

COPYRIGHT NOTICE:

Robert D. Johnston: The Radical Middle Class

is published by Princeton University Press and copyrighted, © 2003, by Princeton University Press. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher, except for reading and browsing via the World Wide Web. Users are not permitted to mount this file on any network servers.

For COURSE PACK and other PERMISSIONS, refer to entry on previous page. For more information, send e-mail to permissions@pupress.princeton.edu

CHAPTER ONE

RETHINKING THE MIDDLE CLASS

Politics, History, and Theory

From Yeoman to Yuppie: The Demonization of the American Middle Class

Arguably no class in human history has received so much comment, but so little systematic study, as the American middle class. And although the great multitude of ordinary Americans have been favorably disposed toward the solid and upstanding middle class, intellectuals have by and large held a different view. In scholarly circles, the middle class has, to put it mildly, an image problem. We cannot, therefore, even begin to think straight about—much less systematically to rethink—the middle class without first considering the one-dimensional vision that has served as the faulty tradition of American intellectuals.

Radicals have been the prime shapers of mainstream intellectual perspectives on the American middle class. Left-wing social theorists have characterized the middle class as politically retrograde, morally inert, and economically marginal for more than a century. Prominent socialist Robert Rives La Monte set the tone in 1908 when, casting about for an appropriate metaphor for the American middle class, he found what he desired in the writings of Maxim Gorky. *Sycophants* and *vampires*, Rives La Monte announced, were the proper labels, for “in the middle stand the people who lick the hands of those who beat you in the face and suck the blood of those whose faces are beaten. That’s the middle!”¹

Unfortunately, Rives la Monte’s nightmarish imagery would reign supreme across the political spectrum among the high thinkers of the twentieth century. Max Weber denounced the hypocrisy and “highly grotesque” characteristics of the American middle class. The entire middle class of the interwar era, David J. Saposs argued, suffered from a profound “inferiority psychosis” and general “inner feeling of defeat and helplessness in the clutches of capitalism.” Even a self-proclaimed defender of the “intermediate millions,” Charles Henry Melzer, could not keep himself from unleashing a torrent of (self?) abuse, calling the middle class “futile, shiftless, feeble.” And, of course, Sinclair Lewis’s *Babbitt* remains a common symbol of the philistinism at the core of middle-class life.²

As one might expect, though, it is Marxists who—having learned to denounce all that is not proletarian—have formulated the most exhaustive case

against the middle class. Here Lewis Corey's 1935 *The Crisis of the Middle Class* stands out for its uncompromising censure. Corey did happily grant "the middle class," particularly its lower segment of independent small property holders, its due in modern history as the primary carrier of democracy and enlightenment, despite its general dread of the masses. Yet with the development of capitalism and "the progressive slaughter of small capitalists," a complete sea-change of reaction had set in. Traditional American middle-class political struggles such as antimonopoly had become, according to Corey, "desperate," "hopeless," and the work of "a handful of bewildered and disunited malcontents." Corey succinctly appraised the future: "the middle class is doomed." Before it died, however, it would issue forth "the monster of fascism."³

In the postwar period, when the prototypical middle-class figure of the era became the lonely, trapped, and desperate Willy Loman, non-Marxist radicals and liberals gladly joined their few Marxist comrades in middle-class bashing. C. Wright Mills crystallized and codified this demonization of the American middle class in his 1951 masterpiece *White Collar*, still after half a century the most important book we have about the American middle classes. *White Collar* quickly turned from balanced—if passionate—social analysis to a jeremiad that became what Cornel West calls a "brazen condemnation of the middle classes": a "total damnation," Mills admitted in private correspondence, "of everything in this setup." Mills's middle-class subjects were essentially hopeless: alienated, confused, dependent, full of illusions and misery; in the best light, they were "cheerful robots."⁴

An equally astute book, E. Franklin Frazier's 1955 *Black Bourgeoisie*, fits neatly into the trashing genre. Analytically, Frazier emphasized oppression, but he nonetheless remained pitiless toward his subjects. Frazier's white-collar workers had no values higher than money, adultery, and poker. The black middle class lived in a "world of make believe," identifying totally with white middle-class values and serving as pawns for the "white propertied classes." Its religion was an artifice, its "contempt for the Negro masses" boundless. Overall, Frazier wrote—in the grand year of the Montgomery bus boycott—that the black middle class was "in the process of becoming NOBODY."⁵ As Deborah White notes, Frazier's "attack" was "malicious" and "singularly vicious."

