Introduction

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Twenty years ago historians would have been reluctant to use the term "middle class" in defining the social structure of eighteenth-century England. They might have referred to specific occupational groupings or interests—merchants, industrialists, traders—or adopted the more general term "middling sort" to describe the men of predominantly mobile wealth or small landed property who could be distinguished from the aristocracy, the gentry, and the laboring poor. The idea of a "middle class" seemed more appropriate to the nineteenth century, the locus classicus of class conflict, than to the eighteenth, where the social and political preeminence of the landed classes, the pervasiveness of patron-client relations, and the relative absence of large-scale industry precluded its emergence.

Many historians might still concur with this formulation, but two recent developments have served to unsettle it. The first concerns postmodernist readings of class that have questioned the salience and durabiilty of class consciousness in the forging of social identities in even the nineteenth century.[1] The second concerns the reappraisal of the middling or "middle-class" presence in eighteenth-century society, a questioning of its marginal status.[2]

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[1] See Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in Working-Class History, 1832–1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); and Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1840–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[2] See, among others, Peter Earle, *The Making of the English Middle Class: Business, Society and Family Life in London, 1660–1730* (London: Methuen, 1989); Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727–1783* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), and *Public Life and the Propertied Englishman* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991); Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Europa, 1982); and Nicholas Rogers, *Whigs and Cities: Popular Politics in the Age of Walpole and Pitt* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989).

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In challenging the notion that the Hanoverian middle class was securely in the thrall of the landed aristocracy, historians have pointed to its role in the public sphere as consumers, as promoters of charitable projects and a host of voluntary institutions, as lobbyists at Westminster and Whitehall, and as active participants in local government, particularly in the new statutory bodies such as turnpike trusts. Although the middle class rubbed shoulders with the landed gentry on many of these ventures and deffered to its leadership, its subordination was far from absolute. Indeed, its cumulative presence served as a check to aristocratic pretension and power. As consumers, the middle class freed the press from aristocratic patronage. As members of interest groups, it beseiged Parliament for concessions, often with singular success. As associators, councillors, employers, customers, and voters, the middle class freed urban politics from aristocratic patronage and revitalized the countervailing forces to political oligarchy. As the principal although by no means exclusive promoters of domesticity, it helped to shape familial and gender relations among the propertied classes. Although often divided by politics and religion and absorbed by sectional or local interests, so the argument runs, the palpable presence of the middle class was substantial enough to discount the notion of a society bound by vertical ties of dependence to the aristocracy or held within a bipolar field of force in which the dominant players were plebs and patricians.[3]

It is within this historiographical context that readers might profitably assess the following essays. Susan Brown's article reminds us that middle-class indentities were sometimes rooted in traditions of civic governance that were not unsympathetic to the plight of the poor. During the subsistence crises of 1795 and 1800, the merchants and tradesmen of the City of London sought to enforce the Assize of Bread, to establish public mills, and regulate markets in a manner redolent of the moral economy and at odds with the Smithian imperatives of the government. Such a policy was shaped less by a paternalistic ethos than by a commercial one that vindicated fair dealing, honest exchange, and a reasonable profit, a tradition that sought to protect small dealers as much as the consumer from speculative middlemen and producers. In framing her argument this way, Brown questions the overly dichotomous distinction between the moral and market economy that has informed the historical debate over food entitlements in times of dearth and the conventional attribution of the middle-class

[3] For the latest statement of the patrician/plebs polarity, see E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London: Merlin, 1991), chap. 2.

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role as middleman and monopolizer.[4] In her view, the middle class was deeply divided over the politics of dearth, and that in this case, local and national politics—over the appropriate civic response, over the continuance of the war and its concomitant fiscal speculation—fuelled the debate in important ways.

If Brown seeks to rescue one section of the middle class from historical calumny, Margaret Hunt offers a darker side to middle-class mentalities through an investigation of travel literature and what she terms the "commercial gaze." She shows that this discourse, increasingly attuned and consumed by a middle-class audience in an era of imperialist expansion, was far from innocent or enlightening, reworking popularly held beliefs about the political, cultural, and economic superiority of the English in a flagrantly xenophobic manner. Particularly revealing is her deconstruction of racist discourse as a "trope of difference" that enabled the middle class to distance itself from the poor as much as from foreign peoples and contribute to its own self-definition. Equally illuminating is the way in which travelogues were fused with economic tracts to vindicate the exploitation of foreign resources in the name of civilization and progress; and how even Smith's *Wealth of Nations* drew on this genre despite his refusal to draw on racist justifications for economic development beyond Britain. Hunt's article powerfully reminds us of the mercantile preoccupation with "getting" as much as "spending," of the imperial as much as domestic context of middle-class self-definition, and of the deep ironies that accompanied the midcentury calls for a bellicose mercantilism in the name of patriotism, empire, and liberty. If the recent history of the Georgian middle class has been a somewhat bland endorsement of improvement or a hedonistic paen to consumerism, Hunt's article should quickly disabuse us of it.

