

Introduction

LEGEND HAS IT that sometime in the late eighteenth century a freed slave, manumitted at the death of his owner, married a white woman and together they settled in a remote wooded area somewhere between Philadelphia and New York. They were joined a few years later by several other freed slaves and white people who together formed a small community where they could eke out a modest living. They called the community Zion.

Like many legends, the story's details are not entirely accurate. The freed slave, whose name most likely was Will, did not settle there until 1807. He was not manumitted when his owner, the Reverend Oliver Hart, died in 1795, but eleven years later when he turned twenty-five. The second freed slave, whose name was James, did not arrive until 1811. Some white people did join them, but it was not until later that the community became known as Zion.¹

Zion is located ten miles from Princeton University. I doubt that many of the university's faculty and students know it exists. To get there you drive past high-end estates through a newer suburb of McMansions until the valley opens into an expanse of horse farms. Then you elevate on narrow, winding roads into rough terrain called the Sourland Mountains covered with rocks and trees, among which are a few houses that have mostly seen better days. Your GPS says you've arrived, but nothing is there. Except a small church called Mt. Zion.

Methodists who came through in the 1830s and held camp meetings in the woods built Mt. Zion church in the 1840s. The church's history tells the story of who was already there when the Methodists arrived. The freed slaves and the white people who joined them came to Zion because it was unclaimed land. It was a "safe haven from the world," whoever wrote the history explained, a world "in which they would have been deemed misfits."²

Similar events occurred in many places. People who did not quite fit founded communities and churches and called them Zion. The name signaled an intentional distancing from the surrounding world, a destination to aim for

in life, and simply a better place. They were German immigrants in the back reaches of Pennsylvania, Scotch Irish in the Carolinas, and slaves in Alabama. Others sang of Zion, laid their loved ones to rest in cemeteries named Zion, and spoke of finding comfort in Zion. Zion was the holy hill of God. The people of Zion were God's people, strangers and pilgrims, sojourning for a time as they looked toward something higher and purer. As the scriptures said, "The Lord hath founded Zion and the poor of his people shall trust in it."³

Poor whites. Freed slaves. Squatters. The ones in central New Jersey certainly had no place in the region's proud history of notable citizens. The slave master Reverend Oliver Hart was a distinguished Old School Baptist from Pennsylvania who pastored a church in Charleston, South Carolina, before moving to New Jersey where his support for the American Revolution was more in favor than it was in the South. His congregation at Hopewell a few miles from Zion had been a rallying place of resistance to the British and included the Honorable John Hart, whose name appeared on the Declaration of Independence. Down the hill a few miles from Zion was the community of Stoutsburg, founded by the Stouts, who owned large tracts of land in the valley. Years later one of the distinguished Americans who would settle nearby was Charles Lindbergh.⁴

Those were prominent people whose stories would be preserved for subsequent generations' admiration. They stood out for their achievements. Theirs was the success that demonstrated what America was all about. The misfits at Zion were not.⁵ However, they did share something with their illustrious neighbors. Settling there in the woods on unclaimed land and hoping to secure food and shelter for their families, they aspired to something that would later be called the American Dream.

How did the misfits fit? What was their place in nineteenth-century understandings of what it meant to be a fine, upstanding American? Were they simply the ones who didn't succeed? Did they figuratively live off in the hills somewhere? Or did they play a more important, if relatively neglected, part in the making of middle-class respectability?

The answer to these questions, I argue, is that the misfits did fit, but not simply as people who struggled and failed. My argument is that marginalized individuals and groups served persistently, repeatedly, and often quite prominently as the contrasting cases, the negative comparisons through which middle-class respectability was defined. To be respectable was a high aim that often could not be pinned down precisely. People on the margins who stumbled along in out-of-the-way places played an important role in clarifying what it meant.

What the common American wanted, historian James Truslow Adams wrote in 1931, "was what he thought America stood for—opportunity, the chance to grow into something bigger and finer, as bigger and finer appeared to him." Adams called this aspiration for something bigger and finer "the

American Dream,” earning for himself the lasting distinction of having originated the phrase.⁶

Adams viewed the American Dream as a national project more than as the aspiration of any particular individual or class of individuals. It was largely the country’s collective effort during the nineteenth century to become a single nation extending from coast to coast, unified from north to south, taming the wilderness, conquering the frontier, and bringing civilization to the continent. Pioneers, soldiers, and statesmen embodied the dream.

Appearing as it did during the Great Depression, the phrase soon took on distinctly economic connotations. Faced with joblessness, Americans apparently dreamed of nothing bigger and finer than food on the table and a steady job, or so it seemed. Indigent sharecroppers and mill hands could best achieve the American Dream by getting a secure job and working their way up. The nation’s role was to provide opportunity for those willing to work hard. On the eve of America’s entry into World War II, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt emphasized “freedom from want” as being of equal importance to freedom of speech, freedom of worship, and freedom from fear.

