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MIDDLE-CLASS CONSTRUCTION

> No actual class formation in history is any truer or more real than any
> other, and class defines itself as, in fact, it eventuates. Class, as it even-
> tuated within nineteenth-century industrial capitalist societies, and as
> it then left its imprint upon the heuristic category of class, has in fact
> no claim to universality.
>
> —E. P. Thompson, "Eighteenth-Century English Society"

Performing a Marriage

The wedding took place during the spring of 1991 on the ground
floor of a half-completed concrete home among the seemingly hap-
hazard thickets of similar homes that make up many of Kathman-
du's sprawling middle-class suburbs. Above, laundry fluttered like
Tibetan prayer flags from clotheslines attached to the dozens of
twisted steel rods sprouting through the roof from the building's re-
inforced concrete pillars. Stretching into thin air, anxious for the
day when there would be enough money to add another story, the
metal rods seemed to mimic the family's uneasy straining to main-
tain the standards of a local middle-class lifestyle and testify to their
part in the ongoing social drama of middle-class construction.

Having been invited by a Nepali friend (a relative of the bride),
I felt privileged to witness the intricacies of an orthodox Hindu wed-
ding and was sure it would be a traditional and authentic event. Yet
before long my happy reverie was shattered by the clamorous ar-
rival of a local video camera crew. As the only "Westerner" in atten-
dance, I felt somehow personally responsible every time the camera-
men—to me the embodiments of an intrusive, "alien" modernity—
held up the proceedings: interrupting the Brahman priest's chant-
ing, clumsily rearranging the wedding party, shining bright lights
onto the already distraught bride, and entangling everyone in light
and microphone cords. I was feeling terribly sorry for the group of
dignified women seated to one side—who seemed to be enduring
the almost slapstick proceedings with stoic resignation—until sud-

denly an elderly grandmother tottered to her feet shouting instruc-
tions to the wedding party and cameramen to essentially "Redo
that last bit!"

In many ways this wedding story is an allegory of life in and for Kathman-
du's middle class. The wedding served as a stage on which to perform
middle-class culture, a culture that labors to produce itself out of the
seemingly contradictory resources of "tradition" and "modernity." The
awkward dance of the priest, wedding party, and camera crew is a minia-
ture version of the dance of the middle class in Kathmandu, a dance that
brings together a host of competing cultural assets, consumer demands,
and media influences into a performance of cultural life that is by its na-
ture complex, halting, unstable, and in periodic need of "redoing"! It is
this sense of middle-class culture as practice, production, or perfor-
mance—along with the anxieties that accompany any act of creation—
that I aim to convey in this book. Like the unfinished home where the
wedding took place, class culture is always a work-in-progress, a perpet-
ual social construction that is as fundamentally bound to the "concrete"
of economic resources as it is to the cultural practices of people who
jointly negotiate their social identities.

Although the bride and groom were part of a cultural production
shared with their elderly grandparents, the two parties were born on either
side of a fundamental turning point in modern Nepali history. In 1951 a
popular democratic movement (inspired by the Indian independence
movement) put an end to a century of isolationist rule in Nepal. The de-
cades since have seen the Kathmandu valley suddenly awash in a tidal
wave of transnational political, economic, and cultural currents that have
brought new ideas, new technologies, and ultimately, new ways of being.
This book traces some of the sociocultural consequences of Kathmandu's
opening to the world. It documents ways in which ever-expanding frames
of cultural reference, and spheres of cultural influence, have transformed
the lives of people in an ostensibly remote and isolated place.

People in Kathmandu are powerfully aware of living in a radically
new era. Whereas the grandparents (and even parents) in this wedding
story grew up at a time when communications with the world outside the
Kathmandu valley required weeks of grueling overland travel, the bride
and groom grew up watching global media events like the Gulf War and
the World Cup "live" on television. People born since 1951 have wit-
nessed the world arriving along the first motorable roads into the valley;
through telephones and now satellite telecommunications; through elec-
tronic entertainment media (cinema, television, video, satellite TV); via
air transportation, mass tourism, and a surge of global commodity im-
ports; and through the logics of a new bureaucratic state apparatus, party

politics, and large-scale foreign development aid. Technological and social developments that took place over the course of centuries in many parts of the world have in Nepal arrived in the space of the past five decades, and in particular, the last twenty-five years.[1]

In Kathmandu the past and present stand in extraordinarily stark contrast in almost every aspect of daily experience. Seen from the air, Kathmandu resembles a fried egg (map 1): a distinct center marks the old city (once surrounded by a wall), with its densely packed traditional architecture, while the sprawling ring of unplanned post-1950s "development"—rich farmland now covered by commercial districts and middle-class suburbs—stands as testimony to new movements of goods, capital, people, and cultural sensibilities. Similarly, for many urban Nepalis, core social and religious values (often manifest in terms of caste and kin affiliations) are engulfed—and sometimes overwhelmed—by a transformed sociocultural context adrift in new transnational currents: new labor and economic relations, a new universe of material goods, new arenas of public display, and new ideologies of education, progress, and modernity. As Kathmandu residents navigate through a range of built environments with vastly different histories, so also must they negotiate a range of competing and coexisting systems of value and meaning. In Kathmandu the meaning and experience of modernity lies in daily balancing the demands and possibilities of a transforming social and material context against those of a deeply rooted cultural milieu of moral values, systems of prestige, and notions of propriety.

This book has three goals: to describe the cultural contexts and historical processes out of which a new middle-class culture has emerged in Kathmandu; to provide a detailed account of the practices that make up contemporary urban middle-class life; and, drawing on these ethnographic insights, to offer a new approach to conceptualizing middle-class culture. This book argues that *class* best accounts for the new sociocultural patterns that have come to dominate urban life in Kathmandu. Caste, kinship, and ethnicity continue to powerfully inflect sociocultural experience, but the daily lives of people in Kathmandu demonstrate that the "epistemological styles" (Appadurai 1990b) of social life have shifted, leaving class as the framing principle for everyday experience. Within this emerging class society, this study focuses on the local *middle class*, those people carving out a new cultural space which they explicitly locate, in language and material practice, between their class "others" above and below.

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[1] As I discuss in chapter 2, the massive changes following Nepal's "opening" in 1951 are due much less to the country's remoteness than to the previous political regime's deliberate policies of social and cultural isolation.

1. Middle-class suburban sprawl encroaching on open lands in Kathmandu's
    Sankhamul area

In this chapter I introduce some of the study's ethnographic contexts
but focus mainly on sketching out the theoretical frame that I will use to
make sense of the middle-class cultural life that I describe. This requires
an excursion into the politically charged debates over class and cultural
practice, debates which reach some of their most arcane and acrimonious
levels when trying to theorize the middle class. Drawing from both Marx-
ian and Weberian traditions, this study charts a path toward an anthro-
pology of middle-class culture in Nepal, and elsewhere.

This approach to middle-class culture explicitly incorporates cultural
processes of consumption (notably including the consumption of mass
media), and the production of "youth culture." Class, consumption,
media, and youth have all been subjects of anthropological study, but
usually in isolation or in pairs: "youth and media" (Fuglesang 1994),
"class and consumption" (Bourdieu 1984), "media and class" (Mankekar
1999), "youth and consumption" (Nava 1992, Sato 1991), and so on.
Combining and building on the key insights provided by each of these
studies (and many others), this book argues that class, consumption,
media, and youth must be seen as not merely *interactive* but *mutually
constitutive* cultural processes. In Kathmandu a burgeoning local con-
sumer culture, the growing power of a mass-mediated popular imagina-
tion, and the recent emergence of "youth" as a distinct social category

are, I suggest, best understood within the context of middle-class cultural life. Cultures of consumerism, media, and youth are not side effects or consequences of middle-class formation. Rather, they are among the most important cultural processes through which an emerging middle class actually creates itself as a sociocultural entity.

Over the past few decades in Kathmandu, an almost entirely new "intermediate" social "stratum" has emerged in the social gap between historically polarized national elites and urban commoners.[2] In the process, members of this middle class have had to construct entirely new forms of cultural practice. This book ethnographically documents the struggles—moral, material, and ideological—that an emerging middle class must undertake to produce a new cultural space where none had been before. The middle class occupies a precarious position along two continua. On the one hand, it is shaped by its self-conscious awareness of its position between "high" and "low" classes. On the other, it is forced to pioneer a space for Nepali national identity somewhere between the global ideological poles of tradition and modernity. People in Kathmandu's middle class are members (and often leaders) of a state with massive ideological and financial stakes in an international economy of "development aid."[3] Yet it is their position on the receiving end of a global development apparatus that defines its targets as undeveloped or "traditional" (Pigg 1992, Escobar 1995) that forces Kathmandu's middle class into the dilemma of reconciling their status as modernity's "traditional" other with their desires to claim a legitimate place within "modernity." Indeed, a great deal of the cultural work described in this book—the work of creating a new middle-class cultural space through processes of consumption, mass mediation, and youth culture—is part of the perhaps impossible project of transforming the idea of "Nepali modernity" from its condition as oxymoron in a global capitalist political economy of places into a legitimate reality in local cultural life.[4]

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[2] Chapter 2 traces the background and early history of this middle-class formation over the past several centuries in Nepal.

[3] See chapter 2 for a discussion of the role of international development aid in Nepal's national economy generally and Kathmandu's local economy in particular.

[4] It is important to point out that the image of Nepali modernity presented in this study represents the experiences of a certain segment of Nepali society: the urban middle class. In the past decade scholars have begun to document other experiences of, and relations to, modernity in other Nepali communities. These include Jim Fisher's (1990), Vincanne Adams's (1996), Sherry Ortner's (1999b), and Kurt Luger's (2000) accounts of Nepali Sherpas, Laura Ahearn's study of youth, literacy, and concepts of "love" in the hills of west central Nepal (2001), as well as Stacy Pigg's (1992, 1996) and Sudhindra Sharma's (2001) studies of the cultural politics of development "aid" in various communities. Dor Bahadur Bista (1991) offers a provocative critique of Nepal's high-caste national leadership and its struggle/failure to modernize. These studies—along with the present one—document what are

Mirroring the organization of the book itself, the rest of this chapter introduces class, consumption, media, and youth.