Even those postwar social scientists who rejected radicalism in order to celebrate American liberalism shared the animus of Mills and Frazier. Although according to these scholars the American working class was uniquely immune to socialism, the American middle class shared its European counterpart's penchant for irrational, right-wing pseudofascist politics. Seymour Martin Lipset, for example, noted in 1960 that segments of the middle class had historically been participants in effective, egalitarian anticapitalist movements. Yet far from taking such crusades seriously, Lipset theorized that the

impulses behind them were increasingly becoming channeled into destructive, ignorant, psychologically impoverished attempts to fight against the bigness of the modern world.⁶

The perspective of these 1950s scholars has shown a remarkable tenacity. A troika of prominent recent works provides evidence of the continuing one-dimensional portrait of the American middle class. In defense of a communitarian left-liberalism, Robert Bellah and his collaborators in *Habits of the Heart* show sympathy for older middle-class traditions of religious and political republicanism. Yet they depict the contemporary middle class as relentlessly success-driven, lacking in familial or communal roots, dedicated to the preservation of private cultural enclaves, and so enmeshed in “the monoculture of technical and bureaucratic rationality” that it chooses all larger social goals in a completely arbitrary manner. Bellah and his colleagues thus give us every reason to simply abandon the middle class, rather than try to locate any political hope in its midst.⁷

Mike Davis presents an even harsher and more pessimistic vision in his *Prisoners of the American Dream*. According to this provocative revolutionary, during the Reagan years the middle class turned toward a “home-grown fascism.” As part of “the mass ruling class of the American world system,” the middle class maintains its “boutique lifestyles” within “sumptuary suburbs.” From inside “the *laager* of Yuppie comfort,” the American middle class is poised to undertake military offensives against third-world liberation forces as well as, eventually, its own ghetto inhabitants.⁸

Between Davis’s Marxism and Bellah’s liberalism lies the caustic treatment of the American middle in Barbara Ehrenreich’s acclaimed *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class*. Ehrenreich optimistically envisions a revival of social concern on the part of the middle class, hoping that antielite sentiments and a desire to uphold the dignity of labor will lead to an alliance with workers and minorities. Once again, though, Ehrenreich’s analysis leaves little reason for such hope. The story she tells is one of “prejudice, delusion, and even, at a deeper level, self-loathing.” Her middle class became in the 1980s—although it was never much better—mean, selfish, and “indifferent to the nonelite majority.” Operating under a general moral anesthetic, perpetually anxious about its ability to consume the right kind of commodities, the middle class has become a defensive and self-conscious *elite*, tending further and further toward the political right.⁹

Overall, then, twentieth-century intellectuals—whether because of guilt over their privileged backgrounds, or because of their lack of democratic faith—have transformed an entire category comprising millions and millions of people into some sort of demon intended to embody many, if not most, of the sins of American society. We therefore live in an age that has recast the typical member of the middle class from yeoman to yuppie: from the democratic representative of an all-inclusive American culture to a self-absorbed,

and dangerous, excrescence on the country's social landscape. We must, and can, do better.¹⁰

The Countertradition

To reorient our thinking about the middle class, we must break free from the demonization paradigm, moving away from its unsatisfactory moral and political sensibility and toward an engaged, critically respectful vision of middle-class Americans. Fortunately, a neglected intellectual countertradition has also come down to us, one that acknowledges the complex nature of the history of middling Americans at the same time that it denies that “the” American middle class has any timeless political or cultural essence.¹¹

The countertradition itself has grown out of an oppositional vernacular heritage, dating back to our national origins. For example, many Anti-Federalists considered themselves representatives of a democratic middling sort whose fate was politically linked with those below them. Voicing his opposition to the Constitution, Patrick Henry proclaimed: “I dread the operation of it on the middling and lower class of people,” and Luther Martin warned that taxation under the new regime would crush “the middle and common class of citizens.” A century later the supposedly working-class Knights of Labor thought of themselves, Leon Fink writes, as a grand producerist “middle social stratum, balanced between the very rich and very poor.” In a like manner the Populists saw themselves in the Omaha Platform as being squeezed between “tramps and millionaires.”¹²