Well before Adams and Roosevelt, something akin to the American Dream was articulated in nineteenth-century literature. Horatio Alger’s novels were perhaps the most widely read depictions of hardworking native-born and immigrant Americans who rose from rags to riches, pulling themselves up by their bootstraps, resisting swindlers and villains, and climbing from the lowest occupational rungs to the highest. Alger’s characters were only the latest in a lineage of rugged, industrious Americans who succeeded across the frontier, on farms, and in business by taking advantage of the opportunities America provided.

Understanding the American Dream as decent-paying jobs, upward mobility, and economic prosperity has remained its most popular interpretation. “We proclaimed a dream of an America that would be ‘a shining city on a hill,’” Ronald Reagan stated in accepting the 1984 Republican nomination for a second term as president. The phrase echoed John Winthrop’s speech aboard the *Arbella* shortly before reaching New England in 1630. But Winthrop’s “city upon a hill” warned that eyes across the world were watching to see if the colonists would observe their covenant with God. Reagan’s was a city of prosperity induced by low interest rates, low taxes, small government, and jobs.⁷

Reagan was not the only officeholder to reinforce the idea that the American Dream should be interpreted in economic terms. “The American dream that we were all raised on is a simple but powerful one,” President Bill Clinton explained in a 1993 speech. “If you work hard and play by the rules, you should be given a chance to go as far as your God-given ability will take you.”⁸ A decade later Congress passed “the American Dream Downpayment Act,” which President George W. Bush said would help homebuyers “achieve an important part of the American Dream.”⁹ Taking a theme from the same playbook,

Barack Obama in his 2008 bid for the White House crafted his best-selling book and one of his signature campaign speeches around the theme of reclaiming the American Dream, linking the idea with jobs, health care, and education.¹⁰

Journalists have described the American Dream in essentially the same terms. Tracing the concept's roots, Kate Ellis and Ellen Guettler observe that something like it was evident in immigrants' quest to escape poverty, Roosevelt's promise of freedom from want, the G.I. Bill, and Americans' post-World War II near obsession with home purchases and new cars. They quote historian David Farber, who explains that the American Dream "became closely linked to material comfort, to the consumer abundance America was producing. 'A better life' started to connote not just an economically secure life, but an abundant life . . . a kind of linkage between mobility, a better life, and the good stuff that would make it so."¹¹

Social scientists, while varying by discipline, have given similar emphasis to Americans' striving for upward mobility, better jobs, and economic well-being. Political scientist Jennifer L. Hochschild suggested in her exhaustive 1995 book on the topic that the American Dream is a cluster of tenets affirming that everyone should have opportunities to achieve whatever they wish according to their talents and desires, arguing that the goal to which Americans aspire can aptly be summarized as *success*, which in most cases means attaining an attractive income and working at a desirable job. Hochschild acknowledged that success can be whatever people want it to be but argued that experts and the general public alike view it in measurable terms, such as annual incomes and how the occupations of a cohort of younger Americans compare with their parents' occupations.¹²

Few measures in empirical studies of the American Dream have captured as much attention as upward mobility. Community studies in which crude measures of social status were obtained led to statistical estimates based on indices of occupational status and levels of educational attainment. Surveys asked working Americans about their parents' occupations while large-scale longitudinal studies assessed changes in family incomes and assets over time. Better data and more sophisticated statistical techniques made for more detailed discussions of rates, trends, and comparisons by race, ethnicity, gender, and family background. Between 1975 and 1999 sociology journals alone included more than 2,600 articles discussing upward mobility.¹³

In the twenty-first century this interest has continued. The Great Recession of 2008 and subsequent evidence of rising income inequality prompted new inquiries into the American Dream's status in terms of measurable economic indicators. Pollsters determined that 80 percent of pollees considered the American Dream important but concluded that Americans were frustrated in pursuing it, working harder, and downscaling their financial expectations.¹⁴ A few years later, commentators pointed to rising employment rates

as evidence that the American Dream was coming back, while other commentators emphasized stagnant wages as evidence that it was not.

Cast in these terms the American Dream has become a measurable standard by which to assess how the nation is faring. Lawmakers look to economists to document whether certain policies are working. Arguments for particular proposals and their proponents find support not only in statistics but also in personal anecdotes. Especially in the context of electoral politics, the rhetoric of worth based on rising from humble origins appears again and again. Whether in the story of an indigent father who delivered milk for a living, a widowed mother who worked as a seamstress, or immigrant parents who fled to America, the successful offspring they bore become the exemplars of merit.

