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The Middle Classes in Europe*

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The attractiveness of a concept rarely correlates with its precision. “Middle class” would seem to be a case in point. The concept has played a central role in—and has been shaped by—political discourses ever since the late eighteenth century. It has been a pivotal concept in many historical interpretations of the modern period. In recent years the history of the middle class has become a prominent topic again, particularly in Central Europe.¹

However, “generations of unsuspecting undergraduates have found the phrase ‘middle class’ a morass, a minefield, even a veritable Pandora’s box. It is certainly a chameleon among definitions.”² The English “middle class” is not identical with its French, German, or Italian equivalents, *bourgeoisie*, *Bürgertum*, and *borghesia*. *Mieszczanństwo* (Polish) and *mesane* (Russian) are even further away. In some languages (e.g., in German) the concept carries very different layers of meaning, reaching from “burgher” (in the sense of a legally privileged inhabitant of medieval and early modern towns) through “middle class” or “bourgeois” to “citizen.” The meanings have changed over time. Descriptive, analytical, and normative functions of the concept overlap; again and again it has served not only as a “neutral” category used by observers and historians but also as a polemical or affirmative code word in public debates, social criticisms, and utopian visions.³

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¹ D. Blackbourn and R. J. Evans, eds., *The German Bourgeoisie: Essays on the Social History of the German Middle Class from the Late Eighteenth through the Early Twentieth Century* (London, 1991); V. Bácskai, ed., *Bürgertum und bürgerliche Entwicklung in Mittel- und Osteuropa*, 2 vols. (Budapest, 1986); E. Bruckmüller et al., eds., *Bürgertum in der Habsburgermonarchie*, 2 vols. (Wien, 1990, 1992); R. Romanelli, “Political Debate, Social History, and the Italian ‘Borghesia’: Changing Perspectives in Historical Research,” *Journal of Modern History* 63 (1991): 717–39.

² P. M. Pilbeam, *The Middle Classes in Europe, 1789–1914: France, Germany, Italy and Russia* (London, 1990), p. 1.

³ P. Gay, *The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud*, vol. 1, *Education of the Senses* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 18–24; J. Kocka, “The European Pattern and the German Case,” in *Bourgeois Society in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, ed. J. Kocka and A. Mitchell (Oxford, 1993), pp. 3–4, 8–15.

Still, there is a tendency toward conceptual convergence in the present literature, at least when it deals with the “long nineteenth century” that began in the eighteenth century and ended with World War I. The concept “middle class” comprises merchants, manufacturers, bankers, capitalists, entrepreneurs, and managers, as well as rentiers, together with their families (lumped together as *Wirtschaftsbürgertum*—the economic middle class—in German). It also comprises the families of doctors, lawyers, ministers, scientists and other professionals, professors of universities and secondary schools, intellectuals, men and women of letters, and academics, including those who serve as administrators and officials in public and private bureaucracies (all lumped together as *Bildungsbürgertum*—the educated middle class—in German).

“Middle class” does not include nobles, peasants, manual workers, and the mass of lower-class people in general, although it is debatable where the exact boundaries should be drawn. There are groups in between that may be seen as part of the middle classes or not, such as military officers and artists. And there is a large, growing, heterogeneous category whose status changed in a typical way. Master artisans, retail merchants, innkeepers, and the like certainly were burghers of the early modern towns. They must be seen as part of the middle class in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. But as time went on, they moved (or were moved) to the margins of what “middle class” meant. In the latter part of the nineteenth and in the twentieth century they were—frequently along with the growing number of low- and middle-ranking salaried employees and white-collar workers in both the private and public sectors—seen as belonging to the “lower middle classes,” the *Kleinbürgertum*, the *petite bourgeoisie*—that is, not to the middle class proper.⁴

Wherever possible, this article concentrates on the middle class proper. That means that we speak of a small minority. In nineteenth-century Germany, middle-class families (*Bürgertum*) accounted for roughly 5 percent of the population. Corresponding to the ratio between urban and rural population, this percentage varied from country to country. It was slightly larger in England and the west in general, smaller in the east and on the peripheries of Europe. It slowly grew in the course of time.⁵ Having decided in favor of a relatively narrow definition of “middle class,” I shall use the adjective interchangeably with “bourgeois.”⁶

⁴ G. Crossick and H.-G. Haupt, eds., *Shopkeepers and Master-Artisans in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (London, 1984); J. Kocka, *Les employés en Allemagne, 1850–1980: Histoire d'un groupe sociale* (Paris, 1989).

⁵ Kocka, “The European Pattern,” p. 4; R. Price, *A Social History of Nineteenth-Century France* (London, 1987), p. 122; Gay, p. 23.

⁶ That means neglecting, for the purpose of this article, some undeniable differences in the use and the connotations of these two words. “Middle class” is usually broader than “bourgeoisie” in that it reaches further down into the “petite bourgeoisie” and

THE BASIC PATTERN

What were the defining attributes of the middle class in the late eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries? What characteristics were shared by businessmen, rentiers, doctors, lawyers, clergy, and others that distinguished them and their families from other social categories not belonging to the middle class? What were their common denominators and the *differentia specifica*, and how did they change over time?

If one takes the concept of "class" seriously, the middle class, in spite of the word, has never been a class, at least not in a Marxist sense, since it includes both self-employed and salaried persons and, more generally, persons with very different market positions. In contrast to the burghers of the late medieval and early modern period, the nineteenth-century middle class cannot be seen as a corporate group (*Stand*) either, since it had no specific legal privileges. Two plausible theories have been proposed to explain the unifying and defining characteristics of the middle class: one relational, the other cultural. As we will see, these two theories are compatible, and both are needed to understand the evolution and the devolution of the European middle class.

It is generally more likely that individuals will form social groups with some cohesion, common understanding, and potential for collective action if they experience tension and conflict with other social groups. By setting oneself apart from others, one gains identity. This is well known from the history of classes, religions, and ethnicities. The same holds true with respect to the European middle class as it emerged as a postcorporate supralocal social formation in the second half of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Merchants, entrepreneurs and capitalists, professors, judges, journalists, ministers, and high-ranking civil servants differed in many respects, but they shared a sense of social distance from the privileged aristocracy and, on the Continent, from absolute monarchy. By stressing the principles of achievement and education, work and self-reliance, a vision of a modern, secularized,

more narrow in that it may exclude parts of the elites. "Bourgeoisie" and "bourgeois" lend themselves more to critical, political, and polemical usage than the more neutral "middle class." See the article by R. Koselleck, U. Spree, and W. Steinmetz, "Drei bürgerliche Welten? Zur vergleichenden Semantik der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft in Deutschland, England, und Frankreich," in *Bürger in der Gesellschaft der Neuzeit*, ed. H. J. Puhle (Göttingen, 1991), pp. 14–58; W. Steinmetz, "Gemeineuropäische Tradition und nationale Besonderheiten im Begriff der 'Mittelklasse': Ein Vergleich zwischen Deutschland, Frankreich und England," in *Bürgerschaft: Rezeption und Innovation der Begrifflichkeit vom hohen Mittelalter bis ins 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. R. Koselleck and K. Schreiner (Stuttgart, 1994), pp. 161–236; U. Spree, "Die verhinderte 'Bürgerin'? Ein begriffsgeschichtlicher Vergleich zwischen Deutschland, Frankreich und Großbritannien," in *ibid.*, pp. 274–306.

postcorporate, self-regulating, enlightened “civil society” emerged that was supported by many middle-class persons and that opposed the privileges and the autocracy of the *ancien régime*. It was largely a project of middle-class men, though it was hardly opposed by middle-class women, who in the long run would try to claim the principles of civil society for their own emancipation.

