The Minds of the Middle Class

LEWIS COREY

IS THERE a middle-class mind? There is, in the sense of general ideas. But within the formal acceptance and unity of those ideas are separate minds, determined by different class-economic groupings and interests. The general ideas may find a bewildering and conflicting variety of concrete forms of expression. It is the separate minds of the middle class that are decisive.

People who speak of the "mind" of the middle class stress the general ideas of the class. But most of those ideas are held by the great majority of Americans still under traditional influence. The "classless" ideal is especially emphasized: Americans are not class-conscious, there are no classes and the class struggle is a myth created by the Marxist imagination: hence fundamental social change must come from "classless" action and "national unity." Yet the people who preach those ideas contradict themselves: they speak of a classless America while insisting that there *is* a middle class (or classes) in between labor and capital which refuses allegiance to either. And they are, moreover, contradicted by American history and the economic set-up of today.

American consciousness has been strongly influenced by the classless ideal. But is the classless approach to American history productive of real understanding? Historians are increasingly, if in a mechanical and limited fashion, applying the class-approach to our history. The Founding Fathers were keenly aware of the existence of classes and class struggles, and they formulated policy accordingly. Was the American Revolution classless? It was a struggle of the colonial bourgeoisie against the British ruling-class, and the struggle was marked by conflicts among the colonial classes: upper and lower middle-class, farmers and artisans. Shays' Rebellion was a class revolt of small farmers against the dominant bourgeoisie. Jacksonian democracy rallied the Western farmers against the industrial, commercial and financial bourgeoisie. The Civil War was a class struggle of the Southern slaveholding class and the Northern bourgeoisie and Western farmers. Populism was an agrarian class-movement, partly supported by the workers and lower middle class in the towns. Unionism meant the emergence of labor as a class, and unions and strikes are a manifestation of class struggle.

It was in the name of classless democracy that the middle class waged some of the sharpest class struggles in American history. In spite of its classless mind, the middle class gave its own peculiar class twist to the general bourgeois ideals of liberty, equality and democracy, interpreting them in terms of widespread ownership of small productive property as independent means of livelihood.

The middle class, the independent small farmers and independent small enterprisers in the towns dominated the America of the 1820's. But the growth of industry converted the farmers into a constantly smaller proportion of the population, with the majority of them eventually becoming propertiless tenants and farm laborers. And industry itself was increasingly absorbed within the control of large-scale corporate enterprise. These developments were aggressively resisted by the middle class of small independent enterprisers, but resistance was overwhelmed by the onsweep of monopoly capitalism.

Under the impact of these economic changes the mind of the middle class began to change. It began to modify its ideals of economic and political individualism. It demanded limitation of free competition to help the small enterpriser and an increase of state power to realize the same end. It accepted state capitalism and imperialism. And, in addition, the mind of the middle class was split asunder by a change in the social-economic composition of the class. The dwindling remnants of small enterprisers clung to small property and its ideals, against monopoly, while an increasing majority of the middle class, the multiplying groups of salaried employes and professionals, had no economic stake in those ideals and in the struggle against monopoly. Separate minds began to develop and to clash.

Monopoly capitalism made the aspiration to ownership increasingly unrealizable and converted the majority of the American people into propertiless dependents on the property of a small minority: today, not much more than 15 percent of all persons gainfully occupied secure their livelihood wholly or mainly from the ownership of productive property. And monopoly capitalism has finally stratified classes (see table). Nearly three-fifths of the gainfully occupied are in the working class of wage-workers. The farmers are a small minority and half of them are propertiless. Only a small proportion of the middle class is composed of enterprisers, of businessmen and independent professionals; the great majority is composed of salaried employes, including salaried professionals.

Class	*Number*	*Per-cent*	*Number*	*Per-cent*
Wage-Workers*.....	5,600,000	44.8	30,250,000	59.3
Farmers†	4,500,000	36.0	7,400,000	14.5
Middle Class**.....	2,300,000	18.4	13,000,000	25.5
Salaried	600,000	4.8	10,300,000	20.2
Enterprisers	1,700,000	13.6	2,700,000	5.3
Big Bourgeoisie	100,000	0.8	350,000	0.7

* Including hired farm laborers and salespeople in stores.

† Including laborers working on home farms.

** Middle class as usually and broadly defined, including all lower-salaried employes and professionals who are economically part of the working class.

Source: Lewis Corey, *The Crisis of the Middle Class.*

There is still, in the sense of general ideas, a middle-class mind. But the concrete forces underlying those ideas create at least three "minds" in the middle class. There is the "mind" of the surviving independent enterprisers: they are, because of their relation to production, dominated by the idea of restoring, or at least preserving, the ownership of small productive property. There is the "mind" of the upper layers of salaried employes, mainly managerial: they are dependent on monopoly capitalism and accept and defend all its relations. And there is the "mind" of the masses of lower-salaried employes and professionals: it is dominated, within the limits of the old middle-class ideals, by their propertiless, dependent condition, their job consciousness and the performance of functional services.

