

Modernity, Cosmopolitanism, and the Emergence of Middle Classes in Tonga

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“THE EMBARRASSMENT OF THE MIDDLE CLASSES”

A recurrent issue in our understanding of the transformations experienced by Pacific Island societies, and societies of the developing world in general, is the extent to which traditional social arrangements (eg, rank-based systems, inequalities predicated on colonialism, or local forms of egalitarianism) are being displaced by social-class structures. A focus on these historical transformations demands that we address what constitutes a social class—an almost unsolvable problem, but nevertheless one for which we are fortunate to have a distinguished intellectual genealogy. The work of two of the founding fathers of modern-day social science, Karl Marx and Max Weber, can be understood as lifelong projects to understand social inequality in the West in terms of social-class stratification. Yet, as social scientists, we continue to have difficulties apprehending social class, particularly in contexts that are not traditionally viewed as the locus of class hierarchies. This article seeks to address these difficulties in the context of one Pacific Island society, Tonga.

The problem is particularly acute when one deals with the middle classes, as opposed to the working or elite classes—those who are betwixt-and-between, caught in a liminal position that, like other forms of liminality, are supposed to go one way or another, while in fact they remain in suspension. This suspension is particularly pertinent to the “middleness” of the middle classes and renders their very nature unstable, in contrast to the solidity that Marx attributed to both the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, groups whose self-consciousness is firmly ingrained in their identities, and who theoretically have little trouble finding a common “enemy”

whose interests are opposed to their own. It is well documented that the class divisions that Marx analyzed in the mid-nineteenth century are quite different from those that characterize the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and that one of the major tenets of this difference is precisely the prominence that the middle classes acquired after his death. For Marx, the dialectic that opposes the proletariat and the bourgeoisie resides at the core of society, and the “petty bourgeoisie” (the basis of what came to be understood as the middle classes), while attempting to play an independent role, ultimately would have no choice other than to merge with either the bourgeoisie or the proletariat (Marx 1988 [1848]). This of course did not happen, and Marx’s failure to predict the increasingly important and autonomous role of the middle classes has come to be known, to cite Eric Wright’s widely circulated phrase, as “the embarrassment of the middle classes” (1987, 13; see also Wright 1989).

In almost diametrical opposition to Marxism, but with Marx’s ghost always present in the background (Giddens 1971, 185), Weber’s work revolves almost exclusively around the *bürger*, a complex category that has come to be understood in English as the middle class, in part as a result of Talcott Parsons’s translation of Weber. The decades that elapsed between Marx’s and Weber’s generations had been a time of enormous change in the structure of Northern European societies. In particular, the rise of private property and the new centrality of consumption had propelled the middle classes to prominence. Weber also differed from Marx in the kinds of explanations he offered for social hierarchy. Rather than focusing on persons’ relationship to capital and labor, and on the relationship between groups occupying different positions vis-à-vis capital and labor, Weber understood class as the product of people acting in a similar fashion in given social situations, for example, having similar aspirations, making similar decisions, and harboring similar affects. Underlying Weber’s analysis is also an assumption of self-conscious agency, of a social rationality that drives people to act and provide meaning to their own and each other’s actions. Weber thus focused on “class situations” rather than social classes as groups.

Clearly, neither a Marxist nor a Weberian approach alone provides the tools for an analysis of social class in either the complex postindustrial societies of the North or the equally complex societies of the developing world. Such an analysis, however, can fruitfully be based on a theoretical apparatus that combines useful aspects of a materialistic approach

with useful aspects of an ideational approach (eg, Burris 1987; Giddens 1979; Wright 1997). This program is perhaps presented most suggestively in Pierre Bourdieu's midlife work, particularly the masterful *Distinction* (1985) and *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), which develop a theory of class stratification and of its reproduction that rests on the simultaneous differential access to material, social, and cultural capital, and on the convertibility of one form of capital into another (Ortner 1984, 144–157). Bourdieu took from Marx the basic insight that people's actions are shaped by whether or not they control capital. However, he also showed that even action that is not designed to manipulate economic conditions in an obvious way is in fact driven by similar designs. Noneconomic action may look disinterested at first glance (eg, the hobbies one engages in, the music one listens to, the sports one plays or watches, the organizations one joins), but is in fact driven by the desire to increase gain of some sort, although this gain may be of a nonmaterial nature. Bourdieu emphasized that economic capital is often not the only or even the most important determiner of social class. This insistence helped his practice theory bring together a Marxist approach to class and a Weberian concept of class situation. Bourdieu's analysis views class as a dynamic entity rather than as a product.

This dynamism, however, has its limits. Practice theory has been justly criticized for failing to pay attention to agency despite claiming to do so, and for providing a picture of society as a rigidly structured whole that does not easily allow for change over time—a rigidity that partly results from the influence of Émile Durkheim on Bourdieu's work. In particular, practice theory's usefulness is put seriously to the test by the diasporic, economically fragmented, socially unstable, and culturally permeable societies that inhabit the contemporary developing world. What can be salvaged from practice theory, however, is that class is formed by both the material and the ideational, and that neither necessarily precedes the other, although either may become more primordial in particular social configurations. This theoretical basis provides a conceptualization of social class that is necessarily less well defined, but it captures the complexity of on-the-ground dynamics, compensating for what is lost in definitional crispness. Social class, after all, *is* complex and potentially problematic, particularly when focusing on the middle class. “Like pointillist paintings,” Mark Liechty aptly remarked (2003, 64), “class categories are best, or at least most clearly, seen from a distance. The more closely one looks at a

class group, the more its boundaries dissolve and its supposedly distinguishing features blur into a haze of contrasting and conflicting details.” Indeed, being middle class is not measured in terms of whether or not one “belongs” to an objectively defined grouping, but is rather a matter of whether one engages in social and cultural projects that have no particular end in sight, but that mobilize time and energy in the daily existence of those concerned.

In the midst of this perhaps regrettable yet necessary lack of theoretical precision, one can identify a number of characteristics of middle-class projects that enable comparison across societies, particularly those of the postcolonial or developing world in which class is a relatively new formation, a structuring of hierarchy that partly coexists with and partly replaces older social orders (eg, Gewertz and Errington 1999). One such characteristic is the role of extralocal resources: middle-class projects in these societies rest on established and dependable links to the outside world, through which one can claim access to material resources (eg, money, objects, travel) and symbolic ones (eg, taste, knowledge, style). A second characteristic is the shift in emphasis from production to consumption, for example, in the way in which agents derive a sense of dignity or direction in life. A third characteristic is associated with the inventive strategizing that agents engage in to meet both material and symbolic needs, tapping resources as opportunities arise, often across radically divergent realms of life and social sites. The fourth characteristic is the shift from relationships of reciprocity and indebtedness to relationships in which those forms of interchange coexist with or are overshadowed by the impersonality of commodity exchange.

Some of these features have already received a great deal of attention, and some are not unique to the developing world. For example, the shift from production to consumption has long been heralded as a hallmark of late-capitalism modernity (among many others, see Bocock 1993; Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Hardt 1995; Miller 1995; Pun 2003). What is interesting is that some societies that are developing social class stratification, such as the one I am about to turn to, may be bypassing the production stage that the industrialized world has experienced. But other characteristics, like the centrality of links to the outside world in middle-class projects, appears to operate in certain kinds of society, in which local resources are few or are already monopolized by others. In this article I explore these various dynamics in reference to the emergence of middle-classness in Tonga.

TONGAN AND THE TONGAN DIASPORA

The Kingdom of Tonga is peopled by 101,134 inhabitants (2006 census), with 70 percent of the population residing on the largest island, Tongatapu. While Tongan individuals are also found living in locations as far away as Iceland, South Africa, and Mongolia, the Tongan diaspora concentrates in the urban centers of New Zealand, Eastern Australia, Hawai'i, the West Coast of the United States, and Utah. The number of overseas Tongans could possibly approach a quarter of a million, inclusive of second and third generations, whose allegiance to Tongan identity varies widely, from the nonexistent to the diffuse to the assiduous in pursuit of often reified and romanticized "born-again" Tonga identity (Morton 1998, 19). Although dispersal began only in the late 1960s, it now affects every family in the Islands and is relevant to all aspects of the economy, society, and culture. Ties between diaspora and homeland, and between different nexuses of the diaspora, are kept alive by the constant back-and-forth movement of people, goods, money, ideas, and symbols.

Until the early nineteenth century, Tonga comprised a loose association of more or less autonomous chiefdoms, with its people (who had initially settled the islands around 3,000 BP) living in scattered settlements. The intensification of contacts with westerners in the nineteenth century, and particularly the backing of Wesleyan missionaries from Britain, enabled one ambitious minor chieftain from Ha'apai in the central part of Tonga, Tāufa'āhau (c1797–1893), to conquer the entire group and unify it under his rule in 1845. In 1875 he became King George Tupou I, the founder of the dynasty that today continues to rule the country. In that same year, he promulgated a constitution drafted by a controversial missionary named Shirley W Baker (Rutherford 1971), which remains in place today. The constitution established a hierarchical system headed by the sovereign, supported by a landholding nobility consisting of thirty hereditary titles, and legitimized by the Christian faith. While this modernity-conscious constitution abolished slavery and guaranteed the same laws for all citizens, it also enshrines a rigid social stratification and provides numerous exceptions to the universal application of law.

