

Caught in the Middle? On the Middle Class and its Relevance in the Contemporary Middle East

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Are we once again “embarrassed” (Wright 3) by the middle class?¹ Recent academic and public debates about the middle class have been reignited by the global financial crisis of 2008 and the Arab Spring, as well as by the global Occupy movement and further popular upheavals in Greece, Spain, Turkey, or Brazil, with their discursive convergence to the global logic of precarity (Glasius and Pleyers 554). This is reflected for instance by the importance of social justice in these protests (558). Moreover, several recent works have discussed middle classes of the Global South

(Banerjee and Duflo; Darbon; Heiman, Freeman, and Liechty; López and Weinstein; Watenpaugh). Thereby, the term is used both “as a concept and as a practice” (López and Weinstein 1): that is, as an analytic category, and as a descriptive term without analytic substance.

Most of traditional theorization on middle class is based on empirical data from the “West.” Therefore, it is a matter of debate if the concept can also be meaningful for analysis of Middle Eastern societies. A new strand of scholarship has developed the concept of a “global middle class,” which has a strong basis in the Global South. These scholars have highlighted how processes of political and

economic globalization have created common labor conditions, lifestyles, and identities, thus constituting a global form of the new middle class (López and Weinstein), particularly in “global cities” (Heiman, Freeman, and Liechty; Castells; Sassen).

Having created new opportunities around the globe, the logic of neoliberalism² promotes the middle class as an aspirational and normative notion that includes democracy, freedom, individualism, and consumption. Thus, the middle class constitutes an “ideological and social construct upon which the neoliberal state rests its political legitimacy” (Heiman, Freeman, and Liechty 18-19; Kandil 201). Some literature also points to ambivalent facets within these processes. Being aspirational on a global scale, middle classes also suffer from negative side effects of globalization processes. Several authors have stressed the “alienation and disconnection of the global middle class from [...] political and economic elites” (S. Cohen, *Searching* 108), along with a “constant anxiety” and “feelings of insecurity that infuse middle-class subjectivities around the globe” (Heiman, Freeman, and Liechty 20).

Regarding the MENA region, Asef Bayat’s concept of the “middle class poor” and Farhad Khosrokhavar’s notion of the “would-be middle class” very aptly reflect

this consideration (Bayat 265; Khosrokhavar 61). Both argue that since the economic reforms of the 1980s that fostered liberalization and privatization, a new societal segment has emerged. This segment consists of individuals who are well-educated and cosmopolitan, and would hence expect a middle-class life. However, marginalized either by unemployment or precarity, that aspiration's negation resulted in the group's widespread participation in the Arab revolts (Bayat 265).

Thus, analyzing the middle class in the Middle East and North Africa represents an important undertaking for grasping the region's modern history and ongoing transformation processes. In order to understand the middle class' current societal stance, a historical perspective is needed. This issue's contributions bring to mind how notions of modernity, such as rationality, emancipation, progress, and liberalism in the region, entrench themselves in post-colonial state-society relations (Watenpaugh 304). The ambivalence of these relations has manifested itself in the authoritarian state's provision of material concessions to particular segments of society, including the expansion of educational facilities and a guarantee of work, in order to enable modern middle-class living. In return, however, restraint in political organization was illiberally expected (300).

The entailing institutional weakness of the middle class resulted in the increased ability of elites to co-opt middle class segments, thus displaying a pragmatic attitude to state power, when this proved beneficial. Taking the societal consequences of these policies into account, Zubaida—while reinforcing Bayat's and Khosrokhavar's reasoning—elaborates appropriately that “[m]ass higher education produces a proletarianized, poorly educated intelligentsia, poor and resentful, directing its ‘re-sentiment’ against the Westernized elites, seen as agents of cultural invasion” (qtd. in Watenpaugh 301). It was this social group of “proletarianized [...] intelligentsia” that constituted large parts of the social basis of two important political movements, namely the Arab nationalist movement and the Islamist movement. The dynamics of the Arab Spring hint at a rupture of these configurations in state-society relations. This issue of *Middle East – Topics & Arguments* will contribute to an understanding of this rupture.

Concomitantly at a second level, the issue's focus offers an opportunity to revisit the contemporary understanding of the middle class in academic theorization. Since the beginning of social sciences, the concept of *middle class* has been interpreted in myriad ways (López and Weinstein 1).

