

BOOK REVIEWS

BATTISTINI, MATTEO. *Middle Class: An Intellectual History through Social Sciences. An American Fetish from Its Origins to Globalization.* [Studies in Critical Social Sciences, Vol. 220.] Brill, Leiden [etc.] 2022. xiv, 217 pp. € 136.25. (E-book: € 136.25.)

As is clear from the title, Matteo Battistini's book is based on a strong hypothesis, namely that the middle class has been a typically American fetish. In the United States, it plays the role of an undisputed and indisputable representation of a society that is balanced despite its differences. In support of this hypothesis, Battistini analyses a range of texts from the European and American social sciences, pointing out that, in contrast to in Europe, the middle class in the United States has become an ideological object capable of producing, organizing, and directing industrial and social policies, and individual and group behaviours. In short, the middle class performed a "mythopoetic function" that, with the support of the social sciences, established the conditions in which it became possible to think of society as an order. It succeeded because in the 1930s and 1940s the fetish served to exorcize the fascist threat from Europe, while throughout the twentieth century it was a bulwark against the constitution of a working class sensitive to the call of revolution and socialism.

Battistini highlights the difference with Europe by showing how, in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain, the reference to *middle rank* and *middle sorting* served as a counterweight to the political role of the landed aristocracy and the social threat of the poor. It was the guarantee of the continuity of the political order during the industrial revolution. In France, the *classe moyenne* denoted the subject capable of opposing the continuous revolutions since 1789 thanks to its social position and republican convictions. It is above all in Germany, however, that the *Mittelstand* acquired a social centrality based simultaneously on its history and its sociology and was considered both as an estate and as a social space for the integration of different actors, from small entrepreneurs to clerks and civil servants, to professionals, up to better-paid factory workers. From the middle – and even more explicitly from the end – of the nineteenth century, the middle class is constructed as a social, political, and ideological antidote to socialism, understood both as a theoretical field and as a political project. The European story already shows that "middle class" is a complex and historically changing concept, which is nevertheless used as if it had an obvious and unquestionable meaning.

Battistini's book has the merit of showing the historical and political meanings that the concept has taken on in the passage across the Atlantic and in the circulation among different academic disciplines, because it is in the United States that the reference to the middle class takes on its most historically and politically relevant meaning. Its nationalization came about thanks to the work of the Census Bureau and, in particular, of Alba M. Edwards, who established a new and lasting way of classifying occupations by virtue of which the policies of the New Deal could be

punctually directed. Thanks to Edwards's work, described by Battistini as the "demiurge of the middle class", public statistics were not limited to describing the current condition of American society, but took on the task of identifying the processes of transformation that affected it. This extensive reworking of social statistics identifies trends of change in the internal composition of the labour force, the growth of intellectual and managerial work, the decline in the production of agricultural and consumer goods, and the increase in the provision of "public service, professional service, and domestic and personal service". These transformations broke down the occupational pyramid, favouring the constitution of a broad middle class whose behaviour would no longer be oriented towards the radical transformation of society, but rather towards the progressive improvement of individual positions. Edwards "identified in the middle class the nerve centre of the social question and the moral imperative of reform policy" (p. 95). He was fully aware that, on the whole, the wages of this middle class were low, but this established the basis for a shared expectation of improvement through the acquisition of new skills also accessible to minorities. The paradoxical character of the sociological construction thus consists in the fact that the class position contains a clear reference to a status that must first be conquered and then defended, and that integrates the individual worker within a community that takes charge of controlling the behaviour it helps to reproduce itself. The Social Security Act of 1935 fully incorporates these indications, establishing the conditions that made possible a vast middle class which, as soon became evident, is mainly white and reveals an indelible patriarchal imprint. Despite criticism from the right and the left, the social policy of the New Deal is the expression of an articulate political project, which is based on and legitimized by the social sciences and whose aim is to integrate the majority of the working population within a democracy that is endangered as much by the class struggle supported by communists and socialists as by fascism, which in Europe had established itself thanks to the support of the middle classes.

The politics of the middle class is not merely the contingent response to a crisis, however, but becomes the historical project of organizing American society, and this means not only reconstructing its genealogy in such a way that it can somehow be considered ever-present, but also demonstrating that the present society is the necessary point of arrival of its history. If the dominant concept in Battistini's reconstruction is obviously middle class, the other that constantly accompanies it is certainly crisis. The two concepts establish a constant field of tension. The affirmation of the middle class occurs as a response to the epochal crisis of hierarchical society in Europe and that of the Progressive Era in the United States. The political centrality it assumes means that, from the 1940s onwards, every economic, social, or political crisis also becomes a crisis of the middle class, which must consequently be restored to its position as the centre of gravity of all politics in society. The historical-political significance of the middle class is to certify the paradoxical existence of a society that claims to be classless, despite the fact that, within the middle class itself, it is possible to distinguish between upper middle, lower middle, and upper lower class. The new figure that the social sciences aim to investigate in its movements is the sociological assumption of the "social contract between big business, big labour, big government". It allows unity to be found already in society, which can thus be governed without fundamental conflicts.

The middle class must account for social differentiation without ever losing that reference to the “middle road” that has been affirmed in US sociology since the research on *Middletown* conducted by Robert and Helen Lynd in 1937.¹ In this way, a sphere is defined that goes beyond social position, to be loaded with symbols and cultural references that reinforce the sense of belonging, despite the differences that continue to exist. The further step in the process of consolidating this social-political constellation comes through behaviourism, to which Harold D. Laswell assigns the task of “reinvigorating the myth of the historic mission of the middle class” (p. 134). In the following decades, the myth served to reinvigorate the link between middle class and democracy, based on the guarantee of certain employment profiles and a corresponding capacity for consumption. The middle class is thus constituted at the intersection of the standard of living that distinguishes it and the specific American way of life, which it supposedly embodies. One of the most relevant results of Battistini’s research is the demonstration, based on an impressive amount of historical material, that the process of constituting the middle class would not have taken place without the engagement of the social sciences. They performed a “constituent function for the middle class by forging the language of a complex institutional network of government agencies, public and private universities, foundations and media, business associations and union organisations” (p. 140). Without the social sciences, the middle class would not have produced the specific ideological effect that compacted American society in the Cold War years. The boundaries of society could thus be projected outwards, while inside an effectively segmented sociological construction was presented as a universal subject, which not only fulfilled a function in the present, but was also a model for the future, not only American.

Its model, in fact, was exported with the policies of economic aid to the countries that were defeated in World War II, thus becoming a global reference point. It was not, however, a linear process without contestation, as is shown by the sociological critique of Charles Wright Mills and Alvin Gouldner, who – not surprisingly – opened up to the anti-systemic movements that brought about another middle-class crisis in the 1960s. With the contestations of social movements, neo-conservative policies, and the effects of globalization, the fetish loses credibility. The social sciences themselves turn towards other objects, sanctioning the inevitable decline of this fetish in a society characterized by polarization between great wealth and equally great poverty. Today, the middle-class fetishism persists as an “ideological anachronism” (p. 165), continuing to present itself as a kind of empty signifier, to which it is no longer possible to attribute a recognized meaning but without which American public discourse still cannot do.

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¹Robert Lynd and Helen Lynd, *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts* (New York, 1937).