Even though the nation-making mythology portrays the trajectory from unification and the promulgation of the constitution to modern times as a period of stability, Tonga was in fact rocked by serious conflicts in the formation of its modernity. Dynastic struggles challenged the legitimacy

of both George I's great-grandson and successor, George Tupou II (1874–1918), and George II's daughter, Sālote Tupou III (1900–1965). George II, a ne'er-do-well womanizer with little interest in the affairs of the state, was widely viewed as inept, while nobles questioned Sālote's authority on the basis of her being a woman and of lesser rank on her mother's side (Sālote's mother was a minor chieftain's daughter whom her father married against the nobles' will) (Wood-Ellem 1999). There were also struggles between the Tongan state and colonial powers, particularly in 1900 when the British representative essentially forced George II to sign a "Treaty of Protection" that turned Tonga into a British "protected state" for seventy years. Modern-day Tongans often stress with pride that, unlike surrounding polities (particularly Sāmoa and Fiji), their country never succumbed to colonial rule—although British interference in Tongan politics was sometimes extensive and often the subject of conflict.

These conflicts were primarily the concern of the high ranking, the powerful, and resident foreigners. Commoners surely took sides in dynastic struggles and civil wars waged under the guise of religious wars, but they played no agentive role, and were often the victims. While enshrined in a modern constitution, the system rested on the age-old cultural scaffolding supporting the relationship between chiefs and commoners. In pre-Christian days, chiefs ensured the welfare of the people through their divinity or at least divine origins, but could claim absolute control over the resources, actions, and lives of subjects. By putting an end to chiefs' divinity, Christianization and state formation modified the terms of this covenant, but it continues to color the relationship between ruler and ruled (Lātūkefu 1974; Marcus 1978a). The royal family and the hereditary aristocracy were, and continue to be, the recipients (and theoretically redistributors) of large amounts of material tribute, which circulate in the opposite direction from the propitiousness that derives from rank. The churches are enmeshed in a similar relationship with their congregations, as church representatives are the recipients of gift giving, while in return they ensure that God looks after congregations. Adept aristocrats and church leaders reinforce the entitlement of rank with occasional "man of the people" gestures (Marcus 1980; 1989). However, the social and political structure of Tonga is based on rank, and rank continues to be the dominant discourse to this day, even though recent promises of constitutional reform by King George V may alter somewhat the country's political configuration.

The last four decades of the twentieth century brought about monumental changes to Tonga, the most significant being the mass migration of

Tongans to industrialized countries of the Pacific Basin beginning in the 1960s. While Tongans had traveled, possibly extensively, between islands and island groups in prehistoric times, the early modern age saw their movements increasingly restricted (eg, by colonial restrictions on long-distance canoe travel) and largely confined to the royal and the high ranking. A turning point came when New Zealand opened its low-level job market to Pacific Island “guest workers,” particularly in rural areas deprived of local (particularly Māori) workers who had migrated to towns. Classically, guest workers became permanent migrants, and migration to New Zealand was soon followed by migration to Australia, Hawai‘i, and the United States. Most joined the ranks of the underemployed proletariat in the industrial West, working in the service industry or as farmhands.

Beginning in the late 1960s, the more fortunate moved overseas for schooling on scholarships from foreign donors, a trend that first targeted students of high rank but gradually became more democratic. As a result, among all Pacific Island communities, Tongans are possibly the most highly educated (or perhaps the most “degreed”). Later, the enormous importance they attach to education led more and more Tongans to use their own funds, in some cases bankrupting families, to educate children overseas. The possibility of obtaining an education overseas became one of the “selling points” of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—a point not lost on Tongans, who continue to convert in large numbers to Mormonism. Some educated citizens came back to fulfill their national scholarship obligations to work for the government bureaucracy for at least five years, while some stayed overseas and returned later, and others migrated permanently. Since the 1980s, young Tongan men trained at the Tonga Maritime Polytechnic Institute have been working on ships owned by transnational corporations, earning more than their compatriots laboring in the fields and factories as guest workers in New Zealand, although not having the impact on the economy that their Tuvaluan and i-Kiribati coworkers have on their respective countries’ economies (compare Borovnik 2006 on Kiribati). A very small but economically significant number of gifted Tongan rugby players have joined the international migrant elite athlete circuit, recruited for their brawn by British, European, and particularly Japanese teams.

Many diasporic Tongans are now well entrenched in their respective adoptive homelands, but Tongans are a people constantly on the move, braving immigration restrictions, travel costs, and other hurdles with remarkable resourcefulness (Francis 2003; Lee 2003; Small 1997). They

move between Tonga and the diasporic nexuses, and among the different diasporic nexuses, permanently or temporarily, often working for short stints on tourist visas to bring home money to last until the next overseas visit. They send back and forth a formidable amount of goods, money, and people, including children, the elderly, and the sick seeking medical treatment not available in the Islands. News, ideas, fashions, images, desires, and feelings travel between the Islands and the diaspora. Transnational movement (or its possibility) suffuses every aspect of Tongan economic structure, social makeup, and culture, and it is deeply engrained in everyday consciousness. No social and cultural dynamic in contemporary Tonga is ever independent of the larger Tongan world that spans the Pacific Basin. This is true even of the most tradition-oriented, locally based forms of action such as rituals of rank and funerals, which are always performed with the self-consciousness, somewhere in the background, of a larger world out there, consisting principally of the Tongan diaspora but also of *muli*—the generic appellation for foreigners, overseas locations, and matters nonlocal.

Monetary remittances from overseas relatives, which are part of traditional patterns of obligation (particularly from brothers to sisters), are the sole source of cash income for a significant proportion of families in Tonga, and in the April–June quarter of 2007 (a period I chose at random), they made up 54 percent of national foreign receipts (Government of Tonga 2007). While the high ranking have been the first to benefit from the new transnationalism (Marcus 1993), the transnational nature of both production and consumption, as well as education, have enabled forms of social and symbolic mobility in the rest of the population that were not possible in the old order. Among these forms of mobility figure the *possibility* that rank is no longer solely determinative of material wealth, and the *possibility* that rank is no longer solely determinative of one's self-consciousness, aspirations, and desires, despite its continued ascendancy in both areas.

THE EMERGENCE OF MIDDLE CLASSES IN TONGA

In the traditional order (to which Tongans refer in reified fashion as *anga faka-Tonga*, or the Tongan way), the cornerstone of the relationship between the high ranking and commoners was land. Tonga's complex land-tenure system, enshrined in the 1875 constitution, parcels out the entire land area of the kingdom to the sovereign, the government,

the thirty hereditary nobles, and six non-noble “talking chiefs” (*matāpule ma‘u tofi‘a*), who are also the sovereign’s attendants. Government, nobles, and chiefs are in turn responsible for assigning parcels of land to every adult male Tongan, who is constitutionally entitled to a 3.34-hectare agricultural allotment (*‘api tukuhaū*) and a village allotment (*‘api kolo*) of 758–1,618 square meters, depending on the location. The practice of this principle is complex, and allows nobles to make sometimes-burdensome tributary demands on commoners on the occasion of land allocations and transfers. Women in Tonga can lease but not own land, except in the case of a widow, who can hold her deceased husband’s land as long as she remains celibate. This exclusion has been the subject of recent but inconclusive debate. Opponents of reform argue that the exclusion of women from landownership is counterbalanced by the lifelong obligation of brothers to support their sisters, which is foundational to the Tongan traditional social order.

Both land and rank were (and still are to a certain extent) associated with agricultural production. Commoners required land not only for subsistence agriculture but also for traditional prestation to the sovereign, the nobles, and the churches. The most important products are yams and pigs—both men’s productions—which on ritual occasions accompany plaited mats and yardages of tapa cloth, the production and circulation of which are women’s responsibility. In recent decades, the overall importance of agriculture has decreased, despite the fact that a significant proportion of the adult population continues to declare its main work activity as agricultural (31.8 percent in 2003, down from 39.4 percent in 1993). The processing of copra, formerly of great economic importance for Tonga, began to dwindle as early as the 1960s as Britain ended a preferential import policy and as competition from larger production markets like the Philippines intensified; copra export is now a thing of the past. Likewise, while subsistence fishing remains important in the underpopulated outer-island groups, Tongatapu waters suffer greatly from overfishing. Transnational fishing conglomerates continue to harvest albacore in Tonga’s waters, but they take their catches to Fiji and American Sāmoa for canning, and thus generate little income for anyone in Tonga.

Three factors have contributed to the decline of agriculture. First, both internal and international migrations have alienated many Tongans from landownership, and nobles expecting compensation and bureaucrats expecting bribes sometimes place the acquisition of land beyond the reach of the non-wealthy (Helu 1999, 167). Tongans rely on various alternative

strategies to access land, leasing if they have the means, borrowing, or relying on plots that clubs or church congregations exploit cooperatively, but all these solutions are potentially fragile. Second, despite the continuing prestige of traditional prestation-related crops, agricultural work has lost prestige, particularly among younger men, whose priorities are urban, migratory, and salaried. The third and perhaps most significant factor that has contributed to the decline of agriculture is the turn to cash crops. Between the 1960s and 1980s, New Zealand gave preferential treatment to banana imports from Tonga and later offered development funds for the cultivation of the fruit. Growing bananas for export became dominant in Tongan agricultural production (Needs 1988, 68–78; Fleming 1996, 7–75), until it was killed by a combination of black leaf disease, a turn to neoliberal economics in New Zealand, and competition from much larger production areas controlled by transnational corporations. Starting in the late 1980s, Tongan farmers enthusiastically switched to growing squash for a single export market—Japan—for one month of the year. Like banana production, squash agriculture initially enriched some growers and eventually collapsed because of international competition and poor management, but not without first displacing subsistence agriculture and poisoning the environment with inorganic additives (Helu 1999, 159; Storey and Murray 2001).

