

About middle class theory: history and modern times



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Abstract. The article analyses the problem of the middle class that had been denoted in the works of Aristotle as far back as in ancient society and that was of interest to social thinkers during the Renaissance and Modern Age periods. At present this issue has been actively discussed both in foreign and in the Russian press. The authors of the article show the reasons for frequent contradictions between the assessments concerning the size of the middle class in Russian society (including the Vologda Oblast) and the prospect for the increase in the share of middle stratum.

Keywords: Middle class, stratification, modernization, differentiation, status, self-identification, standard of living, estrangement.

The problems frequently associated with uncertainty and all sorts of risks, including the project risk of disaster scenarios based on actual events, arise at the modern stage of society development. The nonlinear properties of the environment, increasing the complexity of event space and resulting in the higher realization probability of even improbable events that is

characteristic of nonlinear systems, have been displayed to an increasing degree.

Modern public life actualizes the issue of social development modernization. Most countries have to develop their national resource, to improve the ability to social transformations, to be able to protect their interests, competitiveness in the world economy

and to adequately respond to the challenges of nature, technogenic and sociogenic threats. In this difficult situation it is necessary to determine correctly the driving forces of social modernization. According to modern researchers, “the main and direct factor changing everyday social practices” [5, p. 4] is the activities of not so much the elite and the upper stratum, but of secondary, basic and lower strata underlying the bulk of society. Bridging the gap between the rich and the poor, increasing the number of the middle class also contributes to the sustainability of public development, overcoming of alienation between people.

Modern opinion about the role of the middle class in social development is based on the ideas formulated in the antiquity. The theme of the middle class was clearly defined in Aristotle’s “Politics”. Having analyzed the existing form of government, the philosopher gave preference to polity as a mixed form of government. “The types of state structure that deviate more towards oligarchy, are called aristocracies, and those that tend in the direction of democracy – polities” [1, p. 540].

Aristotle argued that moderation and the mean is the best of all good things, so it is best to have average income. He based this conclusion on the idea that having average income, it is easier to obey reason, to believe in equality and equal rights as “state, comprising the middle people, will have the best political system. If one owns too many, while the other has nothing, there is either extreme democracy, or oligarchy, or pure tyranny” [ibid., p. 507]. Thus, Aristotle directly linked the sustainability of the state with the presence and predominance of the middle class.

The middle class is the best, since under its living conditions it is willing to follow reasonable statute, law and justice to a greater extent, while the rich and the poor are not inclined to follow these principles.

Almost two thousand years later, the Renaissance thinker Niccolo Machiavelli

expressed similar thoughts in his main work “The Prince”. Recognizing the presence of the rich and the poor in the state, he considered it pointless to trust the governance to neither.

The philosophers of later period (T. Hobbes, D. Locke, J.-J. Rousseau) quite clearly realized the existence of social classes and strata, not equal in its essence, which entailed various types of social cataclysms and problems. Systematic theoretical base has not yet been formulated; however, the preconditions for developing the theory of classes and stratification were already established. Subsequently, the ideas of classes, social inequality and class struggle were analyzed and set forth by historians, economists and philosophers of the 18th – early 19th century (A. Smith, E. Condillac, K. Saint-Simon, F. Guizot, A. Mignet, etc.). K. Marx founded his theory of classes mainly upon these works.

The idea of the middle class becomes the most common in the Western sociology in the second half of the 20th century. As a result of the development of research-and-technological revolution, the diffusion of ownership in the course of the reforms in the USA and other advanced capitalist countries, the share of the poor has been decreasing. Comparable income level becomes characteristic of the bulk of the population.

Modern social studies serve as the basis for the conclusion that the middle class becomes a mass phenomenon in the period of society transition to the industrial, and, particularly, to the post-industrial stage of development. “The development of technologies and the tertiary sector of the economy, as well as a special type of state (“social state” and “Welfare State”) contributed to its expansion and formation” [8, p. 26].

