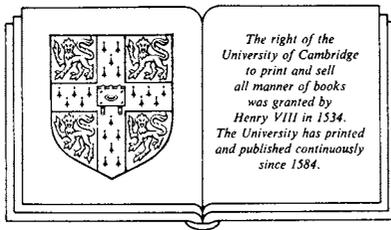


The emergence of the middle class

*Social experience in
the American city, 1760–1900*

STUART M. BLUMIN

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1 *The elusive middle class*

"The most valuable class in any community," wrote Walt Whitman from his editorial desk in 1858, "is the middle class, the men of moderate means, living at the rate of a thousand dollars a year or thereabouts."¹ A strange statement from a man who wrote so lovingly and so often of "blacksmiths with grimed and hairy chests," of "the builders and steerers of ships and the wielders of axes and mauls, and the drivers of horses," of "laborers seated at noon-time with their open dinner-kettles." Whitman found little poetry in the lives of the salaried suburbanites his editorial goes on to describe, and, considering the whole of his work, we may doubt considerably the depth of his own belief in this fleeting editorial judgment.² Yet, his statement is significant for the very nature of its phrasing, and for the seemingly casual association it makes between social class and a particular level of income. A generation or two earlier the term "middle class" seldom appeared on the printed page in America, and probably was seldom uttered in either the city or the country. Rather, a variety of less precise, less concise, and usually plural phrases expressed the idea of social intermediacy – "people of middling rank," the "middling sorts," the "middle condition of mankind," occasionally the "middle (or middling) classes."³ Although these phrases increasingly were joined to claims of social respectability, an older tradition associated them with very modest levels of social and economic aspiration, closer to the bottom of society than to the top. The term "most valuable" was, therefore, freshly linked to the term "middle class." And finally, the specification of \$1,000 as the defining income of the middle class is particularly significant, as this was a level of income denied to nearly all who worked at the manual trades and less skilled jobs that Whitman so often celebrated in his poetry, and who asserted respectability only by setting themselves apart – as society's bone and sinew, as the real producers of wealth – from those who asserted superiority by means of wealth and manners. Whitman, minstrel of the hard-muscled, suntanned common man, momentarily gave voice to a very

different kind of adulation that, in fact, was becoming characteristic of the American culture to which he was so deeply committed. For that one moment Whitman celebrated, in the clearest possible terms, the emergence in America of the white-collar, suburbanizing middle class.

It is the purpose of this book to expand upon that moment, not by celebrating, but by examining at close range the various processes that gave meaning to Whitman's statement. Put another way, I seek to analyze here what can be called the development, or formation, and the elevation, or rise, of the American middle class. All of these phrases, and particularly the last, are weary clichés and signifiers of much abused concepts pertaining to the nature of American social development. To invoke them at all, much less to base an entire study on them, is to court serious risks that range from ambiguity to irrelevance, and to confront continuously the paradox that the concept of the middle class, historically and in the present, is both pervasive and elusive; indeed, that it is elusive precisely because it is pervasive. Americans use the term with remarkable imprecision; yet, we seem to represent something very important about our culture and society by doing so. It is here that ambiguity is joined to irrelevance, within the powerful historiographical tradition invoked by the term "consensus." America, according to this tradition (or these traditions – one can speak here of both the "consensual" and the "ethnocultural" points of view), has had no middle class, but rather a pervasive middle-class culture, and a society in which the most serious conflicts have revolved around differences of race, ethnicity, religion, and region rather than the diverging interests and ideologies of economic classes. In this sense, the term "middle class" is a misnomer and is best understood as a somewhat inappropriate linguistic import from England, where a genuinely intermediate social group, located between a formally aristocratic upper class and a decidedly plebeian lower class, struggled on behalf of those bourgeois values that here so easily won acceptance that they became nearly synonymous with the national culture. "Americans," wrote Louis Hartz more than thirty years ago, "a kind of national embodiment of the concept of the bourgeoisie, have . . . rarely used that concept in their social thought," for "a triumphant middle class . . . can take itself for granted."⁴