Even before agriculture declined, consumption of nonagricultural goods became firmly implanted in the daily lives of Tongans. By the end of the nineteenth century, Tongan elites, like their Hawaiian counterparts, were enthusiastic consumers of imported goods (Sahlins 1988, 32–36), although perhaps more modestly, as Tonga did not have Hawai'i's marketable resources, such as large quantities of sandalwood. Photographs of the high ranking portray them dressed in Victorian fineries, and the white, Victorian royal palace, built between 1865 and 1867, signals an ambition of material opulence. Today the palace is dwarfed by other buildings, including some properties owned by the high ranking and the wealthy that redefine the meaning of kitsch.

Commoners and ordinary people were and are not passive witnesses of this consumption. Indeed, one very important aspect of the practice of rank in Tonga is mimesis, whereby the high ranking provide a model for action that ordinary folk emulate. This mimetic impulse, reminiscent of Thorstein Veblen's concept of "pecuniary emulation" (1994 [1899]), operates today in campaigns led by royals and nobles for the improvement of living conditions (eg, healthy living, trash pickup, development projects). Less

consciously but equally dramatically, it also operates in the general way in which ordinary Tongans take their behavioral cues from the high ranking and, more and more, the wealthy, making Tongans a nation of status-conscious, upward-looking people, if not necessarily upwardly mobile in material terms. Consumption figures prominently in this picture. It looms large in the history of the diasporic explosion: in the early years, migrants would invariably place “building a house in the village” among the most important motivations for seeking employment overseas, which at that time was thought of as temporary. Today, migration is inextricably tied to remittances, that is, to providing relatives in Tonga the wherewithal to consume. I am not implying that consumption is the only reason for which Tongans need money, as they utilize remittances and income in general for many purposes that do not fall under the heading of “consumption” in a straightforward sense. For example, Tongans use remittances for competitive prestation to churches, gift giving at funerals and other rites of passage, and payment of school fees, utility bills, and government service fees of all kinds. But the desire for consumer goods does figure prominently in everyday lives—as witnessed, for instance, by the fact that so many farmers who initially did well exporting squash immediately used their new wealth to buy cars (including many secondhand Japanese cars initially imported to New Zealand but that failed the road fitness test there), making Tongatapu as traffic congested as islands of the Pacific colonized by the United States.

From the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, the commerce in consumer goods was in the hands of European male traders—primarily of German extraction (as well as British and Scandinavian), and many of whom married locally. The dominance of Germans, at least until World War I, is related to the German Empire’s colonial presence in Sāmoa, and they were particularly numerous in Vava’u, Tonga’s major island group closest to Sāmoa. Some traders worked for pan-Pacific business conglomerates, such as Levuka-based Morris Hedstrom, which remained in Tonga until 1999; Sydney-based Burns Philp, which arrived in Tonga in 1899 and remained until the 1990s; and J C Godeffroy & Sohn, which arrived in Tonga in 1867, and after flirting with insolvency in 1878 was reconstituted into the Deutsche Handels- und Plantagen-Gesellschaft der Südsee Inseln, which some have called the world’s first transnational megacorporation, until it folded during World War I (Stern 1977, 396–401). Trading combined the importation of consumer goods to be sold in larger stores in urban centers with the exportation of copra and other resources (eg,

vanilla, bananas, cotton, sandalwood, dried sea cucumbers or *bêche-de-mer*). In the twentieth century, European traders were joined by a few Japanese, Indians, and Chinese, despite the severe restrictions that the Tongan government imposed on immigration from Asia. The part-European, part-Indian, or part-Japanese descendants of early traders continue to play an active role in the country's business. In contrast, few Tongans without foreign ascendants succeeded in commerce, although Tongan-owned business ventures, including commercial ones, did pick up somewhat after the establishment of the Tonga Development Bank in 1977. Until recently, the inhabited landscape was dotted with innumerable tiny Tongan-owned *fale koloa* (village stores), but most were shuttered soon after opening as such ventures succumbed to the pressure of kinship-based obligations (figure 1).

As the twentieth century was coming to a close, the situation changed radically in three ways. First, business in Tonga was transformed as a



FIGURE 1 Boarded-up *fale koloa* owned by a small-scale entrepreneurial Tongan family, bankrupted after two years in the mid-1990s by family obligations. The building is now used as a storage room. Photo by author. (April 2008)

result of the immigration of People's Republic of China nationals that began in the early 1990s, to everyone's surprise, and continues. Chinese immigrants form a heterogeneous population. Many are from Fujian, the region that has exported the largest numbers of Chinese people over the centuries. Some are relatively wealthy while others are country folk who may be indentured to much more powerful entities. Chinese immigrants purchased many of the failed or failing *fale koloa*, and now operate an estimated 70 percent of retail business and a significant portion of the wholesale business, generating serious competition with cheap consumer imports from China (figure 2). Little of the resulting profit stays in Tonga, as evidenced by the under-the-table currency exchange that some Chinese shops offer, paying high rates for US cash that can be easily transported out of the country. The Chinese takeover of retail has put poorer Tongans out of the competition but has not affected wealthier Tongans' ventures. Feelings about the Chinese presence divide poorer Tongans, who harbor serious resentment, from middle-class and elite Tongans, who generally approve of it and often contrast Chinese shopkeepers' round-the-clock work with their poorer compatriots' alleged *fakapikopiko* (laziness, indolence). It is highly unlikely, however, that Chinese immigrants keep appallingly long working hours and live in cramped quarters behind *fale*



FIGURE 2 Successful *fale koloa* operated by Chinese immigrants, taken over from Tongan former owners. Photo by author. (Nuku'alofa, April 2008)

koloa out of choice. Most Tongans are oblivious to the diversity among Chinese immigrants, and while the admiration that some express may be based on a misunderstanding of the conditions under which most Chinese immigrants work, the resentment that others feel targets people who are themselves victims. The average Tongan's resentment has exploded into violence on several occasions, the most dramatic of which were the events that unfolded in November 2006, described later in this article.

The second development that radically affected the country's economic situation is the free market model of economic rationalization that the government has been following assiduously since the late 1990s, spurred by the then crown prince (now King George V), a firm believer in neoliberal reform. The crowning moment of this policy was Tonga's accession to World Trade Organization membership in 2006. The government has privatized many services, including the electricity supply, which in 1998 became the property of the crown prince (at least until he became king), and which has generated huge profits for the key shareholders, while consumers' power bills have increased in some cases by 400 percent (Campbell 2006, 53). A telecommunication company, oddly named TonFön, founded by the same member of the royal family, despite declaring itself on its Web site (a tad defensively) to be "Tonga's very own local Mobile Phone, Broadband Internet and Cable TV service provider," is now owned by a corporation based in Jamaica, incorporated in Bermuda, owned by an Irishman who declares legal residence in Malta (having moved there after a misunderstanding with the tax authorities of Portugal), and under contract with a Malaysian company to install Chinese equipment. It brings in massive numbers of highly remunerated expatriate technicians, whose interest in and commitment to Tonga is nonexistent. The most dramatic development is the acquisition in 1988 of the space above Tonga by a corporation called TongaSat (van Fossen 1999). This lucrative venture, owned by the princess royal, leases satellite orbital slots to the People's Republic of China, which explains why TongaSat's founding was preceded by a sudden switch in Tonga's diplomatic relations from Taiwan to mainland China.

These two developments have two implications: one, endowing an already-existing elite with vast resources, thereby accentuating their "difference" from the rest of the population; and two, opening Tonga's resources and markets to transnational interests that have little local allegiance. To the offshoring effect of privatization one can add the overseas aid industry, in the sense that the multiple projects funded by foreign governments and

nongovernmental organizations typically bring in highly paid consultants from elsewhere, who produce a multitude of reports, the quality of which (particularly when they deal with “social issues”) reflects their ignorance of the local context and the brevity of their missions. The impatience that this practice generates among Tongans trained in the relevant skills is quite understandable. Labor offshoring is tied most explicitly to aid from the People’s Republic of China (compare Crocombe 2007, 249–255), as in its proposed reconstruction of the capital city, Nuku‘alofa, following its destruction by arson in November 2006, which is conditional on Chinese contractors doing the work.

The third factor that changed the economic scene came with the maturing of diasporic communities. While many migrant Tongans, particularly those of the first generation, have menial jobs, a few have become successful, combining entrepreneurial ventures in New Zealand, Australia, and the United States with a wealth base in the kingdom. The current prime minister of Tonga, Feleti Sevele—whose appointment by the king in 2005 was historic because it was the first time a Tongan commoner had achieved the position of prime minister—is one of these successful businesspeople, raised overseas. Tertiary education is an important asset in this development, particularly in a society that is highly conscious of academic success as a marker of status. One important characteristic of business in Tonga is that it is often made up of a diversified “portfolio” of ventures, comprising such unlikely bedfellows as construction, money lending and transferring, selling baked goods, DVD lending, hotel management, retail, shipping, travel and visa agency services, and overseas “shopping services” for wealthier customers. This diversity in business interests resembles the trading practices of earlier, European traders, but also illustrates another important characteristic, that of being closely tied to a cross-border traffic of goods, finances, people, and images. This traffic in fact encompasses almost all of the country’s economic activities, since production for local consumption is limited to agriculture and food processing such as baking, beer brewing, and sausage making (with imported raw materials). The few attempts made at light industry for export, such as the small-scale production of rugby balls and sweater knitting in the 1990s, have long since succumbed to competition from Asia (Connell and Lea 2001, 79).

