



## Social Contracts Under Stress: The Middle Classes of America, Europe, and Japan at the Turn of the Century

From Russell Sage Foundation

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### Social Contracts Under Stress: The Middle Classes of America, Europe, and Japan at the Turn of the Century From Russell Sage Foundation

The years following World War II saw a huge expansion of the middle classes in the world's industrialized nations, with a significant part of the working class becoming absorbed into the middle class. Although never explicitly formalized, it was as though a new social contract called for government, business, and labor to work together to ensure greater political freedom and more broadly shared economic prosperity. For the most part, they succeeded. In *Social Contracts Under Stress*, eighteen experts from seven countries examine this historic transformation and look ahead to assess how the middle class might fare in the face of slowing economic growth and increasing globalization.

The first section of the book focuses on the differing experiences of Germany, Britain, France, the United States, and Japan as they became middle-class societies. The British working classes, for example, were slowest to consider themselves middle class, while in Japan by the 1960s, most workers had abandoned working-class identity. The French remain more fragmented among various middle classes and resist one homogenous entity. Part II presents compelling evidence that the rise of a huge middle class was far from inclusive or free of social friction. Some contributors discuss how the social contract reinforced long-standing prejudices toward minorities and women. In the United States, Ira Katznelson writes, Southern politicians used measures that should have promoted equality, such as the GI bill, to exclude blacks from full access to opportunity. In her review of gender and family models, Chiara Saraceno finds that Mediterranean countries have mobilized the power of the state to maintain a division of labor between men and women. The final section examines what effect globalization might have on the middle class. Leonard Schoppa's careful analysis of the relevant data shows how globalization has pushed "less skilled workers down and more skilled workers up out of a middle class that had for a few decades been home to both." Although Europe has resisted the rise of inequality more effectively than the United States or Japan, several contributors wonder how long that resistance can last.

*Social Contracts Under Stress* argues convincingly that keeping the middle class open and inclusive in the face of current economic pressures will require a collective will extending across countries. This book provides an invaluable guide for assessing the issues that must be considered in such an effort.

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**Editorial Review**

Review

"A truly outstanding anthology that convinces by virtue of its intellectual rigor and cohesion." -- *Educational Book Review, November-December, 2002*

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