American Jews and the Ambivalence of Middle-Classness*

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Class in the United States may be one of the hardest things to determine, and yet one of the most determinant forces. While this has not always been the case, it has increasingly been so since the end of the Second World War, when a mix of economic prosperity and consumer culture helped spin a fantasy of social equality.¹ The belief in an expanding middle class served as confirmation of fading class lines, but the postwar obsession with talking about the middle class also evidenced that class still mattered in American life. The trouble was how to define class, especially the middle class. The knowledge that class shaped American life, and yet that few Americans could articulate how, bred a particular kind of anxiety. In 1955, for example, Allen Ginsberg excoriated middle-class culture in his poem “Howl,” and that same year Sloan Wilson depicted suburban middle-class life as desperately meaningless in his novel The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit.² Novelists and poets were not alone in searching for a language of middle-classness. In that same era, a group of social critics popularized a new vocabulary about and in many ways for the middle class. In their new terminology, middle class served as shorthand for the typical and normal in American life. It also came to define much of what was wrong in America. The writings of these social critics reflected a wider cultural ambivalence about the power a newly defined mass public—the postwar middle class—might wield. By diagnosing the problems of the middle class, these critics sought to control and contain its potential power.

American Jews shared a deep ambivalence about middle-class power that paralleled broader American trends but also was connected to long-standing anxiety about the consequences of Jews assuming power in the

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non-Jewish world. By their own accounts, American Jews’ economic standing rose remarkably quickly, placing the vast majority of them in the ranks of the middle class by the postwar era. General portraits written about the middle class often similarly characterized American Jews as paradigmatic of the postwar expansion and democratization of the middle class. Yet neither Jews nor other Americans saw this fact as unequivocal reason for celebration. For centuries, Jewish economic success, a sign of Jewish power, stirred resentment in the non-Jewish world. During the enlightenment, Jews’ economic behavior, and stereotypes about it, informed debates about whether Jews were fit for citizenship.

Later, these ideas filtered into the theories of many influential social commentators, even some of Jewish origin. In his famous 1844 essay, “On the Jewish Question,” Karl Marx posited that Jewish money—what he termed the Jews’ “worldly God”—and Jewish “huckstering”—the Jews’ “worldly religion”—dominated Europe, making true emancipation and equality impossible. While his true nemesis was bourgeois society, Marx’s contention that Jewish economic power perpetuated societal ills fueled pernicious conspiracy theories about Jews that arose in the late nineteenth century. In the United States, Jews hoped to prove their Americanness precisely through their rising economic status. Yet, although America was not Europe, suspicion about Jews’ economic success followed them across the Atlantic. During the Great Depression, some populist leaders, respinning Marx’s almost century-old conclusions, tried to characterize Jews as at the helm of an economic system that benefited them more than others. When economic times were better, however, Americans tended


4. To be certain, many Jews entered the middle class before the postwar era, but according to socioeconomic gauges, and in popular discourse, American Jews were recognized as a generally middle-class population after the Second World War.

5. Derek Penslar’s study of Jewish economic life in modern Europe has helped me think about the ways in which Jewish economic behavior and stereotypes about that behavior helped create Jewish identity. See Penslar, Shylock’s Children: Economics and Jewish Identity in Modern Europe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). For the classic study about the dynamic tension between Jewish participation in non-Jewish society and Jewish exclusion from it, see Jacob Katz, Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Studies in Jewish-Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times (New York: Schocken Books, 1962).

6. For a complete copy of this essay, see http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/jewish-question/index.htm (accessed May 11, 2007).

7. On antisemitic harangues during the Great Depression, see Alan Brinkley, Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin and the Great Depression (New York: Vintage Books,
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to eschew socialist-tinged rejections of capitalism. Instead they believed that money was a legitimate marker of success.

In many ways, Jewish middle-classness was just the kind of success story Americans loved to hear and tell about themselves. Jews helped create American lore about boundless opportunity and individual pluck. American Jews living in new suburbs, full of new homes, new cars, and new consumer goods worked to prove that they could strengthen a middle-class American public and thus American national interests. Yet Jews perceived that the same middle class structure that was expanding to make room for them was hastening two transformations in American life: the effacement of certain lines of social difference that had once seemed inviolable and the empowerment of a mass public. Jews, and especially their leaders, were conflicted about both of these changes. Indisputably, an inclusive and large middle class offered Jews an unprecedented level of acceptance and security. Jewish leaders also believed that it threatened the very basis of Jewish life. An underlying anxiety about Jewish power and Jews’ relationship to non-Jewish power structures framed the way Jewish intellectuals and leaders described Jewish middle-classness and echoed larger American concerns about power, and in whose hands it should reside.

Whether Jews were assimilated into the new mass public, becoming just like other American middle classers, or were victims of that new mass public, many Jewish leaders feared middle class expansion. The concept of an undifferentiated mass public had become central in a number of Jewish intellectuals’ efforts to explain why Nazism had succeeded and how it could be prevented. They suggested that when a public grew into a mass, it lost any moral compass. Driven by the pressures of conformity and an overwhelming sense of anonymity, a seemingly normal public could become complicit in a genocidal system. Jewish leaders worried that for all the security Jews might gain from an expanding middle class, they stood to lose just as much.

