

Inquiring Minds topic – 10 June 2016

Ed Thomson, Moderator

The Middle Class

Questions to consider:

1) what is the middle class?

a) is there a lower class?

b) is there an upper class?

2) should the definitions be:

a) economic?

b) social?

c) educational?

d) other or a combination

3) Politicians who decry the status of the middle class are saying what about the lower or upper classes?

4) Should a policy be created to move people from the lower class to the middle class? what would such a policy be?

Is the U.S. Ready for Post-Middle-Class Politics?

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On April 12 last year, Hillary Clinton formally announced her run for the presidency by posting a [two-minute video on YouTube](#). For the first minute and a half, Clinton was nowhere to be seen. Instead, the video showed a montage of a dozen or so Clinton supporters: a middle-aged white woman tending to her garden; two Hispanic brothers starting a business; a pregnant young black woman and her husband unpacking boxes in a sun-dappled suburban living room; a burly, bullet-headed white man surveying an American-flag-draped warehouse.

It was a carefully constructed portrait of the American middle class, or the parts of it that tend to vote Democratic — like the patchwork of Carhartt and Ann Taylor that Barack Obama gathered around himself for a speech in Cincinnati early in the 2012 campaign, when he [proclaimed himself](#) a “warrior for the middle class.” American politicians genuflect toward the middle class so reflexively that failing to do so in a speech or a statement about the economy seems almost heretical — which it turned out was the most remarkable thing about Clinton’s video.

When the candidate materialized, she instead said this: “Everyday Americans need a champion — and I want to be that champion.” Her omission of “middle class” was intentional. [Amy Chozick of The New York Times wrote](#) that the campaign planned to “shy away from the characterization ‘middle class’ — because, her advisers say, the term no longer connotes a stable life — and instead use the term ‘everyday Americans.’”

Joel Benenson, Clinton’s chief strategist and Obama’s lead pollster, has thought a great deal about issues of class. In 2011, he embarked on an extensive project in which researchers conducted repeated interviews with about 100 middle-income, middle-aged swing voters in the suburbs of Columbus, Ohio; Denver; and Orlando, Fla. “It’s been valuable,” he told me recently, “because it’s important to know what kind of conventional assumptions about the middle class hold up and which don’t. There’s no question that there was a massive recalibration after the financial crash. People felt very strongly that the foundations — what they had believed they would achieve by working hard, doing things right — were not the same as they had been before.” Public-opinion surveys, too, show that something has shifted, sharply, in the American self-definition. Last spring, [a Gallup poll](#) found that the percentage of respondents who identified as middle class or upper middle class dropped 12 percent since the 2008 financial crisis; nearly half of those polled identified themselves as either working or lower class.

But Clinton’s use of “everyday Americans” proved to be short-lived, perhaps because of its undeniably leaden ring. (Has anyone but Sly Stone ever self-identified as “everyday”?) By September, Clinton had dropped the phrase entirely. Campaign officials [conceded to The Times](#) that it was confusing and, maybe, a bit too close to Walmart’s “Everyday Low Prices.”

The whole episode revealed a fundamental tension underlying this year’s anomalous presidential contest. America’s self-image as a middle-class nation is so deeply ingrained in the country’s politics that we don’t often stop to think what, precisely, that means: whether it defines a concrete socioeconomic identity — a country where most people are neither very rich nor very poor — or an aspiration, the notion that if you “work hard and

play by the rules,” as Clinton put it the first time she ran for president, you’re entitled to at least a modest prosperity. “Everyday Americans” was an attempt to acknowledge that the gap between these two ideas has widened to the point that ignoring it seems out of touch. Yet in its reversal, the campaign inadvertently revealed just how ill equipped American politics is for a post-middle-class nation — how deeply the way the country speaks of itself is tied up with these aspirations, even as more and more of its citizens come to see them as out of reach.

During Donald Trump’s ascent in the polls last fall, the most confounding question in politics was who, exactly, his supporters were. A couple of weeks before the New Hampshire primary in February, Byron York, a journalist well sourced among Republican operatives, crisscrossed the state asking party grandees: “Do you know anyone who supports Donald Trump?” “In more cases than not,” he [wrote in The Washington Examiner](#), “actually, in nearly all the cases, the answer was no.”

