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The Middle Classes and Politics in Contemporary France: A Bibliographic Introduction*

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The 'middle classes' are at the centre of today's political debates. Jean Royer's candidacy in the 1974 presidential election was aimed at them, 'the heart of France' (cf. Bellaiche *et al.*, 1975). Valéry Giscard d'Estaing appealed to them at the beginning of his term of office, praising in *Démocratie Française* 'the great central group' destined to lead France towards 'the advanced liberal democratic society' (69). Just before the 1978 legislative elections, several middle-class movements sprang up, sponsored by Giscardiens and Gaullists hoping to prevent a Left victory.¹ At the same time the Communist Party was trying to align, if not senior business managers, then at least the 'intermediate salaried strata' alongside the working class in the *Union du Peuple de France* (77, 71), while the Socialist Party was urging them to join its *Front de classe* (57, 76). Among the innumerable books and articles that have been written about the middle classes in France, we have selected only a few major works in order to review the political choices of the social categories that supposedly belong to these classes.

These categories vary somewhat according to the time period under review, as well as from author to author. The notion of an intermediary class between the rich and the poor, between the powerful and the oppressed, is not new, as witnessed by the often quoted passage from Aristotle (1962, I, 301): 'In all States without exception, there exist three classes of citizens: one consists of the very rich, another of the very poor, and the third is in between the other two.' In post-revolutionary France, under the pen of someone like Guizot or Tocqueville, the term 'middle' class meant the bourgeoisie, an intermediary class between the aristocracy and the common people. As an industrial proletariat developed and the bourgeoisie came to power, 'the term used in the plural (the middle classes) came to designate the group which was under the bourgeoisie, but above the common people' (Baudelot *et al.*, 1974, 29). Before

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the Second World War, authors as different as François Simiand, Maurice Halbwachs, and Henri Mougins (2) agreed that small shopkeepers and artisans, employees, 'average' civil servants, and certain professional groups should be grouped in this category (Aron, 1939, 99). In spite of their differences, these varied social strata have in common work which is essentially non-manual and a certain economic independence, either because of a small patrimony (craftsmen, shopkeepers) or because of their job stability and security (upper-level employees, civil servants). In addition, they have acquired some higher level of education and share the same hopes: to escape from the working-class condition and to climb the social ladder through work, will, temperance and thrift – the same virtues which were described some twenty years apart by two Catholic theorists of the middle classes, André Desqueyrat (10) and Gaston Lecordier (101). For these two writers the working-class man who has these virtues already belongs to the middle classes.

Recent works on social classes in France, of a Marxist persuasion, prefer the term 'small bourgeoisie'. Nicos Poulantzas (19) defines this group by the fact that it does not belong to either of the two conflicting classes in the capitalist production system; the authors of 'The petty bourgeoisie in France' (3) by its economic base, a transfer of surplus value (*rétrocession de plus-value*); and Pierre Bourdieu (4, 5) by its pattern of social mobility, that of a 'transitional' class between the proletariat, its 'past', and the bourgeoisie, its 'future'. But no matter what their differences, all these authors underline the division within this group between a petty salaried bourgeoisie, or 'new small bourgeoisie' (19, 5), rapidly increasing since the Second World War (cf. Thevenot, 1977), and a petty independently employed bourgeoisie (craftsmen and shopkeepers) which is decreasing in numbers. Previously, the prototype of the middle classes was the small-business owner; today it is the 'executive' (*cadre*). Luc Boltanski has analysed the origin of this concept and its political implications (27). Up until 1946 it does not appear in official statistics, literature or law. The category as such emerged in the 1930s in connection with the middle-class movements of the period and the ideology of the 'third road' between capitalism and collectivism: the latter sprang mainly from two sources, social Catholicism and corporatism. The small-business owners and upper-level employees, united in the same middle class, and the nation's 'healthy' element, were to have the role of arbitrating between the mass of workers on the one side, and on the other the 'plutocratic oligarchy', essentially 'stateless' (*apatride*) and composed of 'aliens' (*métèque*). The experience of the Popular Front speeded the movement along, with these groups feeling that they bore the cost of the alliance between big business and the working class. Organizations for the defence of the middle classes and trade unions for engineers and executives were established at the same time, based on the working-class model, but opposed to it. It was then that the word *cadre* was created to designate engineers and upper-level employees. It was to be sanctioned by the Vichy Government. After the war the word can be seen in official statistics, and the 'rise' of the executives became the main element of the debate about the middle classes. Dressed in the colours of modernity and technology, these 'new middle classes' were to carry with them the hopes of the future, in contrast to the traditional middle classes, the small businessmen, condemned to disappear by the evolution of capitalism. Pierre Bleton's book, *Les Hommes des Temps Qui Viennent* (26), marks this change. From the Right to the Left a whole new series of concepts arose to redefine the executives: new ruling class (37), technostucture (42), new intellectuals (29), new working class

