

CLASS BY NAME AND NUMBER IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

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This essay was first published in *History*, 72 (1987), pp. 38-61;

and also reprinted in P.J. Corfield (ed.),

Language, History and Class (Blackwell, Oxford, 1991), pp. 101-30

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‘Every nation has its Custom of dividing the People into Classes’, it was observed in 1753.¹ Nor was this claim advanced by a social radical or intellectual innovator. Its author was James Nelson, a London apothecary, whose tract on education and child-rearing was profoundly derivative. There is no suggestion in his text or its reception that he was writing in anything other than stock terms and concepts in circulation in mid-eighteenth-century Britain. He itemised five classes as follows: ‘England, a mix’d Government and a trading Nation, have the Nobility, Gentry, Mercantile or Commercial People, Mechanics, and Peasantry’.²

He permitted himself some variation in nomenclature. The same passage continued: ‘Were we to divide the People, we might run it to an Infinity: to avoid Confusion therefore, I will select five Classes; viz. the Nobility, the Gentry, the genteel Trades (all those particularly which require large Capital), the common Trades, and the Peasantry.’ He offered a further clarification of the last term, which, he explained, referred not only to the guileless country ‘Rustics’ but also to their artful urban counterparts – ‘the lowest Class of People, in London particularly. These

People possess indeed the Ignorance of the Peasants, but they seldom equal them in Innocence'.³ He detected both social gradations and social flux, summarising the position in highly eclectic phrasing: 'England, a trading Nation, connects more closely the whole body of the People; links them, as it were, in one continued Chain, and brings them nearer to a Level'.⁴

The point is not to introduce James Nelson (1710-94) as an unsung hero of the social sciences, but rather to consider the eighteenth-century ferment in social terminology that he so well exemplified. It was a period of expanding vocabulary, experimentation in usage, and fluidity of style and expression. 'In the disorder of its expressions, we see a people prepossessed with a range of liberty, which they extend even to their diction, who would think themselves fettered, in submitting to any restraints in their language, and enslaved, in subjecting their periods to the rules either of logic or of grammar', proclaimed the *Monthly Review*, with a certain extravagance, in 1775.⁵ The production of dictionaries became a growth industry, albeit always lagging behind 'the boundless chaos of a living speech', as Samuel Johnson admitted.⁶

There were many proposals for an academy to regulate and standardise the language, as well as complaints at the intrusion of new words from France and America.⁷ Some people, by contrast, welcomed the flexibility of an expanding vocabulary. Optimistically, the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1788 proposed that 'a proper person or committee be appointed, to ascertain all such words as are wanting in our language, to convey clearly and precisely such ideas as naturally arise in the mind of every man'.⁸ Prudently, it refrained from stipulating what those thoughts might be, while awaiting the clarification of the appropriate neologisms (itself, incidentally, a term coming into currency in the later eighteenth-century). In such a context, it is not surprising to find that linguistic

fluidity interacted creatively with social changes, both promoting a new vocabulary and conceptual framework for the analysis and interpretation of society itself.

‘Class’, a powerful organising concept, then came into use. Contrasting with its later combative and contentious resonance, its arrival was simple. It glided into the language, and for some time it was deployed alongside older terms, sometimes almost interchangeably with them. Increasingly, however, both its sense and its contextual usage began to diverge from the specifications of ‘rank and order’. An endless debate about the number and nature of social classes began. And, with that, there developed also a new set of qualifying adjectives, as ‘upper, middle, and working’ and all their many permutations gradually challenged ‘higher, middling, and lower’ and their many variants.⁹ Social language became, as it has remained, a matter of some sensitivity. An enlightened curate, for example, was depicted, in an undistinguished novel of 1813, as one who always spoke of his ‘*industrious neighbours*, for it was by that appellation, and not as the *poor*, that he was wont to designate the labouring class of his parishioners’.¹⁰

Clearly, many others continued to think and write in highly traditional terms. Numerous variations of the Great Chain of Being were invoked. A well-ordered sequence of ranks and degrees in human society was deemed part of a divinely ordained hierarchy that embraced the whole of creation. None put it more cheerily than Soame Jenyns, who admired the ‘wonderful Chain of Beings; ... from the senseless Clod to the brightest Genius of Human Kind’,¹¹ although this was in fact rather a heterodox and modern formulation, since traditionally the angels had been placed at the apex. Belief in catenation was reassuring. It offered a model of an interlinked society, in which all components had an allotted role, of equal importance to the grand design but not necessarily of equal power,

wealth, or prominence in terrestrial terms. There could be no scope for envy, explained Johnson, for there were ‘fixed, invariable, external rules of distinction of rank, which create no jealousy, as they are allowed to be accidental’ (that is, beyond human intervention).¹² The formula applied as much to the political as the social order, soothing Boswell, who had had doubts about a philosophical basis for belief in monarchy.

This cosmography had an ancient lineage, with solid theological backing and a rich imagery.¹³ It could also be given a secular and utilitarian gloss. John Trusler argued in 1790 that ‘A poor man is equally respectable in society also, if he is a useful member of it; and his equality with the rich is shown and seen by his usefulness. As the servant cannot do without a master, so the master cannot do without a servant. ... They are equal in point of utility, as members of the same society and subjects of the same state.’¹⁴ That suggested a new caution, from the author of *The Way to be Rich and Respectable* (1766), but even such a mutely egalitarian emphasis could encourage the very radicalism it sought to allay.

The Great Chain might turn into ‘chains’, with very different implications. Many traditionalists therefore tended to agree with Jenyns, that belief in the system depended rather upon trust than upon close scrutiny. Ignorance, he had strikingly averred in 1757, was the ‘opiate’ of the people: ‘It is a cordial administered by the gracious hand of providence, of which they ought never to be deprived by an ill-judged and improper education’.¹⁵ In the 1790s, Hannah More, in the guise of ‘Will Chip, a country carpenter’, comforted the poor man for his lowly condition with the thought that his wife was below him in social ranking, and consoled the wife with her superiority over her children.¹⁶ Any challenge to universal hierarchy was deemed futile. ‘Believe me, Sir, those who attempt to level never equalise!’ exhorted Edmund Burke in a

famous phrase, also written in 1790. He elaborated: ‘In all societies, ... some descriptions must be uppermost’,¹⁷ although he did not therefore draw the conclusion that social conservatives should never worry.

Composed and finite, the vision of the Great Chain of Being refuted the pressures and tensions within the system; but it could not give a very satisfactory account of their provenance, other than by appeal to original sin. Worryingly, such tensions seemed to be found in some abundance in eighteenth-century Britain. There were many references to a palpable sense of social mutability. It was not expressed simply, or even chiefly, in terms of case-histories of individual mobility, but rather in very generalised terms. Often stressed were innovations in dress and deportment, ‘externals’ that were of significance for rapid social assessment in an emergent mass society, in which individuals were not necessarily known to one another by birth and background.¹⁸ A common eighteenth-century ballad version of the traditional popular satire ‘The World Turned Upside Down’ related to the mutabilities of fashion. Susanna Blamire’s poem, written c. 1776, rehearsed what had become a familiar theme:¹⁹

*All things are changed, the world's turned upside down,
And every servant wears a cotton gown.*

Difficulties in social recognition, especially in the crowded cities, led to a decline of ‘hat honour’ and a much attenuated public expression of interpersonal deference.²⁰

Contemporary references to change are by no means conclusive. They could be exaggerated, whether consciously or unconsciously, or simply erroneous. It sometimes happens that new developments seem more momentous to those living through them than they do to subsequent generations and to the verdict of history. Furthermore, no doubt some people in eighteenth-century Britain considered that little or nothing had

changed, although they tended to be less vocal. Yet the public mood pointed to innovation, whether endorsed as ‘improvement’ or denounced as ‘moral degeneration’. And such viewpoints, however diversified in expression, were not alternatives to ‘social realities’ but an intrinsic part of them.²¹

Prominently emphasised were three developments. One related to the growing diversity in sources of wealth and status. Jonathan Swift, for example, lamented in the *Examiner* in 1710 that ‘*Power*, which according to an old maxim was used to follow *Land*, is now gone over to *Money*’.²² His point was exaggerated, for land and landed titles retained a considerable allure as well as affluence; but, visibly, there were alternative avenues of advancement. Trade, commercial services (especially banking), some professions, government, and, increasingly, industry, were all admired in the eighteenth century for their potential power and riches. Diversity encouraged a notable social competitiveness. ‘As soon as you mention anyone to them [the English] that they do not know, their first inquiry will be “Is he rich?”’ claimed de Saussure in 1727.²³ Landowners were not alone in social eminence or claims to gentility. ‘We Merchants are a Species of Gentry, that have grown into the World this last Century’, quoth Steele’s merchant Sealand in a play of 1722/3. ‘And [we] are as honourable, and almost as useful, as you landed Folks, that have always thought yourself so much above us’.²⁴ Indeed, by this period, the concept of the ‘gentleman’ had already begun its famous social peregrination, losing its oldest connotations of ‘gentle’ birth and ‘idle’ living, so that, in the later eighteenth century, individual vintners, tanners, scavengers, potters, theatre managers, and professors of Divinity could all claim the status, publicly and without irony.²⁵

At the same time, there were perceptions of change in the distribution of wealth in the wider society. Not only was it argued that the

nation as a whole was becoming more affluent, besotted by ‘luxury’, but in particular the gulf between rich and poor was filled by the increasingly numerous and socially visible ‘middling’ interests, later denounced inventively as the ‘middlocrats’. In a celebrated letter on his business policy, Josiah Wedgwood in 1777 explained the value of noble patronage as the key to another equally important consumer market: ‘The Great People have had these Vases in their Palaces long enough for them to be seen and admired by the Middling Class of People, which class we know are vastly, I had almost said, infinitely superior in Number to the Great.’²⁶ It may well be that the collective affluence of this group was exaggerated, particularly as a result of their new social visibility in the fast-growing towns. Contemporaries faced difficulties in the precise assessment of long-term shifts in the ownership both of capital and of disposable income.²⁷ Many, however, agreed with Wedgwood, in detecting a newly extensive diffusion of wealth.

