

*Is There a Tongan Middle Class?
Hierarchy and Protest in
Contemporary Tonga*

Kerry James

References to a middle class in Tonga in both scholarly and popular discourse have increased to the point where they have begun to give substance to something that is not there. There are a lot of “middle-class” people about, but they have not yet formed a class—at least not in the sense implied in Marx’s analysis of class-ordered society, in which economic classes form on the basis of productive relations and are associated primarily with the major social cleavage between capital and labor. Certainly a greater range of “market situations” exists in Tonga than formerly, but the empirical plurality it gives rise to can be resolved through Weber’s less determinative concept of “social class,” which does not require the organization of its members in pursuit of common goals. Nevertheless, the recent attribution of political, social, and cultural agency to the middle classes in Tonga by influential commentators (eg, Benguigui 1989) necessitates an investigation of their alleged presence and agenda.

In orthodox models of class, the nature of the middle class(es) that conceptually occupy the space between the two fundamental classes of capital and labor has always been highly debatable. If this is the case in the most developed industrial capitalist societies, then it is likely to be more problematic in highly traditional societies. Indeed, in view of its contested nature, many analysts have cautioned against the use of the term “middle class,” particularly in non-European or not fully capitalist countries (see, eg, Case 1993, 189 n21). However, in Pacific societies, Tonga included, the term alights (whether the other two classes implicit in the term are present or not) wherever educated professional and managerial people, manifesting modern material lifestyles, values, and aspirations, have become a significant social presence (see, eg, Gewertz and Errington 1999). Yet, in Tonga, apart from Georges Benguigui’s brief foray over a decade ago into

the behavior of what he called the Tongan “salaried middle classes” (1989, 457), the topic has never been systematically investigated. An investigation is merited and timely because of the important practical and political implications of class formation, as well as its abiding interest as one of the most fundamental concerns of western sociology.

The concept of class in its primary economic sense suggests definite links between the social, economic, political, and cultural orders that can engender political action. These linkages could be relevant to the implementation of development plans and political reforms, both of which are of intense interest to Tonga. The success of most development programs depends on local people’s reactions to the overseas advisors’ economic policies, but all too frequently the analytic tools to investigate these processes are lacking (see James 2000, 133–134). In the case of political reform, the question is whether a middle class exists that does, or could, carry out the other social and cultural managerial functions suggested by Benguigui (1989). Further, might it then form the bastion of mass democracy in Tonga as it did historically in Europe?

Clearly, when agency is attributed to class, more is intended than a mere common-sense notion of social class, that is, a horizontal social stratum made up of people with similar kinds of employment and lifestyle. But is there a “middle class” in Tonga that can bear the full theoretical weight of Marx’s notion of economic class and its implications of collective action in defense of common interests? Arguments about class and, more broadly, social stratification are generally arguments about the very nature of society, its component parts, and their relation to one another. In Tonga, until the late 1960s, scholarly focus remained largely on its traditional hierarchical, centralized pattern of social stratification. The concept of western-style economic classes entered the literature on Tonga only in the 1970s, at a time roughly coincident with increasing academic interest in Marx’s ideas, escalating Tongan overseas migration, and growing numbers of people with tertiary education taking up professional and administrative positions in church and state bureaucracies.

ENTER CLASS ANALYSIS TRIPPING GAILY

George Marcus and Elizabeth Bott, ethnographers with detailed knowledge of Tongan society, used simple, common-sense definitions of class to describe the new, educated, bureaucratic elite. Marcus used the term “mid-

dle-class people” simply as shorthand for educated professional and businesspeople. He dismissed the concept of class organization in Tonga on the grounds, first, that the significance of vertical ties continued to outweigh that of horizontal ties, and second, that people activated markedly cross-class networks of kin in their construction of self-aggrandizing personal “estates” (Marcus 1977, 220; 1980, 159). In contrast, Bott concluded that social classes did exist, because rank, title, power, and wealth had coalesced as a result of the nineteenth-century introduction of the rule of law and other changes. She then qualified her findings almost out of existence by noting the marked heterogeneity of the middle class and the lack of definite cutoff points with regard to wealth and status. She recorded that the increasingly noticeable, motley category of “clergy, teachers, medical practitioners, lawyers, shopkeepers, and Government employees of varying degrees of skill and education” continued to maintain close kinship links with both aristocrats and lowly villagers and, as a result, thought of themselves neither as a “distinctive group” nor as a power group (Bott 1981, 69, 77).

Later, various scholars, most notably Christine Ward Gailey (1987), Andrew Needs (1988), Georges Benguigui (1989), and Paul van der Grijp (1993), applied Marxist-derived approaches to class analysis of Tongan materials. Their application of theoretical structural models that determined classes simply as expressions of differential productive relations allowed the swift definition of what were essentially static categorical definitions of class, quite “without the fatigue of historical investigation” (Thompson 1978, 147). But these have not proved empirically illuminating in an economy in which most (at least 60 percent) of people continue to derive their livelihood from the land, most of the labor remains unpaid family labor, and all but a handful of people in the manufacturing category are traditional-handicraft makers. The formal sector provides a limited number of jobs (not enough for the 1,300 people on average who leave school each year), so that the category of “unemployed” is as difficult to define or evaluate as that of “underemployed.” To advance understanding, the nominalist classes read off from structural models must also be seen as meaningful social units by the people involved, because the modes of thinking that accompany the shift in economic organization—from one based on kinship to one based on wage labor and capital—are critical to the ways in which the different forms of inequality are interwoven (Van der Grijp 1993, 10; Kingston 2000, 3, and throughout).

