

# The New Middle Classes

# The New Middle Classes

Globalizing Lifestyles, Consumerism  
and Environmental Concern

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*Cover image:* “Bridge Road” in Bangalore, India taken by Hellmuth Lange in September 2006  
“Orchard Road” in Singapore taken by Lars Meier in August 2004  
“Iguatemi Shopping Mall” in Campinas, SP - Brazil taken by Leonardo Freire in January  
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# Preface

With respect to the developing and threshold economies, it is no longer the poor who are the only focus of media attention. Today, the new middle classes are about to take centre stage, too. With their lifestyles and attitudes, the new middle classes are considered to be both the products as well as the promoters of globalization. They are a highly heterogeneous group in socio-economic terms as well as in habits and preferences, including their societal role as consumers and citizens.<sup>1</sup>

The first wave of scholarly and political attention can be traced back to the mid-nineties. The focal point was surprise and unease about indubitable symptoms of consumerism which, until then had been seen as a characteristic of the richest western societies. However, since the nineties, consumerism has run rampant in developing countries too. This has particularly been noted with respect to the emerging middle classes in South East Asia. The “will to consume seemed inexhaustible, and appetites insatiable. This rage to consume [. . .] was both celebrated and feared by political leaders and other social/moral gatekeepers, who began to condemn the process as ‘Westernization’ and even ‘westoxification’” (Chua 2000: xii). Ever since, the debate about the lifestyles of the new middle classes and their role in society has gained momentum.

Today, concern about the ecological impact of these lifestyles has become a second matter of debate, particularly in the media. In terms of *The Los Angeles Times*: “Can the World Afford a Middle Class?” (Feb 8, 2008). But while a lot of data on consumption levels are available which show the problematic environmental impact of increasing private vehicular traffic, expanding meat consumption, rising energy use due to the spread of electronic devices etc., research into the environmental sensitivity of the new middle classes is still in its infancy. In this regard, the popularity of the topic and the finality of the concerns that are being expressed in the media are disproportionate to the empirical knowledge that is currently available. Thus, the new middle classes, regardless of the public attention that they enjoy, are still a relatively unexplored group. This book aims at shedding some more light on this issue. However, the attention that the new middle classes are given in public debate, and particularly in the media, also mirrors the fact that the rise of the issue serves as

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<sup>1</sup> In view of the heterogeneity of the group, we speak here of the new middle classes in the plural.

a catalyst for more general hopes and anxieties. This is especially true for the question of how much globalization results in a comprehensive homogenization in the sense of westernization to the detriment of existing cultural diversity and economic independence. In this context, the topic of the new middle classes and their lifestyles is closely connected to the debate about “modernity” and “modernities”. A second overarching concern is how we can make headway towards a more sustainable future as defined by Agenda 21 of the UNCED Conference in 1992. In this context, the new middle classes, by adopting and expanding resource intensive western lifestyles, are seen as undermining the limited efforts that have been made in the highly industrialized countries so far. Hence, in respect of the debate on both globalization and Agenda 21, the new middle classes form an extensively nested issue.

Understandably, all the topics addressed here have led to highly controversial discussions. Thus, the new middle classes are a highly contested issue, too. This leads to the question as to which conceptual line the authors of the book are following. Considering the multidimensionality of the new middle classes as a topic and the multitude of competing theoretical perspectives and controversies in analytical approaches, the editors did not ask the authors in this volume to follow one common conceptual line. Instead, some of the most important fields of controversy regarding both the size and composition as well as attitudes and behavior of the new middle classes are delineated in the introductory chapter. The subsequent chapters fit in this framework by referring to the related debates from different angles. In their relation to one another the chapters of the volume thus reproduce elements of the diverse concerns and conclusions that characterize the whole debate.

The chapters of Part I advance different positions on globalization, cultural homogenization and diversification and its resulting consequences with respect to the new middle classes. In Parts II and III case studies are presented. Part II comprises studies on different parts of the new middle classes in a variety of countries from China, through Brazil and Israel, to Ecuador. This part aims primarily at giving an idea of the plurality of the new middle classes in terms of levels of consumption and different patterns of social and cultural embeddedness in the wider society of their countries. The focus of part III is India. By focusing on the new middle classes of one single country a broader variety of aspects can be considered. This applies both to different dimensions of lifestyles, including environmental concerns, as well as to the role that the new middle classes are expected to assume by political decision-makers and the government respectively.

Accordingly, environmental attitudes and lifestyles of a sample of sub-groups of the new middle classes are being analyzed as compromises between often contradictory contexts of personal ambitions and preferences, cultural traditions, social norms, socio-economic assets and limitations, and governmental policies.

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## Reference

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# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Who are the New Middle Classes and why are they Given so Much Public Attention?</b> . . . . .	<b>1</b>
	Hellmuth Lange and Lars Meier	
<b>Part I Modernities, Globalization and Consumption</b>		
<b>2</b>	<b>Convergence and Divergence in Societal Modernization: Global trends, Regional Variations, and Some Implications for Sustainability</b> . . . . .	<b>29</b>
	Volker H. Schmidt	
<b>3</b>	<b>Consumerist Lifestyles in the Context of Globalization: Investigating Scenarios of Homogenization, Diversification and Hybridization</b> . . . . .	<b>49</b>
	Katina Kuhn	
<b>4</b>	<b>Who are the Globalizers? The Role of Education and Educational Elites</b> . . . . .	<b>65</b>
	Steffen Mau	
<b>5</b>	<b>Provider Strategies and the Greening of Consumption Practices: Exploring the Role of Companies in Sustainable Consumption</b> . . . . .	<b>81</b>
	G. Spaargaren and C.S.A. (Kris) van Koppen	
<b>6</b>	<b>From Small Objects to Cars: Consumption Expansion in East Asia</b> . . . . .	<b>101</b>
	Beng Huat Chua	
<b>Part II New Middle Classes in China, Brazil, Ecuador and Israel</b>		
<b>7</b>	<b>Rising Capitalism, Emerging Middle-Classes and Environmental Perspectives in China: A Weberian Approach</b> . . . . .	<b>119</b>
	Fritz Reusswig and André Isensee	
<b>8</b>	<b>Globalization of Lifestyle: Golfing in China</b> . . . . .	<b>143</b>
	Yaoqi Zhang, Jinyang Deng, Suman Majumdar and Bin Zheng	