Claims that the American Dream is achievable by all because a few have experienced remarkable success of course inevitably ring untrue. The realities of poverty and discrimination stand in sharp contrast to the ideal of a nation in which any and all can rise from the bottom to the top. The social science literature on upward mobility is if anything secondary to the literature on these realities. Many of the literature's lasting contributions have dealt with the enduring barriers that inhibit the successful pursuit of the American Dream. Classics such as W.E.B. Dubois's *Philadelphia Negro*, Gunnar Myrdal's *American Dilemma*, and Michael Harrington's *Other America* tell of people and places in which the struggle for upward mobility was quite different from what it was for the few.¹⁵

The misfits who settled in Zion, New Jersey, would be among those about whom history has had little to report. Were more about them known, they would be an important part of the story of how Americans in the nineteenth century pursued the American Dream. The story would show the enduring effects of slavery, the passage of laws that offered freedom but not for their children and only if they could demonstrate an ability to fend for themselves and prove that they were of sound mind, and how their descendants battled the timber companies and worked for meager wages in the quarries. In these respects, they were like many Americans who never quite made it because they were outsiders—the excluded, the discriminated against, the marginalized who existed at the edges of refined society by virtue of what they did, how they looked, or some other trait that branded them as defective.

One way to think about the marginalized and excluded is to regard them as people who failed in their endeavors to achieve the American Dream and who thus beg for something about their struggles to be included in the story of our nation's past. While others marched onward and upward, they stumbled and fell. The American Dream, though, has always connoted something more than the pursuit of economic success. Adams's 1931 discussion framed the topic not only as Americans' quest for a better life but also as the broad cultural narrative that animated democracy's tensions with wealth, conquest of the frontier, and imperialism. Roosevelt's call for freedom from want was couched

in an argument for a “greater conception—the moral order,” as he called it, opposed to tyranny and in defense of the supremacy of human rights.¹⁶ Obama considered the American Dream as much about “a set of ideals that continue to stir our collective conscience; a common set of values that bind us together despite our differences; a running thread of hope that makes our improbable experiment in democracy work” as about jobs and prosperity.¹⁷ Alger’s rags-to-riches stories communicated a moral ideal of integrity and diligence as well as a struggle for upward mobility.¹⁸

If the American Dream is about more than upward mobility, the language in which its larger dimensions have been framed, however, is strikingly vague. It is variously described as a vision, a philosophy of life, a myth, and a national culture. Its ingredients are said to consist of values, goals, and ideals. They serve in various descriptions as personal aspirations, measuring sticks, and moral principles. In that, they somehow provide motivation for hard work, affirmations for achievement, and explanations for failure. The question is whether the concept is sufficiently indeterminate that it has to remain vague or whether something more systematic can be said about it.

The tools of cultural analysis that have developed during the past quarter century offer some insights. The tools are conceptual, drawn from cognitive anthropology, literary criticism, the study of discourse, and cultural sociology. They include two emphases: pay close attention to the actual words, gestures, metaphors, and narratives through which meanings are communicated rather than looking past them in search of overarching themes; and ground the analysis of these words, gestures, metaphors, and narratives in observations of social settings, interaction, ritual, networks, and communities.

The American Dream, as many have argued, is less about the aims and aspirations of individuals than it is about the meanings that emerge in social settings and that shape how individuals in those settings behave and relate to one another. To say that individuals’ behavior is driven by goals, whether the goal is upward mobility or a happy life, is too simple. We know from personal experience that we engage in real and imagined conversations with others, draw distinctions between those we identify with and those we do not, and make sense of ourselves in the context of these ongoing conversations.

In these respects the American Dream is not so different from the processes through which we construct other understandings of ourselves: family life, for example, or how we think about our friends and the ways we choose to spend our time. Moving the American Dream from the stratosphere in which it is often discussed into the mundane realities of everyday life forces it to be considered differently. The topics of relevance cease to be the long-term trajectory through which protagonists rise from rags to riches and become instead questions about the immediate contexts in which people live.

To shift in that direction I suggest the possibility that what we might call middle-class respectability gets us further than continuing to discuss the

American Dream as an ideal or philosophy of life. “Middle class” can be used as a sensitizing concept for present purposes, not in the narrowly specified sense in which it might appear in theoretical discussions, but in the way that large majorities of Americans do when asked in surveys how they think of themselves. To be middle class in those terms is to suggest that a person is generally self-identified with certain lifestyles and expectations, however diverse those may be. Respectability suggests that the respect a person hopes for and receives from others is important, which in turn necessitates bringing the question into a social context by asking, respect from whom?

Horatio Alger’s protagonists, for example, were exemplars of persons seeking middle-class respectability as much as they were hardworking individuals pulling themselves up by their bootstraps. Besides the pluck and good personal habits that distinguish them from indolent and reckless persons, Alger’s characters discover and embrace the patterns of behavior they see in persons they admire and who serve concretely as role models. Starting as impoverished youth who are untutored but eager to learn, “Alger’s heroes learn to imitate the ways of those who occupy higher rungs on the social ladder,” as one writer observes. They “embrace conformity with the mores of a higher social class.”¹⁹ Honesty and hard work become habits less because they led reliably to success and more because they earn the protagonist approval from persons the protagonist wants to please.

