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MIDDLE CLASS IN LATIN AMERICA

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TOBIAS BOOS, GREGOR SEIDL

**Rise of the Latin American Middle Class –
or (Statistical) Storm in a Teapot?**

In 2014 the World Bank's President, Jim Yong Kim, announced that Latin America had transformed into a middle class region. His statement was based on a World Bank study which proclaimed that the long-awaited rise of a Latin American middle class was finally happening. For the first time in history, the number of people in Latin America belonging to the middle class had surpassed those living in poverty.

Yet, this kind of announcement is far from being a neutral statistical finding; rather, the emergence of a middle class is called upon as a more general indicator of positive economic developments. Since the closing years of the first decade of the 21st century, there can be noticed a clear surge in economic development studies from the background of international development organisations, which are dedicated to the theme of rising middle classes at a global or regional scale (Ravallion 2010; OECD 2010; Cárdenas et al. 2011; Birdsall 2012; Kapsos/Bourmpoula 2013; Ferreira et al. 2013). They are all centred on the quantitative measurement of numerically growing income groups above from a case-to-case variously defined line of poverty or vulnerability in the global south, which is supposed to justify the portrayal of a new global middle class rising by millions each year. In the context of Latin America specifically, a very extensive report on Latin American middle classes commissioned for the World Bank comes to the conclusion that the number of people who have joined the middle class between 2003 and 2009 has risen drastically from 103 to 152 million, which would imply an increase of 50 per cent (Ferreira et al. 2013: 1). These selected income groups are regularly correlated to several other apparently distinguishing features of middle classes, for instance, certain values, occupations, consumption patterns

or educational careers (for a genealogy of the relation between the middle class and the idea of a golden mean and related values see Adamovsky 2005). In some cases, such analysis is also very tellingly connected to the concern about weakening US consumption and the expectation of a positive global growth impact by boosting middle class consumerism in the peripheries (Kharas 2010: 8).

This discourse of international institutions such as The World Bank coincides with the rise of the so-called progressive governments in Latin America. After the heyday of neoliberalism during the 1990s, Hugo Chavez came to power in Venezuela in 1998. This was followed by the election of Lula da Silva in Brazil (2002), Kirchner in Argentina (2003), Vázquez in Uruguay (2004), Morales in Bolivia (2005), and Correa in Ecuador (2006). The transformation processes pushed forward by these governments varied as much as their respective countries' political traditions. However, what they had in common was their state driven neo-developmental strategy (Bresser-Pereira 2007) as well as a post-neoliberal framing on a discursive level.

At first glance, this strategy was quite successful. Overall tendencies show that during their time in power, the poverty rate was reduced from 43.9 per cent in 2002 to 28.2 per cent in 2014 (the following numbers are taken from CEPALSTAT, 2017). The same accounts for absolute poverty, which decreased from 19.3 per cent to 11.8 per cent during the same period. Although Latin America remains the most unequal region in the world, the Gini Coefficient fell from 0.547 to 0.491 between 2002 and 2014. As CEPAL argues, this was due to the increased disposable national income caused by the resource boom and terms-of-trade gains (ECLAC 2013: 76f). These incomes were spent on public social policies, increasing their share of GDP from 15.4 per cent in 2000 to 20.7 per cent in 2015.

However, in spite of these figures, important structural restraints remained. Dependent integration into the world market as well as the reliance on the extraction and export of natural resources still persisted or were even reinforced (Svampa 2012; Brand/Dietz 2014; Burchardt/Dietz 2014), while, at the same time, hopes for the emergence of a national bourgeoisie which would identify with the (neo-)developmentalist strategy were disappointed (Chibber 2009).

Naturally, these economic developments also had important impacts on Latin America's social structure, as Boris argues in his article in this special issue. He shows, with respect to different Latin American countries, to what extent the middle class grew, in particular until the years 2013/14. Interestingly, the developmental narrative and that of the progressive governments coincides at this point. While the latter was founded on an anti-neoliberal framework, nonetheless, the narrative of the recovery of the middle class or of the creation of a new one also served the progressive governments as international legitimisation of their policies. The case of Brazil is paradigmatic here, as the discourse of the *Nova Classe Média* (Neri 2010) became intrinsically connected with the governmental projects of Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff (see Bartelt 2013).

Although this edition will only focus on middle class formational processes in the last two decades, the middle class discourses in Latin America and the question of their 'novelty' are themselves far from being novelties. Since the 1950s, the constitution and the highly disputed characteristics of a middle class tied to the political and economic model of import substituting industries and interventionist bureaucratic states is an important theme in Latin American sociology (Franco/Hopenhayn 2010: 13ff; Parker 2013: 12f). In the course of the second half of the twentieth century, the expansion and diminishment of these social groups was causally connected to the expansion and contraction of economic cycles. Middle classes, measured by income and type of occupation, are enhanced or depleted in the rhythm of economic upsizing or downsizing, because they depend on the availability of certain types of (non-manual) middle class occupations, which typically increase in times of economic proliferation and enlarged state activities (Franco/Hopenhayn 2010: 8f).