This was a complicated process with many exceptions. Middle-class families not only set themselves apart from the nobility; they also adopted some of its principles. Civil servants were agents of the state, but they were simultaneously part of the emerging middle class. Still, the various subgroups of the emerging middle class were to some degree united by their common opponents: the nobility, unrestricted absolutism, and religious orthodoxy. They developed common interests and experiences and a certain degree of shared self-understanding and common ideologies. In this way, the middle class constituted itself as a social formation that encompassed various occupational groups, sectors, and class positions.

In the course of the nineteenth century this line of distinction and tension lost much of its power, but it did not fade away altogether. The blurring was due to the gradual destruction of the legal privileges of the nobility in most parts of Europe and to an increasing rapprochement between the upper grades of the middle classes and parts of the nobility. Simultaneously, another line of demarcation came into play—one that had not been altogether absent around 1800 but had become more prominent in the middle third of the nineteenth century. Now a sharper boundary set the middle class apart from the lower strata: the emerging working class and “small people” in general, including the “petty bourgeois” lower middle class. In spite of their differences, late nineteenth-century industrialists, merchants and rentiers, lawyers and higher civil servants, professors, high school teachers, and scientists mostly shared a defensive or critical distance from “the people,” the “working class,” and the labor movement, and this meant much with respect to their self-understanding, social alliances, and political commitments.⁷

While developing cohesion in opposition to people above and below, the middle class defined itself by its culture. Families from various middle-class categories shared a respect for individual achievement, on which they based their claims for rewards, recognition, and influence. They shared a positive attitude toward regular work, a propensity for rationality and emotional

⁷ Tracing the changing meaning, usage, and counter-concepts of “middle class” is one way of documenting these structural changes. Compare detailed evidence in J. Kocka, “Bürgertum und bürgerliche Gesellschaft im 19. Jahrhundert: Europäische Entwicklungen und deutsche Eigenarten,” in *Bürgertum im 19. Jahrhundert: Deutschland im europäischen Vergleich*, ed. J. Kocka and U. Frevert (Munich 1988), 1:20–24.

control, and a fundamental striving for independence, either individually or through associations. The middle class emphasized education. General education (*Bildung*) served as a basis on which they communicated with one another, one that distinguished them from others who did not share this type of (usually classical) education. Scholarly pursuits were respected, as were music, literature, and the arts.

For bourgeois culture a specific ideal of family life was essential: the family as a purpose in itself, a community held together by emotional ties and fundamental loyalties. Strictly differentiated by sex and ultimately dominated by the paterfamilias, it was meant to be a haven protected from the world of competition and materialism, from politics and the public. It was a sphere of female-influenced privacy, although it was not without servants, whose work made it possible for the middle-class mother to give sufficient time to family life, transmitting “cultural capital” to the next generation. To the extent that the public and economic spheres became separated from the increasingly private household and family, the roles of men and women became more unequal; their circles of life moved further apart although they stayed closely interrelated in other respects. Within the nineteenth-century middle class this became the main trend. It has gradually reversed since the late nineteenth century, when women began to enter the public sphere—a slow and protracted process that has accelerated in the course of the twentieth century but has not yet come to an end.⁸

Bourgeois culture could flourish only in towns and cities. There had to be peers with whom one could meet in clubs and associations, at feasts and at cultural events, in numbers that a rural environment could hardly offer. In order to participate fully in the practices of bourgeois culture, one needed a secure economic status, well beyond the subsistence minimum: means, space, and time. This has excluded large, though decreasing, majorities of most populations from becoming truly middle class. If one considers the cohesion and the specificity of the *Bürgertum* to be defined by its culture and its *sociabilité*, one appreciates the importance of symbolic forms in middle-class daily life, of bourgeois table manners and conventions, of quotations from classical literature, titles, customs, and dress.⁹

⁸ L. Davidoff and C. Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Classes, 1780–1850* (Chicago, 1987), pp. 18–28; M. A. Kaplan, *The Making of the Jewish Middle Class: Women, Family, and Identity in Imperial Germany* (Oxford, 1991); B. G. Smith, *Ladies of the Leisure Class: The Bourgeoisie of Northern France in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J., 1981); G.-F. Budde, *Auf dem Weg ins Bürgerleben: Kindheit und Erziehung in deutschen und englischen Bürgerfamilien, 1840–1914* (Göttingen, 1994).

⁹ On Austria, U. Döcker, *Die Ordnung der bürgerlichen Welt: Verhaltensideale und soziale Praktiken im 19. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt, 1994); on Sweden, J. Frykman and O.

These two major arguments make clear what the various middle-class groups had (and to some extent still have) in common: experiences and interests based on common opponents and a common culture. They also make clear that the defining particularity of the middle class is rather thin. To have common opponents and to share a culture defines those concerned only to a limited degree. In everything else, they differ: interests and experiences based on occupation and economic status, gender and region, religion and ethnicity. At any particular time, the middle class has been heterogeneous; within it, "many separate worlds could co-exist side by side."¹⁰

COMPARISONS

Some historians prefer the plural form and speak of the middle classes in order to stress the heterogeneity of this social formation. The plural term seems to be particularly appropriate if one considers regional and national differences. Traditionally, middle-class cultures were rooted in towns. They had strong local components. It is true that merchants, administrators, and intellectuals soon formed supralocal and supraregional networks, and in the course of the nineteenth century something like the nationalization of the European middle classes took place. Still, they continued to be strongly differentiated and even fragmented by locality, region, and nation. It is beyond the scope of this article to reconstruct the rich diversity of the changing European middle-class world. The following paragraphs sketch some major differences between middle classes in western, central, and eastern Europe, including a few glances to the south and the north. They pertain to the "long" nineteenth century only.

The middle classes' relation to the nobility is a crucial factor that varied substantially from country to country. It was closely related to certain characteristics of the old feudal-corporate order and the varying ways in which it came to an end.¹¹ In England the feudal order of the countryside and the corporate structure of the urban economy had been eroding for centuries. Agriculture had been commercialized, feudal bonds had been replaced by contractual relations, guilds had long ceased to exist; the advance of

Löfgren, *Culture Builders: A Historical Anthropology of Middle-Class Life* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1987).

¹⁰ Th. Zeldin, *France, 1848–1945* (Oxford, 1973), 1: 22. According to our definition, "middle class" is not just a category but also a social formation or group whose members share situational characteristics, a sense of belonging together, common attitudes and values, as well as a disposition for common behavior.