As the first election results and exit polls came in, Trump’s voters seemed to be mostly high-school-educated white men, mostly making less than \$50,000 a year. Perhaps more surprising, this description also fits, with some tailoring, the voters who have propelled the candidacy of Bernie Sanders. In mostly white New Hampshire, Sanders beat Clinton among voters making less than \$50,000 a year by a staggering 33 percentage points — twice as big as his margin with voters who made more than that — and by 36 percentage points among voters without college degrees. In Michigan, whose suburban voters are one of the most--watched barometers in American politics, the margins were narrower but still notable: Sanders won white voters without a college degree by 15 percentage points, and voters making less than \$50,000 by 3 percentage points.

These insurgent candidates are capturing one of the two demographic groups that converged in the great middle-class experiment that began seven decades ago. When people spoke of the middle class in the years immediately after World War II, they were typically talking about the group identified by the sociologist C.Wright Mills in his 1951 book, “White Collar”: the usually college-educated, deskbound employees of a newly technocratic, corporate economy. It was only a few years later that the definition was generally extended to include skilled blue-collar workers, who were now earning solid incomes on account of a booming postwar industrial economy and of unions that made sure their members got an equitable piece of it.

The confluence of these two groups — a vision of insurance salesmen and machine operators, mowing the lawns of adjoining split-level ranches and talking about Sunday’s game — felt extraordinary even in its own time, seemingly incontrovertible proof that American capitalism worked. “The fact is that America’s booming new middle-income class consists, to a startling extent, of groups hitherto identified as proletarians,” Fortune reported in 1954. Instead of overthrowing the bourgeoisie, the proletariat had joined it.

The new middle-class utopia did, of course, exclude most nonwhite Americans. Although average incomes for nonwhites increased at about the same rate as incomes for whites in the postwar years, in 1959 the black poverty rate was [still 56 percent](#), and blacks on average earned 53 percent what whites did. What could be said for the midcentury middle class, though, is that it generally worked astonishingly well for those who were lucky enough to be part of it — particularly for blue-collar workers. Probably no one in American history has achieved prosperity with the velocity of the men who grew up destitute in the Depression and, by their 30s, had factory jobs that paid (in 2016 dollars) upward of \$50,000 a year.

The white- and blue-collar middle classes each tended to vote Democratic, which made sense: The new middle class’s good fortune was the combined product of the New Deal, postwar Keynesian economic policy, the G.I. Bill, organized labor and government-backed mortgages. But in retrospect, the Democrats’ hold on the white middle class was balanced precariously on the racial status quo — which, by the mid-1960s, was

breaking apart. George Wallace, the segregationist Democratic governor of Alabama who ran for president in 1964 in protest of Lyndon B. Johnson's turn toward civil rights, performed well not just in the South but also in white blue-collar enclaves in the few Northern states where he was on the primary ballot. When he ran again as an independent in 1968, the members of the United Auto Workers Union local at the General Motors plant in Flint, Mich., voted to endorse him.

By 1984, the extent of the damage to the Democrats' postwar coalition had become clear. That spring, Ronald Reagan's campaign aired its "Morning in America" ad, a Vaseline-lensed montage of overwhelmingly white suburban prosperity. Walter Mondale — the son of a small-town Minnesota minister whose politics radiated an austere, Scandinavian morality — spent the last days of his campaign unfurling increasingly dire pictures of urban and rural poverty and beseeching people to vote for an ["America of fairness."](#) Speaking bitterly of Reagan's commercial, he [told a crowd](#) at a church in Cleveland: "It's all picket fences and puppy dogs. No one's hurting. No one's alone. No one's hungry. No one's unemployed. No one gets old. Everybody's happy." But Americans liked the picket fences and puppy dogs. Reagan swept every state in the country save Minnesota and the District of Columbia.

