

THE SEARCH FOR THE ‘MIDDLE SORT OF PEOPLE’ IN ENGLAND, 1600–1800

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ABSTRACT. *The ‘middle sort of people’ is a social group that has been the subject of increased historical research in the last decade. Many studies have been written, and many definitions offered of the group, its identity, and its membership. As a result, these overlapping groups and contrasting methods of definition have caused the nature and identity of the group to remain elusive. This study charts the evolution of the historiography of the ‘middle sort’, and the many attempts to produce positive and accurate definitions of the group. It suggests that the identity of the ‘middle sort’ may, in fact, be more complex than is allowed for by existing studies, with different identities being adopted according to social context. It concludes that while the term ‘middle sort of people’ is an appropriate contemporary collective term for use by historians, it is much more problematic as a description of an active, cohesive social group in the early modern period.*

The English ‘middle sort’ is a shadowy creature, seldom emerging in clear relief against the historical landscape. As historians, we are sure that it *is* out there, somewhere, lurking in its true form just beyond the limits of the sources. Indeed, as we expand our interests across this landscape, so we encounter this beast more often; here, mauling gentry influence in local administration; there, in tell-tale foot-prints across the mire of the ‘consumer revolution’. So far, we have tentative ideas about its dimensions, and how it behaves. However, we are still unsure about its true nature. We continue to debate what species of social entity it is, whether ‘class’ proper, social or status class, or something less clear-cut. Perhaps because the creature remains elusive it continues to fascinate, and this has resulted in a proliferation of studies tracing its tracks across the early modern period. Yet as long as it eludes capture it leaves a gap in our knowledge, a gap that becomes increasingly significant as we attribute more and more findings to its agency.

I

The phrase ‘middle sort of people’ gained much of its resonance from a confluence of circumstances. By the mid-1980s the evolutionary certainties of Christopher Hill’s ‘industrious sort of people’,¹ or Brian Manning’s² neat progression from ‘peasant’ middle sorts to ‘capitalist’ middle classes seemed inappropriate to the deepening

¹ C. Hill, *Society and puritanism in pre-revolutionary England* (London, 1964), p. 134; idem, *Change and continuity in seventeenth-century England* (London, 1974), p. 208; idem, *The collected essays of Christopher Hill*, II: *Religion and politics in seventeenth-century England* (Brighton, 1986), p. 135; idem, *A nation of change and novelty: radical politics, religion and literature in seventeenth-century England* (London, 1990), p. 10 and comments, p. 99.

² R. B. Manning, *The English people and the English revolution, 1640–1649* (London, 1976), p. 154.

historiographical complexities of the seventeenth-century social order. The mid-century 'revolution' did not produce a well-defined 'bourgeoisie'.³ In fact, permanent 'class' formations or conflicts of any kind were difficult to determine. As R. S. Neale observed, with evident frustration, society in early modern England was 'neither pre-industrialist nor industrial, neither feudal nor industrial-capitalist, neither classless nor multi-class, neither order based nor class based, neither one thing nor the other, although dialectically it was both'.⁴

A terminology of social description was required that acknowledged, and accommodated, a society that was in Keith Wrightson's words: 'highly differentiated but which was far from uniform, rigid, or unchanging in its patterns of inequality. The criteria of social evaluation were complex and ill-defined. Local patterns of stratification varied considerably. Individual social mobility was constant and frankly recognised'.⁵

Yet at the same time it became increasingly evident that historians could not simply fall back on the even older certainties of the social taxonomies of contemporary commentators. David Cressy showed how many observers in the early modern period were unsubtle and retrospective in their characterization of social groups below the gentry.⁶ Social analyses were often established in the sixteenth century, and perpetuated among a host of later writers. Cressy shows how descriptions of the social order passed from Sir Thomas Smith to William Harrison⁷ in the sixteenth century, via William Camden's oft-reprinted *Britannia*,⁸ on to Edward Chamberlayne and Gregory King a century later. All such commentators divided the 'gentle' from the 'commons' according to formulaic social categories derived from legal and feudal distinctions. They preserved the archaic distinction between 'freemen', whether urban 'burgesses' or rural yeomen, and the non-free. The latter were left as a heterogeneous residue of, in Harrison's words, 'day labourers, poor husbandmen, and some retailers (which have no free land), copyholders, and all artificers, as tailors, shoemakers, carpenters, brick-makers, masons, etc.'.⁹ This disparate collection of occupations represented the failure of a system of social classification rather than its successful application.

³ See A. MacLachlan, *The rise and fall of revolutionary England: an essay on the fabrication of seventeenth-century history* (Hampshire, 1996).

⁴ R. S. Neale, *Class in English history, 1650–1850* (New Jersey, 1981), p. 96.

⁵ K. Wrightson, 'The social order of early-modern England: three approaches', in L. Bonfield, R. M. Smith, and K. Wrightson, eds., *The world we have gained: histories of population and social structure* (Oxford, 1986), p. 191.

⁶ D. Cressy, 'Describing the social order of Elizabethan and Stuart England', *Literature and History*, 3 (Mar. 1976), pp. 29–44.

⁷ Smith's *De republica anglorum* was published posthumously in 1583, some twenty years after it was written, and after the appearance of Harrison's *Description of England* in 1577: P. Laslett, *The world we have lost* (2nd edn, London, 1971), p. 31. Chamberlayne's *Angliae notitia* appeared in 1669, and was reprinted regularly until 1702. He regarded trade as corrosive of gentility, and a means by which younger sons of the gentry were 'debased', and gave it an even lower ranking than Harrison or Smith, between copyholders and day labourers: see L. Stone and J. C. F. Stone, *An open elite? England, 1540–1880* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 20, 23.

⁸ W. Camden, *Remains concerning Britain* (1st edn, London, 1611; London, 1870).

⁹ W. Harrison, *The description of England*, ed. G. Edelen (Washington and New York, 1994), p. 118. While maintaining the legal distinction between free and non-freemen, Harrison proclaimed that 'as for slaves and bondmen, we have none'. Here, he opted for contemporary social practice, rather than legal accuracy: see D. MacCulloch, 'Bondmen under the Tudors', in C. Cross, D. M. Loades & J. J. Scarisbrick, eds., *Law and government under the Tudors: essays presented to Sir Geoffrey Elton on the occasion of his retirement* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 91–110.