Hartz, like Alexis de Tocqueville before him, attempted to define the modalities of national character and political culture in America.⁵ This book is rooted in a somewhat different tradition, one that emphasizes the variations that spring from specific social contexts, and that focuses upon the ways in which unequal distributions of wealth, income, opportunity, workplace tasks and authority, political power,

legal status, and social prestige have organized the lives and consciousness of specific groups of Americans. This tradition has enjoyed an impressive resurgence in recent years, most notably in numerous studies of working-class culture, social life, and protest that have done much to define the lower limit of the bourgeois consensus, and to place a substantial number of working-class men and women beyond that limit. To be sure, some of these studies have identified groups or types of workers whose ambitions, life-styles, and political values were resolutely "middle class" (Paul Faler's "loyalists" and Bruce Laurie's "revivalists" come most readily to mind), but each of these studies (and others) points to workers – "traditionalists," "radicals," or simply unlabeled toilers and strikers – who inhabited a social, moral, and ideological world that was different from and even antagonistic to that of the professionals and businessmen who came to be called the middle class. These workers were, and knew they were, of another social order.⁶ Meanwhile, other scholars have delineated urban upper classes that formed not merely an *haute bourgeoisie* of extremely wealthy professionals, merchants, bankers, manufacturers, and speculators but also an aspiring aristocracy, at least in the metaphorical sense of an ascriptive upper class that succeeded to varying degrees and for varying lengths of time in denying its bourgeois origins.⁷ And finally, underscoring these studies of distinctive working-class and patrician cultures are several recent analyses of the dimensions of economic inequality in nineteenth-century America, which point to striking increases in inequality in the antebellum era and to the maintenance of high levels of inequality throughout the nineteenth century.⁸ It is becoming increasingly clear, in short, that Americans diverged widely in their economic circumstances, and that they translated their economic differences into significant differences in life-style, outlook, and aspiration. However broad the bourgeois consensus may have been in comparison to European societies, it did not preclude the formation of distinct classes within American society. The all-encompassing American bourgeoisie, then, may well have been a class after all – the power of its values serving to reinforce rather than to destroy social class boundaries.⁹

But does all this necessarily lead to the concept of an emerging middle class? The discovery of definable social classes at the top and bottom of society lends plausibility to the proposition that such a class or classes also may be found in its middle, and accentuates the relative neglect of middling folk by the very historians who have advanced our understanding of the nineteenth-century urban and industrial revolutions by focusing upon urban elites and industrial workers as distinct historical groups. But this discovery does little or nothing to

establish the character or significance of an emerging intermediate class, which, if it is to be understood as a distinct social formation, must be examined directly and in appropriate theoretical terms. A few years before Louis Hartz described the "triumphant middle class" that really was no class, the Marxist sociologist C. Wright Mills wrote, "The early history of the middle classes in America is a history of how the small entrepreneur, the free man of the old middle classes, came into his time of daylight, of how he fought against enemies he could see, and of the world he built."¹⁰ At first glance an anticipation of E. P. Thompson's insistence on the historicity of class, and on the formation of classes as concrete, discrete, and significant historical events,¹¹ Mills's statement actually introduced a discussion of the "old middle classes" of the nineteenth century that differed little from Hartz's conception of a bourgeois society. "Here the middle class was so broad a stratum and of such economic weight," Mills continued, "that even by the standards of the statistician the society as a whole was a middle-class society."¹² Apparently, the consensual interpretation of at least the pre-industrial and early industrial American past ran broad and deep in the 1950s, when Mills wrote these lines. Neither Mills nor anyone else of his generation saw any need to pursue further the suggestion that the "old" middle class was a definable and significant social formation of a specific historical era, or that the "small entrepreneur" shaped a new social identity through his struggle against "enemies he could see."