A sense of competitiveness and ‘uppishness’ was furthermore reported very generally, and among many ‘degrees and conditions’ of men. Social differentials had certainly not disappeared, nor poverty been abolished. But abjectness and fatalism were observed less often. ‘Revolution’ was specifically applied to changes in social mores, well before that term was applied to industrial innovation. Addison in 1711 observed it approvingly in ‘behaviour and good-breeding’ in the towns as opposed to the countryside.²⁸ In 1724 Daniel Defoe specified it as the decay of subordination: ‘The Common People of this Country have suffer’d a Kind of general Revolution, or Change, in their Disposition, Temper, and Manners; ... I say, they have suffer’d a general Change, such as I believe no Nation has undergone but themselves’, adding a conventional coda: ‘I wish I could say it was a Change for the Better’.²⁹ Henry Fielding used very similar phrasing in 1751. Analysing the

implications of Britain's rapid commercial expansion, he decided that economic growth 'hath indeed given a new Face to the whole Nation, ... and hath almost totally changed the Manners, Customs, and Habits of the People, more especially of the lower sort'.³⁰

Journalists enjoyed the melodrama. 'We are a Nation of Gentry', explained the *World* in 1755. 'We have no such thing as Common People among us; between Vanity and Gin the whole Species is utterly destroyed'.³¹ Pride and a taste for liquor were not the only culprits. Irreligion, education, and the growth of towns were also blamed. Some detected the hand of Eve. The Dean of Gloucester was horrified to see women at Bath making advances to men, and concluded sombrely in 1783 that 'revolutionary principles are continually gaining ground'.³² The sense of fundamental upheaval was reiterated, generation by generation. Southey in 1807 continued the litany: 'Perhaps no kingdom ever experienced so great a change in so short a course of years, without some violent state convulsion, as England has done during the present reign. ... The alteration extends to the minutest things, even to the dress and manners of every rank of society'.³³ In other words, while social differentials still manifestly survived, it was difficult to assert that they were (as opposed to ought to be) timeless and unchanging in their structure and expression. Eighteenth-century England was a mobile and urbanising society, in a commercial and industrialising economy. The static vision acquired its poignancy from the strong counter-currents of change.

Analytical responses to the 'confounding' of order and degree were correspondingly diversified. One major strand of thought embraced the whole of society, at least in theory, as 'the people', and tried to avoid reference to subordinate aggregations within the whole. The basic unit was the individual, in the context of, at most, a family. This view had

intellectual support, drawing upon the philosophical assumptions (if not conclusions) of Thomas Hobbes and, especially powerfully in the eighteenth-century context, of John Locke. It was fuelled by Enlightenment confidence in human rationality; and it matched an atomised view both of the universe, in which unitary elements were juxtaposed within a component whole,³⁴ and of the economy in which competing agents jostled in the market-place.

When formulated in legal and constitutionalist terms of individual claims as against inherited privilege and authority, its thrust was politically innovative: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights’. The Declaration of Independence in 1776 gave immense authority to this approach in the emergent American consciousness. It also had a long provenance in English traditions of dissent, both secular and religious non-conformity appealing to the individual conscience. Meshing with the eighteenth-century belief in progress, it increasingly generated an air of expectation. ‘It is an age of revolutions, in which everything may be looked for’. as Paine riposted to Burke. When the public demand for *The Rights of Man* (1791) was promptly matched by *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), an agitated Hannah More essayed sarcasm to stem the tide: ‘It follows, according to the natural progression of human things, that the next influx of that irradiation, which our enlightenment is pouring in upon us, will illuminate the world with grave descants on the rights of youths - the rights of children - the rights of babies!’³⁵ (In fact, Spence’s *Rights of Infants* followed in 1797.)

While iconoclastic towards inherited titles and authority and dynamic in its acceptance of change, however, individualism was much more ambivalent when faced with acquired wealth and elective political

power. Analysis that focused chiefly upon unitary components had a relatively weak conception of wider social relationships, and therefore often contained many implicit assumptions. Indeed, just as the earlier Whig appeal to the ‘people’ had turned out to be much more restricted in practice than its generosity of language implied,³⁶ so too with many versions of the people’s ‘rights’ in the eighteenth century

. Some sorts of intermediate associations, between the one and the nation, were unavoidable. Individuals functioned within complex mass societies, with many groups, associations, contacts, and loyalties. Indeed, for a theoretical scrutiny of social behaviour, some aggregative analysis is inescapable for generalisation about literally millions of people, who cannot be summed painstakingly one by one.³⁷ Of course, these intermediate groupings have not always been interpreted in economic terms. Local and regional communities, religious allegiance, and racial origin have all proved powerful sources of identification, especially when expressed in opposition to a rival.

Within eighteenth-century Britain, strong feelings certainly centred around all these forms of association. Antagonisms between English, Scots, and Irish had lengthy traditions, as did, in different permutation, tensions between English and Scottish Protestants on the one hand and Irish Catholics on the other. Local and regional identifications were also deeply engrained and much enshrined in popular jests and sayings. Counties were commemorated, for example, for their mythic qualities: ‘Norfolk wiles’, ‘silly Suffolk’, and so forth. The fast-growing urban centres in the eighteenth century also became focuses for loyalty and an often mocking affection. These were all crucial perspectives upon sectional networks, even if some of the epithets were hotly contested. As general descriptive terminology, however, they do not seem to have been as predominantly and as persistently used in eighteenth-century Britain as

were, by contrast, religious and racial designations in the much more ‘

Much discussion therefore centred around social labels. As already stressed, eighteenth-century usage was highly eclectic. Among the older terms, ‘ranks’, ‘orders’, ‘degrees’, and ‘stations’ were still deployed, all having relatively static implications, particularly the last, which ultimately found a still more permanent use with the railways and then dropped from social discourse. Other terms with some currency were ‘sorts’ (frequently found in the seventeenth century), ‘parts’, and ‘interests’³⁸ - the last often in the modern sense of a ‘lobby’ for a special interest group that might include more than one tier of society: for example, on occasion, groups of textile towns lobbied government in the textile ‘interest’ on behalf of both work-force and employers.

‘Ranks’ and ‘orders’ were used in the most general terms, but they had implications of social status as conferred primarily by birth. Individuals could be ennobled by grant from a higher power, but that was thought of as exceptional. In a mobile society in which origins and eventualities did not invariably match, ‘sort’, ‘part’, and, increasingly, ‘class’ were used instead. They were classificatory terms, referring to generic socio-economic position, into which an individual could rise or fall, rather than to lineage. ‘Sort’, the first newcomer, but a rather amorphous word, was outclassed by ‘class’, which was pithy and adaptable as noun, adjective, and verb. It was known in the language at least by 1656, when it appeared in Blount’s *Glossographia*, majestically subtitled *A Dictionary interpreting all Such Hard Words ... as are now used in our Refined English Tongue*. At that time, its major application was specified as scholastic, which it continued to retain; but it had the meaning also of ‘an Order or Distribution of People, according to their several Degrees’, as an Anglicisation of the Latin *classis*, or tax group.³⁹

Scattered usage followed in the late seventeenth and early

eighteenth centuries. Defoe, a great language innovator, was one of the earliest to use the word, conflating the educational and social in 1698 with the announcement: ‘In the Commonwealth of Vice, the Devil has taken care to level Poor and Rich into one Class, and is fairly going on to make us all Graduates in the last Degree of Immorality’. Others used the term to express general categories within society. Readers of the *Spectator* in 1712 may have been amused by ‘Hotspur’s’ allocation of women into their ‘distinct and proper classes, as the ape, the coquette, the devotee’; and they could certainly enjoy Addison’s account of his London club that catered for all ‘ways of life’ and ‘classes of mankind’.⁴⁰