Geoffrey Holmes demonstrated in greater detail that King's description of the social order encapsulated in his famous manuscript 'Scheme of the income and expense of the several families of England...' was 'entirely subordinate to a deeper purpose – a fiscal purpose', and that, like Smith and Harrison, 'his whole thinking about society was retrospective'.¹⁰ King's social hierarchy was conservative in its occupational categories, in its estimates of the size of wealthy trades, and its estimates of *per capita* income – because King disliked social mobility, and was pessimistic about prosperity post-1689. King also preserved the sixteenth-century division between freeholders and others, and once again lumped together many trades and occupations. Holmes notes that 'As for his "shopkeepers and tradesmen" – surely the craziest of all King's categories – we need only reflect that it included many innkeepers who... could vie in wealth and standard of living with the lesser gentry; literally thousands of master manufacturers... and not least astonishing, all the great wholesalers and factors in England.'¹¹ By illustrating King's personal opinions and political imperatives, Holmes questioned the objectivity of King's famous 'social table'. In doing so he also undermined the unproblematic reliance upon it by a generation of historians.¹² Holmes argued that far from providing a clear, contemporary articulation (and quantification) of the various groups in society, the agenda hidden within King's table meant that it had become, 'historiographically speaking, one of the worst things that could have happened for the study of that society'.¹³

Clearly, there was a need for more appropriate contemporary social descriptions, particularly of the problematic groups immediately below the gentry. Wrightson provided the answer by highlighting the evolution of the language of 'sorts'.¹⁴ 'Sorts of people' in early modern England had already been discussed by Hill and Manning, among others, but Wrightson established a chronology for the development of this terminology. He demonstrated how in the sixteenth century writers had distinguished a simple dichotomy of 'sorts', distinguishing between 'the poorer sort' and 'the richer sort', or between 'the wiser' sort, and the "simple", "ignorant", "ruder", "ordinary", "vulgar", "lower", "inferior", "meaner" or "baser" sorts'.¹⁵

This dichotomy had gained wide currency by the 1640s, and was symptomatic of the social stresses of a time of population expansion, inflation, and repeated quests for parochial reformation and order. Against this background a third 'sort' – the 'middle sort of people' – was gradually inserted into social taxonomies between the 'richer' and 'poorer' sorts. Wrightson notes that the phrase first occurred in sixteenth-century

¹⁰ G. S. Holmes, 'Gregory King and the social structure of pre-industrial England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 27 (1977), p. 51.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹² King's 'social table' formed the centrepiece of textbook discussions of the social order at the time of Holmes's piece. See, for example, J. D. Chambers, *Population, economy and society in pre-industrial England* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 38–9; P. Mathias, *The first industrial nation* (London, 1970), pp. 23–31; and Laslett, *World we have lost*, pp. 32–3; H. Perkin, *The origins of modern English society* (London, 1972), pp. 20–1; D. C. Coleman, *The economy of England, 1450–1750* (Oxford, 1977), p. 6.

¹³ Holmes, 'Gregory King', p. 41.

¹⁴ K. Wrightson, *English society, 1580–1680* (London, 1982), p. 37; *idem*, 'The social order of early-modern England', p. 183; *idem*, 'Estates, degrees and sorts: changing perceptions of society in Tudor and Stuart England', in P. J. Corfield, ed., *Language, history and class* (Oxford, 1991); *idem*, "'Sorts of people'" in Tudor and Stuart England', in J. Barry and C. Brooks, eds., *The middling sort of people: culture, society and politics in England, 1550–1800* (London, 1994), pp. 28–51.

¹⁵ Wrightson, "'Sorts of people'", p. 34.

London,¹⁶ proliferated in the pamphlets of the Civil War,¹⁷ and became established thereafter in the lexicon of social description.

Even so, he was careful to draw a clear distinction between these 'sorts of people' and modern social classes. He noted that

however strong the awareness of status within a specific local context, broader class consciousness was inhibited for those below the gentry by their lack of alternative conceptions of the social order, their envelopment in relationships of commonality and deference, by the localism which gave those ties force and meaning and by a lack of institutions which might organise and express a horizontal consciousness of a broader kind.¹⁸

Instead, the concept of three 'sorts of people' expressed a rudimentary perception of broad, rough-edged affinities between occupations of similar wealth, administrative power, and prestige. These imprecise groupings were a better reflection of contemporary opinion than the anachronistic and artificially static hierarchies of 'orders and degrees' perpetuated by Smith, Harrison, Chamberlayne, and King.

Penelope Corfield has carried out a similar linguistic analysis for the eighteenth century, concurring with Wrightson's conclusions.¹⁹ She notes how the language of sorts became an established feature of published social descriptions from the later seventeenth century. Gradually, social descriptions and divisions hardened, and became more precisely related to sociological stereotypes. By the late eighteenth century, 'sorts of people' had crystallized into more rigid 'classes'. The terminology of 'class' followed trends of urbanization and alienation that made the concept of 'sorts' of people 'increasingly generic and decreasingly precise'.²⁰

The reconstruction of this terminology filled the void left by the gradual implosion of Marxist 'class' analyses. It supplied a substitute terminology grounded in contemporary usage, in archive sources as well as printed works. It avoided the rigidities of economic class analyses, but implied the existence of horizontal social affinities, or the perception of common social interests among clusters of similar occupations. Although this terminology lacked the defined boundaries, horizontal solidarities, and dialectical dynamics of 'class', it possessed the potential for greater insight into the operation and ambiguities of early modern society than the blandly deferential hierarchies of 'rank, order, and degree'. The problem was to define the membership of this 'middle sort of people'.

Many studies, particularly those concerned only in passing with the 'middle sort', have followed the definitions of contemporary pamphleteers. David Rollison's 'middling sort' were composed of those 'yeomen farmers, petty-freeholders, and such as use manufactures that enrich the country' that John Corbet described as supporters of parliament in Gloucestershire in the 1640s.²¹ In the same way, for the eighteenth century John Rule cites William Beckford's 1761 definition of the 'middling people of England' as consisting of 'the manufacturer, the yeoman, the merchant, the country

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 41. ¹⁷ Ibid., p. 45. ¹⁸ Wrightson, *English society*, pp. 64–5.

¹⁹ P. J. Corfield, 'Class by name and number in eighteenth-century Britain', *History*, 72 (1987), pp. 38–61; idem, *Language, history and class*, pp. 101–30.

²⁰ Idem, 'Class by name and number', p. 60.

²¹ D. Rollison, *The local origins of modern society: Gloucestershire, 1500–1800* (London and New York, 1992), p. 150.

gentleman'.²² Rule strains to accept the inclusion of the country gentleman, but incorporates Beckford's three other categories in his definition.

When examined in aggregate, however, there is an obvious problem with this simple identification from primary printed material. Studies have defined the membership of the 'middle sort' as consisting of 'artisans, shopkeepers...and small merchants';²³ 'surveyors, attorneys, tutors, stewards';²⁴ 'eminent clergymen...substantial merchants...rich factors...and barristers' as well as 'the inferior clergy,...tenant farmers and even Grub street writers';²⁵ 'doctors, surgeons, and apothecaries... military and naval professions... the London "monied interest"';²⁶ 'people who worked but ideally did not get their hands dirty...'²⁷; and that 'employment of a servant was one of the basic criteria of something approaching middle-class status'.²⁸

While change over time and occupational diversification widened the range of potentially 'middling' trades, this variation is troubling. Apart from the landed aristocracy and those in receipt of poor relief, it seems that almost everyone in between was a possible candidate for 'middling' status in the early modern period. In part, the fault lies with historians. Little has changed since J. H. Hexter's complaint about earlier definitions of this middle stratum that 'the conception of the middle-class... attains all the rigor of a rubber band'.²⁹

The source material for these definitions is also to blame. Contemporaries defined their 'middle sorts' for polemical or rhetorical purposes. They attached the general perception of a rough social affinity among men of modest prosperity, and women with aspirations to fashion, to a specific group in a particular location. Corbet did so in Gloucestershire because he wanted to emphasize the substance, godliness, and (above all) the political independence and rationality of those who supported parliament in the Civil War against royalist gibes about the 'giddy, ungodly multitude'.³⁰

Similarly, eighty years later, Daniel Defoe's 'middle station' or 'the upper station of low life'³¹ located between the 'vicious living, luxury, and extravagances' of the elite

²² J. Rule, *Albion's people: English society, 1714-1815* (London, 1992), p. 55; W. A. Speck, *Stability and strife: England, 1714-1760* (London, 1977), p. 34; C. Herrup, 'The counties and the country: some thoughts on seventeenth-century historiography', in G. Eley and W. Hunt, eds., *Revising the English revolution: reflections and elaborations on the work of Christopher Hill* (London, 1988), p. 300; P. Earle, *The making of the English middle class: business, society and family life in London, 1660-1730* (London, 1989), p. 3.