CLASS AND CULTURE

Why Class?

Kathmandu might seem an odd choice for a study of class cultural dynamics. Indeed, not long ago a prominent British anthropologist argued in print that *classes* do not exist in Nepal and that *caste* is the only principle of social organization at work (Macfarlane 1994:114–15). While caste remains a strongly determining and self-orienting cultural force, this book shows that in the last decades people in Kathmandu have come to live more and more of their lives in contexts oriented around the social logic of class. From a series of detailed ethnographic perspectives, this book shows that class has increasingly come to be the *framing* paradigm for many people in Kathmandu, encompassing (though by no means eliminating) the social valence of caste. As more and more of everyday life revolves around the social imperatives of the money/market economy, the moral (and economic) logic of caste is subordinated to the economic (and moral) logic of class.

When writing about class, one has two basic options: either treat "class" as a given—a taken-for-granted, natural, universal category or concept that speaks for itself—or attempt to actually explain the word by describing the experience of class in everyday life. It is the latter option, the effort to understand class as cultural life, that poses a challenge to anthropology. But once we take up the challenge of constructing an anthropology of class, we are confronted with a range of problems. First, such an anthropology has to counter the claims that "class" does not exist, or that even if it did at one time, the late-twentieth-century "triumph" of the global capitalist order and its freedoms has made it a moot point. Yet even if we turn our backs on these neoliberal naysayers and side with the true believers, we are often not much farther along in the quest for an anthropology of class. The large social-science literature on class, in which the concept is far more often used than defined, leaves us the daunting task of actually describing and analyzing the relationship between class and culture. Ironically, an anthropology of class has to confront both the myths of classlessness and of class; that is, it has to chal-

surely only a few of the many specific social locations from which Nepalis experience modernity.

lenge those who deny the existence of class, even while it attempts to rescue the concept from its static state in social theory.

Out of Sight, Out of Mind

There are many reasons why students of anthropology should be interested in class. Surely one of anthropology's fundamental challenges as it begins a new century is to come to terms—theoretically, methodologically, existentially—with the fact that "the other we study is as modern, or as embedded in conditions of modernity, as we are" (Marcus 1990:5). Indeed, this book will argue that the "conditions of modernity" are even more glaringly prominent on the Third World periphery, in places like Kathmandu, where they stand starkly outlined against memories of earlier, suddenly "traditional," ways of being. Processes of urbanization, market penetration, bureaucratization, industrialization, and class formation play themselves out in ever-changing power relations that bring the local and global together in explosive and unpredictable ways. With fully half of the world's population now living in urban areas increasingly integrated into a world capitalist economy (D. Harvey 1996:403), the complex processes of social life encapsulated in the domains of class relations and practices are realities that anthropologists must confront.

That anthropologists have mainly shied away from the study of class is due only in part to their discipline's "traditional" subject matter. Non-Western, "premodern," "simple" societies were thought to operate around principles of social organization other than class, but then, so were the Western societies that anthropologists called home.[5] Particularly in the United States—an insistently "classless" society in which the vast majority of people self-identify as "middle class" (Roberts 1997)—the idea that "class" (with all of its uncomfortable implications of conflict and inequality) might have something to do with "our" everyday life verges on the antisocial and unpatriotic. In the United States, "we the people" have always been imagined as a classless collectivity in which social inequality must be ideologically subsumed into "one country, indivisible."

But the "we" of "we the people" has also always been an imperfect reflection of the nation, and it is precisely the myth of "the people"—and the nation's "others" that such a myth produces—that lays open the myth

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[5] As Sherry Ortner puts it, "It is well known that American natives almost never speak of themselves or their society in class terms. In other words, class is not a central category of cultural discourse in America, and the anthropological literature that ignores class in favor of almost any other set of social idioms—ethnicity, race, kinship—is in some ways merely reflecting this fact" (1991:169).

of classlessness. From its very beginnings, America's "classless society" has been precariously maintained through the exploitation of human and natural peripheries. Superabundant North American natural resources (exploited in largely nonsustainable ways) provided an extractive "frontier" that opened the way for social mobility and the vast accumulation of wealth. Over the centuries, slavery, steady influxes of vulnerable immigrant populations, and, more recently, highly productive migrant-labor populations (often criminalized and therefore easily exploitable) have all served as a kind of shifting human extractive frontier (hidden within the nation) that has helped make possible the "classless" middle-class American lifestyle. Finally, late-capitalist economic "globalization" has only helped bolster the North American experience of "classlessness" through a series of new regional and global "free trade" regimes (North American Free Trade Association [NAFTA], World Trade Organization [WTO], etc.) that ever more effectively exile our class others out of sight and out of mind.[6] When the Zapatistas of Mexico's Chiapas region timed the launch of their armed peasant rebellion to coincide with the implementation of the NAFTA agreement on 1 January 1994, they gave clear indication that transnational class antagonisms were alive and well in the "new world order" in spite of the First World's happy, classless rhetoric of freedom, democracy, and "competitive advantage" (N. Harvey 1998:181–82). Middle-class Americans, including anthropologists, may project their imagined classless society onto an "ideal" world of free trade and democracy, but it is a depoliticizing, disempowering myth that finds increasingly fewer takers (Shiva 2000, Escobar 1995, N. Harvey 1998, etc.).

This study of class cultural practice in Nepal does not address the overtly antagonistic, potentially explosive relations between new Third World working classes and transnational capital that some anthropologists have studied (Ferguson 1994, Nash and Fernandez-Kelly 1983, Ong 1987, Weyland 1993). Although it draws from and relates to these and many other studies, this book's theoretical and ethnographic focus is elsewhere. Rather than addressing class theory in general, this book contributes to the specific task of *conceptualizing middle-class cultural practice*. Focusing on the middle class, to the relative exclusion of other class formations with and against which the middle class exists, is not simply a capricious act on my part. Characterizing the middle class as a social and cultural entity has always presented a distinct challenge to class theorists. It is the middle class's extraordinarily complex culture—with its myriad forms of competing cultural capital, its ambiguous and anxiety-inducing relationship with the capitalist market, its intricate systems of dissimula-

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[6] See Sitton 1996 for an interesting analysis of Wallerstinian world-system theory and transnational class relations.

tion (whereby it hides its class privilege in everyday practice)—along with its increasingly dominant role in cultural process worldwide, that makes it an important and timely subject of anthropological inquiry. Understanding local middle-class cultural processes in world context is no less important than understanding the relations between transnational labor and capital. What is more, understanding the cultural politics of "middleness" in Kathmandu—a place where a new cultural middle ground is still being pioneered, its structures and fault lines not yet obscured by the sediments of time—may shed light on the class-cultural politics of denial whereby we perpetuate our own myth of classlessness.

The "Embarrassment of the Middle Classes"

Despite the fact that "class" has a long and illustrious pedigree in social theory—and is arguably one of modern social science's foundational ideas—it remains an exceedingly difficult concept to pin down. From the very beginnings of modern social science, class has been a category more often invoked than actually theorized. Even Karl Marx and Max Weber, the two seminal theorists of modern capitalist society, never fleshed out systematic, comprehensive theories of class.[7] Although Marx and Weber are often represented as opposing theorists, in what writings they *did* leave on the issue of class, the two are not as far apart as one might suppose. In the last decades neo-Marxist and neo-Weberian class theorists have narrowed the gap even further (Burris 1987:67). Whether this melding represents the "Marxianizing" of Weberian theory (Wright 1997:34) or the fall of Marxist theory to "the Weberian temptation" (Sitton 1996:36)[8] is not the issue here. What is clear is that the strengths of each theoretical tradition have proven to be, at least in part, complementary.

 Nowhere has the convergence between Marxian and Weberian class theory been more pronounced than in efforts to theorize the middle class.

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[7] Tom Bottomore notes that "The concept of class has a central importance in Marxist theory, though neither Marx nor Engels ever expounded it in a systematic form" (1983:74). Similarly, Talcott Parsons—one of Weber's chief disciples and interpreters—observes that, aside from a brief, sketchy, unfinished chapter at the end of Weber's *Economy and Society*, there is "no other part of Weber's published work in which the subject [of class] is systematically developed" (editorial note in Weber 1947:429). Sitton (1996:265) also notes the theoretical inconsistencies in Weber's writing on class.

[8] In one classic exchange, the staunch Weberian Frank Parkin interpreted the partial convergence of Marxist and Weberian class theory as evidence of "the virtues of bourgeois sociology. Inside every neo-Marxist there seems to be a Weberian struggling to get out" (1979:25). In response, the neo-Marxist Erik Olin Wright noted that "One could just as easily say that inside every left-wing Weberian there is a Marxist struggling to stay hidden" (1997:35)!

Marx's failure to anticipate the twentieth-century expansion of middle classes in advanced capitalist societies has been a source of ongoing theoretical crisis for Marxist theorists (Sitton 1996:17). The "embarrassment of the middle classes" (Wright 1985:13) has been the Achilles heel of Marxist class theory. It is no coincidence that Weber's response to Marx's writings on class consists mainly of an elaboration on sociocultural processes within what Weber referred to as the "intermediate strata" or "middle classes." Since that time, "Marxists have drawn heavily upon Weberian concepts in their effort to adapt classical Marxism to the conditions of late twentieth-century capitalism" (Burris 1987:67). An anthropology of middle-class cultural practice needs to unite a Weberian sensitivity to the powerful role of culture in social life with a Marxian commitment to locate different forms of cultural practice in the context of unequal distributions of power and resources in society.[9]

One way to begin this kind of reconciliation is to view Marx and Weber in light of the different historical moments, class experiences, and political concerns that each addressed. In the context of mid-nineteenth-century labor exploitation, unrest, and mobilization, Marx stressed the material underpinnings of class and the historical dynamic of conflict between workers and capitalists. Underdeveloped in Marx's work is an appreciation for the constitutive role of culture in the production and maintenance of class power[10] and a concern for the nature of cultural life within class groups.[11] Marx recognized the link between economic status and ideology; he saw that class privilege produced a privileged (and privileging) ideology. But he did not appreciate how important a role the very *cultures of social privilege* played in actually producing and reproducing the material reality of economic power.

