

NOTE CRITICHE

On the middle class

Auto-anthropology and social class

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Hadas Weiss | *We have never been middle class*, London & New York, Verso, 2019, pp. 176.

Caitlin ZALOOM | *Indebted: How families make college work at any cost*, Princeton & Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2019, pp. 280.

Reading Hadas Weiss's and Caitlin Zaloom's books gave me the opportunity to further reflect on some of the methodological and political features that emerged during the inquiries I undertook as I prepared my *Ai margini del lavoro. Un'antropologia della disoccupazione a Torino* (Capello 2020). I am referring to the potentialities and risks involved in any auto-anthropology envisioned as ethnography at home, as well as to a renewed interest in social class in contemporary anthropology (Carrier, Kalb 2015). These two questions – closely interrelated – represent some of the main strengths of the books under discussion which both aim to construct – almost from scratch – an anthropology of the middle class.

My inquiry among the unemployed was born from an urban anthropology project about Turin – the city where I've been living and working for many years. The choice of unemployment as the main subject was an attempt to surmount some of the difficulties of any urban “ethnographic homework”. My original interest was in the mutation of the city's social and economic scenario – a constant decline ideologically depicted as a simple change – but I was in doubt about the fieldwork. Even for this reason, I chose to focus my ethnographic eye on the adult, working-class unemployed. The latter indeed emerged as the living symbol of contemporary Turin, which is characterised –

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just like them – by a liminal condition of waiting and a lack of identity. The decision to concentrate my fieldwork on the stories and problems of people rejected at the very margins of the world of employment reflects the most common strategy among anthropologists who investigate their own society. Anthropologists tend, in fact, to look at social reality from the margins and from the bottom, offering in this way representations that differ from and oppose the hegemonic discourse. Although the potentialities of such an approach are clear (Malighetti 2012), we can still ask ourselves: since the scholars – due to their cultural, symbolic (and more often than not, economic) capital – don't share the same social environment of their subaltern class interlocutors, can we still talk in this case of auto-anthropology or of ethnography at home? In other words: don't we risk, without the appropriate awareness, substituting the classic cultural difference with social distance? And last but not least, is studying from the bottom and the margins – as fruitful as it is – really the only method at our disposal in critically investigating our own society? Weiss's and Zaloom's volumes also raise some questions about these methodological (and political) issues, showing the potentiality of anthropological research conducted, not among the subaltern, but rather in the "middle" – the potentiality of an anthropology of the middle class and its myths.

However, it is not easy to speak of perspectives from below and in the middle, of subaltern classes and middle classes. With regard to this kind of class definition and analysis, our conceptual limits converge with the complex subjectivities of our interlocutors. My ethnographic subjects, for example, were not prone to think of themselves in terms of class, and when I pushed them, they tended to describe themselves as "middle class" or, in their own terms, as simply "normal people" (Capello 2020). Doing this, they were following a widespread trend, well synthesized by Weiss (2019: 3): "By and large, many more people self-identify as middle class than would be so identified by any other criteria". We can then ask, along with her: why, in late capitalism, does almost everybody tend to see themselves as part of the middle class? And what, exactly, does "middle class" even mean?

Weiss's line of inquiry revolves around that noun, "class", which the comfortable adjective "middle" tends to disguise. The focus on the "middle" and on social mobility conceals the inequalities of power, resources and opportunities of the economic structure that are at the centre of her critical inquiry. This is why the scholar dedicates the first part of her book to a brief but radical analytical reconstruction of capitalism, as a system based on the accumulation of surplus, and of the concept of social class, shown as the main expression of a social hierarchy of constraints and possibilities.

Because of her interest in the structural dimensions of capitalism, Weiss's analysis reminded me of the important book edited by Carrier and Kalb (2015), with whom she shares the project of going beyond an exclusively ethnographic approach to open up a wider – anthropologically minded – theoretical discourse on the contemporary capitalist mode of production. Furthermore, both works testify a renewed interest in anthropology for the social class – as an analytical tool as well as an object of inquiry. Although social inequalities have never disappeared from the anthropological horizon, only in recent years has the issue of class returned to the forefront. At least in part, the reduced interest in class analysis was due to the fact that the idea of social class shifted, since the 1980s, from being an “experience-near” concept to an “experience-distant” one. In political movements and protests, the rebellion against economic dominance and exploitation left room for other political claims and slogans, declined in terms of race, ethnicity, gender or ecology. At the same time, less and less people identified themselves in terms of class. However, although the issue of class subjectivity remains problematic, the long economic global recession begun in 2008 – which has done so much in showing the dark side of capitalism – has in part contributed to a new rise in interest in the concept of class (Kalb 2015). Within this frame of re-emergence, the middle class matters could play a crucial role. If, in fact, subaltern classes experience the inequalities of the economic system directly, within the “normality” of the middle class the contradictions of neoliberal ideology manifest perhaps themselves even more clearly.