Chronologically, Hunt's article ends where John Money's begins, with the political and economic uncertainties that accompanied the American war and with the subsequent processes of middle-class cultural formation. By focusing on the rise and fall of the "unfortunate" Reverend William Dodd, who was hanged at Tyburn for forging the signature of his patron, Lord Chesterfield, Money relates in rococo style how the middle class negotiated some of the moral problems confronting a rapidly commercializing society. Dodd's case underscored the hazards of self-advancement through patronage and social emulation and stirred the burgeoning middle class to fashion new sources of sociability to safeguard business in an era of precarious

[4] On this theme, see E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, chaps. 4–5.

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solvency. The way was found in freemasonry (with which Dodd had ironically been very visibly associated), whose triad of charity, character, and credit offered a viable alternative to the frenzied Mandevillian ethos of earlier decades that was seen to have sealed Dodd's fate. Freemasonry already had a firm footing in bourgeois radical circles, but it was able to sustain its middle-class following in London in the wake of the disintegration of the Wilkite movement and substantially improve it in the provinces. While some lodges never lost their radical potential, others invoked loyalty and Britishness rather than cosmopolitan patriotism, reinvented local traditions, and doled out good doses of Evangelical self-doubt and self-help.

Money offers some penetrating insights into the tortuous political history of the middle class in the second half of the eighteenth century as well as throws new light on the social foundations of middle-class loyalism, which cannot be simply interpreted as an hysterical reaction to Painite radicalism and French republicanism. But he also subtly explodes some of the historical clichés about the middle class: that it was quintessentially of Dissenting orientation or the hallmark of modernity. While few would question the bourgeois pedigree of the likes of Price and Priestley or, indeed, the antiaristocratic temper of their ideology,[5] it is important to recognize that many middle-class values—individualism, thrift, industry, respectability, voluntarism—could be derived from other intellectual, religious, or social practices and that traditions of civic service could retain a remarkable resilience in the older incorporated towns.

If there was no middle-class prototype in the eighteenth-century, can one legitimately talk of a middle class at all? The language of class was remarkably fluid and flexible in the eighteenth century, and as late as 1797, in the debate over assessed taxes in which men of moveable property had a great stake, politicians and public spokesmen could use the terms "middle class," "middle classes," "middling class," "middle orders," the "middling walks of life," "commercial people," the "trading part of society," and the "commercial and manufacturing interests of the country" to refer to the same sector of society.[6] In

[5] See Isaac Kramnick, *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism: Political Ideology in Late Eighteenth-Century England and America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990).

[6] These quotations are taken from the *Morning Chronicle* (December 12–29, 1797) and *Cobbett's Parliamentary Debates*, 33:1084, 1102–3, 1170–3, 1249. See also P. J. Corfield, "Class by Name and Number in Eighteenth-Century Britain," *History* 72 (1987): 38–61; and Dror Wahrman, "Virtual Representation: Parliamentary Reporting and Languages of Class in the 1790s," *Past and Present*, no. 136 (1992), pp. 82–113.

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fact, some could use the language of ranks and class interchangeably in the same speech, or at least have such terms attributed to them.

Brown, Hunt, and Money use the term "middle class" guardedly, often as an adjective and sometimes within quotation marks. They are aware of its problematic use in this formative period. The linguistic niceties of the term and its major associations, however, are taken up with a vengeance by Dror Wahrman. In a provocative piece, Wahrman traces the shifts in the meaning of middle-classness from 1820 to 1832. Through an intertextual analysis, Wahrman argues that the controversy over Queen Caroline's trial did not generate a specifically middle-class, gendered definition of separate spheres; at least the domestic ideology that informed the support for the queen was not cast as a quintissentially middle-class phenomenon. Rather, middle-classness was invoked as a critical voice of male public opinion in an older constitutional mode. Even when women addressed the queen, as they did in considerable numbers, they did so as women tentatively intervening in the public sphere to endorse the chivalric defence of a victimized queen whose husband had denied her domestic felicity and succor. It was only after the Reform Bill that the middle class was seen as the guardian of domestic virtue, of discrete gendered spheres of life, of both private and public. While the aspiration to establish domesticity within middle-class life was a feature of religious and moral works from Hannah More onward, it had no impact on political discourse until after 1832. In view of the palapable lag in the attribution of domesticity to middle-class identities, Wahrman argues, efforts to frame middle-class formation in terms of separate spheres is seriously misconceived.[7] The middle class was invested with the promotion and preservation of familial values only after its political victory in 1832.

Wahrman's essay throws us into the debate over the determining influence of language or discourse in the shaping of class identities. To what extent does language constitute class experience rather than be constituted by it? If discourse is understood as a set of signifying practices and divested of some of its logocentrism, can it be decoded in class ways, within what E. P. Thompson has described as a societal "field of force"? Or are all social identities discursively negotiable at all times? Wahrman backs away from this last position by insisting that both the domestic and political discourses of the day were "operating within the range of divergent constructions possible in that space between social experience and its representation." Yet ulti-

[7] Compare Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1987).

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mately he concedes that "the distinct perception of the 'middle class,' and the meaning given to 'middle classness,' depended on the eye of the beholder." Whether that leads to a randomization of history, to use Perry Anderson's term,[8] readers must decide. Certainly Wahrman's reworking of middle-class identities in the wake of *Family Fortunes,* the main butt of his criticism, is going to spark interest and debate, converging with the current controversy over class in the Victorian era.

[8] See Perry Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* (London: Verso, 1983).

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