

Middle Class Evolving To Precariat: Labour Conditions for the 21st Century

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1 21st Century Middle Class. Is any room left for optimism?

The idea that middle classes are fading is an old one. From the Eighties up to now there have appeared thousands of papers and books alerting about the fact about the fact that this post-II World War utopia, a class able to absorb the two other –rulers and workers in its Marxist definition-, competent to create a society of tolerance and democracy, able to absorb conflicts and create a security net for almost any citizen is gone. Pessimism reigns everywhere at a first glance inside an elementary bibliography : The Two Income Trap, (Warren & Tyagi, 2003) Stuck in the Middle (MacManus & Topping, 2010), Screwed, The Undeclared War Against the Middle Class (Hartmann 2009), The Revolt Against The Masses, How Liberalism has Undermined the Middle Class (Siegel, 2014) are some of the recent titles pointing this present sensitivity. On the other hand some emergent countries celebrate just the opposite: the birth of a new middle class in countries such as India, Brazil or China. It seems that for the first time in history, “underdeveloped countries” are achieving the social milieu need to have a true democracy.

Middle classes, understood as the guarantee of democracy begin to strive. So now there is that brand new sociological category: new middle classes. Curiously enough that new class is subject to bitter criticism (Lange & Meier, 2009). These third world middle class threatens the climate, are nouveau riches with a consumerist fever, kitsch and immoral according to some experts. They are not by any means the same ecological aware and political open-minded class than in the first world. It would be interesting going deep in these statements but does not belong to this paper. Also the term middle class is difficult to understand from an analytical point of view. The vast literature about the term shows us how broad the term is, how many different actors include and how time, history, have changed meaning. There is a technical meaning for it and also there is a sort of “popular” use. It is not difficult to find people defining themselves as middle classes without having a deep understanding of it meaning. Sometimes the term becomes a void concept. To fine-tune the concept there is a high, medium and low middle classes complicating the scope even more. A doctor traditionally belonged to middle class since he or she worked by hiring time. Also a low rank bureaucrat would belong to the same class but occupying a different place in terms of income. It is difficult, therefore, to distinguish from value judgments and descriptions in many instances. Sometimes it seems that certain studies on middle classes subsume them into mass or crowd. Also middle class has some utopian flavor: if struggles are between two opposite classes, owners and workers, this tertium quid could smooth out conflicts and eventually create a peaceful society with a secure future for everybody. The idea of creating a safety net

linked with the welfare state, that allows people not to live under the umbrella of uncertainty, as a way of managing and minimizing the risks. This hidden utopia, a medium able to erase social conflicts is somehow behind the common assumption of middle class as the guarantee for democracy. Small business and landowners, professionals and civil servants are apparently more prone for 2 democracy and political tolerance than corporations or low-income workers. That assessment –middle classes are always the basis for democracy- can generate paradoxically an elitism unable to realize the present fragile political position; individualism has led to atomization and weakening of that class. Also being the biggest chunk of political voters it seems plausible the constant references for political parties for that class. Every official political party –at least in Spain- claims to defend the interest of middle class individual, does not matter if they belong to centered right or centered left wing. This fact is the consequence of a long political indoctrination.

Individuals included into that category are also diverse. There are white-collar workers, double income families, small business owners, civil servants, single mothers, professionals, and entrepreneurs... The main common factor would be income and consumption power. If this is true, asserting the decline of middle classes would be easy to prove: if income goes down and there are more bankruptcies affecting a certain segment of population then clearly it is true. But income alone would not be enough to explain how this event happens and why there should be reversed, it will be a sum of multiple factors. Here the term gets an important political flavor: again middle classes represent the column for true democracy as stated from the beginning of the US Republic and its founder fathers. Also peace in Europe is due to the existence of a middle class able to avoid populism and fascism. At the same time threatening the very existence of middle classes implies, supposedly, open the door again for radical nationalism, xenophobia and alike.

