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The Global Middle Classes

Theorizing through Ethnography

*Edited by Rachel Heiman, Carla Freeman,
and Mark Liechty*



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8

A Middle-Class Public at Mexico's Northern Border

Rihan Yeh

MIDDLENESS AT THE BORDER

In 1930, Robert Redfield wrote, "Mexico is in no small part modern.... In the more sophisticated villages of the north, in the middle classes of the cities everywhere, are to be found a people much like the masses in our own country. They not only can read, but they do read. The folk hear rumor; these people read the news" (Redfield 1930:3). His tone is cautious and didactic. It warns already: Mexico's modernity is not, in all eyes, assured. His U.S. readers ("our own country," he writes) might have thought that the distinctions he draws separated them from Mexico as a whole. They might, that is, have taken the U.S.-Mexico border itself as the line marking the split between modern and not. Redfield tries to resituate that line. But the border is always ready to reimpose itself as an insurmountable gulf separating Mexico from modernity, relegating its urban middle classes to irrelevance in a country pervaded by the dominant mark of the backward, the indigenous, the rural, the "folk," as Redfield calls them.

The issue of how to relate to the United States is a national preoccupation for Mexico, but in the northern border city of Tijuana, the problem is relentlessly literal. An integral part of the metropolitan constellation of southern California, Tijuana is nonetheless separated from it by one of the most fortified international boundaries in the world. A city of perhaps two million inhabitants, Tijuana began its exponential growth with the "vice

industry" (Taylor 2002) of America's Prohibition. From gambling and prostitution to the violence of contemporary drug trafficking, Tijuana is apt to appear as a nightmare of modernization gone wrong. But though it may be "the most celebrated bastion of chaos on the border" (Urrea 1993:112), quite a different myth circulates locally: Tijuana as a city of opportunity, of upward mobility, of a modernity accessible here as it is not elsewhere in Mexico. In the context of what is often called Mexico's "neoliberal turn," this local myth takes on national resonances. Against the city's "black legend" of moral and social dissolution, those who have found some success here insist on Tijuana as the place where a new society can come into its own: a miniature Mexico of and for the middle class.

Warding off the same demons as Redfield did, those in Tijuana who aspire to middle-class, urban modernity (cf. Schielke, chapter 2, this volume) try to prove that if a good part of Mexico is not that, at least their city is. Their everyday relations with the United States are a crucial, but intensely ambiguous, part of their efforts to situate themselves on the right side of the divide between modern and not. A generation ago, it is said, "everyone" did his laundry and bought milk and eggs in the United States. Still today, with up to a two-hour wait at the port of entry—likely the most traversed in the world, with 110,000 crossings daily reported (Blum 2007)—people cross into the commercial cornucopia of southern California for innumerable reasons, not only for work, school, and shopping but also on errands as petty as picking up mail. In a 2000 study, Alegría (2009:86) calculated that 55 percent of Tijuana residents could cross the border legally. Besides U.S. citizens and permanent residents, many hold a Border Crossing Card, a ten-year visa that permits short expeditions to the United States (but not employment there). Legal, documented border crossing provides one of the most fundamental idioms of class distinction in Tijuana, and the way in which U.S. recognition thus underwrites middle-class status ratchets to unbearable tension the inherent contradictions of projects for an authentically *Mexican* modernity.

Suspended between the United States and "the poor,"¹ the masses of migrants constantly arriving from "the South," Tijuana reveals with particular clarity that the middleness of the middle class in a country like Mexico is a matter not merely of its position in the class structure of its "own" society, but of a delicately negotiated suspension between the national and the foreign, past and future, backwardness and modernity. The middle class has a special privilege and burden in mediating a modernity that seems always to come from "outside" (cf. Liechty 2003:61–86). It stands on the cusp; in this sense, the border is at the heart of what the middle class in

the "developing" world is all about.² The vulnerabilities that so bedevil any attempt to be properly middle class in Tijuana, in the shadow of the U.S.-Mexico border, reflect far more general conundrums of middleness.

CLASSES AND PUBLICS

The binary oppositions Redfield (1930) traces are well known and by no means particular to Mexico. The last, though, stands out, and it is the opposition Redfield makes most emphatically, as if it somehow sums up and gives form to the others: "The folk hear rumor; these people read the news." That which is modern, urban, and middle-class in Mexico coheres, Redfield seems to suggest, in its news reading—in its formation, that is, as a public. In this chapter, I expand on this suggestion in order to examine the conundrums of middleness at the border. News reading and associated genres of informed "rational debate" appear as key to the performative processes by which a middle-class public takes shape in Tijuana.³ Attention to the ethnographic details of how it does so, I argue, reveals some chronic contradictions in projects for middle-class collective being.

My approach to publics here is much indebted to Michael Warner's (2002:90) definition of them as, among other things, "the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse." *Circulation* should be understood to refer not to the physical movement of text artifacts, but to the semiotic processes of recognition and uptake by which certain forms come to be seen as in movement, as "the same" as others (cf. Lee and LiPuma 2002; Silverstein and Urban 1996). The practice of news reading, for example, involves the routine imagination of both the extent of distribution and the periodicity of publication (cf. Anderson 1983).

Through these processes of circulation, a sense of groupness, of collective subjectivity, may be evoked and inhabited on an everyday level: over my morning coffee, I join the "we" of the news-reading public.⁴ The first-person plural is perhaps the most blatant form of the reflexivity Warner emphasizes, in which "we" doubles back upon itself to indicate "we who participate in communications such as the present one" (cf. Lee 1997; Urban 2001). Reflexivity is performative; it makes the group into a living, present reality. When Redfield, for example, addresses his readers as fellow Americans, he subtly includes them as part of "the masses in *our* own country." They are likely news readers themselves; undeniably, they read anthropological monographs, a not unrelated genre of realist reportage. As they recognize themselves in Redfield's casual representation, his text performatively constitutes them as a U.S. (modern, urban, middle-class) public.

Whether readers recognize themselves in a representation such as

Redfield's has much to do with their personal subjectivity, their "I" and how it can find a place in "we." To feel oneself part of and in turn to voice a middle-class "we," exposing oneself to the dangers of mis- or nonrecognition, depend not only on continual processes of recruitment to role in interaction, of negotiating the position from which one speaks (cf. Goffman 1979; Silverstein 2004), but also on one's broader fashioning as middle-class. Publics thus have everything to do with the institutions that form one as a subject over a lifetime of interpellation. In Tijuana, prime among these is the border and the U.S. visa as an emblem of status that sums up past achievements (education, property, employment, grooming, and self-presentation are all reviewed in the application interview) and enables future access to key arenas of consumption (goods are often prized for their U.S. provenance, though always with the nationalist caveat that the items in question are either not available or absurdly expensive in Tijuana). The formation of the middle class as a public is thus intimately tied to some very objective facts of life. But without a sense of how collective subjectivity is evoked in interaction, analysis of the middle class must remain at the level of statistical demarcations of socioeconomic difference or individual engagement with structural factors.