<b>9</b>	<b>Who are the Knowledge Workers of Campinas, SP, Brazil and how do they Live? Local Impacts of Global Trends . . . . .</b>	159
	Leonardo Freire de Mello	
<b>10</b>	<b>Sustainability of a Life Más Cómodo? Agricultural Change, Remaking Families, and the Emerging Indigenous Middle Class in the Ecuadorian Andes . . . . .</b>	177
	Jason Pribilsky	
<b>11</b>	<b>New Middle Class and Environmental Lifestyle in Israel . . . . .</b>	197
	Tally Katz-Gerro	
 <b>Part III New Middle Classes in India</b>		
<b>12</b>	<b>The Political Economy of Lifestyle: Consumption, India’s New Middle Class and State-Led Development . . . . .</b>	219
	Leela Fernandes	
<b>13</b>	<b>“Environmentality” in the Neoliberal City: Attitudes, Governance and Social Justice . . . . .</b>	237
	Emma Mawdsley	
<b>14</b>	<b>India’s ‘New Middle Class’ and the Globalising City: Software Professionals in Bangalore, India . . . . .</b>	253
	Carol Upadhyia	
<b>15</b>	<b>The Changing Food Scenario and the Middle Classes in the Emerging Megacity of Hyderabad, India . . . . .</b>	269
	Christoph Dittrich	
<b>16</b>	<b>Highly Qualified Employees in Bangalore, India: Consumerist Predators? . . . . .</b>	281
	Hellmuth Lange, Lars Meier, and N.S. Anuradha	
<b>Index</b>	<b>. . . . .</b>	299

# List of Figures

4.1	Educational Attainment and Transnational Activities The Figure shows the percentage of yes-responses according to educational level. Respondents still attending school have been categorized according to the envisaged school qualification. The findings are weighted. . . . .	71
4.2	World Maps by Education – <i>Top</i> : High Educational Level; <i>Bottom</i> : Low/Average Educational Level The Figure shows the percentages of those respondents who have regular contact with a person abroad and a transnational relationship with the country in question. To simplify the presentation, Greenland, Alaska, the northern islands of Russia and further sparsely populated regions are not marked. . . . .	72
5.1a	Information-Flows Related to “Direct” and “Indirect” Environmental Impacts . . . . .	86
5.1b	Relative Power of Consumers in Influencing the (in)Direct Environmental Impacts within Production-Consumption Chains . . . . .	87
7.1	Sketch of a Systemic Process Analysis of the Emergence of Modern Capitalism in China . . . . .	123
7.2	China’s GDP from 1952 to 2005 . . . . .	125
7.3	Time Development of Chinese Income Classes (in CNY, 2015 and 2025 are Scenario Based Estimates) (Based on Data from MGI 2006) . . . . .	130
7.4	Change in Chinese Class Structure between 1978 and 2004 (Based on Data from P. Li, 2004, Re-categorized) . . . . .	131
9.1	Map 1 – Spatial Distribution of Creative Professionals by Census Areas – Campinas, SP, Brazil – 2000 . . . . .	169
9.2	Map 2 – Spatial Distribution of Other University-Trained Professionals by Census Areas – Campinas, SP, Brazil – 2000 . . . . .	169
9.3	Map 3 – Spatial Distribution of Other Professionals without University Degrees, by Census Areas – Campinas, SP, Brazil – 2000 . . . . .	170
10.1	Sources and Percentages of Household Income of Non-international Migrant Households . . . . .	181

10.2	Sources and Percentages of Household Income of International Migrant Households . . . . .	182
10.3	Average Amount of Monthly Remittances Sent to International Migrant Households . . . . .	182

## List of Tables

4.1	Problem Competence: National or International? vs. Education . . .	74
4.2	Attitudes Towards Foreigners vs. Education . . . . .	75
4.3	Frequencies of the Transnationality Index . . . . .	78
5.1	Consumer Oriented Provider Strategies . . . . .	92
7.1	Origin of Cumulative Utilized FDI in China, 1979–2004 (Based on Data from Morrison 2006) . . . . .	126
7.2	Occupational Class Groups in Percent (Based on Data from P. Li, 2004) . . . . .	130
9.1	The Class Structure Proposed by Richard Florida . . . . .	165
9.2	Analytical Categories and Criteria . . . . .	166
9.3	Goods Ownership and Number of People in the Household, for Creative Professionals, Other University-Trained Professionals and Other Professionals without University Degrees – Campinas, SP, Brazil – 2000 . . . . .	168
11.1	Distribution of Class Categories . . . . .	208
11.2	Descriptive Statistics of Independent Variables . . . . .	208
11.3	Distributions of Environmentalism Indicators . . . . .	208
11.4	Standardized Coefficients from Stepwise OLS Regressions . . . . .	209
14.1	Ownership of Consumer Goods. (Total Respondents = 132) . . . . .	258
14.2	Major Items of Expenditure . . . . .	259
16.1	Social Structure of India . . . . .	284

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# Chapter 1

## Who are the New Middle Classes and why are they Given so Much Public Attention?

Hellmuth Lange and Lars Meier

**Abstract** Although still a relatively unexplored group, the new middle classes are enjoying a great deal of public attention. The first section discusses the question of why, then, the new middle classes have become a favored topic in the media and the broader political public. Section 1.2 looks at who the new middle classes are and how they can be examined empirically. Section 1.3 links the issue to the overarching debate on cultural globalization between McDonaldization, modernities and cultural hybrids. The focus of Section 1.4 is on the emergence of “civic environmentalism” between individual concern, social protest and political decision making.