The very concept of middle class or its pertinence has been put into question from different instances. Ehrenreich (1990) criticizes what be called self-absorption of the middle class: worried about their own problems and difficulties, other groups like the poor do not have a voice in the political arena. Middle class is an elite not paying attention to the most disfavored elements who, according to Ehrenreich amount for more than half of the country population. 3 Maybe Zizek (2008) makes the strongest case from a socialist point of view. Middle class is defined by what it is not: neither aristocracy (upper classes) nor proletariat (blue-collar workers and dropouts). Also by definition lacks strong political statements because it is the natural place for tolerance. Intended and thought as a common ground to avoid political confrontation, lacks genuine political identity. Zizek (1998) claims that the very existence of the notion of middle class has represented the end of real political debate, rivalry or antagonism (Mouffe, 2005). Is any political agenda for middle classes? It seems so: education, culture retirement, public health, again tolerance and the desire to solve political struggles in a pacific way. But socialists and more radical leftist consider that vague ideology as the source for a deep ideological crisis.

Income is also something under a deep debate because that would be the proof for the attack to middle class. Figure wars have taken an important part of the debate. In fact a great deal of why middle classes are disappearing rests in the assumption that wealth is not distributed. According to economist Paul Krugman (2014) that makes the historical difference from the seventies up to now. It is a common place to understand the birth of a strong middle class after the II World War on the idea that a specific economical policy -the New Deal implanted by Roosevelt- was the main reason to spread a middle class in US. European policies based on the welfare state go in the same rationale: taxation and state support for public education,

health, social security system, retirement pensions are basics elements to create an extended middle class. Neo-liberal and neocon philosophies have transformed in the main enemy: cuts, downsizing, productivity, low wages, unprogressive taxation, outsourcing, and alike explains why unemployment and reduction of wages have taken place. According to Krugman (2014) those neo-liberal policies erase two basic ingredients for considering oneself middle class: security (education, health, retirement) and opportunity (employment, qualification and wages). To prove a decrease of the general wealth in society can be a 4 difficult task. There is not a consensus about that. Journals such as *The Economist* or *The Wall Street Journal* show a sustained effort to prove that public perception about inequality is wrong. For instance, wage lowering is explained as the affluence of unqualified immigrants that affects the general ratio. Bad use of credit goes in the same direction. Consumerism, a bad household economy explains the growth of household bankruptcies. Inability to adapt to a labour market and changing technologies speaks about unemployment for qualified workers (overqualification theories have a special role here, there is no connection between the educational level and the job conditions. Figures of people with higher education degrees are much more than system is able to offer and sustain, so they have to work in lower job positions with lower salaries, lower conditions...). Reasons to support a bad economy in middle classes households is a double income –both parents have a salary- insufficient when thirty years ago a single income would be enough to maintain the family economy. Also a long a detailed examination of how expenditures are made try to demonstrate, in each side, that a careful look should support each side of the discussion.

Cyphers have been a key element to discuss if middle class is disappearing or not. Maybe the most recent speaker about wealth and distribution has been the French economist Thomas Piketty. His proposal tries to analyze how wealth is distributed in three centuries for France and from the beginning of the 20th in US and Europe, based on the available data. According to Piketty that survey shows a clear tendency of capital income concentration. If Piketty is right, there is a long history to show that economical growth does not imply a general improvement of the whole society, one of the neoliberal mantras. On the contrary, this fact would reveal that something intrinsically wrong happens in free market and pure capitalism: these cannot guarantee economical justice by definition. Therefore this period from the 50s up to 70s is an exception produced precisely by strong state intervention through progressive taxation. Piketty also shows, if he is correct, that income capital concentration is 5 not affected by general economical growth. It does not matter for that upper segment of people if there is or there is not growth; in both cases income keep on growing for a selected group. Only state intervention can limit that concentration, the infamous 1% possessing the 40% of the income (Stiglitz, 2012; Krugman, 2012). Piketty proposes the restoration of progressive taxation as it happened in US and Europe from the 50s up to 70s. As a result neo-liberal opponents have declared Piketty as a new communist and accused his work as flawed on data (*Wall Street Journal*)¹. Leaving apart the war of cyphers it is a general consensus that growth does not imply necessarily a just distribution of income and resources for everybody. It is true that there is a significant growth of poverty and loss of income as official statistics show. Globalization seems to challenge traditional axioms for economy. For instance, well-prepared and educated people can earn a relatively low wage in some countries such as India, China or Brazil. This workforce many times serves for Western companies. Outsourcing becomes one

