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Aurea mediocritas

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Aurea mediocritas? The Middling Sort of People in the English-Speaking World in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

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AUREA MEDIOCRITAS ?
THE MIDDLING SORT OF PEOPLE IN THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING WORLD IN THE SEVENTEENTH AND EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES

The 2014 volume addressed "Measure and Excess" in a variety of perspectives ranging from human temper to literary genres, from barbarian mores to the luxury of the opera, and from population counts to the severity of laws. For its 40th anniversary in 2015, the Society chose as its main focus of interest those of modest means, the middling sort of people, and raised the question of whether they embodied "the golden mean," or in the words of Horace, "*aurea mediocritas*," as they neither sank to the depths of poverty, nor rose to the heights of the leisured aristocracy. The poet recommended: "Who makes the golden mean his guide, / Shuns miser's cabin, foul and dark, / Shuns gilded roofs, where pomp and pride / Are envy's mark" (2.10).[1] Though the Latin is in the singular, the "middling sort" of people includes many different situations and occupations and covers income ranging from some £50 to about £800 per annum (Langford 64). Langford also recalls that Millar considered the emergence of this class as a major change in the English and British society after 1688, with the rise of the "commercial age" (61). Besides, in that deeply religious age, and particularly among the Dissenters, the middle station of life may have been the best possible situation for pious and industrious men and women, who could behave as recommended in the last chapters of the Book of Proverbs. Agur's prayer reads:

> Two things have I required of thee; deny me them not before I die: Remove far from me vanity and lies: give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me:

1. The Latin text goes "Auream quisquis mediocritatem / diligit, tutus caret obsoleti / sordibus tecti, caret inuindenda / sobrius aula" (Horace).

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> Lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the Lord? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain
> (Proverbs 30.7-9).

As to the virtuous woman, she was to work hard and take care of her household, including her domestic servants (Proverbs 31). Based on ancient and biblical tradition, it would appear therefore that the relative affluence of the productive (albeit not "labouring") classes offered favourable conditions for them to achieve wealth and virtue.

This potential is perhaps best extolled in modern utopias where all inhabitants are to take their fair share in the production of the goods needed by all. Thomas More, the father of the genre, imagined an island severed from the corrupt continent where the population would renounce both private property and idleness. Under such circumstances, the moderation of needs would lead to a moderation of employment, so that six hours a day of productive labour for each would provide everything that was needed. The guiding principles of *Utopia* would therefore entail an equality of status that would undermine intestine competition and encourage virtue and benevolence. Two centuries later (1764), the Whig dissenter and political theorist James Burgh narrated the emigration of a group of Dutch Puritan craftsmen handpicked by a Mr Van der Neck who ambitioned to form a perfect community in Patagonia. None would be admitted to go but those who lived from their own exertions, neither in luxury nor in destitution. They formed the lower part of the middling sort and were alone judged apt to abide by the rules of a utopian society that entailed moderate, yet diligent, labour. More and Burgh's models construed utopia as a (non-)place where all would accept an equal standard of living that guaranteed universal comfort, far from the excesses of luxury. They would have time on their hands to be educated to true virtue, thus allowing the seeds of a perfect society to come to fruition. Writers of utopia could easily imagine societies based on an idealised *aurea mediocritas* where all would willingly adopt a single pattern of behaviour in order to contribute to the greater good. In the real world, however, human passions – and pride prominently among them – would prove much harder to curb, which allows us to see how utopia can verge on tyranny or dictatorship (Sippel).

Like Brown's gardens, the middling sort of people certainly had "a capability for improvement" as they could afford education for themselves and their children, and some leisure time to share the élite's cultural activities. Yet their very aspirations to join in the tantalizing

refinement of their betters condemned them to remain vulgar *parvenus*. The papers in this volume illustrate the trajectories of a multifaceted group that yearned for respectability. Jeremy Black's analysis of the middling sort as "the people" and "the nation" provides an insightful departure point for the other six papers which all point to the ways in which social status and cultural codes created a sense of national belonging that reached out to those who had hitherto been excluded because of their lack of inherited estates and titles. The next three articles also address the political and social characteristics of the middling sort of people who longed for improvement and citizenship. The last three papers provide insight into dimensions of culture and sociability.

Improvement and citizenship

Jeremy Black's article provides a comprehensive overview of the political significance of the "middling sort of people" in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Britain, and extends his reflections to young America. After historiographical considerations covering a great many monographs that explore the middle ranks under their manifold guises, he more specifically focuses on how they formed "the people" (as in the preamble to the American Constitution) or "the nation." Indeed several of the following papers suggest that by adopting their betters' codes, the middle ranks shared in the national culture and grandeur. Contrary to the lower orders, they had all they needed to further improve themselves: with some exertion, they could use their talents to achieve a higher economic status that would allow them into the influential circles of religion, culture and, perhaps, politics.

