The Myth of Middle-Class Liberalism

By David Motadel

We have long celebrated the ascent of the middle class — from China to the Arab world — as a critical piece in the emergence of open societies and a liberal world order. Scholars and pundits have reassured us that economic liberalization will give rise to powerful middle classes, which will eventually bring about democratic forms of politics. Baked into this argument is the assumption that assertive middle classes are crucial for the triumph of political liberty.

But in the last decade, these hopes have been shattered. The global spread of middle-class society and culture has not resulted in political liberalization. Quite the opposite: The growing middle classes across Africa, Asia and the Middle East seem disinclined to push for democratic reform, while segments of the European and American middle classes, feeling threatened by the rapid socioeconomic transformations of our time, have proven quite open to the appeals of illiberal demagogy. So why did political scientists place so much faith in this social group?

For one thing, the historical record seemed clear — middle classes have often stood at the forefront of the struggle for political freedom. Over the course of the modern period, as the rural and urban middle classes emerged as an increasingly powerful social
group between the aristocracy and the peasants and workers, they began to challenge the powers and privileges of the old, entrenched authoritarian elites, fighting for the protection of private property, freedom of speech, constitutional rights and democratic participation, and the rule of law. Consider the central role of the middle classes in the great bourgeois revolutions of the late 18th and early 19th centuries (mainly in the Atlantic world), of the mid-19th century (mainly in Europe), and the early 20th century (mainly in Asia), all of which sought to limit the powers of monarchs.

With these experiences in mind, 20th-century scholars put forward a robust theory connecting socio-economic structures and forms of political order. “No bourgeois, no democracy,” the sociologist Barrington Moore memorably asserted in his 1966 classic “Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy.” Similar ideas were expressed by the proponents of modernization theory, most famously Seymour Martin Lipset in his influential book “Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics,” published in 1959.

Yet they were all informed by a selective reading of history. A more careful look at the past shows that the middle classes have frequently sided with illiberal forms of government when they feared for their privileges and social stability.

Throughout the 19th century, the golden age of the bourgeoisie, the middle classes in most parts of the world lived in autocracies — among the few exceptions were Britain and the United States — and didn’t always struggle for more political freedom. Anxious about the growing strength of the working classes, segments of the middle classes even welcomed limits on political freedom.
As early as 1842, the German revolutionary poet Heinrich Heine, then exiled in Paris, observed that the politics of the middle classes were “motivated by fear,” as they were all too willing to give up their ideals of liberty to protect their socioeconomic position from the lower classes. This became most obvious in the failed 1848 revolutions, which in many places soon lost the support of the panicking middle classes, terrorized by the fear of plebeian rage and proletarian political participation.

Colonialism, too, revealed the inherent contradictions of the bourgeois middle classes, as colonial racism stood in stark contrast to the claim of universal human equality. “The tensions between the exclusionary practices and universalizing claims of bourgeois culture were crucial to shaping the age of empire," observed the historians Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler.

The 19th-century middle classes also showed little concern over the social and political exclusion of large segments of society — minorities, women, workers. Inequalities — ethnic, gender, social — were part of the middle-class world, in complete contradiction to the universal values of freedom, equality and civility. On the eve of World War I, the European bourgeoisie was caught up in a fervor of nationalism, militarism and racism.

The most extreme historical example, however, is undoubtedly the substantial public support for fascist regimes in the interwar years — which came not only from the lower middle classes but also from significant parts of the upper bourgeoisie. Terrified by the specter of communism, the middle classes across Europe flocked to right-wing strongmen, showing little commitment to the ideals of liberal democracy and parliamentarism. Autocrats like
Mussolini, Franco and Hitler seemed to offer protection for their wealth. Carl Schmitt, Hitler’s notorious legal theorist, claimed that only a strong authoritarian state could guarantee the preservation of the propertied middle class.

Edvard Benes, the Czechoslovak liberal politician, observed in 1940 from his London exile: “The middle classes realized that political democracy, carried to its logical conclusion, could lead to social and economic democracy, and therefore began to see in the authoritarian regimes salvation from a social revolution of the working and peasant classes.”

