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The myth of middle-class liberalism

The bourgeois are supposed to ensure open, democratic societies. In fact, historically they rarely have

We have long celebrated the ascent of the middle class — from China to the Arab world — as a critical piece in the emergence of open societies and a liberal world order. Scholars and pundits have reassured us that economic liberalisation will give rise to powerful middle classes, which will eventually bring about democratic forms of politics. Baked into this argument is the assumption that assertive middle classes are crucial for the triumph of political liberty.

But in the last decade, these hopes have been shattered. The global spread of middle-class society and culture has not resulted in political liberalisation. Quite the opposite: The growing middle classes across Africa, Asia and the Middle East seem disinclined to push for democratic reform, while segments of the European and American middle classes, feeling threatened by the rapid socio-economic transformations of our time, have proven quite open to the appeals of illiberal demagogy. So why did political scientists place so much faith in this social group?

For one thing, the historical record seemed clear — middle classes *have* often stood at the forefront of the struggle for political freedom. Over the course of the modern period, as the rural and urban middle classes emerged as an increasingly powerful social group between the aristocracy and the peasants and workers, they began to challenge the powers and privileges of the old, entrenched authoritarian elites, fighting for the protection of private property, freedom of speech, constitutional rights and democratic participation, and the rule of law. Consider the central role of the middle classes in the great bourgeois revolutions of the late 18th and early 19th centuries (mainly in the Atlantic world), of the mid-19th century (mainly in Europe), and the early 20th century (mainly in Asia), all of which sought to limit the powers of monarchs.

The middle class cherished illiberalism

With these experiences in mind, twentieth-century scholars put forward a robust theory connecting socio-economic structures and forms of

political order. 'No bourgeois, no democracy,' the sociologist Barrington Moore memorably asserted in his 1966 classic 'Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy.' Similar ideas were expressed by the proponents of modernisation theory, most famously Seymour Martin Lipset in his influential book 'Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics' or 1959.

Yet they were all informed by a selective reading of history. A more careful look at the past shows that the middle classes have frequently sided with illiberal forms of government when they feared for their privileges and social stability.

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Throughout the 19th century, the golden age of the bourgeoisie, the middle classes in most parts of the world lived in autocracies — among the few exceptions were Britain and the United States — and didn't always struggle for more political freedom. Anxious about the growing strength of the working classes, segments of the middle classes even welcomed limits on political freedom. As early as 1842, the German revolutionary poet Heinrich Heine, then exiled in Paris, observed that the politics of the middle classes were 'motivated by fear,' as they were all too willing to give up their ideals of liberty to protect their socio-economic position from the lower classes. This became most obvious in the failed 1848 revolutions, which in many places soon lost the support of the panicking middle classes, terrorised by the fear of plebeian rage and proletarian political participation.

Public support for fascism

Colonialism, too, revealed the inherent contradictions of the bourgeois middle classes, as colonial racism stood in stark contrast to the claim of universal human equality. 'The tensions between the exclusionary practices and universalizing claims of bourgeois culture were crucial to shaping the age of empire,' observed the historians Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler.

The 19th-century middle classes also showed little concern over the social and political exclusion of large segments of society — minorities, women, workers. Inequalities — ethnic, gender, social — were part of the middle-class world, in complete contradiction to the universal values of

freedom, equality and civility. On the eve of World War I, the European bourgeoisie was caught up in a fervour of nationalism, militarism and racism.

The most extreme historical example, however, is undoubtedly the substantial public support for fascist regimes in the interwar years — which came not only from the lower middle classes but also from significant parts of the upper bourgeoisie. Terrified by the specter of communism, the middle classes across Europe flocked to right-wing strongmen, showing little commitment to the ideals of liberal democracy and parliamentarism. Autocrats like Mussolini, Franco and Hitler seemed to offer protection for their wealth. Carl Schmitt, Hitler's notorious legal theorist, claimed that only a strong authoritarian state could guarantee the preservation of the propertied middle class. Edvard Benes, the Czechoslovak liberal politician, observed in 1940 from his London exile: 'The middle classes realized that political democracy, carried to its logical conclusion, could lead to social and economic democracy, and therefore began to see in the authoritarian regimes salvation from a social revolution of the working and peasant classes.'

Middle classes vs political liberalisation?

To be sure, not all parts of the middle classes were so eager. The Nazi takeover, the historian George Mosse once pointed out, used 'a double standard' in its policies toward the middle classes, 'distinguishing between native and Jewish bourgeoisie,' and 'was anti-bourgeois insofar as it was directed against the Jew.' In her 1951 book 'Origins of Totalitarianism,' Hannah Arendt noted that 'the German bourgeoisie,' which 'staked everything on the Hitler movement and aspired to rule with the help of the mob,' in the end only 'won a Pyrrhic victory' as 'the mob proved quite capable of taking care of politics by itself and liquidated the bourgeoisie along with all other classes and institutions.'

In their struggle to preserve their socio-economic position, parts of the middle classes are turning to protest politics, believing that populist strongmen will protect their interests.

The Cold War middle classes around the world became overall more liberal — yet they still embraced authoritarian state measures if they deemed them in their interest. Across the societies of the West, a hard hand — limitations on freedom of speech and association — against (perceived) communists and their sympathisers was tolerated, even welcomed. In many parts of the post-war Global South, from the Middle East to Latin America, middle classes prospered

in authoritarian regimes and, fearful of social instability, often supported political repression.

These aren't exceptions to a general rule about middle-class politics. The middle classes and political liberalisation are less closely connected than we have been made to believe. In fact, we have misunderstood their promise all along.

The illiberalisation of the middle classes

Middle classes are not a priori engines of political liberalisation. They can readily become the promoters of repressive authoritarianism if they fear for the loss of influence and wealth. The history of the middle-class opposition to the principles of universal freedom, equality, and civility can be understood as part of the dark side of modernity, as described by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, the two main figures of the Frankfurt School, in their 1947 classic 'Dialectic of Enlightenment.' The middle class has always been Janus-faced. Whether it embraces liberal models of modernity or not depends on the social, economic and political circumstances.

The last years have seen a wide range of publications lamenting the crisis of the middle classes in the West. Consider Ganesh Sitaraman's 2017 book 'The Crisis of the Middle-Class Constitution,' which warns of the collapse of a strong middle class as the 'number one threat to American constitutional government' in the United States. Or Christophe Guilluy's 'No Society: The End of the Western Middle Class,' from 2018, which looks at the crumbling middle in France (and beyond). And there's Daniel Goffart's 'The End of the Middle Class,' from last year, which makes the same point for Germany.

Yet all of these experts operate under the assumption that the middle classes are the bastions of liberal, open societies, and that only their decline could threaten democracy. Sure, the erosion of the middle classes is a problem. But there is another danger which we have not discussed enough — their political illiberalisation.

It's no surprise, then, that right now, growing segments of the middle classes around the world once again turn to illiberal politics. The last decade has seen a wide range of shocks: The Great Recession and the neoliberal excesses of our new Gilded Age, which have led to rising inequalities, have squeezed the middle classes almost everywhere. At the same time, some of the old social centre feel threatened by social, economic and political demands of previously marginalised groups — minorities, migrants and the poor.

In their struggle to preserve their socio-economic position, parts of the middle classes are turning to protest politics, believing that populist strongmen will protect their interests. Establishment and progressive parties need to stop assuming that the middle class will always support them. History says otherwise, and shows how such hubris leads to disaster. The middle classes aren't lost, but political leaders must now work hard to win back their trust. Ignoring them would be at their own and at our societies' peril.

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