By the 1740s, and certainly the 1750s, specific references to social structure were couched in the new terms: Nelson’s five ‘classes’ of 1753 have already been quoted; in 1749 Josiah Tucker wrote of ‘classes of society’, and identified the ‘lower class of people’; in 1756 Massie’s *Calculations of the Present Taxes Yearly Paid by a Family of Each Rank, Degree, or Class* was eclectic in its title, and in its text referred to ‘gentlemen’ and ‘middling and inferior classes’; and in 1757 Jonah Hanway also noted the ‘lower classes’. Within two decades, such applications were commonplace, although probably still a minority usage. Interestingly, this development paralleled the popularisation of the term by the Methodists with their ‘class system’ for study of the Bible.⁴¹ The social application of the term does not seem confined to any particular group or clique of authors or speakers, although spoken forms are, of course, much more difficult to trace. Certainly, the younger Pitt in 1796 was not intending to be controversial when he referred in Parliament to the ‘labouring poor’ as a ‘class’, in context of a speech explaining that nothing could be done by government to alleviate their hardships. By contrast, Charles James Fox, retaining the Whig tradition, usually spoke of the ‘people’.⁴²

New terms could be employed in new ways. The mutual relationship of one 'class' with another was conceptually much more fluid than those of 'ranks', which were 'serried', or 'orders', which were neatly aligned.⁴³ Certainly, the Great Chain did not envisage structural contest or competition within society. 'Rank struggle' would have been a contradiction in terms. 'Class', on the other hand, contained a potential for change, whether by co-operation, competition, or conflict. It also encouraged a much more conscious scrutiny of human society, in parallel with scientific 'classification' (another new term) of the animal and vegetable kingdoms. 'Through the extravagance of the last thirty years, a new mode of thinking has been adopted, and a revolution has taken place in the fashions of the mind', affirmed *The British Tocsin; Or, Proofs of National Ruin*, in 1795: 'The British Nation, once the adorer of prejudice, now invents queries ... and pries into ... abuses, with an inquisitorial nicety'. Among the questions posed by the poor man, it added, was 'Who reaps the produce of his labour?'⁴⁴

There are many uncertainties as to what were the significant bases of social division. Attributions purely by birth ceased to be very helpful for explaining social and economic structures as a whole. Detailed handbooks to rankings and their formal status continued to be published for titled society: *Of the Several Degrees of Gentry and their Precedency* (1719) was one of many such compilations. Showing perhaps an undertow of anxiety, it listed the ten degrees of highest rank (four excellent; six 'noble'), including the gentlemen among whom there were nine degrees of gentility, enabling the attentive reader to distinguish between gentlemen 'of ancestry' and gentlemen merely 'of blood'. These people formed an upper tier, set apart from the 'vulgar'. At once intricate on lineage and insouciant of the rest of society, this approach had its limitations. It was satirised by Addison, who asked whether in the 'Commonwealth of

Letters’, the author of a folio volume should rank above the author of a quarto, and both above a mere pamphleteer? The country squires, who were ‘the illiterate Body of the Nation’, thus fell ‘into a Class below the three learned professions’.⁴⁵

In the wider eighteenth-century enquiry into social classifications, there was fascination as well as imprecision over numbers. Serious economic analysts tended towards pluralism. One of the earliest writers to consider socio-economic groupings was the ever-fertile Defoe.⁴⁶ ‘Tis plain’, he wrote in 1705, ‘the Dearness of Wages forms our People into more Classes than other Nations can show’. And in 1709 he propounded a seven-fold categorisation:

1. *The Great, who live profusely.*
2. *The Rich, who live plentifully.*
3. *The middle Sort, who live well.*
4. *The working Trades, who labour hard but feel no want.*
5. *The Country People, Farmers, etc. who fare indifferently.*
6. *The Poor that fare hard.*
7. *The Miserable, that really pinch and suffer want.*

Clearly not concerned with pre-ordained social rank, this was an attempt at establishing actual differentials, based on types of occupation and income levels, as well as consumption patterns. He offered very little detailed elaboration, but suggested that the fourth sort could be taken for a medium, such as carpenters, smiths, weavers, whether rural or urban, from north or south. Here was a view of nation-wide horizontal groupings, in a modernising terminology.

Another complex formulation was provided by Massie in 1756. Writing to disabuse the British people of their belief that they paid too much in taxation, he was not concerned primarily to establish social structure, and his conceptualisation of society was very fluid. At times, he used a threefold designation (as already noted), but his detailed tabulation considered notional family expenditure for thirty different income groups.

They were named under seven socio-occupational categories, although they were not systematically specified into classes by Massie himself:

1. *Noblemen or Gentlemen*: landed income between £4,000 and £20,000 p.a.
2. *Gentlemen*: landed income between £200 and £2,000 p.a.
3. *Freeholders*: landed income between £50 and £100 p.a.
4. *Farmers*: expending between £40 and £150 p.a.
5. *Tradesmen in London and country*: expending between £40 and £300 p.a.
6. *Manufacturers in London and country*: earning between 7/6d and 12/- p.wk.
7. *Labourers and Husbandmen in London and country*: earning between 5/- and 9/- p.wk.

The fascinations of his intricate tables are manifold, not least the shift in his data, which obviously stemmed from the nature of information then available, from landowners' rentals to traders' consumption levels to workmen's weekly earnings.⁴⁷ Even with incomplete information about commercial and industrial capital, Massie showed that old 'ranking' was no guide to actual wealth.

Something of that need to accommodate social diversification also underpinned Nelson's five-fold classification in 1753, which (as already cited) offered its own variants in terminology:

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. <i>Nobility</i> | 1. <i>Nobility</i> |
| 2. <i>Gentry</i> | 2. <i>Gentry</i> |
| 3. <i>Mercantile or Commercial People</i> | 3. <i>Genteel Trades (with large capital)</i> |
| 4. <i>Mechanics</i> | 4. <i>Common Trades</i> |
| 5. <i>Peasantry</i> | 5. <i>Peasantry (also rustics/ lowest class)</i> |

It held a continuing notation of social hierarchy, with landowners firmly at the head and a 'peasantry' at the foot; but it incorporated evident awareness of non-landed affluence, as well as diversification of occupation and way of life among 'lower' social groups. Not to be outdone, in the climate of social scrutiny, *The Cheats of London Exposed* (c. 1770) joined in with four light-hearted 'classes' of theatre audiences:⁴⁸

1. *The Nobs*
2. *The Citizens and their Ladies*
3. *The Mechanics and Middling Degrees*
4. *The Refuse*

Analytical aggregation in terms of five or seven had, however, considerably less appeal than notation in terms of two or three. These were much the most popular groupings. Two had a certain simplicity, an attractive directness. Its graphic immediacy was much used in journalism and reportage. 'In England, ... in the daytime the lower classes get intoxicated with liquor and beer, the higher classes in the evening with Portuguese wines and punch', remarked de Saussure, in a much relished dictum. *One Half of the World Knows not How the Other Half Live*, trumpeted *Low-Life* in 1752, in an equally memorable dualism.⁴⁹ Again, the terminology was very various. Dichotomous classifications included high/low, upper/lower, superior/inferior, head/foot, great/mean, few/many, gentle/base, gentry/plebeians or, alternatively, gentry/common people, as well as rich/poor, the latter focusing upon wealth as well as status.

This represented a simplification of the fine gradations of the Great Chain, but it still retained a clear sense of dominance/subordination. It was often favoured by those at the traditional apex of society, who tended to view all those below them as uniformly disfavoured. A string of disdainful epithets made it possible to refer to the 'vulgar', 'rabble', 'clowns', 'bumpkins' (usually rural), or Burke's 'swinish multitude'; yet such phrasing seems to have been comparatively cautious in its public expression, and certainly hostile status terminology was rarely used in direct parlance between 'Freeborn Englishmen', however socially unequal.⁵⁰ The political expression of the few/many dichotomy was also adopted explicitly by some advocates of strong central government. Some patricians found it attractive, especially once the dangers of absolute monarchy had been curtailed. That argument recurred in the American

debate after the War of Independence, as enunciated, for example, by Alexander Hamilton in 1787: ‘All communities divide themselves into the few and the many. The first are the rich and well born, the other the mass of the people, ... [who] seldom judge or determine right’. The claims of the few could be asserted in terms of power, whether of birth or of wealth, or, indeed, of intellect. A youthfully confident John Stuart Mill later promulgated in 1829 the dictum that ‘The intelligent classes lead the government, and the government leads the stupid classes’;⁵¹ but brainpower proved notoriously difficult to fit into a social hierarchy.

In economic terms, the rich/poor dualism was also an ancient divisions pointing to obvious differentials in incomes, assets, and way of life. It could promote fatalism, ‘for the poor always ye have with you’. Some writers argued that a twofold classification was intrinsic to all forms of economic organisation, and specified its origin in a division of ownership/labour. Thomas Malthus, for example, explained in 1798:

*A society constituted according to the most beautiful form that imagination can conceive, ... would, from the inevitable laws of nature, and not from any original depravity of man, in a very short period degenerate into a society constructed upon a plan not essentially different from that which prevails in every known state at present: I mean, a society divided into a class of proprietors, and a class of labourers, and with self-love the mainspring of the great machine.*⁵²

Fielding’s Jonathan Wild had in 1743⁵³ postulated a rather similar schema: ‘Mankind are ... properly to be considered under two great divisions, those that use their own hands, and those who employ the hands of others’ - this being the basis of his resolve to become great by employing a gang of thieves.

