

Suitably Modern: Making Middle-Class Culture in a New Consumer Society

Mark Liechty

2003. New Jersey: Princeton University Press

Theorising the Middle Class

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Mark Liechty's *Suitably Modern: Making Middle-Class Culture in a New Consumer Society* (2003, New Jersey: Princeton University Press) is a valuable contribution to the theorisation of the emergence of the middle-class. It is an ethnographic work rich with narratives that has captured Nepal as it goes through cultural transformation in the later 20th century. It is hailed as a "welcome departure from the conventional mode of Nepalese ethnography," which was limited to doing nothing more than studying "normative topics on kinship, religion, ritual, and shamanism" (Gellner 2004:101). This ethnography review will first lay out Liechty's goals in the publication. The review will then attempt to track the theoretical gymnastics Liechty performs as he navigates his data wrought out of his urban ethnography of Kathmandu in the late 1980s. The review will primarily identify key theoretical approaches that he tapped as he shuffles through the pages of his interview transcripts. Another primary objective is to look into the methodology and research strategy that he employed in this urban ethnography. As a secondary objective this essay will assess future directions that this trailblazing work has opened up for further study.

Liechty's main objective is to "conceptualize middle-class cultural practice" (p. 10) through an urban ethnography of middle-class life in Kathmandu. He summarises his aims and goals into three; namely, "1) to describe the cultural and historical context which was the spawning pool for middle-class culture in Kathmandu, 2) to narrate middle-classness as practiced in contemporary urban Kathmandu, and to 3) offer a new approach to conceptualizing middle-class culture" (p. 5). He attempts to grapple with the effects of modernity as it enters a nation-state that has (only recently) opened up to this tide of change after being ruled by the Rana Prime Ministers who exercised panoptic isolationist control over the Nepalese royalty and the Nepali citizens. He states that his study offers some insights on the "experience of modernity" in the third world

periphery (p. xi). The study; however, avoids to perpetuate myths like “westernization, Americanization, and cultural homogenization” (p. 250); arguing that instead of a centre-periphery articulation there are an array of “local cultural narratives” that “flow in and around global narratives of progress, modernity and cultural fulfillment” (p. 250) as experienced by the Kathmandu middle-class. Liechty wants to capture the process of middle-class construction, its “practice, production, or performance” (p. 4), as it took place in the highland valley in the late 20th century.

Liechty deploys a barrage of theories that transcends temporality. He uses both the *old* and the *new* and that I believe this is a key strength of the work because it shows the reader that new theory needs not erase the old. On the one hand he uses classic social theory of Max Weber (1947) and Karl Marx (1973); on the other hand he also deploys an array of contemporary social theory using Raymond Williams (1977), Michel Foucault (1979, 1980), Pierre Bourdieu (1980), Arjun Appadurai (1996), Margaret Somers (1994a, 1994b), and Judith Butler (1990) to name a few. He uses a chimera of classic Marxian and Weberian traditions in tapping the formers “commitment to locate different forms of cultural practice in the context of unequal distributions of power and resources in society” (p. 12) and the latter’s “sensitivity to the powerful role of culture in social life” (p. 12). He carries out a Weberian mode of analysis of the Kathmandu middle-class ethos of “intra-class status competition” (p. 15) and emulation; yet he “constantly returns to [a] Marxian concern for the cultural politics of ‘ruling ideas,’ or how the middle-class disguise its class privileges behind seemingly noneconomic rhetorics of honor, achievement, and so on” (p. 15).

He states that the book looks at “ways of understanding the cultural processes of middle-class life in Kathmandu” (p. 25) rather than looking at cultural outcome or empirical condition. Here he uses Bourdieu’s practice theory (p. 21). He tries to answer the question of “what does class do rather than what is class” (pp. 264-265) - that is class as practice or project. He also taps on Foucault’s post-structuralist theory of power. His work *embodies* the spatial turn when he maps out the “spatial dynamics of class practice” (p. 249); more specifically how middle-classness takes place in space. He states that “Class is an inescapably locational idea: it necessarily implies a geography in which difference (however imagined, and/ or enforced) is mapped onto social space” (p. 255).