BENGUIGUI AND THE MIDDLE CLASSES IN TONGA

As the only sustained analysis of the Tongan middle class, Benguigui's 1989 essay deserves serious attention. Despite its many theoretical insights, its initial equation of "the New Middle Class" with "the salaried middle classes," defined in terms of the International Labor Organization's International Standard Classification of Occupation (ISCO) categories 0 and 1, is a highly questionable methodological procedure in the Tongan context. First, it assumes a class formation rather than investigates the possibility of one, an analytic license exercised in previous class studies in the Pacific that has been criticized to effect elsewhere (Amarshi, Good, and Mortimer 1979; MacWilliam 2001). It also overlooks the fact that the category of "salaried" is only a broad status distinction. The assumption that all people with professional education and administrative positions will have "class-oppositional" interests from other people, including their poorer village-based kin, requires empirical verification and, for the vast majority of people, is unlikely to reflect social reality (see Sissons 1998, 173). The 20 percent of the formally employed population who filled the ISCO "salaried" employment categories do not constitute the kind of stable coherent social entity associated with class formation. As a Tongan woman observed (of a low-paid government clerk, who was both the daughter and sister of cabinet ministers), "The actual job or salary can mean less than nothing here because once you leave the office, all sorts of other things take over like your family background, how you behave, who you know, your connections, adherence or loyalty to a noble title or village, whatever . . ." (James field notes 1997).

One or two generations ago, salaried people gained prestige because white-collar work was seen as "clean" in contrast to farm work, and because it connoted some degree of education and proximity to central institutions of power. This broad dichotomy has now largely been superseded by other, more significant, distinctions in terms of skill, education, income, and responsibility. In addition, the proportion of salaried people in the total formally employed workforce, which Benguigui based on 1976 census figures (1989, 456), has dropped from 20 percent to 10 percent. The relatively low number of people involved must be considered in a population of 97,000, with only a little more than half of them adults. The small society enables the evaluation of individuals in terms of multiple social facets rather than one overridingly important abstract category such as class. Overall, members of the "salaried" category of formally

employed workers share too few characteristics to generate the commonality of disposition and purpose assumed by class theory. For example, application of Giddens's concept of structuration shows the degree of class structuration among the salaried workers as uniformly low except for an increasing degree of sociability evident among the younger, better-off urban professional couples who associate after work in bars, restaurants, clubs, and other kinds of informal outings. The degree of mobility, the primary patterns of association and social networks, cultural orientation, class sentiment, and political activity, however, do not suggest that class structures have formed (Giddens 1973, 105ff; see also Kingston 2000, 20ff). Over the last thirty years, the transformation in the structure of employment has created high levels of inter- and intragenerational occupational mobility. The demand for highly trained professionals, administrators, and managers has moved many people from agrarian origins into "middle-class" positions in the course of a single lifetime. Thus, the employment structure itself has generated a net upward mobility enhanced by the increased application of "meritocratic" criteria in selection procedures. The rapidity and openness of these processes, even in industrialized economies, have generated liberal arguments to the effect that established class structures must give way to more graduated and fluid socioeconomic hierarchies (Newby 1988, quoted in Joyce 1995, 58). In Tonga, increased educational opportunities, especially overseas development-aided scholarships and on-the-job training, have promoted this process.

The ISCO categories that Benguigui defined as Tonga's "middle class" consist of "professional people, managers, and technicians" and include doctors, teachers, and nurses *at all levels*. Police are excluded, however, because they are considered "service" personnel (Benguigui 1989, 457). But these inclusions and exclusions do not accurately reflect the local valuations of employment categories. A further difficulty with the definitional application of ISCO categories concerns the managerial and administrative category because it includes "legislative and government officials"—that is, all senior government officials, who have considerable authority, personal influence, and income, and the twelve most powerful men in the land, the cabinet ministers appointed by the king. Accordingly, from "the salaried middle classes," Benguigui excludes "approximately 30 high-level civil servants (eg, Directors of Ministries, who receive a 'fixed' salary) because of their close Government ties" (1989, 458).

Benguigui's "salaried" definition has a further problem in that it lumps together workers from the public and private sectors, where income

levels, spheres of influence, and status can differ profoundly. In the mid-1990s, a comparison I made of secondary schools in government and non-government sectors showed, for example, that a leading church-owned secondary school was run at less than one quarter of the cost of a comparable government school. The salaries of similarly qualified teachers in the two systems varied by the same ratio: those in the church school were paid only about one quarter of the salaries paid in the government school. Within the church system, the salaries of junior staff were significantly lower (in a ratio of 1:5) than that of senior staff (James field notes 1995). Is it then likely that the lowest-level teachers and nurses—whose annual salaries might be less than one quarter of those of their senior staff, and whose authority might be still less—would be considered members of a common social class? Were they to be organized and made conscious of a common cause, they might; but profession-based organizations such as the Friendly Island Teachers Association have no political edge or potential for it.

Significantly also, most salaried workers dwell with nonsalaried people as mutually supportive members of households. In 2001, a small study I conducted on the main island of Tongatapu among teachers and nurses showed that most had come from wholly nonsalaried families of origin. In addition, most of them currently had spouses who either were not salaried or worked in service categories not included in ISCO 1 and 0 categories. Given the generally low level of salaries (below T\$3,000 a year on average), most salaried workers would have found it impossible on their wage alone to feed their families without primary links with people in the semisubsistence sector. In 1989, at the time of Benguigui's study, the situation would have been more acute, because most nurses and teachers had only minimal qualifications and earned less than T\$2,000 annually. On even cursory inspection of a few of the relevant factors, therefore, one must conclude that the sole fact of their being salaried provides little or no basis for asserting the existence of a discrete class commonality or collective political action among workers.

CLASS AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Far more interesting than demonstrating the inadequacy of various definitions of the middle class is to look again at the events in Tonga that Benguigui evinced as being similar to classic concerns of European (specifically French) middle classes. The pivotal events he discussed included the mass

resignation by Tonga's nurses in 1981, the pro-democracy movement of the 1980s, and examples of "classic consumerist" concerns with health services and the environment. I will add to the list other recent events and argue that, while these social struggles and movements lack the coherence to warrant their being seen as middle-class agitation for change "in professional, political, cultural arenas," they do show the genesis of an elite-created or an elite-led public sphere in Tonga.

The Nurses' Mass Resignation

In 1981, almost all Ministry of Health nurses resigned simultaneously in a well-orchestrated action after having received no satisfaction from their employer, the government, regarding their grievances. The nurses had complained about the chief nursing officer's selection of nurses for overseas training and staff promotions, which allegedly went against the civil service principles of seniority and merit. The cabinet met nine times to discuss the conflict. Finally, in abusive terms that included the word "to herd," used most commonly to refer to animals in the language of abuse, the government ordered the nurses back to work. The nurses refused. Only after an official inquiry had been made, the matron had been relocated in the civil service, and the then prime minister, the high-ranking noble Tu'ipelehake, had publicly and politely *asked* them to do so, did the nurses return to work.