By the early twentieth century, overt struggles between labor and capital had begun to wane, the European and American middle classes were growing rapidly, and a new mass-production–based *consumer society* had

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[9] For useful comparative discussions of Marx and Weber on class and culture, see Bottomore 1966, Burris 1987, Elias 1978 [1968], Gerth and Mills 1946, Hall 1997, Robison and Goodman 1996, and Wright 1997:29–33.

[10] Or, as Tom Bottomore puts it, "Marx insisted that the ruling ideas of any society are the ideas of the ruling class. But he did not seriously consider how important the ideas themselves might be in sustaining that rule, or how difficult it would be for the working class to oppose them with its own ideas" (1966:94).

[11] Although Marx rarely used the word "culture," he did occasionally venture into the realms of what we would now recognize as the "cultural." For example, in "The General Relation of Production to Distribution, Exchange, Consumption," which appears in the *Grundrisse* (1973 [1857–58]:88–100), Marx discusses clothing, food, the arts, the constitution of needs, and so on as cultural aspects of consumption intimately tied into the larger unity of the productive cycle as a whole. For Marx the cultural was, ultimately, a product of production. The material was ontologically prior to the cultural.

dawned.[12] Much of Weber's class theory describes the sociocultural conditions of those people I will call "middle-class," even though Weber himself insisted on using only the terms "middle classes" and "intermediate strata,"[13] apparently as a way of registering his opposition to the Marxist practice of collapsing groups of people into class categories based only on their material relations. Although I affirm Weber's contention that the reality of socioeconomic life is much more complex than the materialist class theory of his day could accommodate, I believe it is possible to construct a theory of middle-class cultural practice that acknowledges Weber's concerns for sociocultural complexity while at the same time envisioning a shared sphere of class practice. In this book I will argue that Weber's "intermediate" groups are not just a series of "strata" or stratified "classes" but a "middle class," characterized by a set of class-specific sociocultural processes that Weber himself was among the first to describe.

Weber's writings on class help to correct some of the economic reductionism of the Marxian tradition by introducing what anthropologists would recognize as "culture" into the equation of socioeconomic power. Weber's main qualification of Marxist class theory is his insistence that *class position* (economic power) is distinct from—though often tied to—*social status* (honor or prestige). Weber observed that social status is very frequently related to class position but "is not . . . determined by this alone" (Weber 1947:428). *Class*, for Weber, was a function of a person or group's position in the capitalist market, both in terms of relations of production (capitalist or laborer) and in terms of ability to consume goods and services in the market. Social *status* on the other hand had to do with a person or group's lifestyle; education, training, and socialization; and

[12] "This era [c. 1880–1930] sees the emergence of a mass production system of manufacture increasingly dedicated to producing consumer goods (rather than the heavy capital goods, such as steel, machinery and chemicals, which dominated much of the later nineteenth century). . . . Incontrovertibly, it is in this period that all the features which make up consumer culture take on their mature form, but more importantly it is in this period that a modern *norm* emerges concerning how consumer goods are to be produced, sold and assimilated into everyday life" (Slater 1997:13). See also Susman 1984, Simmel 1950 [1903], Veblen 1953 [1899].

[13] In some places Weber speaks of "*the 'middle' classes*" as those groups "who have all sorts of property, or of marketable abilities through training, who are in a position to draw their support from these sources." Later he adds that "independent peasants and craftsmen are [also] to be treated as belonging to the 'middle classes.' This category often includes in addition officials . . . , the liberal professions, and workers with exceptional monopolistic assets or positions" (1947:425, 427). At other times Weber speaks of the same people as constituting the "*intermediate strata*," a "continuum of more or less clearly defined status positions determined by a variety of factors and not simply by property ownership" and characterized by internal "relations of competition and emulation, not of conflict" (Bottomore 1966:25–26).

inherited or occupational prestige. With a critique of Marx in mind, Weber wrote,

> In contrast to the purely economically determined "class situation" we wish to designate as "status situation" every typical component of the life fate of men that is determined by a specific, positive or negative, social estimation of *honor.* This honor may be connected with any quality shared by a plurality, and, of course, it can be knit to a class situation: class distinctions are linked in the most varied ways with status distinctions. Property as such is not always recognized as a status qualification, but in the long run is, and with extraordinary regularity. (Weber 1946:186–87)

Weber never explicitly laid out a mechanism that theorized these links between social status and class situation. Yet by acknowledging that class and status are knit together "with extraordinary regularity," Weber affirmed Marx's equation of property and power, even while insisting that economic dominance is always culturally mediated in patterns of socialization, lifestyles, and discourses of honor and prestige.[14] In effect, Weber maintains that even while power is almost always rooted in economic privilege, it is also always exercised and reproduced culturally. Weber's distinction between class and status helped foreground the role of culture (lifestyle, education, material culture, and so on) in class practice, but by focusing mainly on sociocultural dynamics *within* middle-class groups (a politics of competing status claims), Weber and his followers typically downplay Marxist concerns for ways in which access to economic resources structures relations *between* classes.[15]

This difference between Marx and Weber reflects at least in part the fact that by the time Weber appeared on the European scene a very different class dynamic had emerged, one in which a new abundance of mass-produced consumer goods was beginning to defuse earlier forms of overtly class-based politics by opening up a space for a new middle class. The new middle class did not own the "means of production" (productive assets like factories or plantations), but its members were offered access

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[14] According to Wright, it should not be surprising to find considerable agreement between Weber and Marx on class since, Wright believes, "Weber's class analysis is deeply indebted to the Marxist legacy which was part of the general intellectual discourse of his time," and "in many ways Weber is speaking in his most Marxian voice when he talks about class" (1997:29, n. 32; 30). The Weberian social theorist John Hall says much the same thing: "The Weber relevant to class analysis is better located within an agenda of political economy deeply shared with Marx" (1997:16).

[15] Class analysis has largely fallen out of mainstream sociological inquiry and has been replaced by models of social hierarchy based on presumably "freely competing" individual status claims.

to other forms of "property": consumer goods, autos, even private homes. The growth of this new middle class reflected both the rapidly increasing bureaucratic, service, and professional labor sectors, and the ability of the new consumer economy to absorb large portions of the old working classes into the middle class by encouraging them to construct their social identities more around the goods and property they *owned* than the kind of *work* they did (cf. Halle 1984).[16] Many social historians have documented this shift in social identification from "you are what you do" to "you are what you have" (e.g., Susman 1984, Lears 1983), but it is perhaps less often noted that the same shift also charts the move, in Western societies, away from a politics of interclass antagonism (analyzed by Marx) toward an increasingly dominant middle-class ethos of intraclass status competition (analyzed by Weber).

The growing cultural and political dominance of the European and American middle classes in the early twentieth century—the "embourgeoisement" of mainstream society—has long been the subject of critical commentary.[17] My own concern is with how emerging middle classes construct themselves as cultural entities, how their cultural life essentially depoliticizes social life (or hides middle-class privilege behind screens of seemingly "natural" cultural practice in the realms of "status"), and what insights we can glean from social theorists like Marx and Weber into the cultural politics and practices of "middle-classness" in other times and places. Drawing on Weber (and other theorists within the Weberian tradition), this book portrays the middle class in Nepal as a domain of *internally competing* cultural strategies, systems of prestige ("status"), and forms of "capital" that are not, strictly speaking, economic (Bourdieu 1985). But, I will argue, this internal cultural dynamic is always also part of a middle-class project to construct itself in *opposition* to its class others, above and below. The middle class is fundamentally situated in a larger class economy in which power and resources are unevenly distributed. This book constantly returns to Marxian concern for the cultural politics of "ruling ideas," or how the cultural practices of the middle class disguise its class privileges (its economic and political powers) behind seemingly noneconomic rhetorics of honor, achievement, and so on. In this book the middle class emerges as a never-ending cultural project that is simultaneously at odds with itself and with its class others. The middle class is a constantly renegotiated cultural space—a space of ideas, values, goods,

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[16] At that historical moment, Weber notes that, "[F]or the first time mere 'possession' as such emerges as decisive for the fate of the individual" (1946:182–83).

[17] By the likes of Thorstein Veblen (1953 [1899]), Walter Benjamin (Buck-Morss 1991), the Frankfurt School (e.g., Adorno and Horkheimer 1979 [1944]), and Jurgen Habermas (1989 [1962]), to name only a few.

practices, and embodied behaviors—in which the terms of inclusion and exclusion are endlessly tested, negotiated, and affirmed. From this point of view, it is the process, not the product, that constitutes class.

Middle-Class Cultural Practice

Whereas Marx paid scant attention to the role or nature of middle classes (Bottomore 1983:75), Weber focused almost entirely on them. Indeed, one of Weber's main critiques of Marx is that "materialist" theory fails to adequately characterize social dynamics within the middle class.[18] That Weberian theory fails to adequately characterize the politics of *inter*class conflict has already been noted, but Weber did make important contributions to our understandings of middle-class cultural life. Foremost among these are his observations concerning middle-class *relations to the market* and the unstable sociocultural dynamic of *status competition* within the middle class. Weber's discussions of consumption and status rivalry provide very useful insights into the dynamics of middle-class cultural practice in Kathmandu.

One of Weber's key breaks with Marxist or materialist portrayals of class is his observation that the middle class relates to economic or productive processes not primarily as sellers of labor (workers) or owners of capital (the capitalist elite) but as *consumers* of goods in the market place.[19] In other words, the middle class's position is determined less di-

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[18] A great deal of Weber's work on middle-class values and sociocultural dynamics (e.g., on the "Protestant ethic" [1958 (1904–5)]) is written with the "ghost of Marx" always hovering just out of sight (Giddens 1971:185), usually in the form of critical references to "materialism."

