

Why We Campaign to ‘Save the Middle Class’ and Shouldn’t

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“By the late 1990s,” the organizer Jane McAlevey recalled, “I sat through numerous sessions where well-known national pollsters instructed labor leaders to replace the word working class with middle class.” Soon many labor leaders needed little reminding. Nevertheless, McAlevey’s point that the language of “saving the middle class” gained traction through electoral politics stands and her mention of the 90s nails the periodization. Earlier electoral appeals to the middle class had worked locally, mostly in the context of right-wing anti-tax and anti-integration initiatives, but it was the Bill Clinton victories during the 90s that made those appeals national and bipartisan. His pollster, Stanley Greenberg, famously made “middle class dreams” the key to progressive electioneering. The understanding of race and of class in political debates and among social movements has suffered for it.

The logic for such emphases can seem compelling and few have picked a fight with appeals to the middle class. The case for such a focus originally centered on how middle class anger, anxiety, and decline had delivered many formerly Democratic voters into the ranks of Reaganism. The decline certainly occurred. Middle-class hours of work skyrocketed and incomes stagnated. If we define the middle class as those making between 2/3 and twice the median income, as some economists do, its share of national income declined from 61% in 1970 to 50% in 2015, with the 90s marking a midpoint of the descent.

The three decades of emphasizing the salvation of the middle class included years when the approach could claim to be new and exciting and now have stretched long enough to seem merely inevitable. In 2012, candidates Barack Obama and Mitt Romney shared not only the belief that winning the middle class determined electoral success, but also a definition of that class. For both campaigns anyone below \$250,000 in annual income counted as middle class. That included 96% of the population. Thus it was something of a truism that whoever won that demographic would prevail in the election. In this election cycle, Trump will campaign, one supposes, on his allegedly “middle class” tax cuts. Biden swears proudly that everyone calls him “Middle Class Joe,” though reporters

have been unable to find those who do. His main challenger, Bernie Sanders, ran in 2016 with the book/campaign manifesto *The Speech: On Corporate Greed and the Decline of Our Middle Class*. Three Elizabeth Warren books include “middle class” in either the title or subtitle.

For all we hear about “wasted” Green votes and the dangers of radicals not voting, those seeing themselves as on the left overwhelmingly end up supporting Democrats who promise to save the middle class over Republicans promising just the same. Again, there are reasons. In the coming election Trump looms as the main one. Holding out for a pro-working-class campaign can seem outmoded and utopian. Some assume that Middle Class Joe connotes man-of-the-people commitments, as is certainly the hope of marketers. Others note that big, though declining, numbers of workers identify as middle class.

Some like to hear the word class without or without middle in front of it. Sprinklings of “and working families” satisfy us. The term “middle class”—inflated to near universality— carries sufficient vagueness to seem harmless and has animated hopes that the 96% courted by Obama and Romney might magically become the 99% Occupy sought to unite. No substantial bloc of potential voters can feel left out. The great U.S. scholar of the middle class, C. Wright Mills, doubted 70 years ago that mobilizations of its members could ever be easy, finding not really a class but an agglomeration, one “contradictory in material interest” and even “dissimilar in ideological illusion.” But its very amorphousness now makes rhetorical appeals to the middle class the business of both major parties.

Four liabilities of sloganeering regarding “saving the middle class”

To step away from such a firm consensus wanting to save the middle class cannot be easy, especially since there is so much misery from which to save those identifying as such. My new book, *The Sinking Middle Class: A Political History* announces that misery in its title and consolidates and updates the voluminous literature showing how the middle class is shrinking, falling, and failing. Nonetheless it argues that even those who support political campaigns fixed on saving the middle class should remain wary of that phrase. Middle-class people certainly need help. If we use the Romney/Obama yardstick, all poor and almost all working class people are “middle class.” But among those more traditionally seen as middle class by virtue of their education, income, wealth, and home ownership, there is also plenty of hurt, anxiety, debt, addiction, hunger, homelessness, and alienation. Four liabilities of sloganeering regarding “saving the middle class” deserve attention here: its participation in untruths about the U.S. as an exceptional and egalitarian nation; its sidelining and obscuring of questions of race, class, and poverty; its origination and continuing role as a rightward-moving political strategy; and its glossing over of the fact that middle-class life is often experienced as miserable and impossible by those who cling to that status.