Since materialist theorization by Marx and Engels, the middle class was rather conceptualized as a “mediating class in the Aristotelian sense” between the capitalist class and the proletariat (Glassman 105). The middle class—or “petty bourgeoisie”—was expected to merge eventually into the proletariat, due to its financial weakness vis-à-vis the capitalists (Heiman, Freeman, and Liechty 10).

Going beyond the concept of the middle class as a mere “mediating class,” scholars have defined the middle class through positivist economic criteria such as a certain income, a certain consumption rate or certain professions. However, Pierre Bourdieu has prominently pointed out that classes should not be defined by just one criterion, such as occupation. Bourdieu mentions other features that are also associated with social classes, including gender, age, and ethnicity; and the availability of social, economic, cultural, and symbolic capital. He concludes that it is not the sum of these features that defines a class, but rather the “structure of relations between all the pertinent properties” (Bourdieu 100). Others have followed him in asserting that both material framework and cultural practices are constitutive for modern middle classes (Heiman, Freeman, and Liechty 8-9). Interdependencies between these material and cul-

tural aspects of *middle class* are another topical matter of research.

Even though profession is no sufficient *analytical* criterion for the concept of *middle class*, authors still point to professional groups when *describing* middle classes. As indicated, the middle class is not homogeneous. The middle class Marx and Engels introduced was composed of small businesses, farmers, and artisans; nowadays we also find bureaucratic and technocratic staff such as government officials, managers, and educational personnel among the middle class. Taking into account these transformations in the configuration of the middle class, its more recent segments are often referred to as a *new middle class* (Heiman, Freeman, and Liechty 10). However, this *new middle class* is not limited to certain professions, but includes members of traditional occupations—"old middle class professions"—and the unemployed (S. Cohen, *Searching* 91, 95). What is considered more important to analytically grasp the *new middle class* are its members' own practices and discourses, in order to understand how middle classes are signified (López and Weinstein 19). The *new middle class* is characterized as well by nonmaterial demands which have begun to be articulated in postindustrial settings, questioning the contemporary societal relevance of class in a tradi-

tional sense. Contrarily, traditional "class struggle," before emergence of a *new middle class*, involved a labor movement made up of class-conscious activists. The class dimension is much less visible in *new social movements*—i.e. movements fighting for the environment, for peace, or for women's rights—whose members "do not see themselves in terms of a socioeconomic class" (J. Cohen 667). But this does not imply that the "new" segment of the middle class has retreated from social struggles altogether: Even though it refuses to *act* as a class, it is the *new middle class* that builds the basis of post-material *new social movements*—that is, an overwhelming majority of new social movement activists belong to the new middle class (J. Cohen 667; Offe 831-32; Inglehart).

Even beyond its participation in *new social movements*, the middle class's relevance for social and political change remains a topic of debate. With regard to the MENA region, it has been argued that the *new middle class* was hardly mobilizable because "it lacks the heroes and the experience of mass positive change" (S. Cohen, *Searching* 109). On the other hand, as already mentioned, observers have noticed great middle class participation in the Arab revolts, and Islamist movements have long recruited their members from among the middle class.

In this context, we follow López and Weinstein (10) in questioning the view conceiving of Western modernity and its entailing generation of a particular middle class as normative model, while considering middle classes in other world regions as non-original projects. Instead, we aim at understanding *middle class* in the MENA region as a non-exceptional concept and practice, reflecting also global patterns of contemporary societies, while keeping in mind historical specificities of the Middle East.

Notably, the *middle class* is largely defined in a negative way: that is, not by telling us what the middle class is, but rather by telling us what it is not. In contrast, this issue of *Middle East - Topics & Arguments* seeks to provide more precise definitions. Therefore, we deem it essential to critically consider the concept of *middle class*. One aim is to reflect on the emergence and formation of the middle class; another is to reflect on the term itself. Moreover, this issue aims at discussing how the term has already been used in Middle Eastern studies. These approaches are meant to shed light on the term's complexity, and its analytical and normative connotation.