This is exactly Weiss's point of departure. The effects of the prolonged global crisis, pervasive job instability, as well as the alarmist discourses about the shrinking or disappearance of the middle classes are all expressions of a simple truth, one that is consistently concealed by dominant representations: the plain fact that “we have never been middle class”, because actually “the middle class does not exist. For all the time we spend talking about it, much of what we say is contradictory” (Weiss 2019: 1). Let's consider, first of all, the difficulty in defining the middle class in itself and establishing who is part of it and who is not. Actually, Weiss notes, there is no sound parameter of classification and, in particular, no criterion working both within advanced economies and in emergent countries. The kind of occupation, qualifications, level of study, income – all appear to be, to a critical eye, imprecise criteria with a strong political connotation. Similarly, self-definition is even less trustworthy, since almost everybody sees themselves as middle class, nowadays a synonym for “normality” in everyday discourse. The idea of middle class is, therefore, rather vaporous;

yet it enjoys enormous popularity, above all among politicians and mainstream economists, who are always ready to praise its virtues and defend its interests. All this stands, in Weiss's opinion, as evidence that an ideological discourse is at work. The middle class is an ideology. What Weiss aims to do, then, is show the meaning and function of this ideology, above all to an "implicated" audience, to a readership already influenced by the middle-class rhetoric.

In this sense, Weiss is proposing true, critical and engaged "auto-anthropology", based on her personal experience, enriched by ethnographic fieldwork in her home-country – Israel – and in Germany. "Auto-anthropology" that speaks to a public identified not in cultural or national terms, but explicitly by class. To an "us", as she states in the Introduction, who could eventually be defined as middle class, due to the level of cultural capital for example – and that for this reason could be easily deluded. Thus, by deconstructing the same idea of middle class, she wants us to reflect on this ideological illusion and its consequences for our political subjectivities. What Weiss demonstrates is, in fact, that the middle class is the effect of a false representation, centred on an individualistic and meritocratic logic, which leads us to believe that our social standing, our economic security and our wellbeing depend only on us, on our personal efforts; the effect of a delusory discourse affirming that social mobility is simply a consequence of our choices and our investments, instead of being determined by unequally distributed opportunities. The dominant discourse represents the middle class as a clearly defined social standing that we can access thanks to our personal qualities and merits. In this way, it conceals the systemic nexus of constraints and opportunities, legitimizing the social and economic hierarchy.

To illustrate the illusory essence of this discourse, Weiss closely examines some of the pillars of middle-class standing – such as private property, "human capital", civic spirit – revealing their incongruence and inconsistencies. At the core of middle-class ideology lies the idea that individual effort, by way of hard work and savvy investments, is a guarantee of social mobility and economic security. This meritocratic discourse depicting sacrifice as the primary bourgeois virtue, however, nowadays falls short with regards to both residential property and higher education. In the era of financial capitalism, property no longer guarantees concrete economic stability: buying a house, for example, can easily become a bad investment, leading to various forms of debt. But above all – putting aside the individual case – the entire debt machine is directed towards the appropriation of surplus by the financial system, in a way that exacerbates the general

economic turbulence. Something similar can be seen in the realm of education and in that of sociability, both reduced by the dominant ideology to “human capital”: a clear instance of reification of people’s lives and relations. Weiss shows that, notwithstanding our efforts, any personal investments in these such distinctive realms in middle-class identity, actually produce more and more anxiety and debt, instead of success and security.

The awareness that the investments which define the middle-class lifestyle are less and less profitable puts into question the rhetoric of mobility, and in this way helps us to acknowledge that, far from being well-off entrepreneurs of themselves, most members of the so-called middle class are in fact exploited and indebted workers, to whom the system concedes mere scraps of wealth and the illusion of self-determination. The function of middle-class ideology is now clear: presenting social inequalities as the effects of our personal choices and actions, it tries to legitimize generalized competition, concealing the structures and contradictions of contemporary capitalism.