A handful of latter-day scholars have also been articulate voices of the countertradition, arguing that American middling folks have been quite diverse in their culture and politics, with that diversity including a radical democratic heritage. The outstanding challenge to the “restraining myths” about the middle class came with the 1972 publication of sociologist Richard Hamilton’s *Class and Politics in the United States*. By means of an intensive quantitative study of national voting patterns in the 1950s and 1960s, Hamilton argued that the middle class was not at all monolithic in composition or political attitudes. The fundamental division in American society, he contended, lay not between bourgeoisie and proletariat, nor middle class and working class, but between a lower middle class and an upper middle class. Unlike the civil libertarian upper middle class of the consensus sociologists, Hamilton’s high-level white-collar professionals and managers felt most comfortable in the conservative “party of order.” In contrast to the intellectuals’ intolerant and antiradical lower middle class, Hamilton’s clerks and small businessmen held political attitudes consonant with social democracy. Thus Hamilton’s lower middle class was fully capable of forming social and political alliances with the blue-collar working class, and Hamilton maintained—

correctly, we can see three decades later—that the fate of those alliances would be one of the chief determinants of future American politics.¹³

The recognition and rehabilitation of the *lower middle class* was Hamilton's major purpose and accomplishment. Unfortunately, his insight nearly disappeared in the ensuing decades. On the other hand, the upper or professional middle class—far too often the surrogate among the cultural Establishment for the entire middle class—has received significantly more scholarly attention. Here the major achievement of the countertradition has been to recognize not just the complexities, but also the potential *radicalism* of this well-to-do segment of the middling population.

Ironically, the most compelling argument for the possibilities of middle-class radicalism came in Barbara and John Ehrenreich's 1977 "enormously influential" treatise "The Professional-Managerial Class." Although placing themselves within a traditional leftist framework and eschewing the use of the term *middle class*, the Ehrenreichs sought to counter orthodox Marxists' refusal to countenance the development of a third class within capitalist society. They delineated the development of a high-level white-collar class both crucial to the successful functioning of corporate capitalism *and* capable of radical opposition to its would-be masters within the bourgeois ruling class.¹⁴

In his imaginative *Middle Class Radicalism in Santa Monica*, political scientist Mark Kann picked up on the Ehrenreichs' core analysis to argue that "middle class" and "radical" are far from categories of binary opposition. Kann writes that in Santa Monica during the late 1970s and 1980s a powerful radicalism grew out of—not in antagonism to—traditional middle-class American visions and desires. This strain of radicalism, deeply rooted in the American tradition, nurtured dreams of independence, decency, self-respect, and community at least as subversive of the relentless market orientation of modern corporate society as any socialist vision. In Kann's work the past and the present thus compellingly come together so that we might recognize what intellectual blinders have for too long prevented us from seeing—the *radical middle class*.¹⁵

Historians and the Middle Class

American historians have no more been able to transcend the demonization of the middle class than have other intellectuals, nor have they chosen to recognize the radicalism that has periodically flowed out of middle-class life. In the post-World War II heyday of consensus history, most took for granted the middle-class character of American society. Intellectuals as talented as Louis Hartz recognized such a complete hegemony to middle-class values that they felt it unnecessary to examine the middle class itself. As Hartz put it, "A triumphant middle class . . . can take itself for granted."¹⁶

Despite the reorientation of historical studies after the 1960s to matters of race, class, and gender, power and diversity, at least one significant constituent of American life remained trapped in the 1950s: the middle class. Historians wielded a yardstick of condescension when measuring the impact of middling folks on America's past. In two influential studies of white-collar families in late-nineteenth-century Chicago published in 1969 and 1970, for example, Richard Sennett exposed the attitude of many of his generation when he castigated the "slavery," "emotional poverty," "disaster," "counterfeit-nurturance" and "self-instituted defeat" of his subjects. Burton Bledstein's pioneering *The Culture of Professionalism* (1976) likewise concluded that "social idealism in middle-class America has existed only at the edge of personal cynicism and duplicity."¹⁷

Furthermore, the three most significant books that then marked a genuine renaissance of the study of the American middle class consistently retreated back to the old pieties after making significant attempts to move away from them. The first, Paul Johnson's *A Shopkeeper's Millennium*, skillfully analyzed the social context of the Second Great Awakening in Rochester, New York. Johnson's discussion of the middle class is brief and unsystematic, perhaps because his analysis fits so well into the larger intellectual tradition. "To put it simply," pronounced Johnson, "the middle class became resolutely bourgeois between 1825 and 1835." The implication: since then, it has never been anything but. The sensitivity of Johnson's analysis to matters of religion correspondingly fades as being "bourgeois" means, unproblematically, an interest above all in the social control of the proletarian workforce.¹⁸

