

THE “NOUVELLE CLASSE MOYENNE SALARIÉE” (THE NEW WAGE EARNER MIDDLE CLASS): WHAT IS STILL NEW 40 YEARS AFTER ?

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TABLE RONDE 2

This contribution presents a European generalization of an analysis of the French intermediate strata's difficulties (Chauvel 2006b). After Pierre Bourdieu (1979) (and Gustav Schmoller 1897 before him), the multipolarity of middle classes between higher and lower, and between cultural and economic capitals is well acknowledged. Anyway, this analytic vision is now essential to understand the "middle classes adrift" of the last 20 years in France and Continental Europe. The expansion of the "new wage earner middle class" (Touraine, 1969) of the 1960-1980 era is now an old dream of Welfare state expansion, and the European social structure faces a trend of "Repatriomonalization", a U-turn toward a decline in the value of qualified work and an expansion of the return to inheritance of family assets. This paper includes three parts. The first part of this paper describes the European specificity of social structure of middle class and develops a definition of the system of middle classes (plural) in a context of strong welfare state constructions. I propose here a redefinition of the system of middle classes. The second part presents three ruptures in the social trends of the "wage earner society" of the 1960's to 1980's. In this previous period, economic growth, social homogenization, and social protection were major contextual elements of the expansion of a "new middle class", based on educational meritocracy, valorization of credentialed skills, expansion of the average wage compared to housing and capital assets ('depatrimonialization'). In the post-1980's era, the rupture and reversal of these previous trends ("stagnation", "new inequalities" and "social uncertainty" being the new trends) generates a backlash in the system of middle classes. The third one analyses the demographic and social consequences of these new trends in terms of shrinking and quartering for fragmentation) of the middle classes in a context where the inheritance of assets and resources ('repatriomonalization') changes the previous equilibria. The problem of social stability in a context where large strata of the middle classes have less interest in the stability of the social order must be addressed.