Black underlines the teleological dimension of contemporary accounts that equated the numerical and economic rise of the middling classes with the newly acquired freedoms of the English and then the British in the wake of the Glorious Revolution (or of the Americans after Independence). Several other papers point to the rise of the middle classes' sense of forming "the people" or "the nation" as a consequence of changes, whether these were political revolutions (in the 1640s and in 1688 in England, in 1776 in America, or in the aftermath of 1789) or religious revivals like the Evangelical Great Awakening that occurred on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1730s. These upheavals reinforced the reading – and writing – of pamphlets or treatises which, Black suggests,

allowed the middling sort to take part in the debates and to contribute to the development of party politics.

James Gillray (who died exactly 200 years ago) often portrayed John Bull and his sound political awareness. He stands as the allegorical character embodying both the middling sort and the British nation, armed with common sense and able to identify and refuse the excesses and eccentricities of France. Gillray's *Tree of Liberty, or The Devil Tempting John Bull* (1798) offers a telling picture of British political virtue rooted in the mixed constitution: John Bull resists Charles James Fox's attempts to spread revolutionary ideas. Black also shows that identifying the middle stations with "the nation" could be a way of further denouncing the idleness of the declining landed élites who bred idle men of fashion attracted to the deceptive delicacies of French (sometimes Italian) cuisine, music, political fancies or erroneous Cartesian thought.

Giuliana Di Biase's paper "A Gentleman's 'moderate knowledge': Mediocrity as the appropriate Measure of Learning in John Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*" specifically addresses this question of the appropriate education for a member of the English élite. She underlines that although Locke hardly ever used the word "mediocrity" in his writings – and never in his *Thoughts Concerning Education* – the golden mean appealed to him as a personal ideal. The Latin epitaph he composed for his own tombstone reveals that he hoped to leave the memory of "a man contented with his modest lot": "A scholar by training, he devoted his studies wholly to the pursuit of truth. […] His virtues, if he had any, were too slight to serve either to his own credit or as an example to you. Let his vices be buried with him."[2] His virtue and modesty as a man and as a scholar show in his assertion that he did not ambition to more than what he had, and devoted himself to "the pursuit" of truth rather than to "truth" itself. As she explores his *Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), Di Biase demonstrates how the guiding principles of his epitaph pervade the entire work. The virtuous gentry that was to govern England after 1688 had to be taught useful skills and subjects, far from the excesses and pedantry of Cartesian thought or scholasticism. Though he did not use the word in his *Thoughts*, Locke's first lesson was that of how to accept and make the most of human *mediocritas.* Such moderation Locke thought particularly

2. Giuliana Di Biase gives the Latin text in her paper.

suited a limited Protestant monarchy like that of post-1688 England – later Britain.

On the other side of the Atlantic in Massachusetts Bay Colony, although citizenship was originally defined in religious terms, a literate body of middle-class men succeeded in drafting and ratifying a constitution. In "L'implication populaire du Massachusetts dans le processus de ratification constitutionnelle" Isabelle Sicard explores the evolution of citizenship from the 1630s until 1780 when the new-born State of Massachusetts ratified its constitution. Her article draws on earlier research to show how emblematic Massachusetts was as a colony, and then a state, bathed in radical Protestantism where political institutions were an emanation of the Puritan covenant. In the words of Wald and Calhoun-Brown:

> Colonial religious life developed on the principles of voluntary affiliation and congregational independence. […] Membership in a Church was an option rather than an automatic status, and carried with it an obligation to participate in the running of the congregation. In the judgement of the historian Sydney Ahlstrom, membership in self-governing churches "prepared men to regard the social compact as the proper basis of government. (Wald & Calhoun-Brown 45-46).

Sicard sheds light on the various ways in which "the people" – the "fountain of power" – were to take part in complex constitutional and religious debates at the time of the War of Independence. "To a degree unparalleled at that time (though restricted by today's standards), the New England colonies achieved higher levels of suffrage, powerful representative institutions, respect for the rule of law, and social policies that encouraged the spread of education, science, culture and charitable activity" (Wald & Calhoun-Brown 52). In other words, "the people" of Massachusetts laid the foundation stone of a society that would promote the characteristics of *aurea mediocritas* as the social basis of the future United States of America: a group of articulate people able to improve themselves by education and others by philanthropy.[3]

Pierre-François Peirano's paper entitled "'A Ploughman on His Legs is Higher than a Gentleman on His Knees:' The Representation of

3. I would like to express my warmest thanks to my Toulouse colleagues Léna Loza, Zachary Baqué and Françoise Coste for their helpful comments and references about colonial and revolutionary Massachusetts.

the Middling People in Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard Almanac*" addresses the formation of the golden mean in America from another angle, using Benjamin Franklin's aphorisms and maxims as his subject matter. One of the Founding Fathers, Franklin – in much the same way as Locke in Britain – epitomises the ideal member of the middling orders as he worked himself to fortune and learning. If well followed, the practical advice and moral maxims in Franklin's *Almanac* would lead the industrious to both wealth and virtue.