(24, 48, 54, 55). Luc Boltanski's article, 'Les systèmes de représentations d'un groupe social: les cadres' (28), and the introduction to the volume by Gérard Grunberg and René Mouriaux, *Univers Politique des Cadres* (86) provide a good review of this literature, which is much too abundant to be discussed here.

The cleavage between independent and salaried middle classes is not only demographic, but also political, and it emerged as early as the Third Republic. Historians of the Radical Party (Berstein, 1980; Nordman, 1974) confirm the fact that the party took root in the middle classes. Small-business owners, employees and civil servants shared an ideal made up of an attachment to the Republic, to secular values, and to small ownership as a way of liberating the working class. However, as shown in the studies on small enterprises done under the guidance of Philippe Vigier (especially those by Jeanne Gaillard and Philippe Nord), as early as 1890–1900 part of the independently employed began to lean towards the Right (Boulangist, and later Nationalist). The birth of an organized proletariat, the rise of the co-operative movement, and the spread of a Marxist Socialism loosened the links between small shopkeepers and their working-class clientele. And the first welfare laws turned them against their own employees and against state intervention, which under the impulse of the Radicals themselves was becoming stronger (cf. Vigier and Haupt, 1981, especially Nord, 1981; Reberlioux, 1981; also Gaillard, 1982). The salaried middle classes, especially those in the public sector – teachers and civil servants – evolved in the opposite direction, joining the Socialist Party (SFIO) and trade union federation (CGT), where they formed one of the strongest elements. This occurred to such an extent that in the 1930s the majority of authors agreed that they no longer belonged to the 'middle classes', since they had the 'wrong frame of mind' (10). This shift is obvious in Antoine Prost's (1977) analysis of veterans' movements. Shopkeepers, professional people and upper-level employees can be found together in the Union Nationale des Combattants, which was close to the *Ligues*, most notably the Croix de Feu, while teachers and lower-level civil servants joined the Union Fédérale. The crisis of 1929 made obvious the divergent interests of the different elements of the middle classes. The income and purchasing power of the independently employed middle classes suffered the most severely (Sauvy, 1967, II). The Popular Front, the wave of occupation of factories, increases in salaries and in the social insurance contributions which accompanied them, all made their dissatisfaction grow and caused their final break with the Left (Dupeux, 1959).

During the Fourth Republic the development of public opinion polls allows us to define more precisely the percentage of the middle classes within the electorates of the different parties. The best source is still the work done under the direction of Maurice Duverger (85). George Lavau's contribution emphasizes the absence of specific political representation of the middle classes and the scattering of their votes among the various parties. However, the salaried middle classes voted more often for the Socialists (SFIO) and Christian Democrats (MRP), while the independently employed middle classes voted more for the Radicals and the Right. In the mid-1950s Poujadism symbolized a right-wing extremist revolt of the independently employed middle classes: Stanley Hoffman (99) and Seymour M. Lipset (103) have analysed its causes, and Dominique Borne (94) its 'deterioration'. Subsequently, the 'Gaullist phenomenon' studied by Jean Charlot (83) united the majority of the middle classes under one banner.