Historians have tended to level invective against the postwar American middle class, replicating the kind of vitriol that social critics produced at the time. Similarly, those scholars studying American Jewish history often portray the middle class as vacuous and shallow, in contrast to a vaunted working class. Although one may interpret this historiographic trend it-


self as an indication of deep cultural ambivalence about middle-classness, historians have overlooked the roots of that ambivalence. Instead they often label the postwar middle class as consensus driven and incapable of challenging power structures. Such a narrative has guided historical assessments of American Jews. Yet, as I argue, it demands retelling, and here I start to do just that by showing how Jewish leaders created a language of middle-class ambivalence, melding popular social criticism with Jewish concerns about communal identity, religious normativity, gender ideals, and family stability. From the ways that Jews classified themselves as part of the middle class to their participation—whether as authors or examples—in postwar social criticism, it is impossible to ignore the multilayered anxiety that Jews felt about middle-classness. Middle-class ambivalence—and not simply middle-class conformity—became central to the public articulation of American Jewishness by the second half of the twentieth century.

Ways of Knowing Jewish Middle-Classness

In the late 1950s, a Jewish sociologist enthused, “The Jew is not only a member of a religious minority, but also part of the majority of Americans known as the middle class.” His assertion that Jews were, indeed, members of the middle class echoed in countless pronouncements

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that Jews made about themselves at the time and that historians have made since. The public act of classifying Jews as middle class was, to an extent, self-fulfilling: the more Jews pronounced themselves part of the middle class, the more they felt as if they truly were middle class. In calling themselves middle class, they also participated in a clearly American pattern. A Fortune poll conducted in 1940 discovered that 79 percent of Americans identified themselves as members of the middle class. Over the next decade, the percentage only increased.10

Why did the vast majority of Americans classify themselves as middle class, so much so that a Jewish sociologist could proclaim Jews’ middle-classness an indication of their acceptance into the majority culture? Far from an empirical reality, middle-classness was a self-conscious category that individuals and groups employed to characterize economic, cultural, social, and political behavior.11 Starting in the 1920s, cultural authorities and experts, especially social scientists, sought to hone their tools to encapsulate the core characteristics of American life. Convinced that firsthand observation of Americans living their lives could be converted

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into data sets indicative of norms, they sculpted a new set of standards to define normalcy and deviance. Increasingly, they used the terminology of middle-classness as shorthand for that which was most fundamentally American. 12

Class was of persistent interest to researchers studying the American public, especially because American class structure appeared so distinct from European class models, most importantly Marxist ones. Researchers such as Robert and Helen Lynd in their famous Middletown studies or W. Lloyd Warner and his colleagues, who examined so-called “Yankee City,” believed that to understand American life one had to understand how class functioned. Over and over, they noted that the class system, far from creating a rigid boundary among groups, was an instrument for individual and group reinvention. One could behave, consume, and earn as if one belonged to a higher class and, by and by, one would indeed belong to that class. In the 1940s, Warner noted that even so-called “ethnic minorities” such as Jews, Greeks, or Armenians were gaining a foothold on America’s class ladder and working their way up. Only “Negroes,” he noted, remained isolated “from the general life of the community,” no matter their economic status. 13 Class identity, in other words, transcended almost every ethnic boundary. He implied that those ethnic groups that did not rise into the middle class exposed themselves to invidious comparisons with black Americans and undermined the logic of opportunity that justified American class and race structure.

For Jews, proclamations of their arrival into the middle class went hand in hand with attempts to secure their membership in white America. Certain public moments, like the tercentenary of Jewish settlement in America celebrated in 1954, elicited particularly self-conscious pronouncements of Jewish middle-classness. 14 “One way or another,” Harvard historian Oscar Handlin wrote on the occasion, “the Jews were coming to conform to the standards of middle-class life in America.” 15 Likewise,

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in the volume of the *American Jewish Year Book* issued to celebrate the tercentenary, sociologist Nathan Glazer described the trajectory of Jewish life in America as marked by “the tone of respectable, prosperous, ‘middle class’ existence.”

While American Jewish leaders took great pride in the facts and figures evidencing Jewish accumulation of wealth, most also realized that the same information made Jews vulnerable. A 1947 *Fortune* poll reported that more than one third of Americans believed that Jews were “getting more economic power . . . than is good for the country.” Statistics, such as those generated from the 1957 Current Population Survey on Religion, which contained a limited amount of personal information cross-tabulated by religion, seemed possible fodder for American suspicion about Jewish wealth and power. The data appeared to confirm that Jews, according to income and profession, occupied higher class positions than other white Americans. For example, only 3.6 percent of American males reported incomes over $10,000 compared to 17 percent of Jewish males.

Faced with a public prone to associate Jewish economic success with threateningly high levels of Jewish power, many Jews felt pressed to create a public discourse about their economic status. Crafting an explanation for Jewish success was no easy task because it begged the question of how Jews talked about their power. Economic success, of course, could serve to confirm Jews’ value to America and their ability to fit into American life. Yet there was no question that Jewish power, whether perceived by non-Jews or felt by Jews, also was dangerous. For one, antisemitism often met assertions of Jewish power. Furthermore, many Jewish leaders feared that too high a level of comfort in the diaspora would itself undermine what it meant to be Jewish.