[19] In some places Weber links "class situation" to "market situation":

> It is the most elemental economic fact that the way in which the disposition over material property is distributed among a plurality of people . . . in itself creates specific life chances. . . . "Property" and "lack of property" are, therefore, the basic categories of all class situations. . . . But always this is the generic connotation of the concept of class: that the kind of chance in the *market* is the decisive moment which presents a common condition for the individual's fate. "Class situation" is . . . ultimately "market situation." . . . [F]or the first time mere "possession" as such emerges as decisive for the fate of the individual. (1946:181–83, italics in original)

At other times Weber implies that only "status groups" are determined by consumption and lifestyle, even while insisting that class and status are essentially equivalent:

> With some over-simplification, one might thus say that "classes" are stratified according to their relations to the production and acquisition of goods; whereas "status groups" are stratified according to the principles of the *consumption* of goods as repre-

rectly by its relations to the "means of production" (selling labor or owning capital) than by its relations to the market, that is, by its ability to consume.[20] With its members engaged mainly in "tertiary" labor—professionals, bureaucrats, teachers, retail entrepreneurs, independent artisans, and the like—the middle class is one step removed from the productive processes of capital. Whereas workers earn "wages," and capitalists earn "dividends," members of the middle class earn "salaries," a term that implies a certain *moral* distance from "mere" laboring and "mere" wealth.[21] Instead, the middle class stakes its identity on its accomplishments and refinement, moral discourses that it pursues largely through its privileged access to goods and services (from education to fashions) in the "free" market. Thus, for Weber a group's middle-classness is a function of its place in the capitalist economy, a sheltered space removed both economically and morally from the "vulgarities" of production and enacted through the "democratic freedoms" of the consumer marketplace. Weber's views on how middle-class morality is related to its position within the larger class economy, and how a rhetoric of morality naturalizes and defends middle-class privilege, provide important insights into middle-class cultural practice in Kathmandu.

Weber's other key insight into the nature of middle-classness concerns the way in which a range of different cultural formations, lifestyles, and

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sented by special "styles of life.". . . The differences between classes and status groups frequently overlap. (1946:193, italics in original).

[20] Weberian social theorists often interpret Weber's insistence that class is a function of a group's "market capacities" as somehow being at odds with a Marxian understanding of class as a function of a group's relations to the "means of production." I, however, agree with Wright (1997:30), who argues that both Marx and Weber saw class as fundamentally a matter of access to "economically relevant assets or resources," and as such, "both are really talking about very similar phenomena."

[21] One of Weber's main objectives in theoretically separating "class" from "status" seems to have been precisely to capture this moral/moralizing tendency of middle-class discourse.

The status order means precisely . . . stratification in terms of "honor" and of styles of life peculiar to status groups as such. If the *mere* economic acquisition and *naked economic power* still bearing the *stigma* of its extra-status origin could bestow upon anyone who has won it the same honor as those who are interested in status by virtue of style of life claim for themselves, the status order would be threatened at its very root. . . . Therefore *all groups having interests in the status order react with special sharpness precisely against the pretensions of purely economic acquisition.* In most cases they react the more vigorously the more they feel themselves threatened. (Weber 1946:192, italics added)

Status "honor" is all about morally distancing oneself from the "stigma" of "mere" economic power, not to mention the stigma of mere labor.

status claims compete *within* the middle class. Precisely because of their ambiguous relationship to the productive economy (as neither workers nor capitalists), members of the middle class live in a relatively unstable socioeconomic space. This instability is mirrored in the constantly contested, highly materialistic, and anxious character of middle-class lives. Forced to market their "skills," "services," and "accomplishments" in the capitalist "free market," members of the middle class are those who must constantly promote and justify their self-worth in the face of competing claims in the market. In many ways the middle class could be said to *absorb into* its own class-cultural practice the antagonisms between labor and capital that have historically been played out *between* the working and capitalist classes (cf. Miller 1995c:49). The anxieties and contradictions of middle-class life might be understood as reflecting this "internalized" class conflict within people who are simultaneously sellers of labor and owners of capital (professional, educational, and so on).

It is interesting that Weber's most detailed discussion of the intensely competitive and anxious nature of middle-class cultural life comes in an account of his visit to the United States, which, he argued, was "undergoing a profound transformation" toward a much more status-oriented and status-conscious society (1946:311). Writing in the early twentieth century, Weber saw the "characteristic form" of "stratification by 'status groups' on the basis of conventional styles of life" emerging "at the present time in the United States" (Weber 1946:188). He stressed how in the United States the neighborhood in which one lived was crucial to claims of "belonging to 'society,' " and "above all," how status claims demanded "strict submission to the fashion that is dominant at a given time in society," a submission that "exists among men in America to a degree unknown in Germany" (ibid.). In the same way that "strict submission" to fashion was a crucial factor in determining one's employment chances, social intercourse, and marriage arrangements in the United States (according to Weber), so also in the 1990s Kathmandu's middle-class culture was characterized by intense social pressures to conform to local consumer fashion standards.[22]

Running parallel with the powerful forces of *emulation* in the United States were equally powerful forces of status *competition*. Weber noted that there were

> all sorts of circles setting themselves apart by means of many other characteristics and badges . . . all these elements usurp "status" honor. The development of status is essentially a question of stratifi-

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[22] Chapters 3 to 5 ethnographically document the strict demands of fashion within Kathmandu's middle class.

cation resting upon usurpation. . . . But the road from this purely conventional situation to legal privilege . . . is easily traveled as soon as a certain stratification of the social order has in fact been "lived in" and has achieved stability by virtue of a stable distribution of economic power. (1946:188)

Here Weber depicts middle-class life as a space of competing status "circles," each trying to "usurp 'status' honor" for its own configuration of "characteristics and badges." But Weber also makes it clear that this game of competing status claims is no cakewalk. For claims to status honor to be more than mere claims, they have to be "lived in" (or "lived out") and converted into "legal privilege" through a cold and ruthless process of valorization "by virtue of . . . economic power." Indeed, it is crucial to see how processes of status emulation ("submission to fashion") and status competition are all fundamentally rooted in the vagaries and instabilities of the market place. Middle-class status is as precarious and fleeting as middle-class fashions, and it is the chronic fickleness of the "fashion system" (Barthes 1983) that perhaps best analogizes the anxious cultural experience of middle-classness. In this book I will argue that the middle class's relations to the capitalist market and productive processes (a position of instability, ambiguity, vulnerability), its distinct internal sociocultural dynamic (of competing lifestyles and consumer paranoia), and the ways in which these lifestyles naturalize economic privilege (by couching it in a language of honor and morality that excludes its class others) are precisely what make up some of the key generative, or constitutive, cultural dynamics of middle-class practice.

How are we to fit contemporary Nepal into this understanding of middle-class culture, a view derived (via Marx and Weber) from the experiences of people in distant times and places? In one way, this study could be read as a contribution to the larger project of chronicling the global social history of bourgeois culture. Many of the cultural processes of capitalism and class formation that this study depicts have occurred—in the broadest sense—elsewhere before,[23] and continue to unfold around the

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[23] To give just one example, there are remarkable similarities between the Nepali middle-class discourse of "suitability" (discussed in chapter 3) and what George Mosse (1985) calls the "concept of respectability" that emerged within the nineteenth-century European national middle classes.

The middle classes can only be partially defined by their economic activity and even by their hostility to the aristocracy and the lower classes alike. For side by side with their economic activity it was above all the ideal of respectability which came to characterize their style of life. . . . They perceived their way of life, based as it was upon frugality, devotion to duty, and restraint of the passions, as superior to that of the

world. Yet because many of these processes were palpably new to people in Kathmandu in the 1990s, this ethnographic study is able to capture something of the extraordinarily self-conscious awareness of living in an era of transformation, an experience that fosters overt reflection on the meanings of, and contradictions inherent to, processes of "development" and "modernization." Out of these experiences emerge important insights into how modern consumer subjectivities are created, embodied, and naturalized, how forms of capitalist promotion (media and others) constitute desire in webs of cross-referencing mutual publicity, and how new forms of social identification (for example, "youth") emerge from processes of class formation and commodification. For comparative purposes, this study provides glimpses of a crucial historical "moment" in the development of modern capitalist society.

But it is equally clear that this "moment" in 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. Middle-class life in Kathmandu is in no way merely derivative or, to quote this chapter's epigraph, less "true" or "real" than the Western experience of class. Though middle-class life in Kathmandu shares some of the key sociocultural dynamics that I have identified above, its meaning, experience, and nature are uniquely Nepali. As I show throughout this book, middle-class life in Kathmandu is mediated by local caste logics and other religiously based notions of propriety and suitability that, in turn, shape middle-class discourses of honor and prestige. Similarly, powerful state-promoted ideologies of "development" intersect with changing consumer market conditions and media exposure to produce uniquely local middle-class experiences of national identity and feelings of cultural marginalization. These and a host of other social, cultural, and economic factors discussed in this book make it abundantly clear that middle-class experience in Kathmandu is *never* a reliving of some Western social past[24] (even if contemporary Nepali cultural life is often represented, and even experienced, in those terms).

Capitalist modernity does not doom the globe to a condition of cultural homogenization, talk of "westernization" and "cultural imperialism" notwithstanding (cf. Tomlinson 1991). If we understand middle-classness as a cultural project or practice—rather than a social category

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"lazy" lower classes and the profligate aristocracy. Thus, the definition of the bourgeoisie . . . arises out of the growth of respectability itself. (Mosse 1985:4–5)

[24] In chapter 2 I show that processes of class formation in Nepal over the past several centuries are part of the same global historical trends within capitalist modernity that generated class formations around the world. The denial of "coevality" (Fabian 1983) is a popular conceit, but a conceit all the same.

or empirical condition—we can begin to see how the local and the global are brought together in cultural process, not cultural outcome. The ever more globalized condition of capitalist modernity means a world of increasingly shared cultural processes (such as class formation), not shared cultural lives or cultural meanings.

Class as Cultural Process: "Stories That Tell People"

How are we to conceptualize "class as cultural process"? How can an anthropology of class go beyond viewing culture as object, outcome, or product? What alternatives are there for reconceptualizing middle-class culture in processual terms? A number of important steps have already been made in this direction, though ethnographic representations of class practice are few.