Alger’s stories illustrate further that meanings are expressed concretely in actions as well as in thoughts. “The hero’s entry into the world of ‘respectability,’ which entails acceptance of the rules for succeeding articulated by the benefactors,” the same writer notes, “is heralded by getting a new suit.” Clothing becomes the observable marker through which the protagonist becomes respectable. The protagonist’s physical appearance, including the display of appropriate speech, hygiene, and mannerisms, signals a particularly trustworthy status in contrast with the uncertainties of urban life depicted in the behavior of swindlers, drunks, derelicts, and tramps. The change in the hero’s personal appearance is also dramatized by the hero’s relocation to a space that is at once more secure and less confining. Success is instantiated in movement that results in finding one’s place.²⁰

In the late 1880s and 1890s, a decade after Alger’s best-selling rags-to-riches stories, publishing houses such as Lake City and Chapman Brothers in Chicago began producing nonfictional “portraits and biographical albums” of well-known citizens in attractively bound volumes organized by counties and states. The accounts resembled Alger’s stories in emphasizing the notable successes of self-made individuals. Sketches included descriptions, exclusively of men, who rose from humble beginnings, starting from the foot of the ladder, and through self-reliance, energetic ambition, and force of character with no aid from anyone proved the potency of industry and enterprise in achieving success. But the sketches also displayed many of the social characteristics typical of Alger’s heroes.²¹

The self-made men in these depictions may have come from humble stock, but the sketches frequently emphasized parents and grandparents whose occupations and activities augured well for their offspring and set an example of how to behave. The featured descendent then located to a new community that was blossoming with opportunities. And in that new location the industrious person engaged in visible activities that signaled success, such as growing crops, raising cattle, teaching school, holding public office, marrying well, and raising well-mannered children. The person was thus well known and said to have been held in high esteem by equally respected members of the community.

Examples such as these have been identified in advice books of the period, serialized fiction, newspaper columns, primary school readers, Sunday school lessons, and sermons. The common elements include norms for everyday behavior in family life and at work, manners, modes of speech, and examples of dress and grooming. Middle-class respectability was something that people may have aspired to as an ideal, but it was modeled, learned, and exhibited in practice.

Practices, as discussed especially in the writings of Pierre Bourdieu, are routines that become habits through repetition as individuals and groups engage in day-to-day social interaction. Practices are constrained but by no means determined by the social settings in which they take place. They include the aims and aspirations of individuals but also consist of the concrete short-term strategies that people devise to pursue their goals and adapt comfortably to their surroundings. Practices are embodied as well as mental, meaning that they are inscribed in posture, dress, and modes of speaking.²²

Bourdieu insists that status is always reflected in everyday practices. Practitioners bring to new situations the habits, mannerisms, and language they have learned in the homes in which they were raised and from the schools, communities, and workplaces to which they have been exposed. Status in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender as well as social class is reproduced in these ways. Status is reproduced, but it is also attained, reinforced, and communicated. An aspirant achieves status by displaying the appropriate gestures, words, and material accouterments. Success depends on the relevant reference group implicitly conferring acceptance of the cues provided.

Understood this way, middle-class respectability is a practice that consists in the first instance of distinctions. Distinctions are the categories that identify the differences between desirable and undesirable behavior. Distinctions are in these regards norms, but they indicate that norms are more than the accepted means through which goals are attained. Norms become interpretable through actions and understandings based on explicit comparisons. The proper way to behave is shown as much by criticisms of improper behavior as by exhortations to behave properly. Distinctions can thus be said to function symbolically as the guidelines through which people demonstrate that they

understand and accept certain standards. The specific terms in which respectability is defined are dramatized in distinctions.

Distinctions are reinforced through selective social interaction. The criteria of selectivity are sometimes intentional, as in the case of picking friends to invite to a party, but in many instances are contingent on local situations, such as interacting with people who happen to live in the same neighborhood. Interaction may occur more frequently among people who share similar lifestyles and values than among those who do not. However, interacting with strangers and persons with whom one disagrees also reinforces distinctions. Disagreements, conflicts, and situations in which estrangement is felt are often among the most powerful ways in which social distinctions are dramatized.

Although the person-to-person interaction that takes place in daily life is likely to reinforce the distinctions that dramatize differences in statuses and values, the fact that we live in larger public worlds is also important. Interaction of this kind occurs vicariously through the experiences we hear about firsthand from friends and family, such as the story a family member might tell about a run-in with someone at work. It is easy to imagine being in a similar situation and having similar feelings. Listening to questions and answers at town hall meetings, participating in worship services, reading novels and newspapers, and studying texts in school also provide information about social distinctions and statuses.