Even though Arab middle classes are—due to their visibility in the Arab revolts—a frequent matter of public dis-

course, the *category* has rarely been addressed in scholarly discourse. Therefore, in this issue of *Middle East – Topics & Arguments*, we intend to combine analytical examinations of the concept *middle class* with empirical studies about Middle Eastern middle classes, both as actors and as objects. This purpose rests on the observation that the term *middle class* has come to the center of a number of recent academic debates about the region, many of which focus on the middle classes' role in the Arab Spring (Ouaissa, "Blockierte Mittelschichten"; Maher; Traboulsi). By considering the latter question (in Challand's and Ouaissa's contributions to the "anti/thesis" section) along with various other matters, this issue of *Middle East – Topics & Arguments* aims at providing a more comprehensive perspective on the region's middle classes. The issue examines cases from several Arab countries and links actors labeled as "middle class" to a range of practices including charity, education, and political protest.

It is important to note that the term's appropriateness in relation to nonindustrial countries including the MENA region is disputed. Some scholars, including Dieter Neubert in this issue, argue in a general sense that other categories of social structuring are better suited to draw an appropriately nuanced picture. Some

point to competing dimensions of social structuring in the region, including religion and tribal affiliation. This underlines the necessity of differentiating between segments of the middle class. However, as current scholarly and journalistic debates show, the term nevertheless features prominently. *Middle East – Topics & Arguments* is thus dedicating an entire issue to it, in order to foster a more informed and analytically sound debate.

The papers collected in this issue reflect the controversies outlined above and focus in particular on sociological questions. Both conceptual and empirical questions are covered throughout.

The first section of the issue, entitled "anti/thesis," is dedicated to debating controversial questions. Here, Benoît **Challand** and Rachid **Ouaissa** contribute short opinionated papers on the question: "Has the Middle Class Been a Motor of the Arab Spring?" Challand rather negates the question. He argues that the constellation of actors in the uprisings of 2011 was too complex to be reduced to the middle class. Also, he reminds us of instances where middle class segments had a regime-stabilizing effect, or followed undemocratic agendas. In contrast, Ouaissa underlines a crucial role for the middle class in the Arab Spring. His twist is to understand the middle class not as a driving

force *per se*, but as the central group of supporters for a political force. Consequently, he conceptualizes competition between political blocs as a fight for the support of the middle class.

In the "meta" section of this issue, which features trans-regional theoretical contributions, Dieter **Neubert** asks, "What is 'Middle Class'? In Search of an Appropriate Concept." The paper examines the current state of research with a special emphasis on the Global South. Neubert juxtaposes socioeconomic approaches to an analysis of middle class with lifestyle-oriented approaches. He points to the fact that respective approaches build on theoretical concepts which differ tremendously and result in myriad sub-sections within a not-so-coherent global middle class. Consequently, even though *middle class* is a ubiquitous concept in political and scholarly discourse, he challenges the concept altogether and suggests to rather adapt the notion of *milieu*.

The analytical term *milieu* and its link to *class* are also reflected in the "close up" section. In her paper "Pierre Bourdieu: Transformation Societies and the Middle Class," Eva **Barlösius** paints a portrait of the important sociologist, whose concepts of *class* and *milieu* are abundantly present in research on social differentiation. Barlösius describes Bourdieu's development of

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theories across his own life trajectory. She argues that development of his most important concepts was inextricably linked to his experiences in Algeria. It was with relation to both Algeria and France that he elaborated on the painful incoherence of *class* and *habitus* which can occur during times of social transformation.

Bourdieu's thinking on social stratification provides a basis for Sina **Birkholz's** paper, "Struggles of Distinction: Young Women Constructing Their Class Identity in Egypt's Americanized Milieu" Building on interviews with female students of the prestigious private American University of Cairo, she examines practices of positioning the self within society. In this social context, belonging to the middle class is first of all a matter of discursive distinction. It constitutes a crucial component of social identity, which seems to form curiously irrespective of economic status.

In his contribution "Public Education: A Route into Lebanon's Middle Class in the 1960s and Early 1970s," Youssef **Zbib** also addresses educational institutions. He shows how the expansion of public schooling increased demand for teachers, and consequently led to growth of a professional middle class.

Shana **Cohen**, in her study on "The Politics of Social Action in Morocco," examines professional practices of social

sector employees and the impacts of these practices on the broader structure of society. Doctors and teachers are engaged in social action, shaping decisions on how to distribute public goods, thus interacting with recipients from lower classes. Cohen argues that these professional practices are no longer guided by identification as "middle class," but by the capacity to circumvent institutional rules. From this perspective, the social work in question has a very political quality.