**Keywords** New middle classes · Globalization · Sustainability · Modernization · Civic and environmental concern

### 1.1 The New Middle Classes – A Contested Issue in Public Debate

When the new middle classes<sup>1</sup> are addressed in public debate the focus is mostly on their western lifestyles. These lifestyles, however, are not really spectacular. They represent the standard in many parts of the world both in normative and practical respects. Why then, do they merit such attention? The concern behind many reports derives from the fact that the spreading of western lifestyles clearly is no longer confined to the realm of the highly industrialized countries. Instead it is becoming an ever more regular feature of developing countries, too.

Why is this seen as a problem rather than a confirmation of the promise of prosperity and even affluence, which was associated with the term *Industrial Society*? Against the background of this term, “developing countries” meant that the future of

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<sup>1</sup>In view of the heterogeneity of the group, we speak here of the new middle classes in the plural.

these nations lay in their efforts to be like the industrialized countries in their political as well as their economic structures, in the realm of education, professional qualifications and last but not least in terms of values, habits and lifestyles. The accumulation of durable consumer goods was considered an impelling force from the beginning and a measure for the corresponding modernization of everyday life. The term *Industrial Society* summarizes these moments as both an analytical as well as a developmental concept (Bell, 1974).

In practice, in developing countries, sharing key consumption standards of the most industrialized countries, for decades, this has remained a hope rather than a reality. By now however, at least in part, such doubts are losing ground, as new middle classes have emerged all over the world that both can afford and are willing to adopt elements of a “western” lifestyle. This process is evident in the widespread purchase of industrial products that are more or less expensive. Without doubt the private car enjoys pride of place in this context. While this is an indubitable success story with respect to the promises of the “industrial society” concept, two reasons can be identified that might explain why the rise of the new middle classes and their lifestyles fuels not only a high level of media attention but political concern too.

The first reason derives from the fact that the rise of the new middle classes is seen as a symbol of a comprehensive shift in economic and national power relations. In fact, the large number of countries that have been grouped together under the collective heading of “developing nations” differ in many respects. Notwithstanding these differences, they all have two features in common: Firstly, for a long time, even in the higher classes of these countries, only a small fraction adopted “western” lifestyles. Secondly, until recently, these nations were hardly capable of playing an independent role in the global economy. Both factors have changed considerably and, indeed, are closely interconnected. The growing potential of the new middle classes to consume expensive, “western” products was possible in this magnitude only where nations were able to create economies that were increasingly independent (World Bank, 2007). Terms used by the OECD such as “catching up economies” or “emerging economies” try to account for this change. Against this background it is quite consistent to understand the rise of the new middle classes as an indicator of a shift that relativizes the economic power of the classically industrial nations. This goes along with shifts in political influence in favor of some of the “catching up economies”. China and India embody this change most prominently (Humphrey & Messner, 2006; Flavin & Gardner, 2006; Bussolo et al., 2007).

Understandably, such changes are evaluated differently, depending on whether the perspective is that of the winning countries or of those who need to make sacrifices: either in terms of lost business opportunities or of jobs being relocated from OECD countries to developing countries. In sum, the rise of the “new economies” countries, however, does not lead to a proportional decline of the industrialized countries. Also in this respect, the promise of ever-increasing welfare, which is at the heart of the Industrial Society concept, proves valid.

On the other hand, it is obvious that, even today, the new prosperity in “catching up economies” remains very uneven, both between the countries as well as within many of them. China was able to reduce the number of undernourished citizens by

about 60 million between 1990 and 2000. Other countries have been less successful; India falls into this category (Sanchez et al., 2005: 39). The development goals of the UN Millennium Project, therefore, remain pressing (World Bank, 2007).

A second focus of concern that contributes to the high level of media attention given to the new middle classes, ironically, does not relate to a lack of development. On the contrary, the concern is motivated by the lifestyles of the new middle classes and their role as the vanguard of the most dynamic development that the respective countries have experienced during the last one or two decades. Here, the focus is on the rapidly growing ecological footprint in terms of sharp increases in resource consumption, pollution and damages to ecosystem functions and services. In this respect too, India and China are at the centre of media attention and concern.

Some commentators subscribe to a more balanced view with respect to developing and threshold countries. In this spirit, the Human Development Report of the United Nations Development Program highlights the fact that the carbon footprint of China is still far smaller than that of the USA, Canada and a host of other developed countries, and that the ecological footprint of other threshold countries, including India, is even smaller (HDR, 2007 and 2008: 7). Other observers, particularly from the classically industrialized nations, opt for a more dramatic tone, not least with the aim of recommending themselves as business partners in the realm of environmentally sound products and policies. Thus, the development department of a large German bank comments: "Of the 20 cities featuring the worst air quality in the world, 16 alone are in China. According to a World Bank study, the majority of cities in China exhibit maximum-category dust pollution. The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that the poor urban air quality is responsible for around 250,000 deaths each year in China" (Heymann, 2006). They conclude that, "[E]conomic growth in China is anything but sustainable. China's economy is booming at the expense of its environment" (ibid.). The World Energy Outlook 2007 of the International Energy Agency predicts that China, without any substantial change in its politics, will reach a similar level of CO<sup>2</sup> emissions in the year 2015 as all EU-Countries combined (IEA, 2007). For the IEA, "...the effect on climate change would simply be catastrophic" (OECD Observer, 2007 and 2008: 13). As in many other commentaries, this perspective is built on stressing the coincidence of economic growth on the one hand and changing lifestyles on the other hand. "The emergence of China and India on the world economy unfolds. Lifestyles are evolving fast, and that means more demand, more energy consumption and more greenhouse gas emissions" (ibid.). Since the middle classes are essentially the most significant social group behind the lifestyles in question, they appear, as a consequence, to be the pivotal drivers of the much-feared catastrophic developments.