When myth-makers talk about the U.S. as an exceptional middle-class nation they often offer the poet Walt Whitman’s 1858 praise holding that “The most valuable class in any community is the middle class.” Less noted is the fact that Whitman knew that “middle class” remained so unfamiliar to U.S. readers that he immediately had to go on to provide a definition. The term rarely appeared in print in the nineteenth-century U.S. and, when it did, often referred to objects of curiosity in European societies. The U.S. was hardly a “middle-class society” in terms of its self-description. In 1911 the U.S.-based *International Socialist Review* featured a long, didactic article titled “Which Class Is Your Class?” It did not even bother to mention the middle class as a snare into which workers might fall in naming their class positions. The steep increases in the term’s usage occurred with the crisis of capitalism in the Great Depression. Then came the greatest spike, during the Cold War, when “middle class” was part of anti-Communist arguments emphasizing the American standard of life and absence of class conflict in the U.S.

It might be objected, of course, that whatever the words used, the U.S. was a nation with an uncommonly big and prosperous middle class, one that imparted values making the nation. In both the nineteenth century and in the modern U.S., the groups sociologists have come to name as “middle class” bulked large. But they were completely different groups—family farmers and shopkeepers in the earlier period and white-collar and sales workers from the 1930s forward—with different values and social experiences. As Mills wrote, “The nineteenth century farmer and businessman were stalwart individuals—their own men.” The white-collar worker was “always somebody’s man.” To participate in middle-class nationalism places us within all sorts of masculinist, settler and Cold War fantasies. It leads straight to the cult of the entrepreneur that disfigures current politics.

Nor should we imagine today’s U.S. as a nation comparatively generous to those in the middle. If measured as a mean, U.S. average wealth leads that of all other large developed nations because it is so buoyed by the holdings of the 1%. But if we consider median wealth—half above and half below—the U.S. languishes in the middle of the pack, trailing France, Italy, the United Kingdom, Spain, Germany, the Netherlands and many others.

Doing U.S. capitalism’s dream work regarding nation and class in order to make saving the middle class a patriotic duty might not matter if the impact on political life were less dire. The liabilities are both structural and the result of planning by elites. With regard to the former, we might begin with words from the British historian E. P. Thompson, who held that class develops in relationships. “We cannot have love without lovers, nor deference without squires and laborers,” he held, nor a working class without workers and capitalists. What then of the middle class? Who is their other? Those in the middle can look up or down to find an adversary, or see themselves as perpetually ground between others. When political parties agree that the thriving of those at the top is key to a sound economy, saving the middle class channels complaints toward the supposed government largesse towards unionized workers, the poor, and especially the racialized poor. The long radical tradition of wariness regarding political forces cultivating middle-class support has been painfully aware of this tendency to direct anger downward.

The aggrandizement, in terms of sympathetic ears not policy outcomes, of middle-class interests also coincides with the excising of the poor from public discourse. The Center on Applied Research at Georgetown University’s 2013 study compared language on social class used by the ten presidents before Trump in public statements and official communications. Lyndon Johnson spoke of poverty in 84% of such materials. He used middle class just 1% of the time. No president from late 1963 until early 1981 used middle class in more than 3% of such communications. Obama used “middle class” in over half of his statements on class, doubling the percentage of Clinton, the runner-up in using that language. Obama occupied last place in references to the “poor” and to “poverty” at 26%. Similarly, “middle class” proves an especially poor lens for viewing race and wealth. In 2013, the white family at the exact statistical middle of the white U.S. social population held wealth just above \$95,000. The median Black household wealth reached just over \$11,000.