The outline of a new evolution can be seen since the May 1968 crisis, President de

Gaule's resignation in 1969, and the rebirth of the Socialist Party (Epinay convention of 1971) followed by the signature of the Left's *Programme Commun* in 1972. Two important surveys carried out ten years apart give some measure of this evolution. The first, by Guy Michelat and Michel Simon (90), is a collation of the surveys done by IFOP around the time of the 1967 legislative elections. The second is a survey conducted just after the 1978 legislative elections by a team of researchers at the Centre d'Etude de la Vie Politique Française Contemporaine (87). The latter confirms the ties of the petty independently employed to the Right – two-thirds of them voted for the Right in 1978 as in 1967 – and of civil servants and teachers to the Left. It also reveals the sharp turn to the Left that has been taken by the *cadres*, especially the younger generations, within the ten-year period. As demonstrated by Gérard Grunberg and Etienne Schweisguth, the Left has progressed by 22 points within the strata of the salaried middle classes under 40 years of age. Within the Left it is the Socialist Party which has benefited the most from their votes, and François Mitterand owes his victory in the 1981 presidential election to them (88). This phenomenon is connected to the young age of these categories, their particularly high level of education, and their ideological evolution, as well as to a decrease in religious practice and an inclination towards hedonist and anti-authority values of 'cultural liberalism' (87). On the other hand, small-business owners show a marked moral strictness which is often repressive, praising work, savings and authority (4, 5).

Even the modes of action of the independently employed middle classes differ from those of the salaried middle classes. At the call of Pierre Poujade yesterday and Gérard Nicoud today, small-business owners willingly give in to the temptation of direct, if not violent, action (107, 106, 108). They represent a mobilization potential against the state which cannot be ignored, and an efficient pressure group, as Suzanne Berger has shown in one of the rare articles (92) devoted to the organization of the traditional middle classes. At the same time, a growing proportion of employees and executives within large industrial plants and the civil service serve an apprenticeship in union activities and strikes (111, 112, 114). Within these same categories, new means of political intervention have developed on subjects such as the status of women, ecology, or local power. These 'new' social movements have been analysed in detail by Alain Touraine and the Centre d'Etude des Mouvements Sociaux.² Their problematique ties together the decline of the historical role played by the working class and the appearance of 'new social actors' external to traditional political forces. These new actors belong principally to the new petty 'bourgeoisie'. Several of these – the associative movement, the ecology movement, urban struggles – have been studied in detail (82, 91).

The question remains whether the trend of the 'new' middle classes towards the Left will persist. The economic policy of the Socialists since their arrival in power in 1981 directly affects the *cadres*. It is not out of the question that some of them will change sides and that once again organizations and movements of the 'middle classes' will flourish, calling for the old and new petty bourgeoisie to forget their differences and unite in order to eject the Left from power.

NOTES

1 Alongside the rebirth of the Comité National de Liaison et d'Action des Classes Moyennes (1947), we can add Jean Henninot's Syndicat National des Classes Moyennes (1975), Jean-Pierre Prouteau's

Centre National de Coopération Interprofessionnelle (1976), and the formation in 1977 of the Groupes Initiative et Responsabilité, bringing together Michel Debatisse (Fédération Nationale des Syndicats d'Exploitants Agricoles), Léon Gingembre (Confédération Générale des Petites et Moyennes Entreprises), Jacques Monier (Confédération Syndicale des Médecins Français), Francis Combe (Association Permanente des Chambres de Métiers), and Ivan Charpentier (Confédération Générale des Cadres).

- 2 For a synthesis of the research done on this subject, see Boy and Mayer 1980, especially sections 2.3, 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3, which are devoted to the renewal of associational life and social movements. These sections review the principal articles and reference works which could not be mentioned here because of lack of space.

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