¹¹ J. Blum, ed., *The End of the Old Order in Rural Europe* (Princeton, N.J., 1978). A similar book on the end of the old corporate order in the towns has yet to be written. W. Mosse, "Nobility and Middle Classes in 19th-Century Europe: A Comparative Study," in Kocka and Mitchell, eds., pp. 70–102.

capitalism had perforated the divide between countryside and town, between rural and urban elites. Urban wealth was not barred from acquiring land. In contrast to most continental nobles, an English aristocrat could not hand down his title to all of his offspring, but only to his eldest son; female inheritance was possible in the absence of a male heir.

Although recent scholarship has warned against exaggerating the openness of the British elite, one still has to say that the English aristocracy and gentry were notoriously open to middle-class marriages, ideas, and fortunes. In the course of the nineteenth century their accessibility grew. The permeability of the upper class did not weaken its standing, power, and consistency; quite the contrary. In political, social, and economic respects the English aristocracy succeeded in maintaining much of its extraordinary status right into the twentieth century. The line of separation between nobility and gentry on the one hand and upper-middle-class groups on the other was less sharply drawn in England than in most parts of the Continent. Some of this argument holds for Sweden as well, where the feudal distinction between lords and peasants, countryside and town had also been less clearly marked, although for other reasons.¹²

In France, the *ancien régime* had not barred the urban rich from acquiring land, either. In some French regions and towns, part of the aristocracy and upper-middle-class groups had already formed close alliances in the eighteenth century. When the Revolution stripped the nobility of all its legal privileges, those privileges were never restored. The legal distinction between town and countryside was also removed. Historians of France presently like to stress the limited impact of the French Revolution on the distribution of wealth, the recruitment of elites, and the distribution of power. Even after the Great Revolution, aristocrats continued to play a strong role in government, both locally and in the country as a whole. Previously exaggerated notions concerning the alleged triumph of the bourgeoisie in the Great Revolution have begged for correction. But if we compare France with Europe east of the Rhine, it becomes clear that certain flexibilities of the old order as well as the revolutionary form of its end blurred the divide between the nobility and the upper middle classes early in both France and Italy as well as in the Netherlands, Belgium, and Switzerland (where the nobility had been very weak anyway).

The era of the Notables who governed France between Napoleon's demise and the early years of the Third Republic has been analyzed as a transitory stage between the old corporate order and a modern class society. Seen from

¹² E. Hobsbawm, "The Example of the English Middle Class," in Kocka and Mitchell, eds., pp. 127–50; B. Stråth, "Die bürgerliche Gesellschaft in Schweden," in Kocka and Frevert, eds., 1:224–46.

farther east, the aspect to be stressed is neither the strong aristocratic component of this milieu, nor the undeniable importance it gave to the possession of land as a basis of influence and status, nor the traditional mechanisms through which it worked: family connections and local elite cultures. Nor were its more modern, plutocratic characteristics—voting rights based on and steeply graded by taxable wealth and income—exceptional either. What is startling if we compare France with central and eastern Europe is the close proximity and interconnection between aristocratic and bourgeois elements in this elite of Notables. Certainly, the distinction between aristocratic and middle-class cultures had not yet fully evaporated. But there was in France, as in Italy and Britain—though each case was different in other respects—a tendency toward mixing aristocratic and middle-class elements. This *mélange* permitted a gradual, relatively smooth decline of the aristocratic component and a similarly gradual ascent of the middle class, which by 1914 had become the dominant partner in the alliance, certainly in France.¹³

Some regions in Germany resembled the western European pattern—for example, the Rhineland, Hesse-Cassel, parts of Saxony, or independent cities like Hamburg, which saw an early decline of noble influence. But by and large the old order had been more rigid east of the Rhine and particularly east of the Elbe—less commercialized (or commercialized in a different form), with clearly marked legal, political, and cultural differences between lords and peasants, towns and countrysides, burghers and other city dwellers, between the middle class and other social groups. Here the *ancien régime* had largely barred rich urbanites from acquiring land. In central and eastern Europe the legal foundations of the old feudal-corporate order were not removed by one revolutionary act, but by a protracted process that started in the late eighteenth century and lasted throughout most of the nineteenth.

Of course, the differences between central and eastern Europe were deep and manifold. In Prussia and Bavaria, Austria and Bohemia, Galicia and Russia, land reform, individualization of property rights, and the introduction of modern political institutions occurred at different times and with very different results. But in Prussia, Austria, and Russia, the nobility (or part of it) retained remnants of a special legal status and other privileges until the end of World War I, quite in contrast to western Europe. There was, it is true, some rapprochement, some working together, even some limited fusion, between parts of the aristocracy and parts of the upper middle class in central and

¹³ A. Daumard, *Les bourgeois et la bourgeoisie en France depuis 1815* (Paris, 1987); G. Chaussinand-Nogaret et al., *Histoire des élites en France du XVIIe au XXe siècle: L'honneur, le mérite, l'argent* (Paris, 1991); A. M. Banti, *Terra e denaro: Una borghesia padana dell'Ottocento* (Venice, 1989); A. Tanner, "Bürgertum und Bürgerlichkeit in der Schweiz: Die 'Mittelklassen' an der Macht," in Kocka and Frevert, eds., 1:193–223.

eastern Europe. This mingling is demonstrated by middle-class purchases of formerly aristocratic landed estates, by bourgeois-aristocratic cooperation at the upper levels of the growing state bureaucracies, by the bourgeois inflow in the previously aristocratic officer corps, and by the imitation of aristocratic lifestyles by rich upper-middle-class families toward the end of the century. Small minorities of middle-class persons were ennobled—more frequently in Austria and Russia than in Prussia. Some aristocratic-bourgeois intermarriage took place. But by and large the dividing line between nobility and middle class remained more clearly marked in central and eastern Europe than in the west, right into the twentieth century, to the disadvantage of the middle classes. In Germany and Austria they grasped a smaller share of political power and achieved less social and cultural dominance than they did in the west. In Russia they remained even weaker and highly fragmented.¹⁴

Another way of understanding international differences in the history of the European middle classes is to probe into their composition, particularly into the relationship between *Wirtschaftsbürgertum* and *Bildungsbürgertum*.

In the economically advanced countries of the west, merchants, bankers, and rentiers, and later manufacturing entrepreneurs and industrial managers as well, constituted the bulk and the core of the middle class from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century. A high degree of intergenerational continuity was typical for these propertied groups; they were well rooted in their regions and influential in their communities.

There were, of course, lawyers and clergy, doctors and officials, university professors, and teachers at public schools and lycées as well. Their numbers and importance grew, particularly in the latter part of the nineteenth century. But relative to the scope and wealth, status and influence of the economic middle class, they were clearly subordinate, particularly in the earlier part of the century.

In England, observers like John Stuart Mill in the 1830s and Karl Marx a bit later virtually ignored the *Bildungsbürgertum* or saw them as a mere adjunct to the capitalist entrepreneurial class. Historians have frequently followed their lead, particularly those in the Marxist tradition. The British historian Harold Perkin wrote about the “forgotten middle class” when he rediscovered the professional milieu and distinguished them, as part of the emerging middle class of the 1820s, from the entrepreneurs and businessmen.

