
Reviewed by Gary Roth (Rutgers University - Newark)

Published on H-History-and-Theory (May, 2023)

Commissioned by Andrew J. Kettler (University of South Carolina)

Matteo Battistini’s profound meditation on the middle class as an ideological construct provides a history of social science theorizing from opening salvos in the mid to late 1800s up until the present day. By exploring the twists and turns that theorists have taken along the way, and by compiling the contributions of individual theorists, Battistini leads us to the conundrums that continue to agitate the social sciences. As indicated by the book’s title, *Middle Class: An Intellectual History through the Social Sciences; An American Fetish from Its Origins to Globalization*, Battistini is attentive to the presuppositions projected by social scientists onto the middle class and to the theoretical revisions to which they resorted whenever the middle class did not live up to expectations. He reminds us that the prominent motif has been the middle class under siege and on the decline.

These theorists have imagined the middle class as a bearer of democratizing, liberalizing, and modernizing tendencies, despite its habitual relapse into disarray and panic from which it has on occasion embraced brutalizing forms of social salvation and reconstruction. The fascist era in Europe during the early and middle decades of the twentieth century, for instance, was relativized in terms of material conditions that undermined the true interests of the middle class. The fetish that Battistini often refers to is the proclivity of social science theorists to posit a state of existence for the middle class that rarely finds confirmation in the here and now.

Social theorists in the mid-1800s had great hopes for the middle class as a bulwark against aristocratic aggression and modernizers within the transition from feudal-oriented landed estates to the commerce and industry that typified the new order. The middle class stood for free trade and universal suffrage, two elements considered foundational for the rapid unfolding of the modern world. As a political force, though, the middle class proved to be quite timid, a circumstance that greatly disappointed Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, among others. This was the new middle class, not the farmers and self-employed artisans of the past, but the entrepreneurs, independent profes-
sionals, and high-ranking officials in the private and public sectors, who, it was thought, were in tune, if not ideologically, then at least in terms of their immediate interests, with a capitalist economy that was expanding faster than anyone had anticipated.

This ongoing duality between the actual psychological and political presuppositions of the middle class and the social roles to which it was ascribed in theory produced a double crisis: within the middle class itself as generally directionless despite its brief lurches toward the left or the right and also in the intellectual traditions dedicated to analyzing the middle class but that nonetheless repeatedly misdiagnosed and mis-anticipated its behavior. One of the strengths of Battistini’s *Middle Class* is that it draws together theorizing about the middle class that was conducted throughout the social sciences, not just in sociology and political science but also within economics, as these fields developed in the late 1800s and through the first half of the 1900s. He pays special attention to theorists who played prominent roles in the debates and discussions of their own eras but who are seldom referenced in contemporary discussions, including John Bates Clark, Alba M. Edwards, Harold Lasswell, and Lewis Corey, among others.

Social scientists in the United States were confronted with the task of furthering the conceptualization of the middle class begun by their European counterparts in Great Britain, France, and Germany. Battistini takes up this subject in chapter 1. It was clear by the late 1800s that a new middle class had formed within the confines of the traditional middle class but that it was deeply bifurcated between upper-level managers and salaried officials at one end of the income and power continuum and lower-level retail and office workers at the other, a circumstance that considerably confused preexisting attempts to analyze society in class terms. In the US, though, there was little need to explain this new middle class in the terms familiar to European theorists in that the remnants of feudal society, including a hereditary aristocracy, were largely missing, nor was there a strong social democratic (socialist) tradition to which the academic disciplines felt compelled to respond. Politically, social scientists in the US imagined that their pursuit of governmental policies and social engineering might be conducted in abstraction from the electoral and political mobilizations that obsessed their European counterparts. The task, then, was to reorient the social sciences away from the class-based theories that emerged in Europe, for which a focus on the middle class was ideal. That Battistini’s *Middle Class* brings these developments into focus is what makes his book such an important contribution to our understanding of the history and evolution of social science theorizing. He provides a perspective from which we can judge the development of the social sciences in terms of shared assumptions that bind together the individual disciplines, as the middle class became both a focus and a fetish on its own terms.