¹ Surprisingly enough Piketty also received criticism from neo-communists and left wing thinkers. For instance David Harvey accuses Piketty of not understanding Karl Marx. It is true that Piketty is not a communist and his criticism tries to show a hypothesis.

of the biggest threats for white-collar workers when ICT can solve logistics. Privatization, and the supposed benefits of outsourcing, is also one of the biggest fears: State run services become more and more in hands of companies and the idea of public service tends to evaporate or fade away. Against unemployment there should be entrepreneurship, a difficult proposal in a time where big corporations are the rule and states do not protect small business enough. Dices are loaded for the economical success: intellectual property and patent laws would be a small example. Contradictions are everywhere. It is true that the Gilded Era (Twain, 1873) is coming back?

Also the present society relies too much in cyphers, statistics and quantitative measurements (the data are not reality but without data there is no reality). Now it seems that some basic assumptions in economy are put in question. For instance, GDP is said not to reflect properly the real situation of individuals and, as said before, there are situations where GDP does not grow and, at the same time GDP decrease can help some social groups. From the seventies up to now the idea of development and growth has been reformulated many times (Sachs, 1997). Material conditions alone such as income and consumerism do not reflect accurately how individuals really live. Even most neo-liberals, at least in Spain, accept the huge difference between positive macroeconomic indicators and how people live with a 24.47% of unemployment in Spain (Statistical Office of the European Commission -Eurostat-July 2014). Quantifying has shown in the last years how fallible it is; rate agencies have made repeated blunders with countries, banks and companies. It seems there is no room for qualitative analysis in present society and quantitative should be enough to understand what is going on. At the same time the idea of transparency, the blind faith on data and statistics permeate contemporary society, there is nothing to discuss, data will explain by their own.

There is a general agreement about the fact that forty years of intense propaganda have colonized the public imaginary. The case of America should manifest very clearly that: middle class voters choose either Republicans or Democrats, both basically sharing the same agenda in economy, meeting in the mainstream arena. The meme “taxes are bad, are socialism” permeates the supposedly more prepared and politically learned social strata that chooses just the less desirable option. Reduction of direct taxes linked to labor and capital income and increased indirect taxes linked to consumption, generates a higher level of inequality. One of the arguments is that the intense indoctrination has colonized the minds of professors, doctors, medium managers, graduate people, brain-workers ... That is a weak point against the idea of indoctrination because it does not infect the most intellectually weak, just the opposite. When Zizek criticizes the medium class as a no class would be referring to that lack of identity. Zizek speaks about a naturalization of politics as in scientific knowledge. What is natural therefore is that medium term neither rich nor poor; neither right, nor left. That is the victory of the center. Then the possibility of antagonism disappears for a bland tolerance that becomes the principle for discussion or opposition. The idea of a political arena for that networking is quite difficult to accept. In fact, one of the main mistakes most of middle class members have committed is to understand politics as a managerial issue, something outsourced in professional political parties.

