

ON THE SO-CALLED “MIDDLE-CLASS CITIZENS” AS THE POWER OF SOCIAL CHANGE

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Abstract: This article, looking at the middle-class citizens of today who have grown into the majority of the population in developed countries and who are gradually becoming the majority in emerging countries too, argues that none other than such citizens might retain the power of social change in this phase of capitalism. This article, by tracing the different aspects of citizens' features along with capitalist development, reveals the complicated characteristics of contemporary middle-class citizens who though usually supporting of the capitalist system, sometimes turn into influential opponents of the system where they feel themselves betrayed or abandoned by it. This article insists on the distinct meaning of the Worldwide Comprehensive Consumption Reduction Movement, which is effective not only for preventing the destruction of nature, culture and human health but also for the middle-class citizens to develop into constructive reformists, not simply opponents, of the very same capitalist society.

Key words: middle-class citizens; social change; consumption reduction strategy; world-wide movement; ordinary citizens' human development

Introduction: The Peculiar Meaning of the Middle-Class Citizens

In the 19th century, as many theorists after Karl Marx have been arguing, those who can change the social system and create a new system have been considered to be working class, selling their own labor power in exchange for exceedingly low wages with very long working hours and remarkably poor labor conditions. Accordingly, the class struggles between capitalists and workers have been believed to be decisively important in the process of social change.

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Since the early days of capitalism, after already one and a half centuries, however, there seems to have appeared a new type of citizen. They are, in fact, still working and yet selling their own labor in exchange for a salary with very long stressful working hours. But those citizens, with a relatively high standard of education and generally living in or near the big cities, consume far more than the workers of the 19th century so long as the business cycle is operating fairly well.

Also, they support capitalism by mass-purchase of mountains of commodities and services produced by the capitalist system, and what is more the large part of them often play a politically important role as voters for the government party and actually support the capitalist system, too.¹ Besides, the population of such citizens is not only the overwhelming majority in the developed countries, but also is now rapidly growing especially in the successful developing countries. Moreover, what is far more curious is that the citizens themselves sometimes resist their governments when they feel they are betrayed by their social system for any other reason. Accordingly, they can sometimes be threatening to the ruling power because such citizens' form such a large part of the population as well as having considerable influence. On the other hand, the traditional working class needs such citizens' cooperation if the class desires the social change.

So, we cannot ignore those citizens when we discuss social change. Any type of social change will go just with those citizens' recognition of and participation in the social revolutionary process. Therefore the investigation into those people should be set up now to be a core study in the social sciences.

First and Second Generation Citizens

The citizens in the early days of modern Europe (bourgeois) and the middle-class citizens today should be considered as quite different, even though people refer to them in the same way as "citizens."

The most fundamental feature of modern European society and which expanded to the whole world is considered to be individualism, not freedom, equality, democracy or anything else. Either freedom or democracy was derived simply from individualism itself as products of its fundamental features. It is individualism that should be considered as the most important and fundamental character which modern European history created.

Citizens of such individualism, in the abovementioned meaning, in the early days in modern Europe performed great social changes (revolutions) in three stages. In the first stage, they performed religious revolutions (the Reformation), i.e., the revolution on ideology, and established individualism as the modern fundamental ideology through shaping Protestantism. In the second stage, they performed bourgeois revolutions, e.g. the Puritan Revolution in England, the American

Revolutionary War of Independence, the Great French Revolution beginning in 1789, etc. Citizens established their society (bourgeois society), forming the civil law system, the taxation system, the central bank system, etc., and, moreover, they created the concept of "nation," and also created the political framework for modern individualistic society. In the third stage, they performed industrial revolutions to give economic substance for their society and established their society as the capitalist society.

In the process of establishing capitalist society, the successful people turned themselves into capitalists, forming the ruling class of their society (the bourgeois class), and separated themselves off from most ordinary citizens.

In this sense, such citizens who led the religious revolutions, the bourgeois revolutions and the industrial revolutions should be defined as the "first generation citizens" in order to distinguish the ordinary working middle-class citizens of today.