This was indeed a singular example of workplace action in Tonga's recent history, but it is difficult to see it as middle-class action. As Benguigui himself noted, the grievances were not the usual class concerns over pay or working conditions, except for the matron's alleged bad management and nepotism. People in other salaried sectors of the Tongan workforce supported the walkout, but this support took the form only of personal encouragement through a petition of 6,000 signatures (Benguigui 1989, 458). It did not involve donations of cash for wages lost or sympathy walkouts in other workplaces. In essence, the protest action was as much or more about status and traditional respect than about class relations or civil service procedure. The nurses themselves did not speak of class but, rather, of their status in the community as women and as members of a profession. One of the organizers remarked, "It gave nursing a higher profile and struck a blow for women too. Getting those men in government to take notice of us and pay us some respect gave the recognition that we were not to be spoken down to and ordered about like that" (James field notes 1981).

The fact that the salaried category does not form a class does not preclude the formation within it of mini-workplace solidarities. Almost all the nurses were women and worked together in one major hospital. Undoubtedly, they had also enhanced their solidarity by the recent formation of the Tonga Nurses Association with the support of the New Zealand Nurses Association, which helped spur them to action. Hierarchically organized in Tonga as elsewhere, the two hundred or more junior nurses would have had little choice in the matter but to follow the directives of the half dozen or so senior nursing staff. Their feeling that the country's leaders took them for granted was exacerbated by the low standard of local nursing training, low wages, and low status. At the time, nursing was considered somewhat menial because of the "dirty" (not traditionally "ladylike") work it involves, including contact with bodily matter. Nursing was not regarded as highly in the community as teaching, for example, although recruits to each profession came from largely similar family backgrounds.

It is significant, therefore, that the nurses' complaints centered on the matron's peremptory and contemptuous treatment of them as well as her seeming neglect of civil service procedure. A senior nurse explained, "She spoke down to us, and did not show us respect" (James field notes 1981). Their protest can be seen as an attack on the assumption of personal superiority that always threatens to surface in traditional hierarchy. Because the matron was a commoner, the first among peers, rather than an aristocrat, senior qualified nurses were not prepared to accept her claims to the arbitrary power associated with traditional chiefs. Later, the nurses objected to the disrespectful language offered them by high-ranking male government officials, thereby refuting the unquestioned obedience expected of commoners and striking at the very heart of patriarchal hierarchy. Only when the king's brother, the prime minister, politely requested that they return to work, did they do so. Commoners in Tonga will do a great deal if they are asked nicely: respect relations and *feveito-kai'aki*, the honoring of others, are central to Tongan sociality. Out of fear, they might also do a lot, even if they are not asked nicely. Clearly, however, their professional role gave the nurses a sense of power. In their opposition to the government's high-handed treatment of them, they also self-consciously selected a traditional theme, namely, that of a covenant, widely believed by commoners to exist between the chiefs and their people, whereby in society each plays a different but complementary role that deserves respect (contrast Lawson 1996; see also Sissons 1998, 174). Since

that time, local nursing training and wages have improved, and nurses have instigated no more protest actions.

The Pro-democracy Movement

The pro-democracy movement has frequently been equated with middle-class political directives to advance the democratic cause (see, eg, Hau'ofa 1987, 1; 1994, 425). It is doubtful, however, that its association with democracy or with a broad middle-class mandate was ever very strong. Instead, the movement sought greater transparency of government, especially with regard to the use of public monies, and greater representation of the people in parliamentary decision-making. In 1993, one of its leading agitators and parliamentary representatives, 'Akilisi Pohiva, said, "I don't care too much about democracy, but I speak about [it] because democracy is the only system that could bring about accountability" (*MT* 1993). The concept of democracy was little understood in the population at large, and it was explicitly rejected by many of the educated elite. Despite the pro-democracy movement's 1993 electoral success, the general view was that "all educated people here want political change, but that doesn't mean a switch to a western-type democracy. The ordinary village people are not sufficiently educated to make large decisions for the nation and themselves, and still need leaders. Our system is all right, as long as the leaders behave properly and do not abuse their power" (James field notes 1995–1996). Once again, these remarks show the notion of a covenant between the people and their leaders, which, if mutually respected, makes for good governance. It would seem that, despite their occasional use of the term "democracy," many educated people did not want an elected representative system for the very reason that there was, as yet, no large, stable, informed middle class to make it work.

This does not mean, however, that people did not like much of what reformists attempted to do. In four successive elections, Pohiva received support from all sections of his electorate and, therefore, might better be termed a populist than a middle-class leader (compare Campbell 1992, 222). One of his parliamentary colleagues remarked, "I don't think the Tongatapu people voted for 'Akilisi Pohiva because he was labeled as a Pro-Democracy candidate; rather, it was because 'Akilisi captured their attention with the work he is doing" (*MT* 1996, 26). That is, Pohiva has articulated grievances regarding the existing social order in ways that village people cannot or dare not. However, the pro-democracy movement

failed in its 1994 attempt to create a political party. The fledgling People's Party first split over the name (because it did not include the term "Democracy") and then collapsed over personal and policy differences. In sum, the pro-democracy movement is not primarily a middle-class or a class-supported movement. It has all kinds of supporters (and opponents) but has succeeded neither in bringing about a greater sharing of power by the commoner majority nor in altering existing political structures.