He then juxtaposes the above frames of reference to his thick ethnographic data which features the conjunction of performance and performativity as conceptualised by Butler (1990) and narrative and narrativity as conceptualised by Somers (1994a, 1994b, 1997). He claims that performance helps us understand “how people actively produce class culture in ways that with surprising regularity have overtly dramaturgical overtones” (p. 24). He argues that these performances (dramas) in socio-cultural life can best be understood through narratives and narrativity. In fact, he argues that “through cultural narratives people learn who they *are*, through cultural narrativity people learn who they should *become*” (p. 24). He tackles modernity and modern capitalism specifically consumerism and the role of mediascapes (print, radio, TV, theatres, VCR) in propagating modernity and how this gets allocated/imagined in the middle-class project. He tackles what Appadurai calls the “mass-mediated imaginary” as a hallmark of late capitalist modernity (p.32). Liechty takes on Appadurai’s challenge for anthropologists to map out the contours of “processes and [the] role of imagination in modern life” (p. 96). One all important process takes place when the middle-class’ arrayed relations to the capitalist market results to “consumer desire” being rapidly naturalised within their ranks (p. 19). He shows how this has led to internal and external contradictions in the lives of the Nepali middle-class. Interestingly, Sara Shneiderman (2006:645) describes this situation as a Durkheimian state of “*anomie*”. Thus in locating themselves outside (out here in Kathmandu) they also try to imagine possible lives (p. 238) inside modern cities- - like life in America (Hollywood). Liechty in fact touches on what Appadurai has called the “deterritorialization” of local experience through a barrage of imaginative resources. These resources Liechty fittingly calls the “prefab [ricated] imaginative structures” (p. 244). This life (inside the first world) is narrated through media and soon enough these narratives get embodied by the viewers as they adopt to fashion, language, and (consumer) behaviour and this sometimes lead to escapism as seen in the rise in cases of drug addiction among the middle-class youth in Kathmandu- - “consciously avoiding the future by living for each other in the present” (p. 241).

In terms of methodology Liechty spent sixteen months of fieldwork research from 1988 to 1991 with follow up visits in 1996 and 2001 (p. xii). He used participant observation, performing open-ended interviews and sometimes talking to informants in parks, stores, cafes, restaurants or street corners in Kathmandu. He amassed more than 200

transcripts of informal interviews with three quarters recorded in audio tapes (p. xii). He argues that the benefits of recording the semiformal interviews “outweighed” the drawbacks to creating an “artificial setting” (p. xiv). The audiotapes captured various linguistic elements like code-switching, cadence, style, and grammatical construction which allowed him to pay attention to language as not only as “what people said but how they said it” (p. xiv). He tries to use language as a vista to how modernity is experienced in Kathmandu. He admits that his ethnography is “unusually voice-oriented” but argues that these stories gave him access to how social meaning is produced and circulated in everyday life (pp. xiv-xv). In fact, Chapter 9 revolves around the stories of Ramesh and Suman whose stories are “like those of thousands of other young people in the city” (p. 232).

An appeal to universality appears in several spaces in the book. Indeed a superior contribution of Liechty’s work is in “chart[ing] a path towards an anthropology of the middle-class culture in Nepal and elsewhere” (p. 6). According to Liechty the emergent stratification by status groups with its corresponding strict submission to fashion that was seen in early 20th- century United States is a fitting processual analogy (versus historical) to what was happening in the valley of Kathmandu in the 1990s (p. 18). What he has witnessed in Kathmandu has “occurred- in the broadest sense- elsewhere before, and continue to unfold around the world” (pp. 19-20). He hedges; however, when he adds that “Nepal’s cultural history should by no means be understood as the reliving of someone else’s history or as the story of Nepal’s catching up with the West” (p. 20). Interestingly, in one space of his work he also carries out a semi-deductive enterprise when he seems to be predicting the likely outcome of his study where he conveys his critical view of capitalist modernity the “study is more likely to see evidence of market interpellation and commercial objectification” (p. 34). Later in the work; however, Liechty has explicitly stated that his work on class is not a “theoretical tautology imposed on the data but [rather] a vivid ethnographic fact, perpetually produced and reproduced in cultural practice” (p. 265).

