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REFERENCES

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- 1 In *The American Middle Class: A Cultural History*, Lawrence R. Samuel attempts to provide context to what he refers to as “the most important issue in the national conversation,” the fall of the American middle class. Samuels offers an overview of the history of the class that has been traditionally experienced as a reflector of the vitality and robustness of the American republic, from its booming rise in the post-World War II era, to the slow decline of its economic, social, and political power in the 1970s and 1980s, all the way to its contemporary shrinkage and loss of economic and political robustness.

In response to the question of “how and why we got here,” Samuel argues that the roots of the present crisis are to be traced back to the 1960s, when middle-class values came under fire by counterculture movements that questioned both American politics and the American way of life, a process that in fact never ended and still shows “few signs of reversing.” Samuels reads the decline of the American middle-class by examining the *idea* of it over the last sixty years – “its values, attitudes, and behavior, the role within society at a given time” – and the ways in which

it figured in the national discourse. Because Samuel believes that “more powerful forces than simply the economy” were responsible for the crisis of the American middle class, his treatment aims to bypass analysis of socio-economic forces in class evolution to instead focus on “rhetorical and ideological shifts in the arc of the American middle class.”

Chapter 1, entitled “The Greatest Show on Earth,” focuses on the post-war era, when the mid-section of the American class structure literally exploded through fast-rising numbers of both white collar and blue collar workers, who coalesced to “form a group whose power and size were unprecedented in history.” In the 1950s, the middle class’s rise to power became a veritable symbol of the strength of the American democracy and a sign of the pervasiveness of consumer capitalism. As Samuel puts it, “the country’s middle class was used as a weapon in the Cold War, a vivid proof that the American way of life was superior to that of Soviet Communism.” Simultaneously, the emergence of the African-American middle class was appropriated by the official discourse as yet another indisputable sign that “the nation was living up to its lofty ideals,” despite strains against the nascent Civil Rights movement (with critics attacking the group’s bourgeois lifestyle and value system). All in all, the emergence of the American middle class in the 1950s, Samuel argues, was experienced as “a historic achievement, something no other civilization, past or present, had ever seen.” Middle class expansion became a powerful weapon in the ideological arsenal of the 1950s, deployed to help construct the new identity of post-war US as a global hegemon.

Samuel places special emphasis on the ideological construction of the US as a “middle-class nation, the first of its kind in history.” In the first post-war years, he tells us, despite rising inflation that put a tight squeeze on middle-class income, the vast majority of Americans insisted upon defining themselves as members of the middle class, while simultaneously refusing to acknowledge class difference as a determinant of American social experience. According to Samuel, this phenomenon was the result of “two of the nation’s core myths: that [America is] a class-free society and, paradoxically, that individuals could rise in class through ‘upward mobility’.” Belief in American classlessness was ideologically manipulated to argue in favor of “the American Way of Life,” which was pitted against the oppressive classlessness of Soviet Communism. Simultaneously, the widespread notion that the vast

majority of Americans were members of one massive class, obscured the existence of social disparities and class divisions. Still, Samuel points out, despite ideological construction, a general increase in real income and a more even distribution of wealth made the rise of the American middle class an indisputable historical event, “a great, of not the greatest show on Earth.”

Samuel offers his readers a valuable overview of post-war responses to the American middle class, as both a real and an imagined socio-economic entity, by focusing on voices from the world of politics, the media, pop culture, and the academia. Samuel’s overview reveals that in the 1950s there was anything but consensus over what constituted middle-class values, as well as over the value of such values. Cold War politicians responded to what was believed to be a cohesive “middle-class mindset” by tailoring their political positions to appeal to a “moderate” electoral body. The business world capitalized on the supposed “uniformity” of the middle class and, taking the existence of a “one-class market” as a given, proceeded to construct consumption patterns that determined taste, desires, and norms. On the other side of the spectrum, academics stressed financial strains that caused stratification (even within the so-called middle-class). While the mass media celebrated the new middle-class lifestyle, researchers in the field of sociology dealt with the dark underbelly of “middle-class” life, emphasizing the illusoriness of middle-class power and upward mobility, while critiquing middle-class values as “conservative,” “mechanistic,” and “puritanical.” The last section of Chapter 1 focuses on sociological treatments of the rise of the “black bourgeoisie” and on debates among scholars as well as among representatives of the black press and the black business world over the question of assimilation and the extent to which the black middle-class could claim to have attained a degree of empowerment.

In Chapter 2, entitled “The Happening,” Samuel focuses on the “cultural vertigo” of the 1960s, the decade that marked the peaking of the American middle class and the onset of a new phase of insecurity, “the gears of the group now beginning to go on reverse.” Under pressure from movements and events that caused major shifts in the American social structure (the Civil Rights movement, race riots, the Kennedy assassination, anti-Vietnam protests, the rise of counterculture), the middle class lost cohesion and started “breaking apart into different fragments or factions.” Strains appeared within the African-American community as well, with a widening gap forming between

the black “haves” and “have-nots” as the black middle class expanded. In addition to facing the realities of racial discrimination themselves, the black middle-class were often accused as “oppositional to the struggle for Civil Rights” and as “traitors of their race.” At the same time, though, the rhetoric that celebrated the American middle class also persisted in the domains of politics and the media, with emphasis placed on upward mobility and the “melding of the working class with the middle class.” Mainstream media foregrounded the “new” black middle-class, while worsening conditions of life in the ghettos resulted in frequent eruptions of violence and race riots.

