

The Making of the Middle Class: Toward a Transnational History

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Editor: A. Ricardo López
Barbara Weinstein

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The Making of the Middle Class: Toward a Transnational History grew out of two panels on the middle class at the American Historical Association meetings in 2004 and a related conference at the University of Maryland in 2006. Taken together, the 16 papers and three commentaries included in this book have the feel of a big academic meeting. Inevitably, the papers are of varying quality. They are combined in section-panels of uncertain coherence. The commentator-discussants are generous, sometimes detecting insights that eluded the contributors, stretching to find common themes.

The title's reference to E. P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* signals the editors' conviction that class is not a structure or category, but a historical process bound up in the ways people come to define their lives. As the subtitle suggests, they regard this process as 'transnational', in that it has played out more or less independently in diverse national contexts. They strongly reject the notion of a 'global' process by which the development of the middle class spreads from some 'hegemonic' Western power center to societies on the periphery. Their title might have been extended to include a third concept, 'modernity', which is central to their concerns. '[T]his volume', they write, 'sets out to understand the projects of class politics through which middle-class men and women shaped – and were shaped by – modernity since the mid-nineteenth century' (p. 4).

Class

Like many before them, the editors and contributors to this volume regard middle class as a problematic concept. Karl Marx puzzled over bourgeois society's expanding 'hoard of flunkeys, the soldiers, sailors, police, lower officials ... mistresses, grooms, clowns, and jugglers ... ill -paid artists, musicians, lawyers, physicians, scholars, schoolmasters and inventors, etc'.(1) His writings are replete with vague references to middle classes, middle bourgeoisie, intermediate strata and the like, whose growth was inexplicable within the limits of his theory.

Perhaps, the editors concede, the notion of middle class is too 'fuzzy' to be a useful category of historical analysis. But they, like several of the contributors, are dismissive of efforts to nail down the meaning of the concept with what they describe as a 'positivist social science approach that measure[s] middle-classness

through occupational categories, income levels, or consumption patterns'. '[The] important question', they insist, '[is] how a middle class is signified and spoken of in language'. The collection will focus on 'the formative power of language or discourse, while interrogating the different historical material practices of middle-class subjectivity' (pp. 19–20).

It may well be that middle class is a nebulous, incoherent concept in a way that upper class or working class is not, but, then again, the difference might be one of perception. The extremes are more salient, more easily conceived, especially from the perspective of the middle, where most scholars reside. But this collection is haunted by a broader question that recurs in brief, sometimes anxious passages: What are we (analysts) talking about when we talk about class? As the foregoing suggests, these historians prefer to think of class in 'constructivist' terms. Class is in our heads and on our tongues.

There is not a lot of heavy theoretical lifting going on in this collection of short empirical essays. Were the authors inclined to consider the question of class at greater depth, they might do well to start by re-reading the preface to Thompson's book. Here, Thompson insists that class is not a thing but a 'historical phenomenon' that 'happens' over time, is driven by material relationships, and expresses itself in cultural forms.

[C]lass happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men, whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born – or enter involuntarily. Class consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems and institutional forms.

There is, he goes on to suggest, a 'logic' in the way people come to understand their experience, but not an inevitable 'law'. Making a class 'owes as much to agency as to conditioning'.(2)

What most of the historians represented in this collection have absorbed from Thompson is his emphasis on historical process and culture. What they resist – and sometimes seem embarrassed by – is the material foundation of this process. This puts them in the impossible position of refusing to recognize the economic basis of class and of the economic processes that lead to the cultural phenomenon they call 'middle-classness'. Just identifying the subjects for study becomes problematic. In practice, several contributors focus on the consciousness and practices of specific occupational groups, implicitly starting from economic positions. In her comments on the last section of the book, Robyn Muncy concedes that it is nearly impossible to write about the middle class without reference to material indicators, '[a]lthough I hate to admit what seems a primitive desire for knowledge of the occupation and income of the subjects under study' (p. 383).

These historians are legitimately skeptical of grand historical narratives. But how is the emergence of middle classes to be explained without some notion of a macro context? All but the simplest societies require people in middling positions. Such people are likely, however, to identify with the dominant elite until their numbers multiply, which happens as societies adopt industrial technologies and large-scale, complex forms of organization. These societies need increasing numbers of literate people with specialized skills. The market value of their knowledge and their sheer numbers encourage independence and self-recognition – steps toward the making of a middle class. Trade, market competition, imitation, colonialism and modern media promote the spread of these developments, though their character will obviously be shaped by local context. The authors resist thinking on this scale. One of the editors asserts that the cultural turn in the scholarship of recent decades has ‘put to rest’ the notion of a middle class that appears, ‘like the rising sun’, from the Industrial Revolution and can be identified by certain ‘objective’ indicators (p. 107). Well, yes. History is not ground out by some great, predictable machine. But we owe the ironic solar simile to Thompson, who wrote a half century ago that ‘the working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time’.(3) He obviously regarded the Industrial Revolution as essential to the process he was describing.