In his review of the book, David Gellner suggests that the “informants do not appear in the round; one is not told anything of their family background, schooling, social links, or religious orientations” (2004:102). In defense, I believe Liechty does mention the relevant background on the informants in the book (for examples,

Chapter 5 fashion informants, Chapter 8 Dianne and Gopal, Chapter 9 Ramesh and Suman). Anyway, we are also given the assurance that there are transcripts and records made of the interviews and their backgrounds (p. viii). In her review of the book, Sara Shneiderman suggests that in a span of a decade culture change has continued to take place in Kathmandu so much so that ten years after the ethnography was conducted the published book/ ethnography “feels somewhat dated already” (2006:646). I would argue; however, that this was precisely the reason for Liechty’s follow-ups conducted in 1996 and 2001. Furthermore, Liechty published another volume, *Out Here in Kathmandu* (2010), that is a companion to *Suitably Modern* where he says that “although the ethnographic realities documented here are now somewhat dated, my hope is that these essays remain relevant in terms of their topical foci, methodologies, and theoretical conceptualizations” (2010: x).

The book in many respects is charting new ground in terms of anthropological theory. For the most part the work fills up a void in our understanding of the middle-class and its role in the continued survival of late capitalism. I believe the work also opens up a world of possibilities in terms of future theoretical studies. Although Liechty explicitly states that he wants to study what class does rather than what class is (pp. 264-5), he may very well have also answered the latter question in his study. In order to identify his informants, he would have to come up with a working definition of the middle-class - defining markers or criteria of who the middle-class is (?). Although it can be argued that middle-classness is qualitative and relational (being in between those above and those below), we still need some quantitative markers to help us identify members of this class especially when we set out to study them. What is the annual or monthly income? What types of jobs? What is the highest educational attainment?

Interestingly, if we were to pursue case studies of middle-class transnationalism and diasporas in the future we would also have to be aware of cross-cultural incongruities between and among defining variables we use. For instance a middle-class Singaporean citizen could very well be an upper-class if he migrates to the Philippines given the cheaper standard of living there and the wide gap between the rich and the poor. This leads us to another aspect that future research can address - how does the gap between the rich and the poor relate to the space occupied by the middle-class. In the Philippines; for instance, the gap is so wide that subcategories begin to emerge like lower lower-class, middle

lower-class, upper lower-class, lower middle-class, middle middle-class, upper middle-class, and upper-class.

Finally, another important future direction is understanding risk-taking behaviour among the youth. Somon Gimballi, in writing the introduction of Arnold van Gennep's *Rites of Passage* argues that the rites of passage performed by society function to "aid individuals negotiate major transitions in life [...] [T]he problem for the industrial-urban civilization is that we are increasingly forced to accomplish these transitions alone and with private symbols" (1960: xvii-xviii). With society (at large) sentencing younger generations to life spent in educational (social) institutions, is peer life reflective of the individual's attempt to go through the life transitions as a social group?

Liechty mentions that Kathmandu has "biting local critiques of modern youth as good for nothing teens" (p. 264). So it would be interesting to look deeper into peer dependence or peer group "conformity to group-dictated standards" (p. 241). In the case of Ramesh and addiction to drugs, he embodies "what could go wrong, a reference point that both peers and parents looked to in horror" (p. 236). Interestingly, this may bring us back once again to Max Weber and his disenchantment thesis of modernity (see Scaff 2000) - is drug addiction and its lure of hallucinations and trances a form of enchantment that the youth are attracted to?

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