²³ J. J. Looney, 'Cultural life in the provinces: Leeds and York, 1720-1820', in M. Beier, D. Cannadine, and J. M. Rosenheim, eds., *The first modern society: essays in English history in honour of Lawrence Stone* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 489.

²⁴ E. P. Thompson, 'Eighteenth-century English society: class struggle without the class?', *Social History*, 3 (1978), p. 143.

²⁵ Speck, *Stability and strife*, p. 34.

²⁶ P. Borsay, *The English urban renaissance: culture and society in the provincial town, c. 1680-1750* (Oxford, 1989), p. 172.

²⁷ Earle, *English middle class*, p. 3.

²⁸ P. Langford, *Public life and the propertied Englishman, 1689-1798* (Oxford, 1991), p. 10.

²⁹ J. H. Hexter, 'The myth of the middle-class in Tudor and Stuart England', in *Reappraisals in history* (London, 1961), p. 74.

³⁰ Corbet's 'middle rank' were as much a polemical construct as a social category. He saw the possession of economic independence by the 'middle rank' – and their religious zeal – as the foundation for their political role, giving them a financial bulwark against clientage, and a desire to preserve the social order. Therefore, Corbet's 'middle rank' had to be composed of men of financial independence, copyholding yeomen, smaller freeholders, and clothiers managing their own trade, rather than the equally numerous tenant-farmers, non-freeholding retailers, and master-weavers.

³¹ D. Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (Oxford, 1991), p. 2.

and the 'hard labour, want of necessities, and mean or insufficient diet' of the poor,³² were partly a polemical construct. Often hailed as the literary apostle of 'middle-class' values, Defoe's definitions of the middle station are criticisms of those who wished to exchange this honourable but plain estate for the fool's gold of urban gentility, among the socially amphibious 'gentleman-tradesman'.³³

We lack detailed research on the polemical aspect of 'middling' definitions in the seventeenth century.³⁴ However, Dror Wahrman's work on the eighteenth century provides some parallels.³⁵ He divides the rhetoric of the 'public sphere' of the middle ranks between gentlemanly tradesmen looking to 'court' politics and metropolitan fashions, and 'country' tradesmen, who stressed their material, cultural, and political independence of the centre.³⁶ This division might be largely polemical, but Wahrman demonstrates its impact on the political rhetoric of the 1790s – where appearances were often as important as reality. He shows how "Middle-class" language permeated political discourse primarily as a highly charged and contested assertion rather than as a descriptive requisite accompanying a process of socio-economic formation.³⁷

Wahrman's argument refers only to rhetorical distinctions, but he demonstrates how the language of social description was not, necessarily, value-free, nor likely to yield simple descriptions of the composition of the 'middle sort of people'.

Historiographical definitions of this group have allowed us to sift out some common occupations (yeomen, financially independent trades, and knowledge-based 'professions'), but also leave a residue of unassimilated trades, which tests our definitional tools. This occupational ambiguity derives directly from the inconsistencies in contemporary descriptions of the 'middle sort'. As Paul Langford has remarked of eighteenth-century definitions, 'it was commoner by far to dwell on the superior moral credentials and industry of the middle class than to analyse its make-up'.³⁸

This difficulty has led historians to seek other methods of definition. These have attempted to isolate the 'middle sort' by establishing defining characteristics for the group. These characteristics can be divided into two broad categories, providing what can be termed 'exterior' and 'interior' definitions of the group. Exterior definitions define 'middling' status by demarcating the boundaries around the 'middling' – by discovering the occupations at the top and bottom edges of this status; by identifying characteristic forms of activity (such as parish administration), and by establishing the wealth of participants in such activities. Interior definitions seek to define the 'middle sort' by the isolation of shared 'middling' social values, about property, the value of industry, domesticity, leisure, or fashion. Interior definitions have developed out of exterior ones. This evolution of definitions has tended to change the accompanying

³² Ibid., p. 3.

³³ D. Defoe, *The fortunes and misfortunes of the famous Moll Flanders* (Oxford, 1991), p. 60. His description of 'middling' values is highly prescriptive, static, and defined against aspects of social mobility that he regards as inimical to these values. In *The complete English tradesman* (2nd edn, London, 1727) he equates the 'middle station' with industry, application, sobriety, and a lack of pretence; the individual who steps outside it, by aspiring to become 'gentlemen-tradesmen' is viewed as 'brass wash'd over with silver and no tradesman will take him for current', p. 117.

³⁴ The best study of these earlier definitions is L. C. Stevenson, *Praise and paradox: merchants and craftsmen in Elizabethan popular literature* (Cambridge, 1984).

³⁵ D. Wahrman, 'National society, communal culture: an argument about the recent historiography of eighteenth-century Britain', *Social History*, 17 (1992), pp. 43–72.

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 49–50.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 64–5.

³⁸ P. Langford, *A polite and commercial people: England, 1727–83* (Oxford, 1989), p. 61.

historical analysis of the group from a quantitative analysis of its dimensions to a qualitative analysis of its *Weltanschauung*. In practice, this distinction has been more apparent than real and important studies, such as those by Earle, Borsay, Smail, and most recently Joan Kent,³⁹ have applied both.

'Exterior' definitions have been a necessary feature of most studies dealing with actions of the 'middle sort of people', usually supplementing an ascription of occupational membership. Most have been based on taxable 'wealth' bands, in which a 'middling' wealth bracket is defined – a form of analysis described by Wrightson as 'social distributional'.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, as with occupational ascriptions, the boundaries for inclusion or exclusion have shifted from study to study. Sometimes the problem is particularly acute. The studies of London society in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries by Jeremy Boulton and Steven Rappaport produce two different 'middling' wealth strata for the same location, in the same time period!⁴¹

The demarcation of wealth boundaries is a minimum definition, suggesting only that the 'middle sort' lie somewhere within. To define the social boundaries of the group, historians have analysed the participants when they behaved *as* a group. The most successful of these are the multi-dimensional scalar vector analyses of Brodsky-Elliott⁴² and Houston,⁴³ dealing respectively with London and Kent, and Scotland, north-east and south-east England. These are two decades old and have not found their way into print. Their techniques have yielded broadly based statistical evidence for the strength of marital or apprenticeship linkages between different trades; and also the presence of social boundaries, or mobility 'closures'.⁴⁴

Both studies formulated a hierarchy of trades or occupations by analysing the frequency with which particular trades were linked together by marriage and apprenticeship connections. The analyses produced 'clusters' of trades, which were statistically more likely to associate together for the purposes of marriage and apprenticeship than they were to form connections elsewhere. Both studies produced similar hierarchies of trades, involving four separate 'clusters'. At the top were those of gentle status, with the educated professions (physicians, lawyers, and overseas merchants). Next came the 'clean' retail trades (innkeepers, and large-scale shopkeepers and wholesalers), then prosperous 'dirty' manual trades (tanners, butchers, or skilled metal and wood workers). Finally there were the poorly capitalized manual

³⁹ J. R. Kent, 'The rural "middling sort" in early modern England, circa 1640–1740: some economic, political and socio-cultural characteristics', *Rural History*, 10 (1999), pp. 19–54.

