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The middle classes in Latin America: Subjectivities, practices and genealogies

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What type of power and explanatory capacity does mobilizing the concept of middle classes have for people and for intellectuals themselves? What historical processes and situated realities permeate a term that articulate nation-building narratives? Who is the other of whom in the self-affirmation and identification of middle classes? This book edited by Mario Barbosa Cruz, A. Ricardo López-Pedrerros and Claudia Stern condenses possible answers to these questions.

Articulating a synchronic and diachronic dimension, this wide-ranging work inscribes in a long-standing line of study aimed at understanding the middle classes in Latin America (Parker, 1998; Owensby, 1999; Garguin, 2006; Adamovsky, 2009; Visacovsky & Garguin, 2009; Adamovsky, Visacovsky & Vargas, 2014; López, 2019; Stern, 2021 among others). A volume organized in four sections that abbreviate in a meticulous introduction and twenty-two chapters presents as a necessary manuscript for the times in which we live: where we urgently need to situate in time and space the persons to whom we are speaking about.

As Brian Owensby points out in the *Epilogue*, the middle classes constitute a prism from which to access the very question of the ontology of the modern market. This volume contains articles that push the limits on which the identification of the middle class is built. Colonizer and colonized; working class and upper class; manual worker and intellectual worker; the real and the imagined; to imitate and to belong; are some of the binomials between which "the middle" pivots. As the book shows, Latin America's own instability

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does not put the class identity project on hold but forges and exploits other possible ones, recovering dimensions beyond the position in the social structure.

This middle class journey begins with a section entitled *Liberalism, the Idea of Race, and Neoliberalism* which presents the middle class as a process and as a project in neoliberal contexts. Based on the case of Brazil, specifically São Paulo, Barbara Weinstein shows the articulation between middle class identity and modernity where the *paulista* identity claimed to be white state assuming a type of exceptional narrative: sacralizing milestones of upward social mobility as part of middle-class status. This nation-building narrative is close to the case of Mexico analyzed by Susie Porter, where the middle classes, in this country as well as in others in Latin America, were exploited as the engine of independence embodying "good taste". This sector was identified with privileged groups and the media recognized them as respectable people. In this line, Sara Minerva Luna Elizarrarás shows the spatialization of the moral regimes of the middle classes in which, for the Mexican case, positive values and morally acceptable aspirations converged, for instance, achieving a nuclear family as a sign of decency while prescribing the feminine sexuality. As for George García-Quesada, he points out how in Costa Rica the middle class is linked to narratives of both struggle and conciliation after the 1930s, as part of the character that could forge a country with new forms of democracy: advocating as a value the ideology of egalitarianism (*middleness*) (p.49). Finally, it is worth mentioning the analysis of Mara Viveros-Vigoya who analyzes the trajectories of "Black" middle-class in Colombia and the way in which upward social mobility made possible the ethnic recognition of this sector among the people of Bogotá. Viveros-Vigoya, in accordance to the historian Pietro Pisano, recognized that the *Club Negro de Colombia* constitutes one of "the first attempts to acknowledge 'Blackness' as a racial identity" (p.105).

The second part, *Labor, Consumption, and Political Disparities*, focuses on ideas, desires and practices that crystallize a coexisting diversity within the category of middle classes where educational and professional credentials are not enough to grasp its complexity. In this regard, artistic, ludic and enjoyment dimensions begin to delineate historical experiences analyzed from current analytical lenses. For Mexico, María Graciela León Matamoros focuses on the commercialization of romance for the middle classes between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, mainly because of the drop in marriage numbers. So, it is not about "to fall in love" but "make love happen" by generating affective practices as an investment. This love-market was perceived negatively by part of the middle class sector. In this line, Enrique Garguin brings tango to the discussion of the formation of the middle classes, in particular, the way in which in the Río de La Plata it emerges as a cultural artifact of a feasible society. In the lyrics of tango, nostalgia plays a fundamental role, mobilizing a vision of an idyllic and archetypal past locating middle classes between values nurtured between *el barrio* (the neighborhood) y *la casa* (the home). On the other hand, at the beginning of the 20th century in Argentina, Graciela Queirolo, with a focus on "store clerks", introduces the positive perception towards intellectual work above the manual one. In particular intellectual work associated with "sales knowledge" materializing a professional image as well as a correct form of presentation of the self. In her chapter, Cristina Sánchez Parra, focusing on Mexico, analyzes the role of employees in clothing sales and their integral knowledge including writing skills, mathematics and various languages as part of a class experience that provides "good recommendations". For his part, Mario Barbosa Cruz, in his study of the public sector in Mexico between 1903-1931, stresses the progressive expansion of this sector due to clientelistic networks, while at the same time highlighting how fragile these labor positions within the State can be.