The middle-class citizens we see today are quite different citizens in the sense of both their derivation and their culture/characteristics. They emerged in two ways. One is the result of class struggles of labor for higher wages, the reduction of the labor day, the betterment of their labor conditions, etc., and the other is the result of capitalists' measures in the face of economic crisis to preserve the capitalist economy, and as a result, the two ways have merged into one another to create middle-class citizens.

As these historical processes suggest, capitalism itself inevitably creates middle-class citizens on the one hand, whilst itself actually needing those very same citizens on the other. They can indeed be the supporters of the market economy in the sense of being important participants in commodity markets as the big consumers of goods which the capitalist economy produces, in the sense of necessary participants in the labor market through their gaining, (sometimes losing) and changing jobs, and in the sense of being valuable sponsors for financial markets by saving even a little money that can be invested after being deposited in financial institutions.

Middle-class citizens, whose population and powers are increasing, are becoming the actual decision-makers of contemporary societies and nations.

They are indeed the proletariat (working-class people) in one meaning, because they are in the position of wage or salary earners. But they are, at the same time, the consumers of the goods and services which the capitalist economy produces, or the supporters of the capitalist market system in the wider sense, and therefore they appear usually to be relatively solid and stable supporters of the capitalist regime, and as a consequence, they are inclined to accept the ideology of the upper class. The reason why conservatism, like neo-liberalism in recent decades, is influential can easily be seen just through this circumstance caused by the enormous population of middle-class working citizens today. Moreover, middle-class citizens do sometimes oppress the lower classes when such people show their intention to rise to the middle

class. The reason is that too large a middle-class population has the potential to harm the existing middle-class's vested interests. The conservatism after the 1970s, especially in the United States, can also be explained by this situation.

Thus these middle-class citizens, seen everywhere in developed economies and in the cities of newly emerging countries, should be defined as the "second generation citizens."

When Middle-Class Citizens Feel Betrayed by Their Society or Abandoned by the Regime

Insofar as middle-class citizens are the vital element of contemporary capitalist society, if through some circumstances they should feel betrayed by their society or abandoned by the regime, political and social conditions in the nation concerned could develop into a serious situation. It is possible to imagine such circumstances not only in developed nations but also in developing countries. The political changes of the "Arab Spring" and the Chinese younger generation's continual rebellions are only a few such examples. It barely needs mentioning that the middle-class citizens' and younger people's resistance in contemporary European countries are sometimes directed at guest workers and immigrants from Arabian and African countries.

The important point here is that simple acts of resistance or destructive rebellions do not bear any useful circumstances for the future. For example, the "Arab Spring" advanced extremely rapidly, spreading through and between nations via use of the internet, and actually overthrew dictatorships, but after that, only left confusion and disorder without a prospect of bringing the necessary new political visions, programs, institutions and capable leaders. Another important point here is that, should persuasive agitators appear in a confused and disordered society, even honest and sensible citizens have the potential to turn into supporters of extremist political groups. As for real historical examples, we are all well aware of the cases in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. Those cases suggest to us how decisive the high level of consciousness and activities of ordinary citizens are in the process of social revolution to avoid magnifying political disorder.

Not a few middle-class citizens today sometimes feel that the important issue in their everyday life is the human being itself as well as nature (matching well with "labor value theory"). But the very same people at other times feel that the important issues in their economic activities are such things as commodities, money, stocks, results, capital, etc. (matching well with "utility value theory"). The latter inclination has been the important factor in explaining why middle-class citizens actually incline to support the capitalist regime.

Not only as the historical experience of the Luddite movement teaches us but also as the contemporary events we have seen above suggest, simple actions of

resistance or rebellions will not create any useful outcome for the social system in the future. In order to find a brilliant and creative view for the future of human society, ordinary middle-class citizens themselves should abandon their "utility value" based thinking in their economic activities as well as in their everyday lives, and should stand firmly on "labor value" or "human value" based thinking. For these ordinary citizens to do so, they need to experience the mountainous evils of capitalism under some economic crisis or some other unwished-for situations, and consider through their experiences what kind of society should be expected for almost all people after capitalism. The process for citizens to learn to overcome the existing social system will not be short.