Society transforms into a network of individuals with no social relevance at all. But this is not true, middle class tolerance has its limits too; there is a hidden antagonism, as Jones (2012) has shown; lower middle classes, the chavs. The remaining of the working class is the unique social class able to suffer puns and jokes without falling into political incorrectness. That does not apply to other social disfavored or discriminated people. Also there is a growing distrust with younger generations spring from middle classes themselves. Demonization of a social

group that many times reaches 50% of unemployment means to divide the social body from supposedly the threaten class itself. Information and communication technologies (ICT) reveal as a trap for those youngsters, according to psychologists and sociologists. Occupying public places using the Meet applications, absorbed by consumerism, immersed in violent gregarious acts, they reflect not only the uneasiness to live in a society without future but also the lack of education, the failure to cope with frustration, the hedonist attitude for a life with immediate gratification. Sometimes social panic spreads before situations such as the Vasco de Gama Mall in Lisbon. Repressed with prison and compulsory communitarian work, that immature and superficial social strata indicate the deep divisions crisscrossing middle classes. The idea that contemporary middle classes have failed to educate and prepare new generations to go on with their social role is also something to blame. Many societies demonize these new generations in different ways: from the Spanish “Ninis” (ni estudio ni trabajo, neither studying nor working) to middle classes rioters in London it seems that young people is in part responsible of the fact to be unemployed or forced to migrate.

2 Perplexities for the middle class

Is any questioning about the very idea of growth and development in these criticisms? Is consumerism and income the real problem for the vanishing middle class? If wealth were properly distributed, most of the problems we are facing today will disappear? Clearly not. It is difficult to go on thinking in an economical model of infinite growth. It is difficult to think that in the middle of a forecasted ecological collapse. There is another problem with the political system itself. For decades there has been the common opinion that it does not work, that representative democracy has exhausted. It is a growing idea that politicians do represent the interests of that 1% instead of the majority of the middle class. There is a lack of imagination, a sort of paralysis to think in alternatives enough convincing for that majority. Occupy Wall Street or May 15 are good examples for the uneasiness official politics is enduring. 2007 Crisis seems to have triggered this debate. But in fact there is an older line of thought trying to make sense of the new political arena. Colin Crouch (2004) or Geoff Mulgan (2007) tried to show how official politics was in a deep crisis beyond what marxists called the "formal democracy". Citizen's disaffection is reflected in the participation deficit on elections. Corruption, lack of transparency, economicism, indifference towards democratic processes, were a growing phenomena at least from the beginning of the 21st century. There is a clear lack of political imagination for the present times, a real apoplexy on what to do or act, a long distance between people and decision-making processes. Public good is for the majority a hollow abstraction. On the other hand bureaucracy, technical and managerial procedures favoring abstract effectiveness help to create political distance between the people and the system. The idea to recover a "strong democracy" was a theoretical attempt to recover a true participatory political life. Also the idea of global governance, as a way to counterbalance the global capitalism has been on the political debate for a long time. In an interdependent world it seems that only a coordinated government can give new meaning to democracy. Communications technologies have appeared as the panacea to amend that decaying political structures. But experiences have shown that this technological utopia is far from reality (Sustein, 2009; Barber, 2003; Dean, 2009). These technologies have a double edge; supposedly are the way to engage people in democratic procedures but at the same time are the core for productivity and global capitalism. It is difficult to differentiate between participation on line and mere social networking. Customized information threatens the very idea of public space. Companies such as Google, Facebook, Twitter and alike allow people to manifest, interact and express themselves but in a private space ruled by corporations. Those

corporations behave exactly in the same way than the rest: merging, extracting benefits from users and ultimately making profit.

There are strong contradictions inside the present political-economical system. And there is a new social class that embodies such apparent contradiction: the precariat (Castel, 1995; Boltanski & Chiapello, 2002; Ross, 2009; Standing, 2011). According to Bifo (2007) all of individuals are capitalists in our society but at the same time all of them belong to the precariat (Standing, 2011). Bifo's statement is based of the extended idea that every individual takes responsibility for his or her economical life from a moral point of view. Competition, social darwinism, the survival and striving of the fittest have been part of an impressionist social discourse for decades: individuals should manage and more importantly take responsibility for all their life including finances, health, wellbeing, education. If they fail that failure belongs to them, not the states, not society. At the same time precariat is the result of global capitalism; outsourcing, de-localization, expansion, flexi-security, productivity, cuts... produce individuals lacking that traditional social network that shaped middle classes. But that contradiction is apparent because global capitalism works also with the failure of individuals, it is required in a sort of gross social neo-darwinism².