¹⁴ Compare the summary articles on Austria and Poland by E. Bruckmüller and H. Stekl and by W. Długoborski in Kocka and Frevert, eds., pp. 160–92, 266–99. On Russia, Pilbeam (n. 2 above), pp. 18–22, passim; G. Fischer, “The Intelligentsia and Russia,” in *The Transformation of Russian Society: Aspects of Social Change since 1861*, ed. T. E. Black (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), pp. 353–73; A. J. Rieber, *Merchants and Entrepreneurs in Imperial Russia* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1982).

In France the *Bildungsbürgertum* was less marginal, but the professional element among the Notables was relatively weak. For the *notaires* and other officeholders, real estate and local connections were more important than the legal training that some of them had.

Both in Great Britain and in France it was only in the second half of the nineteenth century that the balance started to shift. Now the secondary school system expanded, and formal education became more important for middle-class sons—and eventually for daughters—as a common experience and a marker to separate them from the masses. Universities and professional schools also expanded, though more slowly. Professional careers became more common and more respected. Besides wealth and family background, talent and qualifications played an increasing (though still secondary) role in granting access to the middle class. Additional opportunities opened up for sons and daughters of some lower-middle-class families, but by and large the expensive and not very numerous schools served young men and women who had middle-class backgrounds already.¹⁵

This western European pattern was not altogether absent in central Europe. Where towns and regions looked back on an old tradition of industrial or mercantile wealth and active self-government, the development followed similar lines—for example, in Mannheim, Karlsruhe, and Hamburg. But in most of Germany the trend was different. Commercial and entrepreneurial activities emerged on a more moderate scale; the factory system came later than in England, Belgium, and France. The Germans were less wealthy than their neighbors in the west, and the difference showed itself not only in the smaller fortunes and less impressive mansions of German aristocrats but also in the more moderate lifestyle of the middle class.

At the same time, “reform from above” was a strong tradition in Prussia, Bavaria, Austria, and other central European states. Absolutist rulers and their emerging bureaucracies had taken the lead in modernizing their societies for the sake of enhancing their power. In this context one has to understand the early emphasis on modernizing and expanding the state-run school systems in Prussia and other German states. Secondary schools based on Latin and classical studies (*Gymnasien*) and universities expanded remarkably; the latter were primarily intended to train young men for state service. The number of students grew in the first decades and again in the last quarter of the nineteenth

¹⁵ H. Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society, 1780–1880* (London, 1969), pp. 252 ff.; H. Berghoff and R. Möller, “Tired Pioneers and Dynamic Newcomers? A Comparative Essay on English and German Entrepreneurial History, 1870–1914,” *Economic History Review* 47, no. 2 (1994): 262–87; R. Torstendahl and M. Burrage, eds., *The Formation of Professions: Knowledge, State and Strategy* (London, 1990); K. Offen, “The Second Sex and the Baccalauréat in Republican France, 1880–1924,” *French Historical Studies* 13 (1983): 252–86.

century, in Germany much more than in France. The stress on education and qualification—instead of or in addition to property and family background—helped to make access to the middle class a bit easier for lower-middle-class persons, but it had excluding effects as well vis-à-vis the working classes and other parts of the lower strata. Upward mobility from the working class into the middle class usually extended over two or three generations, with the elementary school teacher being in an important intermediate position. Sliding down could be faster. General education (*Bildung*) and professional qualification were matters of high prestige and public esteem in Germany, and preparing young men for higher positions in the civil service gave them a close connection to the notion of power as well, particularly since parliamentary institutions remained weak and the bureaucratic apparatus strong throughout the nineteenth century.

With university-trained civil servants at its core, the early nineteenth-century German *Bildungsbürgertum* was small and influential. With respect to social recognition, power, and self-estimation its members were ahead of most merchants, manufacturers, and businessmen, who usually enjoyed more income and wealth. Only in the latter part of the century did the balance start to change, when industrialization dramatically increased the wealth, power, and public reputation of part of the business community. For the most part, the pattern was similar in the western parts of the Habsburg monarchy. In Italy, too, the *borghesia umanistica* was relatively numerous and influential. But here civil servants played a much smaller role; members of the liberal professions, particularly lawyers, played a much larger one.¹⁶

In both western and central Europe the *Wirtschaftsbürgertum* and the *Bildungsbürgertum* were at least loosely connected, sharing elements of a common culture and joined by numerous contacts of different sorts, although they were divided by different experiences as well. In the course of the century they came even closer together, as indicated by increasingly similar educational backgrounds, by more frequent intermarriages (at least in the German

¹⁶ H.-U. Wehler, "Deutsches Bildungsbürgertum in vergleichender Perspektive: Elemente eines 'Sonderwegs'?" in *Bildungsbürgertum im 19. Jahrhundert IV: Politischer Einfluß und gesellschaftliche Formation*, ed. J. Kocka (Stuttgart, 1989), pp. 215–37. The southwest German middle class was less influenced by civil servants and professionals. See L. Gall, *Bürgertum in Deutschland* (Berlin, 1989). H. Kaelble, *Social Mobility in the 19th and 20th Centuries: Europe and America in Comparative Perspective* (Leamington Spa, 1985); K. Tenfelde, "Unternehmer in Deutschland und Österreich während des 19. Jahrhunderts," in *Innere Staatsbildung und gesellschaftliche Modernisierung in Österreich und Deutschland 1867/71–1914*, ed. H. Rumpel (Munich, 1991), pp. 125–38; H. Siegrist, *Advokat, Bürger und Staat: Eine vergleichende Geschichte der Rechtsanwälte in Deutschland, Italien und der Schweiz (18.–20. Jahrhundert)* (Frankfurt, 1995); F. K. Ringer, *Education and Society in Modern Europe, 1815–1960* (Bloomington, Ind., 1979).

case), and by a common commitment to powerful ideologies like liberalism and nationalism.

By contrast, in most of east-central and eastern Europe the lines of division between the various middle-class subgroups remained sharply drawn. The relative economic backwardness of most of these regions corresponded to the weakness of an indigenous entrepreneurial middle class. When opportunities arose, foreign capital moved into this gap, and so did foreign—or ethnically different—entrepreneurs, particularly Germans and Jews, Greeks, and Armenians. The Poles, the Czechs, the Slovaks, and the peoples of the Balkans were ruled by supranational empires and governed by foreign elites. A *Bildungsbürgertum* of the central European type could not easily develop. Rather, there was something like an indigenous *Bildungs-Kleinbürgertum* (as Jiří Kofalka has called it), an educated lower middle class, comprising elementary school teachers, Catholic clergy, perhaps some minor officials, and some intellectuals. They had little contact with the merchants and entrepreneurs or the elites (except, perhaps, with some indigenous aristocrats) but were near to the native population at large and played an important role in the rise of eastern European nationalism. (This was true for intellectuals in Finland, Norway, and the Baltic countries as well.) In ethnically heterogeneous east-central Europe, with increasing tensions between the different nationalities and a common culture virtually lacking, the emergence of an integrated middle class was blocked.¹⁷

