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BOOK REVIEWS

Roberta Sassatelli, Marco Santoro, Giovanni Semi (eds.) (2015), *Fronteggiare la crisi. Come cambia lo stile di vita del ceto medio [Facing the crisis. How the lifestyle of the middle class changes]*, Bologna: Il Mulino.

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The volume represents the last piece of a substantial research project about the middle class promoted by the Italian Council for Social Sciences almost ten years ago. The results have been published in different volumes since 2008: *Middle class. Why and how deal with it* (edited by A. Bagnasco, 2008); *Remaining middle class. The passage to adult life in a changing society* edited by N. Negri and M. Filandri, 2010); *The building of the middle class. Images on the press and in politics* (edited by R. Sciarone et al., 2011); *The independent work in the Italian crisis* (edited by C. Ranci et al., 2012). In "Facing the crisis" the central theme is consumption, seen as a dynamic system of practices able to play a basic role in the processes of definition of the "middle class".

The book provides a rich and in-depth insight and gives important data about consumption and lifestyles of the middle class. And meanwhile it suggests a reflection, as said, completing the analysis started with the previous volumes born out from the same research – on the complex range making the "middle class".

By means of interviews, follow-up approaches, focus groups and ethnographical analyses in two gentrified neighbourhoods - the Isola in Milan, and the Bolognina in Bologna - the research focuses on housing, food and cultural consumption practices of different portion of middle class, with specific attention both to upper and lower borders of this class.

As suggested by the title, the starting point of the volume is the relationship between middle classes and economic crisis. Then the interest of the researchers is immediately directed to the transformation of consumption practices of the examined subjects and of their strategies to resist to the downward trend. Consumption seems, in the crisis crunch, one of the principal horizons in which people and families play their economic, and also emotional and cultural, strategies of adjustment.

The first of the systems of practices investigated regards home and neighbourhood. This space is of crucial importance for middle classes. First of all for purely economic reasons, housing being the main budget item of the investigated families. But housing ("home") also assumes particularly dense social significance, as evidenced by a long tradition of research. Clearly, in the case of middle classes home is a central element in the definition that people give of themselves in relation to social stratification, and positioning in the physical space of the city becomes positioning in the urban social space. The house and the neighbourhood in which the house is located are deeply tied to the aspirations that people and families interviewed nourish, to their projects, to their representations. And home is also the stage on which people and family lifestyles are represented. The environments collect and present objects that engage those who live in specific social positions. The environments contain and present objects that peg inhabitants to specific social positions, real or represented.

Cooking and eating are the second macro-area of practices considered. Food practices at home show the traits of a definite ambivalence. They give evidence of a marked routinization and rationalization in the ordinary life, often through choices dictated precisely by economic and time constraints. But on special occasions food and cooking are also invested with great care and attention. For these middle classes, this can become a dense space of social functions to which devote a great amount of energy and resources. Cooking can be a pleasure, a way to interact with other members of the family, a language whereby people can easily communicate their identity through their own recipes. In this dense social code that focuses on cooking, inviting and being invited becomes part of the strategies employed to manage the density of social relationships. Given the importance of this complex, supply and its sources also become crucial. The narrations related to the products, their qualitative characteristics, their origin (both Italian and "short chain" or exotic and multicultural) show a profound ten-

dency of most middle classes to represent themselves as true experts. Even placing the knife on the table can become the occasion of refined distinctions. In this area wine seems to be the ultimate ground of distinction.

Cultural consumption, the last of the systems of practices analyzed in the volume, plays a primary role in redefining the self-representation strategies of the middle-class. The research shows how respondents closely associate culture with "self-cultivation" as a source of "enrichment" and "personal growth". So a very important field for of the middle class representation, a field, however, that has to face costs that are not always easily accessible. Cultural consumption is an area of practices particularly varied and mobile, in which sometimes traditional categories persist that point to the distinction between "frivolous" and "responsible" cultural consumption, "commercial" and "artistic" consumption, and so on. However, such scans and hierarchies are also the subject of transgressions and scraps, typical of the "omnivorous" consumer, which may question the idea itself of a hierarchical legitimacy of consumer patterns.