A good example is the status of freelancer. Token for the hippie uneasiness with *la vie bourgeoise*, a flag for freedom (Ross, 2009), becomes in the 21st century in an extended work relation to avoid costs and make flexible staffs. Limits among self-employment, entrepreneurship, and freelancer become difficult to see. Status of freelancer extends everywhere, from services to the so called general intellect³. Expropriation of that mental or cognitarian work becomes a basic source of income for companies: web designers, content creators, software producers... New economy has created the conditions for this new social class that into a big extent receives their members from the former middle classes. Among the different influences Informational technology in society there are two of special importance: competence and flexibility. Intellectual white collar workers have seen transform their time, according to Bifo: workers suffer a contradiction between bodily time, the time belonging to corporeal sensitivity and the continuous exigency to be connected, available electronically

²The concept of "neo-darwinism" names a line of thought represented, among others by Theodosius Dobzhansky (1970), Ernst Mayr (1988), George G. Simpson (1964). More recently thinkers such as Edward O. Wilson (2000), Richard Dawkins (2006) would represent a second generation for neo-darwinism. This thought was born at the end of 19th century, based in Herbert Spencer writings. Spencer's ideas are based basically in capitalist theories of social organization. In *Social Statics* (1851) Spencer tried to tie ethics and biology, the world of facts and the world of values. Therefore defending more disfavored classes would imply to distort the natural order of cosmic laws. This sociological school had some influence up to the end of the 2nd World War such as the national-socialism theories on eugenics. The appearance of *Sociobiology* by Edward O. Wilson (2000) in 1975, that theory revived, Neo-darwinism is also known as a synthesis of evolution joining classic darwinism with Modern genetics and lately going after economical thinking. The decay of public spaces together with solidarity and social assistance become natural crisis. It appears a realm where economical individualism based on property, on the privatization of public goods and commons and cultural marketing become the natural place for a new social Darwinism as it appears in present capitalist societies.

³General intellect is a Marxist concept included in Marx. *Grundrisse* (on *Machines*, 1987). Italian movements on autonomy (*movimiento operario*) makes from them a general criticism on the contemporary cognitive capitalism and immaterial work (Negri, 2009; Virno 2003; Bifo, 2007). Marx sees the importance of knowledge and cooperative work as productive factors. These sum up to monotonous and repetitive labor made by workers. Scientific knowledge (objective knowledge in fixed capital/machinery) is named also as productivity. That productivity expropriates social cooperation. That objectivation makes social relationships centers for economical productivity.

every second, what Bifo (2007) denominates as info-communicational time. Workers become not a subject but the owner of time units to sell whereas as physical force or the ability to process the electronic world. So time and not individuals is what matters. Standing tries to define precariat as certain work and socio-economical conditions against the will of different individuals: economical flexibility, preponderance of intermittent and unstable work with no secure contractual bond. Present work is not anymore the realm of stability and social rights established after the war as Keynesianism tried to achieve. It is difficult to define at the present moment the features for that new social and economical class. Maybe it does not fit exactly in the Marxist or Weberian criteria. It is difficult at first sight to see common grounds for a successful software designer in Silicon Valley and a sweatshop worker (maquiladora) in Mexico. But both are de-politized individuals in a global, informational capitalism, in a techno-euphoric milieu. Vulnerability and legal exposure could be common features for a joined fight (Bifo, 2007).