Modernity

References to modernity and, particularly, middle-class modernity abound in this book, from the first pages of the introduction to the last page of the afterword. According to the editors, ‘what is at stake’, in both the contemporary debate about globalization and in the historiography covering the last two centuries, is the notion of the Western middle class as the carrier of a universal modernity. This view assumes that modernity is a product of North Atlantic societies, a force that radiated, initially from Europe, and later from the United States, to the rest of the world. Other modernities are judged to be relatively faithful or flawed copies of the Western original, rather than experiences to be understood in their own right. A key objective of the book, shared by the editors and contributors, is to ‘provincialize’ the West. That is, rather than taking Western modernity as the ideal model, to assess it critically, as one among many.

It is difficult at times to discern whether these historians mean to deny the powerful influence of the West, believe that deference to Western models has distorted our understanding of non-Western societies, or are simply offended by a historiography they regard as ethnocentric and supportive of ‘triumphalist’ celebrations of contemporary global capitalism. Perhaps all of these. Nor is it clear what they understand by modernity. There is no sustained effort in the book to grapple with the concept. The contributors distance themselves from various definitions they mention in passing. Writing on the English middle class, Simon Gunn refers skeptically to the ‘well-established narrative’ that identifies this class with three key modernizing developments: industrial capitalism, liberal democracy, and a transformation of the social structure from a ‘graded hierarchy’ to a simpler class system; he warns that we need to ‘be mindful of the very different intellectual traditions in which modernity has been understood’ (pp. 58–9). Sanjay Joshi introduces his contribution on colonial India by observing, ‘Broadly defined, modernity ... refers to new models of organizing social, political and economic relations, which, we are told, draw their inspiration from the ideas of the Enlightenment and material circumstances following from the triumph of industrial capitalism’ (p. 30). In his essay on the Arab Middle East, Keith Watenpaugh finds that aspiring middle-class Arabs were powerfully drawn to Western ‘middle-class manners, patterns of consumption, and ways of thought’ to which they gained access with the advances in transportation and communication of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. From this exposure, they learned how to be modern and how they might modernize their own societies. What they selected from the incoming cultural signals was, according to Watenpaugh, guided by a Justice Potter Stewart standard: ‘[they] knew middle-class modernity when [they] saw it’ (269–70).

What the makers of this volume are suggesting – without necessarily wishing to – is that modernity is a powerful myth that originated in the West and spread through people in other societies who were anxious to receive it. This myth may be a less than perfect reflection of the realities of Western societies, but Western priority and non-Western imitation seem hard to deny.

A Sampling

The contributions to this volume are more varied than my general remarks to this point convey. In this section I take a closer look at a representative selection of the substantive chapters.

Joshi's essay, referred to above, describes the 19th-century middle class of colonial Lucknow, India, which, he reports, consisted of people from traditionally high status families – but not from the wealthiest, economically independent groups. Men who once would have served in the courts of the indigenous elite found new positions of power and influence in the colonial order. They were modernizers, inspired by contemporary Victorian models, which, however, were not perfectly adaptable to Indian conditions. The result was what Joshi describes as a contradictory or 'fractured' modernity. For example, they saw themselves as representatives of enlightened public opinion in opposition to older aristocratic views. But their political influence was limited by their own deep, traditional sense of distance between themselves and status inferiors. They were drawn to modern ideas of gender relations and women's education, but retained a vocabulary suggestive of a traditional ideology of 'husband worship' (p. 31). In keeping with the intention of 'provincializing' Europe, Joshi insists that the modernity of the West was also inconsistent in terms of its own ideal-typical model. If, for example, *homo hierarchicus* continued to dominate Indian society, he was not absent in contemporary Europe, where middle-class men stood well above their class inferiors and all women. This comparison seems to equate caste (a term Joshi avoids) with class.