Studies of classes as publics of various sorts are in fact numerous, but despite increased concern in recent decades with the discursive processes that help constitute classes as social collectivities (Ortner 1998:3), the approach has not been clearly articulated as such.⁵ Conversely, the question of socioeconomic class has not played a prominent part in discussions of publics, nor does it guide the broader, mostly politico-philosophical debates about the public sphere. It is worth recalling, then, that Jürgen Habermas (1989) in his foundational text argued that the bourgeois public sphere emerged in seventeenth-century Europe precisely as the network of institutions through which a new class consolidated itself. Through newspapers and novels, theaters and coffeehouses and salons, all conceived of as open, egalitarian spaces of rational debate, "public opinion" emerged as something weighty enough to impinge on state authority itself. Through the public sphere, the bourgeoisie was able to do just what Marx (1963 [1852]:124) so famously claimed the small-holding peasants of France were incapable of: "enforc[e] their class interest in their own name." For a class to cohere as a group, it must be able, in effect, to say "we."

Tijuana's middle-class public is no bourgeois public sphere. But as a model, the bourgeois public sphere exerts a normative influence—in no small part, thanks to Habermas's work—on ideals of (neo)liberal democracy

circulating in Mexico today.⁶ In the following section, I sketch the diffuse complex of associations that, in Mexico, at once link the middle class with such ideals and interpellate a middle-class public. If news reading and (purportedly rational) debate appear as important ways to claim modernity, these practices are attributed much the same value that theorists like Habermas argue these had in the rise of the bourgeoisie and the birth of the modern nation-state. The Mexican middle class need not share any structural or sociological features with the old bourgeoisie to take up an ideology derived, in great part, from it. Supposedly, in contrast to aristocratic systems of fixed status, "anyone" can participate in rational debate. Those who do are the ones endowed with the promise of a new society, emerging precisely *between* elites and plebeians. Reason appears as a social leveler, the first principle of meritocracy, and full of democratic promise—with no regard for the fact that the performance of rational debate is saturated by power relations at several levels. These premises are fundamental to the articulation of a middle-class "we" in Mexico today and in Tijuana in particular.

To examine the middle class as a public highlights the formation of collective subjectivity as it is engaged and reproduced on the ground in a panoply of interrelated sites and genres running from the mass media to everyday conversation and back. I will first examine some mass-mediated discourses that speak to and evoke a middle-class "we" in Mexico, and then will compare these with the common representation of Tijuana as a middle-class city, as voiced to me in an interview. Finally, I will present two extended ethnographic examples, one highlighting the contradictions of Tijuana's middle-class "we" vis-à-vis "the poor" and the other its contradictions vis-à-vis the United States. In both cases, performances of rational debate appear at the crux of the articulation of a middle-class "we" and of the conundrums that assail it.

A MIDDLE-CLASS PUBLIC IN MEXICO

After a talk at the University of California, San Diego, Denise Dresser, a prominent Mexican political analyst and academic, fielded a question about what options Mexican voters have, given the dire panorama of "dysfunctional democracy" Dresser had painted.⁷ In response, she focused on "what professional, educated middle classes can do." That is, she replaced "voters" with "middle classes." She concluded the question-and-answer session by declaring, "Revolutionary nationalism has run its course, and we're going to have to...create, build, aspire to a much more liberal country." By

“revolutionary nationalism,” she referred to the political system built in the wake of Mexico’s 1910 revolution, which was of socialist bent but is often accused of institutionalizing cronyism and corporativism. The “we” of her address are the “professional, educated middle classes,” including herself and her audience, for many in attendance were Mexican. Dresser evokes the middle class by positing its agency, almost automatically, as the one that will drive the making of a more modern Mexico.

As Claudio Lomnitz (2003:142) has noted, the Mexican middle class appears as the “avatar” of the national narrative, the forerunner of a “we” that seems always to be only just realizing itself. If in Latin America it represents a collective future to be aspired to, this is, Michael Jiménez (1999:217) points out, in no small part thanks to the social scientific literature that, over the past half century or more, has enshrined the middle classes as “the principal ideal object of historical change”—regardless of particular authors’ optimism or pessimism as to the region’s “progress” in this direction. Dresser’s association of the middle class with the possibility of a “more liberal country” comes out of a robust literature.⁸ However various and fragmented the middle classes might be objectively, this academic discourse has consistently projected onto them a “sense of themselves as the ballast of their nations, [having] corner [*sic*] on the respect for the rule of law and the devotion to the well-being of their fellow citizens” (Jiménez 1999:217). The middle class appears as the civic class, the law-abiding class, the class of the liberal democratic future.

These academic writings are authoritative texts; they bear a normative force, and their representations of the middle class are much more than projections. Not only individuals but also governments orient to such representations of the middle class as the emblem of modernity; if individuals aspire to middle-class status, nation-states aspire to join the ranks of the world’s “middle-class societies.” With powerful institutions impelling discourses of (neo)liberal democracy across the globe, academic texts emphasizing the middle classes’ role in this (doubtless variegated) project have influence far beyond their own limited circulation. Dresser herself exemplifies a node through which political and social theory is transformed and retransmitted to a broader public—broader, even, than the UCSD talk would suggest. Recently, a colleague showed me an opinion piece by Dresser defending the right to free speech, forwarded by friends in a working-class neighborhood of Mexico City. However complex or even nebulous the links, everyday understandings in Mexico of the valence of “middle class” are not disconnected from academic social and political theory.

In late 2010, a book titled *Middle-Class: Poor No More, Not Yet Developed*

(De la Calle and Rubio 2010b) caused some stir in Mexico City intellectual circles.⁹ The implicit noun modified by the adjectival title is Mexico itself; the authors argue that despite politicians’ harping on the poverty-stricken masses, this discourse is out of touch with reality. Mexico, they claim, is now a country with a middle-class majority. In a magazine article published earlier in the year—part of a special issue on the middle classes—the same authors provide a slew of figures (mostly to do with consumption) to prove their point. They call the middle class “the essence of development” and declare that it “fits naturally” with democracy; they treat corporativism and citizenship as mutually exclusive, identifying the middle class with the latter. They conclude, “One might ask if Mexico has come of age in 200 years. The answer lies in its capacity to become a middle-class country” (De la Calle and Rubio 2010a).