Jews tended to employ two different and often contradictory ideological statements to account for their middle-classness, one that proffered


Jewish success as proof of American opportunity, and the other that characterized Jewish success as a measure of the unique and superior attributes of Jewishness. In the first, Jews praised the United States as the unending source of opportunity, a place where the children of poor immigrants, no matter their religion or nationality, could make good. Indeed, if America extended its riches to Jews, a people so clearly outside of the mainstream, then it certainly would extend them to any other group. Yet alongside these paeans to American opportunity, Jews also praised their own exceptionalism. According to this second explanation of Jewish middle-classness, Jews described their success in superlatives that distinguished them from other Americans, especially other minority groups. In the tercentenary edition of the *American Jewish Year Book*, Nathan Glazer explained, “[T]he rise in the social and economic position of the Jews has been extremely rapid, far surpassing that which can be shown for any other immigrant group, and indeed surpassing, for the same period, changes in the socioeconomic position of long-settled groups.”

By the end of the decade, another sociologist described it as common wisdom that “American Jews have climbed the social status ladder more quickly and achieved middle-class status more widely than any other ethnic group during the same period of American history.”

Jews were torn between acknowledging their debt to America and celebrating their success as an indication of their distinctiveness from other Americans. Claims about distinctive Jewish economic behavior inevitably raised questions about the meaning and form of Jewish difference. For at least a century, various intellectuals had argued that the essence of Jewishness could be discerned through Jews’ economic behavior. German social scientists in the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries explained that Jews’ ability to thrive in capitalist economies was predetermined by Jewish racial attributes. Werner Sombart, a non-Jew, was best known for this thesis, but Arthur Ruppin, the most important Jewish social scientist of the time, agreed with and extended Sombart’s theory. In his 1904 treatise, *The Jews of To-Day*, he affirmed that “the Jewish race is the incarnation of the capitalist-business spirit.”

After World War II, Jewish social scientists explicitly rejected racial explanations of Jewish economic behavior, characterizing such explanations as, at best, impossible to substantiate and, at worst, fodder for antisemitic claims.\textsuperscript{22} Yet they could not simply dismiss racial explanations without offering an alternative vocabulary to explain why Jews as a group tended to succeed in capitalist economies. One could have argued that the two variables—Jewishness and economic success—were entirely unconnected. American Jews, however, had too much at stake simply to deny a connection. In the first place, it was clear to them that others would make the connection, so they were better off trying to define the terms of it than denying it. Just as importantly, many Jews believed that drawing a clear link between Jewishness and economic success could strengthen Jewish group pride and, at the same time, prove just how useful Jews—as Jews—were to America.

The popularity of the language of culture offered postwar Jews a way of explaining Jewish economic success as a function of unique Jewish attributes, but not as evidence of a racialized conception of Jewishness. Often, however, the line between cultural explanations and racial ones seemed no sharper than a semantic one. Many sociologists employed the vocabulary of culture to create just as inevitable a link between Jewishness and economic success as the vocabulary of race had.\textsuperscript{23} When asked from where Jewish cultural values arose, sociologists tended to characterize them as products of history, substituting historical experience for racial inevitability. University of Pennsylvania sociologist William Kephart, for example, contended that “from a historical viewpoint . . . one statement appears reasonably sound: the Jewish economic philosophy and capitalism came from the same mold.”\textsuperscript{24} Sounding remarkably like Sombart way that demographic data about Jews was collected and interpreted and also secured a place of prominence for Jewish social science.

\textsuperscript{22} In part, the rejection of racial explanations of Jewishness stemmed from the effectiveness with which Hitler had employed these ideas for Nazi propaganda. See Alan Steinweis, \textit{Studying the Jew: Scholarly Antisemitism in Nazi Germany} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

\textsuperscript{23} I am drawing on Peggy Pascoe’s work about the ways in which the language of culture, while seemingly more flexible than race, was still often used to assert immutable and essential differences between groups of people. See Pascoe, “Race, Gender, and Intercultural Relations: The Case of Interracial Marriage,” \textit{Frontiers} 12 (1991): 5-18; and Pascoe, “Miscegenation Law, Court Cases, and Ideologies of ‘Race’ in Twentieth-Century America,” \textit{Journal of American History} 83 (Jun. 1996): 44-69. For a nuanced discussion that traces how Jews employed racial vocabulary and ideology, even in the post-World War II era, see Eric L. Goldstein, \textit{The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), chap. 8.

\textsuperscript{24} Kephart, “What is the Position of Jewish Economy,” 155.
and Ruppin, he explained that a long history of persecution, restrictions against owning land, and exclusions from many occupations forced Jews to develop skills that ultimately were most prized in modern capitalist economies. To this historically based interpretation, other sociologists added that the majority of Jews as well happened to arrive in America during a period of economic boom.

Middle-classness, when described as culturally and historically determined, could be seen through the lens of universal social rules that would operate in kind for all groups of people, not only the Jews. Nathan Hurvitz, for example, a sociologist at University of Southern California, explained in 1958 that although most Jews were not middle class before coming to America, their “latent attitudes, values and goals were of the middle class.” Using the most general language, Hurvitz posited that “just as different social classes have differential rates of mobility, so also do various ethnic groups; and those ethnic groups which achieve more rapid social mobility have the requisite value orientations and the necessary achievement motivations associated with American middle-class life.” By creating a social rule about middle-class arrival—governed by the vague terminology of “value orientations” and “achievement motivations”—Hurvitz was able to credit Jews with their rapid rise into the American middle class without painting them as entirely exceptional.

Far from a rarified academic argument, the notion that certain ethnic groups had greater middle-class proclivities than others was central to popular mid-century social criticism. For example, writing in 1963, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan employed just such a framework to analyze American ethnic life in *Beyond the Melting Pot*. As opposed to Jews, who they believed came to America already set on a course toward middle class success, “Negroes emerging from slavery had no experience with money, and had no occasion to develop the skill in the planning and foresight that even the smallest businessman must have.” In addition to their conviction that blacks were not historically situated to succeed economically, Glazer and Moynihan also argued that they lacked the requisite cultural skills to remedy their historical situation.