Historians writing after Mills and Hartz occasionally used the term "middle class" to refer to some specific, intermediate stratum within American society – as did Sam Bass Warner, Jr., for example, when he described as "middle class" that segment of Boston's population that moved to the streetcar suburbs during the last three decades of the nineteenth century.¹³ But it was not until twenty-five years after Mills wrote in *White Collar* of how the "old middle classes" came into their "time of daylight" that American historians began to translate this vivid expression into propositions concerning the formation of a distinct and even self-conscious middle class during the nineteenth century. In 1976 Burton Bledstein purported to find within an emerging nineteenth-century "culture of professionalism" "a cultural process by which the middle class in America matured and defined itself." "The middle class in America," Bledstein wrote, "appeared as a new class with an unprecedented enthusiasm for its own forms of self-discipline."¹⁴ Bledstein did not pursue this idea as far as he might have, but his suggestion that the middle class was a new and maturing entity within a larger society was something rather new in American historical literature, as was the language he used to express

it. Two years later, in his book on religious revivals and social change in Rochester, Paul E. Johnson stated the case for middle-class formation even more forcefully. To Johnson, the efforts of "whig politicians, industrial moralizers, temperance advocates, missionaries, and family reformers" to "build a world that replaced force, barbarism, and unrestrained passion with Christian self-control" constituted "the moral imperative around which the northern middle class became a class."¹⁵ Also in 1978, Paul Boyer wrote, somewhat more temperately, that these efforts at moral and social reform helped "an embryonic urban middle class define itself," and he described a century-long struggle by the middle class to "achieve a greater degree of internal order and cohesion."¹⁶ And in 1981, Mary P. Ryan framed her stimulating analysis of family life, evangelical reform, and urban-industrial development in Utica, New York, as "a chronicle of the formation of a new American middle class," complaining as she did so that the middle class "is largely a residual category in American historiography, the assumed, but largely unexamined, context for much of the writing about popular culture and reform movements." "Historians," wrote Ryan, "have hardly begun to analyze middle Americans as a class unto themselves."¹⁷

Despite the subsequent appearance of several studies that make more or less serious reference to an emerging middle class, Ryan's complaint remains apt.¹⁸ How, then, shall we respond to the challenge "to analyze middle Americans as a class unto themselves"? What are the most promising theoretical foundations for constructing a solid substantive narrative of the formation and ascendancy of an American middle class? Historians are ordinarily predisposed to dispense with this kind of question, and to proceed at once to organizing a narrative that explains and justifies itself in the telling. In the present instance, however, it is precisely the kind of question that ought to be considered – and answered – in some detail before turning to the details of time and place.

The most obvious theoretical foundation for the study of an emerging social class is Marxism. However, for this study it is also one of the most problematic, for the equally obvious reason that in its most common forms Marxism denies the significance of intermediate classes as social groups, save for the temporarily intermediate (and ultimately dominant) class that represents a new and ascending mode of production. Other intermediate groups, according to this central train of Marxist thought, are both temporary and illusory, consisting of mere appendages of the dominant class or of transitional classes that represent the remains of former modes of production.¹⁹ Thus, although Marxists generally recognize (as did Marx himself) the ex-

istence of intermediate groups in any given society at any given time,²⁰ many also insist that the concept of "middle class" obscures the fundamental two-class structure of capitalist (or feudal) society, and distorts the concept of class by creating an artificial social group that bears no definable and essential relation to the means of production, and contains within it no potential for genuine coherence and consciousness. Even the new and apparently robust intermediate formations of mature capitalist society are dismissed in this way. Several contemporary Marxists, eager to demonstrate that the "new middle class" does not threaten Marxism as a general theory of historical development, have devoted considerable attention to theoretical demonstrations of the essential differences between intermediate groups and "the two basic classes of a capitalist formation," or the "contradictory class locations" (and hence the classlessness) of intermediate strata, or, most recently, the idea that "middle-class formation is an expression of the class polarization process"; indeed, that the middle class, far from being "the harbinger of a new order," is "gradually disintegrating as a class."²¹ In sum, "There is no fixed place for the middle class, no determined role, no necessary direction or certainty of outcome when the class asserts itself. The historical existence, the place in the social division of labor, the class situation of the middle are expressions of a larger set of class relations."²²