This criticism is, however, not without irony. The lifestyles that are being criticized are nothing other than those which in industrialized countries have been considered for decades to be the general standard and which, incidentally, embody the core elements of the welfare society in industrialized nations: ownership of at least one automobile per family, high levels of household use of energy and a diet which includes large quantities of meat. Against this background the critique of the

lifestyle of the emerging new middle classes outside the classically industrialized nations appears rather sanctimonious, leading to the question: Why is it that some are permitted a certain lifestyle while others are not?

However, even if one accepts this plea there remains one problem. This can be illustrated with the example of the automobile as the focal point of the questionable western lifestyle. The acquisition of private automobiles in the industrialized nations has achieved a high degree of saturation. In contrast to this, although in the “catching up economies” the ownership of private cars has just begun, it is increasing rapidly. The World Bank estimated the total number of the new middle classes in developing countries at 400 million people in 2004. Their number is expected to rise to 1.2 billion people in 2030 which equals a share of 15% of the total world population (cf. World Bank, 2007: xvi).

Thus, even if the density of car ownership in these countries remains lower than that in the USA or Western Europe, the large number of new consumers (and the predicted further growth of this group) gives rise to a large potential growth in private car ownership all over the world – and a corresponding dramatic growth in CO<sup>2</sup> emissions. The same problem arises as a consequence of increases in meat and energy consumption (FAO, 2003).

In the realm of public debate this “purely objective” concern is frequently linked to a moral rebuke vis-a-vis the new middle classes. Put briefly: the global North has raised the ecologically questionable lifestyle and is still predominantly responsible for most of the associated problems in terms of resource depletion, global warming and infestation of eco-systems. But after all, the problems have at least been recognized and there is a will to solve them. However, the undisputable truth is that even in the global North the results of these efforts are still limited. This applies particularly to the realm of personal behavior of the citizens with the ecological footprint still much larger than the geographical territory of the countries (Earth Trends, 2008; Footprint, 2007).

In contrast, the new middle classes are accused of lacking any sense of responsibility regarding both societal and environmental needs. Interestingly, this perspective is also shared by experts from developing and threshold countries. Accordingly, the members of the new middle classes, for example in India, are labeled “consumerist predators” marked by “complete insensitivity to any social concern” (Varma, 1998; cf. Gupta, 2000). This kind of criticism is not altogether new. They are reproached for being passive, short-sighted and naïve consumers attracted by simple messages of consumption and unable to reflect critically on their shortcomings. This revives the colonial picture of India and other countries as the unenlightened “Orient” (Said, 1978).

Another criticism classifies the new middle classes as “The New Rich”. This is the title of the first series of studies devoted to the new middle classes, which was launched in 1996 (Robison & Goodman, 1996; Rodan, 1996; Sen & Stivens, 1998; Pinches, 1999; Chua, 2000; Hutchinson & Brown, 2001). The term “new rich”, on the one hand, alludes to a matter of fact. A major proportion of the new middle classes actually attained prosperity relatively recently. At the same time, the term expresses a value judgment, voiced in terms such as “the nouveau riche”,

“the upstarts” and “the parvenu”. This is the perspective of the social establishment who claims that the newcomers do not yet know how to behave and who lack taste and style as a means of social distinction beyond mere wealth. In sociological terms, following Bourdieu (1985): they have financial capital but not cultural capital. However, if earlier the concern was restricted to a lack of refinement only, the allegation of insensitivity to any social and environmental concern, as expressed in the term “consumerist predator”, implies that, through its unsuitable ways of thinking and acting, the new middle classes are endangering the foundations of our civilization and our future (including the efforts that have begun in the West to ensure a sustainable future). The new middle classes are positioned as gravediggers of our common and sustainable future, in terms of the OECD-Observer: “a catastrophe” (OECD Observer, 2007 and 2008).

This critical perspective is everything but undisputed. From the converse perspective, the new middle classes are seen as the principle drivers of hope in the developing countries. They are considered to be those who, above all other groups of the population, represent innovation and management potential. The ability of a nation to prosper in a competitive world is, therefore, said to be dependent first and foremost on its new middle classes. The existence of a strong middle class is also seen as an essential condition for being able to help the land’s economic as well as social progress from within. Understandably, this perspective is encouraged, both by the politicians and by representatives of the middle classes of these countries, including those in China and India. It is however, just as true for other countries in Asia and Latin America that are considered to be catching up economies or that are striving to join that group.

In other words, the contrast in opinions with respect to the new middle classes could not be more substantial. It is just this liveliness of the controversies that shows how much the new middle classes are at the heart of conflicting expectations, both in terms of the economics, politics and culture of the countries they represent.

The actor group that was first to recognize the new reality were those involved in product advertising. Social science research is located more at the other end of an imagined scale. In spite of promising beginnings (see in particular the most topical series “The New Rich in Asia”, edited by Robison and Goodman, 1996) both in the industrialized countries of the global North as well as in the countries where the new middle classes live, there is still a dearth of systematic research into the questions that are addressed here. The public debates about the role of the new middle classes have so far been carried out, at best, with very limited social science research input. Instead, research that concerns populations below the poverty line has dominated the social science research agenda. There are very obvious and pressing reasons for this, which will lose very little of their weight in the near future. However, it is also necessary to pay attention to the new middle classes and there are at least two reasons for doing this. Firstly, the role that the new middle classes will play both as decision-makers and consumers in the developing and “catching up economies” is significant. Secondly, this group essentially contributes to the fact that social modernization in all its dimensions: economic, social, cultural, political and technological, no longer emerges only in the classical metropolises of the industrialized world.

The new middle classes have become a particular focus of social modernization on a global scale and they will play this role even more intensely in the future.

It remains to be seen how and how much the new middle classes will develop specific social patterns, including lifestyles, and what their impact on the use of natural resources and the protection of nature will be. That the new middle classes will play a significant role in this respect is, however, an undisputed fact even today. This book aims to present current social science wisdom that exists on the topics discussed and to link these to one another.

The following section considers three questions: How new are the new middle classes? Are they different from their counterparts in the industrialized world? And, what are the criteria that can be used for a meaningful classification of the group?