This was even more true for Russia, where the traditions of urban self-government were extremely weak. Instead, through most of the period, prosperous merchants were organized, accorded privileges, and taxed by government-regulated guilds. There was mobility in and out of this group, but its members were set clearly apart not only from the artisans, tradesmen, and other petty bourgeois categories below them but also from the *intelligentsia* (minor officials, clergy, teachers, professionals, writers, journalists). In contrast to the central European *Bildungsbürgertum*, the Russian *intelligentsia* rarely included high-ranking academically trained civil servants, who were mostly noble or on the way to ennoblement, frequently foreign-born, and despised by intellectuals. Sometimes members of the *intelligentsia* had closer contacts with intellectuals within the nobility than with members of the commercial and industrial groups, whose status was low and who were the

¹⁷ W. Długoborski, "Das polnische Bürgertum vor 1918 in vergleichender Perspektive," in Kocka and Frevert, eds. (n. 7 above), 1:266–99; M. Hroch, "Das Bürgertum in den nationalen Bewegungen des 19. Jahrhunderts," in *ibid.*, 3:337–59; and E. Kaczynska, "Bürgertum und städtische Eliten: Kongreßpolen, Rußland und Deutschland im Vergleich," in *ibid.*, 3:466–88; G. Ránki, "The Development of the Hungarian Middle Classes: Some East-West Comparisons," in Kocka and Mitchell, eds. (n. 3 above), pp. 439–55.

objects of intellectual hostility. Even before 1917 the Russian situation differed from the central and western European pattern so dramatically that the author of a recent survey concludes, "The Russian middle class did not exist because its constituent elements were determined to avoid fusion and identification."¹⁸

To sum up this section: European middle classes differed in many ways. Seen from a bird's-eye view, one can perhaps distinguish three constellations. In the west, propertied groups dominated within the middle class. While the boundary between aristocratic and bourgeois elites was not sharply drawn and became increasingly blurred, middle-class wealth, privilege, and influence were strong and, of course, growing. In central Europe the educated middle class played a stronger role. The distinction between the aristocracy and the middle class remained more clearly defined. But middle-class influence was limited. Farther east the middle class remained even weaker. The dividing line between aristocracy and middle class was clearly drawn, and the middle class remained highly fragmented. At the eastern and southeastern margins of Europe a coherent middle class hardly existed.

PHASES

What were the major tendencies in the development of the European middle classes? In a process so complex and heterogeneous, one cannot expect precise turning points. Developments differed from country to country and from region to region, not only in structure but in timing as well. Any proposal for periodization is necessarily arbitrary. However, we may distinguish four main periods in the history of the European middle classes: the second half of the eighteenth century; the years from 1800 to 1850; the period from the mid-nineteenth century to World War I; and the period since then.

The Eighteenth Century

One cannot identify a neat beginning for the middle class. There are three overlapping social milieus to consider in seeking its origins. First, there were the burghers of early modern towns. In most of Europe (but not in the east) the towns were islands in a sea of feudalism, enjoying legal privileges with respect to commerce and trade, self-government, and the civil liberties of their inhabitants. In the towns, usually only a minority enjoyed full civil rights (*Bürgerrecht*), including the right to own property, to trade, to marry and set up a household, and to participate in corporations, guilds, and associations as well as in governing the town. Most merchants, tradesmen, and master artisans belonged to this legally privileged group, as did urban landowners, rentiers,

¹⁸ Pilbeam, pp. 22 (quote), 18 ff., 68, 80, 135 ff.

officials, and persons with specific skills and professions; most of them were heads of families, usually male. The mass of the other town dwellers—servants, journeymen, laborers, and the members of dishonorable occupations, as well as dependent household and family members, including most women—did not enjoy full civil rights and did not qualify as burghers in the full sense. It was among the burghers of the European towns that an early bourgeois culture developed. Norms and ways of life centered around work, property, and respectability, thrift and order, religion, and participation in the handling of common affairs. Where the tradition of strong, self-governed burgher towns was absent in the late medieval and early modern periods, an important condition was lacking for the rise of a middle class later on.

Second, there were the agents of capitalism, the wholesale merchants with interregional and international ties, the capitalists and the bankers, and the owners and managers of putting-out systems, manufactories, and mines. They were usually part of the burgher communities. At the same time, their supralocal scope of action, their postcorporate type of business, their competitiveness, and their wealth set them apart from the traditional corporate economy of the towns, regulated by guilds, customs, and morals. Indeed, particularly in central and even more in eastern Europe, they frequently enjoyed special privileges granted to them by the government, which exempted them from the rules of their hometown and set them apart from the community of traditional burghers.

Third, there were those who served the rulers and governments, the princes, bishops, and lords, the numerous authorities of the time: qualified servants and educated officials, administrators and legal experts, and—with some degree of autonomy—professors and clerics. Many of them came from universities. It was among these groups that the ideas of the Enlightenment found the most support, which, in turn, strongly influenced the emerging middle-class culture. These early *Bildungsbürger* usually lived in the towns, particularly in *Residenzstädte* towns and administrative centers. They had close contacts with burghers, but their status was different: it was based on their relation to the ruler and, increasingly, on education, academic training, and expertise. Many of them came into close contact with the traditional elites, with landowners and the nobility. Many acquired land where this was permitted; a minority were ennobled.¹⁹

¹⁹ The literature abounds. A classical study is M. Walker, *German Hometowns: Community, State and General Estate, 1648–1871* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1971), on traditional burgher communities in central Europe; Pilbeam, pp. 212–13 (referring to literature by R. Forster, L. Bergeron, J. Tulard, etc.), on eighteenth-century Notables; W. D. Rubinstein, “The End of ‘Old Corruption’ in Britain, 1780–1860,” *Past and Present*, no. 101 (1983), pp. 55–86.

The European tradition of self-governed towns, the rise of capitalism, and the impact of state formation were the decisive factors. The urban burgher communities, the expanding business groups, and the growing educated circles inside and outside of public bureaucracies certainly differed a lot. But they were usually not noble, nor were they lower class. They were closely related, they partly overlapped, and they developed elements of a common culture. Where and when this happened to more than a minimal extent, the modern middle class emerged, mostly in the second half of the eighteenth century.

1800–1850

In England and Switzerland feudal structures had broken down much earlier. In the north they had hardly existed. In Russia and other parts of the east the feudal dissolution would happen much later, after the Crimean War. But in most of Europe the old order was largely brought to an end between the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth century, either by revolution as in France or by gradual, protracted reforms—and revolution—as in most parts of Germany. The legal distinctions between town and countryside and between privileged burghers and other city dwellers were gradually removed. Land became a marketable property. Guild regulations were weakened or abandoned. The legal foundations were laid for an unrestricted market economy. Capitalism was on the rise in commerce, industry, and agriculture. Later on, industrialization started and the factory system began to break through in England and in parts of the Continent. What had been left from the old corporate order was now dissolved or at least severely weakened. Institutional developments differed, but nearly everywhere there was a trend toward more centralization and intensification of government power, toward some control of autocratic rule by bureaucracies or parliamentary institutions, toward constitutional government and due process of law. State building had started much earlier; now it quickly advanced. These fundamental changes were largely brought about by middle-class actors, and they had far-reaching consequences for the middle-class world.