The would-be historian of the middle class need not be discouraged by this onslaught. The Marxist objection to the concept of middle-class formation rests ultimately on the distinction between the essential classes – classes that are generated by the capitalist mode of production – and the inessential intermediate groups that bear no significant or consistent relation to the means of production. It can be countered, however, that the distinction between essential and inessential classes is derived not from observed differences in social, cultural, or ideological coherence at any given time but from the predictive aspects of what is, at bottom, an epochal theory of past and future capitalist development.²³ Marxists predict – on the basis of the logical structure of this theory – that intermediate classes will simply dissolve and be absorbed into the two essential classes as capitalism becomes more fully developed. In the meantime, having no essential role to play (at best the middle class "mediates the capital/labor social relation"), intermediate classes are simply and safely dismissed, and the basic two-class model confirmed, even with respect to earlier stages of capitalist development. Marxists do recognize the deductive character of this argument and sometimes employ the distinction between "class" and "stratification" to give voice to the superiority of theory over mere observation: "Class is an analytic

category with which the social structure is defined. Stratification describes divisions within the class structure."²⁴ But is it not correct to insist that at some point this distinction between essential classes and inessential classes or strata be subjected to empirical rather than logical proof? In his recent attempt to reconcile Marxist theory with the persistence of intermediate classes, Dale L. Johnson writes that "historical/empirical research must be carried out within the premise that middle-class formation is an expression of the class polarization process." *Must* it indeed? Is it necessarily the case that class polarization is the essence of capitalist development and that any evidence of the formation or continuing vitality of intermediate classes must be subordinated to that deeper reality? Marxists can, I believe, fairly propose a long developmental perspective that will permit observation of the eventual disappearance of transitional and inessential classes, but in the meantime they can only assert that a two-class model for describing past and present capitalist society is something more than a necessity for their own theoretical consistency. And perhaps we might note that if Johnson is deprived of his premise, there remains in his discussion the interesting proposition that the American "petty bourgeoisie," "formed . . . in premonopoly stages of capitalist development," was "a social class of major social weight" throughout the nineteenth century.²⁵

Rejecting this rather schematic brand of Marxism does not require that we reject as well the fundamental insights of Marx and his followers concerning the relevance of classes to our understanding of the history of capitalist society. What ought to be resisted is, to use J. H. Hexter's terms, Marx's "complete and coherent theory of social change," his "package deal" for the interpretation of history.²⁶ Any "framework" for the study of real societies, writes Hexter, ought to be a "temporary scaffolding," not "a prefabricated theory of social change for which historians will forever thereafter be called upon to supply proofs. [It] must take social and economic groupings as it finds them."²⁷ A middle class that was something more than an "expression of the class polarization process" may well have been one of those social and economic groupings in the nineteenth century, and I would observe that there are scholars who have worked wholly or partly within the Marxist tradition who have done other than merely argue the middle class out of existence. Even Dale Johnson, who insists on the transitory character of the middle class, does after all describe it as a class, not as a stratum or a collection of "contradictory class locations," and concedes its importance as a class in the nineteenth century. Others follow a similar line of thought: Nicos Poulantzas more abstractly in *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*, C. Wright Mills