In order to avoid contemporary middle-class citizens turning once more towards fascism, the topic of how to understand the situation of middle-class citizens today and how to understand the possibility for the middle-class working citizens to transform themselves into a new type of citizen creating a new society is of the utmost importance.

The New Type of Citizens Who Can Construct a New Society

What is the new type of citizens who can construct a new society after capitalism? It might be already clear. The image of such a citizen would be an independent person who thinks for her/himself, acts for her/himself and is responsible for her/himself, while thinking, acting and being responsible for the whole populace and for the wider environment. Such people are, in a sense, a reappearance of the first generation citizens. But in another sense, that they are no more in the position of capitalist class, such people are the successors of the second generation citizens.

Such a new type of citizen, according to our definition of the first and second generations of citizens, should be defined as the "third generation citizens." As the "second generation citizens" are the denial of "those of the first generation," we can consider that the "third generation citizens" are the denial of "those of the second generation," and the denial of denial (the negation of negation) of "those of the first generation." The third generation citizens might hopefully be citizens who have both high-level consciousness and the ability to participate in activities of the social revolutionary process.

This new type of citizen has already appeared, though they do not yet form a large part of the population. Citizens in several European countries have been continuing movements to reduce their usual consumption as well as their ordinary labor hours and, as a result, successfully prevent destruction of the environment and human health. "Slow Life" and "Slow Food" movements show the same effect, and as a consequence, citizens come to consider more deeply the "work-life balance" and the relationship between human beings and nature through thinking about agriculture.

Citizen power in Germany and Switzerland, for example, moved government policy largely from expansion to abolition of nuclear power generation. It is also worth mentioning the case of Lolland Island in Denmark. Citizens there proposed and realized power generation from wind power, instead of from nuclear power which the government had proposed. The significant point here is that the citizens had been discussing this for a long time looking for a more constructive way forward instead of simply rejecting the government proposal. Nowadays in Nippon (Japan), even though citizens do not form lines at bus-stops, there is no disorder, because citizens get on buses in order of arrival. Here we can find the most advanced style of freedom with the most advanced social order. Just such citizens might be considered to be the leading actors in creating a new social system, if they rouse themselves in the face of economic as well as social crisis.

The new type of citizen should have high levels of morality, culture, education and skills. In order to realize such high-level characteristics, second generation citizens should train themselves with a high level of consciousness and get rid of the contradictory situation of second generation citizens. What kind of method would help to realize this purpose? None other than the Worldwide Comprehensive Consumption Reduction Movement would be considered as the most appropriate way.

Considering the repeated worldwide economic crises over a long period of time, is it yet a desirable solution to come back to a newly fashioned Keynesian policy designed to increase the consumption demand of middle-class citizens?² Is such a policy which aims to maintain the capitalist social system still necessary for human lives in spite of it being full of complicated problems? If not, we should start bringing to an end such ways that only enlarge the contradictions of capitalism. Yet in this sense, too, the Worldwide Comprehensive Consumption Reduction Movement seems one of the most significant answers to our question.³

How Significant is the Worldwide Comprehensive Consumption Reduction Movement?

First of all, this worldwide movement is effective in preventing over-exploitation of nature, i.e. not only exploitation of raw materials and fuels, but also destruction of the atmosphere and water, mountains and oceans, etc. It is effective, too, in preventing drastic climate change. Secondly, it is favorable for the protection of human culture including traditional arts and historical heritages from damage through too rapid processes of material civilization. It is mostly welcomed in protecting various types of lifestyles, food culture, human knowledge, etc., from homogenization (for example: such American culture as Coca-Cola, hamburgers, rock music or jeans have destroyed various types of culture in the world owing to the ways in which the market economy has penetrated every area of the globe).