The distinctions that provide order in everyday life can be the basis for morally neutral decisions, as in choosing to drink coffee or tea. The distinctions associated with differences in social status, though, are likely to include moral valences. The distinction implies not only a difference but also a right way to behave and a wrong way. Failing to let one's tea steep the proper length of time and in water heated to the correct temperature puts the tea drinker in jeopardy not only of having less than ideal tea but also of being viewed as naïve, inexperienced, and perhaps alien among those properly educated in the art of tea.

Distinctions then are social in two respects: they are enacted and reinforced in social interaction, whether in personal relationships or in vicarious experiences, and they are subject to the definitions and evaluations provided by the bystanders and observers who make up the community in which they occur. Drinking tea properly depends on the presence of a real or imagined community that models, defines, and evaluates the meaning of "proper." The relevant communities are sometimes sufficiently isolated that the activities they define as desirable are quite unique, such as in a family that has its own coded words of affection and gestures that no other family would understand. The possibility that something as general as middle-class respectability exists, though, depends on small, localized communities also being integrated into wider contexts in which shared understandings are communicated, such as in schools, workplaces, and the mass media. Overlapping and yet different

communities are the basis for diversity, meaning that something as widespread as middle-class diversity may be identifiable but will also be composed of variations based on location or race and ethnicity.

The potential for relativizing that occurs in pluralistic contexts is one of the reasons that secondary modes of moral legitimation play an important role in social life. When the question arises of why “we” do things one way and “they” do things a different way, the answer may well involve an appeal to some kind of authority: we do things this way because the law tells us to, because God says so in holy scriptures, because we have discovered that this way causes the least problems and gets things done, because we believe in honoring timeworn traditions, because scientific studies have proven this to be the correct way, and so on.

Distinctions, social interaction, communities of reference, and modes of legitimation all bear on assessments of respectability. A “respectable” showing typically means good enough, acceptable, or solid, rather than the very best. While discussions of social practices such as playing chess and boxing frequently emphasize mastery, practices that demonstrate respectability imply having achieved a threshold level of conformity with social expectations rather than having pushed to the very top.

Middle-class respectability further underscores the idea of performing at a satisfactory level and not necessarily at the very highest level. The distinctions that define middle-class respectability distinguish it from behavior below the threshold, such as failing to work hard enough, but they also distinguish it from behavior that is too high, such as putting on airs and purchasing goods that are too expensive. Middle-class respectability is, then, in between, diverse, and defined both by behavior considered acceptable, such as being a responsible employee and family member, and by behavior that falls below or above the line.

With these preliminary considerations (which I develop in chapter 1), we can return to the question of how the American Dream constituted a widely accepted and widely practiced understanding of middle-class respectability. The period in which to consider this question is one that historians have identified as the time in American history when something clearly identifiable as a middle class came to be discussed as a growing and achievable reality by a large segment of the population. With roots in antebellum America and interrupted by the American Civil War, the idea of middle-class respectability gained popularity in the decades immediately following the war and then adapted to the changing contours of urban and industrial life over the next half century.

The story of *how* Americans became middle class during the nineteenth century has been described in varying levels of detail many times. It included native-born Americans moving west along the frontier that had been taken from its native peoples, immigrants arriving in search of better lives, and

families establishing themselves through public education and expanding opportunities for employment. In this telling, the story of the American middle class is understood through the lens of growth, conquest, and expansion. It is a story mostly of the Americans who made it. The ones who did not make it because of misfortune, discrimination, and oppression have received attention as well, but much more needs to be understood. They were the ones who stumbled along on the margins trying to fit in and make a better life for themselves like everyone else but in ways that deviated from the mainstream.

The literature on social distinctions—symbolic and social *boundaries*, as they are termed—has richly described the ways in which distinctions are constructed and how they affect social life. The evidence suggests that people who were marginalized while others successfully achieved middle-class respectability played an important part in the cultural dynamics of the process. They did so less as examples of failure and more as contrasting cases who by negative example clarified the often-ambiguous meanings of respectability. Respectability was defined in the breach as much as it was through straightforward declarations of what it should be. Individuals and groups that served this purpose were enough a part of ordinary communities that they were familiar, frequently interacting with people who attained respectability, and at the same time deviated from how that was defined to the point that they were stigmatized. In many instances the distinctions were reinforced by physical separation and in some instances by policing and other means of legal enforcement. And yet the process of drawing these distinctions was complicated, involving not only persons and groups on the outside, as it were, but also people who transgressed the interstices and whose status was ambiguous.

