**The Middle Class: A History of Our Present**

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There is no such thing as the middle class. Literally, the middle class presumes a three-class model of society. That is, there is a top or elite class, a bottom or subaltern class, and in between them, a middle class. But no society has ever had such easy or simple divisions. Of course it is true that the term middle class has seldom been used in its literal sense of a class "in the middle." But even so, there never been a single bounded social group, or one set of economic indicators, or even a set of uncontested values that can define or be conclusively defined as middle class. Rather than looking for conclusive definitions or boundaries, it is much better to realize that the middle class, as the term is commonly used, is a cultural construct.

To illustrate this point, let me use two examples that show the very different meanings the term has in two not-dissimilar contexts. In the United States, the term “middle class” exists in the current political lexicon pretty much as a synonym for “ordinary people.” Thus when Barak Obama and Mitt Romney debated their positions in the last Presidential elections, they did so with [both claiming to have policies that would advance the interests of the middle class](http://www.nationaljournal.com/politics/for-obama-and-romney-middle-class-means-pretty-much-everyone-20121018). Whatever be the economic realities, the ordinary American does not like to be labeled “working class.” This is not so in Britain, where the term middle class has a very evident connotations of elitism. Even though a recent study pointed to seven out of ten people [self-identifying as middle class](http://britainthinks.com/sites/default/files/reports/SpeakingMiddleEngish_Report.pdf), the middle class in public discourse refers to those who occupy positions privilege based on birth, wealth, attitudes, accents, among other markers of high status. An ongoing controversy over the use of [derogatory terms to describe plebian culture](http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-13626046) is just one example of this. Despite the rightward drift in actual policies followed by the two major British political parties – Conservatives and Labour – neither of the two parties would claim to work for the benefit of the middle class. The construct therefore indicates two different things in the two contexts – an elite in Britain, and the ordinary Joe or Jane in the United States.

The fact that the term means different things in different contexts does not take away from its value. On the contrary, the way the term has been deployed, the connotations it has in different contexts, allow us to see it as a cultural construct with an important history, or rather histories. These histories are crucial to understand if we are to make sense of some of the ambiguities that surround the use of the term today.

Despite the variations in meaning, though, we continue to write and talk as if there were a single entity called the middle class. In fact, we are told that we live in what is becoming a middle-class world. What does this mean? To *The Economist,* which, a few years ago [did a special report](http://www.economist.com/node/13063298) on middle classes in “emerging markets,” it primarily seems to mean having access to disposable income allied to newer, more conspicuous, consumption patterns. Using those criteria, they argue that “for the first time in history more than half the world is middle-class.” But even *The Economist* notes that the middle class is not just an “income category but also a set of attitudes.” It is this combination of income, consumption, and critically, a perception of certain attitudes, that defines for the magazine as well as most readers, the middle class. Ricardo Lopez and Barbara Weinstein, [in a recent book](http://books.google.com/books?id=Y-wPB0I-5yEC&pg=PA1&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=4#v=onepage&q&f=false) suggest that neoliberal arguments about the benefits of globalization are also premised on a certain understanding of the middle class. In the neoliberal imaginary too, the middle class is associated with western-style modernity, liberal politics, and, of course, free market capitalism. Celebrations of a global middle class are premised on the idea that once “developing” countries develop a sizable or influential middle class, this middle class will champion the same values of modernity and capitalism that are associated with the “original” or Western middle class.

So, where do these ideas about the middle class come from? It is usual to start any history of the middle class with developments in Europe or North America. It is commonly believed that the period from the late-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries inaugurated a new era in human history where an older aristocracy was displaced by “the middle class” who now emerged as leading players in economics, politics and social thought and conduct. According to their preferences, historians think of the Industrial Revolution, the Enlightenment, the political revolutions of this time, or combinations thereof, as the engines of this change. These are hardly histories that can ever be ignored in how we understand the emergence of the middle class.