Samuel places great emphasis on the critique directed against the American middle class in the context of the cultural revolution of the late 1960s. Already from the 1950s, the American middle class had come under fire by liberal academics who critiqued it as complacent, consumerist, image-oriented, and conformist. In the 60s, the voices of liberal opponents multiplied, but this time much of the criticism emanated from within the middle class, especially from youth groups that rejected what they regarded as the bankrupt values of the older generation.

As members or sympathizers of counterculture movements, much of the nation’s young adults rejected the sacred tenets of middle class life, such as “belief in education, faith in upward mobility, recognition of economic and social hierarchy, desire to accumulate money and property, acceptance of responsibility, and optimistic outlook.”

Generational strain, of course, is constant in human history; however, as Samuel points out, “this split seemed significantly larger and deeper than those of the past.” This explains why, according to polls that Samuel quotes, by the end of the sixties members of the American middle class registered uneasiness and even growing pessimism about the future of the nation. According to Samuel, the widespread rejection of middle class values during the 1960s marks the beginning of the decline of the American middle class.

In the next chapter, that bears the sensational title “Apocalypse Now,” Samuel traces the history of the American middle class through the 1970s, a decade that is remembered not only for the carry-over of counterculture that continued to challenge middle-class values, but also for a deep economic recession that put an end to post-war prosperity through a notable decrease of middle-class purchasing power. According to Samuel, over this decade “the very nature and composition” of the American middle class underwent dramatic changes” as a result of upheaval

on all fronts, economic, political, and social; however, the middle class managed to “find shrewd ways to survive and, against all odds, maintain its status as the heart and soul of the nation.” To begin with, the myth of America as a middle-class nation persisted, Samuel notes, especially through the efforts of the media and advertising, which promoted suburban life as typical of the average American; and yet, by the mid-1970s, data suggest that “most Americans were experiencing what unions liked to call ‘shabby but respectable’ lives, i.e., a stable working class standard of living.” In addition to losing purchasing power, the American middle class, Samuel points out, lost cohesion, as a heightened sense of pluralism allowed representatives of various ethnic groups up until then labelled working-class, to be recognized as members of the American middle class. Loss of cohesion was also caused by a generational rift, with youngsters rejecting their parents’ conventional mindset in favor of ideological alternatives, a trend evidenced by the rise of middle-class radicalism, public interest groups, and other community initiatives. To Samuel, however, the happiest chapter of American middle class life in the 1970s concerned the rapid growth of the African American middle class—even though, as he points out, the black middle class was significantly different from its white counterpart in terms of both purchasing power and cultural consciousness (racial pride, “double consciousness”). Overall, Samuel finds that in the 70s the American middle class experienced a dramatic “personality change,” not the least of which was a hardening of class lines and the emergence of a “more competitive paradigm” in American class structure.

In the final chapters of his study, Samuel continues to trace the decline of the American middle class through the 1980s to its present predicament. During the Reagan years, Samuel tells us, despite improved economic indexes (low inflation, decreased unemployment), middle class prosperity “proved elusive,” as people found themselves “working more, having less.” Squeezed even harder by the free market economic policies of the Reagan government, the American middle class was “cloven in half” in a highly competitive environment that caused members of the middle class to move in opposite economic directions, up or down. The “yuppie” culture, Samuel notes, bears testimony to the emergence of divergent lifestyles among members of the middle class in the 80s, the “yuppies” representing the new “bourgeois” face of the 80s middle-class culture. A decade later, this rift simply widened, with immense concentration of wealth among the top 5 percent of the

American population, which “effectively drove the middle class further back in the nation’s economic and social strata, creating what can be considered a small but powerful upper class and a large weak under class.” Now operating in a new global economic environment, the downsized middle class faced the effects of “outsourcing” and the pressure to keep abreast of new types of knowledge and skills, which left them feeling even more insecure and dispensable. The final blow came with the massive recession of 2009, which brought the collapse of home values, extensive job losses, and a sharp decrease of employee bargaining power.

In *The American Middle Class: A Cultural History*, Lawrence R. Samuel is attempting to present the reader with a condensed view of a vast subject. He succeeds in tracing the process of emergence and decline of the American middle class, and in offering us an informed treatment of the cultural and social dimensions of American middle class life. The fact that Samuel has managed to pack so much material in the scope of a rather short book is nothing short of admirable; however, the ways in which the book negotiates multiple perspectives on this complex subject do not always yield a successful synthesis: for instance, Samuel stresses the impossibility of defining “middle class” and emphasizes the mythological construction of American middle class experience, while simultaneously treating the American middle class as a concrete and definable historical entity. Inability to define effectively the terms of discussion is also evidenced in his treatment of the evolution of the black middle class, which in his opinion represents the “happiest chapter” in the history of the American middle class, even though he also wonders whether blacks may not “have a separate class system,” after all. At the end of his book, Samuel concludes that despite class polarity and a steep rise in the income divide, the American middle class (whatever it may be) is, after all, “not on the brink of extinction”: it has “survived other crises, so it is reasonable to conclude that it will survive this one and those to come;” in much the same way, he maintains faith in the American Dream, the ideological cornerstone of the middle class imaginary: “it would be silly to think the American Dream is going to completely disappear, it too an enduring dimension of our national identity.” Despite the naiveté of such conclusions, as well as contradictions that sometimes compromise his argument, Lawrence R. Samuel’s *The American Middle*

Class is a book that rewards its reader with a wealth of material and a valuable bibliography for anyone interested in pursuing further research on the rise and fall of the middle class in post-war America.

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