The socioeconomic echelons beneath entrepreneurial elites are occupied by a large majority who do not benefit from lucrative transnational connections but do their best to “make do.” Communalism is essential

to their economic welfare. Families may include one or two young members who are low-ranking civil servants or service-industry employees, but their meager wages only manage to cover a fraction of weekly bills. Thus wages generally constitute a supplement to family income, rather than its core. For example, in early 2008, the starting weekly salary of junior government employees was only T\$70, while a basket of cassava, which can provide the staple in a medium-sized family's diet for a week, cost T\$10 at the market, a school uniform cost T\$15–25 to have made, and petrol sold at T\$2.70 per liter. (One Tongan pa'anga [dollar] in early 2008 was the equivalent of approximately US\$.50.) Electricity bills, which had soared following privatization and the rise in the cost of crude oil, were a major source of anxiety for everyone. The marginal role that jobs play in constituting incomes and, from there, social class affiliation, does not distinguish Tonga as radically as it may appear from postindustrial societies, where "people are linked to the class structure through social relations other than their immediate jobs . . . people live in families, and via their social relations to spouses, parents, and other family members they may be linked to different class interests and capacities" (So 1995, 318).

For the majority of Tongans, accumulating capital through savings on an individual or family basis may prove very difficult, as income evaporates very quickly in meeting the day-to-day expenses of the immediate family and larger circle of reciprocity. Communal saving is made possible through the micro-credit enterprises of clubs and other groups, particularly *kalapu* (kava-drinking cooperative clubs), which serve kava on a daily basis but also hold fund-raising drinking parties. Radio invitations bring in non-regulars, and money is raised for different purposes, particularly scholarships for tertiary education overseas. For this majority as well, bank and pawnshop loans are an almost universal fact of life, enabling families to meet prestation obligations such as regular gift giving to the church, but also to purchase household items like washing machines, furniture, and stoves, all notable markers of the modern home. For the least empowered, although not necessarily the most destitute, remittances may be the main source of sustenance in an economy that is now deeply monetized. Family incomes often vary greatly from one season to the next, and do not always coincide with the cycle of needs, such as having to purchase school uniforms in February (for the new school term), meet church prestation obligations in May and September (for some denominations), and meet prestation obligations at funerals and weddings on an unpredictable basis.

The resulting picture is that wages and employment in general are a very poor predictor of both economic well-being and class position in Tonga. Employment is only one aspect of the creative, opportunity-driven, and enormously resourceful way in which people “make do” in Tonga.¹

THE NATURE OF MIDDLE CLASSES IN TONGA

How, then, can we determine whether a middle class has emerged in Tonga? Of the several scholars who have tackled this problem, Andrew Needs has provided the most comprehensive and detailed analysis (1988). Writing at the height of one of the Banana Export Schemes funded by New Zealand in the 1980s, Needs demonstrated that overseas-funded agriculture had exacerbated inequalities in Tonga by favoring those able to recruit labor and control large areas of land, that is, some nobles and wealthy entrepreneurs. This was the exact opposite effect that the aid—tacitly motivated by a long-discredited modernization model of development—was designed to have. Needs’s analysis presciently foreshadowed the very same scenario replicated a decade later with the cultivation of squash.

Seeking to locate middle classes at the convergence of, on the one hand, the opposition of capital and labor, and, on the other, the relationship between the state and civil society, sociologist Georges Benguigui argued in a brief paper that the middle class in Tonga has emerged among the urban, professional, and salaried strata of the population; these same people have mobilized politically around certain quintessentially middle class-focused projects, such as questioning the authoritarianism of government, calling for greater social justice, and developing the ideas of consumer and environmental protection (Benguigui 1989). Since the late 1980s, many of these dynamics have been implicitly associated with a political movement generally referred to as the “Pro-Democracy Movement” (officially, Friendly Islands Human Rights and Democracy Movement) led by educated reformist commoners. The politics in question have become gradually tenser since Benguigui’s analysis, culminating, on 16 November 2006, in antigovernment protests and the looting and burning down of a significant (and carefully chosen) portion of Nuku‘alofa’s business district. This event, one of the most dramatic in modern Tongan history, has come to be known to Tongans as “16/11.” It appears to have been engineered by the Pro-Democracy Movement, successful entrepreneurs, and other agents with wealth and influence but no rank, and implemented by generally

young, poor, and disaffected people, many with no political consciousness other than generalized anger and a desire to partake in the looting (Moala 2007; Campbell 2006, 2008).

Recycling the same data that Benguigui marshaled, Kerry James searched for a class consciousness among better-off urban Tongans, and found none. She concluded that, since there is no perceived class struggle in Tonga, there is no middle class, and that better-off Tongans form a grouping “that has no continuity of aim, no inclination to pursue class politics, and no ‘mature’ class organization capable of doing so” (James 2003, 332). For example, she described Pro-Democracy Movement leaders as motivated by personal ambition rather than social concerns—a generally accurate description that was further confirmed by the events leading to 16/11, during which these leaders jumped sides unpredictably and acted in a manner that betrayed individualistic opportunism more than a concern for the common good. For James, rank continues to be the determining model of social difference in Tongan society. She drew an analogy with the celebrated British Marxist social historian E P Thompson’s 1978 analysis of eighteenth-century English society as characterized by class struggle without class formation. For Thompson, class is something that emerges in the course of social relations before it becomes a category: “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 over these issues, and in the process of struggling they discover themselves as classes, they come to know this discovery as class consciousness” (Thompson 1978, 149).

Analyses of class formation in Tonga are of course embedded in a larger discourse about class in Pacific Island societies, a landmark of which is Epeli Hau‘ofa’s model of “the New South Pacific Society,” which identifies the emergence of a pan-Pacific ruling “privileged class” made up of highly educated professionals who “speak the same language, which is English . . . [and] share the same ideologies and the same material lifestyles” (Hau‘ofa 1987, 3); they are increasingly alienated from the locally grounded underprivileged. These are suggestive angles on the problem, although problematic, in that while Hau‘ofa’s “privileged class” is indeed an elite, it is not “ruling” in the sense of controlling the means of production. Hau‘ofa’s argument embodies the overelaboration of education as a marker of both status and rank in Tongan ideology, and his highly person-

alized perspective is perhaps lacking in the kind of nuance that one gains with comparison and distance.

These various analyses suffer from a number of shortcomings. One, common to all three, is the fact that they largely ignore the determinative role of transnationalism and present Tonga as much more of a “closed system” than it has been for a long time (compare Nugent 1982). Needs’s analysis rests heavily on the role of agricultural production in the formation of social class stratification—which was indeed important at the time of his research, but has since waned with the demise of both banana and squash exports, or at least has been overshadowed by other economic dynamics that may have little to do with production. While I am in basic agreement with Benguigui’s conclusion, the sociological model that underlies his argument nevertheless bypasses a consideration of the ideological (or at least ideational) dimension of class formation. Another aspect of Benguigui’s analysis that has not withstood the passing of time is the emphasis of the role of the state in its relationship to civil society. Without meaning to naively succumb to the belief that globalization is eroding the power of the state, I think it is nevertheless clear that this power, in Tonga and elsewhere, now has serious competitors, in the form of the transnational interests the state is keen to invite and diasporic forces it has to contend with. The current state project to “democratize” the political structure in the wake of 16/11 will have important and yet unknown consequences in the near future. Furthermore, attempting to identify social class as a group, rather than as a structuring of positions, will always lead to the kinds of counterargument that James offered, a dialogue that ultimately does not prove useful. James’s argument also confuses, in Marxist parlance, class *for* itself with class *in* itself. Since her definition of class rests on political action (“class *for* itself”), and since the most obvious example is the Pro-Democracy Movement, which lacks organization and focus, she has concluded that there is no middle class in the “accepted” sense of the term “class” (by which she appears to mean “class *in* itself”).

In addition, the relationship between the Pro-Democracy Movement and a would-be middle class is highly debatable, as the demagogical stance that the movement’s leaders adopt appeals more to the disenfranchised (some of whom are convinced that “democracy” means “redistribution of wealth”) than to anyone one would characterize as middle class. Furthermore, underlying the model of social class that James adopted is an underexamined assumption of agency, which seeks to read in people’s actions a self-consciousness about intentions. This assumption has a long geneal-

ogy in philosophy and some social sciences, being tacit, for example, in Weber's concept of "meaningful action." But do people need to be self-reflexive about why they do things in order to form a sociological category or even engage in meaningful action?

Marx (and Thompson) in fact never imputed a political basis to the middle classes. For Marx, the "petty bourgeoisie" (which is generally understood as the precursor to twentieth-century middle classes in the Anglo-Saxon world) was capable of occasional united political action, but it had no sustained impact and paled in comparison to the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. On the other hand, Thompson's analysis of "class struggle without class" in eighteenth-century Britain is about the gentry and the plebeians rather than on any group that bears any resemblance to a middle class. Anthropologists and other social scientists who have subsequently studied middle-class people in industrial and postindustrial societies have characterized them as individualistic, competitive (as the cliché "keeping up with the Joneses" best captures), and absorbed by their own consuming pleasures—characteristics that Weber had already theorized following his visit to North America (1946, 311). If anything unites the middle classes in industrial and postindustrial societies, it is the "fear of falling," the constant anxiety generated by their tenuous hold on socioeconomic status (Ehrenreich 1989; Hornstein 2005; Newman 1988; Ortner 2003; Wolfe 1999). Middle-class people are "united" in their fetishism of individualistic achievement, fierce interpersonal competition, and a permanent discontent with what they have, which resides at the foundation of consumption.