⁴⁰ Wrightson, 'The social order', p. 178.

⁴¹ J. Boulton, *Neighbourhood and society: a London suburb in the seventeenth century* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 135; S. Rappaport, *Worlds within worlds: structures in life in sixteenth-century London* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 284. Rappaport's 'middle sort', based on livery company levies, includes the top two social strata omitted from Boulton's subsidy-based hierarchy.

⁴² V. Brodsky-Elliott, 'Mobility and marriage in pre-industrial England: a demographic and social structural analysis of geographic and social mobility and aspects of marriage, 1570–1690, with particular reference to London and general reference to Middlesex, Kent, Essex and Hertfordshire' (Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge 1979).

⁴³ R. Houston, 'Aspects of society in Scotland and north-east England, c. 1550–1750: social structure, literacy and geographical mobility' (Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge 1981).

⁴⁴ Mobility 'closures' are discussed in A. Giddens, *The class structures of the advanced societies* (London, 1973), p. 107. Giddens argues that such 'closures' are constrictions on opportunities for social mobility, caused not merely by narrow economic relationships to the Marxian 'means of production', but also by inequalities in skill levels, education, or labour relations. These 'closures' help produce the structure, or internal composition, of 'classes'.

crafts (weavers, tailors, shoemakers or petty retailers) at the bottom, just above the labouring poor.⁴⁵ Members of the top occupational ‘cluster’ were very unlikely to marry or apprentice their children (willingly) to those among the bottom grouping, while ‘clean’ and ‘dirty’ trades also tended towards endogamy. Houston’s study concludes that despite some regional variations, ‘there may well have been a fundamentally similar social hierarchy throughout pre-industrial England’.⁴⁶

While the hierarchy is well established, it is harder to align it to the concept of the ‘middle sort’. Peter Earle’s study of London draws on these analyses, and his ‘middle class’ spans the ‘clean’, and ‘dirty’ occupational clusters, encompassing all those dying worth between £500 and £10,000.⁴⁷ Yet he admits that in general ‘those who ended up rich started off rich or at least pretty well off’, suggesting minimal interchange between the ends of this spectrum. Similarly, death entrenched the dichotomy between ‘clean’ and ‘dirty’ trades. Most merchants, mercers, and drapers leaving probate inventories in the capital died in houses furnished in consciously different style to ‘ungenteel tradesmen’ such as coalmongers, soapmakers, distillers, or printers.⁴⁸ ‘Middling’ metropolitan society seems to have contained a social fissure across its centre, dividing the patterns of marriage or apprenticeship, and styles of life among ‘clean’ and ‘dirty’ trades. Does this weaken Earle’s assertion that these groups ‘would have merged into each other and the divisions which have been drawn would vanish in reality’?⁴⁹ These studies certainly emphasize the congregational tendencies of birds of a feather, and the social distinctions and perceptions that lie within the boundaries of a single ‘middle sort’ or ‘class’.

The difficulty of linking these clusters of occupations with the ‘middle sort’ has driven historians to investigate the group through the composition of those who participated in defining activities. The most obvious of these was the administration of the parish or the town. Cynthia Herrup has remarked that ‘these officeholders can be a legitimate, albeit not necessarily a typical, sample that can help us learn more about the middling sort’.⁵⁰ She cites Wrightson and Levine’s classic study of Terling as the prime example of such an inquiry.⁵¹ The relationship between parish office and the formation of a distinct ‘middling’ identity has been substantiated in local studies by Amussen,⁵² Nair,⁵³ Alldridge,⁵⁴ Craig,⁵⁵ Archer,⁵⁶ Seaward,⁵⁷ Underdown,⁵⁸ Hindle,⁵⁹ and by Kent.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 106.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 94.

⁴⁷ Earle, *Middle class*, p. 36.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 292.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 331.

⁵⁰ Herrup, ‘The counties and the country’, pp. 293–4.

⁵¹ K. Wrightson and D. Levine, *Poverty and piety in an English village: Terling, 1525–1700* (1st edn, New York and London, 1979; 2nd edn, Oxford, 1995).

⁵² S. D. Amussen, *An ordered society: gender and class in early modern England* (Oxford, 1988).

⁵³ G. Nair, *Highley: the development of a community, 1550–1880* (Oxford, 1988).

⁵⁴ N. Alldridge, ‘Loyalty and identity in Chester parishes, 1540–1640,’ in S. J. Wright, ed., *Parish, church and people: local studies in lay religion, 1350–1750* (London, 1988), pp. 85–124.

⁵⁵ J. S. Craig, ‘Co-operation and initiatives: Elizabethan churchwardens and the parish accounts of Mildenhall’, *Social History*, 18 (1993), pp. 357–80.

⁵⁶ I. W. Archer, *The pursuit of stability: social relations in Elizabethan London* (Cambridge, 1991).

⁵⁷ P. Seaward, ‘Gilbert Sheldon, the London vestries, and the defence of the church’, in T. Harris, P. Seaward, and M. Goldie, eds., *The politics of religion in Restoration England* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 49–74.

⁵⁸ D. Underdown, *Fire from heaven: the life of an English town in the seventeenth-century* (London, 1992).

⁵⁹ S. Hindle, ‘Power, poor relief, and social relations in Holland Fen, c. 1600–1800’, *Historical Journal*, 41 (1998), pp. 67–96. See particularly pp. 78–80.

Aldridge, Archer, and Seaward have shown how this identity was replicated in urban parishes, as well as in the supposedly 'closed' parish pecking orders of village society.

Can surveys of parish officers lead to a definition of the 'middle sort'? Once again, the problem is to connect the terminology to the group. Groups of parochial rulers are easy to distinguish; the difficulty lies in establishing the nature and extent of their 'distinct' social identity. It cannot simply be assumed that parish elites were the 'middle sort' because they exercised an autonomous administrative role below the gentry, or because they fell within common wealth criteria. Instead, we require evidence, however rudimentary, of a perception of a wider group identity.