Cultural, Environmental, and Health Initiatives

Benguigui cited Tongans' concerns (as far as they exist) about "ecology and protection of the environment," as well as consumerism with regard to quality of life and health issues, as final examples of the "classic pre-occupation of the middle classes" (1989, 461). But both are actually more the result of international and government initiatives or bilateral aid agreements than evidence of local middle-class concerns. While it is true that a journal editor and the local science teachers association led the opposition against a proposal to dispose of hazardous waste in Tonga in 1987–1988 (Benguigui 1989, 461), the protest's less overt agenda also included the improper interest in the proposal by a member of the royal family. Public indignation about this was subsumed under the rubric of environmental concern. The people who joined in were mainly educated community activists—the same kind of people and, in some cases, the same people, who had supported moves for land reform and social justice in the late 1970s and went on to support the pro-democracy movement in the 1980s and early 1990s. Assuredly, they were "middle-class" types but, for the reasons I have discussed, they may better be described as members of the educated commoner elite. I should make clear that by "elite" I mean simply the people at the top of each of the organizational hierarchies they represent. My use of the term does not have the implication of the severe social selectivity and exclusivity that occurs in Marcus' usage of the term "political elite" to refer to men elevated by royal appointment (1983).

The health concerns Benguigui noted are not widely shared by a local middle class as a class. It was an expatriate Tongan doctor resident in Fiji (now Auckland) who noted the declining standard of Tongan health provision (which continued to decline, due mainly to the departure of doctors and nurses discouraged by low local wages and arbitrary civil service postings). The main hospital has been helped significantly by Rotary International, the archetypal middle-class service organization (Errington and Gewertz 1997), and, in smaller ways, by other, local, nongovernmental

fundraising bodies. Rotary Tonga, however, has at least a 50 percent expatriate membership and only a very small local resource base. It acts mostly as a conduit for New Zealand and Australian Rotary projects, which consist of teams of health specialists sent to Tonga for short periods. While this does not detract at all from the club's fine service, it does undermine the argument that health moves were made primarily by local middle-class activists. The input of local resources into the hospital board and health services generally remains small, and people in the higher income brackets usually prefer to seek medical treatment in Pacific Rim countries. One has to conclude that consumerism is not highly developed in Tonga with regard to local health services.

Similarly, with regard to the environment: in 2001, the multimillion dollar environmental programs in place in three of Tonga's four island groups were the result, not of local concern, but of international interest, government initiatives, and aid funds. The local attitude toward environmental issues has been one of widespread apathy. In the 1980s, an official "clean up" campaign stalled until it was headed up by a member of the royal family. The amount of paper immediately picked up and the number of plastic bags instantly plucked from the sea reflected once again the familiar pattern of leadership from "the top"—meaning either royal and noble personages, or, more ambiguously and hesitantly, members of the educated elite in their roles as leaders of voluntary organizations or institutional sectors (see James 1997, 69).

Other Protests

Benguigui pointed, valuably, to several social protests and movements that have occurred in recent years. Other events might also usefully be considered in relation to them. In 1975, for example, a century after the proclamation of the Tongan constitution, at least two important protests occurred. The first was a conference on land and migration held in Nuku'alofa by the Tonga National Council of Churches, which had become increasingly concerned with issues of social justice, especially among the growing poorer sections of the urban population. The government refused to consider land reform and said the churches should not get involved in social issues. Most nobles and cabinet members boycotted the discussion of land tenure and, especially, of the ways in which nobles could prevent individual commoners from legally registering land from their estates. In the same year, Futa Helu began at 'Atenisi the first independent tertiary educational institution in the kingdom. It was modeled on a principle of

Socratic questioning, foreign to traditional forms of Tongan upbringing, and initially aroused a great deal of opposition. These two events, among others, were forerunners of the pro-democracy movement of the 1980s, for which Helu and 'Atenisi together with some church leaders have continued to provide intellectual and organizational support.

In 1978, the government decided to extend the runway at Fua'amotu International Airport, which necessitated felling the coconut groves of nearby farmers. Locals opposed the move because the government neglected to ask the tree owners' permission to cut trees and then proceeded to offer them inadequate compensation. A local spokesperson said, "Had the government asked for our cooperation in this matter, we would have been honored and only too glad to help out. But they ignored us and treated us like dogs. Dad planted those trees and I had to watch mum and the family cry their eyes out when they were cut down. The government offered only the same compensation per tree as if animals, pigs, for example, had injured them. But we deserved compensation like people" (James field notes 1982).

Finally, the farmers received rather more appropriate compensation and the then prime minister, the noble Tu'ipelehake, went in person to the village to explain and apologize to the people. (Three years later, in 1981, in the case of the nurses' walkout, he again had to mollify the commoners' hurt and outrage caused by the government's autocratic behavior.)

In its news sheet, *Ko e Kele'a*, in 1986, the pro-democracy movement published details of the huge overtime payments drawn by ministers for in-country travel to explain a new sales tax. From that time on, Pohiva and other pro-democracy parliamentarians pushed harder for their aims. Later that same year, a street march was organized for peace and justice, the first such demonstration in Tonga. Parliamentary broadcasts began on radio, and the magazine *Matangi Tonga*, which contains lively political commentary and interviews, was launched. In 1989, a new newspaper, *Taimi 'o Tonga*, began to publish views different from those expressed in the government-owned and controlled paper, *The Tonga Chronicle*, and in the newspapers brought out by mainstream churches. Also in the 1980s, television was introduced, and by 2001 three stations were broadcasting from the capital.

The 1987 general election saw six of the nine People's Representatives elected for the first time and, also for the first time, six of the nine elected had university degrees. In addition, this was seen as the first election in which political issues took precedence over ties of kinship and locality in

the selection process. At the end of 1988, Pohiva petitioned the king with a sixty-page list of grievances (and seven thousand signatures) alleging illegal actions on the part of ministers. Many people considered Pohiva's action "uppity," ignorant, and disrespectful. In 1989, the People's Representatives walked out of parliament in frustration over their inability to pass reforms and the nobles' contemptuous treatment of them. In 1991, ongoing protests over the sales of Tongan passports reached a climax when about two thousand people, led by the Tongatapu People's Representatives and the Catholic bishop Finau, walked to the palace with a petition containing the signatures of thousands who objected to the decision to grant citizenship to nonresident foreigners. The march was the largest demonstration in Tonga's recent history. A moderate pro-democratic politician, Fukofuka, said that "the voice of the people has been heard, whether there is a response or not from the King. . . . The most important thing now is to find ways of stopping the government from breaking the law" (MT 1991).