Not long afterward, Stanley Greenberg, a 40-year-old Yale political scientist who moonlighted as a political pollster, was contacted by a group of Democratic Party and union officials in Michigan. They asked him to help explain what had happened that November in Macomb County outside Detroit. In 1960, Macomb voted for John F. Kennedy by a larger margin than any suburban county in the country. In 1984, it voted for Reagan by a margin of 33 percentage points. "The sense was that if we could figure out what happened in Macomb County, Democrats would go a long way toward righting the ship," Rick Wiener, the chairman of the Michigan Democratic Party at the time, told me recently.

In one sense, what had happened was obvious. The postwar suburbs in general had been a racial fortress, their homogeneity enforced by a web of government policies and unofficial restrictions making it difficult for nonwhites to own property in them, and few more so than Detroit's. The white ex-Democrats whom Greenberg's team interviewed, he later wrote, "expressed a profound distaste for black Americans, a sentiment that pervaded almost everything they thought about government and politics. Blacks constituted the explanation for their vulnerability and for almost everything that had gone wrong in their lives; not being black was what constituted being middle class."

Still, Greenberg noted, Macomb voters had not defected en masse from the Democratic Party until after years of worsening economic circumstances — and until they perceived the Democrats as not only having taken up the banner of the urban poor and nonwhites but also having abandoned the white middle class. "These voters wondered why they weren't the central drama of the Democratic Party," Greenberg wrote. Greenberg suggested that Democrats offer a kind of grand bargain to the white middle-class voters he called "Reagan Democrats": The Democrats would reinstate the middle class as the gravitational center of the party's economic policy if those voters accepted an expanded definition of who was included in the middle class.

Among the Democrats who took Greenberg's advice was Gov. Bill Clinton of Arkansas, who used the Macomb study as the playbook for his 1992 presidential campaign, which he built around the theme of "the forgotten middle class." Speaking to voters in Macomb County in March 1992, he offered a [near-verbatim recitation](#) of Greenberg's proposal: "The one thing that it's going to take to bring this country together is somebody's got to come back to the so-called Reagan Democratic area and say: 'Look, I'll give you your values back. I'll restore the economic leadership, I'll help you build the middle class back.' But you've got to say, 'O.K., let's do it with everybody in this country.'"

You can see, in Clinton's 1992 campaign, the basic architecture of how politicians, and many Americans, talk about the middle class today — not just the more diverse picture of American prosperity that politicians of both parties must at least pay lip service to, but also a more expansive economic definition of what the middle class is. In the first year of his presidency, Clinton created a new top income-tax bracket, starting at \$250,000 (nearly \$420,000 in today's dollars). This is as close as we have to a [concrete upper bound](#) for what counts, in political discourse, as the middle class; the “middle class” tax policies of Obama, Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders all apply to earners with incomes of \$250,000 or less.

Bill Clinton was acknowledging, presciently, a skewing of the American economy that has only worsened since his presidency, the steady pulling away of the superrich from everyone else — the division between the 99 percent and the 1 percent. But the more politically meaningful divergence may be one happening further down the economic spectrum. Richard V. Reeves, a scholar at the Brookings Institution, argues that the most significant dividing line in recent American experience isn't between the 99 percent and the 1 percent, but between the 80 percent and the 20 percent — a group that includes not just the very rich but also people most Americans would identify as [upper middle class](#). This is where you draw the line if you're interested not in absolute wealth but in the trajectory of wealth — not whether you have a yacht docked in St. Bart's, but whether you're doing better than you were five years ago.

If the phrase “everyday Americans” tried to preserve a sense of common identity while acknowledging the fragmented economic realities of the 21st-century middle class, it also demonstrated just how difficult that is to do. Consider the different experiences of two groups that sit mostly within what the Democrats' tax policies, at least, define as the middle class: The top 20 percent saw its average real household income rise to \$185,000 in 2013 from about \$109,000 a year in 1967. The middle 40 percent saw their real incomes rise, too, but to only \$68,000 from \$52,000 — the equivalent of a \$348-a-year raise. The top 20 percent is also more likely than the middle 40 percent to believe that hard work gets you ahead in life.