The picture of consumption emerging from this research shows that, despite the crisis, middle class families do not appear surrendering and do not give up marking their social position. On the contrary, they seem to retain some optimism and turn out to be skilled interpreters of strategies to preserve their status. In this perspective, the volume raises highly relevant themes, provides a broad-spectrum analysis and in-depth interpretations. It also raises some questions and critical points for research that stimulate further attention. Let me briefly discuss what seems central to me.

A first point is tied to what we might call the "reflexivity" of the middle classes. The research highlights the profiles of persons who pay close attention to their practices and their social meanings. Those in the middle classes investigated in the volume have relatively limited economic resources - sometimes even shortened by the crisis - and are forced to carefully consider their choices. The values of moderation, "decency", caution, emerge as specific middle class traits. But more interesting is the specific ability that middle classes seem to have to give distinctive meanings and to encode "appreciable" practices to the styles they are adopting. The average class emerging from the research seems particularly skilled in the art of "make a virtue of necessity". Reflexivity, such as the ability to give a name and a sense to the necessary practices imposed by economic conditions, is far from passive. It is rather an adaptive capacity capable of producing and proposing new classifications, new norms and new values.

Having friends at home for dinner thus becomes a viable alternative to the costs of eating out, an alternative that takes on added values of greater intimacy and opportunity for deepening relationships. Seasonal fruits and vegetables are not only cheaper but also healthier, more sustainable and fair. Vintage clothes purchased in the com-

mercial circuits of re-use are not just dealing with limited budget responses, but they also define new trends in fashionable and fair shopping practices. Shortly, it seems that middle class skills are not only in their ability to rationally choose their own styles but also in knowing how to tell, justify and, not rarely, impose them as legitimate tastes tout court. The Veblenian "leisure class", in all likelihood, has not ceased to "dictate the line" and the reverberations of their styles, their practices, their preferences will continue to "trickle down" towards the underlying social layers. But beside them in the social process of creating rules and tastes, there are definitely these middle classes. A particularly meaningful case - clearly shown by the research of Sassatelli, Santoro and Semi - concerns the definitions of what middle classes identify as a good neighbourhood to live in. Both with reference to the Milanese district of Isola and of Bolognina neighbourhood in Bologna virtues such as authenticity, genuine feelings, small scale, human dimension are highlighted. Evidently these are "virtues" that, as documented by an extensive literature, are taken on as general normative models linking to urban development trends that are globally involved in gentrification strategies. But, as is well known, the effects of gentrification processes, in which middle classes play a central role, are often profoundly selective and inherently discriminating. It is no surprise that in the neighbourhoods investigated in this study, respondents show the main fears of a degradation of the area, above all in relation to the presence of foreigners.

It should be noted, however, that the two districts on which the research is mostly concentrated are predominantly inhabited by particular segments of middle classes: which to some extent (at least in the case of Isola) have been part of the process of gentrification. They are certainly affected by the economic crisis and involved in the process of re-adjusting their consumption, but with professional and educational characteristics that echo those of the "creative classes" outlined by Richard Florida. It is easy to think that some of the above mentioned features deal more closely with these middle class segments. At this point, it is possible that the fear of "degradation" linked to the settlement of immigrants - which, as noted in the volume, is a widely spread figure in large areas of population - can be attributed, in the case of middle classes to the fear of poverty: seen as a lower threshold, in a spatial but also a moral sense, from which it is vital to keep away.

As creators of rules, middle classes necessarily take on political significance, and this is a further point of interest in this research. The important proportion of middle classes in the national population makes them a reference of great interest to political actors. In some ways, middle classes are a central reference point in building the agenda of parties and political movements. The recent analyses of the Italian political system have shown the increasing centrality of the - complex and sometimes controversial -

category of “populism”: one might raise the question of the role that middle classes play from this point of view. The point deserves some attention because the normative capacity of the middle classes, as mentioned above, can produce selective regulatory effects that tend to close the horizon of social inclusion as concerns the lower groups and layers of the population, favouring marginalization processes: an eventuality whose consequences should be thoroughly investigated.