Mary Ryan, on the other hand, set out self-consciously to avoid the one-dimensional equation of middle class and social control in her pathbreaking *Cradle of the Middle Class*. Ryan explicitly directed her attention to the "problem" of the middle class, and to the family in particular. In Ryan's hands Utica's middle class is publicly active, full of energetic reform activity, creative in its cultural uses of evangelical religion, and nearly self-conscious at its creation. Ryan succeeded above all in treating her middle class with respect, realizing its complexity, and understanding that we cannot neatly assimilate middle-class hopes and desires into entrepreneurial ambitions. That is, her analysis proceeds in this manner until she reaches the mid-1800s. By the 1850s a stereotypical middle class comes to the fore, having abruptly realized the fulfillment of its historical mission and cozied up to the quiet, intensely privatized existence that Mills ranted about—there to slumber until the 1960s. Ryan's post-Civil War middle class unproblematically packed up and moved to a "darkened corner of history."¹⁹

The other work crucial to renewed historiographical interest in the American middle class, Karen Halttunen's *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, also sought to capture a nearly timeless *essence* of the American middle class. Halttunen's depiction of the creation of middle-class canons of sincerity, the-

atricity, and domestic parlor rituals did sensitively demonstrate how such private performances could serve to subvert as well as to reinforce the entrepreneurial orientation of the middle class. In the end, though, the familiar refrain returned as the complexities of nineteenth-century middle-class culture disappeared. By the late 1800s, according to Halttunen, middle-class sincerity became little more than anxious deception of self and manipulation of others.²⁰

The works of Johnson, Ryan, and Halttunen launched a new era in the historical study of the American middle class, bringing to bear intriguing and complex theoretical considerations in matters of work, religion, family, and culture. Yet just as these historians launched their subject off the ground of condescension, their trial balloons fell back down to earth. The middle class common in these histories remains fixated on its own status, greatly fears outsiders, and lives a privatized existence with an increasingly tenuous relationship to the larger community or world.²¹

We can therefore tell that as the New Left generation has ascended to power in the historical profession, it looks back upon its roots in (professional) middle-class culture largely with fear and self-loathing. Few historians would today be so naive as Kevin Mattson and argue, “I believe middle-class people can be committed to democratic activity and leadership. Privilege need not lead to domination.” And only exceptional scholars have the self-conscious willingness to “celebrate” their middle-class subjects, as Glenda Gilmore does in her eloquent portrayal of the democratic politics of middle-class African Americans in North Carolina during the early years of Jim Crow, much less speak of their “most amazing grace,” as James Goodman does in *Stories of Scottsboro*.²²

Two books, though, have attempted to reopen most of the old questions about the middle class, the process of its creation, and its social and political roles. Stuart Blumin’s *The Emergence of the Middle Class* in many ways attempts to do for the middle class what the new labor history of the 1970s and 1980s sought to do for “the” working class—simply establish its discrete existence. Blumin’s theoretical claims in the book are, however, much grander. He promises to be the first historian to locate the middle class within a coherently examined three-class structure. Tracing the fall of the eighteenth-century artisanal middling orders and the rise of a self-conscious class of white collars, Blumin takes good advantage of recent scholarship in working-class history to make his contrasting empirical arguments about everyday middle-class social life. Yet beyond that, Blumin falls, if not directly into the demonization trap, at least smack dab into an embrace of the suburbanization trope. His middle class is, culturally, little different from the 1950s garden variety. Blumin’s middling folks remain above all intensely private, with the men worried most about getting ahead at work and the women with keeping order in the home. Totally cut off from those below them, they look

only up in admiration of capitalist elites. No complex contests over politics, morality, or the social order intrude into Blumin's middle class. It is comfortably "individualistic"—an insight that he derives *not* from contemporary evidence but from a modern social theorist, Anthony Giddens, as well as from the very problematic social theory of the 1950s.²³