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27. Hurvitz drew on W. Lloyd Warner’s work to distill the key characteristics of middle-classness. Hurvitz, “Sources of Middle-Class Values,” 118.
28. Ibid.
By attributing economic success to a group’s culture and history, these sociologists neglected the ways in which the American economic system itself created unequal opportunities for different groups of people.  

Jews, of course, did not look exclusively to social researchers to define their middle-classness. As a number of historians have shown, when postwar Jews were depicted in popular culture, they increasingly bore attributes that marked them as middle class. In decades past, Yiddish accents, inner-city neighborhoods, and homes bustling with extended families had distinguished Jewish characters on stage, in films, or on the radio. By the 1950s, most of the Jews represented in popular culture lived in the suburbs, spoke clear English, and lived only with their nuclear families. For example, television’s best-known Jewish family, the Goldbergs, left their Bronx apartment for the suburb of “Haverville” in 1955. Philip Roth’s “Goodbye Columbus,” the title story of his 1959 collection of short stories, similarly explored the terrain of the latest Jewish migration: from city to suburb and from working class to middle class. The story juxtaposed the new world of middle-class Jewish suburbia with the old world of Jewish urbanism through the tormented relationship between the narrator, Neil Klugman, and Brenda Patimkin. Neil’s family represented the bygone days of working class Jewry: an extended family living together in a deteriorating Newark apartment building. Brenda’s family embodied the middle-class ideal: a mom, dad, and two kids inhabiting a large suburban New Jersey home.

Roth believed it was a foregone conclusion that Jews would land in the new world of middle-class suburbia, and he, like many Jewish and non-Jewish writers, was right. For scholars who have issued just this kind of criticism against postwar sociologists, see Matthew Frye Jacobson, Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); and Stephen Steinberg, The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in America (New York: Atheneum, 1981).

30. For scholars who have issued just this kind of criticism against postwar sociologists, see Matthew Frye Jacobson, Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); and Stephen Steinberg, The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in America (New York: Atheneum, 1981).


non-Jewish social critics of the time, mocked it, less to destroy it than to control and reform it. As Jews attempted to categorize and classify their middle-classness, postwar social critics were crafting a new and popular vocabulary for talking about the American middle class more generally. While Jews were not a special focus of any of their studies, Jews, either as critics themselves or as pointed examples, were clear participants in the new paradigms and anxieties of American middle-classness.

The Middle Class and Its Malcontents

In 1951 sociologist C. Wright Mills published *White Collar*. A photograph on the cover of the book showed a lone man walking. His eyes, partially hidden by a derby hat, were cast downward toward the sidewalk, and the white of his shirt collar, peeking out from his long overcoat, contrasted with the massive neo-classical columns looming next to him. Here, scurrying anonymously on the city street, was one of the “new little people, the unwilling vanguard of modern society.” With disgust and a measure of sorrow, Mills characterized the American middle class as “estranged from community . . . alienated from work and . . . from self; and politically apathetic.” This litany of disparagements would be repeated over the next decade.

Postwar social critics such as Vance Packard, William Whyte, David Riesman, Betty Friedan, and Max Lerner (the last three Jewish) constructed middle-classness as a trope for America’s cultural deficits. With the exception of Mills, who truly believed in a Marxist socialism, none of these social critics were interested in disrupting American capitalism. Instead they defined and popularized postwar middle-class ambivalence. These social critics celebrated American opportunity as a fact while also seeking to reform middle-class culture to align with their own social visions. Some suggested ways to retain white (and, in some cases, Protestant and male) privilege, or worried about the status of the individual, or, conversely, the fate of true communal attachments, and many grounded their views in an avowed—though often quite contradictory—commitment to liberalism. Although few of them had training in ethnography or social science, they tended to use the methods of social science—surveys,
community studies, and interviews—to speak authoritatively about the
typical middle-class experience and to issue invective against it. Most
generally, these postwar critics bemoaned the lack of awareness that
middle-class Americans showed about their own station in life; in Mills’
words, the middle class was mindlessly “acted upon.”

Massive, yet wanting in self-consciousness and craving the comfort of conformity, the
middle class presented itself as ripe for exploitation. In their polemical
studies of middle-class life, mid-century social critics supplied Americans
with a language for middle-class ambivalence. Foundational to how Jews,
like other Americans, understood themselves in the postwar years, this
language reified the middle class into the American norm, while warning
against leaving its power unchecked.

The striking success of David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd*, one of
the earliest books to attempt to portray postwar middle-class life, proved
that the American public was eager to consume portraits of itself, no
matter how unflattering. Over one million copies of it were sold within
two decades after its 1950 publication. Riesman, aided by researchers
Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney, offered a chronological typology of
the American character. His conclusion was that while earlier generations
of Americans had relied upon inner-directed cues to guide their lives,
twentieth-century Americans were more and more other-directed. This
shift meant that instead of drawing upon internalized resources—culled
from cultural authorities and tradition—to navigate their world, Ameri-
cans were now constantly searching for external sources to guide their
behavior, values, and even emotions. According to Riesman, other-di-
rectedness was the dominant characteristic of the American middle class
and set the patterns—and problems—of middle-classness. All societies
depended upon a level of conformity for their successful operation, but
in a society of other-directed people, mass conformity entirely eclipsed
individuality and issued a persistent threat.

