The Emerging English Middle Class:
Illusory Upward Mobility and the Static Elite

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The North-West Passage, John Everett Millais 1874

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The Britain of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries straddled the globe and thrust itself into the affairs of every continent and every nation. These changes in the world order were reflections of changes within Britain itself; the kingdom's newly forged hegemony was a product of its industry and trade, new developments only possible through a restructuring of society. This metamorphosis threatened — just as England threatened the old world order — the traditional structure of English society.

The emergence of a "middle class" in England, a group of individuals in the vast chasm between the idle landed rich and the toiling peasants is well documented, but the question of the true nature and origin of this middle class in terms of social mobility is often murky. Much of the work of social historians operates on the implicit assumption, furthered by contemporary outside observers, that the middle class served as a stepping-stone from the lower classes into respectability. This notion of early industrial meritocracy appeals to the Cinderella archetype and is found in the oft-maligned systems of China [?], Germany [?], and even czarist Russia [?]. It is not clear, however, that the English middle class could accurately be described as a conduit for upward mobility from the lower classes.

While it is certainly the case that the middle class was looking upward to the aristocracy, it was not just that they thirsted for the social privileges of the upper class; they themselves were most likely an excised remnant of the upper crust. The pattern of English inheritance customs made it far easier (in comparison to their counterparts in the majority of Europe) for unlucky children of noble fathers to fall into relative poverty. The middle class was created not only as a means of sating the labor demands of new bureaucracy forged in the confusion following the Civil War, but also as a means of allowing continued respectability for those who lost out in the primogeniture system.

Before we can discuss the middle class's origins and its role in social ad-

vancement, it first behooves us to characterize this new facet of English society that appeared in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Its very name implies the opposition against the classes on either side, and thus is a natural synthesis of the properties of the upper and lower classes. The middle class was above the common laborers, who had no assets and were usually tied to the land they lived on by tradition. The middle class also had to work for a living and had little or no land assets, but they did have significant liquid and material assets, which they used as leverage to create additional wealth, thus leading Peter Earle to his definition of the middle class:

> The majority [of the middle class] were commercial or industrial capitalists who had a stock of money, acquired by paternal gift, inheritance or loan, which they continually turned over to make more money. They also, together with the upper part of mankind, employed the mechanicks, who had no stock of money and so depended on others for their living. ([?], 3)

Our definition of the middle class seems to fall within the usual Marxist definition of the upper classes — the bourgeois control of the means of production — yet we must reconsider the motives behind the control of land and wealth. The middle class was driven to increase and further develop their wealth; they were spurred to continually improve their own position in life, and this came only with the accumulation of more wealth. The upper class, however, was interested in *not* working. The income derived from their holdings was used not for the creation of more wealth, but for maintenance and the assumption of the social roles expected of members of the elite.

The extent of landholding may seem like an arbitrary criterion to divide the middle from the upper class — the landed are merely richer and don't work as hard as the middle class — but the distinction was clear to those witnessing the divide. The upper class defined itself by extremes: sprawling estates, lavish educations, and the quest for titles and favor from other members of

the elite. By the nineteenth century, 1,700 landlords laid claim to nearly 40% of the land in England and Wales ([**?**], 53). Individuals in the landed gentry then had access to the closely-knit social network that offered control over local affairs. Such individuals not only had nearly absolute control over their tenants, but also had the sole right to participate in national politics, since the prevailing sentiment at the time was that men with property were more responsible and less likely to be bribed than those without ([**?**], 54).

The possession of power and status had enough outward manifestations to clearly demonstrate when one had arrived. The duty of the genteel English family was to furnish and maintain a respectable manor house (if not several) on as large a parcel of land as possible. But this is not enough; one must also ingratiate the family through duty to the state and community socially and economically. The elite had a monopoly on power and were expected to exercise it; the office of sheriff, for example, was one of the surest signs a family was on the ascent (this relationship between rising fortune and responsibility will be further discussed later, but we are focusing on characterizing the shape of the established aristocracy for the moment). Additionally, the elite had to establish social ties with the rest of the landed class.