The special magazine issue, the book (which sold out in Mexico City, booksellers told me, two or three months after its release), and the numerous reviews in major national dailies all linked together to interpellate a Mexican reading public that might well take up the arguments provided as vindicating the existence and strength of a national middle-class “we.” This did happen. “We the middle class are the majority,” wrote one reader in a comment appended to the online edition of a review.¹⁰ The uses of the first-person plural in the online comments performatively clinched the reflexive underpinning of the articles as circulating texts; they prove the readers’ uptake and their interpellation into a Mexican middle-class public.

Other readers, though, objected strongly to the book’s argument. One called it “a marvel of propaganda,” good material for the political “zombies” who insist, “You see, we did it, we’re in the antechamber of the First World.” Another accused a reviewer of being a “cheerleader,” complete with “pom-poms” and a “little blue and white skirt”—a reference to the right-wing National Action Party (PAN)—shouting, “We’s middle class!...Nothing’s happening here!” The last remark implies that to call Mexico middle-class is a politically interested denial of poverty and inequality. As the one negative review I read put it, “those who sustain the argument about the ‘middle-class’ majority are critical of those who speak of Mexico as a country of poor people” (Nexos 2010). Two visions of the country, two projects for national becoming, are at stake in this debate on demographics: as Dresser put it, a “more liberal country” versus “revolutionary nationalism.”

In Mexico, the ascendance of the middle class as a figure of national potential necessitates the decline of another: the *pueblo*, “the people,” marked as a lower-class entity, which achieved status as the national subject proper, thanks to the 1910 revolution. With the revolution, the liberalism

that had (however contradictorily) marked Mexico's nineteenth century (cf. Hale 1989) took a distinctly socialist turn—but soon ossified into a political system that is now frequently labeled a de facto dictatorship. The Party of the Institutionalized Revolution (PRI) was able to ensure its electoral victories at the federal level until 2000, when the right-wing PAN won the presidency for the first time.¹¹ Since 1940, the PRI had moved decisively to reconcile itself with the middle classes (Loaeza 1988:112), but the rhetoric of social revolution and of the pueblo as national subject remained the crux of state legitimacy. The PRI's name itself indicates this fact, as do the comments of certain participants in the debate on *Middle-Class: Poor No More, Not Yet Developed*, who feel themselves left out of the national project: "The Mexican political schema constructed in the PRI era," wrote one, "DOES NOT contemplate and NEVER contemplated the middle class." These readers, however, are not nearly as marginalized as they feel. Deriding one of the favorite themes of the first PAN presidency, a 2006 newspaper article declared sarcastically, "With the government of 'change,' all of Mexico belongs to the 'robust and thriving middle class'" (Fernández-Vega 2006). Official discourse is on their side. The pueblo does remain an important figure, but it has lost status with the "democratic transition" of 2000 as it had not in almost a century. Even in the midst of multiple crises and intense disillusionment, the middle class has found a new lease on its life as national subject. In Tijuana, the stakes of this shift are even higher. Baja California, a third of whose population resides in Tijuana, was the first state to vote the PAN into governorship back in 1989, and the party has remained in power there since. With 1989 as the herald of the 2000 "democratic transition," Tijuana as middle class could truly feel itself the avatar of the national narrative.

Of Brazil in the 1990s, Maureen O'Dougherty (2002) suggests that news of all sorts represented the middle class as the hardest hit by the economic crisis and that these representations interpellated a middle-class reading public as the subject of the crisis—and thus as the national subject itself. A slew of Mexican news articles seem to be doing something similar: "The Middle Class, The Most Damaged by the Economic Crisis" (Milenio 2009b); "Sacrificial Lamb: The Middle Class" (Milenio 2009a); "Building a Bigger Middle Class Is a Goal for Mexican Society" (Miranda 2009).¹² As William Mazzarella (2005:1) points out of India, such concern with the middle class must be taken seriously as a symptom of liberalization in its own right. Even and especially in the alarm over its demise, the middle class emerges as the site on which a whole narrative of modernization, of

the happy development of constitutional democracy and a market economy, bears down and demands to be made a living reality.

The participants in the debate on *Middle-Class: Poor No More, Not Yet Developed* were not all sure, either, of the middle class's objective economic existence. But the debate nonetheless produced them as a middle-class public in an even deeper and more intuitive sense than the voicings of "we" mentioned earlier. One reader expressed this explicitly: "We are the ones who read newspapers, magazines...and expound our opinions here or in other media." The middle class, here, appears to have "corner" (as Jiménez [1999] puts it) not just on the rule of law or liberal democracy, but on one of its foundational pillars according to a tradition of political theory perhaps best exemplified by Habermas: rational, informed debate among the citizenry. The middle class, this reader insists, is synonymous with the news-reading public itself.

This representation of "we news readers" as the middle class itself went unchallenged by other readers. Whereas those who agreed with the book often used the first-person plural, those who objected did not: they did not voice any alternative collective subjectivity, whether of the middle class or the pueblo. In the broader national public sphere, the pueblo is not inert; it speaks for itself to dispute the middle class's status as the national subject. But despite all the argumentation, the debate over *Middle-Class* remains the sphere of appearance of a national middle-class "we," with all its (neo) liberal associations. If De la Calle and Rubio write of "*deliberative* liberal democracy" (2010a; my emphasis), their readers perform, in their online comments, their own deliberation. As they do so, they repeat a constitutive conundrum of rational debate as a figure of modern, democratic promise.

Habermas's elevation of the bourgeois public sphere as normative model rested on his interpretation of the role of argumentative reason in it. Though he recognized that the bourgeois public sphere was in fact highly exclusive (only educated, property-holding males need apply), he saw the value it accorded reason as an emancipatory potential that would slowly break down the boundaries of class and gender. Jodi Dean (2002), however, argues that the bourgeois public sphere's exclusion of the lower classes was constitutive—the public of rational debate *depends* on the figure of the masses who need others to think and speak for them. It must re-create them at every step.

The first conundrum that haunts the middle class is this simultaneous emphasis on equal status via rational debate and on denial that "the poor" could participate. The readers discussing *Middle-Class* repeat it in their

attempts to speak *for* the poor, but always from a position as middle-class and hence properly versed in debate. Tijuana plays out this conundrum in intensified form. The border formalizes and polarizes the opposition between middle class and pueblo; here, the latter is all too often identified with the (illegal) labor migrant to the United States. As Tijuana tries to articulate itself as a city, it inscribes itself within the struggle between the middle class and the pueblo over which should be the legitimate national subject, a broad conflict over models for national becoming that would differently privilege various sectors of the population. It does so by trying to excise the pueblo from Tijuana proper, by refusing to acknowledge it as part of "us" at any level. This denied struggle sets the stage for the tensions implicit in the voicings of "we"—"we *tijuánenses*," "we Mexicans"—in the examples that follow.