There had been close alliances between nobles and upper-middle-class persons in the eighteenth century; the French Notables and the London mixture of aristocratic landowners and officeholders, wealthy merchants, and old professions are two examples. But everywhere the noble element had been dominant. Now the balance changed. The middle-class element gained because wealth became more important than title, and a move toward more meritocratic criteria took place. This redistribution of power within bourgeois-aristocratic alliances did not happen without tensions and conflicts, as in 1789, 1830, and 1848, but it produced only gradual change.

The eighteenth-century *Wirtschaftsbürgertum* had been relatively small. It was dominated by merchants, bankers, and rentiers and either functioned as a

junior partner of the dominant landed elites or remained politically weak and socially marginal. Now this category grew in numbers, wealth, and importance. In the west the rise of the manufacturers began to change the composition of the economic middle class and to contribute to its increasing demands and claims. It was in the rising manufacturing towns (e.g., of northern England, northern France, and the Rhineland) that a new type of self-conscious and radical middle-class culture emerged, stressing work and thrift, independence and self-help. It opposed the power of the capital cities and their elites, worked against the old order with its aristocratic and autocratic traits, and sometimes, in the name of minority religions, attacked the established church and its orthodoxy.²⁰

Particularly (though not exclusively) in central Europe, public bureaucracies gained strength, cohesion, and *esprit de corps*. Schools were reformed and expanded. Universities became a major avenue of access into the middle class. Civil servants and professionals developed new claims and demands on the basis of their education and training. They stressed meritocratic criteria of success and the idea of professional independence for a rising, modernizing elite.²¹

In other words, both the economic and the educated middle class were developing new strength and a new profile. But in the early nineteenth century both remained mostly embedded in the urban burgher communities, which in central and east-central Europe still retained some legal identity and much social and cultural cohesion apart from the urban lower strata and the neighboring countryside. The middle class proper had not yet loosed its ties to the large numbers of artisans, tradesmen, retailers, and minor officials.

Membership in voluntary associations held these middle-class groups together on the basis of an emerging common culture that centered on family

²⁰ Perkin, pp. 196 ff.; Ch. Charle, *Histoire sociale de la France au XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1991), pp. 42–55, 181–228, 239 ff. A recent case study on a small German region: St. Brakensiek, “Adlige und bürgerliche Amtsträger in Staat und Gesellschaft: Das Beispiel Hessen-Kassel, 1750–1866,” in *Wege zur Geschichte des Bürgertums*, ed. K. Tenfelde and H.-U. Wehler (Göttingen, 1994), pp. 15–35. In general, English middle-class culture maintained closer relations to religion than middle-class cultures in Germany and France, where the stress was much more on secularized *Bildung* and laicist self-distancing from the church (with many exceptions, e.g., the pious Protestant businessmen of Barmen and the Catholics, particularly bourgeois women, of Northern France). The “Old Believers” formed a nonconformist religious minority and were strong in the Moscow middle class. See A. Gerschenkron, *Europe in the Russian Mirror: Four Lectures in Economic History* (Cambridge, 1970), pp. 17 ff. On Jewish entrepreneurs, see W. E. Mosse, *The German-Jewish Economic Elite, 1820–1935: A Socio-Cultural Profile* (Oxford, 1989). On the Catholic middle class in the western part of Germany, Th. Mergel, *Zwischen Klasse und Konfession. Katholisches Bürgertum im Rheinland, 1794–1914* (Göttingen, 1994); and Smith (n. 8 above) on France.

²¹ See Pilbeam, chap. 5.

and work, ideas of progress, a strict moral code, education, and sometimes religion. This culture implied a postaristocratic modern vision of life, frequently advocated with outright criticism of the old order and the aristocracy. Out of this culture grew the programs of liberalism, which were translated into different demands and campaigns in local, regional, and national politics. There were, certainly, nonliberal middle-class persons and nonbourgeois liberals; but a basic affinity between middle-class culture and liberalism is beyond doubt in the first half of the nineteenth century. This middle class was on the rise, and its main challenge was directed against what had survived of the old order of privilege and autocracy.²²

1850 to World War I

Between the mid-nineteenth century and World War I some of those trends continued. Industrialization reached full speed in large parts of Europe. Urbanization accelerated. Nation-states were formed in Germany and Italy, as demanded by liberals. The expansion of public bureaucracies continued, the education system grew, and after the 1880s government interventions in the economy and social relations increased further.

The *Wirtschaftsbürgertum* continued to grow in numbers, wealth, and importance, now with the industrialists at its core. The rise of the manager began. More and more businessmen had attended secondary schools and universities. The *Bildungsbürgertum* also expanded and differentiated internally. Self-recruitment ratios declined and professionalization quickly advanced. Even in Germany self-employed professionals and those employed by private organizations started to outnumber those in public employment; the clergy were in between. Doctors and lawyers made up the largest subgroups, which grew quickly as a consequence of advancing medicalization, growing juridification, and the beginning of the welfare state.

In wealth, cultural influence, and political power, the middle class had clearly outstripped the nobility in large parts of Europe by 1914. Although this claim must be qualified with respect to the distribution of political power in Germany, central Europe, and the east, it is safe to say that the last two decades before World War I saw the middle class at its peak. It remained a small minority everywhere, but its members and institutions, its spirit and culture prevailed in many social spaces, in the economy and in education, in

²² R. J. Morris, *Class, Sect and Party: The Making of the British Middle Class, Leeds, 1820–1850* (Manchester, 1990); E. François, ed., *Geselligkeit, Vereinswesen und bürgerliche Gesellschaft in Frankreich, Deutschland und der Schweiz, 1750–1850* (Paris, 1986); J. J. Sheehan, *German History, 1770–1866* (Oxford, 1989), chap. 9; D. Langewiesche, “Liberalism and the Middle Classes in Europe,” in Kocka and Mitchell, eds., pp. 40–69; D. Langewiesche, ed., *Liberalismus im 19. Jahrhundert: Deutschland im europäischen Vergleich* (Göttingen, 1988).

the sciences and the arts, in the cities, at work, and in family life. It would clearly be wrong to speak of a decline of the middle class before 1914.²³ At the same time, however, the middle class became more defensive and more beleaguered. It lost some of its previous energy and much of its inner cohesion.

Long before 1848–49, there had been challenges to the middle class from below. The radicalization of the French Revolution in the 1790s, the elements of class warfare in Britain in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, the uprisings and strikes of French craftsmen and workers in Paris and Lyon in the 1830s and 1840s, the revolt of the Silesian weavers in 1844, the demand for radical reform and even some socialist stirrings in the decade that has been labeled the “hungry forties” or the *Vormärz* (i.e., the period before the 1848 Revolution) did not go unnoticed in middle-class circles. The unrest helped to remind those in the middle class that there was a whole world below them into which it was hard to reach out, which was potentially dangerous, and against which it was prudent to protect oneself, even if one had to give up some progressive ideas and accept a closer alliance with parts of the old elites.

Although the social border between the middle class and those below was not new, it gained full relevance, prominence, and power in the second part of the century. The experience of the revolution of 1848–49 was decisive, with its masses emancipating themselves from middle-class leadership and challenging the middle-class world.