Fissures have also deepened between the two halves of the postwar middle class: between college-educated, mostly white-collar workers and high-school-educated, mostly blue-collar workers. According to a [Brookings study released last year](#), men and women with bachelor's degrees earned a median of 7 percent and 16 percent more in 2013 than they did in 1990. Women who either didn't attend college or attended but didn't graduate made just 3 percent more — up to a meager \$29,500 — and those men made 13 percent less: a median of \$40,700 a year, down from \$47,100 a year.

The aspirational idea of the middle class spoke to the notion that even if Americans were in various stages of prosperity, they were all understood to be heading in the same general direction. But what happens when that's no longer true? On one end of the “middle class” spectrum is a dream inexorably receding from view; on the other is a pair of socioeconomic blinders obscuring the harsher economic realities of those further down the scale. “The upper middle class are surprised by the rise of Trump,” Reeves told me. “The actual middle class are surprised we're surprised.”

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What Happened to Worcester?

The house existed, in my mind, as an idea, almost a dream, before I ever discovered the actual place: “Bumpa’s house,” the home of my father’s grandfather. It represented, in the telling of my father and other older relatives, the kind of place you’d get to live in if you worked hard. It was huge, on a hill, with a big yard, and every Christmas it was filled with toys: “Bicycles and skis and basketballs,” my dad, Jack, now 79, recalled. “And a croquet set.”

On Zillow these days, its value is estimated at just over \$200,000, which happens to be almost exactly the median price for an existing house in the United States. This seems fitting. For my father’s family, the dreams fulfilled by this house had meant a climb from bare subsistence to the middle. This house was the middle; Worcester, where the house still stands, was the middle. The life that Bumpa and Narny built here was the middle. And that, to them and to their children and grandchildren, was a triumph, the goal of a good life.

Having studied the American economy for years, I’ve often reflected on how much my father’s family perfectly models the middle-class story — how closely the details of their lives illustrate the bigger economic forces around them. The way I read economic history, the middle class was a driving force in the American economy for about a century, starting in the second half of the 1800s. Its growth created a virtuous circle: The more people moved into the middle, the more money they made and spent, and the richer the country became, which made more room for more people to move into the middle too.

But in learning about my family’s economic history, I’ve also come to understand how deeply their story is embedded in the history of a place, of one particular city created by and for the middle class. When I mention Worcester to people from New England, they often give a knowing nod or laugh — this unlovely, down-on-its-luck city of dead industry and collapsing buildings. But Worcester was an engine for betterment until the middle of the 20th century, a magical place that transformed lost and impoverished lives.

A few weeks ago, I called my dad to relate what I had learned about his grandparents, George and Mildred Bestick. He told me he knew almost nothing about them before they got to Worcester, where they had settled by 1917. Bumpa and Narny existed as if they had no history. As a child, all my dad knew was that the Bestick name was Irish and that Narny, born Mildred Bailey, came from an old, proud New England family with Mayflower ancestry. They were respectable, clearly. Just look at the massive house and Bumpa’s three-piece suits and Narny’s quiet devotion to her Baptist church.

Only recently, I learned that this respectability was actually self-reinvention, built on top of origins in poverty and chaos. My great-grandparents’ economic journey was one that’s harder to make today, in part because there are fewer “middle” cities now. Even during the middle-class heyday of the 20th century, they couldn’t have done it without Worcester.

Douglas Court: Worcester is filled with contradictory sights: crumbling infrastructure, decaying homes, yet fresh paint and siding and other signs that someone is making some money, trying to create a good home. This is the tension in much of the city — collapse of an old way of working combined with a new, hard-to-discern promise — that makes Worcester so representative of the overall U.S. economy. William Mebane for The New York Times

There is no single technical definition of the middle class — or even consensus on what “middle” refers to. Many use it in the context of income distribution, to designate the range in which people live at or near the median income. But I believe that definition misses a crucial, historical role played by what we call the middle class today. In its earlier incarnations, the members of the middle class were situated between a tiny powerful

elite and much larger numbers of landless laborers and subsistence farmers who struggled to feed their families. Most people typically did not buy anything manufactured or delivered from afar; their food came from what they or their neighbors grew; they made their own homes and clothes. They operated largely outside of a money economy.

