

The Making of Middle Classes: Social Mobility and Boundary Work in Global Perspective

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Datum, Ort: 06.11.2014–08.11.2014, Berlin

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Recently, the middle classes have been (re)discovered as innovators and bearers of new values and life-styles on a global scale. Middle classes are believed to boost economic growth, promote desirable social dynamics, and safeguard democracy. They are regarded as modernisers who embody a positive vision of social mobility. At least, this is the optimistic narrative with regard to the Global South. With respect to the middle classes in Europe and North America, pessimistic narratives of stagnation, if not deprivation and victimisation due to transformations of the world economy dominate. Do these middle classes in different parts of the world nevertheless share some characteristics and experiences? Those commonly grouped under this label seem to constitute a heterogeneous collection of people with a wide range of occupations, income levels, lifestyles and political ambitions. Are they really to be viewed as a single social formation, to quote the workshop's keynote speaker, JÜRGEN KOCKA (BERLIN), „whose members share situational characteristics, a sense of belonging together, common attitudes and values, as well as a disposition for common behaviour and actions“?

As CAROLA LENTZ (MAINZ) explained, the workshop was inspired by the idea that one of the major features shared by all middle classes is their „boundary work“. The history and current dynamics of the middle classes have been, and continue to be, marked by the drawing of boundaries vis-à-vis those „above“ and those „below“, although who precisely constitutes this „below“ and „above“ vary. Furthermore, work is a central boundary marker. Belonging to

the middle class is generally regarded as an achieved, rather than an inherited status. Employment and work thus were central themes in the contributions to the workshop. Further aspects concerned the role of education in the intergenerational transmission of middle-class status; intra-class distinctions through certain ideals of domesticity; gender relations; the role of consumption for demonstrating middle-classness; and the interrelationship between the state and the middle classes.

The workshop was held at the International Research Center „Work and Human Life Cycle in Global History“, Humboldt-University, Berlin, and brought together an international group of scholars working on middle-class formation at different historical moments and across different regions, in Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. It attempted to examine what lessons researchers on the new middle classes around the globe can learn, for instance, from historians of the German *Bürgertum* or the British „middling sorts“ in the nineteenth century. At the same time, participants asked whether and how current processes of middle-class formation may throw new light on Euro-American middle-class histories.

JÜRGEN KOCKA's (Berlin) keynote focused on the European middle classes and, more specifically, the *Bürgertum* in the German-speaking areas during the long nineteenth century. The European middle classes constituted social formations that set themselves off from the aristocracy as well as from workers and the poor. The German *Bürgertum* was characterised by a peculiar combination of *Wirtschaftsbürgertum* (economic bourgeoisie) and *Bildungsbürgertum* (educated bourgeoisie). German bourgeois culture centred on respect for individual achievement, disciplined work, and education, as well as an urban life style and common interest in the arts, music, and literature, supported by specific forms of sociability manifested in clubs, meetings, and associations. The separation of the private from the public sphere, and specific ideals of family life and patriarchal gender relations were further commonalities of the *Bürgertum*. Kocka was sceptical whether the experience of the nineteenth-century *Bürgertum* was not, after

all, a rather unique one that was not to be found elsewhere.

In the first panel, „Between and betwixt: conceptualising the middle class“, CAROLA LENTZ (Mainz) and JAN BUDNIOK (Hamburg) discussed the concepts „elite“ versus „middle class“ from a theoretical as well as an empirical perspective. Carola Lentz examined the usage of the two concepts and outlined the theoretical challenges that research on the middle classes in Africa has to confront. Lentz argued in favour of a rather narrow understanding of elite, in the tradition of „functional elites“ approaches. With regard to class definitions, scholars continue to debate how much weight should be accorded to economic factors. The literature does agree that class membership is thought of as relatively permanent and as comprising the entire household or family. Research on the middle classes in Africa, however, raises questions that challenge these common understandings. Is the totalising concept of class useful, or can class membership vary over time or with regard to different societal domains? Do class identities necessarily encompass (nuclear) families in their entirety? Finally, with regard to scale, how does the emergence of national middle classes relate to cross-cutting sub-national differences of locality, region, ethnicity or religion, and to transnational networks?

Jan Budniok discussed changes in the self-understanding of Ghanaian judges and lawyers, drawing on his research on the history of Ghana's legal profession from the late nineteenth century until the present day. While the first generation of English-trained and usually wealthy judges and lawyers considered themselves members of an elite par excellence, many of the younger generations of lawyers, who graduated from Ghana Law School, usually see themselves as part of the middle class. In the post-colonial period, the legal profession has become increasingly diversified, and it is nowadays highly differentiated, with multiple career choices that go hand in hand with extremely diverse income levels.

