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You, Too, Can Join Royal Ranks

By [JEFFREY ZASLOW](#)

Here in the United States, we don't need Prince William to pluck us out of the common class and turn us into royalty. We can handle that on our own, thanks.



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Getty Images

Matt Damon married Luciana Bozan Barroso, who was working as a bartender when they met.

Great Britain is marveling at how, for the first time in 350 years, a commoner will be marrying a direct heir to the throne. William's fiancée, Kate Middleton, hails from a line of coal miners. Her mother used to be a flight attendant. Her dad was a modestly paid airline dispatcher. Some blue-bloods are sniffing that Ms. Middleton's name is not among the 10,000 or so eligible young women William could have found in Burke's Peerage, the definitive guide to aristocratic families.

In America, of course, we believe we're far less class-focused. We're comfortable elevating our commoners to the highest ranks. Our royalty—athletes, actors, singers—almost always come from the middle class or below. Our "Queen of Daytime" (Oprah Winfrey) and "King of Pop" (Michael Jackson) had humble beginnings.

More on Prince William and Kate Middleton

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We're a nation that loves the story of Cinderella, and so we applaud when movie stars—including Matt Damon, Julia Roberts, Patrick Dempsey, Jeff Bridges and Tobey Maguire—marry non-celebrities. We believe our daughters and sons can meet and marry princes and princesses. Anyone can win the keys to the kingdom.

But before we pass out the scepters, it's instructive to contemplate how class distinctions work in America today. We've set up class

divisions that are defined and determined not by blood lines but by education, achievement, notoriety, attractiveness, and most especially, wealth. We may not have the formal trappings of royalty, but we have plenty of barriers.

"We kid ourselves into thinking we're all the same, that we're a classless society," says Elayne Rapping, a professor of American studies at the State University of New York at Buffalo. "Class divisions in this country are getting wider all the time."



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Reuters

Julia Roberts married cameraman Daniel Moder.

The net worth of the richest Americans on the Forbes 400 list rose 8% this year, to \$1.37 trillion. The top 20% of Americans now own more than 85% of the wealth in the U.S., according to estimates by New York University economist Edward Wolff. Meanwhile, given their debt, the bottom 40% own almost nothing, making this the widest gap since the Depression.

We like that anyone can grow up to be a corporate titan, an Internet mogul or president of the United States. Americans focus on the Horatio Alger success stories, despite the long

odds. "The exceptions get a lot of attention," Prof. Wolff says.

Social-mobility studies show American children have a harder time rising up from their parents' class than children in countries such as Denmark, Norway, Finland and Canada. A University of Ottawa study attributes this, in part, to educational disparities. Finland, for instance, has built an education system that is centrally funded, giving non-wealthy kids equal educational opportunities. In the U.S., school districts are more apt to be locally supported, and wealthier families are able to move into better neighborhoods and school systems, or to afford private schools.

Americans actually may be more class conscious than the British, argues David Patrick Columbia, founder of [NewYorkSocialDiary.com](#), which chronicles the goings-on of the society world. "It's part of our inbred hypocrisy. We pretend we're all equal, but we're constantly calling attention to the fact that 'I'm better than you are.'" For those in the highest classes, their definition of "better" usually means "richer," he says.



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To compare the American class system with class systems in Europe, it helps to understand the semantics of identity. One key difference is the issue of titles. "In Europe, if you're a duke, a count, a king or a prince, and you lose everything, you're still a duke, a count, a king or a prince," says Mr. Columbia. "Even if people make fun of that, they still acknowledge it."

British comedian Russell Howard has been joking about Ms. Middleton being "a total

Jeff Bridges met his future wife Susan Geston in 1974 when she was a waitress.

commoner" who "has never wiped her bum with a swan or had a shower of children's tears." His audiences laugh, yes, but polls show that the

British still support the concept of a monarchy.

In part because the U.S. is a young country, we don't have centuries of traditions and legacies to consider. Americans care more about achievement than lineage, says Sugar Rautbord, a well-known Chicago socialite who is now an investor in "Spider-Man," the Broadway musical. "We don't have a royal aristocracy. We have a literary aristocracy, a rock-music aristocracy. We don't applaud you simply because you were born out of someone who was born out of someone else."

Perhaps the reason some Americans see themselves in commoner Kate Middleton is because we recognize marriage as an economic game-changer. In Europe, young people aren't expected to marry out of their class. But in the U.S., marriage remains one of the clearest paths to a higher class. "Marrying up" is made possible in part because of our culture's fixation on attractiveness; men don't necessarily select trophy wives based on their pedigree or portfolios.

None of this means it's easy in America for someone from a lower economic class to find and marry someone from a higher class. "Assortative mating"—the human urge to pair up with someone who is similar to you—is on the increase in the U.S., according to research by sociologists Robert Mare of UCLA and Christine Schwartz of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. They found that those with college degrees are marrying people with college degrees at higher rates than at any time in the last half-century.



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Patrick Dempsey married Jillian Fink, a make-up artist.

For their part, Prince William and Ms. Middleton have a story with an American flavor to it. They met at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. Her parents could afford tuition there because they are now rich, having made a fortune in recent years by building an online party-supply business.

One reason the monarchy still exists is that, for centuries, a class structure was embedded in British culture; people knew where they belonged. There was a comfort in that.

"In America, people don't know who they are," says Dr. Rapping. "Everyone is trying to find their inner child, to figure out who they are supposed to be. It speaks to our confusion about identity."

We say we live in a land of commoners, where all of us are created equal. Perhaps Prince William and his bride will offer us reasons for reflection about that, as their wedding day approaches.

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