## 1.2 Who are the “New” Middle Classes?

The new middle classes are not as new as the term indicates. The beginnings of political interest in new middle classes can already be traced back more than a hundred years. Its roots are not in the developing and the threshold countries but in Europe and the USA. In order to trace the historical background of the ongoing debate its early core topics will be highlighted briefly. The following section will outline specifics of the rise and the self-understanding of the new middle classes in developing countries. The last section deals with how the new middle classes can be empirically assessed.

### *1.2.1 The New Middle Classes – A Classical Issue*

The term middle class, as a first approximation, serves the purpose of purely formal categorization in relational respect. It indicates a class of society that belongs neither to the upper nor the lower strata of a given society but situated in between. The term still carries this inherent meaning when used in the context of differences in wealth and social status. However, the term was, from the beginning, also associated with a value judgment: the middle class as intermediary social stratum of secondary importance situated between the main classes: the rich and powerful and the poor and powerless. In this interpretation, the term highlighted the element of socio-cultural changes that evolved as a core feature of the transition from feudal societal structures with their large number of social classes, towards the modern – industrialized and capitalist – societies, including increasingly sharp polarizations between the working class poor and the wealthy company owners. This picture always contained an element of political stylization, especially when put forward by the socialist working class movement following Marxist theory. The empirical reality, however, was always considerably more varied. Nonetheless, the political debates since the early 19th century have been characterized by an increasing polarization in terms of the “Social Question”.

The emergence of the new middle classes is closely related and, at the same time, opposed to this interpretation of the “Social Question”. The problem revolves around the employees who represented a new social group that emerged during the second half of the 19th century. As white collar workers they were employed in more or less operational functions and as technical experts in technical and scientific departments. The breeding ground of their evolution lies in the then new world of industry (Jacquin, 1955; Hartfiel, 1961; Blackburn, 1967). In contrast, the old middle classes – mainly small traders and craftsmen – already existed in medieval times. As the *petit-bourgeoisie* they formed a significant part of the urban social structure. Graduates from the universities played a bridging role in different professions, as lawyers and physicians, lecturers and administrative experts.

Skilled work requiring formal training and education, a superior status and corresponding incomes in the framework of waged work are seen as characteristics of the new middle classes (cf. Humblet, 1966: 41 ff.). The development of this group was commented upon critically from the perspective of the labor movement. In fact, despite their dependence on waged employment, and regardless of the fact that most of them had no major influence on corporate decision-making, major parts of them felt closer to the management than to the workers. From the point of view of the labor movement, they were perceived as those with “false consciousness”. Sociology did not go that far. However, studies gave clear evidence that these groups distinguished themselves from the majority of the workers through a specific set of social self-images and behavior referred to as “white collar mentality” or “Angestelltenmentalität” (Braun & Fuhrmann, 1970).

Since the 1920s the size of the new middle classes started increasing considerably; so did the heterogeneity of the group, both in socio-cultural terms as well as in specializations. This marked the beginning of a development that was described after the Second World War as the “tertiarization” of society (Fourastié, 1960). The term denotes not only the genesis of a third sector beyond agricultural production and industrial processing, but also the continuous increase in the significance of varied services within the industrial realm. Thus, over a period of decades, the new middle classes grew from being a new social group and a minority to being the proportionally largest group of wage earners. The sociologist C.W. Mills was one of the first to conduct a large investigation of this group. His book “The White Collar. The American Middle Classes” (1951) is justifiably considered to be a classic. This book is particularly remarkable because it analyzed a process in its early days, during the course of which an ever-growing portion of American society, and gradually also European societies, no longer perceived the new middle classes as new. Instead, as is indicated by the title, an ever-growing part of the social structure was both rated and addressed as just *the* middle classes, irrespective of whether it specifically referred to workers or employees, civil servants or self-employed, craftsmen, professionals or traders.

For many observers this was linked to the additional belief that the capitalist class society of the 19th and 20th century would finally transform itself into a type of middle class society, thus overcoming the social divide that constituted the substance of the Social Question of the 19th century. The main criterion here was the coincidence

of mass production and rising income levels which permitted even workers to access a larger share of the products of more luxurious consumerism. This included, above all, ownership of radios, televisions, refrigerators, washing machines and eventually, cars and an apartment or house (see Bell, 1974).

In other words, the emergence of the term “new middle class” is very closely linked to changes in the social structures and the enterprise structures, which in Europe and the U.S. were part of the transition from feudalism to capitalism via the Industrial Revolution, and the related shift from rural areas to the cities, the latter becoming the most relevant and dynamic centers of social development including new ways of life and cultural identities. The new middle classes are both a result and drivers of this new urban based dynamics. In this context the new middle classes could be classified by a high level of disposable income. Social factors such as education, professional and, last but not least, cultural features and mentalities are also key characteristics. However, it must be noted that, from the beginning, the group showed a strong internal differentiation, both in socio-structural terms as well as with respect to values, cultural preferences and lifestyles. Therefore scholars soon stated that it was better to talk of the new middle classes as a compound of different groups rather than of a single class or stratum (Laroque, 1968: 59).

### ***1.2.2 The Emerging New Middle Classes in Developing Countries***

This is applicable in equal measure in the developing countries. Here too, the unfolding of the new social grouping has been part of larger social change which made the cities become the focus of social dynamics, both in economic and cultural terms. This was accompanied, in the main, by a loss of significance of rural subsistence production in favor of the increased significance of industrial production. But in contrast to Europe and North America, where this process was spread over two centuries, in the developing and catching up economies it is taking place much more rapidly, due to pressure from economic and technological standards that could be set by the most developed countries and companies in the world, due to their earlier start. In this context, it is not only the small farmers who came under and still come under severe pressure but also the erstwhile urban middle classes in the form of craftsmen and traders.