For nearly as far back as we have economic records, we can see evidence of a third, sometimes very small group. These middlemen were crucial: They filled an essential intermediary role, turning raw materials into finished goods. Some were craftspeople, making pottery, textiles, processed foods or other luxuries. Others were traders, transporting raw materials and finished goods over long distances. The middle classes varied by country and era, but they shared certain characteristics. Perhaps the most profound was a unique sort of control over their destinies. In premodern life, the middle people weren't so poor as to be stuck permanently in misery, but neither were they bound by the social codes and strictures of nobility that tended to accompany wealth. They were often more exposed to market forces; their livelihoods, to a great degree, depended on an ability to spot opportunity and sell the right things to the right people at the right price.

We often attribute the Industrial Revolution to a handful of brilliant inventors who created the steam engine, the power loom and other transformative technologies. But many economic historians point out that these developments required a broader middle class, characterized by education, a feeling of opportunity and a lack of deep commitment to the existing socioeconomic order. The Industrial Revolution could just as easily be called the middle-class revolution. Those intermediaries, who converted raw materials into usable consumer goods, took over the economy. We know that story: mass production, global trade, faster innovation ensues. It's possible to have an endless chicken-and-egg debate over whether the middle classes created or were created by the Industrial Revolution. But the answer, plainly, is both, and for well over a century we lived in a world defined by the middle class.

By the early 1900s — as the people who would become my family were establishing themselves in Worcester — the virtuous circle had begun to take hold nationwide. Factories were growing quickly, offering long-term, decent-paying jobs to former farmers, day laborers and immigrants. As workers earned more money, they bought more goods, which meant the factories got more orders and needed to hire more people. As factories became more sophisticated, they needed a better-educated work force and, indeed, the public-school revolution began, ensuring that the children of the new factory workers would be better educated and better able to make even more money. By the 1930s, the middle class was not just an aspirational destination; it had become a bedrock of the country.

Worcester wasn't anybody's first choice, at least not in my family. The first to arrive were Solomon and Leah Davidson, Jews from Kaunas, Lithuania. Both were born in 1862 and left their homeland sometime in the 1890s as part of the first big wave of Jewish emigrants, fleeing anti-Semitism and poverty. They wandered awhile. They were in England until 1898, but I found no records of what they did there. They appear in New York, then head for Boston. Finally they end up in Worcester, in time for the 1900 federal census, now responsible for seven children. Solomon's occupation is "pedlar — rags" [sic]. Rhonda McClure, who specializes in immigration papers at the New England Historic Genealogical Society, told me that Solomon Davidson, my great-great-grandfather, was one of the poorest, least-connected immigrants she had ever come across. He arrived in America, heading a family of eight, with \$18 to his name, a pittance even then. A mark on his immigration papers suggests that he was taken aside for additional questioning, something McClure says was unusual; immigration officers probably feared he would be a destitute beggar. Once settled in Worcester, he applied for citizenship and presented two witnesses to attest to his decency. One was a liquor salesman, the other a grocer; each said he had met Solomon recently and done business with him — presumably sold him some liquor and groceries or bought some rags — and he hadn't cheated them. McClure says she's never

seen a naturalization document with such tenuous claims. Applicants usually enlist family members or at least a religious figure to serve as character references for them.

Solomon struggled in Worcester. The 1910 census identifies him as a fruit vendor, a notch — but hardly a leap — up the socioeconomic scale, because fruit requires at least some meager capital to invest. By 1923, he was selling tonics, or sketchy medicines, on the street. Yet the family was somehow able to buy one of Worcester's three-decker buildings, which must have felt like a miraculous accomplishment for folks who arrived with nothing a few years earlier. And soon enough, his children were thriving. My great-aunt Ethel once described how she and my great-grandfather, Jacob, would pretend to go to sleep and then sneak out the window to go to the dance halls. Solomon's children began working in late adolescence, but not as street peddlers; his daughters became stenographers and bookkeepers; a son worked in a shoe store. Jacob opened his own tannery. The next generations, the ones that came of age after the 1930s, produced the familiar complement of Jewish immigrant children successes — among them lawyers and accountants and C.E.O.s and a high-level executive at CBS.