The Americans who would build the future of the nation were to assume the role of Locke's English gentry as the virtuous élite – but unlike that landed class, their wealth would consist in "a trade" rather than in "an estate." In his *Information to those who would remove to America* (1784), Franklin offered much the same idealised vision of America as that of Crèvecœur's 1782 *Letters of an American Farmer* (especially Letter III, "What is an American") in which the whole of American society appears as an egalitarian agrarian utopia made up of a homogeneous independent class:

> Here are no aristocratical families, no courts, no kings, no bishops, no ecclesiastical dominion, no invisible power giving to a few a very visible one; no great manufacturers employing thousands, no great refinements of luxury. […] We are all animated with the spirit of an industry which is unfettered and unrestrained, because each person works for himself. (49-50).

Later accounts of a supposedly egalitarian American society were similarly optimistic, like John O'Sullivan's of 1839.[4] As we well know though, two centuries were needed for the phrase "we the people" to actually include all the people – women and men, rich and poor, whites and non-whites.

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4. "The American people having derived their origin from many other nations, and the Declaration of National Independence being entirely based on the great principle of human equality, these facts demonstrate at once our disconnected position as regards any other nation […]. [O]ur national birth was the beginning of a new history, the formation and progress of an untried political system, which separates us from the past and connects us with the future only; and so far as regards the entire development of the natural rights of man, in moral, political, and national life, we may confidently assume that our country is destined to be the great nation of futurity. […] It is so destined, because the principle upon which a nation is organized fixes its destiny, and that of equality is perfect, is universal. […] Besides, the truthful annals of any nation furnish abundant evidence, that its happiness, its greatness, its duration, were always proportionate to the democratic equality in its system of government" (O'Sullivan, 429-30)

Cultural and sociable usages

Improving one's condition frequently aroused suspicion and irony rather than respect. Economic success did not suffice to allow the middling ranks into the dignified circles of society and they were mocked and ridiculed for failing to properly adopt the cultural and sociable codes that their betters had mastered and passed on for many generations. If Bernard Mandeville is to be trusted, the early eighteenth century was characterised by an emulation that re-created a great chain of beings – albeit a fretful one – similar to the one that had been disrupted by the rise to affluence of the middling sort,[5] yet different in so far as the new one was prey to constant alterations. His remark on "pride" is quite insightful in this respect:

> What is peculiar to this faculty of ours [Pride], is, that those who are the fullest of it are the least willing to connive at it in others; whereas the heineousness [*sic.*] of other Vices is the most extenuated by those who are guilty of 'em themselves. […] The Druggist, Mercer, Draper and other creditable Shopkeepers can find no difference between themselves and Merchants, and therefore dress and live like them. The Merchant's Lady, who cannot bear the Assurance of those Mechanicks [*sic.*], flies for refuge to the other End of the Town, and scorns to follow any Fashion but what she takes from thence. This haughtiness alarms the Court, the Women of Quality are frighten'd to see Merchant's Wives and Daughters dress'd like themselves; this Impudence of the City, they cry, is intolerable; Mantua-makers are sent for, and the contrivance of Fashions becomes all their study, that they may have always new Modes ready to take up, as soon as those sawcy [*sic.*] City shall begin to imitate those in being. The same Emulation is continued through the several degrees of Quality to an incredible Expence [*sic.*], till at last the Prince's great Favourites and those of the first Rank of all, having nothing else left to outstrip some of their Inferiors, are forc'd to lay out vast Estates and pompous Equipages, magnificent Furniture, sumptuous Gardens and princely Palaces. (Mandeville 149, 153-54)

The following three papers show how the middling orders were torn between the desire to copy the upper classes and their original ignorance, which more often than not prevented them from properly mimicking their distinguished attitudes. Their very thirst for cultural

5. Marie-Laure Massei-Chamayou discusses below how the medieval concept of the Great Chain of Beings had been disrupted by the emergence of the middling sort of people.

and sociable improvement morphed into vulgarity and debarred them from being included in an élite that would extend to the monied and not just landed classes.