Collectively, the papers resonate with recurrent points of contention. All authors assert that the term *middle class* represents an ever-present, yet under-specified concept. Several authors proceed to suggesting refinement. Some articles discuss the possibility of dividing the *middle class* into two parts, one of which is closer to the upper and the other closer to the lower class. Thus, Ouaisa refers to Paul Amar's distinction between a "business-oriented" and a "frustrated" middle class, while Birkholz cites her interview partners as discerning an "upper middle class" and a "lower middle class." Birkholz and Neubert even depart from the strict concept of class, in calls for employing concepts of *milieu* rather than *class*. Another recurrent theme is the role of education in the formation and practices of the middle class. Three papers touch on education, but

from different angles. Education is looked at both from the perspective of students and the perspective of teachers. It is analyzed as an arena for middle class participation for teachers (Cohen), as a means of milieu reproduction for students (Birkholz), and as a tool of social upward mobility for teachers (Zbib). From all these perspectives, authors agree that education is crucial for the formation and definition of *middle class*—but that its actual impact seems manifold, depending on context. A third theme addressed in several articles is the role of the middle class in political and social transformation. The role of the middle class in the Arab Spring is the topic of Challand's and Ouaisa's contributions. In addition, the matter is brought up in the papers of Zbib and Cohen. Cohen frames distribution practices of doctors and teachers as instances of middle class participation that take place not only at the level of open political contestation, but also at the level of everyday practices.³ Finally, Zbib's results imply that teachers, whom he counts as belonging to the middle class, are the object rather than subject of societal transformation.

As the empirical studies in this issue have shown, the term *middle class* is so significant for actors on the ground that they even use the term to refer to themselves. However, notwithstanding this

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ubiquitous descriptive use, the conceptualization of *middle class* leaves us with a number of open questions.

How can we make sense of the widespread use of "middle class" as a self-referential label? Informants and interview partners cited in this issue's articles seem to rarely refer to themselves as upper or lower class. Both middle class members and politicians use the term in a decidedly positive way (Heiman, Freeman, and Liechty 7, 17-19). Technically, they could just as well have chosen identities based on milieu, lifestyle, tribe, et cetera. Therefore, while being "in the middle" seems desirable, as outlined by Birkholz, it would be still interesting to explore the matter of why people choose to refer to themselves in terms of *class*.

Then, the category of *class* seems to be oversimplified. If we follow the argument that the notion of *class*, and in particular *middle class*, need refinement, how can an analytical alternative be found? Is *milieu*, a concept defended by several authors in this issue, the ideal solution?

Another remaining challenge is: How to delineate the middle class from other classes or from other categories of social structuring? In particular, relations *between* different classes in the Middle East are understudied. In this issue, vertical relations between classes are assessed from

rather different angles: They are analyzed with relation to solidarity (Cohen), in the framework of clientelism, and from the perspective of elite legitimization (Ouaisa). However, the agency of upper and lower classes in these vertical relations remains to be assessed.

Moreover, how do cross-class family ties impact the formation and the relation of classes? As middle classes have grown tremendously over past decades, many members of the middle class are children of the lower class.⁴ Thus, we can expect strong personal relations transcending class borders. These family ties and their impact on class relations and class delineations are further issues that deserve attention.

This issue does not provide answers to these questions, but rather emphasizes the need to continue the discussion. We hope they inspire further exploration.

Notes

¹ Erik O. Wright's remark refers to the long-lasting neglect of the middle class' significance in capitalist societies by Marxist theory.

² Neoliberalism is "not an established theory, rather a widely used phrase in both scientific and non-scientific discourse on economic liberalization since the 1980s and its purported political and social consequences" (Neugebauer). For the scope of this editorial, we understand "neoliberalism" as the avoidance of "government regulation, exorbitant public spending, and high tariff barriers to international trade" (Steger and Roy 19) resulting in individual practices mentioned above.

³ The argument of the political relevance of everyday practices is reminiscent of Asef Bayat's theory of "non-movements."

⁴ We thank Ivesa Lübben for generously sharing this observation and her insights on social mobility within the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood with us.

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