A Jewish man writing in the wake of World War II, Riesman’s trepi-
dation about the conformity of other-directed people was informed by
Jewish intellectuals’ theories explaining totalitarianism and authoritarian-
ism. In the late 1940s, intellectual German-Jewish émigrés such as Han-
nah Arendt and Theodor Adorno had suggested that regimes of terror
succeeded by drawing upon people’s need to feel social belonging and

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36. For sales figures for the best-selling books written by American sociologists, see
Herbert Gans, *Making Sense of America: Sociological Analyses and Essays* (New York:
37. David Riesman, Reuel Denney, and Nathan Glazer, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of
their willingness to cede their individualism in return for that belonging. According to these thinkers, in societies where people became convinced that group belonging was an essential cultural ideal, they also tended to accept anonymity and authority with little critical awareness. Most frighteningly, these intellectuals believed, intense craving for belonging often led those oppressed by a system to acquiesce blindly to it. In the name of the group, a member of such a society could be convinced to follow orders, even inhumane or self-destructive ones. Other-directed people not so incidentally exhibited many of the traits that postwar intellectuals, in their desperation to make Nazism rational, had described as pathological preconditions for totalitarianism.

By the mid-1950s, Riesman’s terminology for and criticism of middle-class character had entered the American vernacular. Riesman was a professional sociologist (though he did not have a doctorate) with an academic post at the University of Chicago, but he wrote for an audience—the masses of other-directed Americans—well beyond his discipline. *The Lonely Crowd* was readable, and even Americans who did not read it encountered its conclusions in popular culture. In 1954, for example, *Time* magazine featured Riesman on its cover and devoted several pages to explaining—and establishing—the cultural weight of his argument.

As the fifties progressed, middle-class Americans were increasingly the subjects of popular social criticism. Two of the most influential portraits of and idioms for middle-class life came from William Whyte’s

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The Organization Man and Vance Packard’s Status Seekers. Both books benefited from pithy titles that encapsulated and created catch phrases for their arguments. In his 1956 book, Whyte explained that every American aspired to be an “Organization Man,” willing to squelch his individuality to feel included in the collective. In order for the system to remain stable (and the powerful to remain powerful), enforcers of middle-class life thwarted creativity and individuality: universities prepared people for corporate teamwork; suburbs trained people to seek out “belonging”; and churches and synagogues focused on congregation, not belief. Indeed, so hungry were Americans for belonging that they established clubs and associations just so they could feel like they belonged. The obsession with being part of a group, according to Whyte, bred mediocrity and “false collectivization.”

Max Lerner, another social critic who achieved some renown as a columnist for popular magazines including The Nation, the New York Post, and Playboy, described the same state of affairs as “enforced intimacy.”

Whyte mourned the demise of the Protestant Ethic and the rise of what he termed a Social Ethic. The Protestant Ethic, he believed, had once guarded individualism and endowed it with moral meaning. The new Social Ethic, analogous in many ways to Riesman’s description of other-directedness, “makes morally legitimate the pressures of society against the individual.” In eulogizing the Protestant Ethic, Whyte implicitly lamented the end of the Protestant establishment. Now, the kinds of Americans who were entering the ranks of the middle class were immigrants and their children; they were not old Americans, comfortable in their belonging. The cues of middle-class life did not come naturally to them. They searched instead for models to copy—from advertising, from popular culture, from people who seemed to be in the know—and they copied one another. Whether individuality had reigned more supreme in the past was less clear than the fact that people who were joining the American mainstream in the present were eroding the power of the old mainstream.

42. Whyte, The Organization Man, 7.
A contemporary social critic, Vance Packard, targeted the advertising industry as responsible for creating a conformist, manipulable middle-class. In *The Hidden Persuaders*, published in 1957, Packard argued that advertisers banked on mass conformity, persuading people of all backgrounds that they needed the same product. Advertisers, he explained, were particularly invested in the decline of American individuality; conformists, not individualists, were prone to respond to advertisers’ assertions that everyone needed—or everyone else already had—a particular product. Not a Marxist, his critique did not extend to an indictment of capitalism as the engine behind advertising. In the wake of his book’s modest success, Packard sought to write another that would even more strikingly reveal the machinations of American life. *The Status Seekers*, published in 1959 and modeled explicitly after Whyte’s *Organization Man*, was just that.

*The Status Seekers* topped the bestseller list shortly after it was published and remained on the list for a full year. Like Whyte, Packard deplored the end of individuality and worried that middle-class life dulled creativity and people’s drive to differentiate themselves from one another. Middle-class Americans, on a constant quest for “visible evidence of the superior rank they are claiming,” used things like real estate, club membership, church affiliation, and, even, accents to prove their status. These status markers concealed the true differences among people, replacing them with false symbols that were bought not earned. Distinctiveness withered and conformity reigned as status seekers marched in step, ready to be seduced by the next tangible sign of progress.

