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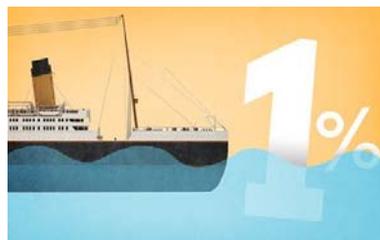
The Journal of the American Enterprise Institute

## Titanic and the 1%

By Edward Tenner  
06/04/2012 03:00

Filed under: Lifestyle, Public Square

**What's striking in thinking about class differences in the age of Titanic is not the similarities to inequality in our own time, but the chasm.**



The 100th anniversary of the launching and loss of the *Titanic* presents many questions. Inequality, for example: Was it about the victimization of poor, immigrant third-class passengers by the callous White Star Line and the arrogant 1 percent in first class? That has become the classic popular story, immortalized by the narrative brilliance of Walter Lord and the film adaptation of *A Night to Remember*, which was an even more important nonfiction novel in its own way than Truman Capote's 1966 book *In Cold Blood*. James Cameron's *Titanic*, soon to be released in 3D, created an equally memorable story of upper-class patriarchal oppression and proletarian decency.

On the other side, columnist Mark Steyn laments the decline and fall of chivalry. He has contrasted the allegedly cowardly behavior of the captain of the Italian cruise ship *Costa Concordia*, which foundered off the coast of Italy in January, and stories of the pushiness of male passengers during the evacuation, with the

"women and children first" ethic that prevailed during the 19th century and the *Titanic's* sinking.

Steyn has some academic support. One distinguished economist who has published widely on the *Titanic*, Bruno S. Frey of the University of Zurich, even observed to the Daily Mail that "the Americans at that time were not very cultured, while the English were still gentlemen." (Perhaps just coincidentally, he also holds an appointment at the University of Warwick.)

Steyn and Frey's opinions are in the tradition of the official British report, issued after exhaustive hearings by the Commissioner of Wrecks, Lord Mersey, which tended to defend British seamanship and professionalism, with some justice, while the U.S. hearings, conducted by Senator William A. Smith at the Waldorf Astoria before British survivors could return, faulted the ship's safety and the captain's decisions.

The reality of class, selfishness, and altruism in the disaster is more ambiguous. As *Titanic* scholars acknowledge, the survival rate of passengers depended in part on proximity to the boat deck. So it is no wonder that nearly all the women and children in first class were saved. Conversely, complex passageways and language barriers further delayed evacuation of third-class passengers. In all classes, as the literary scholar Stephen Cox has underscored in an essay and an excellent book, moral choices cut across social lines.

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Individual responses aside, there are surprises in the statistics. For example, women in third class were significantly more likely to survive than first-class men: 46 versus 33 percent.

The segregation of immigrants with few passages to the upper decks reflected prejudice—but mainly of the U.S. government, not White Star Line. The U.S. Immigration Act of 1891 requiring strict medical inspections was influenced by racial stereotypes, especially of Southern Europeans, as the historian Alan Kraut has shown in his book *Silent Travelers*. (Even over 100 years later, Cameron made his hero Jack Dawson not a typical immigrant passenger but a Wisconsin-born drifter who had won his ticket gambling.)

Customs varied from port to port, but as the law was implemented later in the 1890s, first- and second-class passengers could avoid mass processing and be visited by public health inspectors in their cabins; others, except for U.S. citizens, had to be examined at Ellis Island or similar stations. Wealthy passengers' "slumming" (as it was called at the time) could threaten this arrangement, and the companies discouraged it.

Were the second-class men the most dutiful and chivalrous of all, the true unsung heroes of the tragedy?

John Maxtone-Graham, doyen of ocean liner historians, writes in his excellent short new book, *The Titanic Tragedy*, that the much smaller vessel, *Carpathia*, which steamed to the rescue of *Titanic* passengers, had a capacity of more than 2,250 third-class passengers, showing how relatively spacious and comfortable the *Titanic's* immigrant quarters were, with 708 on board. The *Titanic* had no true steerage in the original sense of a large, open room in the bow, though the cabins were spartan.

We shouldn't exaggerate the first-class luxury on the *Titanic*, despite the opulent furnishings. Even most first-class passengers lacked the private sanitary and bathing areas of the luxury suites.

Not that the 1 percent on the *Titanic* couldn't be arrogant. Some went to great lengths to avoid assignment to the largely empty steerage quarters when rescued by the *Carpathia*; because the *Carpathia* was under way to Europe for a cruise, the third-class passengers were immigrants revisiting their home countries, and many berths were empty, since capacity was based on the much larger westbound traffic. But there were also stories of generosity toward third-class survivors, including a collection organized for their relief.

The most surprising and least known statistic is that nearly twice as many third-class as second-class men survived—16 percent versus 8 percent—despite the greater distance of the former from the boats. Were the second-class men the most dutiful and chivalrous of all, the true unsung heroes of the tragedy? Were the third-class men simply younger and more vigorous? Or were the second-class men the middle managers of the era, either fatally deferential to the upper crust or disfavored, consciously or not, by snobbish stewards? In any case, a larger proportion of the dogs on the *Titanic* survived, 4 out of 13, than second-class men.

The British might have been more courteous than the brash Americans, as Professor Frey suggests, but the most notorious toffs, Sir Cosmo and Lady Duff-Gordon, had to defend themselves for the rest of their lives against accusations that the generous tips they gave crewmen on their lifeboat were in effect bribes to row away without picking up additional survivors.

And even the ship masters, like the *Titanic's* doomed Edward J. Smith, had themselves come up from the ranks rather than from university engineering programs or naval academies. (Smith had left school at 13 for a nautical apprenticeship.) It was a rare chance for a blue-collar lad to rise and rub shoulders as an equal, and on occasion even as a legally empowered superior, with the ultra-rich.

As for technical officers, a 1908 article on the *Lusitania* in a New York Times series, "The Men Who Must Not Make Mistakes," observed that chief

engineers' salaries were relatively small considering their responsibilities—only \$4,000, the equivalent of an \$80,000 salary today. By that stage in their careers they were considered too old to change to related technical jobs on land. The backbone of the *Titanic* was a dedicated and highly competent technical middle class who, by keeping pumps and generators running, bought precious time for passengers to escape.

Finally, feminists and other women in 1912 were starting to question whether all women deserved priority over all men. A Cambridge University historian, Lucy Delap, has observed that the noble-sounding phrase "women and children first" was sometimes used as a code for accusing working-class men of pushing the weak aside in panicked evacuations. In 1912 the Daily Mail claimed falsely that Italians on the *Titanic* were shot down for trying to violate the rule. In reality, many third-class women, like the first-class passenger Ida Strauss, decided to stay with their male relatives, many of them believing (like crew members and other passengers of all classes) that the ship could survive. Some stewardesses, proud of their professional status as crew, were reluctant to abandon ship while passengers were still at risk.

The *Titanic* thus was not a class struggle but a drama plunging rich and poor alike into confusion and, in Cox's phrase, demanding "hard choices." Yet it did mark a milestone in class thinking, one of the last flowerings of a doomed old order, like the ostentatious Russian celebrations of the Romanoff tercentenary in 1913, jeweled Easter egg and all.

What's striking is not the similarities to inequality in our own time, but the chasm. Even before the war, some German ships had grand lounges as an alternative to the White Star Line's after-dinner segregation of first-class men and women. By the 1920s, American legislation had nearly ended immigration, and shipping lines responded by creating an upgraded "tourist" third class, the origins of budget international travel as we know it. It's the distance of the *Titanic* from our own society, with all its challenges, that creates its lasting allure.

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