Battistini’s goal is to show the ideological germination of a middle class that has neither a feudal past to which it can be contrasted nor a strong labor movement that shapes social discourse in terms of the clash between classes rather than that of individuals, groups, or strata. He maps chronologically the evolution of theories that eventually posit a capitalism within which an all-encompassing middle class has effectively banished the discussion of class, a type of veiled class warfare from within the middle class itself. At the beginning of the twentieth century, social scientists were obsessed with the factors that defined the middle class occupationally and that distinguished it from other forms of industrial labor. Thus, mental labor was conceptualized separately from manual labor, brain work from handwork, and white-collar from blue-collar employment. This new middle class was also ascribed its own distinctive behavioral patterns and thought processes.
Efficiency rather than profit or wages, it was conjectured, was the leitmotif of the managerial class, whereby technology and rationality replaced the cruder forms of behavior called forth by the capitalist system. Social science doctrine, known under various labels but primarily as progressivism and liberalism in the US, Fabianism in Great Britain, and social democracy in Germany, France, and other parts of Europe, conceived of a world organized in terms of cooperation rather than conflict, political coalitions rather than political dominance, and technocratic norms and regulations to replace the chaos of market-oriented systems. The middle class, in these renditions, became the bearer of a rational society, a world underpinned by social work and social services, aspects of life for which corporations and proprietors were particularly unsuited.

With an idealized middle class serving as a backdrop, the social sciences took new forms. Even though a major reconceptualization of society with a focus on the upper middle class had been begun by European scholars, Max Weber the most prominent of them, scholars in the United States extended the focus to other parts and aspects of the new middle class. In an especially interesting discussion by Battistini, key developments occurred in the field of economics during the founding decades of the social sciences (late 1800s). The rise of marginalism meant a focus on consumers, rather than the preexisting concentration of classical economists on production and social classes. Consumers were differentiated in terms of income gradations but nonetheless no longer needed to be divided along class lines to be understood economically. Society became a continuum, not even the segmentation posited initially by Weber and others. The stage was set for this view of continuity to be carried over into the other social sciences, which for reasons of their own were also headed in this direction.

A further source of realignment, in another of the highly insightful discussions by Battistini in chapter 3, focuses on the collection of census data during the early decades of the twentieth century, in particular the detailed delineation of the economy into hundreds of distinct occupations, such that class status was obscured. No longer was society solely divided into economic zones, such as agriculture, manufacturing, and services, as was the case in previous census surveys. This delineation of occupations seemed appropriate within an economic order that had begun to introduce minute divisions into the division of labor and had expanded nonmanual labor faster than employment had expanded in other sectors. The continuum of occupations seemed to mirror reality just as well as other means of viewing reality, whether by economic sector or by class. These types of data reconceptualization complemented a focus on consumption and consumers and thus fit with the general trend of focusing on the middle class as the key social class within capitalism. The economists focused instead on the individual, the sociologists on groups of individuals (according to race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and types of employment, white and blue collar, for instance).

It was then only a short step to purging from the concept of middle class the psychological and political attributes that no one had yet to grasp in a manner that fit all situations. For social science theorists in the US, the Great Depression of the 1930s became an era for rethinking the middle class. A key prompt was the failure of social science theorizing to predict middle-class political behavior, which veered in one direction in central Europe but in other directions elsewhere. When shown of an inherent and preconceived politics, however, this divergence in behavior ceased to be a conceptual conundrum. But this also meant transforming the middle class into an object of social science research rather than the basis for political prognostications. Battistini thus presents the 1930s New Deal as a period in which the middle class was reconceptualized. That the architects and executors of New Deal policies embraced the economic theory of underconsumption as the
root cause of economic downturns and stagnation reinforced the focus of a middle class in terms of consumption rather than managerial largess and political leadership. The middle class had thus been universalized in theory.