The masses of lower-salaried employes and professionals are not economically part of the middle class, although they may think so because of tradition. They own no productive property, they must sell their labor power on the job (as much as the wage-worker) in order to live, and their earnings are at the proletarian level; the final destruction, by the depression of the 1930's, of their employment security and privileges has completely revealed that the masses of lower-salaried employes and professionals are a new proletariat. The old ideological lumber in their minds must be thrown out, for it was used to build a house in which they no longer live. As part of the working class, lower-salaried employes and professionals must form unions, engage in collective bargaining and in strikes, become one with the labor movement. The middle-class "mind," and there are "radicals" who accept this, deplores unionism and strikes; our answer is to broaden unionism and strikes to include lower-salaried employes and professionals, for that means the growing of an economic backbone. Alone, in the struggle to improve conditions on the job, the masses of lower-salaried employes and professionals are practically helpless; within the labor movement they can be a mighty power.

Destruction of the old middle-class America and transformation of the middle class itself are results of the change from the old economic individualism to the new economic collectivism. Industry today is dominated by collective forms of economic activity: individual enterprise is an anachronism, while all its social relations still prevail. Monopoly grows more and more powerful, the state performs more and more economic tasks to prevent the collapse of decaying capitalism. Collectivism is identified with the high productivity of industry, with its capacity to produce abundance, an abundance that threatens to strangle capitalism and must be "planfully" limited to protect capitalist profit: which means that capitalism has

reached its objective economic limits. At the same time the objective limits of capitalism are apparent from another angle: collectivism is the economic basis of socialism, of collective ownership of industry and collective appropriation of the fruits of industry.

A crisis is created in the minds of the middle class by the capitalist and socialist aspects of collectivism. Those minds may cling to an older ideal of individualism, but individualism now represents merely the freedom of the monopoly bourgeoisie and its state to crush the economic and cultural individualism of the masses of the people. All economic changes and class struggles become articulate in the minds of people, in the realm of social consciousness. What is happening to the minds of the middle class?

The "mind" of the old middle class of independent enterprisers is opposed to collectivism, capitalist or socialist. But collectivism and the crushing of small enterprise are incontrovertible facts. Hence the "mind" of the old middle class, as it clings to property, thinks in terms of compromise and survival, moves toward state capitalism and fascism. That "mind" sheds all its old progressive ideals and becomes wholly reactionary.

The "mind" of the upper layers of salaried employes, mainly managerial, accepts capitalist collectivism but categorically rejects socialism. The ideals of the old middle class were never very real to the new middle class, for they did not correspond to the hierarchical and disciplinary relations of monopoly capitalism. This class moves easily toward fascism and its totalitarian state of privilege and caste erected on the relations of monopoly capitalism.

But observe: as independent enterprisers and upper managerial employes move toward fascism, they repudiate the old ideals of the middle class. For fascism is the negation of liberty, equality and democracy: they are rejected as against "the laws of nature." This particular middle-class mind becomes a cesspool of the most reactionary ideas, passions and prejudices. It is the direct opposite of the revolutionary mind of the early middle class: a complete transformation.

The "mind" of the masses of lower-salaried employes and professionals is forced to accept capitalist collectivism and it is wholly congenial to socialism. Not only because they are exploited by capitalism, not only because their economic interests identify them with the working class and socialism, but because they are functional groups and their minds are functional minds. The clerical worker, the technician, the professional: they perform constructive craft functions and their minds are shaped accordingly. But those functions, created by capitalism, are limited and degraded by capitalism, especially in the epoch of decline and decay. The functions are liberated by socialism.

Within the class approach, Communism makes a functional appeal to the middle class. It appeals to the functional minds in the class against the exploiting minds. Communism wages war upon the reactionary exploiting traits in the middle class and accepts the progressive functional traits: precisely as the new socialist society destroys the one and magnifies the other. For the unity of manual and mental workers is, in addition to class unity, a unity of performers of useful functional services animated by the sense of workmanship which capitalism degrades and socialism liberates.

People who speak of the "mind" of the middle class forget the diversity of minds within the class, the changes in the form of expression of their ideals, and the clash of those minds in terms of the attitude toward fundamental social change. They say: we must win over the middle class with the ideals it has. But which ideals? The middle class is rent asunder by antagonistic economic interests and the resulting antagonism of ideals. That was largely the approach of the old revisionist socialism, which met its doom in Germany: the approach of reformism and gradualism, which forgot the coming of socialism depends upon the revolutionary struggle for power. It is an approach that under appropriate conditions, may become fascism or prepare the way for fascism.

No social revolution is possible without revolutionary consciousness. There are many minds in the middle class: some must be rejected, others transformed by revolutionary consciousness. That is the answer to fascism, and the capitalist decline and decay out of which it arises. That prepares the unity of the working class of manual and mental workers in the common struggle for liberation.

And what happens to the minds of the middle class after the Communist conquest of power? Socialism liberates all that is progressive and worth retaining in the minds and activity of the middle class, as all its useful functional groups are absorbed in the community of free workers. The antagonism within the minds of the middle class is destroyed: the antagonism between their constructive and destructive elements, the functional and the exploiting. The classless ideal becomes a reality, and liberty and equality are realized in higher forms. Socialism multiplies the technical, professional and cultural services now performed by middle-class functional groups. The middle-class minds cease being middle class: in the human civilization that is socialism, they become human and universal, moving onward toward man's increasing mastery of the world and of himself.



Gardner Rea

"I want to tell you all how my new integration in Buchmanism cured me of biting my fingernails."