more concretely in *White Collar*.²⁸ And there are still others who, beginning with Marxist categories, define intermediate classes without bothering either to subordinate them to more basic classes or to predict their eventual dissolution. Stanislaw Ossowski, for example, has found within the basic structure of Marxist theory the necessity of at least one intermediate class, for Marx specified two basic dichotomous relations – ownership or nonownership of the means of production and employment or nonemployment of hired labor. The “overlapping of two mutually incompatible dichotomic divisions leads to the establishment of at least a third category, and thus a three-term scheme emerges.” More specifically, from the very architecture of Marxist theory there emerges an intermediate class consisting “of those who own the means of production but do not employ hired labour.”²⁹ What is notable is not Ossowski’s discovery of independent producers – all Marxists are aware of them – but his discussion of a class of such producers no less clearly linked to the means of production than are the bourgeoisie or the proletariat and, so long as the dual dichotomies remain unaligned, no more likely than they to disappear.

Ossowski’s interpretation of Marx is singularly static and, as we will see, yields an intermediate group that does not accord with nineteenth-century American documents. More dynamic, and of greater use to the empirically minded historian of the middle class, are Anthony Giddens’s attempts to leaven Marxist theories of class development with a Weberian yeast.³⁰ In *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies*, Giddens maintains the Marxist insistence on “the explanatory salience of class as central to the notion of class society.” “A class society,” he writes, “is not one in which there simply exist classes, but one in which class relationships are of primary significance to the explanatory interpretation of large areas of social conduct.” At the same time, he recognizes the crucial problem of implementing this fundamental proposition in the analysis of specific societies, of identifying in specific ways “the modes in which ‘economic’ relationships become translated into ‘non-economic’ social structures.” Marxism by itself seems inadequate to the task, and Giddens offers instead a broader method for making the transition from the abstract theory of class to concrete descriptions and analyses of what he calls “the structuration of class relationships” in the real world. Giddens first distinguishes between “mediate structuration,” by which he means the degree of “mobility closure” that provides for – or, in the case of highly mobile, “open” societies, fails to provide for – “the reproduction of common life experience over the generations,” and three forms of “proximate structuration” that “condition or shape class forma-

tion" in more immediate ways. These three are the division of labor within productive enterprises; authority relationships within those enterprises (here Giddens seems to be thinking of large, multitiered corporations and of Ralf Dahrendorf's objection to the Marxist focus on legal ownership of, rather than effective authority over, the means of production in a corporate economy); and class relations originating in the sphere of consumption, in particular those identifiable "distributive groupings" that arise from common patterns of consumption. To Giddens, it is the degree to which these sources of "proximate structuration" converge or diverge within a more or less mobile society that determines both the clarity and the salience of class in a given society. Where there is an inconsistent relation among type of work, authority, and levels and patterns of consumption, and at the same time a high degree of vertical mobility, the class principle will be weak. Where these relations are consistent within a setting of "mobility closure," they reinforce each other and reaffirm the significance of class. To Giddens, in short, class is an empirical question – a principle of social organization that can vary in shape and in strength between one society and another. It is not a necessary adjunct to a theory of capitalist development. Even more than Ossowski, Giddens suggests the probability of discovering in any society more than two classes and even proposes that "*a threefold class structure is generic to capitalist society,*" for this is the consistent pattern of relations between the sources of structuration that Giddens purports to find in the capitalist world, at least in the advanced capitalist world of the twentieth century.³¹

The real usefulness of Giddens's theory to the historian of the nineteenth-century middle class, however, may lie not so much in his overlapping categories of class-forming experience as in his adjoining discussion of class consciousness. The issue of middle-class consciousness is a difficult one, for the favorable position of middling folk in American society and politics, in combination with the individualism that lies at the heart of the middle-class system of values, would seem to preclude the development of the kind of class-based solidarity that Marxists call class consciousness.³² And as ethnocultural political historians point out, political movements based explicitly on the grievances or aspirations of intermediate social classes are indeed rare in American history.³³ But is this because middle-class consciousness does not exist or because it is built around values that reduce the likelihood of its manifestation in politics? This question brings us face-to-face with a central paradox in the concept of middle-class formation, the building of a class that binds itself together as a social group in part through the common embrace of an ideology of