In fact, these groups articulate an identity that does not convey either the perception of a society-wide 'middle sort', or of homogeneity within the 'middling' in particular localities. Repeatedly, status as a ruler within the parish is expressed in the phrase 'chief inhabitant', as distinct from the main body of plain 'inhabitants' and householders. This is a distinction that echoes the findings of Brodsky-Elliott and Houston. It is also found, with remarkable consistency, across the country and over time. It occurs in St Mildred-in-the-Poultry, London, in the late sixteenth century,⁶⁰ in Reading in 1604,⁶¹ in early seventeenth-century Terling,⁶² in Sheffield in 1616,⁶³ in Castle Acre, Norfolk, in 1623,⁶⁴ in St Stephen's, Coleman Street, in London in 1660,⁶⁵ in Newbury in 1668,⁶⁶ in Bath in 1700,⁶⁷ in Sowerby, Yorks., in 1755,⁶⁸ in Highley in 1765,⁶⁹ and in Birmingham in 1768, which contained 'many good houses belonging to the principal inhabitants'.⁷⁰

A further complication is that by the eighteenth century, when these parish rulers *did* begin to employ extra-parochial status descriptions, they opted for a further debasement of the notion of gentility rather than the formulation of a horizontal 'class' identity. This trend was noted by Defoe,⁷¹ and brought into the historical lexicon as Alan Everitt's 'pseudo-gentry'.⁷² Langford argues that 'this debasement of gentility is one of the clearest signs of social change in the eighteenth century, the mark of a fundamental

⁶⁰ Archer, *Pursuit of stability*, p. 71.

⁶¹ J. S. Cox, *Churchwardens' accounts from the fourteenth century to the close of the seventeenth century* (London, 1913), p. 13.

⁶² Wrightson and Levine, *Terling*, p. 161.

⁶³ D. Hey, *The fiery blades of Hallamshire: Sheffield and its neighbourhood, 1660–1740* (Leicester, 1991), p. 238.

⁶⁴ Amussen, *Ordered society*, p. 139.

⁶⁵ Seaward, 'Sheldon', pp. 59, 63.

⁶⁶ M. Spufford, 'First steps in literacy: the reading and writing experiences of the humblest seventeenth-century spiritual autobiographers', in H. J. Graff, ed., *Literacy and social development in the west: a reader* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 146–7.

⁶⁷ R. S. Neale, 'Bath: ideology and utopia', in P. Borsay, *The eighteenth-century town: a reader in English urban history, 1680–1820* (London, 1990), p. 266.

⁶⁸ J. Smail, 'The Stansfields of Halifax: a case study of the making of the middle class', *Albion*, 24 (1992), p. 43.

⁶⁹ Nair, *Highley*, p. 129.

⁷⁰ P. Borsay, *Urban renaissance*, p. 209. The same terminology occurs between 1600 and 1650 in petitions to the Essex quarter sessions against ale houses. Wrightson found that these 'originated from and bear the names of small groups of parishioners referring to themselves as "the inhabitants", or in such terms as "the better sort", "the honest neighbours", the "principall" or "chief inhabitants", "good and well disposed Christians", or those "well affected to religion and the publique good"'. K. Wrightson, 'Alehouses, order and reformation', in E. and S. Yeo, eds., *Popular culture and class conflict, 1590–1914: explorations in the history of labour and leisure* (Brighton, 1980), p. 18. Keith Lindley also found that the commissioners for sewers made the same dichotomous distinction between the 'better' and 'baser' sorts in fenland society in the early seventeenth century. K. Lindley, *Fenland riots and the English Revolution* (London, 1982), pp. 28, 75.

⁷¹ Defoe, *English tradesman*, pp. 117–19.

⁷² A. Everitt, 'Social mobility in early-modern England', *Past and Present*, 33 (1966), p. 71.

transformation'.⁷³ He asserts that it was the innovative social identity of the expanding 'middle sort'.⁷⁴

There is also the question of how far the activities of parish ruling elites can be taken as representative of wider 'middling' values. Kent's recent study has echoed Herrup's optimism, suggesting that local administration allowed parish officers 'to join together with other men of similar status and horizontal ties of this kind helped to shape middling identity'.⁷⁵ This contact might have fostered awareness 'that their concerns were often not merely local, but shared by men in similar positions elsewhere'.⁷⁶ Much depends on establishing how far these ruling bodies accommodated or represented their 'middling' constituency. As Kent observes, the disparate composition of parish institutions 'suggests caution in generalizing about the experiences and attitudes of the rural men of middle station'.⁷⁷ The evidence of studies such as *Terling* suggests a degree of co-option, coercion, and reciprocity, rather than an identity of interests, between ruling cliques and the broader, more amorphous group of ratepaying property holders.⁷⁸ Despite shared (largely financial) interests, the 'chief inhabitants' distinguished themselves *both* from the poor and from the other, less wealthy, less powerful 'inhabitants', whom we might be tempted to gather together as a rural 'middle sort'.⁷⁹

In view of these difficulties, the language employed by these parochial elites and their very presence presents two problems for the concept of a 'middle sort'. First, it associates these local rulers with their immediate social superiors by grouping them together as the 'chief inhabitants' or the 'better sort' in the seventeenth century, and as 'gentlemen' in the eighteenth. Secondly, it implies that their perceptions were of a truncated social arena and indicates a restricted social perspective, because these local rulers obviously did not rule, and were not the 'chief' or 'best men', outside a narrow geographical area, and a shallow social hierarchy.

Collections of parish elites will not necessarily lead us to clear, horizontal social groups or clear perceptions of their existence. Instead, their social identity was rooted in, and dependent upon, their immediate surroundings. Parish vestrymen and borough corporation members regarded themselves as members of the 'better sort' or 'genteel' precisely because they stood at the top of the effective, day-to-day hierarchies within their truncated social and geographic spheres. The spatial and temporal consistency of the division between 'chief' and other 'inhabitants' suggests the paradox that a widespread social formulation was not accompanied by broad social perceptions. Instead, such perceptions were directed back to localism rather than on to the realization of nationwide affinities.

II

These questions have led the most recent studies of the 'middle sort' to move towards definitions based on the isolation of the shared experiences and common values that could contribute to the formation of such national identities – that is, to 'interior' definitions of the group. The essays edited by Barry and Brooks attempt to analyse these

⁷³ Langford, *Commercial people*, p. 66.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁷⁵ Kent, 'Rural "middle sort"', p. 42.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁷⁸ Wrightson and Levine, *Terling*, pp. 172–85.