Whyte and Packard, both journalists, wrote for a literate, mainly middle-class public. Although Whyte conducted some of his own research in a Chicago suburb, he and Packard were translators and interpreters more than they were originators. Woven into their criticisms of middle-class life were suggestions, some more explicit than others, as to how the middle class could learn to help and improve itself. In the appendix to his book, for example, Whyte included a detailed set of instructions about “How to Cheat on Personality Tests.” Mockery aside, optimism

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44. Daniel Horowitz explains that Packard wanted to secure his position as a social critic and sought out a topic for his next book that would touch a “national nerve.” See Horowitz, *Vance Packard and American Social Criticism*, 110, 133.


about America prevailed in their portrayals of middle-class life. Packard and Whyte instructed individuals to change their ways so the American dream could truly be attained. Instead of mindlessly joining suburban associations, buying all the products advertisers hyped as middle-class necessities, and paying obeisance to the value of teamwork, Americans were charged with focusing anew on difference. They had to relearn the fact that not everyone could be—or should be—the same, a corrective to the belief that consumer goods or personal affects could transform someone into whom he or she was not.

Packard and Whyte suggested that the middle class suffered from a mass form of emasculation brought on by men who had forgotten how to be men. According to Packard, women were more susceptible to status anxiety than men, but they turned this weakness into power over men. In the throes of insatiable envy, they bullied their husbands into becoming effete cogs, Whyte’s Organization Men. Betty Friedan, who had clearly read both men’s books, wrote *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 as a terrifying glimpse into the world of middle-class women. Yet hardly flush with power, the women she wrote about were even more isolated and desperate in their meaningless worlds than their husbands. They too suffered from middle-class malaise as they bided their time in the “comfortable concentration camp” of their suburban homes. Only if Americans became individuals again, distinguished from neighbors and coworkers by their thoughts, their passions, and their creative impulses, could they resist peril. Only then would the American experiment continue properly.

Nazism and communism, the stuff of nightmares in the 1950s, loomed forebodingly in postwar social criticism. As if by writing about the dangers of an undifferentiated middle-class mass they could control it, social critics situated their polemics in Manichean terms. In a stirring conclusion, Whyte reminded Americans that they had the power to make choices about their lives, and in doing so could “turn the future away from the dehumanized collective that so haunts our thoughts.”

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distinctiveness were the antidotes to mob power and amoral society, yet both Whyte and Packard acknowledged that the success of American middle-classness was in its massiveness and the common culture it offered Americans, no matter where they came from or how they worshipped. Of course, to make this argument they largely ignored African Americans, whose distinctiveness they did not celebrate and whose access to American opportunity was fettered.

Whyte and Packard did, however, draw special attention to Jews, whom they depicted as consummate middle classers precisely because they had ventured into the middle class from a position of outsiderhood. “Jews have been adopting the values of the middle-class majority,” Whyte observed. “Not only does suburbia tend to attract Jews who are less ‘different’; it speeds up the process in which anyone—Jewish or non-Jewish—becomes even less ‘different.’”50 Herein was the anxiety of American middle-classness: in its openness it destroyed boundaries, and without boundaries, people would congeal into one unthinking, powerful, and dangerous mass. For American Jews in particular this anxiety magnified already festering worries about how to maintain communal boundaries and still be American, and how to negotiate Jewish power in diaspora.

Middle-Classness as the New Jewish Problem

Middle-classness offered innumerable advantages for Jews, including material comfort and a sense of security about their lives in the United States. Yet in the 1950s a vocal set of Jewish leaders and intellectuals identified it as the source of Jewish decline. While they were not in agreement about whether religious laxity, the weakening of group bonds, familial instability, or materialism was the true sign of degeneration, they were uniform in condemning middle-classness as a Jewish problem. Informed by a growing body of Jewish sociology, these public spokespeople defined middle-classness as the Jewish norm, yet echoing popular social critics, they warned against the deficits of middle-class culture. Among the Jewish leaders most intent upon identifying and remedying the problems of Jewish middle-classness were Jewish social scientists. Often using even more authoritative language than rabbis’ pronouncements, they diagnosed the problems of Jewish middle-classness and prescribed new modes of Jewishness that would neither surrender class comfort nor Jewish authenticity.51

50. Ibid., 374.
What Jewish leaders feared in the middle class was ultimately Jewish loss on multiple fronts. Yet their anxiety did not take the form of rejecting middle-class Jewishness as much as it did rearticulating it.

While conformity was the key word to convey the anxieties of American middle-classness, assimilation became the key word to communicate the tensions of Jewish middle-classness. In many ways, communal-oriented anxieties about assimilation were harder to express than were concerns about waning individualism. After all, the idea of individuality was enshrined in American lore, so one could be nostalgic for the loss of it—a powerful rhetorical device if nothing else. The idea of the group (smaller than the nation, larger than the individual), however, did not have the same romantic history in the United States, and starting in the mid-nineteenth century, thinkers and politicians worried that group affiliations, especially ethnic ones, hindered American advancement and American values.

Well before World War II, many sociologists had studied the process of assimilation, designating it as an inevitable endpoint of cultural contact, whereby the group would no longer exist in any important sense. Yet postwar Jewish social scientists and leaders helped assign assimilation a more subtle and supple meaning. Jews, they explained, could be functionally assimilated without abandoning their Jewishness, just as an individual could be a conformist without consciously giving up his or her individuality. Furthermore, like conformity in an individual’s life, assimilation in the life of the group came with a steep price. The price of Jewish assimilation was Jewish authenticity. The faces of this kind of assimilation were many: secularization, the feminization of Jewish life, and the decline of radical politics were all perceived, at various moments, as gauges of assimilationist tendencies. Middle-classness and suburbanization, however, emerged as two of the clearest signals of assimilation.

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52. My use of the phrase “key words” is influenced by Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). Derek Penslar argues that Jewish distinctiveness has historically been maintained in part through economic distinctiveness. See Penslar, *Shylock’s Children*.