The centering of “saving the middle class” in presidential politics not only left open the possibility of direction of anger and misunderstanding towards the racialized poor, but encouraged it. Here the central figure was Greenberg, the most famous of the Democratic pollsters McAlevee would have had in mind. Paid in the 80s to figure out leakage of votes from ordinary whites from the party’s candidates, Greenberg used focus group polls in Macomb County, Michigan. That almost all-white suburban Detroit county, a stronghold of auto-worker unionism, had voted solidly Democratic until the early 1960s, but then fled to support George Wallace and Ronald Reagan. Greenberg documented what many would have intuited: that race mattered hugely in this switch of allegiances. Focus groups took place in all-white settings, bringing together property-owners and suburbanites outside of their more integrated workplaces and unions. Greenberg reported some responsiveness of

those polled on class issues, but an overwhelming hatred for Black Detroit. Crucially, he defined Macomb County as the quintessential U.S. middle-class place, though at times—from the 80s till now—claiming that he was also teaching how to win the votes of a “white working class.” One of those polled told the original Macomb study that not being Black was what made a person middle class.

In the 1992 campaign, Bill Clinton employed Greenberg in his against-all-odds victory, running the first national campaign successfully highlighting the “hard-working middle class” in its appeals. At a high-water mark of Jesse Jackson’s insurgent Rainbow Coalition, Clinton and Greenberg argued that recapturing some of the Reagan Democrats made Macomb County the bellwether for ending a period during which Republicans had held the White House for 20 of the preceding 24 years. With scant willingness to offer much that was pro-union or pro-fair trade to workers, it made particular sense to regard the Macomb County voters as middle class, with their whiteness assumed without even having to be specified. Catering to what they were said to want, helped to give us the Effective Death Penalty Act, half-hearted defenses of affirmative action, an end to “welfare as we know it,” and the 1994 Crime Bill. The last of these, as Biden said in boasting of authoring it, showed that Democrats could support “60 new death penalties,” “100,000 cops,” and “125,000 new state prison cells.” Segregated, the county nevertheless came to seem the key to Democratic successes as the party moved right.

Since 1992, both parties have focused on Macomb County in their calculations. Trump’s brew of tax cuts and white nationalism carried it handily in 2016. For the center-right of the Democratic Party, the function of the county has remained largely pedagogical. What it has taught is that moving in social justice directions courts defeat, that white workers can expect sympathetic attention to their worst impulses but not to their union and economic demands. These are the political dangers of embarking on saving the middle class.

Finally, any attempt to save the middle class suffers from the fact that those who claim membership in it—including many working-class people who at least situationally still do so—are often themselves miserable. The radical tradition, which has produced the most penetrating writing on the middle class from Siegfried Kracauer, to C.Wright Mills, to Barbara Ehrenreich, to Erik Olin Wright, has followed Marx in emphasizing that downward mobility focuses the fears and politics of the middle class. But at its best, especially in the early writings of the Frankfurt School, the left has also realized that “middle class” describes a plight and not simply a perch, an insight also very much apprehended by mainstream cultural critics until far into the Cold War. Not only in falling, but in everyday experience while getting by, the organization man, the salaried masses, the so-called blue collar middle class, and the professional managerial class, have appeared as singularly unable to feel and think.

Saddled with middlebrow cultural tastes and trapped in constant spirals of overwork, compensatory consumption, and debt, the middle class became, Marxists argued, the grist for authoritarian politics. Appeals to the middle class fit most comfortably in service of reactionary movements. “Capitalism needs a human being who has never yet existed,” Terry Eagleton wrote, “one who is prudently restrained in the office and wildly anarchic in the shopping mall.” It first produced such humans among those called “middle class.” That layer was united materially by the ability to acquire debt through personal and mortgage credit, by overwork (as many were exempt from overtime provisions in federal labor law), and by the need to engage in what the sociologist Reinhard Bendix called “personality salesmanship” to get ahead (or survive) in lower management, sales, and clerical positions.

For Mills, the middle class carried especially the burden of impossible contradictions, fruitlessly trying to create through their purchases “holiday selves” that poorly substituted for all they had lost

in seeing their personalities as well as their labor closely managed by employers. Seventy years after Mills, levels of debt, hours of work, and the spread of the mandate to perform happiness on the job are so much more taxing as to make the 1950s seem in retrospect something of a golden age. And yet we are drawn into campaigns to save people who urgently need—and often know that they need—social transformations instead.