This socialization did more than to merely serve as a testament to the wealth and resources of those participating in these compulsory displays. They provided a network for control and collaboration that preceded the bureaucratic system that would later emerge with the development of industry. These meetings lubricated the wheels of society; since commerce and control were confined to these narrow echelons of society, these meetings could coordinate all aspects of society: economic, social, and political. These meetings chose the next representatives of government long before elections did. The county seats of many rural areas where the makeup of the gentry was relatively static (i.e. away from the suburbs of major cities where families were constantly

moving in and out) often had uncontested selections of MPs up until the early nineteenth century ([**?**], 14).

The upper classes also served as a means to convey information and gossip. The natural center of English social and political life was London, and the nation's first journalists developed to speed whatever tidbits they could scrounge from the townhouses and courts in the capital to the otherwise isolated country manors. These so called "intelligencers" such as Ben Johnson and Peter Proby were sending letters as early as the beginning of the seventeenth century. These letters were—since the writers were in the employ of the nobles who depended on the letters as a source of entertainment in the dull country — often "spiced with lurid court scandal, and barbed with satirical comment on the antics of the royal favorites and the growing corruption in the administration" ([**?**], 388) but still served as a means of connecting the center of England with outlying estates through the upper classes.

Despite the comfortable system established by the upper class, England was changing. While the aristocracy did an admirable job of maintaining an agrarian economy, a much larger and more efficient system was needed to support a more mercantile and industrial society. The commercial and demographic pressures of the seventeenth century conspired to transform London from merely a population accretion point and an administrative center into a global center of trade and industry.

Surplus labor created depressed prices during the sixteenth century, but spatial immobility prevented the natural correction of this imbalance. The English Civil War, however, created a new atmosphere. The general chaos of the period allowed unprecedented social mobility. In the aftermath, the families could go where they wanted to address shortfalls in labor caused by destruction of property or life. Moreover, the class struggle inherent in the agenda of the Levelers demanded a new class of mid-level bureaucrats

to hold down the defeated party and ward of external threats, partly as officials to exact taxes to pay for the war, and to handle the bold projects of social engineering that revolutionary governments always embark upon. Much of this expansion survived the emergency, and Restoration England found itself saddled with a large navy, a small standing army, and a new force of excisemen, Hearth Tax collectors, Customs officers, Treasury officials, and dockyard workers. ([?], 25)

Moreover, there was a larger class of skilled and semi-skilled labor in the capital. This offered a new class of entrepreneur an opportunity to invest in manufacture and trade. This, in conjunction with the technology brought over from the Low Countries and the growing trade from Britain's colonies and Europe into London, offered myriad opportunities to build a new fortune. Changes at the top also created new opportunities for the emerging middle class. The elite, who had been content to merely sit upon their land and skim from the fruits of the subsistence farmers living under them, were driven by the same crash in land profits to rethink their position in the economy by expanding their holdings, exploring natural resources, or engaging in small-scale industry ([?], 185). New methods in agriculture demanded a new sort of estate manager, someone who was more than an exalted swain. Between 1610 and 1650 the wages of such staff on a typical estate (not including inflation) quadrupled ([?], 292). These positions—along with their new attendant importance in maintaining the economic health of estates—offered enhanced economic clout to a formerly insignificant part of the population.

The changing nature of business in the cities was also contributing to the development of a new sort of middle class. Trade and manufacture were increasingly the domains of the literate and mathematically proficient. New technologies with relatively small startup costs opened up new fields ripe for the middle class; "[The textile industry] created a whole mass of ancillary jobs—in engineering, transport, trade, retailing, finance and the other artisinal trades"

([**?**], 103). In turn, a system had to develop to support the education and entertainment of these new middle class merchants and industrialists: schools, newspapers, coffee houses, and publishers. The individuals fulfilling these roles were also absorbed into the ever growing ranks of the middle class.

Despite having offered an genesis and description of the middle class, we have yet to describe those who entered into the new the middle class. While it is certainly true that members of the middle class helped to repopulate the ranks of the would-be gentlemen, we are primarily interested in the sources and nature of exogenous growth of the class and whether it is possible for members of the middle class to break into the elite.