THE PUBLICIST

When, in the midst of the 2006 electoral campaign, I walked into the PRI's Tijuana offices, the person on whom it fell to deal with me was the party's local publicist. A middle-aged woman, bright and candid in manner, she did not hesitate to grant me an interview on the spot. We began by talking about her work for the party (which had recently made a comeback in Tijuana). She explained that though the PRI sent campaign material from Mexico City, "the local reality in Tijuana is different," and she was obliged to adjust what was sent. "Not all the public is the same," she told me. "Before, it was conceived of as a mass. But it must be segmented." When I asked what the segments in Tijuana were, she answered, "First and foremost, those who have the least." They are the ones who come to the party offices and demand assistance. *Never before in her life, she confided, had she seen so many poor people as in her year with the PRI. Before, when she worked for the PAN, she never saw them, for the poorest people in the PAN, she said, were of a "middle economic level."* When I asked what she thought of the commonplace that Tijuana is a middle-class city, she agreed with it readily and tried to reconcile this with her earlier statement: "[The existence of the poor] is a reality we don't want to recognize. I didn't want to recognize it. [How curious] how we appropriate Tijuana and don't want to see what it was turning into."

The publicist's idea of her city, she says, has been changed by her experience with the PRI. And yet, even as she tells me that the public in Tijuana is now composed "first and foremost" of the poor, she reproduces the stereotype of Tijuana as middle-class. The "we" she voices herself as part of

refers clearly to a middle class understood as the city's original core, pre-dating the arrival of the poor.¹³ "They" are not part of the city's true "we." This middle-class "we" becomes the very basis upon which she addresses me as anthropologist and outsider: not merely as employee of the PRI but as native tijuánense—"proudly tijuánense and proudly Mexican," as she put it—something the poor, always assumed to be migrants from the South, *can never fully be part of.*

The publicist's representation of Tijuana as middle-class reflects far more widely circulating discourses; her "we" appears as a local form of the Mexican middle-class public that took shape in the news readers' debate, repeating not only its stereotypes of party-class alignment but also its liberal aspirations for the nation. Her initial emphasis on "the poor" matches the stereotypes of PRI discourse that so many participants in the debate on *Middle-Class: Poor No More, Not Yet Developed* found outdated. As she speaks, though, the traction of this representation slips. In the very moment of its troubling, in the very moment that the publicist recognizes that her city is full of the poor, the middle-class "we" reemerges as the true Tijuana, in clear distinction from the PRI's constituency. At another point, the publicist explains to me, "It's a problem in our society that people seek paternal governments." She echoes the distaste for corporativism, a distaste associated with "revolutionary nationalism" and the PRI, that the authors of *Middle-Class* emphasize as well. Since those who come to the PRI might be said to come seeking paternal favors, the publicist implies that authoritarianism is a "problem" created by the poor from the South. In the same gesture, she signals her own commitment to a more (neo)liberal vision of the self-reliant citizen, who eschews any form of vote buying and is not in need of social assistance.

While the publicist emphasized her nationalism, she also confessed that, married to a U.S. citizen, she now clamors to him, "Emigrate me already!" If the first conundrum of the middle-class "we" is its relation to the poor, the second is its relation to the United States. References to the United States were rife in the debate on *Middle-Class*. They revealed the United States as a benchmark of modernity and the source of a measuring gaze, but not the more pernicious tensions involved with engaging it. When, in San Diego, Dresser told her audience, "We're going to have to... build... a much more liberal country," she slid between addressing them as concerned *Mexican* citizens and as "you" citizens of a "functional democracy."¹⁴ She thus sutured the Mexican middle-class "we" to an international world of opining citizens, the distinguished sort who would attend such an

event as this one (a complimentary bottle of tequila on each table, a former U.S. ambassador introducing the talk). This suturing is both crucial to the middle class and deeply problematic.

Again, the middle class repeats in contemporary form a constitutive conundrum of the original bourgeois public sphere. Kant, one of its early theorists, portrays the enlightened citizen as formed in a transnational circulation of texts. The "public in the truest sense of the word" (Kant 1970:56) is a cosmopolitan reading public. But the impulse to move beyond national borders must be curbed, Kant writes, and reason put to the service of the nation-state. The tension between foreign and national is not always so easy to manage: rational debate should put one on a par with one's peers abroad, but in a world of radically unequal nation-states, such equality is never assured.

With a desire to emigrate, the publicist reproduces this tension at another level. It is just as routine, though, for Dresser, a professor in Mexico City. In her talk, Dresser spoke (like the publicist) of her nationalist pride—but the things she is proud of are all (she pointed out with a dry laugh) things tourists love. Her Canadian husband, in contrast, is proud of his country's profoundly democratic system. The solution for Dresser is to dedicate her professional life to making Mexico, in this, more like Canada. But the tension is the same as for the publicist with dreams of emigrating. At the border, the conflictual pull of the foreign is a quotidian reality not just for cosmopolitan subjects like Dresser but for a broad swath of the population. Tijuana's ability to imagine itself as middle-class may have even more to do with this fact than with its relative prosperity.

Analytic focus on the voicings of "we" the middle class brings out two quaverings of this "we," two conundrums of inclusion and exclusion that it fails to smooth over. First, the middle-class "we" hesitates in its relation to the poor. Beneath this hesitation lies a fear: "we" ourselves may be "poor," hopelessly unmodern, as revealed in the pun *clase media jodida*, "the half-screwed class." Second, "we" must live up to a standard imposed by the United States—but without running the risk of becoming a bit foreign ourselves (sometimes literally), we can never quite deal on an equal footing with our interlocutors abroad. In Tijuana, the middleness of the middle class is inseparable from the city's always unresolved suspension between "the South," aka the rest of Mexico (all too often the symbol of political, social, and economic backwardness), and the United States (the inevitable symbol of modernity). Thanks to its overdetermined middleness, Tijuana makes patent these two constitutive conundrums of the middle class as a public, which I take up in detail in the following two ethnographic examples.

THE PHOTOGRAPHY CONTEST: MIDDLE-CLASS TIJUANA VIS-À-VIS THE SOUTH

Agnes was my hostess for a total of nearly two years between 2003 and 2007. She was born in 1927 into the extremely hierarchical world of the agricultural estates that lie along Mexico's border with Guatemala, on one of which her father had a well-paid position. Though she describes a privileged childhood, her father died when she was small, and Agnes spent her adolescence as a working girl in Mexico City (she mentions jobs as a seamstress and salesgirl). Her marriage to an editor brought another radical change: she describes a fully appointed home with servants. But before long, her husband sickened and lost his prestigious job; economic duress set in, and in 1972 the family moved to Tijuana. Soon after, Agnes was widowed and raised her four children as a single mother.