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Thirdly, it is good for human beings themselves in the prevention of overwork, stress, professional diseases as well as obesity through the materially over-developed capitalist civilization. As Juliet Schor suggested, this overwork has been promoted as capitalist economy has progressed.⁴ It is now advocated by not a few people that human beings should return to “Slow Life” as people in the ancient and medieval ages usually lived.

The distinguished meaning of the Worldwide Comprehensive Consumption Reduction Strategy, however, is not limited only to the above mentioned items. Fourthly, it is a relatively easy way to shorten or minimize the economic differentials among individuals, areas or regions, and nations, not necessarily through the controlled economy but just under a reasonable market economy. Fifthly, it is useful for the developing economies/countries to lessen their perceived need to “catch up” leading to such extravagant goals as the popularization of cars for every citizen.⁵ Indeed, developing countries have been worried about continuously accelerating higher goals according to the progress of technology and increasingly expensive equipment. Our strategy is, therefore, extraordinarily friendly for the people of developing countries.

Moreover, this strategy has further excellent merits. Sixthly, it can be organized just by ordinary citizens, and furthermore, it can be started whenever and wherever they decide. Indeed this characteristic—of whoever can start or participate, whenever and wherever—would be the predominant point in this worldwide public movement by ordinary citizens. Seventhly, if this movement could attract a good number of members, the real effect will widen thanks to the number of participants, and therefore it is feasible even though each citizen’s reduction in consumption is only slight or the strategy could not be adopted as government policy or could not get government support. One of the most excellent characteristics of this movement exists here.

Some Important Points for the Consumption Reduction Strategy

On the Comprehensive Consumption Reduction Strategy, even though its progressive meaning is agreeable, some unexpected questions may be proposed. Anyhow, if one can understand the general outline, then one should devise details as to what is the wiser way to harmonize with the general outline. The Comprehensive Consumption Reduction Strategy, of course, would be available for contemporary human beings insofar as it would be carried out with some indispensable conditions.

In the first place, it is very important to manage this movement carefully, so as not to destroy the circular flow of economy. Given the extraordinarily large ratio of ordinary people’s consumption affecting the whole national economy, a radical reduction of consumption will inevitably cause a decline of economic activities and

damage not only to the corporations but also to the consumers, especially the lower strata of society. Some conflicts might inevitably accompany us during the process of practicing this strategy. Unfortunately it may sometimes cause such unexpected results as working people losing their jobs and/or some small businesses going bankrupt affected somewhat by the decline of mass consumption. So we have to make up our mind to confront such problems. As many events in world history suggest, to revolutionize the world is almost always very hard work for the people. Therefore it would be desirable to adopt low intensive strategies that would not be so destructive for lower income groups and small businesses to ensure these would not be damaged by our movement. Needless to say, it would also be desirable that some low intensive policies, such as not abruptly cutting off economic growth, are introduced in the developing countries. It would be very important, too, to reserve some space where the adjustment policies can be carried out. Even though the pace of consumption reduction seems to proceed too slowly, the movement must be pressed forward steadily.

Secondly, on the movement of cutting down the consumption level, it is very important to start in the developed countries in advance. As discussed above, almost all responsibility for activities destructive of nature, society and human beings are themselves owing to the people as well as political and business leaders and media in the developed countries, because they themselves have been and are now benefiting from such a world system as capitalist market economy. If one can recognize it, it would just be required that not only the leaders but also ordinary citizens living in the developed societies would pay off their responsibility first in the process of realizing our strategy. A good example to refer to here is the Kyoto Protocol of 1997 which arranged for the reduction of discharge for carbonic acid and some other gasses, i.e. the reduction of 8 percent of such gasses for the EU, 7 percent for the United States, and 6 percent for Nippon (Japan). Just like this example, the reduction policy of a certain percentage of consumption should be arranged among the developed nations in the near future, and along with this policy the project of economic development with consumption-restrained growth should be introduced for the developing countries. By the way, such a trading business as emissions trading recognized in the Kyoto Protocol should never be accepted in the international agreement proposed here, because our proposition for consumption reduction would be expected, too, to be a mild project for reducing national income as well as national consumption as a whole. Any sacrifice in the working people's daily living conditions in the developing countries would be strictly rejected in this project, even if it seems an easy way to approach our goal. As for the detailed investigations into the various ways of reducing comprehensive consumption, a large number of unexpected effects of citizen's consumption reduction and the counter-effects of this measure, will all be big tasks for us from now on.