The most common mode of entry into the middle class was that of an apprenticeship. A young man used his family connections to find someone already engaged in the trade he's interested in and then allowed himself to serve as an assistant to the master to learn the skills and offer his labor as payment (in addition to any additional up-front fees demanded by the master) for the imparted knowledge. Civil service and clerical posts operated on a similar system, even if the break between apprentice and master was perhaps less distinct. In both cases, family connections or pure luck allowed a moderately educated young man to land a position at the bottom rung of the employment ladder. With time and experience, he would gain greater respect and remuneration. Additional perks came from becoming a member of a Livery Company, which provided the right to set up shop in the city and receive a pension after retirement. The other options for entering into the middle class were more capital intensive; families could inherit or save up enough money to buy into the system, but this method offered little opportunity for upward mobility with such high costs. On the other hand, this approach was more often used by the upper castes to buy into the middle class from above.

The English system of inheritance offered little other choice for non-inheriting

children of the upper class. The enduring stability of large estates came at a price; the decline of children from the socio-economic positions of their parents was quite commonplace ([?], 212). While most moneyed parents would prefer their children enter into respectable professions like academia, the military, or religion, success in these fields required a large investments of time, money, and talent. The question remained — what were these inept or unlucky sons suited for?

> The Sussex gentleman, John French, declared in his early seventeenth-century will that if his younger sons were 'not capable of being scholars,' they were to be sent to London to be apprenticed, and such an attitude was a common one. ([?], 88)

Even when younger sons received more support from their parents, it often left little room for the sort of security required for the leisurely life of a member of the elite. Younger sons were given small outlying estates cleaved from the main estate, but the land reverted back to the eldest son (or his heir) upon the younger sons death. Eventually, by the eighteenth century, younger sons were treated in the same manner as daughters; they were given a sum of money not as a dowry but as a seed to make their own in the world ([?], 74).

The obvious goal for a family in the middle class — once firmly established — was to then break into the upper class. The system to do this was, if nonetheless arduous, fairly straightforward: hoard money until aspirants can establish a decent estate, discover or create a claim to nobility, and cultivate the requisite 'port' to prove their arrival. A family's presence in the middle class offered an opportunity to accumulate wealth; an ambitious family then had the opportunity to buy its way into the nobility. Thanks to the high turnover and failure of estates, it was fairly easy for a family to purchase a manor in decline or for someone to marry into a family in need of money.

Once an estate had been established, the aspiring noble must then force-fully reassert its grandeur by enlarging and refurbishing the estate. He riskily

abandoned the spendthrift acumen that allowed him to purchase his estate in the first place and spend lavishly to demonstrate 'port, ' "the obligation to spend generously, even lavishly on occasion, as part of one's duty to society, in return for the privileges of wealth and membership of the ruling class" ([**?**], 185). But merely throwing money around was not enough to gain full access; one must demonstrate a valid pedigree and favor from would-be peers. The ease with which the former was obtained shows either the consanguinity of the upper classes or (perhaps more likely given the work of [**?**]) corruption within the College of Heralds, which had a monopoly to issue such certification.

The latter requisite for accent was more fickle and served as a means of preventing too much contamination of the nobility by the *hoi polloi*. The constant spending to demonstrate port showed one's fiscal commitment to enter the ranks of the elite, and the fulfillment of social obligations like holding "the onerous and expensive office of sheriff, which nearly everyone else tried to avoid" ([**?**], 52) showed that the applicant respected the conventions and social order of the class he was about to enter. Once these initiations were over and the applicants had become fully assimilated, however, subsequent generations had no difficulty maintaining the respect of their new peers.