One of the most favored ways of stopping the government was through the attempted impeachment of ministers. In 1996, the minister of justice went overseas and claimed official expense allowances without obtaining approval while the House (the Legislative Assembly) was in session. For this, the People's Representatives immediately called for his impeachment, but before the motion could be tabled, news of it was leaked by Pohiva to the antigovernment newspaper, *Taimi 'o Tonga*. The House then ordered the arrest of Pohiva and the editor and deputy editor of the newspaper. After weeks of uproar in the overseas press, the expatriate chief justice released the three on the grounds that the House had not followed due process by its failure to notify them of their offense before their arrest. By that time the House had approved the impeachment, but then, on the advice of the crown prince, it accepted a formal apology from the offending minister. The people were incensed at this evasion of due process and produced yet another huge protest petition and street march. At that point, the noble Speaker of the House claimed, rather rashly, that the House had superior authority over the judiciary in matters concerning its internal affairs. The judiciary promptly arraigned and fined him for contempt of court, and the king closed the parliamentary session early, thus preventing full debate of the relative powers of court and parliament. By then, the people's use of the rarely used impeachment provisions of the constitution had got further than ever before. The assault on the king's appointees was noted by a local journalist when he wrote, "The fact that

the House can impeach a Cabinet Minister proves a point that the Parliament can hold Ministers accountable for their actions [even though they are appointed by the monarch]" (*MT* 1997).

CULTURAL COUNTERCURRENTS

None of these protests were about middle-class interests or, in fact, concerned class at all; they addressed much broader issues of truth and social justice, the actions of ministers, law, and the rights of citizens. Against these cases in which the law largely supported the people's claims, however, other events can be posed. In 1997, for example, a noble minister was arraigned on several charges concerning improper land deals. He was removed from ministerial office but was not imprisoned because his trial jury (composed of commoners) found him not guilty of the charges. The decision boggled the mind of the expatriate judge, but in Tongan thinking, nobles are just not put in prison. The noble's removal from public office was heavy enough as a social reprimand; imprisonment would only have shamed his family more greatly and disgraced the institution of the nobility. As an educated woman remarked, "We like our nobility, even though some of them are rascals" (James field notes 1996). On occasion, the crown prince has also managed to extract himself honorably from some legal tangles. The only explanation given was simple: "People like him, and he'll be our next king. He can't always be allowed to do exactly what he wants, but no one wants to bring down the whole system by dishonoring him" (James field notes 2000).

Much has been made of the cultural and political hegemony exerted by traditional leaders in Tonga (see, eg, Lawson 1996). But emphasis should be given as well to the reciprocal respect between commoners and chiefs, which, while it restrains popular protest within the cultural hegemony, also defines the limits of chiefly power. For example, the people, supported by a large proportion of government, successfully opposed the proposal to dispose of toxic waste in the country proposed by one member of the royal family in 1987 (see above); later, again through parliament, members of the public and church spokesmen successfully quashed the idea of a casino proposed by another royal. Yet the people's opposition to the king's decision to sell passports was not successful. The government's assurance that the US\$36 million derived from the passport sales had been invested in the Tonga Trust Fund for use in development projects may have appeared

some people. Whether it is an example of the government “giving” or the people “getting,” however, is moot in the theater of political hegemony.

Most recently, in 2001, over US\$20 million of trust funds went missing as a result of their being invested by a US citizen who, some years ago, was named by the king as his “court jester.” If the loss of funds proves to be the result of a long-term scam, the jester may have the last laugh. He has not been formally impugned, but during one of the king’s routine absences from the country his daughter, the Princess Regent, dismissed from office the two ministers of the crown in charge of the trust for failing in their constitutional duty to protect the king and the government by not exerting sufficient vigilance over the administration of the funds. In Tonga the king’s person is sacred, and while he governs, not he but his cabinet ministers take responsibility (Clause 41, Constitution of Tonga). Not even the antiestablishment newspaper, *Taimi ‘o Tonga*, has criticized the king over the trust funds debacle. The common discourse keeps protest and privilege within limits. Because the king is the national icon and people respect him, he remains above reproach; not only would open criticism of the king be unconstitutional but it would also diminish Tongans’ considerable pride in their identity.

THE NOTABLE ABSENCE OF CLASS

Class commentators generally agree that mature class formation is difficult to attain without trade unions or, at least, politically active combinations of workers. Following the nurses’ walkout in the mid-1980s, a senior government administrator, spurred on by a New Zealand trade union leader, tried to create a civil service association. This was to be an organization with workplace bargaining power, to help break the paternalism with a “patriarchal tinge” that permeates government service. The administrator mentioned as an example a departmental head who had received an internal memo about a staffing issue but had not had the matter explained to him personally. “He threatened to resign because he felt left out, until I spent some time with him. People are meant to leave these personal relations behind when they join the civil service,” the administrator said ruefully, “but, in Tonga, the service becomes, in a way, their *kāinga* [extended family], and each one has to feel they belong and are part of it” (James field notes 1986). (Ironically, this attitude, thought atavistic at the time, is now part of modern western management prac-

tice.) The administrator's plan for a civil service association, however, brought him a sharp personal reprimand from the then prime minister, the king's late brother, who berated him for his disloyalty and disrespect to king and country. In Tonga, a law legitimizes trade unions so that, legally, there was nothing to stop him from forming the association for civil servants. Soon afterwards, however, the administrator was transferred to another government department and then virtually dismissed over an unrelated matter. As Pohiva has pointed out repeatedly, Tongans have many constitutional rights but may fail to claim them because of traditional culture and values (see, eg, *TC* 2001). These impediments may be subjective, but if they are accepted and acted on, they become objective and, consequently, material impediments to action.

Either way, no signs indicate that the criticisms of government are based on, led, or supported by class interests. Instead, they have been coordinated by members of an educated elite whose cosmopolitan experiences have left them less in awe of ascriptive status and patterns of deference. These people have made a partial ideological break with paternalism but have not yet constructed the organizational infrastructure necessary to mobilize opinion and create a collective consciousness of their views. In 1997, a commoner parliamentarian observed, "There is a loose, informal set of middle-class people here that you see at the same functions, schools, charities, cocktails, everywhere. But nothing in the way of more formal links: no common interests, no organization, and no horizontal links you can really use to bring them all behind the pro-democracy movement." He ended, with a shrug, "These middle-class people all go their own way politically" (James field notes 1997).

