Nicola Bishop. *Lower-Middle-Class Nation: The White-Collar Worker in British Popular Culture.* London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. Illustrations. 256 pp. $115.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-350-06435-5.

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White Collar in Britain

In ***Lower-Middle-Class Nation: The White-Collar Worker in British Popular Culture***, the author, Nicola Bishop, tracks down cultural representations of the lower middle class from the mid-nineteenth to the twenty-first century. Her main focus, as the title suggests, is on British popular culture, although it is worth noting that, at times, she makes interesting references to and comparisons with the US context; at other times, she refers to the "Western everyday" (p. 33). What is not evident in the title is that, for Bishop, the representational embodiment of the lower middle class is the clerk. In the author's own words, she tries to "disentangle a series of tropes and characteristics that have been historically associated with the white-collar clerk while becoming more widely intertwined with popular stereotypes of the lower middle class" (p. 185).

Cultural representations, including those of "the clerk," are often expressions of stereotypes, however. Bishop fully realizes this, and, therefore, she takes considerable effort to provide lively descriptions of a wider context: the real circumstances and the transformation (like mechanization) of office work, which had been elevated and embedded into the personality of the clerk in the period she describes. Nevertheless, I think these observations could be extended—even if the omission is by no means a failing of the book—for instance, by specifying various occupations in the contemporary service economy in which "the office" is at the center, as it is certainly surprising how little cultural representations have changed since the mid-nineteenth century. Bishop's own observation is that even in the twenty-first century the office is identified as the main, if not the only, locus of a sedentary lifestyle and the health problems stemming from it, whereas what one does after working hours and the role of that activity in overall well-being are ignored. Importantly, she notes that "these sorts of concerns about office work began in the nineteenth century and have reoccurred at various points since" (p. 49).

Throughout the book, Bishop analyzes a wide range of sources but mainly looks at novels and sitcoms. The image of the clerk that emerges from them is not only classed but also gendered. It is an image of a specific *male* worker—mundane, boring, numb, pedantic, always punctual, extremely well organized. He is unable to shift his role, unless it is to become a meager author of novels about office life. It is also believed that, for ex-

ample, “mechanization [of office work is] symptomatic of the duties carried out, but it also impressed on the office workers a certain state of mind” (p. 60). This excludes the ability to be creative, to the extent exemplified in the extreme case of Mr. Meggs, a character of P. G. Wodehouse’s short story, “who plans to commit suicide but in a manner that fulfils expectations about rigid and mechanical behaviors of those who work in offices” (p. 61).

One can imagine that there were multiple difficulties Bishop faced in compiling her book. First, she had to trace common themes in popular culture over 150 years. This is a task in which the author has succeeded, showing continuities of the representation of the clerk in the British context, as well as certain divergences from US popular culture. Another daunting task is grasping and conveying the sense of the so-called everyday. After all, this might be anything and everything, and it is considered so obvious that it seems transparent. What follows is that the seemingly “obvious everyday” is unusually arduous to pin down. Bishop deals with these problems brilliantly, and this is reflected in the structure of her book. She divides “the everyday” into various spaces in and through which popular representations of the clerk are created, that is, the office, the desk, the commute, the suburbs, and the home. This systematicity certainly enhances the readability of the book. Furthermore, Bishop was burdened with the task of explaining the humor of British sitcoms. And as E. B. White and K. S. White acutely observed, “humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the purely scientific mind.”[1] Nevertheless, *Lower-Middle-Class Nation* is an exception that proves the rule. It is a great illustration of how to dissect and explain humor without flattening its effect. Needless to say, this makes Bishop’s book an even more pleasant read.