These are precisely the same priorities that, for example, compel many Tongans to desire larger and larger SUVs (while the rest of the world is downsizing)—despite the increasing price of gas and the deleterious impacts on the environment and on already poorly maintained roadways—and to look condescendingly on anyone who does not keep up with this competitive conspicuous consumption (figure 3). The locally relevant twist is the fact that such competition is based on the iconicity of size with status in Polynesian cultures; here, the size of vehicles among the non-elites is turned into a symbolic claim to be thrown at both superiors and peers. What fuels these desires and aspirations is the mimesis I discussed earlier between the high ranking and the low ranking, although in this case it is complicated by the mediation of the relative ability to consume, which quietly turns vehicles into sumptuary objects (compare Chalfin 2008).

Because middle-class projects are as much a matter of desire as of the ability to fulfill desire, their boundaries are difficult to determine. In Tonga in particular, social class coexists with the enduring system of rank, which transverses and informs social-class formation but does not determine it. But we can nevertheless identify specific features in Tongan society that characterize the “middle” and not the rest. The dwindling number of village families who depend on subsistence agriculture and fishing, weave mats and beat tapa cloth for their traditional obligations, and struggle to pay electricity bills and school fees with remittances from overseas, do not partake in middle-class projects. The increasing number of families who lead a precarious existence squatting in swampy neighborhoods on the outskirts of Nuku‘alofa do not either. Similarly, the high ranking and the wealthy, some of whom control substantial capital and income, are only concerned with the middle-class project because they set its terms. In contrast, the project dominates the lives of city dwellers, families whose “middleness” is not just a matter of social stratification but also, as I argue presently, a matter of occupying a betwixt-and-between position in other respects: between tradition and modernity, between Tonga and its diaspora, and between the old and the new (compare Liechty 2003, 25).



FIGURE 3 Vehicle carcasses dotting the landscape, an increasingly common sight around Tongatapu. Photo by author. (April 2008)

While my concern here is explicitly not with the high ranking, the wealthy, and the growing numbers of poor people, a few remarks are in order. High rank and wealth overlap, in that members of the royal and most noble families have access to capital and income that make them wealthy, even millionaires in a surprising number of cases. However, the overlap is not complete, since a substantial proportion of wealthy Tongans are not of high rank, and a few nobles, concerned not to abuse the privileges of rank, are far from wealthy. In other cases, however, the privileges of rank have enabled some nobles to increase wealth, indicating that rank not only maintains but also widens the gap between the rich and the poor. What is changing is that modern Tonga probably offers many more possibilities for access to wealth than it did before the era of migration. At the same time, privatization, free market policies, and economic rationalization (including the 2006 accession to World Trade Organization membership) are undoubtedly creating just as many possibilities for *failing* to access wealth, as witnessed by the increasing difficulties that many Tongan families are experiencing in meeting what are collectively considered to be basic needs. These basic needs have also changed over time, of course, because they now include electricity, running water, tertiary education, travel—all of which were, for most, unthinkable luxuries a few decades ago.

Talking about middle-classness in Tonga is rendered complex by the fact that the rise of the “in-between” is one area in which the Tongan language provides few analytic cues. One of the best-known features of the Tongan language is its system of honorifics, which theoretically calls for the use of different words for common meanings like “go,” “eat,” and “want,” when addressing or talking about commoners, nobles, or the king and God. The three “speech levels” only concern a very restricted part of the vocabulary and, in practice, their use is highly situation dependent, in the sense, for example, that the vocabulary for nobles can be used to address non-nobles like Catholic priests, judges, and highly educated people (Philips 1991, 2000, 2007). Tongans, who often feel insecure about the various speech levels, will address high-status people in English if they have a good command of it, to avoid the embarrassment of not using the appropriate Tongan words and not assessing situations correctly (and, possibly, to also assert their own command of the cosmopolitan code). This insecurity is partly the consequence of the fact that honorifics are so ideologically elaborated (school curricula address them in highly rei-

fied fashion, for example). The anxieties that surround the way language encodes social difference focuses on rank, rather than on other parameters of social difference.

Similarly, the Tongan vocabulary of social difference is almost exclusively one of rank and of relations between agents of unequal rank. Tongans speak of *hou'eiki* (chiefs) and *kakai ma'olunga* (high-placed people), but these expressions always connote rank, although the second may include the well-heeled, the highly educated, and those who exercise desirable professions (eg, doctors, lawyers, high-level civil servants). The “dignity” and “respectability” that are the object of so much anxiety among middle-class Tongans can only be translated into Tongan as *matamata'i'eiki*, literally, “having the appearance of a chief.” The English term “respect” is ubiquitous in Tongan descriptions of *anga faka-Tonga* (the Tongan way), for example among diasporic Tongans who are monolingual in English. In this discourse, “respect,” which commonly translates the Tongan expression *'ulungaanga faka'apa'apa*, refers to sister–brother avoidance relations, the respect of children for parents, and the respect of commoners for the high ranking, but overlooks the kind of status-blind respect that post-Enlightenment Western morality values, at least in theory. (The reciprocal term *feveitokai'aki* [to pay attention to one another's needs], borrowed from Fijian, is rarely used in everyday talk.) Those who are seen as seeking more respect than they were born to have are quickly labeled as *fie ma'olunga* (pretending to be highly placed) or *fie'eiki* (imagining oneself to be of chiefly rank), to which Tonga's lexicographer C Maxwell Churchward added “arrogant” (1959, 188). The high frequency with which these last terms appear in day-to-day conversation bears witness to the particular anxiety that surrounds their referents. Class itself is not a category that people invoke explicitly, and James quoted interviewees, members of government, and other elites categorically denying the relevance of class for Tonga (2003), although of course the extent to which such statements can be taken at face value is debatable at best (in the same fashion that we should be suspicious of Americans or Australians declaring that their societies have no class distinctions). Yet the constant surveillance that Tongan people subject each other to for signs of unwarranted social pretension indicates a clear sensitivity to social class. These dynamics strongly indicate that one must read beyond the “natural conservatism” of language (and certainly beyond vocabulary) to understand the social and cultural dynamics at play in class formation.

EXTRALOCALITY, MULTIPLE MODES OF LIVELIHOOD, CONSUMPTION, AND COMMODITIZATION

What are, then, the characteristics of middle-class projects in contemporary Tongan society? Four features characterize projects of middle-classness: a reliance and consciousness of the extralocal world and its resources; particular value placed on consumption, predominantly of a conspicuous kind; a creative, opportunity-driven, and multiple approach to resource management; and a shift from traditional forms of kinship-based reciprocity to a commoditized mode of organizing life. None of these characteristics are divorced from the older rank order, but rather piggyback on them. Class formation in Tonga is both a matter of continuity and rupture, and is only intelligible to a social theory that is attentive to both processes.

Reliance on the Extralocal World and Its Resources

The first of the four characteristics is the predication of middle-class projects on material and symbolic resources that transcend the confinement of the local. At the same time, middle-class people and aspirations are locally grounded, and here I disagree with Futa Helu's position that the Tongan middle class "is largely an *imported one*" (1999, 167, emphasis in original). As I illustrated earlier, free-market policies have opened the Tongan economy to transnational interests, some owned by or at least connected to the very wealthy; this gives rise to a privileged petty bourgeoisie benefiting from the high salaries that transnational corporations offer, at least as long as the latter stay in Tonga. Less dramatic but equally predicated on a transnational logic are the entrepreneurial activities of both the successful and would-be successful, which revolve largely around the importing and processing of consumer goods. At the lower level of entrepreneurialism are sellers at the very popular secondhand marketplaces around town, called *fea* in Tongan (from English "fair"). Consumer goods that small-scale entrepreneurs offer for sale at the *fea* are part of long-distance networks of reciprocity that link relatives, particularly sisters and brothers. Thus, deeply ingrained in one of the foundations of "the Tongan Way" as well as in the modernity of consumer goods and trading, the *fea* embodies the importance of material links between Tonga in the islands and Tonga in the industrial world (Besnier 2004).

An even more striking example is the incessant traffic in *koloa faka-Tonga* (Tongan valuables, namely, plaited mats and manufactured tapa

cloth of no practical value but heightened ritual significance) between Tonga—where the objects have to originate because it is where the raw materials for their production and the manufacturing skills are available—and the diaspora (Addo 2004). The traffic of these materials is in the hands of those who can afford to travel or to send the valuables—and, frequently, to provide loans to less-fortunate compatriots against the valuables as collateral; they keep the valuables if the borrower defaults, in an example of what Nancy Munn has called the “diversion” of non-commodities into the realm of commodities (1983; see also Appadurai 1986, 16–29). Pawnshop operators and moneylenders may combine their visits to family members overseas with trips to sell unclaimed pawned *koloa faka-Tonga* in New Zealand, Australia, and the United States, where the demand for the precious objects is high. Interestingly, these entrepreneurs sometimes pay close attention to currency fluctuations to time their travels so as to maximize their gain. It is a brisk and potentially extremely lucrative business, as the proliferation of pawnshops in the early 2000s demonstrates, but it is also risky, requiring capital, reliable connections, and know-how grounded in both traditional and modern fields of knowledge and practice (Addo and Besnier 2008).