Although we have demonstrated the process an ambitious middle class family can employ to gain egress into the upper classes, we have not adequately described the nature of this movement up from the middle classes. How often is the newly minted nobleman a victim of primogeniture reclaiming his birthright, and how often is he a legitimate example of English upward social mobility? The middle class, as we have seen, was often populated with second and third sons from noble families forced to make their own way in the world. An examination of the indentures in London (the city is an obvious choice for a microcosm for England) shows that while during the sixteenth century poor folk from the country could land an apprenticeship in London, by the late

seventeenth century "most apprentices, or at least those likely to end up as independent businessmen, were the sons of yeomen or gentlemen if they were countrymen, while increasing numbers were the sons of urban professional or commercial people" ([?], 86). Even more telling was the composition of the established middle class — some indentures failed to make it into the middle class —within London: 91% were the sons of country gentry ([?], 6).

Nevertheless, it could be that those descending from nobility into the middle class are destined to stay there; those ascending to the upper spheres of society could be the plucky families that pushed their way into the middle class from below. Here too, the argument for a universally upwardly mobile society collapses. Not only was there a lack of success in climbing to the top from the bottom, there were active countermeasures from above in response to the challenges from below. By 1700, the gentry in a representative rural county where prospective nobility would purchase estates

> had become more localized, and the longer they remained set-tled in one place the more frequently they intermarried, and the more intense became their sense of mutual cohesion. Along with the sense of authority, the influx of new blood into the gentle classes from the local yeomanry was no longer welcomed. ([?], 66)

In fact, only about six percent of the owners of new estates were men whose wealth came from money accumulated through trade; the vast majority already had interconnections to noble families, even if their wealth was created through professions ([?], 403). Indeed, while there was an active turnover of estates, the composition of the upper class was relatively static; the creation of wealth was not confined to the lower classes working their way upward. The old rich were just as happy to take advantage of the opportunities of trade and industry for advancement ([?], 242).

Given works such as *Mansfield Park*, *Jude the Obscure*, *Barry Lyndon*, and *Great Expectations* that demonstrate the possibility (even if still fraught with

psychic hurdles) of meteoric rises in the social hierarchy even in the space of a lifetime, it is clear that the idea of social elevation existed. Yet the lack of a substantiated pathway for upward social mobility begs the question of why this "rags to riches" story persists. Clearly, there is an advantage to a society that perceives a possibility of upward mobility; it prevents the proletariat from becoming too disillusioned with their lot in life. Excluding the possibility of a concerted conspiracy to cultivate such an impression, how did this idea begin, and why has it endured?

The nobility themselves considered the few examples of uncouth members of the lower ranks a *casus belli* and proceeded to clamp down on the means and methods a usurper could use to gain access to the privileges of nobility. Eventually, these claims of debasement and their calls for legal measures to prevent the lower classes from sullying the respectability of the upper classes had "worn thin" by the beginning of the eighteenth century. "The 'haemorrhage of capital' into land, although a plausible assumption suggested by some well-known examples" was never substantiated ([**?**], 242). After the tumult of Restoration had ended, the techniques used to build the first fortunes that bought initial upstarts gentrification were well known, and the upper classes were using the same techniques (made more effective with their deeper pockets) to bolster their own fortunes.

The "chameleon-like adaptability" ([**?**], 39) of the *nouveau riche* shows the efficacy of the measures taken to ensure the assimilation of those that do manage to buy into the elite and maintain the character of the upper classes even if their constituents do change. The forced homogeneity of those trying to find their way into the apex of society also masks the not-so-humble origins of the middle class, thus allowing the fiction of an upwardly mobile society to persist. It also accounts for the somewhat sinister aspect of the examples of upward social mobility in fiction mentioned above; it is only possible to

rise above one's station if he or she is cultivated and respects the cast iron conventions of the upper class.

The high mobility of the social structure is like a clever game of Three Card Monte. There is so much confusion in the movement from side to side that a spectator can be fooled into thinking that the lower classes are moving upward. If enough shills — nobles temporarily thrust into the middle class — win the game, the lower classes cannot help but believe that their luck might hold. The middle class, a product of the new economy that emerged as Britain transformed itself into a world power, did indeed offer social mobility to a thoroughly stratified society, but it served more as a safety net to the downwardly mobile gentry than as a means of advancement for the poor. Nevertheless, the new middle class offered more options and opportunities than the previously dichotomous stratification, and even a stacked deck sometimes deals a lucky break.

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