Jacob's eventual wife and my great-grandmother, Annabelle Lewis, was another sort of Worcester immigrant. She grew up in a remote corner of Maine, descended from Yankee sailors. Her father was a saloonkeeper; the census says he couldn't read or write. What stories I remember about him are brutal: He was a violent drunk, a horrible father. According to family accounts, she fled early and ended up in Worcester, with little education, no money, no prospects. She worked in a dance hall, dancing with men for money. In December 1916, she and Jacob made a hurried trip to Vermont to be married by a justice of the peace. Three months later, my grandfather Stanley was born. One of Jacob's sisters told me that their father, upon hearing his son married a non-Jew, ripped his clothes and proclaimed him dead to the family. Jacob and Annabelle moved to Rhode Island for a time but returned to Worcester a few years later to open the tannery. They were beginning to repair relationships with the family when Jacob became sick with tuberculosis. He died in 1924, when my grandfather Stanley was 7. A few years later, Stanley met a young girl at school, Helen Bestick. She wrote in her diary, "I met a Jew today."

Helen's family had its own story of Worcester's redemptive powers. Her father, George (the man my dad called Bumpa as a toddler), grew up poor in Braintree, another small industrial city in Massachusetts. Eventually he became an office manager in a razor factory, which, given his background, would have counted as an impressively skilled, sit-down job. At 33, he seemed to be stuck: at home, caring for aging parents; his two siblings had long ago found spouses and moved away. Then he married a 30-year-old widow, Mildred, who had survived a tough life as well. She was born in Plymouth, Mass., where her ancestors, passengers on the Mayflower, had settled centuries before. But by early adulthood, she was with her parents in Braintree, with a failing marriage, a baby and a job as a stitcher in a shoe factory. Before long, her husband and baby both died. Whenever it was she met Bumpa, she would have been considered a spinster with a questionable past, whatever the distinction conferred by her heritage.

Their history makes me love Worcester. These two trapped, poor, broken people somehow met and managed to put all that pain behind and create a new life in what still felt like the fresh, quickly growing frontier of central Massachusetts. Bumpa, following a tip from a minister who had moved to Worcester, seems to have arrived in the city with an office job in hand, at the Heald Machine Company, where he worked until his retirement decades later. A combination of historical luck, a fast-growing economy and his own hard work enabled him to carve out a good life that must have seemed unattainable when he was younger.

My grandparents, Stanley and Helen, had their own hurried wedding in 1936, followed too soon by the birth of a son, my father, Jack. Before long, they had three more children. By then their families were able to help out. Bumpa George got Stanley a job at Heald. It was a great job for a young man with a new family in the midst of

the Depression. He did well there and rose to factory foreman. By the time he retired after 54 years at the company, Stanley owned three homes and vacationed in Europe in the summer. Needless to say, few people dealing with pregnancy in high school today could expect to attain such a good life.

The virtuous circle collapsed by the 1980s. Technological innovations changed factory work. (It's incorrect to say that America doesn't make anything anymore. U.S. manufacturing has grown steadily for the past several decades. Today's factories, however, are filled with very few — albeit highly skilled — employees and lots and lots of machines.) The expansion of global trade meant that low-skilled American workers were competing with low-skilled workers abroad. And many of the country's rules, like union-friendly laws and other protections for workers, were weakened or disappeared.

The forces that would eventually afflict the American middle class came early to Worcester. The development of the Interstate highway system, beginning in the 1950s, and containerized shipping a few years later, meant that factories much farther away could afford to ship to East Coast ports. Manufacturing became more consolidated — Heald Machine, for example, was bought by Cincinnati Milacron, which brought some of its workers (including my grandfather Stanley) to Ohio. There are still factories in Worcester — for example, Norton, one of Worcester's biggest and oldest plants (which was bought by the French conglomerate Saint-Gobain in 1990). But long gone are the days when Worcester's plants offered a decent job to just about anybody willing to put in a hard day's work. New employees looking to join the middle class must have not just a high-school diploma but an associate degree, if not a bachelor's degree.