The links to the outside world that are foundational to middle-classness are not confined to the material. For example, fluency in the fashion discourse of New Zealand or the United States (Besnier 2004), and an ability to talk confidently about travels overseas for reasons other than working illegally at menial jobs, are indexes that distinguish someone as being in a different league from the agrarian rural underclass of small faraway villages, the outer islands of Ha‘apai and Vava‘u, or the swampy squatter areas of Nuku‘alofa. This awareness of an Other, and of the resources that can be derived from it, is particularly important on a day-to-day basis to the self-conscious performance of middle-class status. The suspension of the middle class between Tonga and the industrial centers is thus not just material but also symbolic.

However, claiming cosmopolitanism when one is not “entitled” to do so, or claiming the “wrong” kind of cosmopolitanism, is also risky, as other people may scrutinize such assertions and assess them as misplaced or ill supported by material evidence. Particularly egregious are cosmopolitan pretensions that appear to others as attempts to obliterate one’s Tonganness—often referred to as *fie Pālangi* (pretending to be a white person, acting like a white person; this term that goes hand-in-hand with the negative characteristics I discuss at the end of the preceding section). These

pretensions are the opposite of what identity-anxious diasporic Tongans refer to as “Tongan pride,” a phrase often worn on T-shirts and declared on personal Web sites. While the dividing line between “appropriately” modern and *fie Pālangi* is very thin, shifting, and subject to many different dynamics, situations in which people judge others as claiming greater transnational status than they “really” have access to are very common. In earlier works (eg, Besnier 2003, 2007), I discussed the dangers associated with speaking “too much” English rather than Tongan, or of speaking English without having the full competence to do so (as a Tongan friend put it, “hurry mouth no grammar”). At the time, speaking English was making an implicit claim to cosmopolitan sophistication, and if this claim was recognized as unfounded, one could expose oneself to ridicule and contempt. The situation has changed somewhat, as English has now penetrated everyday interactions in Tonga in a way that it had not when I first ventured to make those remarks. In another work (Besnier 2004), I microanalyzed a *fea* trader’s assertion of the local acceptability of a belly-button-showing blouse that she was trying to sell, only to then quickly retreat when her interlocutor (the shopper) disagreed. These entirely mundane acts are inconsequential on their own, but when iterated across contexts and persons they become generative of class structures and identities, just as performance is generative of all forms of identity (Butler 1990).

But fashions change and what was unacceptable in 2000 when I conducted that particular fieldwork is now accepted (eg, wearing boardshorts, tank tops, or skimpy camisoles in town). While the bar has shifted in certain respects (more for men than for women, more for Tongans who reside overseas than for those who do not), the sense of how one brings the outside world to Tonga has not shifted. Thus, when a young man with little education and no visible income asserted to an audience in a hair salon that he was an “international consultant,” the frenetic gossip that followed his departure dissected that claim into nothingness. Perhaps the most dramatic instances of the vulnerability of cosmopolitan claims are found as part of the extremely popular transgender beauty pageants, where young and generally poor contestants brave potential ridicule, asserting themselves in sophisticated evening gowns and inventive outfits, until they are brought out to speak English, which most cannot do with confidence, and they then lose control of the humor to the audience (Besnier 2002). These ethnographic vignettes demonstrate that the Other that forms the audience for the performance of middle-classness in Tonga is twofold: on the one hand, it is the outside world, including the

diaspora; and on the other hand, it constitutes other island-based middle-class Tongans, who are not only very quick to judge but also constantly busy perfecting their own performance of middle-classness. This is one of the points where a Weber-inspired approach is particularly helpful. One is cosmopolitan in Tonga (and elsewhere, of course) only if one's peers recognize one as such. If no one else knows that your clothes are the latest fashion in New Zealand, it matters little that they are. The material consequence is a self-perpetuating cycle of consumption for Tongans, who must know and consume extralocal practices, goods, and ideas in order to belong to the ever-shifting definition of modernity.

The Importance of (Conspicuous) Consumption

The second important characteristic of middle-class projects is precisely the foregrounding of consumption, particularly conspicuous consumption, in lives and self-consciousness. Consumption is of course not only a matter of purchasing products, but also, and more importantly, a matter of performances, relations, and desires (Appadurai 1986, 29–41; Douglas and Isherwood 1981; Miller 1995). I have mentioned the sumptuary politics of vehicles and vehicle driving on Tongatapu roads, which already differentiate its residents from those of the country's smaller islands. The enormous importance attached to cars originated in the initial wind-fall from which squash growers benefited in the early 1990s, and more subtly to the “maturing” of the diaspora, events that for most Tongans transformed cars from unaffordable luxury to barely affordable necessity. When I discussed the matter with Tongan respondents, they invoked a discourse of utility, arguing that they needed a car, and one as large as possible, “to take the children to school.” And indeed, the morning traffic around schools now rivals the traffic around California suburban schools. But the fact is that children a decade ago walked or took the bus to school—methods of transportation that Tongans generally now find lacking in dignity, causing shame (*mā*), and exposing one's children and family to denigrating gossip.

Sunday morning church services are the other notable contexts that give rise to high concentrations of SUVs, vans, and trucks parked awkwardly along roads, since church areas were never designed with the possibility in mind that space would be needed for numerous large vehicles. Mormon churches, the only churches built with adjacent paved parking lots, are particularly notable for the number of cars parked around them. Both the paved parking lots and their enthusiastic use are reflections of the fact

that Tongan Mormons occupy the front lines of the march toward capitalistic middle-class modernity, which also accounts for the massive conversion rate (Gordon 1990; Besnier 2004; Addo and Besnier 2008). The ironic consequence of the burning of buildings in downtown Nuku'alofa on 16/11 is that now there is enough room there for shoppers to park their large vehicles.

One can also point to the increasing importance of custom paint jobs on souped-up cars, personalized license plates, and high-power stereo systems blaring various styles of local and international music from cruising vehicles, all encoding a particular concern with image making for all to see and hear, and an assertion of selfhood that a few years back most Tongans would have found entirely inappropriate. These are the dynamics that centralize consumption in the lives of people, intricate systems of desires, anxieties, and affects (figure 4).

The shift to consumption has given rise to a service industry catering to desires that did not exist until recently. One example, again associated with cars, is the car-wash business, advertised conspicuously on the license plates of the ostentatiously enormous (and invariably clean) SUVs driven by the owners. Equipped with materials from overseas, those businesses



FIGURE 4 Traffic jam at the Saturday morning secondhand marketplace. Photo by author. (Nuku'alofa, April 2008)

are designed to rid cars of the dust and mud that constantly cover vehicles driven on poorly maintained roadways. Another notable service business is the mobile-phone repair shops, which make brisk business “unlocking,” for a substantial fee, the now-essential mobile phones that people bring from overseas. Real estate agencies, public relations agencies, management consulting firms, and “leadership training workshops” aimed at disaffected youth—none of which was present in 2000—have now sprouted, catering to new consumer desires, as well as creating needs that Tongans did not know they had. The upper echelons of these ventures respond to the demands created by the government’s economic rationalization and outsourcing, but other ventures of a more modest kind are tied to the everyday desires of ordinary people. Hair salons have multiplied, encouraged by the fact that going to a salon to have one’s hair done is a way of showing one’s sophistication and *savoir faire*, in contrast to doing it oneself at home or having it done by a relative or neighbor. One salon, advertising “good shampoo, hot rainwater,” strains to turn the customer’s visit into an “experience” of pleasure and pampering, or at least to educate the less well-traveled customer about this possibility. The insecurity that followed 16/11 and the dramatic increase in break-ins and violence have multiplied security services (eg, guards, call-and-response services, patrol vehicles), and have motivated one entrepreneur to import the first armored money truck to the kingdom, a move of which other middle-class Tongans speak approvingly.

Restaurants, which first emerged in the 1970s but long catered mostly to a Western and elite clientele, are now proliferating and democratizing. A full range of restaurants and food stands is represented in Nuku‘alofa, from establishments providing elegant sit-down affairs followed by a hefty bill, to simple constructions where seafood is served (including imported seafood), to takeaway joints emulating explicitly fast-food franchises in industrial countries (eg, in the use of the appellation “Kentucky” for fried chicken). Inspired by “*bulihuli* chicken” stands in Hawai‘i, some entrepreneurs have converted trailers into fowl-broiling contraptions, which spread an enticing aroma when parked at street corners, with a loud boom box contributing to the sense of excitement. Also multiplying around town are lunch stands (figure 5), some in front of private homes, others no more than a cooler on the roadside, serving curried meats in a piece of aluminum foil, particularly the infamously greasy mutton flaps (*sipi*) imported from New Zealand (Gewertz and Errington 2007). These offerings have long replaced the buttered buns that workers bought from market stands for

10 cents in the late 1970s, and are defined as “the only lunch solution,” despite the fact that many people find the T\$4–5 price tag a bit steep.