A binary vision could, indeed, become a spur to action, not only to individuals but also to collective protest. If the rich/poor dichotomy was

translated from have/have-nots into exploiters/exploited, drones/workers, oppressors/oppressed, then a powerful sense of grievance could be generated. Not surprisingly, the younger Pitt in 1795, for example, hastened to reject the dissenter William Smith's prototype of two groups the 'useful' (commercial) and the 'useless' (landed) class. Equally strongly, political radicals on occasion in the 1790s stressed the charge of exploitation. Tom Paine denounced the coercive demands of aristocratic government: 'There are two distinct classes of men in the nation, those who pay taxes, and those who receive and live upon the taxes', and Thomas Spence attacked the unfair privileges of the 'grand, voluptuous nobility and gentry, living on wealth', which was generated by 'the toil of the Labouring classes'.⁵⁴

Yet, while a Manichean either/or interpretation continued to hold a strong appeal, particularly in times of confrontation, it was under continuing assault in the course of the eighteenth century from a tripartite classification. More complex and subtle than two, the 'three' was yet finite enough to be readily comprehensible. It evidently held much attraction. There were parallels in triadic constitutional forms, as in trinitarian theology. Indeed, it has been argued that a conceptual trifunctionality lies at the core of all Indo-European thought systems⁵⁵ - perhaps an excessively tidy-minded viewpoint.

In the English tradition, there were familiar triads in 'king, lords, and commons', or, alternatively, 'nobility, gentry, and commonalty'. As social distinctions, however, they were unhelpful, since so much of the population fell into the residual third category. Gradually, a more complex classification was adopted. It can certainly be identified in some seventeenth-century usages, albeit usually casually rather than systematically applied. Francis Bacon, for example, had referred to three tiers of society, with the 'better Sort' and the 'meane People' alike

contrasting with the ‘middle People’, who made the best soldiers. Richard Baxter had other battles in mind, when he too wrote of a ‘sober sort of men of the middle rank, that will hear reason, and are more equal to religion than the highest or the lowest usually are’.⁵⁶

A number of early eighteenth-century economic writers and pamphleteers, including Davenant, suggested a threefold classification. Terminology remained very flexible, with references to an intermediate social group, convened in phrases such as ‘middle sort/state/set/part/people/condition/life’, all less strictly hierarchic, as well as the older ‘order/rank/station’. ‘Citizen’ or ‘Cit’ also had some currency, but ‘bourgeois’, which can be found, did not Anglicise very successfully. The three formations were taken by some to represent different characteristics and lifestyles. Samuel Butler, in a private memorandum written in the 1670s, had resolved ‘to have nothing to do with men that are very Rich or Poor, for the one sort are commonly Insolent and Proud, and the other Meane and Contemptible; and those that are between are commonly the most agreeable’. Later, Daniel Defoe was an advocate for the ‘middle State’. As Robinson Crusoe’s father explained, individuals so situated were ‘not exposed to the miseries and hardships, the labour and sufferings of the mechanic part of mankind; and not embarrassed with the pride, luxury, ambition, and envy of the upper part of mankind.’⁵⁷

In one instance, there was legislative endorsement of a tripartite schema, in a differential tariff of fines for public cursing and swearing (which was a behavioural characteristic of all levels of society). The earliest statute in 1624 had contented itself with a single tally of 1/- per offence for all offenders if charged within a given time span. Upon re-enactment in 1695, a higher fine of 2/- was introduced for all those specified as above the rank of a day-labourer or a common soldier and seaman. In the Profane Oaths Act of 1746, one further tier of penalty was

inserted. Day-labourers were still fined 1/-; all others, above the labourers but below the rank of a gentleman 2/-; but gentlemen and higher ranks (royalty not excluded) were now charged 5/- per offence.⁵⁸ The Act thus envisaged hierarchy in a definite threefold manifestation, indicated partly by occupation and partly by status (although what constituted a gentleman was not defined). Its effect upon the curbing of profanity was, however, widely agreed to be negligible.

Meanwhile, the public analysis of triadic society gradually incorporated the terminology of 'class'. As it did so, there emerged a parallel and key mutation in the qualifying adjectives to accompany the new noun. The 'higher', 'middling', and 'lower' classes, which were current concepts by the 1750s and 1760s, almost immediately began to be reinterpreted in some quarters, as 'upper', 'middle', and 'industrious', or eventually 'working' classes.⁵⁹ It is notable that those who used the new adjectives almost invariably paired them with the new noun. Hybrids, such as 'labouring ranks' or 'working ranks' were comparatively rare once 'class' had come into currency .

The contrasts showed most vividly in changing perceptions of the 'lower orders'. Yet the new vocabulary had a subtle effect at all levels. The vertical axis and the immobile construction of the Great Chain were under conceptual challenge. A gradual verbal shift from 'higher ranks' to 'upper class' was relatively undramatic. It shed the notion of a purely titled qualification, and could embrace a monied as well as a landed aristocracy. On the other hand, it still retained a sense of 'altitude'. But it was much more cautious in its expression, and was certainly less laudatory than older terms that referred to social 'superiority' which had connotations of better as well as higher status.

A growing chorus of public praise for the 'middle class' was still more assertive of a new social dispensation. The mid-point on the scale

could traditionally be viewed as a mere half-way house. An aristocratic republican, in a poem on *The Equality of Mankind* (1765),⁶⁰ had enjoyed teasing the social nervousness of the middle groups, depicting them as ‘motley Beings’:

*Who, dragged by Fortune into Middle Life,
That vortex of malevolence and strife,
Envyng the Great and scoffing at the Mean,
Now swol’n with pride, now wasted with chagrin.
Like Mahomet’s unsettled ashes dwell,
Midway suspended between Heaven and Hell.*

This perception was, however, contrasted with an alternative celebration of the central equipoise, greeted in positively Aristotelian vein as the new ‘Golden Mean’. The middle ‘sort’ or ‘class’ were singled out for their ‘elegance’ (1770); their state of life was ‘undoubtedly the happiest’ (1782); they fostered ‘all the arts, wisdom, and virtues of society’, and were the true preservers of freedom (1766); they were ‘comfortable, modest and moderate, sober and satisfied, industrious and intelligent’ (1800); indeed, they were ‘the most virtuous, the most enlightened, the most independent part of the community’ (1790). Thereupon Joseph Priestley proposed that political office should be restricted to those of moderate fortunes, as they were generally ‘better educated and have consequently more enlarged minds and are ... more truly independent than those born to great opulence’.⁶¹ These views were certainly not unbiased, but they were strongly affirmative. They tended, incidentally, to be voiced by members of the professions (clergymen, doctors, authors) rather than by the less vocal shop-keeping middle class.

The transformation of the ‘lower orders’ into ‘workers’, however, marked the clearest and most direct refutation of traditional hierarchy of ‘high’ and ‘low’. This, too, had a lengthy tradition. The earliest reference, so far identified, to the ‘working class’ as such dates from 1789,⁶² a

symbolically notable year. But many variants had been in currency since at least the 1760s. For example, a petition from the Corporation of Norwich in 1763 referred to the ‘industrious class’; Sir John Steuart in 1767 to the ‘industrious classes’; John Gwynn in 1766 to the ‘useful and laborious classes’. The *Monthly Review* had earlier, in 1751, referred to ‘a class of all others the most necessary and useful to all, yet the most neglected and despised; we mean the labouring part of the people’.⁶³ The common emphasis was a rejection of verbal ‘lowliness’ and a recognition of the economic and social significance of toil.