Middle class is a multi-dimensional concept that refers to a socio-economic category, a cultural world, and a political discourse. However, the attractiveness of the term for

self-description seems to change over time, and its recent rise appears to be connected to the global conjuncture of neoliberal politics. Middle classes generally see their success as dependent on their own efforts rather than on social networks or „corruption“. Another point raised in the discussion concerned the importance of the state, and state employment, for the making of the middle classes. While historically, European middle classes insisted on their autonomy from the state, at least the „older“ middle classes in the Global South emerged precisely from among state employees. This may have important consequences for the political ambitions and visions of the middle classes.

The second panel discussed „Social mobility and kin work: negotiating middle-class status“. All three examples highlighted changes in attitudes towards morality, sexuality, household arrangements, and gender. The paper presented by HENRIKE DONNER (Oxford) discussed how after a boom in the construction business residential patterns and conjugal models of the middle class in Kolkata underwent changes as the availability of personal loans and income for women allowed for new household arrangements. Donner showed that Kolkata's rather traditionalist Bengali-speaking middle-class families today tend to live in smaller household units, but that social obligations, such as (female) care for next of kin remain in place. The paper demonstrated how Bengali middle-class women negotiate the tensions between modern ideals of autonomy embodied in the media ideal of the „New Indian Woman“ and the real-life limitations of female agency. These women manipulate the discourse on the „joint“ family, filial obligation and demographic change, and invest care work in order to gain control over property.

ANDREA NOLL (Hildesheim/Mainz) presented a case study of two Ghanaian family foundations that promote the upward social mobility of kin. The associations bring family members together and aim at helping to transmit knowledge and occupational training from one generation to the next, thus diminishing intra-family class boundaries. In regularly held, formalised meetings, the family decides over contributions and the finan-

cial support of less affluent family members who can apply for assistance, particularly for furthering their education. Both foundations invoke a charismatic ancestor and expect that beneficiaries follow their ancestor's moral standards. In consequence, the foundations work towards making class boundaries and family boundaries more congruent: in order to be fully accepted as a legitimate member of the family, one has to be highly educated, socially successful, and hard-working.

Festivities in the course of the life cycle have always marked social status and displayed the wealth of a family. As JULIA PAULI (Hamburg) argued in her study of life-cycle celebrations in Namibia, while funerals are necessary and therefore universal life-cycle events, their specific staging represents a family's social standing. Weddings, on the other hand, have become ever more important markers of social differentiation because they are no longer universally celebrated, and are now costly celebrations that demonstrate status. A new life-cycle ritual, cherished by young middle-class women, is „the key“, which lavishly celebrates the twenty-first birthday of girls who are not yet married and have not yet become pregnant but control their sexuality. Taken together, these life-cycle rituals manifest the norms and values of middle-class families and create moral and ritual cohesion as well as new forms of social exclusion.

MOSA PHADI (Johannesburg) showed the film „Phakathi: Soweto's Middling Class“ (2013), which provoked further discussions on boundary work and middle-class self-perceptions. About 60 per cent of the population of Soweto call themselves middle class, for a variety of reasons and according to different understandings of what middle class means. The definition of the middle class is always relational. Describing oneself to be middle class may entail unexpected meanings, because people on the ground may use it in ways that differ from the Euro-American social-science literature.

An afternoon lecture by FIONA DEVINE (Manchester) discussed „Mobility and the middle classes: opportunities and threats for generational and intergenerational advancement“. Devine's paper reflected on recent pat-

terns and trends in the social mobility of men and women in contemporary Great Britain and their implications for middle-class reproduction. Due to the current global financial crisis housing prices in the UK have increased, while wages have been cut. These developments have hampered progress for middle-class affiliates. In particular, parents who support their children's education struggle. The main reasons for downward mobility have been divorce and single parenthood. Devine's lecture offered a review of the methodology and major findings of past studies of social inequality, and presented the „Great British Class Calculator“, which she and Mike Savage developed for a large social survey supported by the BBC. Based on Pierre Bourdieu's approach to social stratification, and defining classes according to people's access to and composition of economic, cultural, and social capital, the „Calculator“ distinguished seven social classes, namely elite, the established middle class, the technical middle class, new affluent workers, emergent service workers, the traditional working class, and the precariate. According to Devine's argument, class reproduction depends on the composition of a family's various forms of capital. General trends were a clear polarisation between the „top“ and the „bottom“, and increasing fragmentation in the „middle“.