With the shift to neoliberal adjustment in the wake of the debt crisis in the 1980s, the middle class also entered a period of disarray. For Svampa (2000; 2010), the effects of these political and economic changes hit different parts of the middle class differently, thus producing winners and losers (see also Kessler/Virgilio 2008; 2010). Consequently, one could not refer anymore to a homogenous and comprehensive middle class, which might have existed in earlier times, but to fractured social groups, which were torn apart by contradictory tendencies. Since the turn of the millen-

nium however, surveys note a new increase of a Latin American middle class (Franco/Hopenhayn/León 2011). In this sense, as a specific moment of a longterm historical pendular movement, there is a legitimate reason to speak again today heuristically of ‘new’ middle classes in the context of the above-mentioned growth strategies of progressive governments and their records.

What is more, there is also a second aspect to the question of novelty. What is termed ‘new and ‘old’ as regards middle classes also depends on conjunctures of political and discursive struggles. “[P]eople invoked ‘the middle class’ consciously and explicitly as an argument in pursuit of specific goals”, writes Parker (2013: 16). Analytically, hence, it seems more promising to go beyond the idea of clean historical sweeps of middle class formations or images of a tabula rasa of completely new social formations, concentrating instead on real and complex structures and practices of social transformation, where ‘old’ and ‘new’ middle classes, moments of perseveration and moments of disbandment, co-exist and overlap (Heiman/Liechty/Freeman 2012).

This also becomes apparent if we return to recent political developments. After years of soaring growth and expansion of consumption capacities, Latin American’s middle class felt the abrupt economic slowdown from 2011 onwards. The discontent of the ‘old’ middle class, which had profited comparatively little during the years before, and the new social climbers, with their growing aspirations, was unleashed in the protests of 2013 (see Singer 2014; Anderson 2016). With the economic downturn and when important parts of the (new) middle class turned away from the governments, questions of modes of living, ideas of morality and especially the political opinion of the Latin America middle class were placed back on the agenda.

In this issue we want to address some of the following questions: what is really going on in Latin America and the middle class configurations in the region? How have social-structures changed during the last two decades? Do these changes justify the enthusiastic announcements of development organisations? And, is there anything that could justify the use of concepts of the middle class, and if there is, how can we apply these in a critical manner?

While the middle class seems to be on everyone's lips, agreement on its definition is rare. Not only have different theoretical traditions put forward distinct notions, but even within these traditions, the topic of the middle class has been discussed in a highly controversial manner. We do not pretend to give a fully-fledged overview of these debates. Instead we will try to provide a few points of orientation which strike us as most relevant.

Firstly, within the Marxist tradition, this discussion reached its peak in the late 1970s. For example, Nicos Poulantzas proposed the notion of a *New Petty Bourgeoisie*; others, such as Gorz and Mallet, spoke about a *New Working Class*, while others saw a totally new class emerging, as Barbara and John Ehrenreich did with their concept of the *Professional-Managerial Class*. (For an overview of different approaches see, for example, Wacquant 1991; Wright 1985). Wright (1985: 239f) argues that within the Marxist tradition, two different starting points can be discerned. On the one hand, perspectives which start from the economic writings of Marx and, on the other hand, ones which take his political writings as a point of departure. The former defines the middle class based on a structural position, drawing an ever more detailed boundary between different locations within this structure. Wright (1997) himself offers with his concept of *Contradictory Class Locations* the most sophisticated variant of this perspective. The second perspective within a Marxist framework rejects the "boundary question" (Meiksins 1986) as misleading. Instead, proponents argue for a historic-procedural definition of class which is inspired by authors such as E.P. Thompson (2002) and Ellen Meiksins Wood (1995). From this perspective, the making and unmaking of class, that is the formation and reshaping of social forces, comes to the forefront.

The latter is also open for engagement with a second tradition, which departs from a social anthropological perspective often inspired by the oeuvre of Pierre Bourdieu (1984). Recent works examine, for example, habits, consumption patterns, discourses or daily practices which permit the middle class to differentiate and distinguish itself from others (for example López/Weinstein 2012; O'Dougherty 2002; Dávila 2016; Heiman et al. 2012).

The third approach can be assigned to a (neo-)Weberian tradition of class analysis. Market relations are the tenets of this perspective (for an overview see Breen 2005). There is a huge amount of different approaches inscribed in this tradition, which vary strongly regarding the variables (as e.g. income, education, social mobility) they take into account. However, what they seem to have in common is their treatment of these factors as attributes of individuals which define their social position.