By the 1780s and 1790s, ‘labouring’ or ‘laborious’ tended to supersede ‘industrious’: William Hutton wrote in 1781 of the ‘laborious class’, John Thelwall in 1796 of the ‘laborious classes’, and a correspondent to the *Monthly Magazine* in 1797 of the ‘labouring classes’, both variants being used by Thomas Spence; and Frederic Eden’s *State of the Poor* was subtitled *A History of the Laborious Classes* (1797). These references were all made respectfully, some with specific radical purpose, as in the case of Thelwall and Spence, while Paine also proposed ‘the industrious and manufacturing Part’.⁶⁴

An incoming alternative usage was ‘working class’, first used by a Scottish writer, John Gray, in 1789, and echoed by John Aikin, describing a visit to industrial Lancashire in 1795. In the same year, a radical ballad, sardonically entitled ‘Wholesome Advice to the Swinish Multitude’, placed the words in close but not total juxtaposition, as it enquired melodiously:

*You lower class of Human Race, you working part I mean,
How dare you so audacious be, to read the works of Paine ...?*⁶⁵

These were relatively unusual formulations in the 1790s; but within two decades the new term had become quite widely used (sometimes in the singular, sometimes in plural form). From the start, it had connotations of

political and social combativeness, to which ideological controversy was rapidly added, from Robert Owen's *New View of Society* (1813) onwards.⁶⁶

The language of 'work' and 'labour' fused a number of emergent traditions in the course of the eighteenth century. Economic writers had observed the positive input from the toiling masses. Defoe again wrote of the importance of the 'working manufacturing People of England' (1725), sometimes simply described as 'working People' (1713, 1736); while others referred approvingly to the 'labouring and industrious Families', (1719), 'industrious People' (1731), 'manufacturing Work-folk' (1755), or, unvarnishedly, to 'Working/Labouring Men'.⁶⁷ These usages also converged with a long awareness in Poor Law policy formulation that the lower orders could not simply be described or treated in aggregate as the universal 'poor'. In practice, there were many gradations of living standards, even among the socially vulnerable on low incomes. Hence, from at least the later sixteenth century, the distinction had been made between the generality of the 'labouring poor' and the much smaller numbers actually in receipt of parish relief.⁶⁸ That bespoke a practical realism, especially given the habitual caution of ratepayers. Thus, while many in the eighteenth century continued to refer loosely to the 'poor', as though they were all equally impoverished or even all 'paupers', Poor Law policy had long recognised otherwise.

Affirmation of the common interests of labour also recurred in industrial disputes in the eighteenth century. Particularly given the perennial difficulties of framing a coherent organisation, both within and certainly between trades, an emphasis on shared 'work' could foster a shared campaign. 'No Lowering Wages of Labouring Men to 4d. a Day and Garlick', an unmistakably English crowd demanded at Bristol in 1754. Legislation against various forms of industrial combination

indicated official concern at the possibilities of united action from the work-force. A magistrate explained in 1759 that ‘such Confederacies would have occasioned the greatest Confusion between the lowest Class of People and their Superiors, in all Trades and Occupations, in every Manufactory and in every Employ’,⁶⁹ although in practice trade union activity faced many difficulties in sustaining such an organised ‘Confusion’.

Rejection of hierarchical explanations of immanent inequality led to examination of the civil and economic bases of social differentiation. Enlightenment philosophers in Britain and France investigated systems of classification in society as well as the sciences. Furthermore, analysis was put into a framework of historical change, notably in the works of a trio of Scottish professors. Adam Ferguson’s *Essay on the History of Civil Society* saw history as a moving process, advancing towards science and enlightenment. Social ‘classes’ and distinctions of ‘rank’ (he used both terms) came with the development of property and with increasing economic specialisation (‘Thinking itself, in this age of separations, may become a peculiar craft’). His analysis veered between emphasis upon change and dependence upon some degree of ‘permanent and palpable subordination’.⁷⁰ In 1771, John Millar’s *Observations Concerning the Distinction of Ranks in Society* also detected innovation and specialisation. History showed the ‘gradual advancement of society in civilisation, opulence, and refinement’. With that, ‘money becomes more and more the only means of procuring honours and dignities’, while the ‘labouring part’, also termed the ‘mechanics and labouring people’, became liberated from the grossest poverty.⁷¹ Both accounts were determinedly secular, relativistic about social forms; both were diffuse studies, hesitant about the ultimate destination of change.

Adam Smith synthesised their belief in the ‘natural progress of

opulence' with his own newly systematic study of economics. He argued that the division of labour in commercialised and urban societies was the source of growth and technical innovation. He also specified a tripartite classification, derived from the specialist means of production. The enterprise of freely competing individuals generated three great economic interests, or functional polarities. One was based upon rent; one upon profits of stock or capital; one upon wage labour. 'These are the three great, original, and constituent orders of every civilised society, from whose revenue that of every other order is ultimately derived', he wrote famously, in the *Wealth of Nations* (1776).⁷² Again, his social language was traditional, although diverse; but it was the distinctive triad of land, capital, and labour that found resonance. Those competing economic interests were subsequently taken by some radicals as constituting momentum for change. Charles Hall suggested in 1805 that 'Wealth consists not in things, but in power over the labour of others', but he was melancholic that the process of growth and 'civilisation' would lead to a widening gulf between two classes of rich and poor. By contrast, John Thelwall's social analysis in 1796 was uncertain about the origins of inequality, but buoyant in the confidence that 'Monopoly and the hideous accumulation of capital in a few hands, like all diseases not absolutely mortal, carry in their own enormity, the seeds of cure'.⁷³

Diversity of debate, fluidity of language, competing interpretations: the eighteenth century in Britain was not an era of social inertia or conceptual stasis. There was a belief in change and social mutability, rather than in a strictly graded or strictly denoted social hierarchy.⁷⁴ Specifications of 'class' intersected, however, with the older language of 'rank and degree'. Many vocabularies intermingled the two,⁷⁵ as the old terminology became increasingly generic and decreasingly precise. Social judgements were flexible, often dependent upon 'externals' rather than on

birth and parentage. As the flighty young heroine of another bad novel (1757) declared, in intended parody of contemporary style: ‘Well, the age is come to nothing; the world is turned topsy-turvey - no taste, fashion, genius, or *bon goût* left. I’ll go home and change my dress, for I hate to be seen above three hours in my own gown’.⁷⁶

The atmosphere of social change was particularly characteristic in urban and commercial circles; but these were very much the new cultural lodestars. It was a commonplace that Britain was a maritime and trading power, well before the growth of its industrial might. ‘I have been bred up to think that the trade of this nation is the sole support of it’, remarked the Duke of Newcastle (b.1693) in 1766. Edmund Burke later worried that ‘Commerce, trade and manufactures’ were instituted as ‘the gods of our economical politicians’.⁷⁷ The pluralism of wealth, the visibility of the middle class, and the ‘uppishness’ of the once ‘lower orders’ were the corollaries of economic change. In 1774 Dean Tucker considered that the challenge to traditional hierarchy was the origin of ‘that medley, or contradiction of characters, so remarkable in the English nation’. It antedated the advent of large-scale industrialism and factory production. Southey, who had identified the advent of the new manufacturing system, also explained in 1807 that ‘The commercial system has long been undermining the distinction of ranks in society. ... Mushrooms are every day starting up from the dunghill of trade’.⁷⁸

New ‘classes’ remained difficult to define in detail. There were often individual misfits, as well as collective uncertainties as to the number of significant social alignments. Disputes between Manicheans and Trinitarians continued. There were also tensions within emergent social stereotypes, as between the ethos of the ‘professional’ and the ‘shop-keeping’ middle class. The specification of group ‘consciousness’ was not a simple response to new nouns and adjectives.⁷⁹ Lower-class

organisations were faced with the task of co-ordinating an even greater diversity of trade and sectional interests. Yet the fierce anxiety in conservative defences of the 'old ways', especially in the political reaction of the 1790s, indicated the extent to which traditional power dispensations were held to be under threat. Reform, which many viewed as inevitable in the 1770s and 1780s, was halted by alarm and retrenchment, not by social inertia.⁸⁰

British society in the eighteenth century was therefore increasingly experienced as mutable and combative. Power was resynthesised into active terms, of acquisition, production, and display, rather than of inheritance, formal title, and ancient lineage. If earlier generations had devoted their calculations to the search for the 'number of the Beast', their successors had a fertile new field of enquiry into the nature and number of 'social class'.

ENDNOTES

¹ J. Nelson, *An Essay on the Government of Children under Three General Heads: Viz. Health, Manners, and Education* (1753 in 1756 edn), p. 273. He also suggested that four main social groups were to be identified in France: the ‘Quality’, the noblesse, the artificers, and the peasantry.

² Nelson’s social commentary came in his section on education, of which one reviewer simply observed, ‘under the last head, that of Education, there are few peculiarities’: *Gentleman’s Magazine*, 23 (1755), p. 509.

³ Nelson, *Essay on the Government of Children*, pp. 365-6

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 317.

⁵ *Monthly Review*, 43 (1771), p. 529.

⁶ Preface to S. Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), as cited in M. Cohen, *Sensible Words: Linguistic Practice in England, 1640-1785* (Baltimore, 1977), p. 92; see also *ibid.*, pp. 88-94.

⁷ S.I. Tucker, *Protean Shape: A Study in Eighteenth-Century Vocabulary and Usage* (London, 1967), esp. pp. 33-48.

⁸ *Gentleman’s Magazine*, 58 (1788), p. 947.

⁹ The bibliography is extensive. For a compact general survey, see P. Calvert, *The Concept of Class: An Historical Introduction* (1982) and works cited there. The *locus classicus* for English usage is A Briggs, ‘The Language of “Class” in Early Nineteenth-Century England’, in A. Briggs and J. Saville (eds), *Essays in Labour History* (1960), pp. 43-73: it is illuminating on nineteenth-century formulations, but underestimates the precedent debate in the eighteenth century.

¹⁰ A. Plumptre, *The History of Myself and my Friend: A Novel* (1813), Vol. I, p. 19.