Weiss’s auto-anthropology is above all a piece of critical theory, using ethnography mostly as a point of departure for her argumentation; in many ways, Caitlin Zaloom’s book is the perfect complement thereto, offering us an original in-depth ethnographic description of the middle class and its contradictions. Zaloom investigates the middle class by focussing on the huge problem of the rising costs of higher education in the United States and the resulting student and familial debts¹. The ethnography vividly exposes the absurdity of a university system that, having fallen prey to finance and neo-liberal ideology, turned into a source not of social mobility but of insecurity and anxiety for so many families. *Indebted* could then be seen as a development of the author’s previous work: as if, after having studied the world of finance by means of the ethnographic description of the stock exchange system (Zaloom 2006), the anthropologist had felt the need to look at its tangible impact on the lives of American people.

Zaloom has, then, noteworthy experience in the realm of auto-anthropology: of the study of her own society. In her new book, however, the auto-ethnographic dimension is more evident: being a professor at New York University, one of the most prestigious and expensive American universities, and a member of the (upper) middle class, the contradictions

1. An important issue even for the American political debate: one of the main points of Bernie Sanders’s program is the cancellation of students’ debts, as well as free access to state universities and colleges.

she investigates concern her directly. Indeed, as she explains in the Introduction and in the Methodological Appendix, the research project was born out of a personal interest for the predicament of her students, from whose situations the inquiry started before extending to other colleges and universities.

Since the inquiry aimed at understanding the opinions of middle-class families about university and its growing costs, Zaloom's first problem was to find an effective criterion to establish middle-classness. She finally decided to define middle-class every family whose income was above the threshold for receiving grants, but who then required loans and mortgages in order to pay the university fees and taxes. Besides its methodological usefulness, the chosen criterion is indeed interesting because debt – rather than college attendance, for example – is presented as the true sign of contemporary American middle class.

The families Zaloom met are faced with a dilemma. Reporting the words and opinions of many interlocutors, the anthropologist shows how higher education is important for them, for many different reasons. First of all, we find a number of pragmatic motives: university is, above all, a means for social status, since higher education is deemed mandatory for young people to find a good job and a successful career. Furthermore, sending children to college is, in itself, a distinctive badge of middle-class identity. Alongside these kinds of reasons, however, we can also find some more “idealistic” ones: from the point of view of these families, university is indeed an investment, but first and foremost it is an investment in the human and intellectual “potential” of their children. Giving their children the opportunity to cultivate their potential becomes, then, a primary value superseding any economic calculation.

Still, economic and pragmatic calculations are necessary in any case because university and college costs are so exorbitant that middle-class families end up in a real predicament – made up of student loans and family debts – that directly affects their projects and their future. Due to political decisions influenced by a merely economic vision, over the past decades university costs have reached levels considered unbelievable by us Europeans: even in a public state university – without even considering elite private colleges – fees and enrolment costs amount to more or less \$35,000 a year. Zaloom carefully reconstructs the history of the political and ideological changes that led to such a situation: if, following the Second World War and for many decades afterwards the public politics aimed to make higher education – seen as a public benefit because of its positive

effects on society as a whole – accessible to as many people as possible, since the 1980s neoliberalism has completely overtaken the university system, emphasizing its elitist nature. Higher education is now portrayed in the dominant discourse as a private resource, or even as a mere commodity finalised to job and career, and then as an exclusively personal investment. This neoliberal representation of the educational system has led costs to skyrocket, due to the cut in public spending for the university system and the drastic reduction in public funding for students.

All this is the source of a dramatic aporia for middle-class families, who are in a way obliged to balance their ambitions with economic strategies, and to think of their children's potential in terms of human capital to be invested in, with less and less assurance of actual economic gain. Above all, debt – personal and familial – goes against what they deem the main purpose of higher education: personal autonomy. Because of the level of debt incurred, far from becoming autonomous young graduates have more limited options with respect to their career plans and, above all, remain dependent on their families for many years.

Due to neoliberal hegemony higher education, which should be a collective resource for the growth of civic spirit as well as a solid opportunity for the young, has turned into a trap for too many people. This means, for Zaloom, that the influence of finance over university has led to a betrayal of the true democratic values with regards to education and personal freedom.

Even in this regard, then, we can detect some analogies and differences between her inquiry and Weiss's book. Both scholars are engaged in a critical denunciation of the effects of financial capitalism on common people, whose lives are more and more insecure and indebted. However, while Zaloom seems to share the values of her middle-class interlocutors – bemoaning their betrayal by a political system subjected to the neoliberal credo – for Hadas Weiss these same values are in large part ideologically-loaded and contradictory in themselves.

This difference is strictly linked to the political stances of the two authors, leaning towards the anti-capitalist left, in the case of Weiss, and towards the liberal left in the case of Zaloom. I stress this point, because I deem that any auto-anthropology – whatsoever we may mean by the term – should necessarily take a clear political position. Exactly as it should take into account – as we have seen – the class nature of our social system.

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