Olivier Zunz's *Making America Corporate, 1870–1920* represents the fullest break by a historian from prevailing conceptualizations of the middle class. What makes *Making America Corporate* refreshing is Zunz's insistence on the relative autonomy of white-collar people, not their passivity and degradation. Through an imaginative use of a range of corporate archives, Zunz examines the role of a new class of white-collar executives, managers, and clerks in the creation of large corporations. According to Zunz, members of this middle class independently helped to build the new corporations. Unfortunately, Zunz also fails to break away from old stereotypes. His analysis turns out to be a fairly deterministic reduction of social to economic experience. Zunz's corporate executives almost heroically respond to the market imperatives driving them to build, with great self-confidence, the new continental corporate economy. With few exceptions, "they bypassed larger ideological debates"; all segments of the middle class unproblematically "continued to take their cues from business values." In the end, Zunz's middle class is just as intensely privatized as those of Ryan and Blumin—or Bellah and Ehrenreich.²⁴

Toward a Political History of the Middle Class

We can sum up the crucial missing element in the works of Zunz, Blumin, and almost all other historians, in one word—*politics*. In fact, we need to go back more than forty years for the most sustained historical exploration of middle-class politics. Although correctly located in the consensus camp, and a firm believer that members of an unproblematically defined middle class above all sought conservative respectability, Richard Hofstadter did understand the complexity of the relationship between the middle class and capitalist democracy. Historians still use *The Age of Reform* as evidence of the futile politics of a declining middle class desperately trying to maintain its status. Yet Hofstadter actually presented significantly more complicated insights. Foremost, he showed that the middle class lived in an intensely public and politicized world during the Progressive Era. Middle-class politics derived from moral conceptions of character and justice in a manner substantively different from—and Hofstadter strongly implies better than—the technocratic politics that came to the fore in the New Deal. In the end, Hofstadter's Progressives passed "one of the primary tests of the mood of a society," "whether its comfortable people tend to identify, psychologically, with the power and achievements of the very successful or with the needs and sufferings of the underprivileged. In a large and striking measure the

Progressive agitations turned the human sympathies of the people downward rather than upward in the social scale."²⁵

A handful of books have revealed the fine intellectual fruits that we can harvest by extending Hofstadter's insights. Most ambitious in its theorizing is Jurgen Kocka's *White Collar Workers in America*. Kocka conducts a systematic comparison between German white-collar workers, with their alleged predisposition to Nazism, and the new class of American salaried workers. Kocka convincingly places middling Americans in the leftward portion of the political spectrum. He establishes that white-collar workers in the United States, even at the height of the Great Depression, were not susceptible to fascist appeals and did not substantially differ from blue-collar workers in political ideology or behavior. Alan Brinkley has, in turn, explored the worlds of the two middle-class insurgencies that might most easily qualify as quasi-fascist, the movements of Huey Long and Father Coughlin. Brinkley finds that while Long and Coughlin's populist ideology represented a futile protest against centralization, the two movements were fundamentally democratic. They directed their anger at genuine economic problems while eschewing xenophobia and intolerance.²⁶

If Brinkley presents a last honest, even valiant—but ultimately ineffectual—stand by those in the middle, Catherine Stock shows how the same kind of middling folks actually were able to come to grips with “modern” life. In *Main Street in Crisis*, Stock demonstrates how an “old middle class” in the Dakotas neither disappeared under the weight of the twentieth century nor acted out of panic and anxiety as corporations and big government threatened its traditional way of life. Her small business owners, family farmers, independent professionals, and skilled workers instead survived the economic and political crisis by balancing “fundamentally contradictory, but equally heartfelt, impulses: loyalties to individualism and community, to profit and cooperation, to progress and tradition.” Perhaps most critically, the “moral economy” that these old middle-class Americans had constructed from roots in producerism endured the depression, emerging battered and transformed but still powerful. Through their encounter with the modernizing New Deal, middle-class Dakotans built a society that celebrated both the striving for individual success and “a cooperative vision of community life.” Profit, competition, and growth were good, but only within limits that prevented the communal honoring of excessive wealth.²⁷

Through a focus on politics and political economy, Kocka, Brinkley, and Stock have reinvigorated fundamental questions about the relationship between “the” American middle class, capitalism, and democracy. The historian who most forcefully extended this line of argument was the late Christopher Lasch. In *The True and Only Heaven* Lasch brilliantly analyzed intellectual, religious, and labor history to argue that “lower middle class populism” has been the most distinctive form of opposition to American capitalism. Lasch

contended that a political ideology based on petit bourgeois small property—not on supposed proletarian virtues—has represented the most expansive of democratic hopes in American history. Within this rich tradition, based above all on respect for the masses, Lasch insists that Americans might still discover a solution to our cultural and political crises. Most fundamentally, the populist impulse insists on cultural, economic, and environmental limits in the face of a corporate consumer juggernaut. Despite the book's one-dimensional valorization of middling folk, *The True and Only Heaven* should help to insure that a new, and fully politicized, reconceptualization of the middle class will become a part of the debates of both historians and cultural critics. And, also, that we will take seriously the idea of a lower middle class.²⁸