Agnes calls herself middle-class. In her reminiscences, though, she weaves together different idioms of distinction. She mentions her father's French citizenship and claims that his family once owned a silverware factory. She is critical of her mother's family but does not hesitate to tell me that they still own large estates in Guatemala. She is proud, too, of her Colombian husband's intellectual prowess and of his (now lost) papers proving descent from Spanish aristocracy. But she is intensely proud, too, of her ability to earn her living by working without shame and without putting on airs. She likes to tell of the velvet furniture in her childhood home, but she boasts just as much of how her most successful son (a corporate accountant) started off by mopping floors or how her husband, hit by hard times, was not afraid to roll up his sleeves and work as a mechanic.

When I asked Agnes the difference between Tijuana and her native city of Tapachula, on Mexico's southern border, she answered without hesitation: in Tijuana, "anyone" can have lunch at the country club; "anyone" can become a member. Surprised, I reminded her that the cost of membership was high: US\$10,000, I had heard, astronomically beyond Agnes's means. That fact made no difference to her. In Tapachula, she explained, the club kept a list of names, and money could never buy one a place on it. "Middle-class" as Agnes uses the term and as it defines her means just this: not on the list in "the South" but admissible in Tijuana, if not without a fight. In the cleanness of this opposition, Agnes draws a swift, sure arc across her life, from South to North, closed to open, from the principle of birthright and blood to that of merit and money, from an oppressive hierarchy to the promise of mobility, and she amalgamates all the variety of her eighty years into a single term: *middle-class*.

I should have known, then, not to ask Agnes about Tijuana's "old family names," the founding fathers of local enterprise, the closest thing Tijuana has to an aristocracy. Evading my questions, she told the following story:

Also, on another occasion, Gil [her son] had a heated argument. We had a friend, may he rest in peace, Castillo Luna. Dr. Castillo Luna. A very good doctor here in Tijuana. A very good friend of ours. And since he knew that Gil didn't work and all that, well, we'd go see him and he never charged us for it. He was a Masonic brother.¹⁵

So then one day there was a photography exhibit and contest. And [the contestants] came from various parts of the republic. [Among them] there was a young guy, who came from I don't know where, but he was...indigenous type. Like, dark-skinned, hair sticking up like so, indigenous type. But Gil says he had very good photos and that, what with landscapes and things of that sort, he had very good photos.

So the exhibit happened and all. And the judges came out. And among the judges was Castillo Luna. And then, well, they gave first place to a young guy from here in Tijuana, who didn't have good lighting in his photos, and some other little defects, right? And they give him the prize. And Gil asked to speak [*pidió la palabra*]. And he said that he didn't agree with that prize, because the judges didn't know what they were talking about.... "Let's see," he says, "they put Dr. Castillo Luna as judge, who is a great surgeon" (because for tonsils he was the marvel of the world), "a very good doctor. Very tijuana, very much all that. But he doesn't know anything about photography."

Because he [Gil] knew Castillo Luna for what he was, right? He'd chatted many times. He [Castillo Luna] was a historian, nothing more, because, well, he liked history a lot. And he ended up with books of Gil's, he did, because he died and we couldn't get them back.

And then, uh, he [Gil] says, "And engineer X, and doctor Y..." he says, "may they tell me what they know about photography." And then a doctor said to him (also a Mason), he said, "Look here, kid. You don't know what you're talking about," and he [Gil] said, "Yes, I do know what I'm talking about because I do

know about photography."... And he started arguing with them. And, well, nothing to be done about it.

Gil's objection, Agnes claims, was "put up for debate," and the judges ended up giving the prize to the young, indigenous-type outsider. Gil told his mother later, "I recognized that the guy had better photos than I did." At this point, Agnes puts in his mouth the moral of the story: *hay que reconocer*. "One must recognize" merit; one must give credit where it has been won. Agnes would make this principle Tijuana's, defending the city from any revival of "acquired rights" (as the authors of *Middle-Class: Poor No More, Not Yet Developed* call them) and their ossification of status. With this principle, Agnes would distinguish her Tijuana from the South, from whence the young photographer came. If the judges represent Tijuana's elite, Agnes summarily introduces the South by means of its quintessential representative: an indigenous-type, dark-skinned young man. Where he comes from does not matter, only that he is recognizable precisely as a type. Contrary to all expectations, his photos are good, but the judges prefer a local competitor. Trampling merit, they follow (initially) the old aristocratic principle of status by birthright.

Agnes uses a formal phrase to describe Gil's request to speak: *pedir la palabra* is what one does in a chaired meeting or at town hall. It implies conventions of decorum, a whole set of formalities governing a particular speech genre. It evokes scenarios of democratic debate, in which citizens rise to speak their mind and rationally defend their propositions. Gil's argument with the judges was, for Agnes, a *discusión* in the literal sense of the word, a discussion in which status falls away and reason merges with rhetoric to prove which man is best.¹⁶ Though Gil is clearly the hero of the day, he simply opens the space for true rational debate, the conclusion of which his reason merely foretold: "And it was put up for debate, and then, well...they gave the prize to the young guy."

"Look here, kid," the doctor says. "You don't know what you're talking about." Gil defends himself proudly: "Yes, I do." His position is informed. As a debate, this may sound infantile. And yet, by virtue of its lack of content, the exchange is a purer image of debate: there is nothing at stake beyond the issue of status by speech itself, the right to speak in a forum where speech effectively counts, and the possibility of having the photography contest be such a forum at all. Just as Castillo Luna is, above all, a figure representing Tijuana's elite and the "indigenous-type guy" represents the South, so Gil's *discusión* is emptied to leave an abstract image of rational debate.

Rational debate is at the heart of the representation of Tijuana that Agnes defends here. She describes how her son hijacked a public event by means of rational debate and, thanks to it, succeeded in leveling status distinctions there. Gil argues man to man with the elites, putting them to shame, and the indigenous-type fellow takes the prize. This possibility, she effectively claims, symbolizes Tijuana. The part that rational debate plays in the formation of Tijuana, as Agnes describes it, parallels the part it was supposed to play in the original bourgeois public sphere. Status falls away before the power of reason; interlocutors speak as equals and merit prevails. The old values of the aristocracy expire. But Tijuana as Agnes represents it echoes as well a basic conundrum of the bourgeois public sphere, which Dean (2002) points out: "we" only engage in rational debate because of the plebeian masses, who are unfit for enlightened discussion.

