

# Deconstructing the “Middle Class”; Constructing its Transnational History

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A. Ricardo Lopez and Barbara Weinstein (eds.) *The Making of the Middle Class: Toward a Transnational History*. Duke University Press, 2012. 446pp.

*The Making of the Middle Class* is an edited collection that spans an impressive—almost intimidating—amount of material. Featuring chapters and commentaries by 21 writers, it provides a collection of historical analyses of the formation of the middle class in a variety of historical moments and geographical contexts, offering the resources through which a detailed and global picture of its formation can emerge.

Any reader looking for an interdisciplinary treatment of the subject of the middle class will be disappointed: the book is unambiguously located in the discipline of history, which makes it challenging reading for anyone not versed in that particular paradigm. Yet this is also the key contribution made by *The Making of the Middle Class*. Its principal objective is “to criticize modernity itself as a transnational phenomenon, and to do so by *historicizing* what it meant to be middle class” (18, emphasis added). The editors argue that this historicization is necessary in order to invite critical conversation about the neoliberal present. Rhetoric about the middle class has come to take on a particular resonance and power within contemporary global political and economic debates. “In the neoliberal imagination, societies are spatially envisioned as advancing towards a one-class society—that is, the global middle class—which is seen as the political foundation for an always-becoming postclass global society” (3). A historical critique provides the means by which “the middle class as an idea and as a practice of modernity” (4) has become implicated in current conversations about global structures of power and value. The Afterword by Mrinalini Sinha (a chapter that might be best read first by non-historians) provides some context as to how the discursive construction of the middle class plays into contemporary global power structures. But the focus of the book is not the shape of the middle class as it exists today, but on its *making*.

A paradigm prevalent in scholarship examining the middle class as a “global” phenomenon conceives it as something fundamentally tied up with modernity and

imperialism, with colonialism and “civilizing missions,” and with a linear determinism that conceives of modernity and the middle class as originating in Europe and then “moving out to the rest of the globe” (5). This leaves no scope for theorizing the middle class outside of global relations of power. *Making the Middle Class* seeks to unsettle the “deeply embedded Euro-American centrism in the study of the middle class” (10) by paying attention to a variety of alternate modernities and examining how middle classes took shape in non-western contexts, as such inviting “the reader to think about the historical formation of the middle class in a comparative, connective, and transnational framework” (11). The book certainly achieves this goal: it pluralizes and de-westernizes the notion of the middle class, shifting from a notion of a centre to a focus on multiple localities and from a linear narrative to multiple moments in history.

### **Historical middle class formations: Key themes**

The book “proposes four main, interlocking historical problems through which we seek to rethink the historical formation of the middle class across the world” (12). The first interrogates “practices of modernity,” the second examines experiences of labour professionalization in relation to state rule and class formation, the third notes the role of politics and revolution in middle class formations, and the fourth addresses forms of participation in the public sphere. The volume is thematically structured, eschewing a chronological or geographic organization in order to address the core cross-cutting topics of middle class formations around the globe. Each section of thematically linked chapters is helpfully summed up in a concise précis (again, for non-historians it might be more helpful to read these commentaries before the preceding chapters).

The first five chapters, collected under the section title “Practices of Modernity,” focus respectively on colonial India, colonial and post-colonial Zimbabwe, England, America, and Cold War Canada, examine the extent to which “modernity made the middle class” (107) and conversely how middle class practices and identities played a “crucial role in defining what it means to be ‘modern’” (29). The approach shared by the contributors of chapters in this section is the acknowledgement of the inseparability of the middle class and modernity. In the US, as Marina Moskowitz’s chapter argues, middle class identity was “based on notions of cultural capital, luxury, material aspiration, and credit” (13). In Canada, as Franca Iacovetta’s chapter shows, a key site through which the middle class identities were constructed was the integration of immigrants into the Canadian way of life, which entailed being trained in “modern” practices and ways of life. As Sanjay Joshi articulates, “efforts of cultural entrepreneurship made the middle class a significant player in the social and political life of colonial India” (30). In Zimbabwe, Michael O. West points out, although the middle class had its origins in the colonial project, the struggle for social mobility evolved

into a struggle against the terror of colonial oppression.

As Barbara Weinstein sums up in her commentary, “The aspirations stirred by modernity may vary, but [...] they vary surprisingly little; everywhere they hypothetically include roads, communications, basic services, medical care, education, and a certain capacity to consume” (112). And it is the middle class—however constituted, and in whatever cultural context—that both demanded and utilized these modern facilities.