In some other respects the evolution of the new middle classes in the developing countries has also been markedly different from that of the classically industrialized countries. In contrast to the industrialized countries where modern industrial concerns were the incubators for the new middle classes, the genesis of the industrial sector in the developing countries came about in a limited and delayed manner – not least because of their colonial history and related forms of transnational division of labor. Where a middle class managed to develop it was characteristically promoted by the state. Here, it was initially the colonial powers that systematically encouraged the growth of a new service class. Its members occupied the lower and middle ranks of the administration and other service sectors, including the different vocational

professions (such as lawyers, doctors, scientists). As part of the agenda of nation-building and social development, the post-colonial states continued to support this process. As Kessler puts it, “the post-colonial state. . .as part of its agenda of nation-building and social development, launched itself into the project of creating a local indigenous middle class” (Kessler, 2001: 39). Such a process took place in one form or the other in all the countries of South Asia and Africa that won independence from their colonial rulers. The industrial sector also developed in many of these countries in close relation to the state’s concept of development, including various elements of a planned economy.

In the first decades after attaining independence these state related sectors ranked among the flagships of self-determined development. In the context of the recent debate about the new middle classes they have widely lost this rank. Moreover, they have acquired the status of a negative example. Today, the most promising and prestigious sector is seen as companies with an international orientation that are exempt from any government control. Only these are considered to form the sector that has the conditions that can give rise to the new middle classes, above all, IT-Sector companies and the associated service sectors (Kapur, 2007).

Accordingly, the widely shared self-understanding of this sector, including major parts of its employees, is that of promoters and representatives of a long-awaited modernization process of their own countries. In parallel, the policies of the governments accord them a central role as agents of modernization and, last but not the least, as consumers. This is independent of whether the government is an authoritarian regime, such as China or Singapore, or democratically elected, such as India. Other actors – politicians as well as journalists – are more skeptical, seeing the new middle classes driven by “a rage to consume” and betraying the values that are said to have characterized the middle classes of the countries at their early stages (cf. Chua, 2000: 3).

This latter view is particularly true of India. Thus, Varma asserts that the old middle class “had played a pivotal role in the making of modern India”. The program of Gandhi and Nehru had formed a “composite ideological framework” that, for the middle class in its early stage, served as a guideline in the respective areas of activity. In particular, the idea of modernizing the country through industrialization was irrevocably bound to a “social sensitivity towards the poor” and “a reticence towards ostentatious display of wealth” (Varma, 1998: 32). Varma concludes, there is hardly any trace of this left today. Instead, naked egoism along with a “withdrawal of the most influential segment of the nation from any commitment to community and social welfare” (Ibid., XII) is the dominant constellation (see also Alam, 2005: 355). Similar diagnoses can be found in almost every country where, before and after independence, a large number of the erstwhile middle class, in the framework of the process of decolonization on the one hand, and because of their professional activities in the interstice between the state and society on the other hand, saw themselves especially bound to the ideology cited above. Other prominent examples are Indonesia and Malaysia (Embong, 2001a) and China.

The state was very important for this group precisely because it guaranteed employment and social influence as well as being a point of orientation for

one's own political and professional self-image. However, it served not only as an Archimedean point of altruistic disposition and corresponding action. Kessler defines the other side of this coin as a phenomenon that is relevant for quite a number of Asian countries: "this new class emerged and began to crystallize under state sponsorship, its inclination and those of its members reflected its origins: as the creation, a dependent, even a client of the state structure and dominant regime" (Kessler, 2001: 39). Corruption and clientelism are the highly visible companions of this development, and this too appears to be relatively independent of whether the governmental system is authoritarian or democratic.

There is no indication that the flux between those parts of the new middle classes that are still bound to the state because of the focus of their work and those who are involved in private companies (either of one's own country or from other countries) that operate in an international context and are increasingly independent of the state, has reached its end. Thus, it is important to assess thoroughly the size and structure of the new middle classes both now and for the future. However, this is proving more difficult than it might at first appear, against the background of lively public debate on the subject.

### ***1.2.3 How to Assess Empirically Size and Structure of the New Middle Classes?***

Given the fact that there is no consensus on how to define the new middle classes, we abstain from offering an account of our own or opting for one of the competing approaches. Instead we try to display the heterogeneity of approaches in the field. Unsurprisingly, the spectrum is enormous.

The simplest definition looks only at differences in *purchasing power*. From this perspective, Myers and Kent even avoid the term "new middle classes". Instead they talk of "new consumers". Using World Bank data, they consider four-member households that in the year 2000 had an income that, in their own countries, exceeded the purchasing power of more than \$10.000 per annum. This sum is seen as "marking a degree of affluence that enables wide-ranging purchases such as household appliances and televisions, air conditioners, personal computers, and other electronics, among other prerequisites of an affluent lifestyle" (Myers & Kent, 2003). In this manner they come to a total of 1.1 billion "new consumers". These are distributed over 20 countries, of which 17 are developing countries and three are transition countries in Eastern Europe. According to this indicator more than half a billion "new consumers" live in just three countries: China, India and Brazil. The proportion of the total population of a country that is seen as part of the global class of "new consumers" depends on the affluence of each country. In this respect, the differences among the developing countries are considerable. In Malaysia and Thailand the group amounts to a respectable 53% of the population, in Brazil 44%, Indonesia 30%, China 24% and in India only 13%. Further, the growth rates are also very different.

There are other approaches to measuring the size and the structure of the new middle classes which lead to different outcomes. This can be illustrated using the example of India. While Myers and Kent identify a group of 132 million new consumers (33 million households) other more optimistic estimates assume a consumer market potential, and related attractiveness for global retailers, twice that size (Kearney, 2006). In contrast to these figures, a study by the Indian National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER) identifies 10.7 million households, with an annual income between 200,000 and 1 million Indian Rupees (~4700–23.000\$), as the Indian middle class. Another study regards this particular group as representing only the comparatively small upper segment of “rich consumers” (6 million households). Here, the main criterion for belonging to this group is that they can afford own cars, PCs and luxury items. The study defines 75 million households as belonging to the less wealthy “main group” of consumers who can afford branded consumer goods, two-wheelers and refrigerators (cf. KPMG, 2005). This indicates that even when using the simple concept of purchasing power the criteria vary greatly.