Most of the approaches within development studies and the debate surrounding a (global) middle class would classify for the last approach. Income-based approaches in particular are of particular relevance here, and most of the studies mentioned at the beginning of the introduction are informed by this perspective. Here we can distinguish between absolute and relative income-based definitions. While the former define the middle class as those who live on 2US\$ -13US\$ per day for example (Ravallion 2010), the latter draw the line based on the median household income, for instance those who have between 75 per cent and 125 per cent of the medium median income (Birdsall et al. 2000).

Different proposals have been made regarding the best quantifiable cutoff line, which is a persistent point of disagreement between scholars. This, however, is not by accident, as we would argue, but rather points to a theoretical problem which remains unresolved: while the working class and capitalist class are positive, qualitative definitions (the ones who have to sell their labour force; the ones who own the means of production), the middle class is not. Rather it represents a social and spatial metaphor – being in the middle of society. Therefore these approaches also have to rely on arbitrary demarcation lines (e.g. 2US\$-10US\$ per capita or 75 -125 per cent), which they draw as limits between different classes (Adamovsky 2013).

These reservations are not only sustained by accounts which criticise a switch from working class narratives to middle class narratives within scientific debates (Therborn 2012), but also by scholars of regional studies. In the case of Africa, Henning Melber (2013; 2016) points out that developmental reports on the middle class limit their focus to sheer monetary and income aspects, thus lacking “any analytical substance” (Melber 2016: 2). Against the backdrop of persistent rates of poverty and high

inequality between very rich and very poor Africans, there is not much social space left for a middle (class). Furthermore, Melber refutes such developmental literature on global middle classes as “wishful thinking” (ibid: 8; Melber 2013: 115), which only serves to legitimise neoliberal policies of the ‘trickle down’ effect.

A second criticism addresses the typical argument of an inter-relatedness between middle class expansion, economic stability, and democratic maturity, which reveals a striking resemblance to discourses of modernisation theory. Economic studies on global middle classes, e.g. in Easterly (2001) and by the OECD (2010), still hold on to the idea of social processes of ‘catching up’ in the peripheries, in terms of imagined standards of a universal and irreversible model of a transition to modernity (Inkeles 1969; Lerner 1958; Lipset 1959; 1963). In the case of Latin America, this relation is not accidental, as the debate on the middle class was, from its early beginnings, influenced significantly by US and emigrant European social scientists (Franco/Hopenhayn 2010: 14f), who conveyed either US concepts of a broad middle class society, or specifically European experiences with fascism, to Latin American realities.

Opposed to the idea of transferring European or American concepts of class simply to Latin American realities (Quijano 1989), there is a wholly different strand of creative and critical thinking about the problematic of social classes from the perspective of the Latin American peripheries. A central issue in relation to (the model of) a peripheral distinctiveness of Latin American class relations, without walking right into the trap of essentialising these peculiarities, has been the reflection on the interrelation of capitalist and colonial roots of class formation. Class theory, as argued by some representatives of Marxist inspired dependency theory, has to take into account the issue of racist and colonial domination of indigenous and colonised populations. These representatives put forward the concept of “internal colonialism” for this purpose (González Casanova: 2006 [1969]). This argument was later pushed forward more cohesively by decolonial theorists such as Aníbal Quijano, who pointed to the articulation of racist classifications, labour regimes and cultural and epistemic forms of domination within the totality of a globally structured pattern of power, which he named “coloniality” (Quijano 2000; 2014). To bring together materialist concepts of middle class, predominantly devel-

oped in the context of capitalist centres (Poulantzas 1973; Wright 1978; 1997), and those critical currents reflecting Latin American class realities, as mentioned above, is still an important open question, since many – often neglected – aspects of the discussion of Latin American middle classes reside in the tensions located at the line between these two theoretical projects: the tension between urbanity and rurality and the question of whether there are rural middle classes; the tension between imaginings of a homogenous national population and indigenous struggles. Additionally, one should note the tension between projects of modernity and the realities of coloniality, often viewed simply in the light of an Eurocentric and racist notion of ‘backwardness’; the tension between different concepts of democracy, which divides middle class political representation and alternative forms of democracy; the tension between consumerist policies and anti-capitalist and anti-colonial ones; and the tension between a purely economic account of class and an enlarged perspective on complex relations of domination.

With regard to recent social and political transformations in Latin America, we want to address at least some of these tensions and open questions in this special issue. The contributions assembled here deal with aspects of an appropriate theoretical conceptualisation of the middle class as well as with the material, often contradictory social and political realities to which it refers.

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