In the discussion, it was argued that economic capital continues to be extremely important for reproducing social class. Focusing only on income to define social class would be misleading because it would overlook the importance of inherited wealth and other kinds of capital. The welfare state also plays an important role. However, it seems that many state-related resources are mainly accessible for the middle and upper classes.

The third panel discussed „The state and boundary work: the making of middle-class politics“. RICARDO LÓPEZ (Bellingham) demonstrated that certain new conceptions of professional, rationalised labour were at the core of the Alliance for Progress, the most significant foreign-aid programme of the 1960s in Latin America. The Alliance for Progress allocated political power, economic resources, and the right to rule in democracies neither to elites, nor to workers, but to the middle

class and promoted what policy makers, intellectuals, and politicians in Latin American countries called a „middle-class revolution“, making the middle classes, and their normative views of discipline and meritocracy, the backbone of an orderly democracy.

JASON SUMICH (Trondheim) traced for Mozambique how national and international interventions and different political regimes since independence in 1975 (Marxism-Leninism, civil war, the collapse of socialism, democratisation, structural adjustment, and the rise of an elected single-party government) have shaped a middle class. He discussed the meaning of being „middle class“ in the Mozambican context. He emphasised that the political links which helped to form the middle class at the same time threaten its social reproduction.

LOUISE WALKER (Boston) discussed the transformation of the economic relationship between the state and the middle class in Mexico during the period of economic deterioration in the 1970s, focussing particularly on legislation concerning middle-class consumption. The Mexican Miracle, an economic post-war boom, had been based on a pact between the ruling party, the national capitalists of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), and the middle class. Since the late 1970s, due to increasing inflation, salary subsidies no longer guaranteed the middle class' consumption patterns. Afraid that the economic crisis might lead to political upheaval, the PRI provided public sources of consumer credit and passed radical consumer rights legislation. Walker argued that with these changes, the middle class acquired a new political identity as consumer-citizens.

The discussion highlighted the role of policies and political parties for middle-class action, identity, and consolidation. The papers illuminated the government's own dependence on the middle classes.

The final panel addressed „Consumption, life style, and social milieus: creating middle-class distinctions“. In her paper on Tanzania's post-socialist society and the emergence of a new middle class CLAIRE MERCER (London) suggested that measuring income, occupation, and consumption patterns is important, but of limited usefulness if we are to

understand what middle-class lifestyles are like. She focussed on how houses are becoming key sites where lifestyles are visibly in flux. Drawing on a small sample of the new styles of houses being built in suburban Darussalam and Machame, Kilimanjaro, she outlined four different types of middle-class domestic aesthetics: respectable, local aspirational, global aspirational, and minimalist. Each is characterised by a distinctive use of architecture, materials, interiors, décor, and compound space. Houses have thus become part of the cultural capital that can be deployed to demarcate middle-class distinctions in post-socialist Tanzania.

Drawing on examples from Kenya, FLORIAN STOLL (Bayreuth) discussed how members of the middle class draw boundaries not only vis-à-vis milieus in higher and lower classes, but also vis-à-vis other middle-class milieus. He suggested that the sociological concept of „milieu“, based on Bourdieu's concept of habitus, may be more productive for the analysis of social stratification in African societies than European concepts of class. With regard to Kenya, Stoll distinguished between the milieus of „(neo-)traditionalists“, „social climbers“, and „young urban professionals“. While traditionalists are strongly determined by ethnic affiliations and rural-urban ties that are regarded as more important than work, „social climbers“ focus on work and social mobility. Young urban professionals are more oriented towards certain modern jobs and a rather hedonistic, consumption-oriented life style.

SMITHA RADHAKRISHNAN (Wellesley) explored a particular segment of India's „new“ middle classes, namely those employed in the industry of microfinance institutions, which offer opportunities for stable, well-paid, upwardly mobile jobs to working or lower-middle class Indians. The paper examined how interactions between microfinance employees often share similar class and linguistic backgrounds with those they serve, and must leverage a shared habitus to build trust and establish longstanding relationships. At the same time, they have to maintain their distinction from their clients, pressuring them to repay in difficult financial circumstances. Microfinance borrowers

treat these officials with deference. The processes of class distinction mobilised at the interface between microfinance employees and borrowers become crystallised over time. As long as loans are repaid, workers will continue to enjoy career advancement and security, while borrowers will continue to borrow at exorbitant interest rates.

In the final discussion ERDMUTE ALBER (Bayreuth), DIETER NEUBERT (Bayreuth) and BARBARA WEINSTEIN (New York) pointed to a number of overarching themes that workshop contributions and comments on the papers had addressed, but that needed more attention: the role of the state in the formation of the middle classes; kinship, gender relations, the life course, and the intergenerational transmission of social status; the ambiguous role of ethnicity and race; and the intersections between transnational, national, and local spaces of middle-class formation and reproduction.