For almost a century social theorists have tried to reconceptualize class, in the words of E. P. Thompson, not "as a 'structure,' nor even as a 'category,' but as something which in fact *happens* (and can be shown to have happened) *in human relationships*" (1966 [1963]:9, italics added).[25] Among at least some academics, there has arisen what Patrick Joyce identifies as an increasingly "deeply felt need" to think in "processual ways about the nature of the social" (1997:xi–xii). Yet these efforts to "processualize" class—to think beyond static categories and dualistic "structural" oppositions such as "culture" and "economy"—face a never-ending epistemological battle with the Western predilection toward forcing "object-ness," or stasis, onto all phenomena, even processes (Tyler 1984:27).

Within anthropology this "poststructuralist" turn was marked by the decline of earlier functionalist, "ethnoscience," and interpretive schools in favor of a new trend toward "practice theory" (Ortner 1984, Marcus and Fischer 1986). Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "habitus" (1977, 1980) has been one of the most influential formulations of practice theory within anthropology. Bourdieu's insistence that social science focus on the *ways that culture works* (the "modus operandi") rather than the *outcomes* of cultural labor (the "opus operatum") (1980:52) has helped

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[25] This is not the place for a detailed history of the efforts social theorists have made to pull a concept of class as cultural process from the teleological and categorical confinements of orthodox Marxist class theory and from political oblivion in Weberian sociology. From the long-ignored writings of Antonio Gramsci (1971) and Norbert Elias (1978 [1935], 1978 [1968]) to the work of the British "cultural Marxists" (Thompson 1966 [1963], Williams 1977) and members of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Hall et al. 1977, Hall 1986, Willis 1977), efforts to theorize and portray class as cultural practice have been ongoing.

shift culture theory toward processual perspectives.[26] Although not often viewed as an example of "practice theory," Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood's *The World of Goods* (1979) was one of the first anthropological works on class-cultural process.[27] Since the 1980s anthropologists have looked to other disciplines and theoretical schools for inspiration in efforts to construct more nuanced approaches to culture-as-process. These have ranged from calls for a new process-based anthropological cultural history, building on the work of Gramsci and the British "cultural Marxists" (Fox 1985, 1989, 1991),[28] to phenomenological approaches built around notions of "preobjective," "prereflexive" embodied culture (Csordas 1990:6) and "the making of lived worlds" (Weiss 1996). Drawing on Michel Foucault's poststructuralist theory of power—according to which power is productive or constitutive, rather than simply repressive (Foucault 1979:200ff., 1980:93ff.)—anthropologists have also embraced new process-oriented ideas such as "discursivity" and "governmentality" (e.g., Darian-Smith 1999, Escobar 1995, Ferguson 1994, Yang 1994). Performative nouns like these help us rethink culture away from the image of restrictive "web" and toward an understanding of *the cultural* as that which *produces in day-to-day practice the contours of power*—along the axes of gender, sexual, racial, ethnic, *and* class difference—that constitute social life. But Foucault's radical refusal to locate power in social formations make his ideas like "bio- power" (1980) and "discipline" (1979) difficult to translate from theory to method, spurring social theorists to search for other, less elusive pathways to a view of culture as process.

Theories of "performativity" and "narrativity" are two trends that promise more accessible avenues into the nitty-gritty of cultural process

[26] For all its subtleties, Bourdieu's notion of habitus—even with its emphasis on cultural practice and process—fails to break cleanly with structural, "objective" understandings of culture and class. In Bourdieu's hands, habitus becomes not just a kind of iron cage outside of which creative thought and practice is "unthinkable" (1980:54) but also a kind of black box "generating practices perfectly conforming to its logic and demands" (1980:57). Thus, in *Distinction*, Bourdieu's influential work on French class culture (1984 [1979]), classes remain a priori analytical categories into which cultural traits are simply filed.

[27] By characterizing class groups as spheres of exchange in which people who share certain social and material conditions attempt to synchronize their cultural domains of value (1979:126–27), Douglas and Isherwood insist that classes be understood as sets of cultural processes, rather than predetermined outcomes. Their concept is not unlike Bourdieu's idea of habitus: "Each person is a source of judgements and a subject of judgements; each individual is in the classification scheme whose discriminations he is helping to establish. . . . [A]ny choice between goods is the result of, and contributes to, culture" (Douglas and Isherwood 1979:75–76).

[28] For Fox, culture exists only as it is practiced and, as such, it is "constantly being made, unmade, and remade." Cultural traditions always encode systems of dominance and inequality that are reproduced or abandoned through "active human endeavor" (1989:29).

and practice. This study draws on both of these theoretical perspectives for ways of representing and analyzing facets of middle-class cultural life as cultural process. Often associated with gender studies generally, and the work of Judith Butler in particular,[29] theories of performativity are built around a distinction between deliberate or intentional behaviors ("performance") and behaviors that are enacted and embedded in complex cultural contexts that shape or "script" cultural performances in significant, though not necessarily absolute, ways ("performativity"). As Louisa Schein explains, theories of performativity suggest that "there is no essence, origin, or reality prior to or outside of the enactment of a multiplicity of performances. It is the recurring regularity in performances that makes certain social norms acquire their authority, their aura of inevitability (1999:369)." In the same way that gender could be said to be nonexistent outside of its endlessly repeated sociocultural performance, this book adapts ideas of performativity to class theory to suggest that class also is a reality, but one that exists only in its perpetual sociocultural enactment within a limiting "matrix of intelligibility" (Butler 1990:17).

While the idea of performativity allows one to see class as process, perpetually reenacted and recreated by the bearers of class culture, it is less helpful in opening windows into the "matrix" or context that transforms agentive "performance" into objectifying "performativity." In other words, performativity theory is less successful at conveying the sense of how the historical continuity, or inertia, of cultural life extends from the past into the present, and even projects itself onto the future. Here I feel that a theory of "narrativity" provides a valuable complement to "performativity." The ideas of "narrative" and "narrativity" help us conceptualize, analyze, and ethnographically represent *what it is* that is being performed in sociocultural life, and how the "matrix of intelligibility" is itself culturally produced.[30]

Out of the extensive literature on narrative theory from many disciplines,[31] Margaret Somers's work in historical sociology on processes of class and identity formation (1994a, 1994b, 1997) is particularly relevant to this study. Somers turns to narrativity as a way of escaping classic social-science analytic categories like society, culture, tradition, class, economy, and so on, all of which she rejects as "abstractions, denarrativ-

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[29] See Schein 1999:369, 2000 for discussions of the origins of performance/performativity theory.

[30] Performativity theory tends to posit an analytical distinction between performance and context as though the context, like a stage, exists prior to and independently of the performance.

[31] Lewis Hinchman and Sandra Hinchman's edited volume (1997a) is a valuable introduction to the use of narrative theory across a range of scholarly disciplines.

ized and atemporal" (1997:75). For Somers, narratives are "stories that social actors use to make sense of—indeed to act in—their lives" (1997:84). Through stories ("narratives")[32] of honor and shame, heroes and villains, piety and sacrilege, exploitation and resistance, pasts and futures, people construct worlds of cultural meaning, and in turn construct themselves. As such, narratives are not only stories that *people tell*, but "stories that *tell people*."[33] According to Somers, a narrative perspective on social process holds

> that social life is itself *storied* and that narrative is an *ontological condition of social life* . . . ; that people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories; that "experience" is constituted through narratives; that people make sense of what has happened and is happening to them by attempting to assemble or in some way to integrate these happenings within one or more narratives; and that people are guided to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of the projections, expectations, and memories derived from a multiplicity [*sic*] but ultimately limited repertoire of available social, public, and cultural narratives. (1994a:613–14, italics in original)

Through cultural narrative people learn who they *are*; through cultural narrativity people learn who they should *become*. It is through narratives and narrativity that groups of people transport ideas about meaning and value from the past into the present, where these stories then stake claims to the futures of those who tell them.

For Somers a crucial aspect of narrativity is its "fundamental trait of relationality": "Narrativity renders understanding only by connecting *parts* (however unstable) to a constructed *configuration* or a *social network* (however incoherent or unrealizable). The connectivity of parts turns (events) into *episodes*, whether or not the sequence of episodes is

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[32] I use the words "narrative" and "story" more or less interchangeably. Although not all stories are narratives, narratives are stories of a particular kind. Hinchman and Hinchman's definition is a useful starting point: "narratives (stories) . . . [are] discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way for a definite audience, and thus offer insights about the world and/or people's experiences of it" (1997b:xvi). Similarly, for Seidman, "Narratives tell a story; they are organized around a plot, a linear, sequencing of events, a marked beginning and end, and a tale of good and evil intended to shape social behavior" (1994:205). These definitions capture both the sequential/causative and relational/social aspects of narrative stories.

[33] I borrow the wonderfully evocative phrase "stories that tell people" from the title of Sarah Miller's beautifully written study of high-caste marriage ritual in Kathmandu (1992). Miller's analysis of linguistic "performatives" leads her in some of the same directions as I take here in my use of performativity and narrativity.

presented or experienced in anything resembling chronological order"
(1997:82, italics in original). In other words, cultural narratives always
exist in relationship both with *other people* and *other times*. Stories con-
stantly circulate through channels of relationships, but they also flow
through time (from generation to generation), carrying the momentum of
the past into the present and into dreams for the future. In this way narra-
tives serve as powerful carriers of both cultural epistemology and ontol-
ogy: stories in and of relationality tell people who they are (and are not),[34]
but they also place individuals within the flow of cultural time, carrying
them along with a tide of cultural inertia that is difficult to resist. It is this
cultural inertia of narrativity that, I believe, offers useful insights into the
nature of the "matrix" or constraining context of cultural performance
and performativity.

Thus book uses concepts of both performativity and narrativity as
ways of understanding the cultural processes of middle-class life in Kath-
mandu. Performance perspectives help shed light on how people actively
produce class culture in ways that with surprising regularity—as in the
wedding tale told at the beginning of this chapter—have overtly drama-
turgical (and increasingly mass-mediated) overtones. The idea of narrativ-
ity, in turn, offers ways of analyzing the "dramas" that are being per-
formed. Through the stories that people *tell* and the stories that people
live out every day, sociality—including inter and intraclass relations—
becomes an ever recreated, reenacted reality.