⁷⁹ For illustrations of the formation of this 'chief' status, through office holding, wealth, and length of residence, and the differences with other 'inhabitants', see H. R. French, 'Social status, localism and the "middle sort of people" in England, 1620–1750', *Past and Present* (forthcoming).

socially defining 'middling' experiences, such as office holding, apprenticeship, work in the professions, social connections, and material culture. These studies follow (and incorporate) the work of Peter Earle, whose multi-faceted analyses of 'middle-class' life in London have reconstructed the experience of this group without enforcing a single restrictive definition. In particular, Jonathan Barry has contributed a new analysis of social formation among the 'middling', based on the establishment of social affinities, rather than the discovery of 'class' fissures.⁸⁰

Barry's 'middle sort' is urban, and predominates in the era after 1660. He believes that the post-Restoration economy generated sufficient wealth, and the scale of settlement in towns bred the necessary societal perspectives and horizontal social affinities to allow the group to crystallize.⁸¹ His interpretation attacks the Weberian notion of individualism as the central social characteristic of the urban 'bourgeoisie'. Instead, he argues that the common and widespread experience of this group was 'association and collective action within a civic, and more merely urban, context'.⁸² Association, in local government, in charitable foundations, in business partnerships, in political clubs, and learned societies, was a defining response to the insecurities of life in the urban trading arena.⁸³

This shared activity reinforced a shared sense of values, based on civic involvement, mutual support, common economic interests, and shared leisure activities.⁸⁴ Barry argues that such values exerted a centripetal force to overcome the centrifugal pressures of wealth inequalities or economic and social competition. Yet these centrifugal forces were still strong enough for him to be able to distinguish three sub-sets within this urban 'bourgeoisie': a 'mercantile elite',⁸⁵ 'a middle rung',⁸⁶ and 'those on the lower edge of independence'.⁸⁷ Despite this, Barry suggests that 'association... articulated values that seemed relevant to all the bourgeoisie'.⁸⁸

This approach demands that attention be paid to the actual affinities and behaviour of this 'middle sort', rather than to its external wealth boundaries. It allows a more subtle, flexible definition of the group, which does not rely on Victorian stereotypes or elite perceptions.⁸⁹ However, this analysis is subject to a number of problems. Smail's work on Halifax demonstrates that 'association' had only limited power to overcome the fissures within this supposedly homogeneous 'middling sort', and that it could be the means by which social boundaries or mobility 'closures' became visible.⁹⁰ These fissures were perpetuated and enlarged by the use of property thresholds for membership of clubs and vestries in Halifax. These thresholds diminished the influence of the less prosperous among the 'middling'. This reinforced social divisions in the supposedly inclusive 'public' endeavours of local government,⁹¹ the building of chapels,⁹² the funding of canals,⁹³ and the foundation of a lending library.⁹⁴ Such distinctions within public functions and institutions also helped to create barriers in the 'private' spheres of gender roles,⁹⁵ consumption,⁹⁶ and sociability.⁹⁷ 'Association' may therefore have strengthened the cohesion and exclusivity of the town's elite, by enabling it to formulate

⁸⁰ J. Barry, 'Bourgeois collectivism? Urban association and the middling sort', in Barry and Brooks, *Middling sort*, pp. 84–112. ⁸¹ J. Barry, 'Introduction', in *ibid.*, p. 20.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 85. ⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 95. ⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 98. ⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* ⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 104. ⁸⁸ *Ibid.* ⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 'Introduction', p. 24.

⁹⁰ Smail, *Origins*, ch. 5, pp. 121–63; ch. 6, pp. 164–87. ⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 130. ⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 138. ⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 145. ⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 176. ⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

a style of life founded on wealth and the tokens of leisure and gentility that distinguished it from the less wealthy 'middling'.⁹⁸

So association did not necessarily function as the social solvent that created Barry's 'bourgeoisie'. The search for 'middling' values is still confronted by a fundamental problem that has not changed since Hexter savaged Louis B. Wright's 'middle-class values' nearly forty years ago.⁹⁹ Barry and Earle¹⁰⁰ modify the precise values they wish to define as 'middling', but they continue to believe that the identification of those who possessed them is the best guide to the identity of the 'middle sort'.

This methodology carries the risk that the definition of different 'middling' values can lead us to different definitions of the 'middle sort'. This is precisely what has happened in historiography of 'middling culture' in the eighteenth century. Increasingly, we encounter two 'middle sorts', either the aspiring, genteel, conspicuously consuming 'middling sort' of Borsay, Earle, or Langford; or the independent, industrious, domestic 'middling sort' of Margaret Hunt and Joan Kent. Both groups have been distinguished by the same process of definition, both are described as the true representatives of the 'middle sort', but one is situated immediately above the other in the social hierarchy.

Borsay and Langford argue that 'middling' identity was defined by the pursuit of the hallmarks of gentility. Langford states that 'nothing unified the middling orders so much as their passion for aping the manners and morals of the gentry'.¹⁰¹ Borsay suggests that the claustrophobic social competition of the town impelled these tradesmen to rebuild their houses and refashion their lives as part of a new 'cultural definition of gentility'.¹⁰² This 'middle sort' is defined as the 'people holding surplus wealth... that part of society engaged in "the pursuit of status"'.¹⁰³ Inevitably, this produces a definition that gravitates towards the most conspicuous consumers.¹⁰⁴

However, Lorna Weatherill's work on national patterns of consumption suggests that participation in it was not uniform within this supposedly unified 'middle sort'. She demonstrates that the wealthier urban trades were more likely to own 'new and decorative goods'¹⁰⁵ than lower status trades, yeoman farmers and sections of the gentry. The attention of Borsay and Langford has been drawn to these most wealthy, most conspicuous consumers. Once again, it is simply inferred that their activities were characteristic of a more broadly defined 'middle sort'. Borsay suggests that they were different only because they had the 'surplus wealth' to realize aspirations shared by the whole of 'middling' society. Yet their actions appear to have been designed to

⁹⁸ Ibid., pp. 195–6.

⁹⁹ Hexter, 'Myth', p. 75. Significantly, perhaps, Barry offers support to Wright's idea of a 'bourgeoisie' defined by 'bourgeois' values. Barry, *Middling sort*, p. 18.

¹⁰⁰ Earle, *Middle class*, pp. 157–8.

¹⁰¹ Langford, *Commercial people*, p. 67.

¹⁰² Borsay, *Urban renaissance*, p. 207.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 175.

¹⁰⁴ It also contrasts strongly with the life experiences of many 'middling' autobiographers. Michael Mascuch notes that most of the consumption and accumulation among these individuals was directed towards economic *survival*. 'In the subjective perspective of reality framed by the middle sort, the openness of the abyss of poverty, into which providence might at any moment cast whole families, was more awesome than the openness of the elite into which individuals might climb', M. Mascuch, 'Social mobility and middling self-identity: the ethos of British autobiographers, 1600–1750', *Social History*, 20 (1995), p. 61.

¹⁰⁵ L. Weatherill, *Consumer behaviour and material consumption in Britain, 1660–1760* (2nd edn, London, 1996) p. 169. Weatherill's analysis of gentry probate inventories is compromised by the absence of (more wealthy) Prerogative Court of Canterbury materials in her samples.

distinguish themselves from this wider group, and to nullify this shared identity. If this consumption is characteristic of only part of this 'middle sort', can it contribute to a definition of the whole?

Hunt's study has used different definitions of these 'middling' values, and has defined a different 'middle sort'. This analysis of the 'middling sort' in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries gravitates towards less-conspicuous urban inhabitants. Although she draws a minimal 'exterior' definition of the group, comprised of 'shopkeepers, manufacturers, better-off independent artisans, civil servants, professionals, lesser merchants, and the like', with 'incomes in the range of £80 to £150', she does not reduce these experiences into closely defined patterns of class formation.¹⁰⁶ Instead, her definition rests on the discovery of the values common to this societal segment, produced by a shared relationship to the market, and the perception of moral differences with the gentry.

