Changing 18th Century Attitudes toward Class and Social Rank

Note: This article details the way that money increasingly was replacing birth as the marker of class as Britain moved through the early stages of the Industrial Revolution. Thus, it describes the beginnings of changes that would become more pronounced in the time periods of the four novel choices.

'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

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many permutations gradually challenged 'higher, middling, and lower' and their many variants. 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 appelation, and not as the *poor*, that he was wont to designate the labouring class of his parishioners.

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', 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 distinction of rank, which create no jealousy, as they are allowed to be accidental' (i.e. beyond human intervention). The formula applied much to the political as social order, soothing Boswell, who had had doubts about a philosophical basis for belief in monarchy. [...]

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, that 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, where individuals were not necessarily known to one another by birth and background. A common eighteenth-century ballad version of the

traditional popular satire, 'The World Turned Upside Down', related

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the mutabilities of fashion.

Susanna Blamire's poem, written rehearsed what had become a familiar theme:

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 inter-personal deference.

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.

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'. His point was exaggerated, for land and landed titles retained a considerable allure, as well as affluence; but, visibly, there were altternative

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avenues of advancement. Trade, commercial services (especially banking), some professions, government, and, increasingly, industry, were admired in the eighteenth century for their potential power and riches. [...]

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 latter, 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', the latter 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 workforce and employers. [...]

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 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, it paralleled the popularisation of the term by the Methodists with their 'class system' for study of the Bible.' 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'.

New terms could be employed in new ways. The mutual relationship of one 'class' with another was conceptually much more fluid than those of

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'ranks', which were 'serried', or 'orders', which were neatly aligned. Certainly, the Great Chain did not envisage structural contest 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 extravagence of the last 30 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 in to ... abuses, with an inquisitional nicety'. Among the questions posed by the poor man, it added, was: 'Who reaps the produce of his labour?

The significant bases of social division were uncertain. Attributions purely by birth ceased to be very helpful for explaining social and economic structures as a whole. [...]

The atmosphere of social change was particularly characteristic in urban and commercial circles; but they 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 the nation is the sole support of it,' remarked the Duke of Newcastle (*b*1693) in 1766. Burke later worried that 'Commerce trade and manufactures' were instituted as 'the gods of our economical politicians'. The pluralism of wealth, the visibility of the middle class, and 'uppishness' of the once 'lower orders' were the corollaries of economic change. Dean Tucker considered in 1774 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

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society ... Mushrooms are every day starting up from the dunghill of trade.'

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 'shopkeeping' middle class. The specification of group 'consciousness' was not a simple response to new nouns and adjectives.79 Lower-class organisations faced an even greater diversity of trade and sectional interests to co-ordinate. 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

Eighteenth-century British society was therefore increasingly experienced as mutable and combative. Power was resynthesised into active terms, of acquisition, production, display; rather than inheritance, formal title, and ancient lineage.