Another emerging trend of modern society development is connected with the increasing differentiation among the middle class. As a result, the research focus is shifted on separate constituent groups. The attention of researchers focuses on the “new” middle class, at first,

then on the “professionals” –the owners of the unique human capital, and in recent years on the so-called “information workers”. Since 1980s, the middle class is considered as “the totality of qualitatively different social groups” [ibid], making a stabilizing impact on the society.

Meanwhile, there is an alternative point of view, the main idea of which is that “the middle class is a new (for us) social myth” [7, p. 16]. In the view of the concept representatives, the middle class is “a very complicated mythologem” associated with the transference to the Russian reality of external value-conscious images of its potential future, formed by overseeing someone else’s future” [ibid., p. 17].

Multivariate stratification, proposed by M. Weber, P. A. Sorokin and other sociologists is regarded as the most adequate criteria for identifying classes, layers, and strata. Thus, M. Weber considered power, property and prestige as three interacting factors which, in his opinion, underlie the hierarchical structure of any society. According to him, the possession of power, i.e. the possibility of influencing others, runs through all spheres of social life. Property differences generate economic classes; in turn, the economic situation gives an opportunity of (or prevents from) disposing of the goods and the skills for the purpose of income generation within a particular economic system. Differences in attitudes to the authorities give rise to large groups of people, referred to as the parties, and the prestigious differences form groups of people by status [3].

Recognizing the heterogeneity of the phenomenon of “middle class” modern researchers suggest applying the method of cluster analysis of the society and its major groups. The variables that characterize the economic resource, including the income from own business, property; power resource – the ability to affect the decision-making within a specific social organization; qualification resource – level of education, qualifications,

commitment to its improvement; cultural resource as a characteristic of the primary socialization environment, are introduced to identify the main groups within the middle class.

In Russia the problems of the middle class are mainly studied by the sociologists and economists (T.I. Zaslavskaya, A.G. Zdravomyslov, V.V. Radaev, O.I. Shkaratan, N.Ye. Tikhonova, S.V. Goryunova, A.A. Shabu-nova, etc.). The same criteria for the middle class as in the West are applied in modern Russian society, such as: a) medium (for a certain country) level of welfare and permanent income sources; b) high level of education and professional qualification; c) high level of mobility (including within the middle class); d) desire for social stability (the mentality of this social stratum assumes reformism, individualism, support of the existing regime) [see, for example, 6].

According to T.I. Zaslavskaya, the middle class can be rightfully interpreted as performing an interactive function of “social mediator”, because of its intermediate position between the upper and lower strata of society; serving as a social stabilizer, due to the relatively high level of material security; acting as the main agent of technological and socioeconomic progress, due to high intellectual qualifications; carrying public interests and national culture [5, p. 4]. That is what makes the middle class relatively self-sufficient and independent part of the population, which is a sort of “buffer” between the two main poles of the poorest and the richest social strata. Therefore, the thinner the middle stratum, the more likely the confrontation between these two antagonistic groups.

The development of industry, science, education and services contributes to the increasing quantity and quality of the middle class. In industrialized countries the middle class comprises, as a rule, the majority of the population (60 to 70%).

The role of the middle class is that it acts as the main social base of civil society, is an opponent of the big bourgeoisie, high officials

and extremely hostile part of the lowest social strata. In addition, the middle class is the main co-component of productive social forces, capable of working hard, acquiring new skills, being creative, raising a new generation, etc.

The middle class is interested in maintaining the social system, which will provide (create) conditions for successful development. The extreme social strata (the excessively rich and the poor) rightly belong to instability factors.

The monitoring, conducted in 2010 in order to create the strategy of the regions' modernization, makes it possible to describe the state of the social structure of the Russian adult population and separate regions, social wellbeing and the attitude of the population to public institutions, to assess the living standards of different social groups and to highlight some of the general and regional problems facing the country that is trying to carry out modernization.

In accordance with the standard UN methodology, the middle class is distinguished on the basis of several criteria: level of education, financial status and identity.