To be sure, not all parts of the middle classes were so eager. The Nazi takeover, the historian George Mosse once pointed out, used “a double standard” in its policies toward the middle classes, “distinguishing between native and Jewish bourgeoisie,” and “was anti-bourgeois insofar as it was directed against the Jew.” In her 1951 book “Origins of Totalitarianism,” Hannah Arendt noted that “the German bourgeoisie,” which “staked everything on the Hitler movement and aspired to rule with the help of the mob,” in the end only “won a Pyrrhic victory” as “the mob proved quite capable of taking care of politics by itself and liquidated the bourgeoisie along with all other classes and institutions.”

The Cold War middle classes around the world became overall more liberal — yet they still embraced authoritarian state measures if they deemed them in their interest. Across the societies of the West, a hard hand — limitations on freedom of speech and association — against (perceived) communists and their sympathizers was tolerated, even welcomed. In many parts of the postwar Global South, from the Middle East to Latin
America, middle classes prospered in authoritarian regimes and, fearful of social instability, often supported political repression. These aren’t exceptions to a general rule about middle-class politics. The middle classes and political liberalization are less closely connected than we have been made to believe. In fact, we have misunderstood their promise all along.

Middle classes are not a priori engines of political liberalization. They can readily become the promoters of repressive authoritarianism if they fear for the loss of influence and wealth. The history of the middle-class opposition to the principles of universal freedom, equality, and civility can be understood as part of the dark side of modernity, as described by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, the two main figures of the Frankfurt School, in their 1947 classic “Dialectic of Enlightenment.” The middle class has always been Janus-faced. Whether it embraces liberal models of modernity or not depends on the social, economic and political circumstances.

The last years have seen a wide range of publications lamenting the crisis of the middle classes in the West. Consider Ganesh Sitaraman’s 2017 book “The Crisis of the Middle-Class Constitution,” which warns of the collapse of a strong middle class as the “number one threat to American constitutional government” in the United States. Or Christophe Guilluy’s “No Society: The End of the Western Middle Class,” from 2018, which looks at the crumbling middle in France (and beyond). And there’s Daniel Goffart’s “The End of the Middle Class,” from last year, which makes the same point for Germany.
Yet all of these experts operate under the assumption that the middle classes are the bastions of liberal, open societies, and that only their decline could threaten democracy. Sure, the erosion of the middle classes is a problem. But there is another danger which we have not discussed enough — their political illiberalization.

It’s no surprise, then, that right now, growing segments of the middle classes around the world once again turn to illiberal politics. The last decade has seen a wide range of shocks: The Great Recession and the neoliberal excesses of our new Gilded Age, which have led to rising inequalities, have squeezed the middle classes almost everywhere. At the same time, some of the old social center feel threatened by social, economic and political demands of previously marginalized groups — minorities, migrants and the poor.

In their struggle to preserve their socioeconomic position, parts of the middle classes are turning to protest politics, believing that populist strongmen will protect their interests. Establishment and progressive parties need to stop assuming that the middle class will always support them. History says otherwise, and shows how such hubris leads to disaster. The middle classes aren’t lost, but political leaders must now work hard to win back their trust. Ignoring them would be at their own and at our societies’ peril.

David Motadel (@DavidMotadel) is a historian at the London School of Economics and Political Science and co-editor of “The Global Bourgeoisie: The Rise of the Middle Classes in the Age of Empire.”

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Correction: January 22, 2020

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction: An earlier version of this article misspelled the surname of the author of “The Crisis of the Middle-Class Constitution.” He is Ganesh Sitaraman, not Sitarman.

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Editorials, Op-Ed and Letters

If Jeff Bezos Was Hacked, Be Afraid

By Charlie Warzel

If the Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, wants to chat on WhatsApp, politely decline.

That’s the lesson from a series of reports this week based off a forensic examination of Jeff Bezos’ communications with the
crown prince. The investigation — conducted at Mr. Bezos’ request by FTI Consulting — found that his phone had most likely been attacked in 2018 after he received a WhatsApp message from the prince’s personal account. While my colleagues in the Times newsroom have pieced together details of the investigation, there’s still a great deal unknown. And cybersecurity experts have serious questions about FTI’s report, which, according to CyberScoop, “has not impressed the information security community.”