As Roth’s fiction intimated, Jewishness in America had been formed in tandem with industrial American urbanism: its street life and lack of privacy, working class culture, and political activism. What then would happen to Jews who left urban working-class space? By the 1950s, Jewish sociologists were as confident as Roth that the Jewish future—whatever it might bring—would play out in the suburbs, a space that was almost always defined as middle class. Albert Isaac Gordon, a Conservative rabbi and a trained sociologist, argued in *Jews in Suburbia* (1959) that suburban Jews “changed the location and often the character of Jewish community life in America.” He described suburbia as “the symbol of Utopia—the middle-class Shangri-La.” Yet Jewish social scientists and rabbis alike worried that authentic Jewishness, which in retrospect—if nothing more—had thrived in the city, withered in the suburb. Gordon himself believed that some of the suburban Jews he studied and ministered to had lost their Jewish moorings to a tainted middle-classness: “Lacking the understanding and support of their Hebraic traditions and group life, some suburban Jews fall prey to the current cultural ‘success system’ and, in their own insecurity, scramble madly after prestige and power.” Another sociological study argued that the higher class status a Jew occupied, the less traditionally Jewish she or he was likely to be.

Pitting middle-class success against religion and cultural vibrancy, many social scientists and rabbis agreed that suburban life threatened to turn Jewish life into a weaker and more assimilated version of itself. In the early 1960s Morris Kertzer, a rabbi at a large Long Island Reform temple,
L.C. Berman: Jews and the Ambivalence of Middle-Classness

delivered several sermons about the problems of middle-classness. In his view, Jews were “the most middle class and the most affluent segment of . . . society,” a fact that ironically explained Jewish decline.  

Religious creativity, he explained in another sermon, thrived in a state of poverty; spirituality was not an organic outgrowth of affluence. For this reason, Kertzer explained, “Those of us in synagogue and church life who are seriously concerned with the abiding values of life will have to devote some of our mental energies to creating a spiritual climate that can have meaning in our abundant society.”

Although Gordon had discovered that suburban Jews, more so than their urban counterparts, joined synagogues, he, like Kertzer, maintained that secularization could go hand in hand with synagogue membership. When he probed deeper, he discovered that only 1.8 percent of his sample gave “I am religious” as the reason for their religious affiliation. Many more explained that they joined synagogues so they could send their children to religious school. Contemporary studies of Jewish suburban life similarly found that children-centered Jewishness thrived in the suburbs. Herbert Gans, a young sociologist who studied Jewish life in a suburb of Chicago, discovered that, when asked why they built a synagogue, Jewish residents answered that they wanted a place where their children could attend Sunday school. He concluded, “[M]any parents reject involvement in the cultural-religious aspects of the Jewish tradition for themselves as adults, while they demand that their children involve themselves to the extent of learning about this tradition, without, however, getting so involved as to wish to practice it.” This, he explained, was a hallmark of Jewish middle-class behavior.

If the infantilization of Judaism was one sign that Jewish life was becoming debased in a middle-class milieu, its feminization was another potentially more devastating one. Suburbs, the stomping ground of the postwar middle class, were women’s places by day, and some Jewish leaders feared suburban Judaism was similarly becoming the domain of women. Gordon noted that a new cadre of women was replacing the male leaders of decades past. “In my opinion,” he wrote, “this does not necessarily connote a healthy condition within the synagogue,” since

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Jewish women lacked the knowledge and training to lead the Jewish people. Just as social critics had warned that gender disorder was a sign of larger middle-class woes, Gordon and other Jewish leaders characterized female empowerment as an unhappy by-product of middle-class life and another indication of Jewish decline. Judaism as children’s play or women’s work signaled the loss of authentic Jewishness and thus paved the way toward assimilation.

Status hungry, soulless, and feminized, suburban middle-class Jews were often characterized as suffering from the same deprivations as other middle-class Americans, as if in their middle-class malaise they might become as American as anyone else. Yet the fact of the matter was that postwar suburban Jews continued to behave in certain ways that marked them as Jewish. The question was whether Jewish middle-classness could merge an authentic Jewish and American identity or if it threatened to undermine both. Writing in 1961, a team of sociologists observed that Jews preserved a Jewish “intimate core”; their spouses and close friends were almost always Jewish, and many even described their values as stemming from Jewish ideas. However, in their study, a survey of Jewish life in Minneapolis, they found that 62 percent of Jews believed there was no difference between a Jew and a non-Jew except his or her religious affiliation and that almost one-third said being Jewish made no difference in their lives. The authors, Judith Kramer and Seymour Leventman, concluded that middle-class Judaism was “watered down” so as to be a tool for Jews to gain acceptance into mainstream society. Pitting true Jewishness against middle-classness, they argued that with the expansion of one, the other would be forced to contract. Marshall Sklare, a well-known sociologist, wrote an irate review of the Minneapolis study, accusing Kramer and Leventman of “suffer[ing] from the same disease that afflicts many other Jewish intellectuals” —namely, hatred of “the Jewish bourgeoisie.” Sklare was no optimist when it

64. Gordon, Jews in Suburbia, 63.
67. Ibid., 192–94.
68. Ibid., 167.
came to the Jewish future. Starting in the 1960s, he issued frequent warnings about the rising rate of intermarriage. But he also saw little merit in decrying middle-class Jewish life. Instead he hoped to craft a vocabulary that could convince middle-class Jews to preserve meaningful Jewish lives by changing their politics and frankly asserting a new kind of Jewish power and pride.\textsuperscript{70}

