

The Formation and Transformation of the American Middle Class: A Summary of the JAAS Conference Session

Ryo YOKOYAMA
The University of Tokushima

The 27th annual conference of the Japanese Association for American Studies, held on April 3rd and 4th, 1993, at Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto included a session dedicated to “The Formation and Transformation of the American Middle Class.” As the chair of the session, I should point out two main reasons for the selection of the subject, one topical and the other methodological. The first was the political behavior of the middle class in the 1980s and 1990s, which, it is generally assumed, played a decisive role in the outcome of the presidential election—e.g., in the “political revolt of the middle class” which lay behind Ronald Reagan’s stunning victory in 1980, or the success of Bill Clinton’s appeal to “the forgotten middle class” in 1992. This recent political prominence of the middle class along with its deteriorating economic status has sparked academic interest in how the American middle class was formed and how it has been transformed into its current state.

The methodological interest concerns the question of whether or not the method of social history, which has been developed over the past 20 years to probe “ordinary people’s” lives, human relationships,

Copyright © 1993-94 Ryo Yokoyama. All rights reserved. This work may be used, with this notice included, for noncommercial purposes. No copies of this work may be distributed, electronically or otherwise, in whole or in part, without permission from the author.

values, and behavioral patterns in family and community as well as in the workplace—with special focus on the working class and ethnic minorities—is applicable to the analysis of the middle class. I believe that it is, and that, applied to the study of the middle class, it will lead us to break through the traditional interpretation of the Consensus School that America as a whole was and had been a middle-class society by nature. The three papers presented in the session, two of which are published in revised form in this volume, dealt with different historical periods and different subject groups. On the whole, however, the perspectives noted above constituted the common background of interest within which each paper presented its specific argument.

Our session opened with a presentation by Kohei Kawashima titled “The Formation of the Middle Class: A Historiographical Perspective.” In his review of previous literature, Kawashima paid particular attention to Stuart M. Blumin’s explanation of the formation of the middle class in antebellum America. Blumin, utilizing Anthony Giddens’ theory of the class structure of advanced societies, proposed five categories of experience in identifying the emerging middle class—work, consumption, residential location, formal and informal voluntary association, and family organization and strategy. Applying the above criteria, Blumin maintained that the middle class diverged from the working class through the physical separation of nonmanual from manual work in early nineteenth-century Northeastern cities.

Kawashima’s critique of Blumin maintains, however, that he failed to articulate sufficiently the differentiation between the upper class and the middle class. Kawashima suggests that in this area it is useful to turn to the hypothesis put forward by Giddens that the difference in the quality of authority separates the former from the latter, e.g., those who have capital from those who do not, or those who are on the top of a bureaucracy from those who are at the bottom.

Further, interpretations vary with regard to the American class structure in the twentieth century. On the one hand, as in the Lynds’ Middletown studies, the middle class is viewed as having a solid existential basis in constituting the mainstream social strata within American society. On the other hand, as E. Digby Baltzell’s works showed, there had been a continued dominance of the upper class and a correspondent impotence of the middle class. One of the important reasons for the difference in interpretations seems to lie in the ambiguity of criteria which divide the middle and upper classes. Kawashima’s paper, using

statistical data from nineteenth-century Boston society, attempts to clarify the boundary between the upper class and the other classes, but suggests that in reality active interaction across the class line and the increasing heterogeneity of the community combined to break the enclosure of the old upper-class hegemony toward the turn of the century.

The second paper of our session, titled "Solid Middle Class: The Social Structure of Berkeley during World War Two as Reflected in School Life," was given by Natsuki Aruga. Making effective use of a longitudinal psychological study of California's Berkeley High School students during the Second World War, she probed into the inner lives and relationships of her subjects and found that middle-class students solidly dominated the working-class cohort. The relations of dominance and subjugation, as her data indicated, revolved around social club activities. Aruga maintains that such class division among the children was a direct reflection of the social structure of the wider Berkeley community. Pointing out the acute contradiction between the existence of class hierarchy and the unifying national sentiment of wartime America, Aruga argues that it was only after the 1960s that the middle-class dominance in Berkeley began to show any signs of erosion.

The last paper, given by Eiichi Akimoto, was titled "American Economy and the Crucible of the Middle Class in the 1990s." Since it is not included in this volume, I would like to give a summary of his presentation here. Akimoto proposes to use the notion of the American middle class as a working hypothesis, actually defining it both as people who are doing business and as "consumers." The American middle class as such, after absorbing a large portion of the working class in the 1950s and 1960s, was confronted with the worsening of the American economy as well as the widening of the income gap in the 1970s and 1980s. The middle-class electorate voted for Clinton in the 1992 presidential election as they expected him to initiate changes to revitalize America which, they felt, was on the decline. The middle class today is mainly composed of baby boomers who feel impoverished by the increasing double burden of child rearing and supporting the older generation. They have been suffering from the stagnant wage level caused by the slow growth of productivity since 1973, as well as the hollowing out of American manufacturing industries with the movement of facilities overseas. Reagan-Bush policies made matters worse.

Bill Clinton, recognizing the critical condition of the middle class, brought forward "the New Covenant" in order to rehabilitate "the forgotten middle class."

Akimoto's paper was useful in explaining the economic background of Clinton's successful political strategy to win middle-class voters. In addition, Akimoto suggested that Clinton's promise to the middle class, far from being mere lip service, is in fact quite serious and substantial in light of the critical situation in which the American middle class finds itself. Nevertheless, Akimoto's contention that a large portion of the working class was absorbed into the middle class in the 1950s and 1960s under "Keynesian social integration" appears to be incompatible with Aruga's view that Berkeley's middle class was solid into the 1960s. This seeming discrepancy suggests that time lag and regional difference in the evolution of the classes in America must be taken into consideration, as Kawashima and other participants pointed out in the subsequent discussion.

We were fortunate to have three stimulating presentations in our session which promise to generate further studies on the American middle class. Differing in their approaches and the criteria used to divide classes, they together offered informed and sensible insights into the formation, domination and transformation of the American middle class. The time is perhaps ripe for synthesizing the accumulated studies into a broader and more comprehensive understanding of class and power in the United States. For too long the existence of the middle class has been taken for granted in modern America. Nonetheless, it is imperative to reconsider the concept as well as the present, past and future status of the American middle class.