Restaurants, particularly the more upmarket ones, are tapping into ways of relating to food and eating that Tongans are exposed to overseas, as well as encouraging those new ways: menus are in English, (theoretically) deferential service is given, dishes are brought in succession, and a rank-leveling micropolitics of space is created in which *kakai ma'olunga* (important people) are seated next to and at the same level as any ordinary folk who can afford to be there (compare Liechty 2005). In contrast to the abundance of food, large size of food items, and hearty eating (mostly in silence) that characterize traditional feasts and festive family meals, restaurant patrons are served plate-size servings designed to be pleasing to both taste buds and the eyes, with bite-size eating alternating with conversation. The distinction in eating style, which echoes the tension between working- and middle-class manners in Western Europe (Bourdieu 1985),



FIGURE 5 “Ifolicious Takeaway” (*ifo*, good to eat), one of the small entrepreneurial fast-food joints that dot the urban landscape, this one offering “BBQ,” fish, mutton flaps with *bele* leaves (*pele sipi*), and curry (*kale*). Photo by author. (Nuku‘alofa, April 2008)

is now a clear marker of difference of which Tongans have a heightened awareness. At more upscale restaurants, people pull money out of their wallet in an open manner, rather than hand crumpled bills in a closed fist as non-middle-class people tend to do at the produce market or the *fale koloa*. The owner of an upscale eating establishment, which occupies a prime location in the capital, tells me that he is often asked by patrons to be seated by the bay windows that open onto the street, so that they can be seen from the outside. “Conspicuous” is indeed the right descriptor for this kind of consumption.

Consumer desires are inextricably linked to the urban environment (Liechty 2003, 94). The village or outer island offers little in terms of consumer goods. The rural *fale koloa* provides basic necessities: tin fish, tinned meat, matches, soap, kerosene, mosquito coils, cigarettes often sold by the unit, and so on. More specifically, buying what one needs at the village store is a far cry from the consumer experience that one might have in the city—that of searching, touching, feeling, comparing, and longing for objects that one cannot (yet) but one day might afford to buy. It is in the city that one hears sales pitches over loudspeakers or FM radio, as the relentless voice of the tout attempts to create an atmosphere of excitement and urgency. Similarly, the attractiveness of the secondhand marketplace resides not only in the fact that one can purchase objects there that are not available in retail stores, but also in the experience of “shopping” that the market offers: browsing, comparing, feeling, and discussing (Besnier 2004).

Inventive Resource Management

The third notable characteristic of the practice of middle-classness is an inventive approach to resource seeking, particularly in the entrepreneurial ventures that people engage in. Emulating the practices of successful entrepreneurs, which in turn are mimetic of the practices of European traders of yesteryear, middle-class families strategize and diversify. But instead of capital-backed entrepreneurial ventures, their activities are more accurately described as “multiple modes of livelihood,” finding creative ways of earning a living and seizing opportunities as they come along, strategies akin to those that analysts have encountered among African urban middle classes (eg, Owusu 2007). Boys and men may thus still grow food for the family’s consumption and for sale at the produce market. They grow kava and harvest sandalwood, while women process mulberry tree bark in partial preparation for tapa making, and all of these products are sold in

local markets or, if the opportunity arises, overseas, where the prices they fetch are several times higher than in Tonga. The family car may double as a taxi, and the family may sell birthday cakes on the side. People add ventures to and drop them from their repertoire as they respond to and create circumstances. Thus, if the cost of maintaining a taxi base at the airport becomes unaffordable, a taxi driver may limit his taxi driving to the town. Similarly, the need to take care of an elderly mother may motivate a very talented young woman to accept only temporary work instead of the civil service or industry employment she qualifies for. A family member may travel overseas and take on temporary farm or factory work, more or less legally, for a couple of months. If times are hard, the traditional valuables (*koloa faka-Tonga*) that women manufacture and of which all families try to keep a stock in reserve, can be sold or pawned (Addo and Besnier 2008). Secondhand consumer goods, primarily clothing, that overseas relatives send back can be sold at the *fea*, perhaps after a stint wearing them (Besnier 2004). Finally, monetary remittances from overseas relatives provide a sometimes dependable, sometimes negligible complement to other economic and entrepreneurial activities (figure 6).

A particularly interesting kind of middle-class economic activity is framed in traditional terms of assistance to the less fortunate, referred to with the ubiquitous term *tokoni* (helping). *Tokoni* encompasses any gift that flows down the ranking system (or that defines the recipient as subordinate to giver), ranging from overseas aid to gift giving at feasts. Some pawnshop owners, for example, refer to their activities as *tokoni*, because they help people meet their obligations and goals; this moves to the background the fact that they also make a healthy profit from the “help” they provide. Another example is form filling, which includes visa or bank loan applications and other bureaucratic forms that require the increasing levels of competence and resources that are embedded in the middle-class experience. People with these assets provide services to those who are not familiar with bureaucratic paperwork, for a fee, while still framing their activities as *tokoni*. Some do it casually, while others, more entrepreneurially, have set up businesses designed to fill out customers’ visa applications, arrange their flight bookings, and loan them their fares and “pocket money.” When I filled out US visitor visa applications for two friends—a complex process that requires not only a computer, competence in bureaucratic English, and Internet access, but also a follow-up trip to Fiji for the applicants to appear in person for a consular interview—friends joked that I should set up a business and charge money for my *tokoni*. Framing



FIGURE 6 Multiple modes of livelihood: small store selling secondhand clothing, bundles of mature coconuts, and (on the table in the shadow) a variety of cosmetics, as well as renting DVDs. Photo by author. (Nuku'alofa, April 2008)

business activities in terms of *tokoni* bestows a particularly Tongan twist on modern practices, enabling entrepreneurs to appear to stay grounded in *anga faka-Tonga* while profiting from those who are less fortunate, and in the process widening the gap between those who have bureaucratic know-how, capital, computers, and access to the Internet, and those who don't.

Commoditization of Social Relations

The fourth salient characteristic of middle-class life in Tonga is a gradual commoditization of social relations, as already illustrated by the previous ethnographic vignettes. As their counterparts in late capitalism have been doing for a while (Hochschild 2003), middle-class Tongans today are replacing goods and services that, for their parents, were part and parcel of traditional structures of kinship-based reciprocity with goods and services that they buy. People are thus employing gardeners to do the yard work, housekeepers to keep homes clean, and security guards to protect property, invoking, like their middle-class counterparts in the West, the notion that they are too busy or too anxious to meet such needs

themselves. The increasing visibility of security services, which a few years ago only provided bouncers for bars and discos, is in response to another “service industry,” that of the “redistribution of wealth” through house break-ins targeting the well-to-do. Such crimes are becoming more and more frequent, brazen, and violent. Middle-class Tongans attribute the problem to young Tongan men who have returned from overseas, particularly *tīpota* (deportees), a new category that is increasingly blamed for all of society’s ills. However, some aspects of break-ins are steeped in the local context, such as thieves’ particular fondness for *koloa faka-Tonga* (Tongan valuables), which they try to sell, pawn, or export.

Children, who in the village continue to be under the care of large networks of relatives and neighbors (Morton 1996), in the urban context are taken to the kindergarten in the morning, because grandmothers are no longer available to perform child-minding duties, or in some cases are too busy running their own business ventures. Alternatively, in even sharper contrast to the village, a paid babysitter not related through kinship may be hired to take care of the children (and the classic situation of the child’s father running off with the babysitter also sometimes occurs). Until recently, young salaried people moving to Nuku‘alofa from other islands normally stayed with relatives. The problem with this arrangement was that they were expected to support both their immediate family back home and their host family. Increasingly, young people moving to town are instead setting up households with housemates in rental houses, thus replacing one set of kinship obligations with rent; this practice also ensures that the immediacy of a host family’s demands does not take precedence over obligations to the family back in the islands. The *koloa faka-Tonga* (Tongan valuables), which in the old order were produced by older women of the extended family, are increasingly purchased from strangers, particularly as demand increases due to “inflation” in prestation at weddings and funerals. The pawnshops that dot the landscape do a brisk and very lucrative business selling unclaimed valuables that have been left as collateral, which they do not even have to advertise (Addo and Besnier 2008).

All in all, these examples illustrate the gradual displacement among the middle class of structures of reciprocity and obligation. In contrast, these structures still dominate the lives of the poor, whose only reliable source of wealth continues to be “tradition” (Hau‘ofa 1987, 12). Reciprocity is unlikely to be completely replaced any time soon, although it is certainly being restructured, along with its importance and its location in people’s

social lives. The restructuring of reciprocity goes hand-in-hand with the clear boundaries that entrepreneurs seek to draw between family and business relations—boundaries they see as being key to success (compare Gewertz and Errington 1999 on Papua New Guinea). As a retail entrepreneur famously declared in the 1990s, “‘Oku ou fāmili pē ki he kapa ika mo e māpakupaku” (My only relatives are the tin fish and cabin biscuit), indicating that she did not mix business transactions with kinship-based reciprocity.

A dramatic example of the commoditization of social relations is the emergence of catering and “event management” ventures, on which busy middle-class Tongans rely to orchestrate important traditional events like funerals and weddings, as well as newer types of functions like birthday parties, anniversaries, retirement parties, and even divorce parties. Until recently, funerals and weddings required the mobilization of many family members to feed large numbers of attendees. Funerals in particular have traditionally involved a nightlong wake called ‘*āpō*, during which people have to be fed all night (the ‘*āpō* tradition began with the wake of Queen Sālote III in 1965 and mimetically trickled down to commoners [Kaeppeler 1978]). Some families are now replacing the ‘*āpō* with an ‘*ā*‘*aho*, which is held during the daytime (‘*ā* [awake], *pō* [night], ‘*aho* [day]), in the hope that it will be cheaper, because it is shorter in duration and young men cannot so easily steal food under the cover of darkness.

