

Dorling, D. (2020) Review by Danny Dorling of: Hadas Weiss, *We Have Never Been Middle Class*, The Times Higher, forthcoming, accepted for publication 28 November 2019.

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Hadas Weiss, ***We Have Never Been Middle Class***,

London, Verso, October 19<sup>th</sup> 2019, 166pp, ISBN 978 1788733915.

Not everywhere is like the United States of America. When Weiss claims that the secure middle class does not exist, and that we must ‘consider academic degrees whose price is calculated over many years of student-loan repayments’ (page 42), the dystopia being described is the USA and a few of its mini-me copy cats such as the UK. Some of the fieldwork for this book was undertaken in Germany, but in Germany student fees are almost non-existent; let alone any loans required to repay them. The very first sentence of this book states that: ‘The middle class does not exist’. This is an argument that relies on anecdote, mostly taken live and direct from the United States.

Some 136 pages later, ‘The US is perhaps an extreme example...’ say Weiss. Too true, but why the ‘perhaps’ and why then rely so much on the USA? It is hardly the place of the future. This is a well written book, stuffed full of interesting references and telling insights about much of that literature. However, one look at the data on the distribution of wealth, income, life chances, mortality rates, debt, imprisonment and the precarity in the USA and the caveat of ‘perhaps’ would disappear. The anthropological tradition of distrusting numbers means that *We Have Never Been Middle Class* can never quite get to the core of the issue – distribution.

Earlier it is asserted that ‘Class is stronger in indicating an external determination of our lives than categories like race, gender and religion’ (page 23) in which case class exists as much as race, gender and religion exist and matter. On the very same page the middle class, is defined as the group that spurn the notion that anything but individual effort matters ‘in a big way’. If that is the case then the middle class does exist: a group of people who behave and believe in a certain way. One page earlier the assertion is made that: ‘we

have come to perceive society as being comprised, quite simply, of middle classes and others'. Have we? I might well be an outlier, but I tend to perceive the others as falling into two very distinct groups – those below and those above the middle classes. And those two very different groups are not an 'other' to the middle.

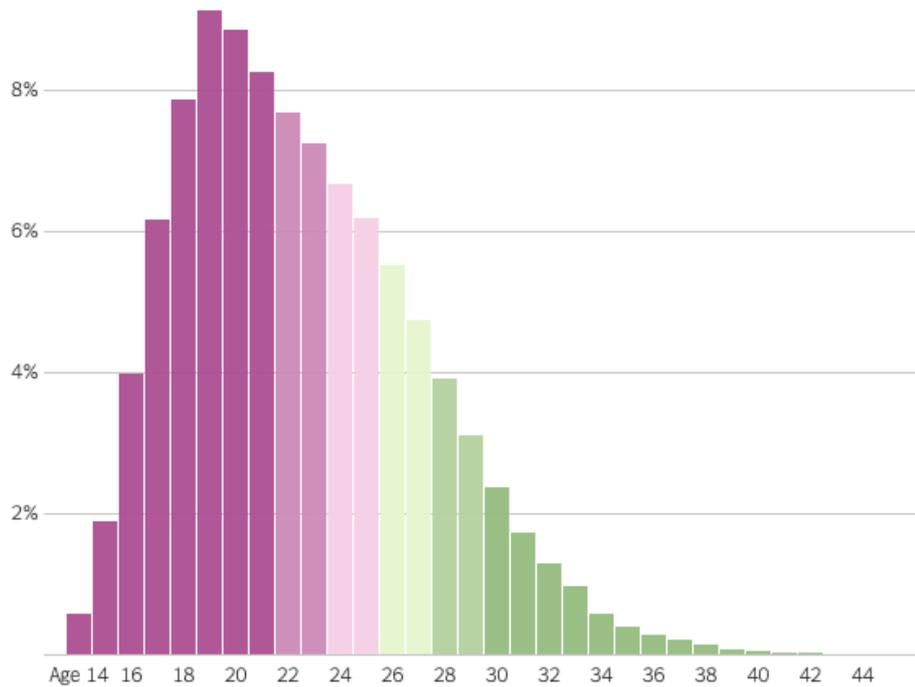
This book is most useful in helping make clear that the boundaries are vague; but over-claims when suggesting that 'in each country there is too little variance between middle and *somewhat lower income brackets* to convincing distinguish their members from one another' (page 3, emphasis added). A call for the somewhat lower income brackets of the world to unite, having nothing to lose but their chains, chains which are only marginally more constraining than the chains of the that bind almost everyone else, might have a certain truth in today's USA – the land of falling working class life expectancy, multi-billion dollar middle class student debt bubbles and growing precarity for all – but when your class matters so much for determining your life chances; and where elsewhere in the world the secure middle class is still the dominate class that votes in the dominant conservative politicians – class matters as much as it ever did.

### **Coda, not included in the published version:**

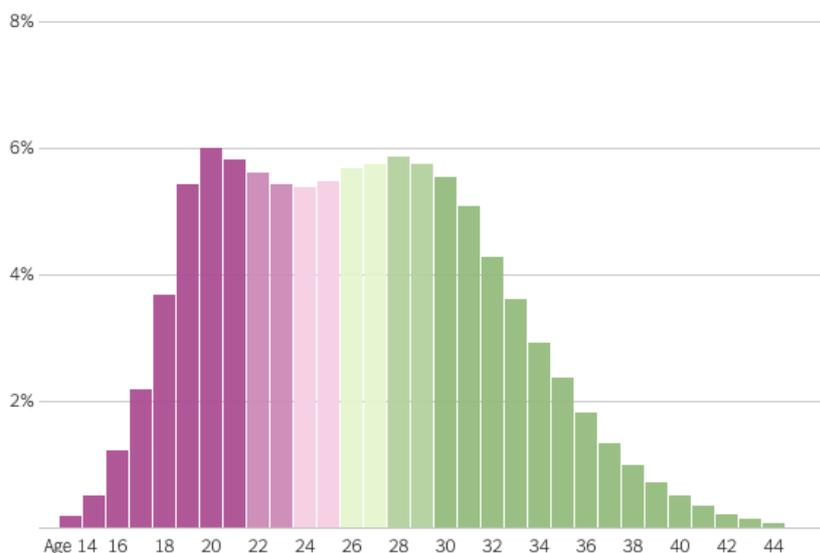
If you really want to see where the middle class is least in evidence, it is the most equitable countries of the world to which you have to turn, not to the USA. Those that are sometimes described as having a ninety person middle-class or working class. In contrast, the United States, and a few other extremely unequal affluent countries display all kinds of acute social class divides. For instance, by 2016, the United States had a bimodal distribution of births because it had become such a socially divided country with two births peaks for mothers, at ages 20 and 28. This compares to the single U.S. peak a generation ago, shortly after the USA was at its most equitable by income, in 1980 at age 19 [See Quoc Trung Bui and Claire Cain Miller, "The Age That Women Have Babies: How a Gap Divides America," New York Times, 4 August 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/08/04/upshot/up-birth-age-gap.html>]

## USA social class as indicated/implied by first time mothers' ages

Ages of first-time mothers in **1980**



Ages of first-time mothers in **2016**



**CAPTION: The age distribution of first time mothers in the United States of America where today, the middle class tend to have their first children after the mother is 25 years old and the working class before then (with some overlap). The distribution is now bimodal. There are two large and increasingly distinct social classes in the USA. This was much less the case forty years ago.**

Source: Quoctrung Bui and Claire Cain Miller, "The Age That Women Have Babies: How a Gap Divides America," New York Times, 4 August 2018.

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/08/04/upshot/up-birth-age-gap.html>