Michael West's contribution on Zimbabwe (Southern Rhodesia) is a history of the country's black middle class, from its colonial origins to the present. Based on their experience in India, the British wanted to avoid creating a potentially subversive African middle class in the colony. But such a class did emerge because Christian missionary schools were producing educated natives, many of whom would continue their studies abroad, and because increasing numbers of professionals, technicians and other educated personnel were needed for positions in the colonial administration and the colony's prosperous, white-dominated economy. It was cheaper, the British soon recognized, to fill these positions with Africans. West traces the ambivalent, shifting attitudes of this nascent middle class toward the colonial order and the unlettered African majority. He finds that middle-class blacks vainly sought an alliance with liberal whites based on an elitist ideal of 'equal rights for all civilized men'. Ultimately, they supported the nationalist cause against the colonial state and the white separatist regime. In independent Zimbabwe, the black middle class initially flourished, gaining access to well paid positions in the state and private sector, adopting the opulent lifestyle once reserved for whites, and treating their many servants as abusively as the British colonials once treated theirs. Since 2000, under Mugabe's increasingly despotic rule, the middle class has suffered along with, if not so severely as, the majority of Zimbabweans. Those who could find a place for themselves abroad, fled the country. As in the colonial past, West concludes, this middle class struggles for its existence against the power of the state.

Susanne Eineigel focuses on the people of Santa María la Ribera, a middle-class Mexico City neighborhood, in the first decades of the 20th century. Santa María was built in the late Porfirian period, an era of relative stability and economic expansion that created the conditions for the growth of an urban middle class. The residents were not the liberal professionals traditionally associated with the middle class, but part of an expanding lower-middle stratum of government and private office workers, teachers, merchants and skilled artisans. The modernizing city, Eineigel notes, offered the self-identified middle-class inhabitants of Santa María ample opportunities for 'conspicuous consumption and self-display'. Though disdainful of the 'Francophile pretensions' of the elite, in many ways they emulated its manners and lifestyle. In the wake of the violent upheaval of the Mexican revolution, their needs became more basic, beginning with food, which was in short supply. But even as they petitioned for food ration cards, they emphasized their middle-class status. As conditions improved, their perceived needs, expressed in letters and petitions, expanded to what they regarded as the requirements of a decent middle-class lifestyle, including material for proper clothing, urban services, and affordable housing. The counterpart to a middle class determined to preserve its class identity was a receptive post-revolutionary government anxious to win middle-class loyalties as it

consolidated power. Eineigel suggests that the petitioners in this period who identified themselves to authorities as middle-class understood that it was politically useful to do so.

Several contributors write about middle-class professionals engaged in reformist endeavors, generally state-sponsored and targeting the subaltern. Franca Iacovetta describes a broad middle-class effort by social workers, doctors, teachers, volunteers and others to make 'new Canadians' out of the European refugees swept into Canada after the Second World War. These immigrants, it was presumed, required instruction in 'Canadian ways' and values, from domesticity to anti-communism. Ricardo López presents a study of Colombian community development workers of the 1950s and 1960s, who hoped to bring 'democracy' and material progress to the nation's backward, violence-ridden countryside. He stresses the Cold War context and the American encouragement of their efforts. The program was, in other words, a form of imperialism lite. Michael Ervin's subject is the training, professional organizing and mixed fortunes of Mexican agronomists in the 1920s. At the time, progressive young agronomists identified with the unfulfilled agrarian reform promises of the revolution. These chapters have intrinsic topical interest. But the authors and editors are not convincing when they suggest that such reformist enterprises are specifically middle-class projects or that we can learn about the formation of the middle class by studying them.

Marina Moskowitz, in her chapter on the United States in the early 20th century, asks why most Americans came to think of themselves as middle class. Her starting point is a 1940 *Fortune* magazine survey which found that 80 per cent of respondents labeled themselves middle class, offered the choice of upper, middle or lower class. Moskowitz finds that during the period she studied, the middle class was 'recast as a socioeconomic group defined by cultural productions its members share' (p. 80). At the same time, there emerged a shared conception of a 'comfortable', but not extravagant middle-class standard of living. These developments permitted a broad population to attain or at least aspire to middle-class status. Middle-class goods were obtainable on credit. An expensive dress could be reproduced at home. As a result, she concludes, middle-class became an inclusive, unifying category, rather than an exclusionary, oppositional one. To be middle class was to be American.