That power and pride found its most fruitful expression in the burgeoning language of ethnicity. As it was theorized and lived in the postwar decades, ethnic expression served as a corrective to middle-class conformity. Herbert Gans, who wrote broadly on the topic of ethnicity, explained that, unlike immigrants and their children who shed their distinctive identities on the path toward American success, suburban middle-class Americans felt little need to “surrender their ethnicity to gain upward mobility.”\textsuperscript{71} Middle-class Americans, already quite similar to one another, were increasingly invested in fighting “cultural homogenization,” by “establish[ing] their differences from each other.”\textsuperscript{72} Another Jewish sociologist, Milton Gordon, agreed that ethnicity guarded against the middle class transforming itself into an undifferentiated mob. “[B]eing a middle-class Jew,” he explained, “is not the same thing as being a middle-class Gentile except for the additional factor of being Jewish.”\textsuperscript{73} In other words, precisely because Jews could be middle class, post-Holocaust social critics’ hysteria about an undifferentiated mob-like middle class was unwarranted.

Ethnicity wed middle-classness to group distinctiveness. For Jews, the language of ethnicity blurred Jewish pride and success with the general phenomenon of cultural nationalism. Through ethnicity, Jews could assert power, though of a rather generic kind. If even white Anglo-Saxon


Protestants could be ethnic, as some theorists of ethnicity maintained, then Jews had no reason to think that they would be singled out for their economic success in America. The language of ethnicity, however, could not entirely resolve Jews’ ambivalence about middle-classness. Some worried that Jewish ethnicity was just as enfeebled and inauthentic as Jewish assimilation. Conversely, others wondered if ethnic Jewish pride would reignite the problems associated with Jews’ expressing power in a non-Jewish society. Regardless, as the twentieth century progressed, it was less and less possible to disentangle Jewishness from middle-classness in the United States.

Generative Ambivalence

The persistent airing of cultural fears about middle-classness did not thwart Jewish upward mobility. Indeed, these conversations reified middle-classness and confirmed Jews’ involvement in it. Yet they also provided a vocabulary for ambivalence, self-criticism, and fear. Jews’ self-conscious investment in distinctiveness arose as an antidote to conformity and assimilation. Still, critics wondered if the types of distinctiveness made allowable through postwar ethnicity were a thin veil for an overwhelming conformity. And as the cold war escalated, some American leaders grew suspicious that overwrought individuality and group distinctiveness threatened American unity. In their eyes, nonconformity was more dangerous than conformity.

74. Glazer and Moynihan, in the conclusion of their study of ethnicity in New York City, contend that “white Protestants are a distinct ethnic group in New York.” See Beyond the Melting Pot, 314. On white ethnicity more generally, see Jacobson, Roots Too; and Joshua Zeitz, White Ethnic New York: Jews, Catholics, and the Shaping of Postwar Politics (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

75. Anthropologist Sherry Ortner persuasively argues that class and ethnic identity in America are continually intermingled. See Ortner, “Identities: The Hidden Life of Class”; and Ortner, New Jersey Dreaming.

76. Will Herberg was best known for this critique. See Herberg, Protestant-Catholic-Jew.

Far from an era of consensus, the postwar years brought with them a powerful language of middle-class ambivalence.78 American social critics and Jewish leaders pushed Jews to think about the loss and anxiety that accompanied their class journeys. While some Jews had already been ensconced in middle-class life well before the postwar era, many were recent migrants to it, people who had moved a highway’s drive or commuter line trip away from the “old world” of city space into the suburbs. As these Jews settled into new landscapes, they saw American society differently—and sometimes jarringly so. Some had left cities after experiencing race riots; some watched as their property values plummeted or worried that if nonwhites moved next door, then the Federal Housing Authority would no longer subsidize mortgages in their neighborhood; some pulled their children out of rapidly integrating schools and placed them in far better staffed and equipped schools that were functionally segregated.79 They helped dismantle old synagogues and Jewish centers and erect new buildings to house their Torahs, holy objects, meetings, and social circles. These kinds of transformations shook the Jewish world, even as postwar Jews took on more and more of the trappings of American middle-class comfort. Their children, baby boomers, were reared with a sense of economic and cultural security but also with access to a vocabulary of ambivalence. With their parents, they lived the tension of middle-class arrival and, sometimes, turned that tension into revolution when they protested the power structures of American and Jewish life.80


80. On these developments in American Jewish life, see Mark Oppenheimer, Knocking on Heaven’s Door: American Religion in the Age of Counterculture (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), chap. 3; Riv-Ellen Prell, Prayer and Community: The Havurah in American Judaism (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989); Debra Schultz, Going South: Jewish Women in the Civil Rights Movement (New York: New York University Press, 2001); and Staub, Torn at the Roots.
Ambivalence about middle-classness represented a new chapter in a long story of Jews’ ambivalence toward power. Most specifically, Jews worried about the price of claiming power—and in some senses, superiority—in a non-Jewish system. The cultural wages of middle-classness were indisputable; the cultural losses of it were the source of ongoing communal strife. Late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century debates about intermarriage, gender politics, liberalism, antisemitism, and Zionism—just to name a few—drew some of their ferocity from ongoing communal ambivalence about middle-classness. Far from ushering in an era of psychic unity and consensus, postwar middle class life exposed new fissures in Jewish life, especially when it came to imagining the consequences and responsibilities of Jewish political, economic, and cultural power in the diaspora.