But the model of a liberal, democratic, progressive middle class which seizes power from a decadent, enfeebled, feudal order to reorder society and politics along the lines suggested by the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment is a myth which has been undermined repeatedly by historians of Europe. [Dror Wahrman](http://books.google.com/books?id=WbpfKwGqgQQC&pg=PA1&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=4#v=onepage&q&f=false) revealed significant variation between a messy and complicated historical reality and the model of a progressive, enlightened, middle class emerging “like the rising sun” out of the Industrial Revolution. [Sara Maza](http://books.google.com/books?id=C64RX-cousEC&printsec=frontcover&dq=sara+maza&hl=en&sa=X&ei=5mbdU47MC8XgoASLh4GoAg&ved=0CDoQ6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q=sara%20maza&f=false) argues that the idea that France underwent a “bourgeois revolution” in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century is a complete myth and no group that came to power in the torrid years self-defined itself as either bourgeois or middle class.

Being middle class was a project. The focus of Dror Wahrman’s book is not on a single sociological group defined by income, occupation and the like, but on showing the way the term “middle class” was used to create a representation of reality and help the agenda of those seeking to empower themselves over existing entrenched elite. Ideas about democracy, about the value of work and training over birth, etc. came to be deployed as part of that argument. These were part of a strategy through which those currently holding power could be critiqued, and an alternative model of exercising power established. Nor should it be forgotten that an important (perhaps even more important) part of this strategy involved marking out ways in which this middle class was deemed to be superior to the lower orders of society. The many movements of social reform (temperance, prostitution, sanitation and the like) that demonstrated middle class superiority to the lower classes were as important to identifying the middle class as critiques of aristocratic privilege.

But these historical complexities are surprisingly overlooked even among scholars when discussing the middle class. The majority of the scholarship seems to work with the assumption that we already know what a “real” middle class should be. In fact, some of the debtates have shifted to whether or not a given society is indeed “middle class” enough. Some scholars, for instance have argued that the elitism of the British middle classes prevented them from creating a truly middle class society. It was the United States rather than Britain, [they argue](http://books.google.com/books?id=oQmGAwAAQBAJ&dq=zunz+social+contracts+middle+class&source=gbs_navlinks_s) that created the conditions necessary for a true middle class society. And this true middle class society, it is assumed, is the one that promotes liberty, equality, democracy and justice. Despite plenty of data to the contrary, the idea that the middle class represents progressive, liberal, and, in appropriate historical contexts, market-friendly ideals, comes to be firmly entrenched in popular and scholarly rhetoric. And, it travels.

This is why commentators are repeatedly astounded when so many in the non-Western world, even those who are well educated, westernized, and self-identify as middle class, don’t necessarily follow the perceived model of middle class behavior. This incredulity is well captured in [Rana Faroohar’s article](http://www.newsweek.com/unstable-and-less-liberal-global-middle-class-69469) in *Newsweek* a few years ago.

As China, Brazil, Russia, Turkey, India, Indonesia, and other large developing nations became more prosperous, it was always assumed that they would become more like the suburbs of Washington or London—liberal, democratic, market-friendly bastions not only of Western-style consumerism but also of political liberty. With time and wealth, ‘they’ would become just like ‘us.’

But they didn’t. And, despite some perceptive analysis of the reasons why affluent Chinese, Brazilians, Russians or Indians did not behave in exactly the same ways as their counterparts in London or Washington DC, the idea of a single model of middle class-ness is too deeply ingrained to be left aside. Thus Faroohar can only go back to a developmentalist model to conclude, by saying: “ ‘They’ have a very long way to go before becoming ‘us.’ ”

