

Introduction

Are You Middle Class?

I am middle class. My parents are both teachers. They invested in shares when the government privatised our state industries. They own the home I grew up in. I attended a suburban state comprehensive school. We holidayed regularly in Europe. I went to University. I have been covered by a private medical plan. I am going to be a barrister. I think of myself as being middle class.

That satisfies me that I am middle class. But who are the middle classes? In his paean *The Decline and Fall of the Middle Class and how it can Fight Back*,¹ Patrick Hutber states that this question has never received a satisfactory answer; he contends that 'the mere lack of a definition has, in a strange way, damaged the middle classes in the past. It is much easier to portray them as a snobbish, selfish minority if one carefully avoids the necessity of asking who they are.'²

Why not simply ask people? Why not ask, 'are you middle class?' In 1976, Hutber's concern with such surveys was that social aspiration meant that results were distorted. He thought that there were fewer people in the country who were actually middle class than the number who viewed themselves as such.³ My concern in 2005 is that there are more. An 'inverse snobbery' is at play in Britain, whereby people that would by most objective standards be considered middle class think of themselves as working class. 'In the last major survey of the issue, two-thirds of all Britons announced that they

[1] Patrick Hutber, *The Decline and Fall of The Middle Class, and How it Can Fight Back* London, 1976.

[2] Ibid p. 16. I acknowledge that there is no definitive homogenous group that is 'middle class' and that there is great diversity amongst those that are broadly (and recognisably) 'middle class.' The pedantic phrase 'middle classes' could be used but, following Hutber's example, I shall prefer the simpler 'middle class'.

[3] Ibid p. 21.

consider themselves to be working class; 55 per cent of social groups ABC1 think that they are working class.⁴ In both Hutber's time and mine, asking individuals to volunteer a position on their status is — whilst interesting for other reasons — not conducive to determining it.

Having discussed various potential standards as measuring tools of class — education, manner of speech, income, occupation; and having dismissed each one, Hutber goes on to settle for *motivation* as his key distinguishing quality — using the word to describe a set of 'virtues, aspirations and attitudes'. This presents difficulties, as it is my contention that that it is this very motivation that has been given up by the middle classes. I believe that these qualities have been largely (and sometimes consciously) abandoned, but that they are in some ways still visible. He believes that being middle class is ultimately 'a state of mind'⁵ — but I believe that the state of mind he envisages is a state of mind now consciously shed, disavowed by many in society who would traditionally have been held to be middle class.

One of Hutber's main theses is that the individuals within the middle class distinguish themselves from the class below them by their general willingness to rely on their own endeavours — rather than those of the state — to support them and determine their life's path: proof of his supposition, he suggests, is manifested in the traditional middle class tendency to save for the future, foregoing immediate pleasure for future security and greater pleasure. I believe that this is no longer the case, and that increasingly our middle class looks to the state for guidance in living in a way once seen only amongst our lower classes, which were at least in part compelled so to do by their financial state.

This confusion reflects Judith Brett's conclusion: that discussion of 'the middle class' is difficult because of 'the failure to resolve whether the term middle class is ... part of a schema of social classification Marxist or otherwise, or whether it is a term of self-description. Of course it is and can be both, but it is important in using it to know which is which.'⁶ Brett was interested in the latter: in 'the middle class' as a term 'people use to describe themselves:' more particularly, as a 'projected moral community whose members are

[4] John Lanchester 'The rise of the angry young chav' p. 23 *The Daily Telegraph* 30th October 2004.

[5] Hutber p. 27.

[6] Judith Brett *Australian Liberals and the Moral Middle Class: from Alfred Deakin to John Howard* (Cambridge, 2003) p. 7.

identified by their possession of particular moral qualities'.⁷ I am interested in the way in which these two templates of the middle class once neatly fitted on top of one another in Britain, but now do not.

I will look at the middle class through the former definition: I wish to discuss a category of individuals whose boundaries are determined by general, rule of thumb criteria such as a particular level of income, non-manual occupation and home ownership — the 'I know them when I see them' middle class: broadly speaking, these were once individuals that in effect were also in the Brett *moral* definition of middle class, being people upon whom one could traditionally depend to defend, in their behaviour and in their attitudes, established values and moral standards, but now cannot.

Brett, like Hutber, believes that the middle class 'is not a class defined by its members' economic role, but a class of individuals whose membership of the middle class is the result of their individual attributes and moral qualities'.⁸ I wish this were the case, but, in the United Kingdom at least, I do not believe it is, as individuals opt out of the grouping both consciously and by behaviour: given this perspective, discussing the middle class in any way other than as a group identified objectively from 'above', on an abstract, objective basis, would be meaningless.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid p. 9.