Much of the literature has dealt with the lines defining middle-class respectability through contrasts with groups marginalized on the basis of social class and race. Although these contrasts are culturally constructed, they are the ones that have characteristically hardened into sharp distinctions that serve as the basis for exclusion, either through informal patterns of behavior or through enforced separation. There is, however, another kind of distinction that plays a subtler role in daily life and is perhaps less easily recognized. These are the symbolic and social boundaries that arise from people crossing them in unexpected ways—coming and going, being on the edge of the community and sometimes straying beyond its borders while still being part of it in other ways, and necessitating discussion by virtue of having an unclear relationship to middle-class respectability. It takes cultural work to figure out who they are, why they behave like they do, and what they imply for how ordinary people who want respect should act. That work necessarily happens in local settings and involves firsthand interaction, even though it usually includes the intervention of persons in positions of authority and sometimes results in laws being passed and punishments being imposed. The discussions are interesting because they communicate messages about the meanings of respectability that

imply the complex criteria on which nineteenth-century status determinations were made.

Other than race and gender, *place* was probably the distinction that most often played a role in daily life. The very notion of being an “insider” or “outsider” was based on metaphors of place. Places were “ours” or “theirs,” “close” or “distant,” owned by “us” or owned by “them,” and they were in turn nuanced with feeling familiar or strange and secure or unsafe. Spatial distinctions figured in property ownership, government surveys, placement of roads, parish and township boundaries, municipal identities, and tax codes. Some have argued that places were particularly important to nineteenth-century Americans because they were in fact a mobile population whose ancestors had been less mobile and who wanted to emulate that experience by settling down. Whether that was the case or whether the desire to put down roots was simply a human instinct, the national project clearly encouraged the establishment of new settlements, farms, and towns.

The role of places in the quest for power, status, and respectability has been examined on multiple fronts, with research increasingly directed toward the processes and flows involved in the construction of places and attributing them with meaning.²³ Among the most consequential exertions of dominance and exclusion were the formation of plantations under slavery and the displacement of American Indians. On a smaller scale regional histories document the economic stakes involved in “county seat wars,” decisions about the routing of railroads, and contested property rights. A cultural distinction that lasted well into the twentieth century in conjunction with urbanization separated the rural population from the town population and gained expression in political disputes as well as in stereotypes about “country bumpkins” and “city slickers.”

The question of how people who may not have fit neatly into any of the generally accepted spatial categories were regarded and what role they may have played in clarifying and dramatizing those categories has received less attention. One such group was composed of hucksters whose presence was widely known to nineteenth-century Americans and who played an important role in the period’s economic transactions. Hucksters exemplified what might be called *placeless labor* because they operated not from farms or shops but in between, always in motion, transporting goods from place to place. They were literally the connective tissue that linked farms and cities, vivifying the distinction between the two by crossing it routinely.

To have worked as a huckster was to have occupied a liminal cultural space and thus to have provided an opportunity for discussions of what it meant to be respectable when respectability had so much to do with being located in an established place. There was nothing inherently moral or immoral about being a huckster, at least not in the nineteenth century, but (as I show in chapter 2) huckstering revealed the extent to which morality and such attendant

virtues as trustworthiness and decency were associated with being located in a particular place. Huckstering's meanings were negotiated as people in local communities interacted with hucksters and peddlers, told stories about them, and read about them in stories and newspapers. Its meanings, though, were not entirely cultural. Huckstering also had important economic implications and was contested legally and politically.

Like hucksters, lunatics were also legally and politically defined with the intent of constraining their activities and setting them apart from respected members of the community. Lunacy was clearly different from huckstering in most other respects. While it was considered to be an affliction subject to medical diagnosis, its causes were acknowledged even by medical experts to be poorly understood. Insanity could happen unexpectedly in an instant with no known cause or could develop over a long period and be anticipated in the smallest deviations from standard speech and decorum by any who might be watching. There was widespread concern that the insane could and apparently often did commit atrocious acts of violence, which made it a popular narrative through which to account for crime. It was likely enough to be inherited to cast suspicion on siblings and offspring, and whether it was inherited or not, it posed questions about morality, especially in discussions of drinking, promiscuity, and other kinds of intemperate behavior. Religion was useful in deterring these impulses toward immorality, it seemed, but "religious excitement" could also be a leading cause of insanity.

Lunacy reinforced place-based social distinctions insofar as the preferred method of treatment was institutionalization, effectively removing the insane from interacting with respectable citizens and resulting in tragic realities of confinement. If insanity was culturally managed by means of literal displacement, though, its reality and potential remained an aspect of daily life. Its role in defining respectability by deviating from it occurred in two important ways (discussed in chapter 3) that were more public than private. The first was in court hearings that required neighbors and friends to testify about behavior they considered as departures from how persons of "sound mind" behaved. The second was in similarly public information required of families of the insane who hoped to receive financial support from government pensions. Evidence of this kind illustrates the extent to which insanity figured in local discussions that in turn negotiated particular meanings of respectability. Insanity deviated from respectable behavior especially in small departures from ordinary decorum in social relations and in decision making that seemed to observers to betray a lack of rational planning. For the families, respectability figured in the breach through financial difficulties, dependence on relatives, and being drawn into legal and bureaucratic interactions that otherwise would not have been present.

