

Afterword: The middle class and the capitalist state

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If the capitalist state could choose its ideal citizenry, this citizenry would be middle class. It would be so in the conventional sense of the term: modern and individualist, ambitious and hard-working, and above all, propertied and professional. In other words, it would be invested in the material and human-capital projects that constitute a state's competitiveness in the global economy. In holding up its end of the deal, such citizenry would expect and be entitled to the fruits of the expanding economic pie. Indeed, it could receive those fruits at the same time as surplus would be accumulated and profit pocketed by financiers and employers. The luckiest of these citizens would then be granted enough stability and prosperity to continue working and investing in the projects that enhance national economic growth.

This virtuous cycle is a pillar of the modern liberal state project. And to the extent that the middle classes are those for whom the state system delivers on its promise of stability and prosperity (as the introduction to this collection suggests), it works. Until it stops working. Because, in spite of many years of deliberate efforts and public investments designed to turn the core of their populations into model middle classes, states and their citizens run up against insurmountable obstacles to the realization of this ideal.

The articles in this collection illustrate some of their failures. In South Africa, cadres of black salaried professionals performing their newfound authority and prestige are plagued with the injuries of limited recognition and unrealized potential. Mining and hydrocarbons functionaries in Mozambique fashion their professional selves in relation to an idealized national project, yet as this project erodes, their relationship to the state become unstable. The Aymara bourgeoisie of Bolivia, who are to demonstrate national success while conforming to global standards, balk at the state's efforts to redirect their profits away from their kin and business networks. For women in India, the promise of home-ownership-related autonomy intensifies their responsibilities as home-makers and caregivers. Jordan's attempts to redefine gender roles are undermined by unemployment, discrimination, insufficient childcare, lack of safe and reliable public transportation and a suburbanized built environment catering to male breadwinners. And in Croatia, the

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emergent middle class, interpellated as the educated and investing backbone of the new market society, is squeezed at birth of its income and feels itself the victim of injustices.

Why can states not fully deliver on promises to their middle classes? And why, in turn, do citizens so identified resent the state that favours them above other populations and courts their consent? The answer resides in the subordination of states to capitalism, a system in which growth is predicated on the exploitation of labour power. For all the professional credentials and property acquisitions of so-called middle classes, their income derives primarily from work: they cannot afford to stop working without suffering a substantial decline in living standards. As de facto workers, they are exploited insofar as they receive less value than the value they help produce. And they are dominated insofar as they cannot extract themselves from a system that compels them to work or to seek employment under existing conditions, however demanding, precarious or risky.

If workers were willing to submit passively to this dynamic, according to Simon Clarke (1991), there would be no state. The main role of the capitalist state, he explains, is in preventing workers from recognizing themselves as an exploited class and from organizing on the grounds of their exploitation. The capitalist state does so by sharpening divisions and hierarchies between workers: the very divisions which middle-class ascriptions and ideals of investment and meritocracy are designed to maintain. Capital, then, becomes the necessary agent of a divided population's coordination.

The designation 'middle class' is an expression, in the social identity and self-understanding of workers, of capital's successful insertion of its own interests in the workforce, recast as an investing citizenry whose efforts and acquisitions lead to their advancement. Yet capital's need to exploit labour power contradicts its need also to educate these workers, to sustain family care, and to secure the reproduction of the workforce. The form and content of state policies are the result of an always provisional resolution of this contradiction. But it remains the case that the material reproduction of the workforce is dependent on the expanded reproduction of capitalism.

The only means that states have of maintaining and improving citizens' living conditions is by intensifying their subordination to capital. The result of states' attempts to improve workers' livelihoods while also ratcheting up their exploitation is that one section of the working class is always favoured over others and at their expense. The capitalist state offers relative advantages to those most invested in and advantageous to its economic growth. In so doing, it consolidates cross-cutting alliances between work and capital that undermine worker solidarity.

The articles in this collection shed light on two important means by which states create and exploit divisions between workers while binding their interests to capital, namely professionalism and home-ownership. The capitalist state uses professionalism to translate privileged knowledge and skills into social and economic rewards, granted at the point of employment. It undermines workers' political organizing power, as changes in the occupational structure lead to changes in the constellation of interests attached to it. Alliances previously based on certain shared interests dissolve, while others have to be forged around the new and quickly outdated skills and work conditions of new and quickly outdated occupational groupings (Chibber, 2022).

In organizing the linkages between education and the marketplace, professionalism also performs the ideological function of justifying status inequalities between workers. Under the state's sponsorship of education and qualification systems, the relative privileges associated with the professions divide workers, introducing status differentials, status aspirations, and status mobility among them at all levels of the occupational hierarchy. Rising modern professions serve, thereby, as instruments legitimizing the mature capitalist order. They segment the workforce and predicate advancement on workers' relative investments and attainments (Larson, 2013 [1977]).

The ideological hold of professionalism on self-identified middle classes remains tenuous, however, so long as professional status privileges are expected to translate into economic ones. This translation often misfires in the current neoliberal order, marked by wage stagnation and the suppression of public spending. Private housing allows states to go further than professionalism with their promise of middle-class prosperity, insofar as housing is more widely shared among a broad segment of the population. The ideal of home-ownership and the underwriting of its value encourage many to work harder than they otherwise might in an effort to enhance and protect their incomes and in order to service their debts. In turn, mortgage debt binds the fortunes of households to the global competitiveness of their economies.

Since the 1980s, central banks have strived to maintain bond-holder confidence by disciplining price inflation and wage growth. They repress wages and consumer prices in the service of asset price appreciation, the new motor of global capital accumulation. Rising housing prices, combined with wage stagnation, segment the workforce no less than professionalism does. But they do so differently, namely by intensifying the divide between workers who earn their incomes from work alone, and (nominally middle-class) workers who derive some of their incomes and protections from home-ownership (Adkins et al., 2020).

The insecure and contingent gains of professionalism and home-ownership are at the core of middle-class insecurity. They trap the middle classes in a double bind. At the one end are top-down state-promoted ideals of educational and professional meritocracy as well as a mortgage-fuelled home-ownership democracy. At the other is bottom-up 'boundary work', as workers who are also professionals and home-owners try to protect their relative gains by shutting out strivers and newcomers who threaten the value of their acquisitions. These dynamics are two sides of the same coin: encouraging workers to compete against each other for relative advantages by investing in the human and material capital that the state organizes. By individually and dividedly allying themselves with private and state-mediated (public) capital, workers fuel capital accumulation at their own collective expense.

In sum: since the capitalist state is itself bound to the dynamic of global capitalism, it can only improve the living conditions of its population in a provisional and fragmentary way that necessitates their continued exploitation as workers. States do so most commonly through professionalism and home-ownership. These affordances provide the well-positioned and most heavily invested-in among the national workforce with just enough (indebted) property and credentials for them to envision the security and prosperity that are, in fact, beyond their reach; and to fear the loss of what privileges their

homes and credentials have helped them attain. The capitalist state thereby remakes a population of exploited workers into a citizenry of competing individuals, invested and investing in the resources and institutions that underwrite its economic growth and global competitiveness. It refashions them, in other words, as a restless, fragile, and divided middle class.

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Author Biography

Hadas Weiss is an anthropologist working on social aspects of contemporary capitalism in Germany, Israel and Spain. She is the author of *We Have Never Been Middle Class: How Social Mobility Misleads Us* (Verso, 2019).