For all its decline in the second half of the 20th century, Worcester did enjoy one bit of good fortune: In the 1960s, the University of Massachusetts placed its medical school in the city. The school, which continued to grow, brought several generations' worth of high-paying medical jobs and a fair number of lower-paying support positions. Similarly, Worcester's position close to the center of New England has been good for the transportation business. Many of my relatives who stayed in town have worked either in the medical center as nurses or in the transportation field as truck drivers, dispatchers, rail-yard inspectors. These are solid, stable jobs, but they don't enable the kind of jump-up in socioeconomic status that my family experienced many decades ago.

If you drive around Worcester now, it's easy to imagine there is no rising middle class, no aspiration at all. In reality, it's just much harder to tell Worcester's story simply. A century ago, you could have picked any three-decker and immediately grasped the basic life story of all its tenants: where in the world they came from, which factory they worked in, what their hopes and fears were for their children. Today things are not so clear. Deborah Martin, a professor of geography at Clark University in Worcester, has spent years leading students through the city and researching its social dynamics. She knows a fair bit: where the Ghanaians live, how the Latino immigrants are differentiated by country of origin. But she often finds herself noticing newly renovated three-deckers and wondering, who is that? What are they doing?

Worcester reflects what's going on throughout the United States. There are a healthy number of higher-paying jobs. The Worcester area has a disproportionately large community of well-paid medical professionals, from nurses and midwives to physicians and microbiologists; it has a huge number of educators for its population, a result of having nearly a dozen colleges in one medium-size city. But it also has more than the average number of lower-skilled jobs at or near the minimum wage — food-service workers, personal-care aides and a host of other medical-care assistants.

John C. Brown is a professor of economics at Clark and a visiting scholar at the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston. He told me that Worcester is right in the middle when it comes to the current circumstances of once-flourishing manufacturing centers in New England. Brown says one quick way to assess a city's fortunes over

time is to look at its population. Many urban areas in Massachusetts experienced a population collapse in the 1970s and 1980s. But Worcester and some others have had slow and steady growth over the past few decades. Worcester, he notes, can't credit its success to any one industry. It doesn't have, say, Boston's robotics or the tourism of Salem and Lowell. Worcester instead benefits from a whole bunch of things: hospitals, universities and a bit of manufacturing still. Nothing screams at recent immigrants or people struggling in other parts of New England to rush to Worcester to fulfill their dreams. The city's economy is a more complicated tale.

One day recently, I went to see the shuttered Heald Machine factory on the northeast side of town. As I drove past the factory gates, the first shop I noticed, right across the street, had some Arabic writing in the window. I stopped the car and entered a tiny tailor's shop. I met the proprietor, Ahmed Yusef. He grew up in Mosul, Iraq, where he worked with his father, also a tailor. His father had specialized in custom-made men's suits. But after the American invasion, Mosul became a front line in the battle between American and Iraqi forces and Al Qaeda. Nobody wanted men's suits, so Ahmed's father took a contract making uniforms for the Iraqi Army. This landed him on a hit list, and in 2005 the family fled, first to Syria, then to Egypt, worrying all the while that their temporary visa would not be renewed and that they would be sent back to Iraq. In 2012, the family received word that its refugee application to the United States had been approved, and they were offered a chance to resettle in Arizona. Ahmed, thrilled, called the one person he knew in America, an old client who lived in Worcester. Don't go to Arizona, he was told. It's too hot there, and there are no jobs. Move to Worcester, where housing is cheap, and opportunities are plenty.

Ahmed soon found work as a tailor — he's been at Brooks Brothers for three years now. One day, walking with his parents in Worcester's Green Hill Park, his mother pointed out a young Iraqi woman. Now they're married, and they have a newborn daughter and plans for more kids. Ahmed opened his own business, though he still works several shifts a week at Brooks Brothers. He envisions that, one day, he'll have many children, that some of them will even work with him in the tailor shop.

He told me that he has been to New York and Miami. They were beautiful: "Like a dream," he said. But he was always happy to get back to Worcester. Those other cities are too expensive, too busy. "Too much," he said. I said, "You like Worcester." He said: "No, not like. *Love*. I love it. I have a future. New York is for dreams. Worcester is for working."

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