HIERARCHY AND PROTEST IN CONTEMPORARY TONGA

If for the present we leave aside entirely the notion of class, we see that the common factor in all of the protests has been opposition to the government, prompted not by economic issues so much as by outrage and resentment at what commoners have perceived to be government leaders' lack of respect or simple human concern toward the people as fellows, workers, and citizens. These struggles are not evidence of class or "class struggle" in any simple way. Rather, they show the reciprocal nature of the "superior to inferior" relationship and the basis of the "paternalism-deference equilibrium . . . in which both parties to the equation are, in some degree, the prisoners of each other" (Thompson 1978, 150). The form of

people's opposition, the use of law, and the role of the press must also be taken into account to explain the resistance to hegemonic power. The protests have been led by members of the educated elite against the bastions of hereditary privilege. Thus the struggles have been not between capital and labor but between members of the large social underclass—the commoners—and the small, powerful overclass of traditional leaders and social superiors who have long monopolized rank, social, and political power. The educated also desire a greater share of power and decision-making at the national level. Some resent the “glass ceiling” placed on achievement within the rank-ordered society and specific abuses of privilege, but most of the time people work within the hegemonic system and seek only a measure of social honor for themselves. By their protests, elite-led commoners seek to remind the aristocratic and noble *hou'eiki* (who are fond of reminding the commoners of their duties through theatrical ceremonial displays and the etiquette of social superiority and deference), that they also have duties toward the people, some of which are enshrined in constitutional law.

Thus, the contest is between members of a polity who have such “mutuality of relationship” that Thompson might well have regarded it as a situation “difficult *not* to analyse at the level of class relationship” (1978, 145). He argued for the use of the term “class,” however, not because of its fit but because “we cannot (in the English language) talk of ‘estate-struggle’ or ‘order-struggle’” (1978, 149). Surely, however, we can speak of an “estate-order struggle” in Tonga. Despite the historical variability of meanings of “class” and “a class” in industrialized societies (Joyce 1995, 15–16), the terms now remain implacably associated with economic notions derived from nineteenth-century industrial society. They fit uneasily with Tongan cognitive systems because until the nineteenth century Tongans lived and fought as status-differentiated “estates” or as *kāinga* (extended family-based political groups) (Gailey 1987).

In 1875, the provisions of the newly proclaimed constitution created a particular kind of rule that existed almost unquestioned for 100 years. To borrow what has been called a most “unfortunate copulation” of terms, it might be described as rule by an agrarian bourgeoisie (Thompson 1978, 162). Titled landed nobles promoted chiefly patterns of rule locally as well as within most of the great offices of state through their domination of the privy council and cabinet. It was as much this form of state power as agrarian productive relations that determined the cultural and political expressions of the next century. While much has been made of the fact

that over the years several educated commoners have been appointed as ministers of the crown, less is made of the fact that, once appointed, constitutionally they acquire the same legal status as nobles. The honorific terms '*eiki nōpele*' and '*eiki minisitā*' merely distinguish, respectively, those who are nobles by virtue of their birth and those who are honorary nobles by royal appointment to ministerial office. As a result of this kind of rule, a description of government in eighteenth-century English society accords astonishingly well with aspects of Tongan government until recent years: "[the] State, weak as it was in its bureaucratic and rationalizing functions, was immensely strong and effective as an auxiliary instrument of production in its own right: in breaking open the paths for commercial imperialism, in imposing closure on the countryside, and in facilitating the accumulation and movement of capital, both through its banking and funding functions and, more bluntly, through the parasitic extractions of its own officers" (Thompson 1978, 162).

The government of Tonga controls the disbursement of most overseas aid funds. It controls and usually shares in major overseas business investments. It divided land into individual town and garden allotments and regulates their registration and lease. It maintains commercial ventures, frequently in direct competition with ones in the private sector. It remains the country's largest single employer, employing a sixth (5,700 people) of the total formally employed workforce of 37,000 (Tonga 1993, 7). About 2,000 government employees fall into the "salaried" ISCO categories of 0 and 1. Until the recent introduction of two new commercial banks, the government operated the major lending banks as well as the reserve bank. It is highly traditional in composition and administration. Ministries are rather like bailiwicks; the ministers run their own operations in relative isolation from one another and tend to bind employees to them through ties of personal loyalty. The theater of cultural hegemony is reinforced by honorific terms of address, the use of formal language, and the etiquette of deference, which may include seating oneself on the floor to speak to a noble minister in his office. In subtle ways, it is performed daily by the observation of hierarchical and patriarchal relationships within the family, the household and extended family, and churches and nongovernment groups, which all base their organization on the dominant cultural model. In this way, everyday civic actions help buttress the prevailing political structures. In some spheres, especially among the educated elite, these patterns of behavior are breaking down. Nevertheless, if one were to ask, following Marx, what is the "general illumination" that modifies the "spe-

cific tonalities” of the society (Marx quoted in Thompson 1978, 151), it would be still the quality of *‘ofa*, a complex concept that includes respect and “reverential fear,” specifically, that of the inferior toward the superior (Kavaliku 1977; see also Morton 1998, 13).

The centralization of political and economic power means that ambitious commoners tend to prosper through client ties rather than through opposition to government personnel and the people closely linked to them. Government- and church-controlled institutions employ most of “the salaried.” Businesspeople in Tonga, like those elsewhere, rely on government stability, and the families that have profitable business alliances with members of the nobility seek to protect and nurture their interests. In the light of the 1987 and 2000 coups in neighboring Fiji, the vast majority of Tongans seek to avoid major civil upset, but at the same time a number of less well-placed aspirants and political reformers have become increasingly resentful of the various forms of parasitism on the state by its officers and their adherents and clients. They seek either to consolidate their position in Tonga through the acquisition of property and influence or to remedy it by social and geographical relocation through emigration overseas.