Despite the many original and insightful contributions in Battistini's Middle Class, the book nonetheless has a certain porous quality theoretically that undermines its thesis. The final chapter is telling in this regard: its title, "The Rise and Fall of a Fetish." Battistini states "that the middle class takes on the appearance of a fetish: a symbolic object of mediation in which Americans recognize themselves regardless of the manual or intellectual work they do" (pp. xii-xiii). Further, this fetish "provides the key to accessing the secret laboratory of the legitimation of capitalism in which the social sciences have developed the historical project (both scientific and political) of constructing the middle class" (p. xiii). Why, then, pronounce it as fallen, when his book has shown repeatedly that the concept of middle class is battered whenever society unravels economically and politically?

Notwithstanding the recent resurgence of working-class identities among college graduates stuck within the gig economy and the revival of public-sector unionism, along with hundreds of union drives by employees of multinational corporations in the transportation, tech, and service industries, societal-wide dissatisfaction since the 2008 Great Recession is still referenced in terms of a middle-class existence no longer attainable. The fetishism, to speak in Battistini's terms, helps fuel the frustration and protests, rather than the frustration and protests eclipsing and replacing it. Battistini's fetish is as alive as ever, not only among social scientists but also among the population at large, much of which lives in economically precarious situations.

Fetishism—as a concept—is, in any case, highly problematic. It presupposes philosophically that non-fetishistic thinking can replace the faulty analyses and consciousness of the social scientists under review. Marx tried to deal with the issue of false consciousness and fetishism (in this case, of commodities) by means of science-inspired methodologies and rigor, but this was by no means as clean-cut a procedure as he had hoped and is attested to by the wide range of interpretations subsequently given to his work. Battistini offers no such rationalization, but isn't his critique of middle-class fetishization also subject to its own fetishization? Does an anti-Battistini need to accompany the one that already exists?

Because Battistini's book focuses on social science theorizing, it is difficult to escape the idealistic underpinnings of his analysis. In his view, social scientists were key in persuading the population at large to think of itself as middle class. But while some of the theorists under consideration influenced government policies, others merely reflected on or anticipated trends on which they had no influence. Their audience was only themselves, a fate that often befalls academics. An example is Lewis Corey, to whom Battistini devotes a quite interesting and extended discussion. Corey's articles and books during the Great Depression described the grinding down of the middle class as a permanent feature of capitalist society, but his ideas were chiefly influential within the limited set of intellectual circles that were oriented on the Communist Party. As an example of a social scientist who focused on the middle class, Corey is well chosen. Still needed is an analysis of just how influential not just his ideas but all the theorists covered in Battistini's book were beyond the intellectual, academic, and political circles in which their works circulated. So influential that they brainwashed large sectors of the population into believing that they were something they were not? Such a view idealizes the power of ideas.

Nor does Battistini explain why the population's embrace of a middle-class identity was a fetish rather than a straightforward materialistic response to the huge proliferation of consumer
goods that arose from the enhancements to labor and machine productivity over the course of a century's worth of industrialization. Capitalism produced a situation in which people in traditionally working-class occupations could live within a level of material comfort previously the exclusive prerogative of the wealthier parts of the middle class. That social scientists sensed that this situation would arise decades before it did is one of the fascinating aspects of Battistini's book, but his obsession with fetishized interpretations leads him to attribute hegemonic importance to the ideas, discussions, and trends he so carefully delineates but that seemed mostly out of touch with reality when they were articulated. Social scientists may have theorized about an all-embracing middle class for a half-century before it actually became a reality in the aftermath of World War II, but these are two separate phenomena whose connection needs to be explained and not just assumed. Were the social scientists prescient or just lucky that their speculative musings bore some relationship to reality?

Besides, does it really matter whether the population identifies as middle class, working class, or, as is often the case, some combination of the two, depending on the situation? That Battistini deconstructs middle class as an identity that functions as an ideology, but does not do the same for working class as a conceptual paradigm, again speaks to the idealistic tendencies within his analysis. Like many of the social scientists he investigates, he has put his finger on a phenomenon without quite accurately or fully explaining it. A book less convinced of its own correctness and less willing to retreat into a metanarrative about discourse and fetishism would take us further toward a full comprehension of past and present. That Battistini's *Middle Class* has taken us part of the way is a major accomplishment. A book this bold and ambitious needs only to be tightened up a bit theoretically to avoid some of the fetishistic pitfalls to which Battistini has so grandly introduced us.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-history-and-theory


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58835

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.