Hunt employs primary printed material to illustrate the contemporary messages and norms aimed at the 'middling'. However, the relationship between the message and the behaviour of its audience is problematic. The connection rests on an assumption that the concepts of conduct, moral prescriptions, and societal metaphors transmitted by this literature were connected directly to those of its readership, among this 'middle sort'.¹⁰⁷ Hunt argues that such works publicized the normative 'political' divide between the domestic virtues of the 'middle sort' and the licentious vices of the elite. They also fostered the 'class' divide between a commercial, prudential, industrious 'middling' culture, and a profligate, idle, aristocratic elite.¹⁰⁸ In this interpretation, material consumption, display, and leisure were indicators of 'bourgeois' 'domesticity and privacy'¹⁰⁹ rather than symptoms of 'a passion for aping the manners and morals of the gentry'. For Hunt, social emulation worked in reverse, as these norms leached upwards into aristocratic families through 'bourgeois' literature during the eighteenth century. Yet, at the same time, by naming social, sexual, societal, and national differences this literature also rendered these divides visible to a 'middling' reading public, contributing to the formation of its social identity.

Kent has isolated similar 'middling' values, but she has suggested more subtle methods of transmission. For her, parish office was the key agent, providing fertile ground for the development of 'middling' groups and interests, but also supplying the institutional mechanisms by which 'middling' values were expressed and implanted among the parish poor.¹¹⁰ These were values of 'diligence, hard work, discipline and economic independence',¹¹¹ enforced through poor relief, settlement, parish workhouses, charities, and schools, particularly as poor rates escalated after 1720. The connection between the 'middling' and their values is more direct in this instance than in Hunt's study, and more convincing. The question is whether such values were specific to the 'middle sort', or whether they merely possessed the power to articulate and apply them in the parish. Many of the poor espoused the values of diligence, hard work, and discipline. They may simply have been separated from the parish elite by their ability to sustain economic independence by the application of them.¹¹² Similarly, the

¹⁰⁶ Hunt, *Middling sort*, p. 15. ¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 178. ¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 197–202.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 213. ¹¹⁰ Kent, 'Rural "middle sort"', pp. 31–8. ¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹¹² Cf. J. Rule, *The experience of labour in the eighteenth century* (London, 1981). Rule notes the importance of 'independence' to labour identity in the eighteenth century, defining it as the individual workman's 'capability of supporting himself and his family at a proper standard without having recourse to charity or the poor law', p. 202.

increased assertion of these values by parish administrators in the eighteenth century may reflect the shift, noted by Slack, towards the institutionalization of mechanisms of relief, and the substitution of formal statutory regulation of behaviour for informal communal sanctions.¹¹³ Increased regulation and better administration provide better evidence of attitudes towards poverty, but do not, necessarily, prove that those attitudes ‘hardened’ over time.¹¹⁴

These ‘middling’ identities are similar to Wahrman’s provincial, ‘country’, independent, industrious ‘middle sort’, or Barry’s urban ‘bourgeois collectivists’. They stand in opposition to the metropolitan, polite, gentlemanly, mercantile ‘middle sort’ favoured by Earle, Borsay, and Langford. The dilemma facing the historian searching for such definitional characteristics is which kind of ‘middling culture’ to choose, and consequently which ‘middling’ group to embody it. How do we incorporate both in the same social group, when one appears increasingly to define itself against the other?

The problems of defining the ‘middle sort’ by the isolation of ‘middling’ values have been well described by Wahrman.¹¹⁵ He questions the extent to which these values can be associated exclusively with one societal segment in the eighteenth century. He argues that notions of ‘domestic ideology, separation of [gender] spheres, and Evangelicalism’¹¹⁶ were ‘not restrictively characteristic of some sociologically defined “middle class”’, and extended to parts of ‘the landed classes and of the working population’.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, Wahrman finds that there were several available models for the expression of ‘middle-class’ identity in the early nineteenth century, and that

The presence or absence of a ‘middle class’ as a distinct and meaningful group depended, ultimately, on the eye of the beholder, as did its association with these ‘bourgeois’ patterns of behavior... Far from being natural or automatic, classifying such patterns of behavior as ‘middle class’ was a particular way of representing social experiences which achieved preference over others through historically specific circumstances.¹¹⁸

He asserts that such values were ‘constructed’ in contemporary polemics, becoming much more prevalent after the supposed triumph of the ‘middle class’ in the 1832 Reform Act. As the ‘middle class’ were defined as a political and societal force, so more traits, associations, events, and institutions were woven into the fabric of ‘middle-class’ values. Wahrman dismisses such defining values as ‘a charged and contingent historical invention’.¹¹⁹ So, does this also apply to the search for the ‘middle sort’ through the isolation of ‘middling’ values?

Wahrman is more attuned to deconstructing linguistic conventions than to analysing societal formations, and his work focuses narrowly on the period around the turn of the

¹¹³ P. Slack, *Poverty and policy in Tudor and Stuart England* (London and New York, 1988), pp. 162–82, 188–200. Ironically, the growth in the legislative burden on parish government is also well described in J. R. Kent, ‘The centre and the localities: state formation and parish government in England, circa 1640–1740’, *Historical Journal*, 38 (1995), pp. 363–404.

¹¹⁴ Hindle, ‘Holland Fen’, pp. 80–95. Hindle shows that parish administration changed over time, policy acquired different emphases, and expenditure increased between 1600 and 1800. However, he suggests that attitudes remained the same mixture of paternal provision and regulation of the ‘settled’ poor, with harsh exclusion and prosecution of interlopers. As legislation altered, so did the mechanisms by which this policy was executed.

¹¹⁵ D. Wahrman, ‘“Middle-class” domesticity goes public: gender, class and politics from Queen Caroline to Queen Victoria’, *Journal of British Studies*, 32 (1994), pp. 396–432. See also idem, *Imagining the middle class: the political representation of class in Britain, c. 1780–1840* (Cambridge, 1995).

¹¹⁶ Wahrman, ‘“Middle-class” domesticity’, p. 401. ¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 401.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 423.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 431.

nineteenth century. Yet his conclusions have a resonance for the earlier period. The term ‘middle sort’ was just as much a linguistic construct and a polemical tool as the term ‘middle class’. It was a particular, contingent characterization of the experience of two social segments. As we have seen, it could be applied equally to the ‘genteel’ aspirants or the ‘independent’ tradesmen. As has also been demonstrated, there were other ways of regarding society, and its middle sections.¹²⁰ These were local perspectives, within which the ‘middle sort’ was the elite, associated with a wider social elite, among the ‘better sort’, the ‘chief inhabitants’, or the rank of ‘gentlemen’.

III

Recent studies of early modern society have echoed Wahrman’s conclusions. The story of social evolution is no longer told exclusively in the language of ‘class’, or exclusively about the creation of a tripartite ‘class’ society. This trend has been encapsulated and exemplified by David Cannadine’s recent survey of British society over the *long durée*.¹²¹ In the first century of his study, the eighteenth, he has observed that this society was ‘not only seen as aristocratic and hierarchical; it was also regarded as bourgeois and triadic; and sometimes as dichotomous and plebeian. It was none of these things separately because it was all of them together.’¹²² Cannadine separates the underlying, ‘un-evolving’ social order from these three contingent and contradictory descriptions of it.¹²³ For him, these descriptions are merely different ways of perceiving the same social hierarchy, rather than objective characterizations of three different ones. Such an interpretation also brings the historiographical schools of J. C. D. Clark,¹²⁴ Wrightson and Corfield, and E. P. Thompson¹²⁵ into uneasy alliance, by denying each an interpretative monopoly.