Other studies seem to adopt a *sociological* criterion by differentiating between the “upper” and “lower middle class” on the one hand and the “poor” on the other. In substance, they also allude exclusively to the available purchasing power (MGI, 2006) which might be sufficient for market analysis. But this perspective is definitely too narrow to allow meaningful answers to further questions pertaining to the social and cultural embedding of consumption patterns and the values, attitudes and habits connected with it. Yet, this embedding is most important for understanding the prospects of upgrading the incomes in question and how they are disposed of. However, it is not easy to analyze these factors based on the limited possibilities offered by official statistics.

A first approximation can be achieved using diverse *professional categories*, as is done in the official employment statistics. In this context Embong includes the “professional and technical occupations” and the “administrative and managerial occupations” in the group “new middle class”. He excludes two neighboring groups: the “clerical, sales and a portion of services categories”, defining them as “lower middle class” occupations, and the “small proprietors and self-employed” defining them as “old middle class” occupations. In this way one obtains a clear picture of how much the social structure has changed in the last 20 years despite the fuzziness of these categories. Following this basis for calculation, the numbers of the new middle class grew in Malaysia from 6% in 1970 to 15% in 2000, and in Singapore from 11% in 1950 to above 40% in 1999 (Embong, 2001: 87; Chan, 2000 with relation to Hong Kong; Reusswig and Isensee in this volume with relation to China).

Admittedly, even this type of calculation does not permit anything more than a preliminary approximation of the dynamics and complexity of the social changes that have been brought about by the new middle classes. Beyond the differentiation based on profession, cultural differentiations are of considerable significance. Thus, in many countries, to a large extent, religious traditions condition the social self-image and the everyday activities of social groups. This is evident for example in Malaysia, Indonesia and India. The same holds true for ethnic differences

(for example for the Chinese population outside China in South East Asian countries), for gender structures (different fields and space of activities and expectations from men and women), for patterns of social mobility and biographical structures (social climbing, often related to moving from the country side to urban centers). All these factors require careful consideration in the context of examining consumption patterns and the environmental concerns of the new middle classes, both in general and with regard to the specific situations in each of the countries being studied (cf. Robison & Goodman, 1996; Chua, 2000; Embong, 2001; Rappa, 2002; Gerke, 1999; Fernandes, 2006; Nijman, 2006).

Cultural differences related to lifestyles are of equal importance. Based on personal decisions they are not so closely related to social and cultural traditions. Hence, within the framework of the given economic margins, they can be modified according to personal opinions and preferences. Research into lifestyles catenates market research and phenomenological sociology. The analysis done in China by SinusSociovision is one such example (SinusSociovision, 2005).

By now there are studies on all the aspects mentioned here. Nevertheless, a systematic coverage of the whole topic and the search for consensus amongst those reviewing the results is still in very early stages. The kind of data available through the official statistics does not allow us to comprehend relevant social characteristics in the necessary detail. At the same time the financial resources for more complex and focused sociological studies are not always easy to mobilize. However, even a significant increase in funding would contribute only in small measure to convergent assessments of the social role of the new middle classes regarding both size and internal composition as well as attitudes and behavior. It can be assumed that this is especially true for the question that is addressed in this book: to what extent and in what ways do the new middle classes accept elements of civic and environmental responsibility?

This is even more so since the issue is related to the more comprehensive but equally controversial debate on how globalization is acting as a specific driver of social modernization. Is it creating a progressive homogenization or moving us towards a greater heterogeneity of cultures, ways of life and lifestyles? The rise of the new middle classes also functions, to an important extent, as a projection screen for the hopes and anxieties, as well as convictions and doubts, that exist with regard to the overarching topic of globalization. In this sense, the issue of the new middle classes serves as a proxy.

### **1.3 The New Middle Classes – A Proxy for Controversial Assessments of Globalization**

In fact, not only the emergence of the new middle classes, but also globalization is everything else but a new topic (Hopper, 2007: 13). For a long time the meaning of “globalization” was centered on economic and political dominance with respect to countries of quite different levels of wealth and cultural identity. Only recently

has globalization been discussed as a mechanism of cultural homogenization, with the new middle classes as a main driver. As a consequence the more general debate on cultural homogenization, diversification and hybridization comes into play (for a detailed overview see Albrow, 1996; Guillén, 2001; Martinelli, 2005).

The establishment of the colonial system following the Spanish and Portuguese conquests in the pre-industrial period marked the start of the rapid spread of political and economic dependence relationships on a global scale. The integration of this system into the enfolding industrial system further developed the fabric of global economic, political and cultural dominance. Marx and Engels observed as early as 1848: “The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere. The bourgeoisie has, through its exploitation of the world market, given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country” (Communist Manifesto). A less distinctive occurrence, but one no less consequential, was the reorganization of the global system of economic, political and military structures during the period of decolonization and the cold war. Nonetheless globalization became a widely shared concern only at the end of this phase and this not only in a few nations but also globally.

The following dimensions are at the heart of ranking systems that aim at distinguishing different levels of globalization: economic investments, exports and imports of goods and services, migration and technological innovations and flows. Nevertheless the ranking orders differ considerably depending on the indicators used (KOF Index; Kearney, 2007).

In view of the creation and development of the world market as a central process of globalization and the close link of this whole historical process with the rise and fall of the colonial system, it is not surprising that there are two topics that dominate the debates around this issue. Firstly, the distributional effects of globalization: which countries and population segments profit more and which ones less? This includes the question of how the former colonies use and can use their formal independence to play an increasingly autonomous economic and political role. Secondly, the cultural dimension: there are obvious processes of cultural homogenization following the Western and American Way of Life. But diversity of lifestyles is increasing, too, including the development of intercultural hybrids. In both respects the new middle classes are seen a most relevant social actor group, making a strong impact on the process of economic, technological and cultural change within their countries.