Still, the story seems to have everything: from lighthearted, embarrassingly earnest texts, “divorced guy” memes and world leaders who awkwardly sign their text messages with their full names to the deeply problematic issue of revenge porn and stealing of private nude photos. Though it’s a gilded example of digital theft, there’s something troubling and relatable about it all. Billionaires, they’re just like us!

Or maybe not. Looked at one way, the attack on Mr. Bezos’ phone could be seen as yet more proof of what my colleague Kara Swisher called “the death of privacy.” If the richest man in the world — the man who sells listening devices used in millions of homes and whose servers create the internet’s infrastructure — can be hacked, what hope is there for us mere mortals?

Turns out, there’s some. Yes, your personal privacy and security are constantly under threat. And yes, you should be trying to safeguard against malware, phishing and bulk data collection. But the Bezos attack is an example of extremely targeted surveillance, the potentially expensive and risky kind that is aimed at high-value targets like executives, government officials, celebrities and billionaires. And as it turns out, many of those with the most to lose
are woefully inept at safeguarding their privacy.

Not long after the Bezos news broke this week, I spoke to Christopher Pierson, who founded BlackCloak, a cybersecurity company for high-net-worth and high-profile individuals — executives, celebrities and billionaires. According to Mr. Pierson, few people take their digital lives as seriously as they should.

“The majority of clients we onboard come on in some kind of hacked state,” he told me. “Their computers are compromised or their login credentials are available on dark web. Their home camera systems are accessible to people on internet or their entire home and appliances are vulnerable and viewable by persons remotely.” Mr. Pierson suggests that’s in part because high-value targets choose to focus on physical security over digital and invest in private bodyguards, camera systems and protections like kidnapping insurance.

How bad is it? “We see passwords in little black books on desks by the machines and in files on the computers. We see passwords that are the same everywhere. We absolutely do not see good use of dual factor authentication on email, health care and financial accounts. I’d say we see less than 1 percent of high-net-worth individuals using dual factor.”

Mr. Pierson said BlackCloak has found more than 82 percent of its clients’ current passwords on the dark web when it ran an initial search. “In the case of high-net-worth individuals, the same compromised password is frequently used by 20 to 40 different accounts — some of those are personal, some are in the office.”

What Mr. Pierson describes is low-hanging fruit — the kind of
security flaws that can quickly be fixed with a little knowledge and attention to detail. Even then, he said, it takes time for the true nature of clients’ vulnerability to sink in. “They’re shocked when we give them their password and tell them where we found it, but it doesn’t hit as hard as when we tell them their entire home automation system has been potentially online and viewable for three or five or eight years,” he said.

When it comes to a Bezos-style breach — potentially at the hands of a nation-state’s intelligence service — high-profile targets would most likely be even less prepared. As Mr. Bezos’ lengthy investigation into the 2018 attack shows, it’s difficult to get straight answers even when you have the money and resources to run full forensics.

Of course, it’s not just wealth that turns somebody into a person of interest for hackers. Journalists, government employees, workers at energy companies and utilities could all be targets for someone. Those who work for financial companies, airlines, hospitals, universities, Hollywood studios and tech businesses are all potentially at risk. You can take steps to secure yourself from corporate data collection by using privacy settings on your phone. And to protect yourself from cyberattacks there are helpful guides you can use that have been vetted by security professionals.

For most of us, the attack against Mr. Bezos isn’t the death of privacy, but a reminder of the risks of living a connected life. It should be a moment to think as critically about what you do online as you might in the real world. Invest in a password manager. Turn on dual factor authentication. Be skeptical of any communication that looks out of place.
For the ultrarich and influential, the Bezos hack should be a terrifying revelation. As the former State Department employee and whistle-blower John Napier Tye told me last autumn, “For someone who’s truly a high-value target, there is no way to safely use a digital device.” The stakes are astronomically high. Not just personally, as Mr. Bezos found, but professionally. Company secrets, matters of national security, access to critical infrastructure and the safety of employees could all be compromised by lax security at the top.

The internet has long been thought of as a truly democratic tool, flattening and democratizing the ability to publish and communicate. It’s also the great privacy equalizer. Money can buy a lot of things. But on a dangerous internet full of exploits, flawed code, shady actors and absent-minded humans, total, foolproof security is not one of them.

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