Fanaticism overlapped with insanity to the extent that excessive religious enthusiasm was sometimes considered a source of lunacy and because fanatics

and lunatics were often said to exhibit similar characteristics. The interesting aspect of fanaticism for present purposes is not its etiology, about which much has been written, but how it illustrated the limits of respectable displays of religious emotion. For religious leaders and academic observers alike, religion posed a significant quandary in terms of how much or how little emotion was appropriate to display. The pious were supposed to be zealous in the cause of Zion, but they were also expected to avoid putting emotions ahead of clergy authority. The matter had to be decided locally and for that reason varied in what was deemed respectable.

Instances in which fanaticism gained popular attention demonstrated that charges of excessive emotion could be used as a weapon against any person or group that challenged clergy authority. Upstart preachers sparked interest by holding events at which raw emotion seemed to show the presence of the Holy Spirit, but there also had to be limits. If sufficient reason and order were not also demonstrated, enterprising leaders could be branded as heretics. Accusations (discussed in chapter 4) served as well to suggest that certain groups dressed improperly, behaved strangely, and could not be trusted.

Hucksters, lunatics, and fanatics shed light on the question of how certain ambiguously marginalized groups figured in defining middle-class respectability. The lines between “us” and “them” in these cases were negotiated in local contexts that were sufficiently similar to have implications for how ordinary people were supposed to behave. The distinctions demonstrated by negative contrast the value of such small things as having a known address, making reasonable decisions in the conduct of personal affairs, and keeping one’s emotions in check most of the time. These were usually not matters that resulted in violence or that subjected entire populations to discrimination, but they sometimes did include those consequences—and did so often enough that cautionary tales resulted.

There are other questions, though, that require considering different groups and different modes of categorization. Hucksters, lunatics, and fanatics were often marginalized as individuals, one person at a time, and the categories into which they were placed were shaped in the process. These examples provide few opportunities to consider how marginalized groups functioned as groups. Among the most interesting of such groups were ones that could have easily moved from the margins into the mainstream but continued to behave as outsiders. The impetus in these instances involved distinctions imposed on the groups from the outside but also was a kind of centripetal force that bound people together from the inside. The pressure against nonconformity from the outside, in short, existed in interaction with an opposing pressure from within.

Immigrant religious groups that adopted a kind of sectarian stance toward their neighbors illustrate this kind of cultural boundary work. They held beliefs and engaged in styles of worship that differed from others’ practices and in many instances led them to be regarded as outsiders, and yet they continued

to adhere to these distinctive practices instead of assimilating. They thrived, as observers would argue about later such manifestations, by maintaining strict standards of behavior and by regarding themselves as embattled. Many aspects of what was involved in maintaining these distinctions nevertheless remain underexamined. Was it simply to keep their doctrines pure that they set up barriers against the outside world, for example, or were there other considerations, and, if so, did they cultivate their own standards of respectability or manage to interact with outsiders on equitable terms?

The reality that native-born and immigrant nineteenth-century Americans faced was that many of them died young. They failed to gain the success of their notable neighbors through no fault of their own. They simply died, and in many instances their loved ones' hopes for success died with them. The value of acknowledging this reality is that it supplies one of the ways of understanding the role that religious communities played. They sustained the bereaved emotionally and provided supportive networks. Their strength depended on more than shared beliefs and obligations. They also had to resolve conflicts among complexly interrelated families, attract newcomers, and deal with attrition. These practices, as discussed in chapter 5, illustrated how distinctions were dramatized through internal solidarity as well as from external characterizations.

If the distinctions defining immigrant religious communities complicate the story, so do the practices through which groups regarded as superior were classified. Although persons of high status are presumably looked up to most of the time, being of high status is by definition to be in a numeric minority and for this reason subject to the drawing of symbolic boundaries that may malign rather than simply adulate the other. Donna T. Andrew's study of aristocratic vice, for example, illustrates how middle-class respectability in eighteenth-century England was crafted through attacks on dueling, suicide, adultery, and gambling.²⁴ In nineteenth-century America, depictions of how the pursuit and uses of wealth might need to be morally constrained provided additional occasions in which ordinary, nonwealthy people developed an understanding of middle-class respectability. Many discussions described ordinary Americans as sharing the same aspirations as the wealthy and simply being less fortunate in attaining them, but during the latter half of the nineteenth century sharper distinctions that portrayed the wealthy as corporate entities rather than as individuals became increasingly salient.

Although it was relatively short lived, the public outcry against profiteering that emerged during and immediately after World War I, as discussed in chapter 6, significantly altered how the wealthy were depicted and in turn what it meant to be a common person. The common person was more clearly than before a citizen consumer, an identity reinforced by concerns about rapidly rising prices and the need for price controls. The campaign against profiteering had a strong moral dimension but also brought government regulation

into the marketplace in ways that demonstrated the difficulties of putting such regulations into effect.