Such a perspective is particularly well-suited to an analysis of middle-
class cultural process because it allows us to capture something of the
chaotic interplay of competing, often contradictory, narratives, and the
fragmented, nerve-wracking performances that they inspire. This study
traces a number of powerful cultural narratives at work within Kathman-
du's middle class. As the middle class pioneers a new space of cultural
"betweenness"—between high and low, global and local, new and old,
"tradition" and "modernity"—as it struggles to produce itself in cultural
life, its members must experiment with a host of cultural stories that are
by no means necessarily complementary. From the modern consumer
logic of "fashion" to long-held understandings of *ijjat*, or prestige, from
the state-promoted ideologies of "progress" and "development" to lo-
cally circulating stories of cultural decline and resistance, middle-class
Nepalis live in an unusually complex world of competing narratives of
truth, reality, and value. Each of these stories "tells" the meaning of rela-
tionships between people in different ways; each configures the sequence

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[34] Narrative stories have what Hinchman and Hinchman call "transsubjective truth
value" (1997:xvi).

from past to present to future according to its own narrative agenda; each offers its own story of being and becoming, or what it means to be and what a person should become.

While much of the work done in narrative theory consists of detailed analyses of individual spoken or written narratives,[35] this study is more concerned with what have been called "metanarratives," powerful stories of meaning and value that naturalize certain privileged cultural practices. Despite Lyotard's (1984) pronouncement of the end of narrative knowledge in postmodernity, in fact narrative remains a tenacious part of the construction of meaning in everyday life.[36] Some of Lyotard's *grands récits* or "master-narratives" (Science, Religion, orthodox Marxism, etc.) may be struggling in some sectors. Yet the rise of new fundamentalisms, whether religious (Christian, Hindu, Islamic) or secular (neoliberal economics) suggests that new metanarratives have arisen to fill in the gaps. In a country like Nepal, with its "development"-driven state apparatus and (since 1995) rural Maoist insurgency, competing metanarratives have never been more terrifyingly matters of life and death. As I discuss in the chapters to follow, global modernist metanarratives such as progress, achievement, and growth are very much alive in Kathmandu's middle class, where they intermingle with and color other, more local but equally powerful narratives of value, honor, and meaning.

This book documents the almost Herculean task that Kathmandu's middle class faces as it attempts to reconcile a host of narrative forces: new and old, competing and contradictory. If Weber pointed to a sphere of intensely competing "characteristics and badges" (1946:188) as a defining feature of middle-classness, emerging middle-class cultures on the global periphery today are sites of fantastically complex interplay between divergent stories of value and ways of being. Middle-class culture is a veritable economy of circulating and contending narratives of honor, prestige, morality, suitability, and propriety. As these narrative currents disperse, their "sources" become increasingly difficult to locate. Each stream flows in and through the others in ways that "modernize" traditional narratives, localize global stories, devalue stories of value, and valorize narratives of subjection. In this context, performing the cultural narratives of middle-classness becomes a confusing, contradictory, anxiety-inducing, but nevertheless inescapable endeavor. In the remarks that follow, a Kathmandu man defends local tradition in the face of change.

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[35] See, for example, Mattingly and Garro 2000, Kleinman 1988, Caverero 2000.

[36] Indeed, as Hinchman and Hinchman observe, "the death of narrative may have been 'greatly exaggerated' " (1997:xiii)!

Modernity: "It's just the style."

When an acquaintance wanted to argue that change in Kathmandu was only "superficial," he turned to the subject of weddings:

> Take a marriage ceremony. When it comes to our rituals, we are doing *every* ritual in our *own way*. They aren't getting *any* effect from that [modern forces]. Well, just a little bit. Like in marriage it *was* more of a ceremony. We used to invite them and they would sit [on the ground] and we would distribute food [on leaf plates] and like that. But right now it has changed to the hotel. You know, "buffet style"—that's the thing. But anyway, it's just the *style*.

Anthropologies of Middle-Class Culture

The anthropological study of middle-class groups is in its infancy.[37] Even among the relatively few ethnographic accounts of class, the majority deal with working-class groups, and a few deal with social elites (e.g., Marcus 1983). This "tradition of working around the (class-) edges of . . . society" (Ortner 1991:167) has left the topic of middle-class culture understudied. This book contributes to a small but growing number of ethnographic works on middle-class culture.[38]

The last several years have seen the beginnings of an anthropological literature on non-Western middle-class societies, particularly within the

[37] As Sherry Ortner observed, "The first thing that strikes an anthropologist reading the ethnographic literature [on class is] . . . its marginality in anthropological studies." She goes on to note that, within anthropology, "there is a tendency to avoid almost any kind of macrosociological analysis, let alone making class a central category of research" (1991:165–66). For reviews of anthropological literature on class, see Foley 1990: appendix A, Goldschmidt 1950, 1955, Smith 1984, Ortner 1991.

[38] Much of the ethnographically based literature that deals with middle-class culture focuses on educational settings where the middle-class is the main subject or one of several groups studied (Eckert 1989, Foley 1990, Gaines 1990, Holland and Eisenhart 1990, Proweller 1998). This literature mainly addresses socialization and social-reproduction theory, leaving the matter of "middle-classness" more or less unproblematized. Other works consider the plight of middle-class families caught in processes of deindustrialization and "down-sizing" (Newman 1988, 1993, Ehrenreich 1989). To complement a large body of historical works on other middle-class formations (Barry and Brooks 1994, Earle 1989, Hunt 1996, Thompson 1988, to name only a few), we have at least one anthropological history of a national middle class (Frykman and Lofgren 1987). Sherry Ortner's ongoing Weequahic High School project (Ortner 1991, 1994, 1997, 1998, 1999a) is one of very few anthropological studies to, in her words, "take the bull by the horns and tackle both the American white middle class as such, and the complex dynamics that reproduce the Ameri-

booming national economies of East and Southeast Asia. In addition to offering comparative perspectives on the "new middle classes" across the region, these studies document how recent processes of capital accumulation have produced new, intensely consumerist, middle-class cultures (Blanc 1997, PuruShotam 1998), how middle-class cultural practice is gendered (and how gender practice constitutes middle-classness) (Stivens 1998a, 1998b), and how middle-class consumers construct explicitly non-Western, "thoroughly modern 'Asian' "; identities (Blanc 1997; see also PuruShotam 1998, Yang 1997). All of these studies illustrate how, as in Nepal, new middle-class cultures are oriented toward a multicentered (not simply "Western-dominated") global capitalist economy in which competing modernities vie for gender, class, ethnic, and regional affiliation (Ong and Nonini 1997, Robison and Goodman, eds. 1996, Sen and Stivens 1998).

Three other recent studies offer book-length anthropological accounts of emerging middle-class societies in Asia. Patricia Sloane's study (1999) of newly affluent society in Malaysia looks at how young, educated, urban, ethnic Malay entrepreneurs construct new lifestyles and systems of value at the intersection of state, religious, and capitalist market forces.[39] Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington's study of "emerging class in Papua New Guinea" focuses on "the social and cultural work of creating new forms of distinction" in a society where new "class-based inequalities" have developed over the past seven decades (1999:8–9).[40]

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can class structure" (1991:167). To date Ortner has offered only a few glimpses of her findings, but a full account of her project is eagerly awaited.

[39] Although Sloane occasionally uses "middle class" to characterize the "Malay 'haves' " in her study (1999:6), her goal was not to represent or critique class culture per se but rather to ethnographically document and analyze the new culture of entrepreneurship in Malaysia. As such, Sloane's study is framed more as a contribution to understanding alternative cultures of capitalism than as an exploration of class-cultural life. Nevertheless, Sloane's account of how Malay businesspeople weave together narratives of Islamic morality, capitalist modernity, and a highly politicized sense of "Malayness" is an interesting and important comparative study of an emerging middle-class culture.

[40] Gewertz and Errington deal with the topic of middle-class culture extensively, though the class dynamic that they describe is very different from the one in this book. Rather than a middle-class culture emerging from the subjective and structural experience of "betweenness"—the sense of constructing and occupying a cultural space between class others that is evident in the present account of middle-class life and others (Elias 1978 [1935], Eley 1994:320, Frykman and Lofgren 1987:27, 266, Habermas 1989 [1962], Mosse 1985:4–5, Weber 1946:192)—Gewertz and Errington use the terms "elite" and "middle class" interchangeably and describe an essentially two-part class-cultural dynamic between the "grass roots" and the "middle-class elites" (1999:12). Gewertz and Errington promise to provide "fine-grained ethnographic detail" (1999:15), but in the end their short book comes across as mainly anecdotal, a collection of scenes from the expatriates' lives with their class peers at the local Rotary Club, golf course, and so on.

A third recent book, Purnima Mankekar's *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics* (1999), comes closest to this study in both theoretical and regional focus. Subtitled "An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation," Mankekar's work situates middle-class culture in north India in the context of state-run Indian television.[41] Perhaps the main difference between Mankekar's study and this one is that for Mankekar, middle-class culture is mainly an ethnographic setting in which to study processes of identity formation and cultural politics, rather than the object of ethnographic inquiry itself. "Middle-classness" is a recurring theme, though it is ultimately framed within other concerns for issues of gender and nationality. My study, by contrast (as I discuss further below), focuses less on the text/reader media dynamic—which Mankekar treats with theoretical subtlety—and more on the place of media consumption within broader patterns of middle-class consumer practice, and how media images, like other consumer goods, find roles in the production of middle-class life.

Consuming "Love"

In the Nepali film *Jivan Yatra*, fashions take on a leading romantic role. Set entirely in rural Nepal, the hero and heroine wear "traditional" village attire from start to finish except during their romantic interludes. For example, in one scene the country hero falls asleep on a mossy bank, dreaming of romance with the heroine. Strangely, in his dream both hero and heroine are attired in modern Western fashions. As dream lovers, the hero and heroine are transformed from rustic village folk into high-fashion urban trendsetters, serenading each other in a luxurious formal garden.