Moslowitz is too willing to take the *Fortune* poll at face value. A survey conducted a few years later by sociologist Richard Centers, added a fourth answer choice, working class, which turned out to be the preference of over 50 per cent of respondents. Middle class was a close second. The Centers question, which became the standard, is still widely used in national surveys, with roughly similar results.(4) What this reminds us is that what we have to say about class, obviously including our sense of class identity, is very sensitive to context. When Americans call themselves and others middle class, they are often saying, as Moskowitz suggests, that we are all regular people. But Americans do not use the term in a consistent way, and there is an ample stratification literature, based on detailed interviews and ethnographic observation, that shows that Americans are quite aware of the class hierarchy that pervades their society and are conscious of class distinctions between themselves and others.(5)

In her chapter, Carol Harrison challenges the established historiography of post-revolutionary France regarding the role of religion in the life of the bourgeoisie, the term she prefers to middle class. She rejects the view that class had displaced faith as the anchor of identity and that the bourgeoisie, in its urbane materialism, had come to an instrumental conception of religion – relevant only as a buttress to social order. Harrison also questions the 'feminization of religion' notion of a bright distinction between two bourgeois worlds: a women's domestic sphere defined by faith and a men's secular business sphere. Catholic faith and practice, she contends, remained central to the lives of bourgeois women and men. Harrison's contribution here is a study of early 19th-century children's literature, emphasizing its religious content. She does not offer evidence on the dissemination or reception of these books, but assumes that they were aimed at and widely read by bourgeois children. Harrison describes their content as 'short moral tales in which children personify various elements of virtue and vice' (p. 323). They take as given a class-stratified society, in which poverty is inevitable and people don't necessarily rise in Horatio Alger fashion based on their own hard work. Catholicism looms large in these books. Families are Catholic. Church rituals frame children's lives. Charity, offered in a specifically Catholic context, is the proper response to poverty. The attitude toward

giving, in the texts, is more Christian than capitalist: readers learn that charity should be offered with compassion, rather than arrogance, since the world is unpredictable and reversals of fortune are always possible. The boys and girls in these stories have gendered lives, but for both, religious practice and Christian virtues are central. Harrison finds no suggestion of divided paths to ‘devout womanhood or dechristianized manhood’ (p. 331).

David Parker is the author of a sophisticated account of the formation of the middle class in Peru.⁽⁶⁾ His contribution to this collection concerns what he characterizes as a symbolic struggle over the boundary between upper and middle class, waged with insults and stereotypes in late 19th- and early 20th-century Peru and Chile. He is especially interested in the use of *huachafo* in Peru and *siútico* in Chile, pejorative terms applied to social climbers: the parvenu with more money than breeding or the young man disguising (he thinks) his humble origins with extravagant dress and affected speech. At times, these terms were employed with racist overtones. That they should have come into common use during this period is not surprising. The region’s thriving export economies were providing opportunities for swift accumulation of enormous fortunes by ambitious men of uncertain pedigree, many of them immigrants. Not infrequently, new money was able to win its way into the old upper class by what Parker describes as ‘social money laundering’ – everything from investing in rural property and buying elite education to making strategic marriages. But if upper-class status was to retain its presumed intrinsic value, it could not openly allow itself to be reduced to a commodity, available to all who could afford the price. Resisting (or at least denying) the commodification of status was, by Parker’s account, the function of the discursive skirmishing around terms such as *huachafo* and *siútico*. Parker’s suggestion that the struggle was over the upper/middle class boundary is – as he might well concede – too simple. The significance of this denigrating discourse depends on context and speaker. In the mouths of people we might think of as middle class, these terms suggest the archaic conception of Latin American societies divided between a small stratum of *gente decente* (decent people) and *el pueblo*, the great illiterate, unwashed majority. When they describe others as *huachafos* and *siúticos*, middle-class people are making what they understand, not as a class distinction, but as a cultural and sometimes racial one. By doing so they are claiming for themselves the status of *gente decente*.

Do You Need this Book?

The Making of the Middle Class may amount to less than the sum of its parts. That is, taken in its entirety, the volume does not advance our understanding of its central concerns terribly far. But the authors raise significant issues and individual chapters have real merit. Scholars interested in the formation and historical role of the middle class will also value the historiographic discussions scattered through the book and the extensive bibliography.

Notes

1. Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value* (London, 1963 [1863]), vol. 1, p. 563.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1991 [1963]), pp. 8–9.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *Ibid.*, p. 8.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Dennis Gilbert, *The American Class Structure in an Age of Growing Inequality* (Thousand Oaks, CA, 2011), pp. 193–4.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. W. Lloyd Warner, *Social Class in America* (Chicago, 1949); Richard Coleman and Lee Rainwater, *Social Standing in America: New Dimensions of Class* (New York, NY, 1978); Gilbert, *The American Class Structure*, pp. 21–39.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. David Parker, *The Idea of the Middle Class: White Collar Workers and Peruvian Society* (University Park, PA, 1998).[Back to \(6\)](#)

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