What Is the Middle Class? Toward an Antidefinition

Significantly, the historians who have done the most important work in undercutting the demonization tradition, such as Kocka, Brinkley, Stock, and Lasch, have not attempted to analyze “the” middle class. Instead, they have pointed to critical *divisions* within that beast—above all, considering its “lower” segment as something of an autonomous actor. In other words, they have taken a decisive step away from considering the middle class as one monolithic entity. In order to take the next step, we must confront the problem of definition. For when all is said and done, don't we still need to be able to answer the question: “what is the American middle class”?

I will argue that the simple answer to this question is *no*. In fact, we cannot formulate a satisfactory a priori theoretical definition that a scholar can use to examine the middle class with any chronological depth—if at all. “The” middle class has always stood within history. To examine middling folks as they have constituted (or not constituted) a class *over time* requires giving up the illusion that sociological abstraction can aid us much beyond providing interesting ideas to reflect upon and use in a highly flexible manner. We must therefore blend together an eclectic mix of occupation and ideology, gender and culture, property and politics, in order to bring out a middle class—really, middle classes—with any significant complexity and historical meaning.

The book as a whole provides evidence for this argument—and for why, at the same time, class itself remains a valuable analytical tool in an age where so many intellectuals announce its death. Here, though, it is worth providing a brief theoretical defense of what I call an “antidefinition” of the middle class through an extension of the insights of E. P. Thompson. Thompson's 1963 preface to *The Making of the English Working Class* deservedly endures as the most influential treatise for the dwindling band of historians who persist in their loyalty to the concept of class.²⁹

Scholars, however, have been unwilling to follow through on the full implications of Thompson's ideas. For example, Thompson decisively rejects the idea that class is a thing, an abstract theoretical or sociological category. Rather, class is a process—a historical relationship—that patterns conflictual human experience arising primarily out of the sphere of production. In applying Thompson's formulation, labor historians have produced invaluable studies of working people that have, generally, made the concept of class much more flexible. Collectively, however, these works have implicitly rejected Thompson's theoretical wisdom, for they have—at the very least, by the end of the time period they consider—almost always found roughly the same “working class” anywhere and everywhere they have looked. Certainly if we use a Thompsonian approach, it is inconsistent to argue that classes have the agency to actually make themselves—and then always end up with the same classes.³⁰

Instead, let us take Thompson to his logical conclusion. We need to see that if people are genuinely making their own history, they are making *their own classes* as well. And if they are doing this, then we need to be open to the possibility that people very well might construct “classes” that do not fit into standard academic or political conceptions and categories. As Thompson himself put it, “Class is defined by men [people] as they live their own history, and, in the end *this is its only definition*.”³¹

Therefore, a true Thompsonian, when asked, “What is the working class?” must logically answer that “the” working class does not exist. Instead, different working classes make and unmake themselves over various periods. At times one kind of “working class” exists; two generations later a fundamentally different kind of “working class” has likely come into being—or perhaps none has at all. And sometimes curious, unexpected kinds of classes—perhaps like the hybrid grouping that I discuss most extensively in this book—will play a critical social role.³²

The same insight applies just as forcefully to the American middle class. As J. H. Hexter waxed metaphorical half a century ago, “the middle class is as fluid as water. A concept that at a distance seems solid gold turns out on closer inspection to be mere melted butter.” We must, therefore, finally abandon one of our favorite grand, timeless, universal, and monolithic analytical categories, a classification that historians have used in almost as changeless a fashion as social scientists. In the place of “the middle class,” we will find a much more complex and interesting way of looking at middling people.³³

Class should help tell us, most fundamentally, how society organizes power and inequality in the economic sphere, but with spillover effects to other areas of life. Class therefore affects—often structurally—educational opportunity as well as taste in music, the neighborhoods in which people dwell, as well as the way they raise their children. All human beings, however, react to power and inequality in ways that are ultimately contingent and patterned

only in the loosest sense. Therefore *politics*—the mediation of struggles over power and inequality—is central to the way people in any society construct their classes.³⁴