The stepwise democratization of voting rights for males—as a consequence of the events of 1848–49 in France, of 1867–71 in the emerging German nation-state, of the 1880s in Italy, and more gradually in Britain and other parts of Europe—brought the “ordinary people” into the political arena more than ever before. The structure of politics changed from a system of Notables to mass and class politics.

The strength of independent labor movements indicated the rise of the working class as a dynamic factor and increased widespread middle-class anxieties. The Paris Commune of 1871 was a signal registered all over

²³ H. G. Haupt, *Sozialgeschichte Frankreichs seit 1789* (Frankfurt, 1989), pp. 232–60; H.-U. Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte* (Munich, 1995), 3:712–50, and “Wie bürgerlich war das Deutsche Kaiserreich?” in *Bürger und Bürgerlichkeit im 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. J. Kocka (Göttingen, 1987), pp. 243–80; F. M. L. Thompson, *The Rise of Respectable Society: A Social History of Victorian Britain, 1830–1900* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988); D. Lieven, *The Aristocracy in Europe, 1815–1914* (London, 1992); Y. Cassis, “Businessmen and the Bourgeoisie in Western Europe,” in Kocka and Mitchell, eds., pp. 103–24; H. Kaelble, “French *Bourgeoisie* and German *Bürgertum*, 1870–1914,” in *ibid.*, pp. 273–301; M. Hildermeier, “Sozialer Wandel im städtischen Rußland in der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 25 (1977): 525–66.

Europe. In different forms and degrees, partly disguised, class tensions and conflicts permeated social relations, domestic politics, and culture in most of Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, much more than they had done a hundred years earlier. Large parts of the middle classes turned to face a new adversary. The offensive challenge to the old elites had been central to middle-class culture and politics, but now a defensive self-distancing from those below became paramount.

Middle-class circles had to make explicit what had gone without saying before: that they did not belong to the ordinary people. The split between the circles of property and education and “the people” grew. The rest of the corporate basis of the burgher communities was breaking down while the differentiation between the upper and lower parts of the middle classes advanced. A gap widened between merchants, industrialists, professors, and higher civil servants on the one hand and artisans, retailers, innkeepers, minor officials, and employees on the other. Only in the second part of the century did the petite bourgeoisie establish its profile as a separate entity, while the concept of “middle class” was narrowing down to the better-off circles of property and education.²⁴

At the upper margin of the middle class the constellation was changing as well. Recent research has relativized the notion of “feudalization” of the late nineteenth-century upper middle class, with very good reasons. To acquire land and to live for part of the year in a mansion outside the city, to consume conspicuously and enjoy hunting and cricket, to mix socially with aristocrats, and not only during the London or Berlin “season,” to think about marrying one’s daughter into an aristocratic family—all this did not really make a nobleman out of a wealthy bourgeois.

It was possible to adopt elements of an aristocratic lifestyle without leaving or neglecting one’s business, and many did so. Liberalism was never a strictly defining characteristic of middle-class culture, and consequently the move to the conservative right by many well-to-do businessmen, high civil servants, and professionals since the late nineteenth century cannot be seen as a betrayal of their middle-class origins. Formal ennoblement remained rare. Most of the sons of well-established businessmen seem to have stayed in the business world, and aristocratic families continued to favor endogenous marriage strategies and to maintain their disdain for industrial and commercial pursuits.

²⁴ E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital, 1848–1875* (London, 1977), chaps. 12, 13, and *The Age of Empire, 1875–1914* (New York, 1987), chaps. 5, 7; H.-U. Wehler, “Die Geburtsstunde des deutschen Kleinbürgertums,” in Puhle, ed. (n. 6 above), pp. 199–209; G. Crossick, ed., *The Lower Middle Class in Britain, 1870–1914* (New York, 1977); J. Kocka, ed., *Arbeiter und Bürger im 19. Jahrhundert: Varianten ihres Verhältnisses im europäischen Vergleich* (Munich, 1986).

After all this is said, however, one should reaffirm the kernel of truth in the feudalization thesis. In contrast to 1800, large middle-class fortunes in 1900 matched and even exceeded aristocratic wealth. An upper stratum of the middle class came very close to the aristocracy in lifestyle and culture. Cross marriages and other forms of mixing between bourgeois and aristocratic circles reached an unprecedented high in Edwardian England and Wilhelminian Germany, and in prerevolutionary St. Petersburg, too. In politics the showdowns between landed and business interests, between mostly conservative noblemen and the largely liberal middle classes, were definitely over. Large parts of the nobility had accepted the modern world and adopted central elements of middle-class culture, and a large part of the middle classes moved to the right. Confronted with challenges from below, those on the top cared more for their common interests and common experiences than for what continued to separate them. Something like a composite elite emerged, which tended to bridge the old aristocratic middle-class divide, particularly in western Europe.²⁵

For the middle class this meant further internal differentiation. Its upper stratum was withdrawing. One of the two social fronts that had served so long as its cornerstones for defining middle-class identity partly evaporated. The previous affinity between middle-class culture and liberalism eroded; middle-class progressivism became a minority phenomenon. Nationalism continued to be strong, but it had increasingly illiberal, imperialist, and sometimes racist connotations. Intellectual insecurity grew. Against this background, harsh criticism and outright rejection of the middle-class world could spread widely, directed against its philistine and hypocritical aspects, its conventionalism and rigidities, its all too "rational" vision of life. Antibourgeois criticisms were most powerfully brought forward by the socialist labor movements. They were frequently propagated by middle-class persons themselves, by intellectuals, artists, and avant-garde writers, but also by the largely middle-class youth movements of the turn of the century. There were numerous clubs and associations in which antibourgeois *Kulturkritik* ran high; usually their

²⁵ D. L. Augustine, *Patricians and Parvenus: Wealth and High Society in Wilhelmine Germany* (Oxford, 1994); H. Kaelble and H. Spode, "Sozialstruktur und Lebensweisen deutscher Unternehmer, 1907–1927," *Scripta Mercaturae* 24 (1990): 132–78; H. Berghoff, "Aristokratisierung des Bürgertums? Zur Sozialgeschichte der Nobilitierung von Unternehmern in Preußen und Großbritannien 1870 bis 1918," *Vierteljahrsschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 81 (1994): 178–204; the articles by F. M. L. Thompson and P. Thane on aristocracy and middle class in England in A. M. Birke et al., eds., *Bürgertum, Adel und Monarchie: Wandel der Lebensformen im Zeitalter des bürgerlichen Nationalismus* (Munich, 1989), pp. 15–35, 93–108; T. Durandin, "Entre tradition et aventure," in Chaussinand-Nogaret et al., eds. (n. 13 above), pp. 319–451; A. J. Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime: Europe to the Great War* (New York, 1981).

members were middle class. At the fin de siècle and before World War I, the middle-class world was not only attacked from below but also questioned from within.²⁶

Since World War I

The history of the middle classes since World War I has been a tale of victory and diffusion. In a way, the middle class has disappeared, along with its two main opponents, while its culture has changed and spread.

