobs: They're Made, Not Born

By EMILY EAKIN
Published: June 08, 2002

Joseph Epstein drives a Jaguar S-Type. His son went to Stanford. He has hobnobbed with Saul Bellow and shared meals with five other Nobel laureates (three in economics, two in physics). He's been to a Chicago Bulls game with Gene Siskel ($350 front-row seats), exchanged greetings with Oprah Winfrey and had Lynne Cheney to his apartment for supper. He's on friendly terms with one of Monica Lewinsky's lawyers and receives the occasional note from former Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan.

Oh, and he wants you to know that on a recent visit to New York City, he was put up at the Plaza.

Impressed? Mr. Epstein certainly hopes so. An essayist, author and former editor of The American Scholar, he is also, by his own bashful admission, a snob. Those celebrity names and status brands glinting from the pages of his new book like Swarovski crystals on an Armani gown are just his way of letting you know that he is a person of superior taste and social standing. And since the book is "Snobbery: the American Version" (Houghton Mifflin), they're also intended to encourage reader confidence that Mr. Epstein is just the man to tackle an affliction apparently as slippery as it is ubiquitous.

Everyone knows a snob when he sees one, he notes. But there is considerably less agreement about exactly what makes one a snob. Virginia Woolf, who confessed to uppity impulses -- like keeping letters from her titled friends in conspicuous view -- in her 1936 essay "Am I a Snob?," claimed that "the essence of snobbery is that you wish to impress other people."

Marcel Proust, a famous snob from a country generally thought to be teeming with them, defined snobbery as "admiration of something in other people unconnected with their personality." He also called it "the greatest sterilizer of inspiration, the greatest deadener of originality, the greatest destroyer of talent." Perhaps, Mr. Epstein suggests, the philosopher George Santayana put it best when he said that to call someone a snob "is a very vague description but a very clear insult."

Lexicographers can provide no further help. The origins of the word snob are a total mystery, though Mr. Epstein comes up with four intriguing theories: 1) it is derived from a Scandinavian term for dolt or charlatan 2) it comes from an abbreviation of the Latin sine nobilitate, supposedly used to distinguish commoners from bona fide nobles on official lists 3) it is an antonym for the word nob, British slang for a person of genuine wealth and stature or 4) it is derived from French peasants' elision of the phrase "c'est noble," meaning "it's noble."

But whatever its roots, scholars generally agree that before the 19th century, the word snob simply did not exist. And in Mr. Epstein's view, this makes sense. Snobbery, he contends, is a peculiarly modern disease: a byproduct of democracy. "The social fluidity that democracy makes possible, allowing people to climb from the bottom to the top of the ladder of social class in a generation or two," he writes, "provides a fine breeding ground for snobbery and gives much room to exercise condescension, haughtiness, affectation, false deference and other egregious behavior so congenial to the snob."

In the past, he argues, such behavior was pointless -- and little indulged in. Who was going to mistake a scullery maid's daughter for a lady, no matter how skillful her piano playing or fluent her Latin? Your place in the rigid social order was fixed at birth. And this, Mr. Epstein says, explains why Shakespeare, Dante, Aristophanes and the Bible are basically snob-free: "Snobbery as we know it today, snobbery meant to shore up one's own sense of importance and to make others sorely feel their insignificance, was not yet up and running in a serious way."

By 1848, however, when the English novelist William Makepeace Thackeray wrote his "Book of Snobs" -- the first major literary use of the term -- they were apparently everywhere. Thackeray's comprehensive treatment includes chapters on every possible strain: royal snobs, city snobs, country snobs, military snobs, literary snobs, club snobs and "dining-out" snobs. "It is impossible for any Briton, perhaps, not to be a Snob in some degree," he remarks at one point.

According to Mr. Epstein's theory, such an explosion of snobbery was only to be expected. By 1848, a large and prosperous commercial class was wreaking havoc on England's old caste system.

But no place, he insists, proved a more ideal incubator of snobbery than the United States. Living in a country with few built-in class distinctions, Americans turned to snobbery as compensation, a means of clarifying what the Constitution failed to: just who was better than whom. (Alexis de Toqueville, who saw this phenomenon up close, wrote that "democratic institutions most successfully develop sentiments of envy in the human heart.")

Nor did it hurt that America was predominantly middle class. "Vague and wide-ranging though the term middle class may be," Mr. Epstein writes, "it does render anyone who is part of this class capable of, if not intrinsically susceptible to, snobbery in both directions. To be middle class positions one nicely to be both an upward- and a downward-looking snob, full, simultaneously, of aspiration to rise to the position of those above and of disdain for those below."

Mr. Epstein traces snobbery's fickle path through American history, noting the changing status of brand names, people and objects -- from neighborhoods and cities to music, beverages, colleges and dogs. (King Charles spaniels and golden retrievers are out; half-Labs are the new

status symbol.)

Along the way, he finds a dizzying array of new snobbisms, including "reverse snobbery," which amounts to asserting your superiority over other snobs by embracing what they disdain and disdaining what they embrace. Calling "The Simpsons" high art and The New Yorker a middle-brow rag is the sort of thing Mr. Epstein has in mind. (His own reverse snobbism is mostly limited to expressing a strong aversion to the work of Susan Sontag, a writer generally held in high esteem by the literary establishment.)

If Mr. Epstein is right, as social barriers fall away and more Americans of diverse backgrounds join the middle class, the nation's snobbery quotient is likely only to grow. But perhaps that's not such a bad thing. If snobbery flourishes where freedom and social mobility are great, maybe it's less a symptom of disease than a sign of health.

Times topics | Member Center

Copyright 2010 The New York Times Company |

Privacy Policy | Help | Contact Us | Work for Us | Site Map | Index by Keyword