Indeed, in Kathmandu—as in many South Asian films—there is a peculiar logic that links cinema, romance, and fashion. For example, when I asked one young man why Hindi "love stories"[42] had become the most popular commercial film genre in Kathmandu, he responded obliquely: "Look, now we can get all the fashions coming

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[41] In particular the book explores how middle-class women construct identities as bearers of class, gender, and nationality in the face of powerful ideological forces. Mankekar's ethnographic focus on the intersection between "televisual texts, viewers' interpretations of them, and the viewers' life experiences" (1999:17) offers significant new insights into the politics of mediation and subjectivity in South Asia. Mankekar analyzes Indian national television's role in "the cultural construction of 'middle-classness' through consumerism" (1999:48), the relationship between media consumption, consumer desire, and middle-class status (1999:94ff), and mediated images of middle-class womanhood (1999:113ff.) and offers a range of other perspectives on middle-class life and media consumption.

[42] As discussed in the preface, words spoken in English in otherwise Nepali speech are designated by the use of a sans serif font.

from Hong Kong and Thailand and therefore we young men and women [*keṭākeṭī*] like to go to the theater and watch the love stories." This apparent nonsequitur in fact conveys the logic of an imagined world where media shape and promote youthful romantic longing and then associate this desired relationship with a range of consumer activities, commodities, lifestyles, and objectified body ideals. In the minds of many middle-class Nepali young people, to "do love" one needs "fashions," just as it is "fashion" to "do love."

Class, Consumption, and Mass Media

Consumption is one of the key cultural dynamics of middle-class life. How class formations relate to goods, and how goods are imbued with social meanings, have been recurring themes in social theories of class from Marx and Weber onward. Significantly, these same concerns have also been at the heart of a new anthropology of consumption that has grown rapidly over the past two decades. In a review essay on consumption studies in anthropology, Daniel Miller (1995a:266) "unambiguously" dates the "birth of the new anthropology of consumption" to the almost simultaneous publication of Douglas and Isherwood's *The World of Goods* (1979) and Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984 [1979]), both discussed above as ground-breaking anthropological studies of class cultural process. That the anthropology of consumption and the anthropology of class are so intimately connected underscores one of this book's primary contentions; class and consumption have to be seen as mutually constitutive cultural processes, especially when we are trying to conceptualize the nature of middle-class culture.

For class and consumption to be understood as "mutually constitutive," "consumption" needs to be seen as involving much more than simply the act of purchasing some product. To be sure, a person's or group's access to financial resources (money) fundamentally determines their ability to arrive at the "point of purchase": the reality of socioeconomic inequality is the bedrock on which class-based consumer cultures are built. But the act of buying is only one "moment" in the cultural process of consumption.[43] Goods themselves have "social lives" (Appadurai 1986). Who wants what? When do they want it, and why? What do people do

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[43] Significantly, Marxist-oriented theories of consumption tend to be concerned with capitalist processes of promotion and aestheticization that lead *up to* the point of purchase (Aglietta 1987, Haug 1987, Galbraith 1969, etc.), whereas more Weberian (or Durkheimian) approaches to consumption tend to focus on the social use of consumer goods *after* the point of purchase (Bourdieu 1984 [1979], Douglas and Isherwood 1979).

with the goods they acquire? How do new consumer goods fit into earlier forms of cultural life? How do objects become centers around which new forms of individual and group behaviors form? The anthropology of consumption is less concerned with the objectness of goods[44] than with how goods circulate within groups, or how, as we will see in this study, goods become a kind of social currency that is transacted in middle-class life.

Middle-class culture is uniquely embedded in the social trajectories of things. What things people desire, the meanings they attach to them, the class-cultural practices they construct around them, and thus the very nature of middle-class consumer practice, will vary enormously across time and space.[45] But to the extent that middle-class people share a common orientation to capitalist productive processes as *consumers* of commodities, and to the extent that consumption (with all the social fashioning and practice that the term implies) becomes their primary mode of cultural production, middle-class practice is inescapably consumer practice. Because of their ability to both include and exclude class others, and to both display and conceal class privilege, commodities (and their attendant practices) are the primary currency of middle-class life.

Mass media play a central role in the lives of middle-class people in Kathmandu and are hence one of the dominant themes in this book. But rather than making media its object of ethnographic inquiry,[46] this study situates media consumption within middle-class consumer culture generally: the consumption of commercial entertainment media is inseparable from broader processes of middle-class consumption. By placing assorted media products (TV shows, movies, radio programs, magazines, recorded music, etc.) in the same category as other "consumables" (from fashions to food to education), it is easier to see how commercial media fit into broader patterns of commodity promotion and consumption. Media not only coexist with other cultural commodities but, much more importantly, are in constant "dialogue" with other goods, cross-referencing and mutually promoting each other. An important and recurring theme in this book is how media products constantly intersect with, promote, and naturalize a host of other commodities, helping to create "auras" of meaning that surround other goods with consumer desire. By tracking these "intertextual" linkages in what I call the *media assemblage*, this book examines how the combined forces of commodity promotion synchronize their calls

[44] See Miller 1998 for a collection of studies that focus on the materiality of material culture in consumption.

[45] Consider, for example, the extraordinarily diverse meanings that a McDonald's hamburger can have depending on where it is consumed (Watson 1997).

[46] Anthropologists have begun to make important contributions to "the ethnography of media consumption": Dickey 1993, Fuglesang 1994, Mankekar 1999. See also Manuel 1993.

for consumer identification within an image realm of generalized consumer desire. The synchronized auras of commodified goods and images (mass media) soon cast their shadows onto the minds—and bodies—of local consumers, as in the case of the young male "body builder" described below.

"Just Look at My Body": Media and Imagination

One afternoon in 1991, while waiting in the crowded courtyard of a popular movie theater in Kathmandu, a boy standing next to me observed the mad crush of young men, each struggling to make his way to the ticket window, and sighed: "You know there are no rules here for how to get the tickets. There's no control. So since they're strong and we're not, we can't fight it out. They have body and we don't have body." Speaking in Nepali, he used the English word *body* to describe what he lacked in this context. People who are "strong" and can "fight it out" have "body."

Similarly, a few months later, in the course of an interview, one of my co-workers asked another young man from Kathmandu about his preferences in films. When the young man responded that he preferred "English" films to those made in India or Nepal, my co-worker asked what kind of English films he liked best. At this the young man (a nineteen-year-old college student) paused, and then explained in a somewhat irritated voice: "Well, among English films I like the *Rambo* type of films. I've seen all of them, parts 1, 2, and 3. I mean, just *look* at my body and you can *see* that I'm interested in that kind of film. If you *look*, you can tell what kind of film *I* like."

Here again the speaker chose the English word *body*. Unlike the Nepali word for body, *jiu* (a gender-neutral term), for this young man the English word obviously carried the meaning of a certain physique—a muscular, powerful, and very male physique—firmly associated with the action film hero Rambo. Indeed, in his mediated imagination, the body style he cultivated through a regimen of martial arts and bodybuilding should have communicated visually the fact that he preferred "the Rambo type of films." For him, film preference and body style were so inseparable that either one should have clearly signaled the other.

It is this "mass-mediated imaginary" that Arjun Appadurai identifies as one of the hallmarks of late capitalist modernity (1996:6). Kathmandu's increasingly market-based, media-saturated, and globally inflected cultural economy has begun to transform the ways, the terms, and the means by which individuals come to imagine themselves, others, and their

society's meaningful social categories. Mass media, in tandem with other commodities and other forms of commodity promotion, produce a space for the imagination that is increasingly transnational. Whether in cinematic representations of romance, adventure, or luxury; in advertisements for soft drinks or cigarettes; or in shop windows filled with the same consumer goods depicted in films and in advertisements, the world of commodities and media representations forms a cross-referencing, mutually reinforcing realm of images and imagined ways of being.

The anthropological literature on consumption is now sizable,[47] and the anthropology of mass media is growing.[48] Since Tamar Liebes and Elahu Katz's pioneering cross-cultural study of responses to American television dramas (1990), more and more ethnographically based studies of mass media consumption in non-Western societies have appeared.[49] Of these, the studies most comparable to this one are Mankekar's book on television and middle-class women in India (1999; discussed above), Sara Dickey's path-breaking book on cinema and lower-class spectatorship in southern India (1993), and Minou Fuglesang's fine-grained ethnography of media consumption and female youth culture in East Africa (1994). Where this study differs from "ethnographies of media consumption" such as Mankekar's and Dickey's is in its framing of media consumption within broader patterns of middle-class consumer culture. Fuglesang's ethnography relates to this one in several important ways. Like the middle-class Nepali young people in this study (and people in many other parts of the world), Fuglesang's young media consumers are drawn into

[47] For general reviews of the literature, see Miller 1995a, 1995b. Much of the anthropological literature on consumption is either theoretical in nature (Appadurai 1986, Douglas and Isherwood 1979, McCracken 1988, Miller 1987) or in the form of short essays in edited volumes (Appadurai, ed. 1986, Howes 1996, Miller, ed. 1995, 1998, Orlove 1997, Rutz and Orlove 1989). Other edited volumes that speak to issues of consumption from anthropological perspectives include Breckenridge 1995, Cohen et al. 1995, Mitsui and Hosokawa 1998, and Watson 1997. We have several important anthropological studies that chart histories of commodification and consumer subjectivity in colonial and postcolonial settings (e.g., Burke 1996, Tarlo 1996). For notes on the history of commodification and consumer culture in Nepal, see Liechty 1997. There are only a handful of book-length anthropological studies of modern consumer culture in either Western (Bourdieu 1984) or non-Western (Miller 1994, Weiss 1996) settings.

[48] For reviews, see Spitulnik 1993, Sklair 1995:147ff. Ginsburg et al. (forthcoming) is an important contribution to the anthropology of mass media.