The term McDonaldization has established itself as shorthand for an especially comprehensive form of cultural *homogenization*. Ritzer introduced this term into the social science debate about globalization (Ritzer, 1993, 2004). He understands McDonaldization to be a particular form of company management. In this definition, the main management concern is to strive for efficiency, measurability, predictability and control of the company processes, a strategy that is deliberately made a matter of the company culture to be sustained by the employees. It is seen as having encompassed, in a short time and on a large scale, concepts that have grown far beyond

the fast food sector. McDonaldization is thus, “the process by which principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American Society as well as the rest of the world” (Ritzer, 2004: 1).

Since Frederick W. Taylor’s efforts at developing the most effective forms of organizing production processes and the pre- and post processes form a core topic of modern company management. The success of Ritzer’s McDonaldization thesis is due to the fact that he linked the concept of company management to globalization. In this context, McDonaldization acquires a new meaning as a strategy, through which the “American Way of Life” universally subsumes other forms of national, regional and local culture and, just as unstopably, causes them to disappear. This inherent tendency to a literal cultural impoverishment and new economic dependence of global magnitude is aided by those citizens who voluntarily support the process, both as consumers and within the framework of corresponding self-concepts.

In parallel, Ritzer connects his concept with the sociological tradition (Ritzer, 2004: 24 ff.). The particular rationality and effectiveness of industrial company organization have long been topics of sociological interest. Attention was originally focused not only on organizational, technical and economical principles but also on the subjective dimensions of values, beliefs and mentalities. Max Weber’s work on the meaning of the protestant work ethic for the unfolding of capitalism and on the principle of rational management as a characteristic thought and action paradigm of modern society, and modern administration in particular, is but one prominent example. In this respect the understanding of globalization as a process of forced homogenization and “Westernization” is part of a long and well-established sociological tradition of analysis and interpretation of modern societies (see also Reusswig & Isensee Chapter 7 in this volume).

Interpreting globalization as a process of ever-increasing and comprehensive homogenization is, nonetheless, anything but indisputable, both politically as well as sociologically. The most debated sociological antipole is probably Eisenstadt’s thesis of “multiple modernities” which puts emphasis on *differentiation*. Following Eisenstadt (2000), modernity can be interpreted as a new civilization marked by particular cultural and institutional characteristics. Modernity is seen as a comprehensive counter-example to the earlier “Axial Age”, which was characterized by the centrality of religious revelation and faith as key factors in framing social order and governance. Modern societies, in contrast, according to Eisenstadt, are founded on the basis of secular reason and social optionality (Eisenstadt, 2000). Although all modern societies share these basic characteristics of the modern program, institutional and cultural patterns took different forms in different social contexts. This led to the emergence of multiple modernities taking shape in terms of different cultures Eisenstadt’s concept explicitly aims at relativizing the idea of a continued cultural homogenization in the sense of “westernization”.

A problem with this diagnosis lies in the fact that, while Eisenstadt’s basic framework (modernity versus the “Axial Age”) relates to a historical period of several hundreds of years, the evidence for his diversification-thesis comes from short time periods of recent history. In this context, comparing different countries and

different economic, political and cultural subsystems, one can actually find many examples of heterogeneity. However, this is true not only of today but also of pre-modern times provided that the focus of the analysis is on shorter time periods and particular social dimensions and subsystems. In other words, the closer one is to the object under observation, the clearer and the more diverse are the details and peculiarities. Nonetheless, Eisenstadt holds that there are institutional settings, new types of hegemony and large cultural aggregates (above all in the context of Islamic, Hindu and Confucian traditions) that are significantly different from the “western models” and therefore justify the assumption of different modernities.

This view is countered by the argument (see Schmidt Chapter 2 & Kuhn Chapter 3 in this volume) that comparisons between different countries do shed light on manifold differences in terms of institutions, political regulatory structures, policies and cultures. But since each sector is developing and functioning according to particular logics and temporal rhythms it proves difficult to describe these as homogeneous parts of relatively uniform cultures of nation states such as India, Indonesia, Brazil and China to be regarded as substantially different from “the Western” culture. This objection also applies to the analyses of Hofstede (Hofstede, 1997; Hofstede, 2001) and the GLOBE study (House, 2004) on country specific cultures, although these studies base their conclusions on comparatively more explicit and sophisticated schemes and methods of analysis. The “varieties of capitalism” approach, put forward by Streeck and others, avoids macro-diagnoses by restricting the analytical focus to international comparisons of policies with respect to identical policy fields, such as welfare-state regulations (Streeck & Yamamura, 2004).

In view of the fact that lifestyles and consumption patterns represent combinations in which heterogeneous lines of tradition and rationalities are connected to one another, a third analytical perspective has been put forward. It concentrates specifically on processes where historically different cultures make contact and become interrelated with each other, thus leading to the rise of new, hybrid, patterns. *Hybridity* is the product of the comingling and fusion of identities and cultures through contact with the outside (cf. Hall, 1993; Hall & du Gay, 1996). In this context it is not only a mixture but also something new that emerges from the contact. Thus Bhabha (1996, 2007) argues that a Third Place evolves from globalization and migration, giving rise to hybridized identities located in borderlands (cf. Anzaldúa, 1999). This is more specific in the term “Creolization” that originally referred to Caribbean identities and their comingling. Now, this term is used, however, in a more general sense for the comingling of identities and cultures. The term *melange* is also used (cf. Pieterse, 2004).

In this context, globalizing identities or even “varieties of cosmopolitanism” (Delanty & He, 2008) are increasingly analyzed (Szanton Blanc, Basch, & Glick-Schiller, 1995; Hannerz, 1996; Pries, 2002). A special focus is on the effect of travel and migration. A second dimension of the evolution of hybridized identities and cultures is the emerging network of professional relationship in transnational firms (Dürschmidt & Taylor, 2007: 57 pp.; see also Mau Chapter 4 in this volume). The concept of fluxes and flows, as defined by the Wageningen Environmental