¹¹ S. Jenyns, *Disquisition on Several Subjects* (1782), in C.N. Cole (ed.), *The Works of Soame Jenyns, Esq. in Four Volumes* (1790), Vol. 3, p. 179.

¹² F.A. Pottle (ed.), *Boswell’s London Journal, 1762-3* (1950), p. 320.

¹³ The Great Chain or Golden Chain were among the most frequently cited images; Jacob’s Ladder was the main alternative, but that was going out of fashion by the eighteenth century, as the notion of ascent to heaven was taken less and less literally. See A.O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study in the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, Mass., 1936); and discussion in W.F. Bynum, ‘The Great Chain of Being after Forty Years’, *History of Science*, 13 (1975), pp. 1-28.

¹⁴ J. Trusler, *Three Short Letters to the People of England* (1790), p. 6. This book was written specifically in response to events in France, counselling the English people against radicalism and discontent.

¹⁵ S. Jenyns, *Free Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil* (1757), in *Works*, Vol. 3, pp. 49-50. His essay was reviewed critically by Samuel Johnson, who pointed out logical problems in notions of a strictly graded hierarchy of beings throughout the universe.

¹⁶ [H. More], *Village Politics, Addressed to all the Mechanics, Journeymen, and Day Labourers in Great Britain, by Will Chip, a Country Carpenter* (8th edn, 1793), in *idem*, *Works* (1833/4), Vol. 2, p. 227. It follows a fictional exchange between Tom Hod (a mason), who asserts, ‘I say all men are equal. Why should one be above another?’ and Jack Anvil (a blacksmith), who replies, ‘If that’s thy talk, Tom, thou dost quarrel with Providence and not with the Government’.

¹⁷ E. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790; Harmondsworth, 1979), p. 138.

¹⁸ See references in P.J. Corfield, ‘Walking the City Streets: The Urban Odyssey in

Eighteenth-Century England', *Journal of Urban History*, 16 (1990), pp. 132-74.

¹⁹ S. Blamire, *Stoklewath: Or, the Cumbrian Village* (written c.1776?; publ. 1842), in R. Lonsdale (ed.), *The New Oxford Book of Eighteenth-Century Verse* (Oxford, 1984), p. 647. The satirical tradition of *The World Turned Upside Down* or *The World Turned Topsy-Turvy* had long been represented in European popular song and prints, associated with ideas of inversion and misrule (prints showed a horse riding a man, a baby nursing its mother, and so forth) and had some currency in eighteenth-century Britain, including use as an inn-sign: see G. Böhmer (ed.), *Exhibition Catalogue: Die Verkehrte Welt* (Goethe Institutes, London, Amsterdam, and Munich, 1985). The concept also had a sharper application in periods of political upheaval: see C. Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (1972), p. 86 and passim. Reportedly, also, the tune of 'The World Turned Upside Down' was played at the British surrender at Yorktown in 1781.

²⁰ The wearing and doffing (or not doffing) of headgear was socially very sensitive, as witness the impact of the early Quakers' refusal to remove their hats in the presence of social superiors: see Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, pp. 198-9. In the eighteenth century, formal 'hat honour' seems to have been on the wane, at least in the towns: see references in P.J. Corfield, 'Dress for Deference and Dissent: Hats and the Decline of Hat Honour', *Costume*, 23 (1989), pp. 64-79.

²¹ This approach therefore rejects any dichotomous sundering of 'perceptions' and 'realities'. Viewpoints, even if shown to be erroneous, are not thereby rendered 'unreal'. This is a key point: the discussion looks at interpretative concepts in their full historical context, without discounting either the importance of ideas and words or that of social configurations. For linguists' debates about diachronic analysis of language change, see T. Bynon (ed.), *Historical Linguistics* (Cambridge, 1977), p. x, where the historian's approach seems closest to the 'transformational-generative' model.

²² J. Swift, in the *Examiner*, 13 (1710), updating James Harrington's proposition that 'such ... as is the proportion or balance of dominion or property in land, such is the nature of the empire', *Oceana* (1659).

²³ Mme Van Muyden (ed.), *A Foreign View of England in the Reigns of George I and George II: The Letters of M. César de Saussure to his Family* (1902), pp. 207-8.

²⁴ R. Steele, *The Conscious Lovers* (1722/3), in S.S. Kenny (ed.), *The Plays of Richard Steele* (Oxford, 1971), p. 359. The nature of the interplay between landed and non-landed sources of wealth and status is discussed in L. and J.F. Stone, *An Open Elite? England, 1540-1880* (Oxford, 1984), esp. pp. 281-92 for elite/bourgeois cultural assimilation.

²⁵ As listed in later eighteenth-century urban directories; from a survey by P.J. Corfield, 'Urban Occupations in Britain in the Early Industrial Revolution', funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, 1982-5. 'Gentleman' had always had a certain ambivalence between a moral and a social definition, and a growing chorus began to stress the former at the expense of the latter: see, for example, R. Steele, in the *Tatler*, 207 (1710): 'The Appellation of a Gentleman is never to be affixed to a Man's Circumstances but to his Behaviour in them'. See also S. Letwin, *The Gentleman in Trollope: Individuality and Moral Conduct* (1982), and H.J. Shroff, *The Eighteenth-Century Novel: The Idea of the Gentleman* (New Delhi, 1978).

²⁶ Quoted in N. McKendrick, 'Josiah Wedgwood and the Commercialisation of the Potteries', in N. McKendrick, J. Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialisation of Eighteenth-Century England* (1982), p. 131; see also passim, as well as J. Sekora, *Luxury: The Concept in Western Thought: Eden to*

Smollett (Baltimore, 1977), and J. Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects: The Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1978), esp. pp. 173-80.

²⁷ Historians have shared these difficulties, compounded by scarcity of reliable data and problems in defining social boundaries. Compare approaches in S. Pollard and D.W. Crossley, *The Wealth of Britain, 1085-1966* (1965), esp. pp. 169-73, 185-9; H. Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society, 1780-1880* (1969), esp. pp. 17-94; and W. Rubinstein, 'Wealth, Elites and the Class Structure of Modern Britain', *Past and Present*, 76 (1977), pp. 99-126.

²⁸ In 1711, Joseph Addison wrote of 'a very great revolution': *Spectator*, 119 (1711; reprint in 1950 edn), vol. 1, pp. 362-3.

²⁹ D. Defoe, *The Great Law of Subordination Considered* (1724), p. 50.

³⁰ H. Fielding, *An Inquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers* (1751), p. xxiii: preface.

³¹ *The World* (1755), as quoted in C.W. and P. Cunnington, *A Handbook of English Costume in the Eighteenth Century* (1957), p. 21.

³² G. Shelton, *Dean Tucker and Eighteenth-Century Economic and Political Thought* (1981), p. 255.

³³ R. Southey, *Letters from England*, ed. J. Simmons (1951), pp. 362-3. Other changes included 'the invention of the steam-engine, almost as great an *epocha* as the invention of printing; the manufacturing system carried to its utmost point; the spirit of commerce extended to every thing; an Empire lost in America, and another gained in the East', putting economic and imperial developments in close conjunction with social transformation.

³⁴ Among an extensive bibliography, see C.B MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford, 1962), S. Lukes, *Individualism* (Oxford, 1973); and J. E. Crowley, *This Sheba, Self: The Conceptualisation of Economic Life in Eighteenth-Century America* (Baltimore, 1974).

³⁵ T. Paine, *The Rights of Man* (1791/2; Harmondsworth, 1969), p. 168; H. More, *Works*, Vol. 3, p. 100. For the pluralism and diversity of radical traditions in action, see G.B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979); M. and J. Jacob (eds), *The Origins of Anglo-American Radicalism* (1984); J. Brewer and J. Styles (eds), *An Ungovernable People: The English and their Law in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (1980).

³⁶ C. Hill, 'James Harrington and the People', in idem, *Puritanism and Revolution* (1958); H.T. Dickinson, *Liberty and Property: Political Ideology in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (1977).

³⁷ Harriet Martineau disputed this point with Coleridge in the 1820s, claiming to envisage society purely as an 'aggregate of individuals'; but in her writings she used a number of collective nouns, including 'Capital', 'Labour', the 'middle class' (which she specified as her own), and 'workies', which she proposed as an affectionate version of 'working class': H. Martineau, *Autobiography* (1877; in 1983 edn), Vol. 1, p. 396; Vol. 2, pp. 115, 306-7. See also her *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1834), Vol. 1, pp. xiv-xx. A tradition of not referring explicitly to social class is continued today in some political circles, especially among economic liberals; but it is still difficult to avoid some aggregative groupings, such as 'ordinary people/top people' or providers of 'essential services/others with special gifts': see, for example, M. Thatcher, *Let Our Children Grow Tall: Selected Speeches, 1975-7* (Centre for Policy Studies, 1977), p. 35.