Thirdly, as we can understand easily by looking at what is going on now in the economic field, it is remarkably important, too, that the Comprehensive Consumption Reduction Strategy should be connected with a policy to control financial institutions, of course including various types of investment "funds" or hedge "funds" as well as governmental "funds." Besides, this control would be only effective as far as it would be practiced globally. As discussed above, the money thrown into financial gambles today has derived from excess capital which is the very product of over-capacity of production. We should recognize the fact that the amount of money daily invested and withdrawn in speculation is now as large as one hundred times the money in the real economy. Therefore it is a strong probability that the excess money which results from our strategy would be used for financial games, unless these are restricted and controlled severely. As the amount of excess money is already extraordinarily large, the control of financial institutions is definitely vital insofar as we expect to restrict and control such excess money as a resource to be thrown into financial gambling. Moreover, according to the news, many "hedge funds" survive and continue their businesses thanks to governmental relief subsidies after only one year since the Lehman Brothers bankruptcy shock in 2008. Considering such vitality to revive in only a short period and such energy to move and act everywhere in the world, the task to control financial institutions will be one of the most important in leading our strategy to success.

Finally, it is extraordinarily essential for this strategy, too, to oppose any types of wars, invasions, military conflicts and also the production of weapons even if there are reasons to attack enemies. No one would deny the tragic course of promoting wars or local conflicts as well as the accumulation of weapons if one remembers the process of overcoming the 1930s Great Depression. As is well known, the Great Depression was overcome neither through the New Deal measures nor "bloc" construction but an enormous new World War. The fact suggests how new wars and/or mass consumption of weapons, i.e. such external factors for the economy as warfare, are decisive in getting over economic problems. In order not to allow the production and consumption of weapons for any kind of warfare as a way out instead of mass consumption by ordinary people, it will be essential to oppose any kind of warfare.

Conclusion: A Kind of "School" for the Ordinary Citizens Today to Study to Become the Third Generation of Citizens

Given the number of people's movements in the world today, such as the "Occupy Movements" in the United States, resistance in European countries caused by the euro crisis or guest workers' problems, the uprisings in Arab countries, the protest activities by young workers in China, we can find, on the one hand, some signs

favorable to the change of the current social system to another type of system. But, on the other hand, at the same time we may find there is only a slight possibility for such movements to revolutionize the capitalist system. Not only that, there does remain the anxiety that some movements can also have dangerous possibilities which draw toward some extremist movements such as fascism, if agitators were to appear and form links with the angry people.

Given also that contemporary global capitalism has an extreme tendency towards financial capitalism in the developed countries on the one hand, and has become a global system exploiting the world's poor for developed countries on the other, these circumstances indicate that this is the time to revolutionize capitalism into a different system.

Given these two conditions, we can realize some important issues. First of all, such people that can certainly revolutionize the capitalist system into a completely different one are those with a wide and deep understanding of the contradictions of the capitalist system, not those who are just manual laborers.

Secondly, such people with a wide and deep knowledge of the contradictions of the capitalist system are those who are working for and serving the capitalist economy on the one hand, whilst relying and supporting market systems (commodity, labor as well as financial markets) on the other, by consuming goods and services that the capitalist system produces (commodity market), by gaining, losing and changing jobs (labor market), and by providing operating funds for investment banking by purchasing and selling financial commodities investing the small amounts of money each of them has (financial market).

Thirdly, when such people who rely on and support the capitalist system get angry feeling they are betrayed by the very social system at times of recession or economic crisis, the possibility that they will transform themselves into activists for an alternative social system is rather slim, with the majority inclining towards simple acts of rebellion. The possibility of being drawn towards extremist repulsion like fascism just exists here.

