

# H-Net Reviews

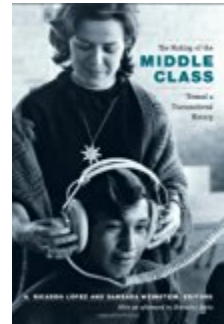
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

A. Ricardo López, Barbara Weinstein. *The Making of the Middle Class: Toward a Transnational History*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012. 446 S. \$99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-5117-7; \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-5129-0.

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The sixteen essays in this anthology concern the middle class in a variety of places: India, England, Germany, France, present-day Zimbabwe, present-day Syria, the United States, Canada, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, Chile, and Argentina. Editors A. Ricardo López and Barbara Weinstein, asserting that the history of the middle class is “more properly transnational than global,” allow each of their authors to make his or her own argument about the middle class in a specific place and time (p. 4).

The authors attend carefully to historiographical issues, especially the relationship between the middle class and modernity. Most also argue against a “traditional” view that the middle class was born in England and America and became global as people around the world succeeded or failed to copy the Anglo-American prototype. As Mrinalini Sinha puts it in the afterword, the cumulative effect of the essays is to “successfully demolish the view of the singularity of a middle class that sprang fully formed [as the] North Atlantic middle classes” and against which “all other middle classes are measured” (p. 387). Some of the authors also attend to the vexed question of definition, with most seeing the middle class as a cultural or rhetorical construction. In his introduction, López sets the historiographical tone by presenting the book’s “proposal that we open genuine venues of critical inquiry by staying close to the formative power of language or discourse, while interrogating the different historical material practices of middle-class subjectivity,” which will let us “understand the middle class 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” (pp. 20-21). On this point, I sym-

pathize with commentator Robyn Muncy, who “hates to admit what seems a primitive desire for knowledge of the occupation and income of the subjects under study” (p. 383); for me, the most satisfying parts of the book were details about the concrete realities of middle-class life—such as how middle-class Midwesterners arranged their homes in the 1920s (Marina Moskowitz, p. 79) or how social climbers behaved at the theater in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Chile (David S. Parker, pp. 344-345). As Muncy puts it, “analyzing the changing material conditions of our middle classes does not in any way undermine our commitment to constructivist understandings of class; rather, it confirms that class has been created not only by changing relations to the means of production but also by vigorous cultural, political, and social work” (p. 383).

The book originated in two conferences on the history of the middle class (one in 2004 and another in 2006), and it evokes the experience of participating in an especially satisfying conference, in which thoughtful scholars convey cutting-edge insights and introduce little known events and people. The form of the book contributes to the effect, with conference-style commentaries on each of its four sections as well as an afterword that serves as a formal response to the entire collection of essays. As López points out, organizing the book geographically would have inappropriately reinforced the narrative that makes Anglo-American middle classes the model upon which all other middle classes have been patterned. Instead, the editors organize the geographically specific essays in thematic groupings.

The first group of essays focuses most directly on the

relationship between the middle class and modernity. Especially when taken together, Sanjay Joshi's essay on the middle class in colonial India and Simon Gunn's overview of the English middle class show how complex the relationship between modernity and the middle class can be. In India, "a small and relatively privileged group of men—and later, women—made their distinctions from other social strata, by virtue of being representatives of a modern social order" (p. 36). At the same time that these middle-class Indians were using modernity to define themselves and assert their right to power, they were also taking advantage of tradition and their existing status in a nonmodern, hierarchical society. In this, the Indian middle class was distinctive only in the way it combined modernity and tradition, not for having done so. Joshi points out that "a close examination of the discourse of modernity [throughout the world] reveals its illiberal and perhaps nonmodern substrata" (p. 41). Gunn elaborates on this insight, looking at the middle class in England. Gunn notes that the historiography of modern England has energetically rejected, in recent decades, the idea that the English middle class was the vanguard and catalyst of modernity. Instead, the new orthodoxy depicts the English middle class as "backward"—or, "more precisely and variously, as subordinated, fractured, amorphous, and mythical" (p. 61). For Gunn, revisionist historians have fallen into a modernity-or-backwardness debate that goes back to the nineteenth century. "The revisionist historiography of the English middle class ... was not ... the product of neutral, self-contained academic research," he asserts (p. 64). Rather, it grew out of the same sort of cultural crises that had produced earlier versions of the debate. He suggests it would be more fruitful to reframe our questions so that we can consider the social reproduction of the English middle class and understand its place in networks that extended beyond England.

The second group of essays explores issues of professionalism and cultural capital. For example, Daniel J. Walkowitz makes a case study of English country dance aficionados in the United States (people who participate in traditional dances that resemble contra dancing). The hundreds of dancers he interviewed are mostly well-educated and well-paid professionals; almost all of them are white; and they identify themselves as leftist or countercultural. Their dancing is characterized by restraint, which they describe as an escape from modern life and from more exuberant and sexualized forms of expression

(such as hip hop). Their dances also have the high-brow cachet of classical and baroque music. Although the English country dancers are "puzzled and disappointed" (p. 136) at attracting so few non-whites to their gatherings, Walkowitz finds that their dances have "little resonance with the working class or racial minorities" (p. 138). Thus Walkowitz sees English country dancing as a form of cultural capital that makes its participants into a distinct subset of the middle class by excluding the Other: the dancers' body language and "cultural messages signify to those they miss how much the absent groups do not fit" (p. 138).

Both the third and fourth groups of essays concern middle-class participation in politics, with politics sometimes helping to create middle-class identity and sometimes serving as a vehicle for a self-identified middle class to pursue its own class interests. The fourth group of essays combines questions about politics with questions about the public sphere. In treating these topics, the essays also consider the larger questions of the book, such as the relationship between modernity and the middle class. For example, Carol E. Harrison considers the way anticlerical Frenchmen linked women to religiosity as a way of protecting men's political autonomy. By painting middle-class women as religious and "not-modern," Frenchmen could justify disenfranchising them when they otherwise "might easily have fit into liberal notions of citizenship" (p. 321). Harrison's analysis of children's literature shows how distorted the anticlerical depictions were. Middle-class French family life engaged all family members in Catholicism to some extent: both male and female "bourgeois children learned class and Catholicism simultaneously, as social practices that ought to be combined in the charitable impulse" (p. 326).

Taken together, the essays in this anthology and the commentaries on them provide theoretical insights on, and fascinating details about, the middle class around the world. The variety of locations under discussion will make the anthology useful for those who study the past through a comparative perspective. (Those interested in pursuing even more comparisons should consider Burton J. Bledstein and Robert D. Johnston's *The Middling Sorts: Explorations in the History of the American Middle Class* [2001], which is also an anthology of [then] recent scholarship.) What world historians will likely find most useful about this anthology, however, are its historiographical discussions, especially on globalization and modernization.

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