³⁸ ‘Commercial’, ‘trading’, ‘manufacturing’, and ‘monied’ interests were all referred to in the eighteenth century, as well as the ‘landed’ interest, the last appealed to with subdued sarcasm in J. Tucker, *An Humble Address and Earnest Appeal to those Respectable Personages in Great Britain and Ireland, who, by their Great and Permanent Interest in Landed Property, their Liberal Education, Elevated Rank, and Enlarged Views, are the Ablest to Judge and the Fittest to Decide, whether a Connection with, or Separation from the Continental Colonies of America, be most for the National Advantage and the Lasting Benefit of these Kingdoms* (Gloucester, 1775).

³⁹ T. Blount, *Glossographia* (London, 1656); see also brief comments in Calvert, *Concept of Class*, pp. 12-13. Some seventeenth-century writers in Latin, including Milton, used *classis* (plural, *classes*), subsequently translated as social class or classes; but this, although comprehensible, is anachronistic in terms of usage in seventeenth-century English.

⁴⁰ Compare D. Defoe, *The Poor Man’s Plea, in Relation to all the ... Acts of Parliament ... for ... Suppressing Immorality in the Nation* (1698), p. 19; ‘Hotspur’, in the *Spectator*, 354 (1712); and Addison, *Spectator*, 34 (1711; 1950 edn), Vol. 1, pp. 101-2; and Vol. 3, p. 107.

⁴¹ Nelson, *Essay on the Government of Children*; J. Tucker, *A Brief Essay on the Advantages and Disadvantages which Respectively attend France and Great Britain with Respect to Trade* (1749); J. Massie, *Calculations of the Present Taxes Yearly Paid by a Family of Each Rank, Degree, or Class* (1756), pp. 1, 8; J. Hanway, *A Journal of Eight Days Journey* (1757), Vol. 2, p. 264. A scan of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century literature for social terminology has to take into account other applications of ‘class’ e.g. [J. Burton, attrib.], *The Class System Vindicated and Recommended* (1843), is a tract in favour of the Methodist study groups for religious education.

⁴² Spoken usage from the eighteenth century is, of course, only recorded through the written word, although some forms of transcripts, dialogues, and plays did attempt to record or re-create actual speech. Printed versions of parliamentary oratory were almost certainly edited after the event, and thus usage should strictly be dated by publication: see W. Pitt, *The Speeches of the Rt. Hon. William Pitt in the House of Commons*, ed. W.S. Hathaway (1806), Vol. 2, p. 365; also C.J. Fox, *The Speeches of the Rt. Hon. Charles James Fox in the House of Commons*, ed. J. Wright (1815), Vol. 2, p. 174: ‘It was the best government, where the people had the greatest share in it’.

⁴³ This comment refers to contextual meanings rather than formal definitions, since dictionaries from Johnson’s *Dictionary* of 1755 to the current *Oxford English Dictionary* habitually define ‘rank’ as ‘class’, and *vice versa*. It was not strictly necessary for the words to change for meanings to mutate, as there are many examples of old words turned to new usages over time. The fact that terminology did change substantially, however, suggests in itself an emphatic process, generating new concepts of society and new vocabularies *pari passu*. Social conflicts and transformations in earlier periods have not infrequently been associated with similar linguistic challenge.

⁴⁴ Anon., *The British Tocsin: Or, Proofs of National Ruin* (1795), pp. 8, 21. This was a radical tract, published by Daniel Isaac Eaton, calling for liberty and revolution.

⁴⁵ Anon., *Of the Several Degrees of Gentry and their Precedency* (1719), pp. iii, vii. ‘Excellent’ were prince, duke, marquis, and earl; ‘noble’ were viscount, baron, baronet, knight, esquire, and gentleman, among which last ‘calling’ there were nine gradations. Addison poked fun at disputes over precedence: *Spectator*, 529 (1712; in

1950 edn), Vol. 4, pp. 168-9.

⁴⁶ D. Defoe, *A Review of the State of the British Nation*, Vol. 6, no. 36 (2 June 1709); idem, *A Review of the Affairs of France*, Vol. 2, no. 18 (14 Apr. 1705).

⁴⁷ Massie, *Calculations*, pp. iii-iv, 13-42 [interpolated pagination]; and P. Mathias, 'The Social Structure in the Eighteenth Century: A Calculation by Joseph Massie', in idem, *The Transformation of England: Essays in the Economic and Social History of England in the Eighteenth Century* (1979), pp 171-89. Massie's figures can be adapted for comparison with the income/expenditure tables for different ranks and occupations compiled by Gregory King (1688) and Patrick Colquhoun (1803); but grouping their data into social classes is more problematic: compare Mathias, 'Social Structure', pp. 186-9, and Perkin, *Origins of Modern English Society*, pp. 20-1.

⁴⁸ Anon., *The Cheats of London Exposed* (? 1770), pp. 66-7.

⁴⁹ Van Muyden (ed.), *Letters of Saussure*, p.192; Anon., *Low-Life: Or, One Half of the World Knows not how the Other Half Live, Being a Critical Account of What is Transacted by People of Almost All Religions, Nations, Circumstances, and Sizes of Understanding, in the Twenty-four Hours between Saturday Night and Monday Morning* (1752; 2nd edn, 1754; 3rd edn, 1764).

⁵⁰ A common salutation 'even to the poor' was 'Honest Man': F.M. Misson, *Memoirs and Observations in his Travels over England* (Eng. transl. 1719), p. 221. On the other hand, Englishmen were not slow to abuse the Scots directly, as Boswell often complained: see, for example, Pottle (ed.), *Boswell's London Journal*, p.72

⁵¹ A. Hamilton, Speech on 18 June 1787, in S.K. Padover (ed.), *The Mind of Alexander Hamilton* (New York, 1958), p. 114; and J.S. Mill, *Collected Works*, ed. F.E.L. Priestley (1963), Vol. 12, pp. 27-8.

⁵² T. Malthus, *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798; Harmondsworth, 1970), p. 144.

⁵³ H. Fielding, *The History of the Life of the Late Mr. Jonathan Wild the Great* (1743; in 1976 edn), pp. 41-2.

⁵⁴ Pitt, *Speeches*, Vol. 3, p. 3; T. Paine, *Complete Writings*, ed. P.S. Foner (New York, 1969), Vol. 2, p. 478; H.T. Dickinson (ed.), *The Political Works of Thomas Spence* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1982), pp. 50, 53.

⁵⁵ For a critical elaboration of Georges Dumezil's approach, see G. Duby, *The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined* (Paris, 1978), transl. A. Goldhammer (Chicago, 1980). In medieval times, three orders were invoked: 'those who fight, those who pray, and those who work'; rendered into more civilian mode in 1610 by C. Loyseau, *Traité des ordres*, as nobility, clergy, and the Third Estate.

⁵⁶ F. Bacon. 'Of Seditious and Troubles' and 'Of the True Greatness of Kingdoms', in idem, *Essays* (1941 edn), pp. 51, 54, 109-10; also R. Baxter, *The Poor Husbandman's Advocate*, as cited in C. Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (1964), p. 251.

⁵⁷ S. Butler, *Prose Observations*, ed. H. de Quehen (Oxford, 1979), p. 14; D. Defoe, *The Compleat English Tradesman* (1725-6; in 1841 edn), Vol. 2, pp. 89-90; and idem, *The Life and Strange Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719-20; in 1840 edn), Vol. 1, p. 3.

⁵⁸ 21 Jac. I, cap. 20 (1624); 6 & 7 William III, cap. 11 (1695); 19 Geo. II, cap. 21 (1746): as the fines were raised in successive codifications, so the period of prosecution time was progressively shortened, from 20 days to 10 days to 8 days. T. Turner, *The Diary of a Georgian Shopkeeper*, ed. G.H. Jennings (Oxford, 1979), p. 37, observed that had all offending vestrymen been charged with their offences against this legislation, 'there would be no need to levy any tax to maintain our poor'.

⁵⁹ The noun shift can be found in other languages (French: *états* to *classes*; German: *Stand* or *Schicht* to *Klasse*), although their usage did not change as early or as prominently as it did in England, where the changing adjectival emphasis was particularly notable. See for comparison W.H. Sewell, *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labour from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge, 1981); and for a brief overview of English applications, R. Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976).

⁶⁰ M. Woodhull [sometimes Wodhull], *The Equality of Mankind* (Oxford, 1765); there are a number of variant readings in different editions.

⁶¹ See variously J. Shipley, *Works* (1792), Vol. 2, pp. 143, 273; O. Goldsmith, *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766; Harmondsworth, 1982), p. 116; J. Larwood, *Erratics: By a Sailor* (1800); J. Aikin, *Address to the Dissidents of England* (1790); J. Priestley, as cited in R.V. Holt, *The Unitarian Contribution to Social Progress in England* (1938), p. 86. The intellectual ancestry of this viewpoint is found in Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk 4, ch. 11. For a later survey of definitional problems, see G.D.H. Cole, 'The Conception of the Middle Classes', in idem, *Studies in Class Structure* (1955), pp. 78-100.