[49] Written from a range of disciplinary perspectives and focusing on a variety of media industries and products, monographs include Allison 2000, Armbrust 1996, Dickey 1993, Fuglesang 1994, Gillespie 1995 (on media in the South Asian diaspora), Kottak 1990, Mankekar 1999, Manuel 1993, Michaels 1993, Pinney 1998, Rajagopal 2001, and Tufte 2000. Other studies that pay significant attention to media include Derne 1995, Dwyer 2000, Richards 1996, and Siegel 1986. Edited collections on non-Western media include Babb and Wadley 1995, Brosius and Butcher 1999, and Eickelman and Anderson 1999.

the orbit of the Indian cinematic melodramas. Fuglesang shows how young women derive new ideas of romantic love, female fashions, and commodified beauty practices from Hindi films. But rather than regarding these media-influenced behaviors as possible instances of women's co-option into modern capitalist economic and ideological structures, Fuglesang sees these new perspectives on love, fashion, and beauty as avenues for the release of "repressed and suppressed energies, allowing temporary escape from everyday toil and male dominance, and triggering dreams and visions of alternatives" (1994:12).[50] For Fuglesang, media consumption is about "creating both self-esteem and empowerment" among women (1994:9).[51]

By contrast, this study of mass media, consumerism, and middle-class culture takes a considerably more critical view of capitalist modernity. Where Fuglesang celebrates "a sort of symbolic resistance" in women's cinema-influenced, consumerist fashion practice (1994:144), this study is more likely to see evidence of market interpellation and commercial objectification. The pleasures of consumption, while real, are never far removed from the gut-wrenching anxieties that arise as people attempt to maintain their positions in the middle-class consumer culture. As we will see in chapters 3 to 5, for many in Kathmandu's middle class, the pleasures of commodity consumption are inherently transient, each act wedging the consumer ever deeper into a market-dependent economy of fleeting and vulnerable prestige.

My aim is to present consumer practices not as evidence of passive capitalist victimization but rather as indispensable elements of a larger middle-class cultural project. As I argue throughout this book, middle-class consumption is less about *having* or *possession* than it is about *being* and *belonging*. As such, middle-class consumption is "about" middle-class production; it is in the *practice* of consumer regimens (from "doing fashion" to restaurant going to watching videos) that the middle class *performs* its cultural existence, day by day. That this local class-culture building draws these actors ever deeper into global commodity regimes testifies less to their own victimization at the hands of an external global capitalism than to the fact that Kathmandu's emerging middle class is itself a response to, and active purveyor of, a now globalized capitalist market and commodity regime. Members of Kathmandu's middle class

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[50] Fuglesang's interpretive stance is in line with one strand of media and consumer studies that finds potential for resistance and social critique in consumer behaviors (Fiske 1989a, 1989b, Willis 1990, de Certeau 1984).

[51] In her discussion of women's "identity work" and mass-mediated consumerism, Fuglesang celebrates the "freedom of choice gained by today's generation" (1994:88) without critically considering what other "freedoms" and "choices" might have been lost in the bargain (cf. Appadurai 1990b:206, Tomlinson 1991:151).

are precisely those who have hitched their local sociocultural lives to an ever growing world of goods.

> *"Without Fashion We Can Do Nothing": Youth and Consumption*
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> Noting the stylish ready-made clothes of a seventeen-year-old college student, my research co-worker asked him, "What do you think about fashion?"
>
> "Listen," the student replied, "these days the world has become very modern. So, about fashion, it's like without fashion we can do nothing, there is nothing. Before now, it was a wild, savage age. People used to run around wearing tree bark! Actually, now, in a way, fashion has become a part of our bodies."
>
> "*And are you personally interested in fashion?*" my co-worker asked.
>
> "That's for sure! Look, I'm a young man, so of course I am really into fashion. Today's young people, we are almost into the twenty-first century . . . so we're interested in fashion, but also films, sports, . . . and the romantic world. We all have interest in these things."

The Middle Class and Youth Culture

Occasionally age (or "generation") is added to the standard sociological troika of "race, class, and gender" as one of the main principles that societies use to arrange hierarchies of privilege and power. In other words, along with sexism, racism, and class-based discrimination, "ageism" is one of the ways that societies produce and police authority. But just as we know that race and gender are culturally constructed categories, and that class privilege (or exploitation) is produced in cultural practice, so too the meanings attributed to age are cultural creations. This study considers one such act of cultural creation, the production of a new "youth" identity within Kathmandu's middle class. I argue that in capitalist modernity the constitution of a particular form of "youth" identity or "youth culture" has been an integral part of middle-class formation. The new discourse of "youth" that has emerged in Kathmandu over the past few decades is one of the key facets of the larger process whereby the middle class has struggled to create itself in cultural practice.

The relationships between race and class, and gender and class, have been much theorized,[52] but how the production of age categories might

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[52] For viewpoints and reviews of the literature see Burris 1987, Sacks 1989, and Ortner 1991.

be related to class-cultural process has received less attention. In the vast literature on youth and youth culture in sociology, psychology, cultural studies, and education,[53] youth are often represented as the targets of class-based processes of socialization/indoctrination/reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990 [1970], Freire 1970, Willis 1977), but actual social categories like "youth" and "adolescence" are themselves typically treated as natural, universal, and ahistorical. It has been mainly social historians who have charted and analyzed the sociocultural construction of youth and youth culture in light of shifting class dynamics in the West during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Aries 1962, Kett 1977, Palladino 1996, Springhall 1986, Walvin 1982). This study analyzes the specific sociohistorical context out of which new class-based categories of youth and youth culture have emerged in Nepal.

Social categories of "youth" have been brought into being for a variety of class purposes,[54] but perhaps the most enduring cultural process of youth production has been their constitution as bearers of middle-class culture. In capitalist modernity the production of youth has been a central project of the middle classes, with the meaning and nature of "youth culture" perpetually shifting according to the demands of middle-class industrial/consumer society. From the late-nineteenth-century bourgeois "invention of the adolescent" (Kett 1977) at the dawn of the era of industrial mass production[55] to the early-twentieth-century shift in commercial marketing away from adults and toward "youth" as the new "ideal consumers" and fashion leaders,[56] "youth culture" was enlisted to (and co-produced by) the cause of middle-class consumerism. The postwar years saw the creation of the middle-class suburban "teen" consumer through whom "rebellion" was recruited to the cause of consumption (Frank

[53] See Griffin 1993 for a review of "representations of youth and adolescence in Britain and America."

[54] Depending on their locations within new class formations, "youth" have been figured variously as industrial laborers (Perrot 1997), military recruits (Loriga 1997), objects of bourgeois education (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) and discipline (Foucault 1979), and agents of (often right-wing) political change (Michaud 1997, Passerini 1997), to name a few class-related processes of "youth" production.

[55] According to Kett, "adolescence" was "essentially a conception of behavior imposed on youth, rather than an empirical assessment of the way in which young people actually behaved. The architects of adolescence used biology and psychology . . . to justify the promotion among young people of norms of behavior that were freighted with middle-class values" (1977:243).

Not coincidentally, the same middle-class values that made "ideal youth"—conformity, loyalty, hero worship, anti-intellectuality, body objectification ("fitness," "beauty," etc.)—also made youth ideal consumers.

[56] See Hurlock 1929:165–88 for a particularly revealing contemporary account of this process. See also Ewen and Ewen 1982, Susman 1984.

1997, Palladino 1996). Contemporary post-Fordist ("postmodern") flexible production techniques have led to a vast array of micro-youth markets with manufacturers adroitly manipulating and appropriating inner-city styles for middle-class suburban youth (Spiegler 1996) and allowing young people to "buy into" a seemingly endless menu of youth identities and rebellions.[57] Although young people may have many other (often competing or even contradictory) subject positions or identities available to them, in industrial and late-capitalist societies "youth," as a distinct age-based sociocultural identity, has been largely generated by forces of class-cultural production and reproduction.

Chapters 8 and 9 describe commercial efforts to construct a new "teen" consumer identity in Kathmandu and the heated debate over the meaning of "modern youth" among members of the middle class. These chapters also consider the experiences of young people themselves as they navigate the treacherous narrative currents of "youth," state-sponsored modernism, consumer gratification, and Nepaliness, among others. Creating and debating "youth" is one of the most fundamental cultural projects of Kathmandu's emerging middle class. To the extent that the "modern youth" or "teen" in Kathmandu is constituted and lived as a species of consumer, "youth culture" is almost by definition middle-class culture. As such, youth culture is not simply a by-product of a larger middle-class cultural project; it is in fact the constantly honed tip of the wedge that opens up the cultural space of middleness and constitutes the middle class as a domain of consumerism and consumer subjectivity. Youth act as the vanguard of an emerging middle-class consumer culture. Constituting youth as consumers is the same cultural project as constituting middle-class subjects: producing "youth" *is* producing the middle class.

This book portrays class as a constantly reenacted *cultural project*, emergent at the confluence of processes of consumption, mass mediation, and the production of youth culture. Class is never a "thing" that exists by itself, prior to, or outside of, its actual performance in everyday life. Approaching class as *process* rather than *object* allows me to show how middle-class culture in Kathmandu grows out of cultural practices with both local and translocal roots. The nature and practice of class in Kathmandu is tied to, but does not simply reflect, global patterns of capitalist promotion, distribution, and labor relations. Instead, members of an emerging middle class meld preexisting, local cultural narratives (such as notions of propriety, orthodoxy, and honor) with "modern" logics of

[57] It is increasingly difficult to disagree with Alberto Moreiras's assessment that "consumerist globality not only absolutely circumscribes but even produces resistance to itself as yet another possibility of consumption" (1998:92).

value and truth (achievement, progress, development) in their efforts to construct a new sociocultural space and claim legitimacy for their own class values. This study traces the processes whereby people in Kathmandu's social middle strive to speak and act themselves into the joint production of middle-class culture. Following a chapter that lays out the historical and contemporary context of class formation in Kathmandu, the book proceeds through three overlapping ethnographic terrains: class and consumerism, mass media, and youth. The conclusion combines an ethnographic summary with a discussion of the spatial implications of class-cultural practice. I suggest that what class practice *does*—what makes class *a reality*—is its production of cultural space.