Adam Smith suggested that a stroll in a landscape garden generated pleasures similar to music as it aroused a *variation* of different feelings:

> When we follow the winding alleys of some happily situated and well laid out garden, we are presented with a succession of landscapes, which are sometimes gay, sometimes gloomy, and sometimes calm and serene; if the mind is in its natural state, it suits itself to the objects which successively present themselves, and varies with every variation of the scene. (Smith 287-88)

Pierre Dubois's "Porous Places: Music in the (Late) Pleasure Gardens and Social Ambiguity" ushers us into the "sumptuous" garden of Vauxhall to partake in musical delights. Landscape gardens were places where the middling sort could prolong their intellectual and even political improvement. Michel Baridon demonstrated how gentlemen improved their gardens and how those who visited them were in turn improved by the places' designs: "Le gentilhomme jardinier n'avait nul besoin d'aller à Oxford et Cambridge pour se former le goût à l'imitation des classiques; la contemplation de la nature et l'amour de l'élégance rurale constituaient en soi une formation intellectuelle" (53). Besides, he continues: "Prôner l'asymétrie et l'irrégularité signifie que l'on est ami des libertés et de la Constitution mixte" (Baridon 46). A little like Locke's education, taking a stroll in a landscape garden while listening to Handel's music was a distinctively British experience, one that was perhaps all the more British as it was not French. Yet, though audiences may have been culturally and politically elevated by the shows, the lighter pieces that were included in order to please the middling ranks tended to lower the quality of the programmes in much the same way as comedy debased painting or literature in the traditional hierarchy of genres.

Women were not immune to the pride that animated the competition between all ranks of society. Alongside with the *beau* and the man of fashion, they were a frequent target of satire. Ariane Fennetaux offers an original view of middling class women as she adopts the methodology of material culture studies to dive into women's pockets in her paper entitled " 'Ty'd around my middle, next to my smock': Pour une approche matérielle des pratiques et valeurs des femmes des 'middling sorts' en Grande-Bretagne au XVIIIe siècle." This contribution draws on

research to be published in *The Artful Pocket: Social and Cultural History of an Everyday Object – Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, written together with Barbara Burman. In the present article she explores how the manifold fabrics used to make these separable pockets mirrored the occupations and habits of women, from the domestic servant running errands to the lady giving alms. The making and usage of the pockets was subjected to strictures from conduct book writers who emphasised that they were indicative of the owner's virtue.

Carried underneath the skirt and above the petticoat, pockets were concealed and the display of their contents conformed to heavily codified principles. Beside the pockets themselves, Ariane Fennetaux explores a wide range of written accounts such as inventories or trial court testimonies to examine the contents of these pockets. There was a thin line dividing distinction from vulgarity, one that could be easily crossed by those who wanted the subtleties of etiquette. Using one's smelling bottle immoderately unmistakably gave away a *parvenue* who had attained the economic condition of the gentry but failed to appropriate its attitudes.

Jane Austen, a descendant of the English gentry by birth, was rather part of the middling sort by occupation and condition. Her life on the boundary of these two worlds qualified her as an excellent observer of the snobbery of the ones and aspirations of the others. Marie-Laure Massei-Chamayou's paper "La 'Médiocrité dorée' dans l'œuvre austenienne: des 'middle ranks' à l'émergence de la 'middle class'?" sheds light on how Austen's novels depicted the social intercourse that went on among the landed and monied orders at the turn of the century. Austen's novels showed that the British élite was made to include new members. Despite some resistance, money, rather than rank, became the key to distinction in an age in which talents were commodified. Reciprocal respect bound the monied, paying public and the proficient professionals: the apothecary and his patients in *Emma*, or Austen herself and her readership. Massei-Chamayou suggests that *Emma* offers the best insight into the rise to élite circles with the opposing models of Mr Weston, whose affluence has been built over several generations, and the Coles, who are doomed to vulgarity because of their too rapid ascension. The character of Emma shows the way to modernity as she accepts an invitation from people inferior in rank: as both circles overlap, it is the whole of British society that is changed. This article thus highlights the performative power of Austen's literature: by picturing the mingling

together of the middling sort and the declining landed gentry, she allowed her readership – and all her contemporaries – to realise that times had changed and that a new monied class had emerged: the middle class.

Though the modern middling sort of people could breed hopes of forming a class that could be educated to virtue, all sorts of pitfalls were to be avoided, which required a great deal of moderation in one's aspirations. Unless, if we were to adopt Mandeville's perspective, the middling sorts were golden insofar as their boundless material, cultural and political aspirations bred competition with their betters, which in turn fuelled the economic growth and national grandeur of modern Britain and America in the early days of consumer societies.

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