LOCAL VIEWS OF CLASS

The socioeconomic elevation of “educated” or “successful” commoners makes them a set of elites rather than a western-type class. In 1995 and 1996, I carried out ninety-three interviews to supplement those conducted over the previous fifteen years, mostly but not exclusively among professionals or skilled managerial men and women, and specifically on the topic of an emergent middle class. From the few sample comments given here, it is evident that even the people who thought a middle class existed were thinking mainly in terms of horizontal social ties that define new status groupings. Alternately, they identified the middle class exclusively with the newer sets of business people, as Helu tends to do (1999, 154, 167). Most respondents, however, did not believe that the social order had changed, or thought that middle-class values now permeated the entire society. The views overall give valuable insights into the people’s altered perspectives of their own society (see also Ewins 1998).

A senior government educator explained at some length:

We care about parents and most brothers and sisters but don’t have time to see them during the week. If it weren’t for the family meal on Sunday, I may not see them at all. I have late meetings most weeknights. When there is a social

gathering it tends to be with ex-school mates or people from the Tennis Club who are also work mates. Old Students Associations are quite a strong informal pressure group. You sort of think alike and have a close tie. If you want anything done in government, you can call them up. Educated people are not going against the family but wish more to be with those who share their interests, just “birds-of-a-feather-flock-together” kind of thing. The new middle class definitely have power in their own structures because they put their energy behind things and become influential, but it doesn’t become politically focused. To say the pro-democracy movement is middle class doesn’t really explain it. Instead, what occurs is that the educated people start everything here, try to bring new things into the system, and that is why it looks as if it is the middle class that pushes it. The top group is a minority, so its power rests on the one immediately below: the middle group that has the strength, knowledge, and power to change things by convincing the majority below it. That’s why it’s influential. Also the top group feels threatened in a way. Before, they were 100 percent nobles or *hou’eiki* [aristocrats], but now they are being replaced in some areas by educated commoners and so might feel like it is being taken over. See the middle class as having a real political cutting edge? No, it’s more a matter of it having influential communication between the top and the uneducated majority. (James field notes 1995)

A church educator felt the system was opening through western education and economic values. She said:

Some educated people come right out of “nobodies”; whole sets of children of uneducated parents all achieve professional positions. But the parents must have imbued or envisioned complicated middle-class values to do with a highly organized way of living to push their children to make that move. The values include discipline, planning for the future, putting aside present enjoyment for future gain, being task-oriented within an efficient time frame, and having a well-developed sense of achievement. “Middle class” is a wholly western concept, but most people here have the aspirations now. All they lack is the means to fulfill them. It does not mean neglecting the family ties. Although some small number do that, they are despised deep down. All respectable Tongans acknowledge their relatives, especially in family events and ceremonies, and that is how they are valued. (James field notes 1996)

A senior business advisor who is kinsman to a noble family said with emphasis, “Middle class is a foreign concept and a non-concept here. If it is attached to the old structure, it would be confined solely to the ‘business class.’” (James field notes 1995) In his mind, this was largely a question of values: the business ethic based on individual profit making being con-

sidered contrary to traditional mores of sharing (*fetokoni'aki*). A senior church educator, however, put a different value on the social effects of newly arisen local businesspeople, when he explained:

Along with the educated elite, there are quite a few enterprising people who have begun businesses. So a middle class is emerging and beginning to exert its influence. Previously, the nobility was the center of attention. People looked only to imitate their manners and behaviour; but, now, they are looking at a new group and saying we'd rather be like you because we appreciate the hard work and the earning of privilege rather than having it just granted. And they begin to question the former values of birthright. (James field notes 1995)

Most people, however, did not believe a middle class existed, or use the term. A senior government educator summed up this position with the observation:

The middle class is not here yet because the traditional structures are still so strong that no matter what a person's economic position is, or personal lifestyle, or consumption pattern, s/he will be nothing in a social context where s/he is not the boss. At a church or village function, the church minister, the town officer, or the *taubi fonua* [elders] or the *matāpule* [chief's attendant], or whatever will be the one in charge, and the educated person has no authority whatsoever. The family ties are still strong and run from the bottom of the society to the top. A person may go from nothing, uneducated, to the top in a short time. But we all pretty much know what our position in society is. One person's good success may lend prestige to the family and to the individual, but it does not alter the position of the family as a whole. (James field notes 1996)

PROTEST AND THE CREATION OF A PUBLIC

Sporadic and lacking in class-consciousness, the recent protests are perhaps "only fragments of proto-conflict" (Thompson 1978, 134). Further, they may better be termed "rank- or estate-order" struggles because, basically, they are between chiefs and commoners, a traditional social cleavage that is still "the only politically effective division" in the society (Helu 1999, 170). Eventually they may spawn classic "horizontal" economic class formations, but equally they may not, because of overriding cultural concerns with important rank-order status distinctions and the "vertical" ties still inherent in all political structures and traditional institutions. In Tonga, commoner activists tend to become agitated over some government irregularity, organize protests and expressions of discontent, and

then go quiet and attend to family and church activities, the sites of their main pleasures and leisure pursuits, until another incident captures their attention. In this way, they are highly particularistic, even individualistic, rather than socially oriented in their concerns.

Nevertheless, the recent protests indicate the formation of a public sphere, conceptually located between society and the state, in which opinion will increasingly be fashioned and articulated. Ideally, the creation of a strong, well-informed public sphere or civil society is a prerequisite for a liberal democratic political regime. The question then arises, in whose name will this public speak? "Classes" and "the people" are just two of the answers suggested by European experience (see Joyce 1995, 15). In Tonga, the "nobility" and "democracy" are two others. The commoner political leaders profess to speak for the people, but so too do the nobles. Indeed, a major tension lies in the fact that most commoner leaders seek not to do away with the nobility but to marginalize it to a solely ceremonial function (to which, it must be said, many of the less communally active nobles have already effectively marginalized themselves) and to set up a parallel, alternate form of civil leadership (see also James 1997, 69; Sissons 1998, 176).