3 Degrowth as Political Agenda or Is Better to Be Happy or to Be Rich?

As seen before, work is a central notion to define middle class; the growing expansion of wages and labor conditions were the responsible for a strong American middle class from the 50s to the 70s, also connected/linked with the expansion of leisure time and the consumption levels. But in the 21st work becomes a problematic issue for many reasons. For decades technology has served as a means to boost productivity and, as a result, more and more workers become redundant (The system can go on with a much lower number of workers). In a capitalist milieu, work is not only the way to get an income to survive. Also it represents a strong element of identity, it is common that people define themselves by their job. Now there are big chunks of population with no labor interest. The unemployment army as a source to restrain wages and keep workers under control does not apply for the 21st century. There are too many workers, complete areas, countries out of control where population seems to lack any economical value at all. Technology facilitates processes, makes cheaper good and makes people redundant but at the same time people still on the labor market works more hours per year than ever (Bifo, 2007). Unemployment has gone in Economics through different evaluation. First, reaching certain level it was a socio-political danger (Republic of Weimar) but now there are countries and population sectors –immigrants, young people- that have reached even worse levels than in Weimar. Also work does not always mean to be safe from poverty and exclusion. Right now there are working places in the 1st World that do not allow workers to escape poverty. These low incomes applied to formerly middle class members are one of the dangers today. For this reason it is difficult to think again in a full employment. On the other hand, as Illich (1978) claimed in the seventies how industrial society has gone through a threshold where consumption does not bring happiness but, on the other hand, requires more time working. Consumption is neither the key to happiness nor to tolerance and political wisdom; it becomes consumerism. Consumerism has been a long debated question that goes directly to the dangers of middle class. Customization has reached the point that personality is expressed by the personal choices including politics. Less and less there is no space for the others, for true communities or real care. Consumerism makes world more hostile. Degrowth theories go against the standard assumption that growth is a basic requirement to re-balance the present situation. But the environment and social ties say another thing. It is time to degrow. Now the new middle classes, in emergent countries, are also part of the problem because it is considered as a new plague. A threatened world overwhelmed with the burden of developed countries cannot put up with the extra weight that China, India or Brazil represent. On the other hand the existence of new consumers in those countries would be a way to regain growth. The question is it is possible to live with low

consumption and have a better life? Can we trade personal time for material goods? Can we get rid of so many commodities for a social time shared by as many people as possible? Would be that a good business? Environment is not the only element that degrowth takes into account. Also independence, autonomy and the possibility to relate to others are critical aspects for a richer society in human terms.

4 Where is Now the Public Good?

It seems that it is necessary to rethink what is the meaning for the middle classes, what allow their members to have some sense of belonging. Number, income, consumerism, retirement and tolerance do not fully give sense to produce a real social class. When speaking about the public good, the public sphere and the public goods it is required to revise carefully what they are and how to understand them. Last years studies on the commons and the public good have spread. Downsizing state structures has become the mantra for the last three decades. The results have become precisely the most threatening movement for middle classes. The security net is dismantled step by step. Social and welfare states are fading through privatization. Corporate companies take over water, state infrastructures, communications, energy, education ... For many years this process had the support of middle classes in part as in US. Saving taxes would give more money for everybody. Results seem to be obvious: privatized services do not improve significantly and become more and more expensive if not less accessible for people. This is maybe the most visible problem. One possible interpretation is to understand that protests about the dismantle of welfare state as a way to reclaim for lost middle class privileges (as Zizek notes). If that is true is difficult to see how to revert that situation. If precariat is the final fate for a great proportion of middle class people then it is difficult how to articulate a way to recover those. Social justice then does not play a significant role if there are lost privileges. So there is necessary to understand that what is at stake is not the loss of status. Politics should not be driven by the anxiety of losing privileges.

What lacks here is a real idea of what is public good, what is commons and how collective goods should be managed. A great part of injustice comes from how the public good has been stolen from citizens. Surprisingly enough, technology has been precisely one of the key elements to start the debate on public goods⁴. Copyright legislation was under attack when free software began the idea of copyleft. One of the elements defining medium class -culture- is reformulated. For the first time the debate if culture is a commons or belongs to private interests is formulated. Content in the internet, the cheapen costs for producing and distributing cultural goods have marked a new sensitivity about the cultural heritage, the role for producers and consumers and how private sector is taking advantage of technical productivity (Benkler, 2006). Digital commons opened a bigger debate about what is public property and how private interests should articulate. A basic mistake for these years was to think there were three actors: State, commons and private interests (Klink, 1991). Still a basic mistake lingers in many discourses; there are private public and open access goods. Each one has it own features. Public goods such as roads, forests, fisheries can be perfectly privatized. Even an open access good such as the air can be privatized if there is the possibility to sell air pollution quotas⁵. Ugo Mattei (2011) has shown clearly how this is false: today states work

