

The Middling Sorts: Explorations in the History of the Middle Class. Edited by Burton J. Bledstein and Robert D. Johnston. *New York: Routledge, 2001. 384 pp. Cloth, \$85.00; paper, \$23.95. ISBN: cloth 0-415-92641-6; paper 0-415-92642-4.*

Reviewed by Scott Miltenberger

Nearly fifty years ago, the distinguished British historian G. D. H. Cole observed in exasperation that “[t]he concept of the middle class is exceedingly elusive, by whatever route one approaches it” (G. D. H. Cole, *Studies in Class Structure*, 1955). While Cole was speaking of the British middle class, his observation applies equally to America. Indeed, since the 1970s, many scholars have invoked Cole in their attempts to uncover the “elusive” American middle class. In this, Burton J. Bledstein and Robert D. Johnston’s edited collection, *The Middling Sorts: Explorations in the History of the Middle Class*, is no exception; where it is different is in its commitment to find the middle class not by one particular route but by many.

This collection features work by both established and young scholars—all of whom, as Bledstein declares in his introduction, seek “to begin sorting out the middling sorts, to begin thinking about the middle class in fresh idioms” (p. 17). *The Middling Sorts* is divided into seven, roughly chronological, sections that examine the middle class from the late-eighteenth century through the end of the twentieth. Bledstein and Johnston furnish the introduction and conclusion, respectively, as well as editors’ introductions to each of the sections. Following Bledstein’s introduction, Sections One, Two, and Three—with essays by Joyce Appleby, Bruce Laurie, Elizabeth Alice White, James Marten, Debby Applegate, Edward James Kilsdonk, and Andrew Chamberlin Rieser—trace the political, social, and cultural changes in America from the American Revolution to the end of the nineteenth century that contributed to the creation of a “middle class.” Appleby ponders the largely intellectual and social effects of the Revolution, while Laurie examines how mechanics and craftsmen in the early nineteenth century navigated the vicissitudes of a growing, free-market economy. White and Marten both consider the role of the marketplace in the mid- to late nineteenth century: specifically, White examines charitable women’s “fancywork,” while Marten explores the moral lessons to

be found in children's books. Applegate, Kilsdonk, and Rieser investigate the role of religion and spirituality, with Applegate focusing on Henry Ward Beecher's national celebrity, Kilsdonk on nineteenth-century middle-class church music, and Rieser on the Chautauqua movement at the turn of the century.

In Sections Four and Five, essays from Andrea Volpe, Marina Moskowitz, Andrew Wender Cohen, Clark Davis, and Jeffrey M. Hornstein move the study of the middle class into the twentieth century. Volpe and Moskowitz address the material representations of middle-class life: Volpe investigates *cartes de visite* portrait photography, and Moskowitz, the proliferation of such distinctively "middle-class" manufactured goods as bathroom fixtures and silverware in hotels, railroad cars, restaurants, and department stores. Cohen, Davis, and Hornstein all challenge C. Wright Mills's classic portrayal of the lonely, alienated, twentieth-century white-collar male worker, with Cohen exploring the "grittiness" of the lower middle class in pre-World War II Chicago, Davis, white-collar masculinity in early-twentieth-century corporate Los Angeles, and Hornstein, twentieth-century male and female "Realtors."

In the final sections of the collection, Adam Green, Theresa Mah, Sylvie Murray, Sven Beckert, and Robert Johnston explore the further complexities of middle-class identity in the twentieth century. Green, Mah, and Murray consider specifically the issue of race for the twentieth-century middle class. Green examines *Intercollegian Wonder Books* from the 1920s, a series of almanacs devoted to African American history and culture, and finds—contrary to E. Franklin Frazier's analysis—an activist and egalitarian African American middle class. Mah explores how racial exclusion in suburban San Francisco effectively shut out minorities from middle-class life. Murray, by contrast, reveals that middle-class community activism in Queens, New York, in the 1940s and 1950s led to a kind of New Deal liberalism rather than racial exclusion. In a historiographical essay, Beckert urges American historians to follow their European colleagues in examining the "lower middle class" as an independent group that has made its own impact on American political, social, and cultural life. Johnston then concludes the volume by calling upon future historians not only to recognize "the many ways in which the multitude of middle-class citizens participated in the making of the American

political order” but also to treat the middle class “with the respect they deserve,” a respect not accorded by previous historians (pp. 303, 306).

Reading *The Middling Sorts*, one would be hard pressed not to appreciate Johnston’s concluding statements. One, however, may be equally hard pressed to agree with his characterization of the work of Paul Johnson, Mary Ryan, and Karen Halttunen, among others, as historically condescending toward the middle class. These three scholars have sought to do what the contributors to this volume now seek: an understanding of the historical experiences of this complex social group. However limited their analyses may appear in retrospect, the mere fact that many of the contributors to this collection build upon and even surpass the work of Johnson, Ryan, and Halttunen is a testament to how important the contributions of an earlier generation have been toward advancing our appreciation of the American middle class.

Bledstein, Johnston, and their individual contributors nevertheless have fashioned a truly stimulating piece of work. Indeed, diversity of opinion is the chief virtue of this collection, reflecting the energy that all of these scholars bring to the study of the American middle class. Each historian is attuned to the myriad ways—economically, socially, culturally, and politically—in which this social group has constituted and defined itself in the past. *The Middling Sorts* is thus a “must read” for business, social, cultural, and political historians of the middle class, a work that suggests future directions for the study of this most “elusive” group of Americans.

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