Christina Benedict

Dr. Aull, ENG 306

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Contemporary Connotations of Middle Class Culture

Introduction:

The emergence of the American essay in the early twentieth century is frequently attributed to the development of middle class culture. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu defined this culture as “middlebrow” and “common” in regards to their original societal standings. However, mass readership of the essay, along with its interpersonal rhetoric (ie; conversational tone, etc…), allowed various demographics to associate under a common identity and grow as the middle class. Henry Canby, author of “The Essay as Barometer,” supports the argument that interpersonal discourse helped shape the middle class’s identity, describing the essay’s role in mass culture as “matured leisured thought blended with personality.” Canby argues that the essay’s “personality” is commonly characterized the ability of interpersonal rhetoric to serve as a basis of newfound relationships between individuals previously unrelated. Here we see interpersonal discourse in essay mass readership as a tool for unification and expansion among the middle class as it facilitates solidarity among members of the class.

Today, the middle class has grown comprise a significant portion of Americans and, for the most part, constitutes mass culture. For the purposes of this report, I will define mass culture as popular culture middle class Americans consume through magazines, television, and other forms of media. In this paper, I will attempt to analyze whether or not middle class culture is still viewed as “common,” or unrefined, in the same ways Bourdieu theorized; meaning that middlebrow culture did not compare to sophisticated art forms available to the upper class. I am interested in the ways the terms *middle class* and *culture* are used and described in contemporary mass readership publications, and how this data reflects growth and development of the middle class identity. My research and conclusions will be drawn under the definition of contemporary mass readership publications as magazines written after 1990.

Research Review:

Corpus linguistics helps to document the frequency and context of words or terms over time, and is useful in reflecting culturally constructed associations of language. In her book *Exploring Corpus Linguistics: Language in Action*, Linguist Winnie Cheng elucidates the uses of corpus linguistics analysis in tracking the change of the English language. Cheng states that researching “pragmatics” of words allows language theories to be “grounded in actual language use” (4). That said, I will be using The Corpus of Contemporary American English to conduct my research, specifically, the popular U.S. magazine subcorpus, COCA Mag. The subcorpus will offer more precise context and connotations of the terms *middle class* and *culture* in essay mass readership.

Descriptors of the terms – collocates three words away – will be useful in examining the connotation and “status” of the middle class and mass culture among current opinions. This data will help elucidate the role of essay readership in facilitating the growth of the middle class and unification under a common identity. Additionally, the query may uncover relationships between essay consumerism in magazines and its effect on shaping contemporary connotations of *middle class* and *culture*

Analysis and Findings:

The results of the query in COCA Mag for collocates of *culture* showed that the top three most frequent collocates were *our, American, and popular,* respectively. For now, my focus will be on the collocate *our,* and the two interesting trends it presented in describing culture. The first trend analyzes the use of *our* in the query examples. *Our,* a possessive pronoun used identify or claim individuals’ commonalities, was used to claim possession of *culture.* For example, an article in a 1995 Futurist Magazine states “**Our** role at this stage is to advance **our** understanding, **culture**, and harmonious functioning to its maximum potential” [Tough, 1995]. Here we see an illustration of mass publications uniting their readers under a common culture, which they even go as far to describe as “harmonious*.*” This description suggests that culture belongs to those who have established similarities and interpersonal relationships in order to describe the culture they possess. These relationships are often facilitated by mass readership of the essay, and its use of interpersonal rhetoric, serving as a basis for establishing connections across a range of demographics.

The second trend notes that the use of *our* tended to refer to mass populations, rather than a few individuals. A 2001 publication in Futurist Magazine offers the following example: “the Internet will be the international ‘collaboratory’ in which we will develop the great institutions of **our** emerging global **culture**, and the creative commons on which we will build those institutions will be **our** future” [Wagner 2001]. Not only does the author attribute Internet readership (a mode of contemporary mass readership), but also describes culture as a collaborative effort having the ability to establish “creative commons” even on a global level. Other frequent collocates of culture, *American* and *popular*, also refer to a large amount of people. These frequent descriptors of *culture* seem to indicate a growing population of individuals who unify as one culture.

The results of the second query, collocates for *middle class,* were diverse in racial and socioeconomic descriptions, the most frequent being *black, white, upper,* and *lower.* However, despite the wide range of sub-groups individuals identify as within the middle class, *American* and *growing* were top collocates as well. The disparities between frequent collocates of *middle class* also allude to the ability of the essay to relate groups of different backgrounds under a common identity. The National Review writes, “that is a fair description of the **American** nation circa 1965 -- the country of the great **American** **middle** **class** that was forged from the unmeltable ethnics which began melting seriously after the Second World War” [O’Sullivan; 1997]. This example further emphasizes the diversity of individuals who unite as the middle class – a single identity whose composition, the author describes, is made of “melted” ethnicities and backgrounds that were previously “unmeltable.”

Implications:

In contrast to Bourdieu’s analysis in the 1920s, middle class culture seems to be viewed as offering much more than “common” cultural forms. While middle class culture may still be described as less sophisticated than high class culture, the amount of individuals identifying with the middle class and consuming its culture alludes to the idea that it is no longer seen as lowly. The collocate, *popular* describing *culture* emphasizes the shift in connotation of mass culture from being “common” or simple, to “popular,” or exciting. Likewise, the example offered above by the National Review refers to the American middle class as “great” [O’Sullivan: 1997], highlighting the shift in social status of the term *middle class* from “common.”

Furthermore, the frequent use of *American* in describing *middle class* hints at an even more unified population. Not only does the term “American middle class” identify its members as belonging to each other, but also America as a whole. This description seems to suggest that contemporary publications hold a positive view on the middle class and its culture due to their inclusiveness at a national level. In other words, the trends observed in my analysis seem to suggest that middle class culture offers a sense of belonging to diverse demographics historically segregated and seen as outsiders of one another. However, with the increasing popularity of online databases for essay readership, it is important to note that my conclusions are based only on data from magazine sources. A study comparing collocates between magazine and Internet sources may provide insight on the ways contemporary connotations and descriptors of the terms vary between essay modality.

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