The divide between the aristocracy and the rest of society has faded away. In the twentieth century, the nobility of Europe lost all legal privileges and most social particularities. In eastern Europe the aristocracy was destroyed and expelled by communist dictatorships. In central Europe it did not escape the damaging effects of fascism and war. In most of the Continent the victories of capitalism and democracy eroded what had been left of aristocratic entitlements and distinctions. Some of them may still exist, particularly in England, but for the most part it is no longer meaningful to distinguish between aristocracy and the middle class at the top of the social pyramid. Consequently, historians of recent decades and students of present societies prefer to speak of composite elites, of the *Oberschicht*, or of *classes supérieures*.²⁷

The second social boundary that helped to define the middle class in the nineteenth century has survived much longer. Throughout most of the twentieth century the divide marked by tensions and conflicts between the middle and working classes has strongly influenced social relations and domestic politics. Even now this class line has not disappeared in any west European society, and it is about to reappear in the east, where it had been eroded, suppressed, and supplanted by other forms of inequality. Still, the composition of the working population has fundamentally changed as a result of the stagnation and decline of the blue-collar sector, the dramatic expansion of the white-collar working force, and deep changes in the sphere of work. Workers' lives changed drastically following democratization, the rise of the welfare state, and the unprecedented growth of mass purchasing power since the 1950s. The integration of the labor movements advanced. The dictatorships and wars of the twentieth century, and the massive destruction and compulsory population transfers that accompanied them, have contributed to the erosion of traditional working-class cul-

²⁶ H. Mommsen, "Die Auflösung des Bürgertums seit dem späten 19. Jahrhundert," in Kocka, ed., *Bürger und Bürgerlichkeit*, pp. 288–315.

²⁷ Y. Cassis, "Financial Elites in Three European Centres: London, Paris, Berlin, 1880s–1930s," *Business History* 33 (1991): 53–71; H. Kaelble, "Die oberen Schichten in Frankreich und der Bundesrepublik seit 1945," in *Frankreich Jahrbuch 1991* (Opladen, 1991), pp. 63–78; H. Morsel, "La classe dominante de l'entre-deux-guerres à nos jours," in *Histoire des français XIXe–XXe siècle*, ed. Y. Lequin (Paris, 1983), 2:536 ff.

tures in most of Europe, but the dramatic improvement of postwar living standards and the rise of a consumer society have been even more influential in accelerating working-class devolution.

The patterns of social and cultural inequality have become more amorphous in recent years. Certainly, labor movements have not disappeared; in fact, their threat to the middle-class world increased after World War I, as communism first became a domestic challenge and later—moving beyond its original working-class base—a fundamental international challenge. But within Western societies of the post-World War II era the labor movements have lost part of their power and nearly all of their radical thrust. Finally, the communist threat has ended in the international arena too.

All these are complicated stories, not to be told here. Suffice it to say that the fundamental challenge from below, which was so closely tied to the rise of the working classes and socialist labor movements and which had helped to constitute and define the middle classes of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe, has not survived. There are new cleavages, such as that between the majority and the new underclasses of immigrants, the unemployed, and marginal minorities in most Western countries. Social inequality as a whole has not decreased. There are new conflicts, for instance, over ecological issues. But all this does not function as it did when the proletarian-socialist challenge enticed the middle class to affirm its boundaries and stick together in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²⁸

The middle class proved to be stronger than its opponents. It won. Its culture and its principles have spread widely to all parts of the *classes supérieures*, and to a certain extent to the shrinking rural population, to the middle masses that used to be called “lower middle class,” and even to parts of the working class. There continue to be limits to the spread of middle-class culture, and there continue to be differences everywhere; even western societies have not become thoroughly “bourgeois.” But middle-class culture, which has a built-in tendency toward universalization, has moved far beyond the social segment where it originated and which it once helped to define. In this victory the middle class lost much of its identity.

But there have been many internal changes as well. The salaried segment of the middle class has outnumbered its self-employed part. Consequently the definition of middle-class “independence” has had to change. Bureaucratization has left its stamp. The number of rentiers—those who live on income

²⁸ J. Mooser, *Arbeiterleben in Deutschland 1900–1970: Klassenlagen, Kultur und Politik* (Frankfurt, 1984); A. A. Jackson, *The Middle Classes, 1900–1950* (Nairn, 1991); A. Marwick, *Class: Image and Reality in Britain, France and the USA since 1930* (New York, 1980). Most recent and stimulating: H. Siegrist, “Ende der Bürgerlichkeit?” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 20 (1994): 549–93; K. Tenfelde, “Stadt und Bürgertum im 20. Jahrhundert,” in Tenfelde and Wehler, eds., pp. 317–53.

from property without working—has dramatically gone down (except in old age); this decline can be seen as a gain for middle-class principles stressing work and achievement.

Other elements of nineteenth-century middle-class culture have been lost in twentieth-century catastrophes and modernization. Ever since World War I, the number of servants in middle-class households has steadily declined; servants had been of the utmost importance for nineteenth-century middle-class families. Classical education became marginal as it gave way to more specialized forms of training, and this change dissolved an important bracket that had kept the middle class together. The culture of work and thrift, of progress and order, of religion and self-righteousness that defined large parts of the rising middle classes in the earlier parts of the nineteenth century is largely gone. The most central institution of middle-class culture, the family, has changed tremendously, as a clear separation of gender roles had been essential to it. Gender relations have changed thoroughly. Other influences had an effect as well: for example, the changing status of youth, the rise of the media, and the multiplication of choices available in modern society. As a result the family has lost many of its nineteenth-century functions and part of its inner cohesion, with disintegrative effects on middle-class culture.²⁹

But it is worthwhile to remember that most of these changes originated in the middle-class world. This is certainly true with respect to the movements for women's equality, which got off the ground by taking certain middle-class promises—individual rights, education, work and achievement, active participation in public life—seriously enough to demand their extension to women, to whom they had been largely denied during the first hundred years of modern middle-class history. To incorporate “the other half” into middle-class culture on a more equal basis, the culture itself had to change. The same holds true with respect to attempts to incorporate other classes and other parts of the world into middle-class culture. These processes are still under way and it is not at all clear how far they will get.

This article has dealt with the middle class in the sense of a small but coherent and highly influential social formation defined by common opponents and a shared culture. The degree to which it existed has varied over time and space. It emerged in the eighteenth century and declined in the twentieth. It was

²⁹ L. Davidoff, “The Family in Britain,” in *The Cambridge Social History of Britain*, ed. F. M. L. Thompson (Cambridge, 1990), 2:98–129, in contrast to Budde (n. 8 above); K. H. Jarausch, *The Unfree Professions: German Lawyers, Teachers and Engineers, 1900–1950* (New York, 1990), in contrast to R. Koselleck, ed., *Bildungsbürgertum im 19. Jahrhundert II: Bildungsgüter und Bildungswissen* (Stuttgart, 1990). C. Hall, *White, Male and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (Cambridge, 1992); U. Frevert, ed., *Bürgerinnen und Bürger: Geschlechterverhältnisse im 19. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 1988).

more clearly established in the west and in the center of the Continent than in the east. Its existence depended on certain historical constellations, among them the tradition of Enlightenment and a specific separation between countryside and town. It seems that these were constellations specific to Europe. It is not very likely that they will be found in many other parts of the world.