Tongan funerals, which are central to *anga faka-Tonga*, can be extremely onerous. Resourceful entrepreneurs are now taking over the task of organizing and feeding, banking on the fact that families “cannot be bothered” (in the words of one of them) to try to mobilize the services of relatives, to whom they would then be indebted. One entrepreneur includes in his services the overseeing of the proper traditional folding and presentation of mats and tapa cloth (*koloa faka-Tonga*) to the high ranking—knowledge that he has acquired while being brought up among the elite. Many urban Tongans no longer have such knowledge, and because relatives are no longer directly involved, it is no longer readily available from older, traditionalist family members. What is being commoditized here is not the knowledge of the new and far away (Appadurai 1986, 41–56), but expertise in traditional prestation. Another caterer, who organizes the feeding of large crowds at family functions, finds her clientele principally among her own relatives. This is evidence of two points, one being that people generally prefer to patronize relatives’ businesses, and the other being that business relationships are displacing family obligations. These examples

demonstrate the deep interpenetration of “tradition” and “modernity,” as heralded by urban Tongans who have the means to replace relatives’ labor with purchased labor.

LINKING THE OLD TO THE NEW

Diaspora has a profound effect on a society, no matter how much effort is made by those in power to maintain the status quo. This effect is less likely to be a revolutionary transformation (as some of the leaders of 16/11 seem to have believed) than a gradual change in which the old generates its own transformations. It is also clear that it is not just people who engender historical transformation, but a vast and complex system of agentive entities (to allude to Bruno Latour’s 1988 insights on this topic) including people, objects, circumstances, places, and vectors. The middle classes in Tonga are thus *agents* of transformation—as when they hire an event manager to orchestrate Grandma’s funeral—as much as their actions are the *products* of transformations—as when they organize their economic lives in terms of cosmopolitan possibilities opened to them by previous generations of villagers. It is the role of social scientists to be cognizant of these complexities, and not to try to understand social formations in terms that are too simplistic to capture the dynamics at play, such as searching for a Tongan middle class in political protests that are only vaguely related to social formations, or in a sense of class consciousness that does not even operate among the middle classes in societies where the very notion of social class originated.

Taking inspiration from the marriage of Marxist and Weberian models of social class, I have identified four important characteristics constitutive of the Tongan middle class, in the sense that they both define and are defined by what it means to be middle class in Tonga. These characteristics are an intense awareness of the importance of the extralocal for the local; a valorization of consumption and of the performance of consumption; an engagement with multiple modes of livelihood; and a commoditization of structures of reciprocity and obligation. None of these characteristics is either wholly Weberian or wholly Marxist, as they all have both material and ideational dimensions. Each of them potentially contrasts Tongan middle classes to different entities. Thus, being aware of the extralocal and engaging in multiple modes of livelihood are characteristics that both middle-class and poor Tongans share, but they help us contrast middle-class Tongans from, say, middle-class North Americans or Japanese, for

whom the extralocal is of no or little relevance to self-definition. In contrast, awareness of the extralocal finds tantalizing echoes in other small-scale postcolonial settings (eg, Freeman 2008 on Barbados). On the other hand, consumption and commoditization do distinguish Tongans who can afford to consume and are willing and able to commoditize social relations from other Tongans, while these characteristics also bring out the commonalities between middle-class Tongans and middle-class people elsewhere in the world.

Conspicuously absent from my analysis is an exploration of the way in which middle-classness in Tonga “maps onto” political struggles, simply because it does not do so, either in Tonga or elsewhere. The middle classes in Tonga are politically “all over the map”—as they are in industrial societies. Some middle-class people are reformists, while others are deeply conservative, and many are politically in-between, just as they are socially in-between, having different views on different issues, changing their minds according to the context, or simply being unsure. Politics in Tonga is as complex and deeply enmeshed with persons as in other parts of the Pacific, hence politicians’ frequent and sometimes surprising fence jumping. Seeking the emergence of a middle class in political movements is both theoretically problematic and irrelevant to this particular situation.

My characterization of contemporary Tongan life may seem at odds with ethnographic works that have emphasized historical continuity, including, for example, two relatively recent monographs with the telltale words “persistence” and “perenniality” in their respective titles (Evans 2001; van der Grijp 2004). Works such as Tēvita Ka‘ili’s compelling analysis document the deeply empathetic ties that Tongans maintain with one another in the diaspora, which they term *tauhi vā* (to nurture social relations) (Ka‘ili 2005). I have no doubt that many forces are at play, in Tonga and particularly in the Tongan diaspora, to keep alive the prescriptive tenets of *anga faka-Tonga*—principles of mutual respect (*fefaka‘apa‘apa‘aki*), empathy (*fe‘ofa‘aki*), and mutual help (*fetokoni‘aki*). Modernity, as many have shown, is anything but a unilinear process with a single predictable outcome, and it is as likely to engender affirmations of continuity as it is to create change. In the Tongan context, discourses of continuity are strongly supported by hegemonic ideology, such that one of the oft-cited arguments against political reform goes roughly like this: “Tonga is a small country, away from everything, steeped in tradition, so don’t bring ideas of democracy from larger countries.” (It is of course none of these things.) I have argued in this paper, perhaps against the grain of most other analyses of

contemporary Tonga, for a more complex approach, attentive to the forces of both tradition and modernity, and attuned to a material and ideological politics of interpersonal relations that is more subtle than strikes, protests, and riots, yet possibly just as consequential. This approach also demands that, for example, empathy and competition, or tradition and modernity, be carefully located on a sociocultural map.

In a related fashion, I have insisted in the course of my discussion that social class is not replacing rank in Tonga. Limitations of space preclude me from analyzing here the organization of rank in Tonga, other than to say that rank, and in particular Tongan commoners' relationship to the royal family and nobility, has undergone profound transformations in recent years, transformations that are related precisely to the rise of the middle class. What I find particularly interesting is not so much the fact that rank as a way of organizing society coexists more or less comfortably with social class as a way of organizing society, but that certain constitutive aspects of rank enable the formation of other social arrangements. I have mentioned mimesis, an important aspect of the working of rank that also underlies the conspicuous consumption and "rationalization" that middle-class people engage in. I conclude with another example. Analysts of the Tongan past have highlighted the fierce battles that elites waged, the plots and the conspiracies, and the competition among chieftains and contenders to chieftainship (Marcus 1978b; Wood-Ellem 2007). These features of Tongan history are instances of what Irving Goldman famously called "status rivalry" (1970), such rivalries "hav[ing] constituted a persistent theme in Polynesian societies over a long term" (Howard and Borofsky 1989, 248). Status rivalry motivated, among other things, strategic marriage alliances designed to enhance the sacredness and power of persons and lineages (eg, Biersack 1996; Bott 1981; Herda 2007). However, we know next to nothing of the role of commoners in these dealings, other than the fact that they were undoubtedly quite incidental to them. But that commoners today do engage in status rivalry, with one another and now with those of higher status than themselves, should not come as a surprise.

This rivalry, which is equally engrained in the Tongan past as it has acquired new forms, manifests itself at the very core of the middle class, for example, in people's constant evaluation of each other's words and actions against material evidence of status. However, these dynamics inevitably fuel other projects and experiences, such as the resentment of those whose claims of dignity are not heeded by others, the disillusionment of

those who struggle for a living in an urban context in which money is scarce and growing food has lost the dignity it once had, and the unreasonable expectation that “democracy” will engender wealth redistribution. On a more sinister note, they also underlie political maneuverings that derail promising calls for political reform and incite disaffected youth to burn down the town.

* * *

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Note

1 Development geographers Geoffrey Bertram and Ray Watters coined the acronym “MIRAB” (Migrations, Remittances, overseas Aid, and state Bureaucracy) to characterize the economic underpinnings of Pacific Island microstates like Tonga, which they described as stable over time despite their apparent lack of viability (Bertram and Watters 1985; see also Bertram 2006; Poirine 1998; and many others). While this model has generated vigorous debate among development experts, particularly Down Under, it has generally not captured anthropologists’ imagination, at least in the metropolitan traditions of the discipline. For example, a search I conducted in April 2008 on the term “MIRAB” in AnthroSource (an Internet portal that combs the complete content of thirty-two key North American anthropology journals) returned one mention of the term in an article and two in reviews. The reason for this interest differential, besides possible academic provincialism, is the fact that, while MIRAB may be a useful top-

down descriptor of Pacific economies, it elides Islanders' agentive role in the conduct of their economic lives. The model portrays Islanders as passive recipients of overseas money, contrary to the agentive role I document here, and confines them to an inappropriate reactive utilitarianism (compare Connell 2007, 130; Evans 1999), depicting them as people killing time around branches of Western Union Money Transfer, waiting for remittances from their overworked and underpaid relatives from Auckland, Sydney, and Los Angeles. At the same time, the model fails to address the fact that migrations, remittances, overseas aid, and bureaucracy benefit constituencies in divergent ways, with aid and bureaucracy, for instance, benefiting traditional elites and the upper echelons of the middle class, while certain forms of migration and remittances serve as the sole source of survival for the lower social strata, as Andrew Needs documented two decades ago (1988, 122–123).

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Abstract

The formation of social classes in Pacific Islands societies and in their diasporas continues to raise theoretical questions about the nature of social classes and their relationship to prior forms of social organization. In Tonga, middle classes both reproduce aspects of the older rank-based system with which they continue to coexist and innovate new forms of acting and being, many of which emerged with

the diasporic explosion of the society. While “middle-classness” is fragile and shifting, it is constituted by four important characteristics: an intense awareness of the extralocal; a valorization of consumption; multiple modes of livelihood; and the commoditization of structures of reciprocity. These characteristics form a basis for comparison of Tongan middle classes with non-middle classes locally and with middle classes in other societies of the Pacific and beyond.

KEYWORDS: social class, diaspora, modernity, cosmopolitanism, consumption, commoditization, Tonga