Such assertions invite controversy. Social historians working on either side of the artificial divide between ‘early modern’ and ‘modern’ society will take issue with Cannadine’s unchanging ‘social-cum-occupational groups’ – particularly since the period saw so much profound change in economy, demography, and patterns of urban settlement. In addition, Cannadine concentrates on social descriptions rather than social identities, on external images rather than internal perceptions. This widens the debate about the nature of the ‘middle sort’ but does not deepen it, particularly on the question of definitions. However, the value of this work for early modern historians is in illustrating the possibility of contingent and multiple social descriptions – of the presence of co-existing, competing descriptions of the same hierarchy. It also invites speculation about the possibility of multiple, overlapping social identities among the groups so described.

¹²⁰ Corfield demonstrates how these other characterizations persisted in social description of society into the second half of the eighteenth century. Corfield, ‘Class by name and number’, pp. 47–52.

¹²¹ D. Cannadine, *Class in Britain* (New Haven and London, 1998).

¹²² *Ibid.*, pp. 50–1.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 18. Cannadine employs W. G. Runciman’s four ‘systactic’ sociological categories, ‘a small elite’, ‘managers, businessmen and professionals’, ‘wage workers’ and ‘a deprived ... sometimes criminalised underclass’.

¹²⁴ J. C. D. Clark, *English society, 1688–1832: ideology, social structure and political practice during the ancien régime* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 70–1.

¹²⁵ E. P. Thompson, *Customs in common* (London, 1991), p. 71. See also P. King, ‘Edward Thompson’s contribution to eighteenth-century studies: the patrician–plebeian model re-examined’, *Social History*, 21 (1996) pp. 215–28.

As the search to define a single ‘middling’ identity suggests, the reconstruction of such perceptions is extremely difficult, depends on tenuous evidence, and is constantly vulnerable to circular arguments. Yet, there are fragments of evidence about this fragmentary identity. There are abundant examples of the expressed dichotomy between ‘chief’ and other ‘inhabitants’. This phraseology implies a restricted, sub-national social perspective, in which parish elites placed themselves at the top of truncated hierarchies. Similarly, these elites developed a tendency in the late seventeenth century to describe themselves as ‘gentlemen’. By their modes of dress, behaviour, conversation, and consumption they associated themselves with a status affinity that was understood nationally.¹²⁶ Undoubtedly, as this notion of metropolitan gentility evolved so did other ‘provincial’ notions of ‘middling’ decency and respectability. In the later eighteenth century these often went together with other forms of association, self-improvement, and political activism to fashion a new, more meritocratic notion of ‘gentility’.¹²⁷

This *mélange* of identities may have allowed individuals to move between social self-definitions according to context, in the same way that they moved between geographic ones. Individuals of equivocal status seem to have tried to maximize their standing within their home locality, while presenting a less exalted or vulnerable social persona to a wider world.¹²⁸ These shifting self-descriptions may have matched the shifting external descriptions applied to this ‘middling’ stratum. They may also explain the elusive quality of the ‘middle sort of people’, apparent only to some contemporary observers, and rarely to the group themselves. ‘Middling’ identity may simply have been one of a range of identities claimed by people in a societal or wealth segment defined by historians.

Cannadine and Wahrman have emphasized how historians have selected this ‘middling’ identity and invested it with meaning, by the appropriation of Earle’s ‘vaguely middle-class things’.¹²⁹ This selection has been made largely for the sake of convenience, to find an appropriate means of characterizing this societal segment as part of a wider society of ‘sorts’. As such, the ‘language of sorts’ and the ‘middle sort’ provide useful aggregate description and societal reference points. However, this selection reduces our understanding of the variety and complexity of social identities in an era before the hegemony of the language of ‘class’. An appreciation of the multiple and context-driven nature of these identities is important, because considerations of the social order have moved away from overtly economic determinism. If individuals’ social identities were conditioned by a wide range of impulses, and were expressed in a variety of forms, can these be subsumed accurately under the collective label of ‘middling’ or

¹²⁶ Peter Laslett’s ‘one-class’ society may have found few advocates, but his understanding of the strength and pervasiveness of notions of gentility in the period deserves to be restated. See P. Laslett, *The world we have lost: further explored* (London, 1983), pp. 22–52.

¹²⁷ For an illustration of this tendency see John Brewer’s consideration of the engraver Thomas Bewick and his Newcastle circle. J. Brewer, *The pleasures of the imagination: English culture in the eighteenth century* (London, 1997), pp. 499–530.

¹²⁸ For example, Thomas Bewick joined Swarley’s Club in Newcastle where ‘every member should behave with decorum and like a Gentleman’, Brewer, *Pleasures*, p. 508. In the wider world, he cultivated the ‘simple dress, direct manners and rustic appearance’ of the ‘son of nature’, *ibid.*, p. 519. For further consideration of this point, see also H. R. French, ‘“Ingenious and learned gentlemen”: social identity and self-fashioning among parish elites in Essex, 1680–1740’, *Social History* (forthcoming).

¹²⁹ Earle, *Middle class*, p. 336.

‘bourgeois’? Similarly, if these identities affected their social behaviour, can these alternative perceptions be dismissed as historically insignificant?

The ‘middle sort of people’ in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries remain elusive, definitions of them continue to be imprecise, and the resultant groups are still incoherent and untidy. ‘Exterior’ and ‘interior’ definitions both produce ambiguous outcomes – two ‘middle sorts’ defined by wealth in seventeenth-century London, and two ‘middle sorts’ defined by their values in eighteenth-century Britain. This is because the concept of a ‘middle sort’ has a national and absolute focus, whereas the identities we perceive are local and transient.

Our ‘middle sort’ might be composed of individuals who ruled their parish, paid the highest rates, and described themselves as its ‘chief inhabitants’. Yet it might also include a less wealthy, less well-defined, and mute group of ratepaying ‘inhabitants’. The former might pursue ‘clean’ distributive trades, the latter ‘dirty’ manual ones, with little interchange of sons into apprenticeship and daughters into marriage. The two groups might make common cause as the united ‘inhabitants’ on a matter of parish interest, such as a highway or boundary dispute. At other times, on questions about the maintenance of parochial discipline or the parish poor, they might divide between the ‘better’ and ‘poorer sorts’. By the mid-eighteenth century, both groups might harbour aspirations to forms of ‘gentility’, but to two different forms, one with a metropolitan focus, the other proclaiming provincial ‘rationality’ in the face of such cultivated influences. Both groups might emphasize their status inside the parish, but be unable to escape the constraints of their restricted standing and influence outside its boundaries.

In these various circumstances, social affinities and identities might slide back and forth. To describe them, definitively, as ‘middling’ is to generalize. This is an acceptable compromise, but it does not describe the totality of their behaviour, nor (crucially) does it provide an adequate explanation for it. If we seek such explanations we have to alter our focus and our societal perspectives. As we do so, the ‘middle sort’, like other more recent shadowy creatures, tends to disappear before our eyes.