A remaining aspect of the boundary work that defined middle-class respectability by maligning outsiders concerns the nature and extent of the maligning itself. Nineteenth-century Americans learned not only to differentiate themselves from others they considered inferior but also to demonize them. The “others” were dangerous, treacherous, and evil. Understanding the language used and how it was applied requires looking at the stories children learned and the advice parents received about children. The stories and advice communicated the importance of obedience and honesty and showed how children who observed these traits gained approval from all who knew them and generally became successful in life.

Less attention has been paid to the naughty children who also inhabited these spaces of moral instruction. They were present too, often in the persons of more colorful characters who did more interesting things than their milque-toast counterparts. They stole things, told lies, disobeyed their parents, hit their siblings, broke their toys, tortured their pets, pouted, yelled, and played pranks, and as they got older their bad behavior got worse. They demonstrated what not to do and thus by negative example illustrated what good children should do. And, insofar as that was the role they played, their place in the moral culture to which children were exposed was relatively straightforward.

But that was not all. The stories invite closer investigation, and when the nuances are considered, as discussed in chapter 7, it becomes evident that more was being implicitly communicated. Naughty children appeared in illustrated stories wearing particular kinds of clothing and interacting with some adults more than others. Naughty boys misbehaved in different ways than naughty girls. Some of the children were irredeemably bad while others deviated only temporarily. Methods of punishment varied considerably and changed over time, but naughty children frequently suffered severely for their behavior. They experienced illness, died, were attacked by vicious animals, lost their parents, and learned that God did not love them. The stories carried clear implications for parents as well: naughty children became worse as a result of bad parenting and would become bad adults unless extreme measures were taken. In these respects the lines that were sometimes easily transgressed solidified as children grew into adulthood. The lines also became more distinct as older children experienced life outside the family. Good children and bad children were institutionally separate: the good ones went to school and church and joined juvenile temperance associations; the bad ones joined street gangs and had to be removed from the community by being sent to workhouses and placed in penitentiaries.

Those early nineteenth-century settlers in the Sourland Mountains of New Jersey are a reminder that status distinctions are shaped in the cultural imagination as well as in material reality. Zion was the holy hill of God, literally one

of the hills in Jerusalem, but figuratively much more. For the predominantly Christian eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American population that lived in communities of faith where they worshipped under the tutelage of clergy, Zion referred to the hope they shared in attaining eternal life as their heavenly reward. It expressed a higher goal, attainable by even the humblest in worldly standards, and was thus an expression of unity and commonality. To be a part of the community aiming for Zion implied a moral commitment to live according to the community's rules. It evoked standards of behavior that earned those who conformed respect, and it stigmatized those who did not conform.

The fact that Zion was a hill was profoundly significant to its metaphorical meaning. Zion's aspirants elevated themselves as they moved closer to Zion. The worthy deemed themselves to be marching confidently toward Zion, never quite making it in this life but gaining in perfection and in the esteem of their neighbors. They were not only marching toward Zion but also working for its mission to be accomplished on earth through pious preaching, evangelism, and upright living. The moral order that Zion symbolized was in this sense deeply religious, giving divine impetus and legitimation to those who best exemplified its holy perfection.²⁵

But Zion was also a hill that many found difficult to climb. They stumbled more than they marched. They backslid, sinned, and had to be redeemed again and again. They died before their time. They displayed too much emotion in their quest for faith, or not enough. Their zeal for the kingdom of God left them suffering from religious monomania. Or they simply were on the margins because of the work they did and where they lived. Zion was in these respects a moral order that drew sharp distinctions. It was defined not only by an image of the faithful moving collectively in ascent but also by the outcasts, the stragglers, and the transgressors who sometimes merited redemption and just as often failed to receive it.²⁶

A map of New Jersey printed in 1850 amply illustrates the small but important ways in which social distinctions were part of Americans' everyday lives. The path that would later be named Zion Road separated Montgomery Township from Hillsborough Township, sending residents in opposite directions when they had taxes to pay and votes to cast. To the immediate left of Zion was Province Line Road, which marked the state's colonial division between the Dutch part to the north and the English part to the south. And there were two churches, not one: the Methodist Chapel up the road and a hundred yards away the African Church.²⁷

The map illustrated some of the distinctions, but in so doing it also shielded others from view. The settlers at Zion did what they could to earn the trust of one another and were undoubtedly looked down on by their more prosperous neighbors. Daily life would have been a matter of negotiating relationships between men and women, parents and children, and with strangers. Perhaps a huckster came through from time to time selling produce, and

perhaps someone went insane. Respect would have been an aspect of all those relationships. We can imagine some of the dynamics. We can do so by asking how nineteenth-century Americans in other contexts dealt with the neighbors who did not quite fit and who thus provided the occasion for thinking about respectability.