Adam Przeworski has most forcefully explained the primacy of politics for the analysis of class relations. This prominent political theorist insists that “Social cleavages, the experience of social differentiation, are never given directly to our consciousness. Social differences acquire the status of cleavages as an outcome of ideological and political struggles.” Like others intensely critical of the Marxist tradition of polar and objective class categorization, Przeworski notes that the issue of the middle class “forces us to rethink the entire problematic of class formation.” Przeworski’s most striking insight is his declaration that “struggle *about* class precedes eventual struggle between classes.” Scholars must therefore understand the dangers in approaching the past with static categories of class, because we risk missing the critical contests that all societies have over whether, how, and to what extent class will actually be an operating principle. Because of these conflicts, “the process of class formation is a perpetual one: classes are continually organized, disorganized, and reorganized.”³⁵

As historians, then, we need to understand that when we are looking for “the” middle class, we cannot know beforehand what we will find. Or at the very least, even if we have a good idea of what prize we are searching for, we need to be ready to find big surprises. Only through the use of an antidefinition of class—and of the middle class—will we get closest to uncovering historical reality. The sociologist Lïc Wacquant writes eloquently, “The epistemic ambition of defining, once and for all, the correct classification, of discovering the ‘real’ boundaries of the middle class, is doomed to failure because it rests on a fundamentally mistaken conception of the ontological status of classes: The middle class, like any other social group, does not exist ready-made in reality. . . . The indeterminacy, wooliness, and contention that exist and partly define it should not be destroyed but preserved in sociological models of this reality.” Or, as Franklin Palm wisely declared in 1936, “Anomalous, mutable, with tenuous fringes, the middle classes never have been and are not now a fixed entity, to be encompassed by a simple, rigid definition. . . . Thus, the meaning of middle classes is likely to remain with good cause in a state, so to speak, of suspended definition.”³⁶

Fortunately, a small band of historians has finally begun to accept the challenge of moving away from the boxlike categories that have constricted previous investigations of the middle class. Most challengingly, Dror Wahrman has written about British representations of class in the period from the French Revolution to the Reform Bill of 1832. He argues compellingly that the middle class has always been first and foremost an “imagined constituency.” The correspondence between social “reality” and linguistic conceptions of the middle class has never been straightforward; instead, politics always

makes class concepts meaningful in society. Wahrman reminds us that those who employ the category “middle class”—whether pamphleteers, novelists, or historians—are always using “a purposeful construction, politically defined, conditional and malleable, and forwarded to bolster a particular agenda.” Other historians have extended this insight. D. S. Parker, for example, takes seriously the ideological and political construction of the middle class in Peru during the first half of the twentieth century. Likewise Sanjay Joshi recognizes that “the middle classes in colonial north India were constituted not by their social and economic standing, but through public-sphere politics,” and thus were “constantly in the making.”³⁷

Bruce Laurie, in an innovative analysis of antebellum politics, provides a bold example of how powerfully a historian of the United States can revise our ideas of a period when freed from orthodoxies of class. In an article setting out the agenda for a book on what he labels the “popular bloc” in antebellum America, Laurie argues that we need to distinguish between our usual “middle class”—with its core of well-to-do business owners and professionals—and “the *middling* class” (a term that is a hybrid of contemporary and scholarly categorization). These middling folks included, above all, small employers who because of their tenuous economic condition, low levels of property ownership, and limited aspirations cannot be considered capitalists. Middling people, used to dealing with their employees in a fairly mutualistic manner, easily allied with workers. According to Laurie, it was this bloc that, primarily due to its hostility to the rich but also to immigrants, provided the backbone for the multitude of third-party movements before the Civil War.³⁸

A “middling class” *versus* a “middle class”? Such strangeness surely means it has finally come time to rethink completely what we will find when we all come to look for the middle of America. Indeed, Laurie’s argument should help us realize that it has become absolutely necessary for historians to fully deconstruct our current ideas about the middle class. The binary oppositions that structure our instinctive comprehension of class, in particular the stark polarity of “middle class” and “working class,” have become untenable.³⁹ Much important scholarship has recently demonstrated how race and gender are inherently unstable categories, socially and politically constructed in historically contingent ways. Yet as often as historians talk the talk about the social construction of *class*, residual materialist and political loyalties lead almost all scholars to fall back into a reified and essentialist conception of a monolithic American middle class. We must therefore transform how we talk about the people in the middle, focusing on previously neglected cracks and fissures, while intensively investigating the way that actual middling folks came to grips with their own constructions of being middle class.⁴⁰