Though Gil appears to break into the closed circle of the elite, to wrest authority and power from them, he is able to do so only on the basis of his already established status in Tijuana: he is phenotypically white, raised there since early childhood, well spoken and well read despite his lack of formal education. Most important, he already has a relationship with the elite. In much the same way that Habermas (1989) postulated a public sphere of letters historically preceding the political public sphere, Gil's attack on the constituted authority of the judges was preceded by his exchange of books and his conversations about "history" with Castillo Luna. The indigenous-type man, in contrast, does not accede to Gil's circle. He remains mute and passive, incapable of representing himself in public. He is an accessory to the drama of the middle class's coming into its own, its necessary occasion—which is nonetheless summarily dispensed with.

Agnes narrates a public scene of rational debate as emblematic of Tijuana. She thus posits the city itself as a reflexive "we," a collective subject knit in "our" participation in such debate, and she stakes her own self-presentation before me, her U.S. anthropologist housemate, on this representation. Her life history, told in bits and pieces, makes clear that I am not the only audience for this performance—she has a perduring commitment to the values she lays out in this narrative, giving substance to what she calls "middle-class." Just as the category "middle class" so often serves to reconcile differences across a broad swath of the population, so it gives coherence and direction to Agnes's life of wild ups and downs. As she evokes Tijuana as a public of rational, egalitarian debate, as the teleological aim of her life history, however, she rearticulates in sublimated form a basic contradiction that haunts the utopian promise of the middle class as mainstay of liberal democracy.

THE BOARDROOM: MIDDLE-CLASS TIJUANA VIS-À-VIS THE NORTH

Asking about U.S. visas, I conducted a series of interviews in one of the transnational assembly plants for which the northern Mexican border is well known. Before my interview with the manager, he invited me into a boardroom to sit with him and four other men as they transferred files over their laptops. Only mildly occupied, the men had time for chitchat. This interaction and what the manager had to say about it afterward again show the importance of the idea of rational debate to Tijuana as middle class. As with Agnes, Tijuana's delicate middleness is at stake throughout, but here it is the contradictory relation of the middle-class "we" to the United States that is most evident—of course, the figure of the South necessarily plays a role.

The men began, courteously enough, with a topic that might well interest me: a *gringo*, an American, regularly sent down by the company's U.S. headquarters.¹⁷ They recommended that I interview him. A good Spanish speaker, remarkably familiar with Mexican culture, he fulfills well (they seemed to judge) his formal role as cultural intermediary. I quote from my fieldnotes: "When we get, like, 'Fucking gringos!' he says to us, 'No, the thing is, it's like this, like that...'" The speaker paused. "And when they [the Americans at headquarters] get, like, 'Fucking Mexicans!' he also says to them, 'No, the thing is, it's like this...'"

The real inequality between interlocutors is, of course, the underlying theme of the anecdote: "Fucking gringos!" coming from the plant is in no way symmetrical to "Fucking Mexicans!" coming from corporate headquarters. But the anecdote sets up the two parties as equivalent. The dramatic pause between its two halves heightens the contrast between the expected asymmetry and the perfectly symmetrical punch line. In portraying both sides as equally reaching a breaking point, which is resolved in exactly the same way, the anecdote posits an equality free from the power differential not only between headquarters and plant but also between the United States and Mexico. Addressed to an American (me), it is a reminder of the equality of interlocutors under the principle of equal national sovereignties.

The gringo emerges, however, not just as mediator, but as defender of Mexican national sovereignty against *internal* assaults. The men recounted with delight an incident between a taxi driver and him: when the driver insisted on being paid in dollars, the gringo threw his pesos at him, shouting, "Mexican! You're in Mexico!" We may infer that the taxi driver recognized the nationalist accusation in the mouth of the gringo and was shamed into accepting payment in pesos. His countrymen in the boardroom, at any rate, laugh at him; he is shown up as a traitor.

However oddly, the authority of a Mexican nationalist discourse of equality is confirmed by the gringo's use of it. The men's convivial, in-group tone is subtly undone. They address me precisely as that most problematic of interlocutors: the American, the "they" who in some remote, offstage location explode, "Fucking Mexicans!"—all too quick to abuse a very real power that yet remains all too necessary in authorizing its own restraint. That is, the men end up invoking U.S. power and re-creating it in the interaction. This conundrum, the tension between egalitarian address and subtly resuscitated distinctions, was repeated as the discussion turned to regional differences and an explicit mobilization of debate among equals as a model for Mexico internally. One man, darker-skinned than the rest, informed the group, "In Mexico City, they really are spicy. Here, they aren't. There, they really are enchiladas. Here, your momma takes the seeds out, and there, they stuff more chilies in." With "your momma," this man addresses his fellows as native tijuansenses, people from "here," which at least two of them were. When the talk turned to soccer a moment later, this same man spoke with equal gusto as the sole defender of the Mexico City team.

With beaming smiles, the men exchanged insults. I was surprised to note that they universally addressed one another as *Ingeniero*, Engineer—a term they used frequently in this part of the conversation as they hammed up verbal flourishes of politesse before delivering their barbed puns and insults. The manager, sitting next to me, glanced at me more than once and, in a lull, after about fifteen minutes of banter, took it upon himself to do some explaining: "Here in the North, they don't come to blows over these things. It's pacific. Here, to each his own opinion, and talking and that's it." He made hand motions in the air, referring to their just enacted, egalitarian exchange of opinions, little motions in the direction of each participant. "But there in the stadium, with the beers and the heat..."

The exchange was clearly ludic, yet the manager reframed it as debate. The men's joking insults became "opinions" to which each was entitled; the speaking of one's mind appeared as a right to be respected. This type of interaction, he says, is characteristic of the North. The South, on the other hand, is represented by the stadium, where plebeian passions rise to blows. The feisty provocations of the dark-skinned man do not, however, represent an element of the stadium in the midst of rational debate. The North, with its emblematic mode of interaction, is more robust than that. The southerner here has already been reframed as northern. His contributions both provide the opportunity for and cinch the manager's claim as to the nature of the North and of the interaction. Like my own status as American, the color of his skin is a difference curiously both at issue and suppressed in

the interaction. It *must* be there to be ignored. If the North is the place where all parts of the republic can represent themselves equally in the public space of free rational debate, if the North wins because it represents a future and a model for national being as a whole, this is only thanks—as in the photography contest—to the presence of the South, covertly summoned up in the interaction.

