

*The Global Bourgeoisie: The Rise of the Middle Class in the Age of Empire*. Christof DeJung, David Motadel, and Jürgen Osterhammel, eds. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. 396 pp. \$99.95. Hardcover ISBN: 9780691195834.

The mid-to-late nineteenth century has long been thought of as a belle-epoque of European history, characterized by relative peace, rapid scientific and technological progress, industrialization, and the rise of the bourgeoisie. It was also a period of intensifying economic globalization with revolutionary developments in transport and communications—the steamship, the railway, the telegraph—and important infrastructure projects bringing the world closer together and spreading information with increasing rapidity. Industrial change and intensifying global interconnectedness meant that this was an age of increasing affluence for some, yet for others it was an age of colonization and marked inequality both within and between nations.

*The Global Bourgeoisie: The Rise of the Middle Class in the Age of Empire*, edited by Christof DeJung, David Motadel, and Jürgen Osterhammel, is an ambitious collection of chapters that seeks to understand the rise the middle class/bourgeoisie amidst this transformative era as a global phenomenon. That is, the editors and contributors of the volume are determined not to confine themselves, like many prominent scholars in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did, to an assumption that middle classes were formed only in the industrial (or industrializing) societies of Europe and North America. Instead, as the editors set out in their masterful introduction, the rise of the bourgeoisie is better understood as a result of interactions across national borders and within growing empires as so many of the occupations in which middle classes engaged were predicated on the flow of ideas and capital and the exchange of various commodities, often over great geographical distances. The professional skills and mobility of this class were the basis on which international connections and entanglements, including colonial and semi-colonial trades and administrations, were built, staffed, and maintained. As such, the rise of the middle class is best understood in metropolitan and colonial contexts, with a diverse, multi-ethnic and cosmopolitan membership that included the colonized as well as the colonizer, though imperial hierarchies largely defined their participation.

Excluding the introduction from the editors and an excellent closing essay by Richard Drayton which probes into the relation between European hegemony and class formation across the globe, there are fourteen chapters divided into five thematic parts. In order, they cover: politics and middle-class formation; empire and class; capitalism and class; religion and class; and cases where a middle class failed to emerge. In terms of regional scope there are individual chapters which focus on Iran, the United States, East Africa, India, Britain, Japan, the Ottoman Empire, South America, Russia, and China, as well as others with a more multi-regional thematic approach on topics such as population planning, colonial service professionals, and the interplay between class and race. This wide geographic coverage is a strength of the volume, and it can thus rightly make a claim to provide a global history. But if one must quibble, then a weakness of the volume is that for all the interconnectedness stressed in the introduction, little has been done to tie them together and some of them read as if they were written in isolation from the rest of the work.

Nevertheless, thankfully this is a “splendid isolation,” as it does not detract from the overall quality of any of the individual chapters, all of which could easily be placed on respective national history course reading lists.

Among the individual contributions, those by Marcus Gräsner on the “Great Middle Class” in the United States and Janet Hunter on the rise of an entrepreneurial middle class in Japan are particularly noteworthy. Gräsner traces the emergence of much fabled middle class in the United States from colonial times through to the end of the nineteenth century and does much to dispel myths about its coherence. Instead he highlights several fragmentations including location, race, religion, occupation, and association, and in so doing, provides an excellent critical survey of social class in United States history. Hunter sheds light on the often-overlooked Japanese case which is especially important given that Japanese success in industrialization and empire building was a major challenge to the logic of racial and imperial hierarchies of the time. As a non-western emerging power, Japan’s middle class was formed independently of colonial subjugation though of course Japanese efforts at commercial and imperial expansion involved intense interactions with Euro-American counterparts. Hunter expertly traces the emergence of Japan’s middle class from the late Edo period and dramatic political change that followed the Meiji Restoration through to the 1920s. In doing so, she shows how the effort to maintain autonomy in the face of western imperialism legitimized a hierarchical social structure with an industrial capitalist elite able to dominate the economy which in turn stunted the growth of a middle class in the conventional sense. Nevertheless, over time a recognizable middle class emerged in Japan together with mass consumption even if the interaction between old and new business classes as well as between indigenous traditions and cosmopolitan bourgeoisie values were not resolved until the postwar years.

Overall, the volume succeeds in its aim to provide “the first truly global survey of the history of the bourgeoisie” (3) and it will provide a useful platform from which other established and aspiring global historians can seek to deepen our understanding of class beyond the confines of national and European history. This volume demonstrates the value of a global approach and adds greatly to our understanding of the historical context in which middle class society was formed and how the ideas, values, and efforts of this class strengthened an emerging liberal world order, albeit not without interruption. The volume reflects a renewed interest in social class and history within the wider social sciences since the global economy crashed in 2008, probably best illustrated by the popularity of Thomas Piketty’s research on long-term inequality. As such, the volume can expect a wider readership than would normally be the case for an edited volume of academic papers on a specific theme. It is my opinion that this wider readership would be richly deserved. At the very least it should feature prominently on readings lists for courses in global history, the “long” nineteenth century, and social class.

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