⁶² Dictionary datings are all liable to revision in the light of fresh work on the eighteenth century: communication from *Oxford English Dictionary*, which welcomes new research findings. Grateful acknowledgement is due to the editor, Robert Burchfield, for generous help with references and datings.

⁶³ Norfolk Record Office, Case 16c, Petition for Bill to Regulate Burden of Poor Rate, etc., 1763; J. Steuart, *An Inquiry into Principles of Political Economy* (1767), Vol. 1, p. 334; J. Gwynn, *London and Westminster Improved* (1766); *Monthly Review* (Jan. 1751/2), reviewing H. Fielding, *Inquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers*. 'Industrious' was also used generically, however, for many 'middling' manufacturing occupations, as well as those of the 'lower sort'.

⁶⁴ W. Hutton, *An History of Birmingham* (Birmingham, 1781), p. 50; J. Thelwall, *The Rights of Nature* (1796), Vol. 2, p. 83; *Monthly Magazine*, 4 (1797), p. 109; Dickinson (ed.), *Political Works of Spence*, pp. 53, 55-6, 99; F. Eden, *The State of the Poor: Or, a History of the Laborious Classes* (1797); T. Paine, *The Poor Man's Friend: An Address to the Industrious and Manufacturing Part of Great Britain* (1793).

⁶⁵ J. Gray, *Some Reflections intended to Promote the Success of the Said Society*, in G. Dempster, *A Discourse containing ... Proceedings ... of the Society for Extending the Fisheries and Improving the Sea Coasts of Great Britain* (1789), p. 50; J. Aikin, *A Description of the Country from Thirty to Forty Miles around Manchester* (1795), p. 262; Anon., 'Wholesome Advice to the Swinish Multitude' (1795), in J. Holloway and J. Black (eds), *Later English Broadside Ballads* (1975), pp. 278-9.

⁶⁶ R. Owen, *A New View of Society* (1813; 1817), pp. 17, 26, 48, 59, 176. This book was very eclectic in social terminology, contrasting the 'privileged classes' with variously the 'inferior situations in life', 'lower classes', 'working classes', 'lower orders', and 'poor and lower orders'. The pithiness of 'working class' commended its adoption; but it rapidly became controversial, and those of conservative cast of mind often preferred the plural form, to disavow notions of class struggle. However, even among radicals, usage remained very various; and their social critique was often couched in political rather than purely economic terms. For a fertile discussion, see G. Stedman Jones, 'Rethinking Chartism', in idem, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832-1982* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 90-178.

⁶⁷ Defoe, *Compleat English Tradesman*, Vol. 1 p. 252; Anon., *The British Merchant: The Cost of Living* (1713), Vol. 1, p. 237; D. Defoe, *Letters from a Moor* (1736), p. 168; Anon., *A Second Humble Address from the Poor Weavers and Manufacturers to*

the Ladies (?1719); Anon., *Case of the Petitioners against ... a New Workhouse in Manchester* (?1731); J. Clayton, *Friendly Advice to the Poor* (Manchester, 1755) pp. 13, 14. For changing economic interpretations, see also D. Coleman, 'Labour in the English Economy in the Seventeenth Century', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 8 (1955/6), pp. 280-93; and C. Hill, 'Pottage for Freeborn Englishmen: Attitudes to Wage Labour', in idem, *Change and Continuity in Seventeenth-Century England* (1974), pp. 219-38

⁶⁸ Gregory King's often misunderstood binary division (1688) between those 'increasing' and those 'decreasing' the wealth of the nation did not imply that the latter 50 per cent were equally 'poor', and certainly not that they were all 'paupers', as his detailed figures made clear: see M.D. George, *England in Transition* (Harmondsworth, 1964), pp. 150-1. For the continuance of the debate, see G. Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age* (1984).

⁶⁹ See the 1754 slogans of a Tory crowd, cited in L. Colley, *In Defiance of Oligarchy: The Tory Party, 1714-60* (Cambridge, 1982), p. 155; and view of magistrate Sir Michael Foster, reported in *Manchester Mercury* (3 Apr. 1759) and cited in A.P. Wadsworth and J. de L. Mann, *The Cotton Trade and Industrial Lancashire, 1600-1780* (Manchester, 1931; 1965), p. 367. For general discussions of problems of industrial organisation and the extent or otherwise of labour consciousness, see C.R. Dobson, *Masters and Journeymen: A Pre-history of Industrial Relations, 1717-1800* (1980); J. Rule, *The Experience of Labour in Eighteenth-Century Industry* (1981); and R.W. Malcolmson, 'Workers' Combinations in Eighteenth-Century England', in Jacob (eds), *Anglo-American Radicalism*, pp. 149-61.

⁷⁰ A. Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (Edinburgh, 1767; 1768), pp. 56, 161, 217, 249, 304. Ferguson (1723-1816) agreed with Montesquieu that 'Man is born in society, and there he remains' (p. 27), accepted that some subordination was 'natural' but not in conflict with 'natural rights', and attacked both despotism and slavery (pp. 103, 161, 308-9 respectively). For the European debate in the mid-eighteenth century, and particularly for the important contribution of the French physiocrats, see Calvert, *Concept of Class*, pp. 19-25.

⁷¹ J. Millar, *Observations Concerning the Distinction of Ranks in Society* (1771), esp. pp. 37, 184, 187, 232-3. Millar (1735-1801) used the term 'rank' in his text and title in a very generic sense; he also deployed descriptive synonyms for specific groups (pp. 184, 233, 237). In his next work, *An Historical View of the English Government, from the Settlement of the Saxons in Britain ... to the Present Time* (1787; in extended edn 1803), Vol. 4, pp 115, 118, 141, he wrote specifically of 'class' in a categorisation of 'Landlords, capitalists, and labourers' derived from Adam Smith. The Scottish contribution to the British debate was notable; and Scottish traditions of social description might repay further examination.

⁷² A. Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776; in 1970 edn), Vol. 1, p. 230. See also p. 336, for the 'progress of opulence'; and Vol. 1, pp. 10, 70, 310-11, and Vol. 2, p. 346, for his variegated social terminology. Like many fruitful syntheses, the writings of Adam Smith (1723-90) have influenced many later, different schools of thought, by direct descent, as in *laissez-faire* economics, and by dialectical extension: cf. Marx's comment 'No credit is due to me for discovering, the existence of classes in modern society, or the struggle between them': letter to J. Weydemeyer, 5 Mar. 1852, in D. McClellan (ed.), *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (Oxford, 1977), p. 341.

⁷³ C. Hall, *The Effects of Civilisation on the People in European States* (1804/5; 1849), p. 39; and Thelwall, *Rights of Nature*, Vol. 1, p. 24.

⁷⁴ This argument therefore differs from the interpretation in Perkin, *Origins of Modern English Society*, p. 17, where English society is defined as ‘an open aristocracy based on property and patronage’. It also diverges from the emphasis in E.P. Thompson, ‘Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class struggle without Class?’ *Social History*, 3 (1978), pp. 133-65; and idem, ‘Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture’, *Journal of Social History*, 7 (1974), pp. 382-405. In particular, the emergence of a self-conscious urban middle class seems to be omitted from both these influential accounts, as well as the general sense of pervasive social change.

⁷⁵ Investigation of terminology in writings of some of the eighteenth-century's long-lived letter-writers and diarists shows individual flexibilities, especially in youth, with usage tending to become more stereotyped in later life. Much change was also inter-generational. Diverse and conflicting usage in eighteenth-century language makes it difficult for historians to describe society purely in the terms used at the time, as some authorities would prescribe.

⁷⁶ Anon., *The Sedan: A Novel* (1757), Vol. 2, p. 4.

⁷⁷ British Library, Add. Mss 32973 fos 432-3, for Newcastle; Burke, *Revolution in France*, p. 174.

⁷⁸ Shelton, *Dean Tucker*, p. 177; Southey, *Letters from England*, p. 367.

⁷⁹ An immense area for debate about social/political ‘consciousness’ has been opened up by E.P. Thompson’s challenging *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963); see also references and discussion in R.S. Neale, *Class in English History, 1680-1850* (Oxford, 1981); R.J. Morris, *Class and Class Consciousness in the Industrial Revolution, 1780-1850* (1979); and much work-in-progress on the eighteenth century.

⁸⁰ In 1783, e.g. the younger Pitt had declared that every thinking man must agree that constitutional reform was ‘absolutely necessary’; while in 1792 he feared ‘great danger of anarchy and confusion’ in the attempt: Pitt, *Speeches*, Vol. 1, p. 75; Vol. 2, p. 90. Some scholarly research has stressed the lack of social fluidity at the traditional apex of the peerage and the owners of large country houses: Stone, *An Open Elite?* passim; and J. Cannon, *Aristocratic Century: The Peerage of Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1984); but this focus has tended to isolate the titular elite, especially as the number of intermediary titles (knights, baronets) was in decline (*ibid.*, p. 32). The alleged immobilism at the top certainly did not stem wider social change and demands for reform.