The exchange as a display of egalitarianism was anchored in the vocative *ingenier*. All addressed the others as *ingenieros*; the term was a reminder of their equal status in the debate. It cleared a space within which "opinions" could be respected. In this space, the manager was willing to shed his status and assume equality with his subordinates—but this equality depended on the exclusivity of the boardroom. *Ingeniero* is also a reminder of relative status, of one's educational degree and of one's position in the plant, as in society. It is a reminder of those who are not present, who are not *ingenieros*, and who could not contribute so elegantly to the virtuosic tending of "opinion." The exchange repeated, as Agnes did, the tension Dean points out in the original bourgeois public sphere between a utopian openness/egalitarianism and a de facto exclusivity. The man from the South is, before all else, an engineer like the rest of "us." But even within the boardroom, equality has its limits, for it was the manager's status that licensed the whole performance—which is why he retained the right of explaining it.

As rational debate, the banter in the boardroom may fall a bit short—as does Agnes's narrative of Gil's discusión. And yet—again, as with Agnes—it is held up in all seriousness as an image that typifies Tijuana and underlies social relations in the plant. In our interview later, the manager twice brought up the debate on soccer as an example of his personal ethos ("That's who I am") and a managerial style that, he claims, underpins daily interaction in the plant and, ultimately, productivity. "So if you treat your companions like people, I mean, or as equals? There won't be any problem. For example, in the discussion we had just now. The supervisor, a clerk from Materials, [the] coordinator, the plant manager. I mean, within the social structure in Mexico, 'No [way], how [could this be]?!'" The scandalized voice the manager mocks is that of the old, hierarchical Mexico he opposes himself to. He is able to create the boardroom as a new Mexico of equals because his status as manager allows him to impose his personal, tijuansense ethos. But he is not licensed as the manager by just U.S. headquarters. His status and the rational debate he animates as the essence of Tijuana are underwritten by the U.S. state in the form of his non-immigrant visa.

The manager has held a visa since early childhood. He reapplied as an adult: "I had no problem. The information you have to present is that you have to be economically solvent and that it's not your idea to have the visa to go work in the U.S." In Tijuana, the undocumented migrant to the United States is stereotypically southern; "we" tijuanaenses are visa holders. Agnes and her children have had theirs since their arrival in Tijuana in the 1970s. Many still consider the migrant, much as the taxi driver desirous of dollars, to be degrading "us" both in real economic terms (this idea is, of course, erroneous) and in foreign eyes, and the manager has been described to me as "one of those who think you're betraying Mexico if you go work in the U.S." In our interview, he told me, "I prefer to be a first-rate citizen in my own country than to live better in another country where I won't be treated the same." With a salary twelve times higher than that of the line operators in his plant (also, stereotypically, migrants from the South), the manager could not very well live "better" in the United States. If he feels he is treated "the same" in Mexico, that is, in egalitarian fashion, this is only because he can accede to the sphere of "first-rate citizenship." Tijuana's middle-class, rationally debating public is composed of the "first-rate citizens" who know that they are such because the impossibility of their becoming "illegal aliens" in the United States has been embalmed for them in the form of a visa.

In the boardroom, the manager explained that baseball is the region's true sport. He traced a map in the air, signaling soccer and baseball states: "When I was little, soccer [he squinches his face, shaking his head]. We watched it on TV. Baseball we did follow, here in San Diego [he signals northward, casually], because of the Padres." His gestures in the air, dividing regions on an imaginary map of Mexico, parallel the ones he made earlier, signaling the participants in the debate: "to each his own opinion." "We" who first took shape as children, as a sports-viewing public, are precisely the ones to offer the possibility of seeing and representing as equal all those regional and personal differences that make up Mexico. This tijuanaense "we" articulates itself through an attempt to instantiate rational debate among equals, the formation of "opinions" in a protected sphere of tolerance where status is shed. But this "we" is anchored in the last gesture of the manager's, pointing even farther north, across the border. It is the same gesture as that which evokes the gringo as authorizer of a Mexican nationalist discourse of equivalence; it is the same gesture as *this entire performance before me as but another figure for the United States, from which recognition must always, in the end, be obtained.* The collective subject, the "we" of rational debate, seeks to extend itself from Tijuana to all of

Mexico. But it appears deictically situated only between, on the one hand, a map on which "we" can be located and, on the other, the anchoring gesture, "here in San Diego."

CONCLUSION

Agnes and the manager are radically different, not only in age and income but also in personal and family histories. Yet, both make clear their allegiance to rational debate as a communicative genre that defines Tijuana, its forward-looking and progressive character, and its legitimate status as a horizon of future becoming for the nation as a whole. This representation of Tijuana finds its footing in multiple texts and images; backed by formal institutions, it is the dominant understanding of the city. A local newspaper, for instance, ran a full-page spread that declared, "To be of the border is to be open and frank, it is to look each other in the eye and converse, exchanging opinions and accepting dialogue."¹⁸ The spread interpellated its readership as just the "open and frank" tijuanaense public it described.

Tijuana's emphasis on "openness" and "dialogue" may be part of an older local ideology, inflected by Frederick Jackson Turner-style (1993) notions of the nineteenth-century western frontier as the cradle of U.S. democracy. Tijuana, too, conceives of itself as a frontier society of loosened boundaries, where hard work and merit rule supreme and everyone has a chance at prosperity. It is the "American dream" within Mexico. This local discourse resonates with a national shift toward the right, which gained even greater legitimacy with the "democratic transition" of 2000. Tijuana, with its overdetermined middleness, thus provides a privileged window on Mexico's turn to a new liberalism that would again relegate the pueblo to marginal status.

As Agnes and the manager represent Tijuana to me, they take up and rearticulate reflexive circulations of "rational debate," of the "open" exchange of "opinions," that draw the middle class together as a public and as a collective subject in Mexico. Our interactions are but moments in the circulation of an imaginary in which a prospering, visa-holding, comparatively white Tijuana can finally be the real Mexico. These representations are shot through with anxieties and contradictions borne of a middleness that is as much about nationality as class. The border, with its legal categories, only exaggerates the stakes of a national push toward a middle-class Mexico, as illustrated by Dresser or by the online news readers' debate, in which "we" likewise vacillate in "our" relation both to Mexico's poor and to the United States as an authorizing source of recognition.

Tijuana's middle-class public reformulates widespread discourses that tout the middle class as the hope for modernity. Agnes and the manager show Mexico's middle-class "we" in movement, localizing itself, calling itself "Tijuana," grounding itself in personal history and everyday interaction. In Tijuana, this "we" articulates itself by trying to instantiate communicative genres first given political weight in the bourgeois public sphere of seventeenth-century Europe. It treats rational debate as if it were capable on its own of breaking down old barriers of social distinction and creating a merit-based, democratic society of opportunity. The manager's version links freedom of expression and cross-class communication directly to economic profits and productivity—development, in the most neoliberal sense of the word. If the middle-class "we" echoes the ideology of the bourgeois public sphere, this should be no surprise. A strong, open, public sphere of debate is not often critically analyzed as part of contemporary (neo)liberalizing projects, but it is a cornerstone of them, as indicated, for example, by De la Calle and Rubio's (2010a) use of the phrase "deliberative liberal democracy." Rational debate thus appears as an imperative in its own right; Habermas's own writings have been influential in this regard, positing the old bourgeois public sphere as a model for contemporary societies. An intellectual history of his text's influence in Latin America would be of interest in understanding the extraordinary emphasis on "opinion" in a place like Tijuana and its connection to the figure of the middle class.