The volume’s second section, “Labour Professionalization, is comprised of four chapters that focus respectively on middle class workers in the US, colonial Bombay, the Columbian capital Bogotá, and in Mexico during the revolution. Despite these different perspectives, the chapters share the perspective that one key characteristic of the middle class is the type of work it does. Although “class as an identity linked to labour has become almost obsolete” (14), it retains a certain degree of legitimacy in examining the middle class, which was—in many contexts across the globe—defined by the expansion of the service sector and “professional” work. This in turn shaped middle class identities. Daniel Walkowitz’s study of the participation of the professional managerial workers in the folk dance movement in the US demonstrates how “middle class is more about style and status claims—cultural capital—than about political or economic power” (126). In colonial Bombay, as Prashant Kidambi shows, doctors, lawyers, teachers and doctors similarly “claimed cultural capital as a way to struggle for a place in an educated middle class,” thus becoming “arbiters of appropriate social conduct for the society at large” (15). In Colombia in the 1950s and 1960s, A. Ricardo Lopez argues, professional workers were conscripted into becoming development workers such that “the concept and practice of ‘middle-class professional’ became embedded in a new form of democratic rule in the context of US imperial expansion” (163). As Mary Kay Vaughn summarizes in her commentary, an ideology that linked middle class professional workers in all these contexts was that they could “transform society in progressive, modernizing and civilizing directions” (223). As “professionals, engineering a modern society” (224), the middle class “propagated and appropriated a cultural project that was transnational in nature, diffused, and easily recognizable wherever it took root” (224).

Three chapters examining middle class politics in revolution in Peru, Mexico City, and the Arab Middle East, respectively, make up a section entitled “Revolutionary Politics.” In Peru, as Iñigo García-Bryce shows, the American Popular Revolutionary Alliance (APRA) did not merely represent a pre-existing middle class, but in fact created and reinforced that identity. “Belonging to APRA became one of the many identity markers that could make an individual middle class” (237). In the context of urban Mexico, Susanne Eineigel argues that “in contrast to traditional characterizations of the middle class as passive and apathetic” (253), they in fact took an active

political role in the aftermath of the revolution. Meanwhile, Keith David Watenpugh's examination of Arab middle class politics shows how they created institutions of civil society while remaining unable to translate their solidarity into real political power (269). The commentary by Brian Owensby highlights the shared argument of the previous three chapters: the middle class (and not only the peasantry and working class) also defined its identity through political action. This rests in tension with the "idea that the middle class has always obscured the operations of power in capitalist modernity" (295), which might be why, Owensby concludes, the middle class has so often been "brought up short by politics" (295).

The final section of the book, "Middle Class Public Spheres," includes four chapters thematically organized around notions of participation in civic life, taking in examples from 19<sup>th</sup>-century Germany, post-revolutionary France, Chile and Peru in the five decades spanning the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and Argentina in the mid-1900s. Gisela Mettele shows how "during the nineteenth century [in Germany], women critically participated in a variety of voluntary civic associations" precisely in order to constitute themselves as middle-class subjects (17). Carol E. Harrison shows how in post-revolutionary France, middle class identity was linked to religiosity, where charity in particular was linked to notions of a shared public good. David S. Parker examines the ways in which the boundaries of the public sphere in Chile and Peru were patrolled through ridicule and vilification of "the social climber." In Argentina, as Enrique Garguin argues, during the first decades of the twentieth century the middle classes claimed the public sphere as their own, and by so doing constructed legitimate political participation as not only middle class, but also as exclusively "European and white" (18).

Together, the chapters in this final section show how the middle class was formed through various kinds of public participation and action, but also how those public spheres were to some extent exclusionary and elitist. As Robyn Muncy summarizes, "one of the many variables [...] in the emergence and maintenance of middle classes around the globe has been the precise way that middle-class subjects identified who their social superiors and inferiors were" (378).

### **Fractured Characterizations: The 'Fuzziness' of the Middle Class**

As an interdisciplinary scholar working on the relation between consumer culture and the media, one of the key questions that I brought to my reading of the volume was: What are the characteristics of the "global middle class"? Despite—or rather, precisely because of—the wide range of historical analyses of transnational middle classes offered in the volume, it does not provide a clear and eliminating definition of the middle class. This is because as the editors themselves acknowledge, that the "middle class" is a fuzzy term characterized by an "overabundance of meanings" (19),

which brings up more complexities and problems than it offers conceptual and analytical usefulness.

To some extent this could be considered a strength of the volume, as it provides a degree of sophisticated flexibility, treating the middle class not as an established conceptual framework but as “a working social concept, a material experience, a political project, and a cultural practice – all of which acquire meaning only within specific historical experiences and discursive conditions” (21). Although I had hoped for a set of theoretical navigation points for studies in the middle class and was initially disappointed that they were difficult to locate, the further and deeper I read into and around the volume (for it is not the type of academic book that one needs to read in a linear fashion), the clearer it became to me that the notion of the middle class is vexed from a huge variety of perspectives, and a coherent theoretical framework for middle class studies not only does not exist, but perhaps cannot exist.

One key debate that arises again and again in the chapters is whether the middle class is a discursive or sociological formation. Indeed, this conceptual tension may be a particularly fruitful site for ongoing work in the field, be it contemporary or historical. The position outlined by the editors is instructive: it is unhelpful to simply accept the notion that the middle class is “a mere abstraction, a discourse, a metaphor, a rhetorical device” (20); but, similarly, scholars should take great care to not simply accept “middle-class identity (if not an actually existing middle class) as yet another given” (20). The volume succeeds in challenging and questioning these “two poles of interpretation by radically moving the historical analysis from fixed categories and preconceived definitions to the historical practices of what it meant to be – and live – the middle class in a variety of geographical locations” (21). By so doing, *Making the Middle Class* represents a significant contribution to the relocation of grand historical narratives about modernity, colonialism, capitalism, and civilization, and the place of the middle class in all of these structures.

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