While certain members of the educated elite have made the ideological break from the more oppressive bonds of the highly traditional patriarchal political regime, they have failed as yet to carry with them in any significant way the mass of the people, most of whom derive their livelihoods from the semisubsistence sector and rely heavily on patriarchally organized households and patronage for labor requirements and other forms of economic support. Uneducated villagers, too, may chafe under social restrictions and take the law into their own hands. Their forms of protest action have typically been direct, violent, and more in defense of custom than opposed to it. Village youths or adulterers who repeatedly offend may summarily be beaten; couples who refuse to marry may be refused a house site or bush allotment, or may simply be told to leave the village. To a large degree, through land allotment and the extensive use of family labor, producers control "their own immediate relations and modes of work" (Thompson 1978, 158). Unless they operate through the informal economy, however, they rarely control export markets or prices. Squash growers' frustration with export quotas has led to arguments and litigation. In 1994, a gun was fired at the vehicle of the minister of labour, commerce, and industries whose ministry set the quotas. The minister later forgave the angry growers in a traditional ceremony. But were such

acts of swift, violent destruction to become widely practiced, the Tonga Defence Forces would deal summarily with them. Too low in the social order to articulate grievances themselves, an increasing number of villagers are gradually becoming more responsive to the appeals of better-educated protesters who use the media, debates in parliament, and *faikava* meetings (where men congregate to imbibe the national beverage and discuss matters of import) to educate villagers about their rights of citizenship and the illegal abuse of privilege by members of the government. These male-dominated reformist moves have been split to some extent by recent moves on the part of women to acquire equal rights to inheritance of land, encouraged especially by the Women-in-Law Association (Bleakley 2002, 144).

While it is premature to talk of a middle class in Tonga, evidence suggests that current social struggles reach beyond class. The issues have concerned social justice, the rights of citizenship, and, in the case of the nurses' walkout, feminism. Thus the concerns have either been more encompassing than the merely sectional interests of the community represented by class; or (as seen again in the cases of the nurses' walkout and the attempt to create a civil service association) they have been narrower in focus than class interests, addressing professional status and workplace relations. While the protests implicitly criticized the principle of rank on which the social hierarchy is based, none of them were solely, wholly, or primarily ones of class. It is significant that the nurses' successful workplace action involved the formation of a workers' association and also that the attempt to form a civil service association was unsuccessful. Perhaps in time the fragmentary and uncoordinated efforts of discontented parties might serve to crystallize the interests both of the people and also of those with hereditary privilege (or the appointed power of cabinet ministers). This in turn might lead to the formation of politically active combinations, associations, unions, or political parties of mature class struggle (see Helu 1999, 170). As Thompson has argued, "people find themselves in a society structured in determined ways (crucially, but not exclusively, in productive relations), they experience exploitation (or the need to maintain power over those whom they exploit), they identify points of antagonistic interest, they commence to struggle around these issues and in the process of struggling they discover themselves as classes, they come to know this discovery as class-consciousness" (1978, 149).

Thus, Thompson explained, "Class eventuates as men and women *live* their productive relations, and as they *experience* their determinate situ-

ations, within ‘the *ensemble* of the social relations,’ with their inherited culture and expectations, and as they handle these experiences in cultural ways” (1978, 150, emphases in the original). In his view, classes do not exist abstractly beforehand and then commence to struggle. The better-off, urban-based people might look “middle class” if by that term, following Weber, we mean merely a social class that incorporates a range of class situations “within which individual and generational mobility is easy and typical” and marriage relatively frequent (Giddens and Held 1982, quoted in Crompton 1998, 33). But this kind of social class has no continuity of aim, no inclination to pursue class politics, and no “mature” class organization capable of doing so.

If class does form in Tonga, its genesis and development will be historically and culturally specific. It is likely to be of an estate-order type, in which rank continues to be significant, and not a western-type middle class defined simply by reference to the International Labor Organization’s ISCO categories of salaried workers. This type of positivist definition has no claim to universality (Joyce 1995, 15), nor can it substitute for class analysis (Crompton 1998, 108–109). Despite the ongoing usefulness of the concept (contrast Pakulski and Waters 1996), class can no longer provide the intellectually tidy catchall explanation for social behavior once claimed for it. Most forms of modern social differentiation are not easily subsumed or wholly explained by class organization but involve a range of factors including family relations, values, moral issues, and the relative worth of people (see also Gewertz and Errington 2001, 271). Rather than simply include so many status factors in the concept of class that it ceases to have its original meaning, new concepts must be developed or old ones reformulated to handle the existing social reality.

The alternative, stratification theory, would still seem to provide greater explanatory power for the present situation in Tonga, although it is a more piecemeal, less dramatic, and, perhaps for those reasons, less intellectually satisfying explanation than class. While falling short of class formation, the significant presence of educated people of the “middling sort” and the newer constellations of status groupings they have given rise to tell us a great deal about the kinds of changes that have taken place in a highly stratified and hierarchical society as structures based on inherited rank and its attendant forms of power contend with more numerous and fluid principles and institutions. The growing business sector might provide a stronger basis for capitalist class formation than the educated elites employed by the government and churches. Equally, Tonga might never

develop “mature,” that is, self-conscious and historically developed class formations, with the ideological and institutional expressions that allow direct transnational comparison. Nor is it necessary that it does.

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Abstract

Benguigui used the term “middle class” in a way that suggested it exerted significant social agency in contemporary Tonga (1989). My review of his analysis concludes that there is no coherent, durable middle class in Tonga capable of the effective class action he claimed for it. Instead, the social struggles of recent decades, typically led by members of commoner educated elites, may be seen as protests against the traditional patriarchal hierarchy and especially what they perceive to be the actions of an arrogant, paternalistic government. Rather than issues theoretically associated with class, the struggles have involved commoners' claims to respect from socially superior leaders and recognition of the covenant-like relationship that ideally should exist between them within the body politic. The sporadic protests or fragmentary proto-conflicts that have occurred might in time produce significant class consciousness and appropriate forms of class organization. But they probably will not because of the people's continuing adherence to particularistic ties—to family, locality, church, and chiefs. While the crusading efforts of protesters have created a more informed and active public sphere, most educated achievers are more concerned with personal advancement and entry into newly created status groups than with membership in a common class that seeks appropriate political expression for a unified common social purpose. The increasing social visibility of educated professional and business people should be seen as part of the changing patterns of social stratification instead of class formation.

KEYWORDS: elite, class, hierarchy, protest, public, social stratification, Tonga