While several contributions discussed the role of the state in the formation of the middle class, there was no definite agreement to what extent employees of the public sector should be counted among the constitutive elements of the middle class. In the contemporary Global South, the public sector was, and often continues to be, one of the major employers of upwardly mobile educated men and women. Nowadays, middle-class visions of a meritocratic order, based on individual achievement and professional competence, are shared by many people. To a certain extent, it seems as if „middle class“ has become the most acceptable self-designation, an all encompassing social category, and almost the „only“ class. Today, the middle classes in the Global South appear to bear, once again, the promise of a future harmonious society – a vision that seems more appealing than the idea of antagonistic struggle inherent in the concept of the working class.

Various papers addressed the importance of studying kinship and gender roles in middle-class lives, and of paying close attention to the intergenerational transmission of property and educational benefits. Questions of race and ethnicity have rarely been addressed by research on nineteenth-century middle-class formations, but new studies on

their role with regard to contemporary middle classes in the Global South suggest that perhaps ethnic (and linguistic) homogeneity has been an important pre-condition for the formation of nineteenth-century middle-class culture. In the Global South, ethno-regional origins and race have often determined access to educational institutions and thus access to more lucrative employment and other kinds of economic capital. Middle-class status thus often implies, or is even built on, other social differences. What seems clear is that globally circulating discourses on and concepts of the middle class play a much more important role in middle-class formation today than in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, through global migration and migrants' remittances to their home families, transnationally generated income has come to play a crucial role in the making of „national“ middle classes. Nevertheless, the framework of the nation-state still seems to constitute the overarching framework within which people's views of their own place in society, and a desirable, just social order, are being imagined and negotiated. Finally, the workshop participants discussed the question of how sensitive the concepts of social scientists and historians need to be to people's own terms of interpreting their social positions. „The middle class“ constitutes a powerful means of self-positioning and expressing one's social aspirations.

Conference Overview:

Keynote:

Jürgen Kocka (Berlin): Property, education and work: European middle classes of the nineteenth century revisited

Panel 1: *Between and betwixt: conceptualising the middle class*

Chair: Dieter Neubert (Bayreuth)

Carola Lentz (Mainz): African elites or middle classes? Lessons from transnational research on social stratification

Jan Budniok (Hamburg): From elite to middle class: processes of differentiation in Ghana's legal profession

Panel 2: *Social mobility and kin work: negotiating middle-class status*

Chair: Erdmute Alber (Bayreuth)

Henrike Donner (Oxford Brookes): 'Daughters are just like sons now': negotiating kin-work and property regimes in Kolkata middle-class families

Andrea Noll (Hildesheim/Mainz): Family foundations for social mobility: negotiating class boundaries in Ghanaian families

Julia Pauli (Hamburg): Rites of passage into the middle class: social differentiation through changing life-cycle celebrations in Namibia

Film screening

Mosa Phadi (Johannesburg): *Phakathi: Soweto's Middling Class* (2013)

Afternoon lecture:

Fiona Devine (Manchester): Mobility and the middle classes: opportunities and threats for generational and intergenerational advancement

Panel 3: The state and boundary work: the making of middle-class politics

Chair: Jan Budniok (Hamburg)

Ricardo López (Bellingham): 'A middle class revolution': the Alliance for Progress, Democracy, and Labour in Colombia, 1958-1970

Jason Sumich (Trondheim): 'We are afraid because my family has done well no matter which regime is in power': middle classes, boundary work and uncertainty in Maputo

Louise Walker (Boston): Consumer citizens: economic crisis and the politics of middle-class consumption in Mexico City, 1973-76

Panel 4: Consumption, life style, and social milieus: creating middle-class distinctions

Chair: Ricardo Lopez (Bellingham)

Claire Mercer (London): Middle-class construction: domestic architecture, aesthetics and anxieties in Tanzania

Florian Stoll (Bayreuth): Work and mobility versus sociocultural influences: boundaries of milieus in the middle classes of Nairobi (Kenya)

Smitha Radhakrishnan (Wellesley): Making 'new' middle classes in the Indian micro-finance industry

Roundtable and final discussion

Chair: Carola Lentz (Mainz)

Barbara Weinstein (New York)

Dieter Neubert (Bayreuth)

Erdmute Alber (Bayreuth)

Tagungsbericht *The Making of Middle Classes: Social Mobility and Boundary Work in Global Perspective*. 06.11.2014–08.11.2014, Berlin, in: H-Soz-Kult 15.01.2015.