⁴ 15 May in Spain seems to sprout in part from a civil group against SINDE Law, a very restrictive code for electronic (Sampedro & Lobera , 2014).

⁵There must be a clear classification of commons. Free as in free beer does not imply commons, as Stallman (2010) would claim. What is free does not belong to anybody. There are free access goods such as the air and there are commons such as certain pastures or forests. Public goods managed by states are for instance

for private interests and do not have limitations to privatize public goods such as energy, water, education, health, communications, stealing from the public domain. After Thatcher has become an ordinary practice to understand public goods as something available to politicians with no responsibility. It is basically get more and more income for a thinner and thinner state until almost its complete depletion. Only when that privatizing movement has reached the limits of what can be privatized then the question has become crucial. Still the idea that private interests are more vigilant and efficient preserving goods is quite extended. Hardin's paper still keeps the attention to explain plainly why private management is the only possibility. Neo liberalism relies very often in Hardin's idea. But it could be interesting to know how many middle class members still agree. Mattei has pointed out a very important issue: commons have not their own legislation; it is the State who regulates them for the public. Politicians taking decisions should be as stewards for the public and the general public wealth should not be decreased by any reason. What happens is just the opposite and big private businesses are created extracting the value from the public good and ultimately each present and future individual.

Commons imply, as Ostrom (1990) has shown, a way to manage a public property belonging to a specific community. It is true that there have been many commons that disappeared due to a bad management. But Ostrom (1990) discovered that in order to work properly any commons requires at least two political ingredients: complete information for everybody about the good and the implication to follow consensual choices. So members must be active gathering information and getting involved in the process of how to manage roads, health or education. Commons should be a way to recover some sovereignty for the people, middle and the lower classes, for communities in a real sense.

5 Conclusion

It is clear that situation will not reverse, no way to be back in a society with high consumption levels, with a ever-growing public services and secured by the state. There are too many new ingredients that make impossible to go back. At the same time going back is not a desirable prospect for a true social justice. The middle class utopia is gone if it is thought in its historical terms. Now middle class must be reformulated with a different political agenda. Consumption as a result of income should not be the main factor to identify middle class as political entity. Certainly progressive taxation is an important element to reorganize states and economy. That would imply to thicken back states to make them more important in reference to Environment, justice, solidarity and interdependence are basic elements to reinforce in a different society. That should reverse the idea that taxes are radically bad and consumption is the way to restore the economical balance. Going beyond that bland ecologism it is clear there is an ongoing ecological disaster caused in a great deal for middle class consumption. But Environment is not an end in itself; it is the condition for people to live in better conditions. So degrowth should be not only the way of protecting Environment but to care about people in society. Reaching certain level of consumption, as Illich proposed, society becomes iatrogenic and there is no room for happiness and fulfilment. Rethinking the commons and practicing an active politics on commons would also deal with both questions: human and Environmental solidarity. In order to do so middle classes have to take into account the notion of interdependence (Butler, 2004). Precariat becomes then something more than an economical condition, it becomes the shared vulnerability each one has. That vulnerability

telecommunication infrastructures. Now states manage all those public goods –free, commons and public- and the tendence is to sell them in order to secure income.

and the need to rely in others, that interdependence, leads to a politics of acknowledge the value of others. In fact the prospect is a society divided into upper class and precariat, at the end. So if Ehrenreich is right the middle class self-absorption should be eliminated. Middle classes must think in society as a whole, taking into account the lower classes that are the biggest part in society right now.

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