The section *State, Social Movements, and the Cold War*, presents the interweaving of global processes and local manifestations to understand the political uses assumed when appealing to the middle classes. In this regard, Sebastián Rivera Mir by focusing on the government of Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico, studies the way in which his discourses were used by transnational sectors to influence the political command of México. In particular, his analysis centers on the Confederation of the Middle Classes (CCM), which claimed to be the voice of the middle class and its supposed cosmopolitanism as a civil society force in opposition to Cárdenas, a Confederation that had a pendular movement of adherence. In this line, Valeria Coronel, analyzing the experience in Ecuador between 1895 and 1938, shows the instrumental use of middle class concept. The author identifies the negative image of radicalized middle class at the beginning of the twentieth century and the way in which delegitimizing discourses threatened this social sector by giving visibility to lower classes. Continuing in Ecuador but in recent times, Celso Villegas refers to the “*Rebelión de los Forajidos*” in the context of Rafael Correa’s presidency where middle class unites sacred with revolutionary. Middle class *forajido* (outlaw) is identified as part of a collective representation for decades that assumes a bricolage narrative. In the case of Colombia, Ricardo López-Pedrerros analyzes the experience in Bogotá and the role of bureaucrats in the mid-twentieth century, especially at a time when political violence permeated the comprehension of *otherness*. Then, *petit bourgeois* experienced a progressive proletarianization in which it was perceived as improper, inferior and undisciplined. Claudia Stern, for the case of Chile, tries to analyze the project of Integral Chileans as an identity that embodied the social and moral duty of citizenship, although it was not exempt from nuances crossed by political (right and left) and gender (men and women) cleavages. She focuses on the Chilean male leftists, especially on the young people who forged political experiences that articulated with militancy and patriotism. The 1973 *coup d’état* of Augusto Pinochet led the Movimiento de Acción Popular Unitaria (MAPU) to reinvent the notion of integral Chilean, working strongly in the cultural field.

Finally, *Social Mobility, Neoliberal Discourses and the “Pink Tide”*, exposes how the middle class remains a crossroads perhaps because of its initiatory definition that associates it with the place occupied in the relations of production linked to the economic structure. This section, deeply related to the second part of the book, presents forms of living, feeling and narrating of social groups that assume or discuss this category. Sergio Visacovsky, with a focus on Argentina, studies public speeches between 2002-2015 where local political figures refer to the possibility of *becoming* a middle class country again, claiming a long-term project of past values restoration: hard work, honesty and the desire for progress as a “moral rebirth of the nation” (Visacovsky, 2022: 325). For his part, Moisés Kopper, concentrates on the experience of access to public housing in Brazil and its effects on people’s lives. In particular, the expression of upward social mobility in the material and sensorial world among those who identified themselves as “Classe C”, alluding to the fact that they do not fall within the class system. Kopper refers to people with aspirations for the future centered on the present articulated by assemblages of experience. To them the idea of investment is linked to social, symbolic and affective dimensions. In this line, Claudia Zamorano describes the benefit experienced by working class families who settled in Mexico City after the Revolution and who have achieved the “Mexican Miracle” by gaining access to social housing projects, a miracle for a few, perceived as “winners”. Zamorano analyzes residential situations within an unequal middle class that navigates between public credit and private bank loans. Azun Candina Polomer, located in contemporary Chile, refers to the notion of “class transvestism”

as a way of denoting the logic of imitation of others, in this case poor people who do not define themselves as middle class but embody it as part of a performative action: as a public appropriation of social and historical uses assigned to them even though they are poor. Miriam Shakow notes how a new Bolivian middle class emerge and the way in which indigenous pride associates to nation building processes. Shakow draws attention to a recent new solidarity between middle and lower sectors. Terioska Gámez focuses on white-collar workers of the 21st century, grasping success narratives related to meritocratic values nurtured by a managerial class. To conclude, David Parker, invites to a reflection on the taxonomies that often obstruct the study of the middle classes and opens the invitation to deploy the senses to understand the mysteries of human consciousness while studying this social group.

Middle class is still an uncomfortable concept and at the same time a recurrent appellation among Latin American intellectuals. This compilation places us in this dilemma and invites us to study its "vestigial" (p. 9) yet amplified character. It is a socio-historical contribution that "provides a good barometer on the progress of what many since the 1990s have termed 'the new cultural history'" (p. 5).

Without wishing to abbreviate the richness of this book, this overview is intended as a general picture of the virtues of the contributions, while leaving open the challenge of continuing to broaden the approaches to the middle classes, especially those linked to processes of racialization and genericization throughout Latin America. A publication that successfully undertakes possible genesis of practices and subjectivities can only present itself as a valuable and necessary reading.

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