Fourthly, therefore the steady, honest, continual day-to-day movement for changing capitalist society by such working citizens has a distinctly important meaning today.

Finally, the way for the working middle-class citizens to develop into actual reformists is to be found in the widespread citizens' movements. And such experiences might be supposed to lead working citizens to become constructors of a new social system, rather than some kind of fascist way.

As for the Comprehensive Consumption Reduction Movement, it must have, in addition to a number of features which we have discussed, distinguishing characteristics as a new type of wide-ranging people's movement, i.e. it will inevitably accompany the movement for the overall restriction and control of financial

institutions on the one hand, and the widespread peace and anti-war movement on the other. Needless to say, the task of overall restriction and control of financial institutions is the most recent urgent worldwide task, and the task of peace and anti-war has been and still is the ultimate worldwide task of human kind. It is in the sense that it contains within itself both of these urgent and ultimate tasks that this movement has the distinguishing characteristics as the movement most likely to revolutionize the world economic system since capitalist economy began. Besides, the Comprehensive Consumption Reduction Strategy will have to be practiced mainly by a broad people's movement, being one that anybody can start, join and promote at any time and everywhere in the world. Therefore no other new movement will be more essential for citizens in the world in the near future.

Furthermore, thanks to these abundant significances, this movement can be seen as a kind of "school" for each ordinary citizen to learn how individual citizens should behave with consideration for the whole of society as well as the whole of the nature.

Notes

1. Investigating the cases in the developed capitalist countries, we find that the materially wealthy lives of ordinary people as well as the activities of huge industrial and financial corporations let the developed countries become the actual rulers or the actual subordinate rulers of human-kind on the earth today. As for the United States, not only the political leaders, business leaders and influential mass media, but also the "middle-class citizens" in this country, too, are now actually dominating (*or at least* supporters of) the contemporary world economic and political systems and culture. The number of American middle-class citizens is only less than 3 percent of the world's population, they have been enjoying high and increasing levels of material well-being, with the cooperation of subordinate partners such as Western European and Nipponese (Japanese) middle-class citizens (and moreover including the relatively wealthy people in Asia's newly emerging countries), and they also are increasingly wasting natural resources, disrupting the natural environment and exacerbating poverty among people in underdeveloped countries. They are gaining mountainous benefits from all over the world in a double sense: getting products and resources on the one hand, and getting money as the foreign investment flows into the US (especially US Treasury Bonds), etc. on the other. This situation might be exceedingly fortunate for them. Therefore they tend to be conservative, and furthermore they tend to be chauvinistic in protecting such a fortunate situation, when their individual and/or national identities are attacked by unexpected threats.
2. The principal origin of contemporary depression is, no doubt, a result of an over-inclination to expanding reproduction since the end of WWII. After Keynesian policy was taken to be a President's Economics in the United States, mass consumption turned into a virtue instead of a vice. And according to this point of economic view, mass production, mass sales, mass consumption, and mass dumping in the last few decades have been regarded as normal activities for contemporary economic life. Moreover under this expansionist point of view, the pursuance for more money and/or more profit came to be normal activities for contemporary economic life, too. Furthermore, it became normal for every economic problem to be solved by expansion of the economic pie.
3. About my original proposal, see Setooka Hiroshi (2009) and (2008).
4. As for this issue, see Juliet B. Schor (1992) and (1998), and additionally refer to Jill Andresky Fraser (2001).
5. The pursuance of unsuitably high levels of living standards as well as unsuitably high levels of productive capacity is not only harmful to the preservation of nature but problematic to keeping

normal national identity. For example, Nipponese (Japanese) people as well as business enterprises rely too much upon imports not only to continue business activities but also to sustain everyday high standards of living of the people, and upon exports, too, to get money to buy everything from raw materials for the industry to daily consumption goods for the people. Just exactly this situation forces Nippon (Japan) not to be able to refuse the intolerable US requests. For a more complete discussion, see Setooka Hiroshi (2004), (2005c), and (2007b).

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