Bishop does not hide her personal attitude on the topic, exemplified in personal experiences and nostalgia related to growing up in a lower-middle-class household. This gives the reader an intimate familiarity with the narrator. Her detailed knowledge of the subject and the passion she pours into the pages make the narration relatable. But perhaps this is a kind of intimacy that leads to some mishaps as well. Bishop makes it obvious that the intended readers of her book are British (and at times, Western) audiences, or more specifically the “British nation.” As she states in the introduction, “I suggest that lower-middle-class cultural values have become central to our national vision more widely, arguing that while there are economic, social and political aspects of the petite bourgeoisie that are not, perhaps, ubiquitous amongst British society, there are a series of cultural frameworks for self-identification that align with British, and indeed Western, contemporary life more widely” (p. 7). This angle is further emphasized when on the following pages, the author frequently refers to “us,” presupposing the identity she means to inscribe. Perhaps aiming at British readership is not a problem in itself, but it becomes a problem in the *Lower-Middle-Class Nation* because, first of all, neither the intended British reader nor the nation that Bishop describes (which is even indicated in the title) is fully defined. That is, the British nation that creates various cultural representations of the clerk and the “us” Bishop thinks is reading her book are taken for granted and left to the impression of the reader. So even if Bishop gives attention to differently gendered representations (as mentioned above, the clerk is most often male) and to sexually objectified female representations of office workers (such as typists and secretaries), the audiences of her book and the audiences co-producing these representations appear to be homogenous. In other words, it is not clear whether her readers and the audience of the sitcoms and novels she analyzes are differentiated by ethnicities, genders, or religion. Who is “the nation” that perpetuates

the image of the clerk? Did not the identities of the members of the nation and the nation itself undergo any change over the 150 years her book focuses on?

The second aspect relates to the most obvious question in the context of the book about class: how exactly does this "British nation," which constructs the representations of the clerk, get divided into classes? That is, to what extent and in what ways does the image of the clerk as an embodiment of the lower middle class (petite bourgeoisie) connect with other members of their class? After all, Bishop notes that the lower middle class is indeed diversified: "in economic terms," the lower middle class spans "the lowest paid clerks and shop-workers, through middle management and white-collar workers in more elitist institutions, such as banking" (p. 7). Thus, how does "the clerk's identity" translate into the "shop-keeper's identity"? Moreover, it is not clear what the boundaries are between the lower middle class and other classes mentioned in the pages of the book (the middle class and the working class). Bishop defines the relationships between them as a "subtle class war," through which she signals that the lower middle class is relational (p. 13). But especially in this case, it seems crucial to clearly indicate the other classes and the roots of class divisions. Since the author's focus is mostly on identity—although strictly related to, and even derived from occupations—what constitutes a class depends on the features the analyst finds significant to delimit the identities; in other words, class is defined in subjective terms. If we want to grasp the identity of the lower middle class, we need to know what cultural factors and representations are associated with the working class and the middle class. Bishop references these issues, but they are rather fleeting than deep. This is evident particularly in the chapter about suburbs, inhabited by members of all the classes mentioned above: "in class terms, too, the suburbs are ill-defined, offering housing at multiple price levels that are often mixed, a feature that is, in part, responsible for the type of social self-consciousness for which it has become so well known. While this chapter would not argue that suburbia is monolithically lower middle class in composition, cultural attitudes remain fixated on the behaviors, values and characterizations associated with this group" (p. 137). However, to prove that suburban cultural attitudes are asociated with the lower middle class and not with other classes, the author should have elaborated on the comparisons between the lower middle class and other inhabitants of suburbia. Instead, while she obviously delves on lower-middle-class cultural tastes and identities, the cultural identities and tastes of the middle and working classes are rather mechanically derived from their occupations.

This being said, Bishop's book can certainly be seen as an inspiration for other researchers interested in cultural representations of white-collar workers and class divisions in the United Kingdom. The author's passion makes her book enjoyable not only for those who would simply like to learn more about how stereotypes about clerks and their work are constructed and reproduced but also for scholars who are well acquainted with the topic. Last but not least, ***Lower-Middle-Class Nation*** has perhaps an unintended but very important value as an educational tool that counteracts stereotypes and simplifications in contemporary societies.

Note

[1]. E. B. White and K. S. White, "The Preaching Humorist," ***Saturday Review***, October 18, 1941, 16.

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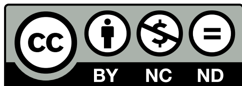

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