The statistical data along with the population opinion about their living standards lead to the conclusion that "the number of the poor in the first decade of the 21st century stabilized at the level of one-third of the country's adult population, and along with those, who consider themselves needy, the number makes up 50%" [2, p. 9-10]. These monitoring data are comparable with the results of the European social survey, according to which in 2010, 55% of Russians believed it was difficult or very difficult to live on the income they earn. The "excessive stratification" of citizens by living standards was officially recorded: 10% of the best-to-do Russians get income that is 15-17 times higher than the income of the poorest 10% (according to Rosstat). V.V. Putin, in one of his pre-election articles in 2012 subsumed 20-25% of the Russian population to the middle class.

Analysis of the population assessments with regard to their financial situation, held in the

Vologda Oblast, showed that 9% of residents fell under the group of "the wealthy" and "the rich" in 2010. For the 2008–2009 crisis period the population share of the lowest strata increased in the region – "the needy" and "the indigent" (from 29% to 33%) and "the needy" (from 22% to 26%). Thus, the share of the "well-to-do" accounted for about 32%. A sharp decrease in the social status was observed in 15% of the region's population [9, p. 21].

Head of Rosgosstrakh Centre of Strategic Studies A. Zubets gives the following middle class financial criteria: lower threshold starts at 50 thousand dollars per year, or 46.3 thousand rubles per family member (of 3 people) per month, almost twice the average annual salary in Russia; upper limit – 300 thousand dollars a year for a family, or 277.8 thousand rubles per family member per month [newspaper "Trud", August 2, 2013].

The level of average monthly wages, according to Rosstat data, for the last year (from July, 2012 to July, 2013) indicates the insufficient role of the education factor when defining the middle class: doctors – 38.7 thousand rubles; teachers – 28.9 thousand rubles; kindergarten teachers, cultural workers and social workers – 22.2, 17.9 and 13.2 thousand rubles, respectively [newspaper "Arguments and Facts", No. 333, August 28 – September 3, 2013]. The salaries of University professors with scientific degrees and titles differ just a little from the salaries of doctors and teachers.

However, the subjective assessments of the financial status of a considerable part of the Russians are over estimated (not by income, but by "feeling"). According to "Philosophical encyclopedia", 80% of the Russians (2000) considered themselves well-to-do [6], indicating that the citizens are willing to embellish their situation, to raise a bit their social status.

According to the authors, the considerable discrepancies in assessing the size of the middle class are due to the fact that: a) in some cases, only the income of the family head is taken into

account, while in most of the studies (which is right) the total family income is evenly divided by the number of all family members; b) pensioners constitute about 30% of the population and their allowances amount to 38% of the average gross payroll (according to the 2013 data), so 22% of Russians, living on welfare, have to work; c) the number of middle class in Russia falls heavily at least twice: during default in 1998, and in the 2008–2009 period of crisis.

The peculiarity of the real social strata, defined as the middle class, is that it is an open, complex, unbalanced system, comprising various public groups, experiencing pressure and lower layers and large owners of various administrative structures. One component of this system is the cognitariat – “highly educated employees in the sphere of business, science, culture and other areas of human activities, based on special knowledge and information and applying information technologies” [4, p. 4].

The cognitariat can be identified as creative, intellectual component of the middle class, which forms and can become the core of the middle class in the post-industrial society, to express the interests of the mentally developed representatives of intellectual and manual

workers. It has special movable communications to joint and fight for its own interests – social networks.

The representative of the cognitariat is not a “one dimensional man” of consumer society (H. Marcuse), his actions cannot be strictly predicted. Even small, scientifically unreasonable actions of the authorities or of capital may lead to a sharp structuring of social layer, denoted as “middle class” that is still loose. Openness, nonlinearity of the dynamic system of the modern middle class can lead to the formation of special critical states of society, bifurcation points, beyond which it is difficult to predict the direction and nature of social changes.

All in all, the majority of domestic researchers agree that the middle class is just being formed in Russia, but in the near future it has the prospect of extending at least up to 35-40% of the active population. But only having reached the 60-70% level, it can become the basis of social stability, as its representatives will have something to lose, they will be interested not in unrest and cataclysms, but in the peaceful, sustainable development of the state, and society as a whole.

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