But how did this idea of being middle class reach “them”? One of axes of this travel was colonialism. [My own research](http://books.google.com/books?id=73qRQgAACAAJ&source=gbs_book_other_versions) has been on the middle class of colonial India. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, there were many young men (and soon, women) who had, through their exposure to colonial educational institutions, imbibed deeply of the rhetoric of a progressive middle class. They were themselves not from the very highest elites of native society, but for most part came from social backgrounds of considerable privilege. This was the group who now fashioned themselves as an Indian middle class. Through activities in the public sphere they undertook exercises quite similar to their British counterparts, in distancing themselves from the “decadence” of older Indian elites even as they disparaged the cultures of the plebian classes of Indian society. The middle class represented itself as the harbinger of modernity, and sought to blend what it perceived as the best of indigenous traditions and western modernity. If one were to evaluate them from what we may call the *Newsweek* perspective (that is, how similar were they to the ideal-type of a Western middle class?) their efforts may be found wanting. The middle class of Lucknow, the city where I focused my research, claimed the virtues of modernity, egalitarianism, secularism, and liberalism. Yet, they were not egalitarian enough to perceive the lower social orders as equal citizens. They were not liberal enough to allow even women from their own class equality within the home. They were not secular enough to keep away from religious imaginings of the nation. The objective of my book was to understand why this happened to a class that so consciously modeled itself on the ideals of a progressive, egalitarian, liberal, secular middle class of the West. The answer, I suggest, did not lie in India’s incomplete transition to modernity, whether accounted for by primordial attachments to pre-modern beliefs or indeed by mutations necessitated by colonialism. Rather, the problem lies with our very understanding of modernity, and the middle class as embodying these virtues of modernity.

Leaving aside the enormous condescension built into the comparative framework (where India, Russia, Brazil, China or Indonesia have to be judged according to a model, however ahistorical, derived from the history of EuroAmerica), we have to ask ourselves how our commonly-held ideas about the middle class square with known history of Europe? Historical data challenges the notion of an always-progressive or liberal middle class in the West. Just ask the colonial subjects who were ruled by members of the British middle class, or British women who had to fight so hard to get the right to vote. Nor were the Americans that much better, if you were to ask racial minorities, or indeed women for that matter.

The nature of the middle class itself, even where people did identify with the term, as in England, reveals behavior at odds with the model of democratic, egalitarian liberalism commonly associated with the middle class. Hierarchy was very much part of the domestic as well as public life of the mid to late nineteenth century European bourgeoisie. [Eric Hobsbawm](http://books.google.com/books?id=e6_h5VaNASMC&dq=eric+hobsbawm+age+of+capital&hl=en&sa=X&ei=AHrdU93hHsz9oASso4KAAw&ved=0CC4Q6AEwAA) argues that a sense of superiority was central to the constitution of the bourgeois man, and “the monopoly of command - in his house, in his business, in his factory - was crucial to his self-definition.” We know very well that ideas of egalitarianism extended neither to women nor to the non-white peoples over whom this English middle class was ruling while the sun never set on the British Empire. Democracy too, was fine, but, as Hobsbawm reminds us, only as long as it was “compatible with the rule of law and with the kind of order which kept the poor in their place.”

Of course there were and are sections of people who identify as middle class (in India, Brazil or China as much as Britain, France or the United States), who do subscribe to progressive, liberal, and secular ideals. But as a social class, there is no evidence to suggest that either a majority do so, or that their positions are always internally consistent. We see self-identified middle class people equally involved in conservative, illiberal, prejudiced or fundamentalist positions as more liberal or progressive causes. *The Economist* as well as other commentators who believe that a middle class would always support free market policies, would also be well advised to remember that most socialist leaders in Europe (and the oft-forgotten socialists in the United States) hailed from middle-class backgrounds.

As a cultural construct, the middle class is a product of history. All we can generalize about is that it is a term that seeks to mark a separation and distance from both a putative higher and lower class. Very often the process of marking that difference entails a critique of both the patrician and the plebian. Given that it came into its current meaning in the time when the world celebrated its break with the past, it has also come to connote modernity. But such breaks are seldom total. And this is well exemplified in the history of the middle class. Unfortunately, ahistorical generalizations – ironically, themselves a product of history – prevail. And it is those generalizations rather than the category itself that give rise to much of the confusion surrounding the middle class today. As I have tried to suggest throughout this essay, whether we look at Western (Euro-American) or non-Western histories, a middle class that is strictly rational, secular, egalitarian, and free of traces of superstition, sentiment, or prejudice, exists only in the realms of an ideal-type. In most places in the world middle class modernity was built upon an existing set of ideas, which they transformed to include elements of both authoritarianism and liberalism, emancipation and hierarchy.

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