I have described two conundrums of the middle-class public in Tijuana and in Mexico generally: its relation to the poor or the pueblo and its relation to the United States. These echo conundrums of the bourgeois public sphere: its relation to the masses unprepared to participate in rational debate and to a foreign public of the enlightened. In contemporary Mexico, at the border in particular, these contradictions deepen as a middle-class "we" of rational debate is called on to mediate not just between elites and masses, but between the nation and the globe.

Egalitarian rational debate is shown up as a weapon of class distinction and, ultimately, exclusion: Tijuana's middle-class public subtly reproduces racialized and classed, regional and national differences. The display of egalitarian debate can take place only under certain conditions: the protected sphere of Agnes's dining room or the factory boardroom; my status as guest in these settings; the dark-skinned men's status as photographer or engineer. Neither do so-called reason or opinion stand on their own; they both depend on external recognition and authorization, in this case not that of the state to which a public sphere should ideally be oriented, but that of a foreign country. As the middle class tries to position itself at the

vanguard of democratic openness and properly modern egalitarianism, it must ignore these contradictions.

Ethnographic focus on the reflexive circulations that undergird and reproduce a middle-class collective subject brings to light its self-contradictions: its use of egalitarian debate to exclude class others below it and its dependence on a foreign source of authority and recognition. Tijuana's middle-class public thus appears bound to a nest of binary distinctions—gringo versus mexicano, North versus South, white versus indigenous, patriot versus traitor, visa holder versus "illegal alien," middle class versus poor. All are articulated within the logic of "rational" and "free" public communication as a pillar of modern, liberal democracy—but this logic only tenuously holds together the principle of equal national sovereignties and that of equal parties to debate within the nation.

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Notes

1. I use "the poor" as a local category, as I do "the middle class."
2. As Olivia Ruiz felicitously titled her study of nearby Sonora, *Between Mexico and the United States: A Mexican Middle Class in the Middle* (1984). Schielke's (chapter 2, this volume) study of Egypt, across the sea from Europe, provides a striking comparison.
3. The quotation marks are meant to indicate that I am interested not in the rationality of debate per se, but in "rational debate" as a category of interaction, or a set of communicative genres, which people perform in different ways.
4. Following Benveniste (1971) on pronouns as the prime site of subjectivity in language, I sometimes use "we" as a shorthand for collective subjectivity, though this may actually be evoked by more subtle means.
5. Examples of works that approach classes as publics include E. P. Thompson's (1963) demonstration that the English working class was a reading public; Loaeza's (1988) study of how the Mexican middle class took shape as a specific political issue (education) was fought in the public sphere; and Liechty's (2003) study of the middle class in Nepal, which shows the intertextuality of major media forms not only with one another but also with urban public spaces.
6. An intellectual history tracing these connections is beyond the scope of this chapter. Suffice it to note Habermas's (1989:4) parallel argument: "The model of the

Hellenic public sphere...[has enjoyed]...a peculiarly normative power. Not the social formation of its base but the ideological template itself has preserved continuity over the centuries.”

7. “The Need for Reform in Mexico,” January 20, 2010, at the Institute of the Americas and the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD). A recording is available at <http://usmex.ucsd.edu/assets/023/11118.mp3>. The Institute of the Americas is an independent organization housed on UCSD’s campus; its Tequila Talks series usually requires an entrance fee, though Dresser’s did not. Thus, its public is somewhat exclusive and, though educated, not exactly academic.

8. John Johnson (1958) made the first extended argument on the central importance of the “middle sectors” for political change in Latin America. On the association between the middle class and democracy in Mexico, see Loaeza 1988.

9. Thanks to José Carlos Hesles for bringing this to my attention.

10. Reader comments are drawn from Aguilar Camín 2010 and *Nexos* 2010, though more articles were consulted.

11. See Gilbert 2007 for an account of the middle classes’ (legendary) role in the electoral change.

12. Lomnitz (2003) builds on O’Dougherty (2002) in his analysis of Mexico City’s reading middle-class public in the crisis of the 1980s.

13. Local wisdom has it that the 1980s were a watershed decade in which the poor began to arrive in massive numbers. Whether or not this is statistically true, lower-income residents had already been a palpable (and problematic, from the dominant perspective) presence for many decades.

14. “What I say in Mexico...is what every one of you would be saying here. It is what people say in a functional democracy.” Earlier, though, Dresser implied that the United States is a *dysfunctional* democracy.

15. Agnes’s husband was a Mason.

16. *Discusión* is usually better translated as “argument.” I say “man” because of the public sphere’s highly gendered nature. Rational debate in Mexico is very much (though not always) a male sport (cf. Piccato 2010).

17. *Gringo* connotes Anglo-American ethnicity; it is a standard analogue of *mexicano*.

18. *Frontera*, July 25, 2003.

9

Private Homes, Distinct Lifestyles

Performing a New Middle Class in China

Li Zhang

The post-Mao economic reform has brought about unprecedented wealth and remarkable economic growth, but the income gap has increased and social polarization has soared in this rapidly commercializing society. A small group of the newly rich—including private entrepreneurs, merchants, well-positioned government officials, and managers of large, profitable corporations—is taking an enormous share of the new wealth and cultivating a luxurious lifestyle beyond the reach of the majority of ordinary Chinese. At the same time, millions of rural migrant laborers, laid-off workers, and other disadvantaged citizens (*ruoshi qunti*) are struggling to make ends meet, a situation leading to widespread discontent and even public protests (see Lee 2000; Solinger 1999; Zhang 2001, 2002). Despite such rising social problems, neoliberal practices centered on the privatization of property and lifestyles are being increasingly naturalized and valorized in the urban public sphere. One of the most important changes in China’s urban landscape, made possible by this privatization, is the formation of a new social stratum: the “new middle class” (*xin zhongchan jieceng*).¹

The demise of the public housing regime and the rise of the commercial real estate industry have opened up new opportunities for urbanites to seek differentiated lifestyles, status recognition, and cultural orientations. Thus, reconfigurations of residential space have proved vital to the formation of a new urban middle-class culture. My central argument here is that