Does this then mean that we must also rule out of order the very term *middle class*? That we must constantly use those dreaded quotation marks to destabilize the category? Certainly, I want to radically problematize histo-

rians' rhetoric of "the middle class." Yet for analytical—as well as stylistic—reasons, I will generally no longer use quotation marks when speaking of the middle class. For the label represents a reality, even if a highly ideological one. That means that the battle for control over the *category* has historically been an intensely political struggle, both inside and outside the academy. And by calling my subjects middle class—as well as, inconsistently, *middling*, *petit bourgeois*, *lower middle class*, and similar terms that help us capture their character, even if in an imperfect fashion—I validate their political and cultural claims to being not just part of the middle class, but "the middle class" itself.

For *the middle class* matters, if only because millions of people believe it matters. We need to start following the intellectual lead of those millions—who of course disagree vigorously among themselves—and not worry nearly so much about the theoretical winds blowing in from lecterns across the Atlantic or from sociology departments across campus.

Rehabilitating the Middle Class

My goal, of course, is to do far more than deconstruct the middle class. Rehabilitation also requires positive reconstruction. Here I take the lead not from scholars, but from my protagonists. Whether relatively known and influential, or points of light in a statistical table, the middling-class people in Progressive Era Portland used their ideas about being middle class to fight for a fully democratic world. People like Senator Harry Lane, who voted against American entry into World War I; Will Daly, who went from a milieu that straddled organized labor and small business to nearly become mayor of Portland in 1917; William U'Ren, who gained national prominence as the era's chief architect of direct legislation; and Lora Little, Portland's most influential antivaccinationist, actively worked—along with their fellow citizens—to create a middle-class utopia that would, through a vigorous expansion of populist democracy, abolish most class distinctions, eliminate capitalist exploitation, bring women to full political power, allow ordinary families to make decisions about their lives in an age of expert control, overturn American imperialism, and even (although this was the most provisional) subvert racial privilege.

The issues that these middling folks latched onto were classic middle-class issues, with deep resonance in mainstream middle-class, and especially "petit bourgeois," American culture: small business, home ownership, family life, taxes, education, and fundamental fairness for all people. Yet those among the Portland middling sorts stretched well beyond the boundaries we usually imagine for them when they imagined a middle-class democracy. For example, those we usually consider "workers" were at the center of their construction of "the middle class." Indeed, this book, unusually, has as one of its

fundamental sources the *Portland Labor Press*, precisely because in a middle-class utopia the working class and the middle class would meld into “the people.” Such a vision of the ideal society did not arise from deluded ideas of classlessness; rather, modern notions of justice inspired this fully twentieth-century version of populism. By retelling these stories, we can reclaim lost heroes as well as restore a lost thread in American political history.

Members of the radical middle class had many successes in Progressive Era Portland. They brought about a fundamental democratic renewal of Oregon politics; they preserved their culture of small business through at least the 1920s; they stymied the efforts of unelected public health officials to control basic medical decisions; and they ensured that unions would have an increasingly strong and effective political role in municipal affairs. That they more often failed, and at times even faltered in their democratic vision, is not surprising. The purpose of utopians is not to rule society. It is to provide the ideas, and the political passion, that can energize their fellow citizens to work toward the world to come.

Like a rainbow, the world to come will forever fade from view. Yet, in crucial ways, that world is already here, and in good part because of the hard work of middle-class radicals who have carried a middling populism continuously through American history, from the eighteenth century to the present. In our new millennium, populism tends to be cramped and constrained, often succumbing to exclusionary impulses. Too many intellectuals therefore simply want to abandon its political ideals. Yet the democratic radicalism of middling folks is far from dead. A study of the past can, first and foremost, help historicize middle-class radicalism, showing its complexities and how it survived and changed, as well as what used to be politically possible. Once we understand, we can also cultivate, for middle-class populism could provide a foundation for a new and more meaningful—perhaps even redemptive—politics in the United States. As we throw ourselves into the very different historical world of early-twentieth-century Portland, Oregon, we should, then, see the radical middle class not just as a product of our Progressive Era past, but potentially even as a harbinger of our democratic future.