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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c. 1780-1840* by Dror Wahrman

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to attend church regularly, veiled by a screen so the entire congregation might gaze upon a spectacle of reform, Vallone demonstrates that happiness and virtue were understood to arise from reform and self-control and points out that both good girls and wayward young women were positioned within a similar paradigm, defined by silence. If “‘Tell your story to no one,’ was posted on each ward’s wall in the second Magdalen house” (p. 19), alienating the girls from their own histories and from each other, then it was also true, as Vallone points out, that similar silencing strategies operated around the seventeenth-century “spousal,” where good girls would be defined by their silence, their virtue represented as blushing loss of consciousness at the moment of the marriage proposal. If no reproaches for past behavior were permitted for the fallen girl—the premise for the Magdalen’s silence—then no verbal pleasure in success on the marriage market was likewise permitted—such behavior would be marked as unchaste, passionate, or shrewd. In Vallone’s argument, social prescriptions, and pressures around prostitution and marriage take on similar roles in terms of each institution’s capacity to define and regulate behavior for girls. Both rest on what Vallone defines as an economy of virtue. This economy permits discipline, as in the reform homes for young women, and authorizes the prescriptive literature that provided paradigms of moral conduct and that took the form of conduct manuals and domestic novels.

In this way, Vallone’s study is noteworthy for its efforts to mark out a relationship between authorized social behavior for young women and prohibited social behavior, and for its suggestion that this relationship resulted in coercion and control. Vallone’s study builds on the work of other scholars, including studies by Deborah Gorham, Judith Rowbotham, Claudia Nelson, and Vallone’s earlier text, co-authored with Claudia Nelson, *The Girls’ Own: Cultural Histories of the Anglo-American Girl* (1994), and Vallone briefly mentions that age difference should be as important to feminist and cultural studies as gender, race, and class. Still, while many of Vallone’s discussions are fascinating—especially her descriptions of dowry and marriage settlements—the study is limited by its descriptive nature. Much of Vallone’s analysis is accomplished in broad strokes, covering two cultures across three centuries, with gestures toward materials considered. Vallone does not re-theorize much of what she discusses, but instead she describes some of the “institutional, literary, instructive, legal, and domestic forces that have helped to create girls’ culture in England and America, from the late seventeenth to early twentieth centuries” (p. 157). This approach makes this study an excellent introductory text for students who wish to make more concrete the historical and cultural pressures surrounding literary representation of girls’ culture.

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Dror Wahrman. *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c. 1780–1840*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 1995. Pp. xiv, 428. \$69.95 cloth, \$22.95 paper. ISBN 0-521-47127-3.

Although Dror Wahrman’s ambitious study covers roughly the same period as E. P. Thompson’s classic work, he makes clear in the opening line of his introduction that he has no intention of writing “The Making of the English Middle Class.” Indeed, Wahrman believes that it would be impossible to do so. Nor does he follow the recent examples of Theodore Koditschek or R. J. Morris, who seek to locate the emergence of the middle class within the context of industrialization’s impact on politics and society in a specific place, such as nineteenth-century Bradford or Leeds. Deeply skeptical of any attempt to reduce the

category “middle class” to “a straightforward sociological concept or historical narrative,” Wahrman instead focuses on something rather different: “How, why, and when did the British come to *believe* that they lived in a society centred around a ‘middle class’?” (pp. 408, 1). In his answer to this complex question, his emphasis is very much on the word *believe*. For Wahrman, the middle class is, above all, an “imagined” construction; throughout the book, in fact, the phrase almost always appears in quotation marks.

Determined to challenge the sway that the myth of the rising middle class exerts over British history writing, he argues that most interpretations of class ignore the degree of freedom, the autonomous space, between social reality and its representation. Neither language nor social process determine by themselves the range of possible representations; other influences, Wahrman argues, are at work as well. Here he emphasizes the crucial role of politics and political language in shaping “the evolution of the divergent representations of British society” between 1780 and 1840. By political language, he means, “the language of writers and speakers as found in those means of public communication geared towards interventions in the political process and towards audiences interested in such interventions, even when a particular enunciation was not directly concerned with politics” (p. 10).

Focusing on an exploration of the lulls as well as the peaks in the language of middle class and shifts in meaning and emphasis, Wahrman divides the period between the French Revolution and the 1830s into three parts. Each part in turn corresponds to a distinct political configuration that “created different stakes in the language of ‘middle class’” and led to “different implications and outcomes of its uses” (p. 16). The first of these coincided with the polarized, highly charged politics of the 1790s. Within the heated, divisive political debates of that decade, the “Friends of Peace” and others who opposed Pitt’s policies turned to “the middle-class idiom” as a means of developing a political middle way between the extremes of Jacobinism and belligerent loyalism. What unified those who adopted this rhetorical strategy, Wahrman is careful to stress, was a common political outlook, not a common social position. Profoundly influenced by changes in the political climate in Britain during the Napoleonic wars, the second of these shifts in the uses of the language of middle class reached a point of closure with Peterloo in 1819; in its aftermath the image of a sober, respectable, and “tamed” middle class, one that represented “a new and rising social constituency” and was “anti-popular and committed to political stability,” gradually emerged in the political debate over the issue of limited constitutional reform (p. 226). At the center of his analysis of shifts in the meaning and use of the category “middle class” is the 1832 Reform Bill. But, its role in his account, as Wahrman hastens to point out, is very different from the role that the “Bill of Bills” plays in current historical understanding. Critical of the tendency among historians to explain 1832 as “a simple epiphenomenon riding on the coat-tails of the deeper underlying social process,” he emphasizes that it “was not an endpoint of a long social transformation...but rather in itself an important catalyst in the decisive transformation of people’s conceptualizations of *their* society” (pp. 17–18).

Unafraid of big questions and controversial answers, *Imagining the Middle Class* is an intelligent, provocative piece of work, one that deserves a wide audience. And yet, it is not always convincing. While Wahrman displays an impressive knowledge of the extensive secondary literature on language and class, he constructs, in the course of the book, a number of straw men. Take the example, cited above, of his critique of so-called conventional wisdom about the background to the 1832 Reform Bill, the centerpiece of his analysis of the language of middle class. Have historians really been so naive and simplistic in their understanding of 1832? One also has to consider the crucial question of sources and their

effect on his interpretation of class. Although he samples the editorial opinions of various radical journalists like T. J. Wooler and Bronterre O'Brien, Wahrman makes relatively little use of the radical press. Nor does he examine in any systematic way the speeches and printed works of the early generations of millowners, a body of work that Anthony Howe analyzed in his fine 1984 study. If Wahrman had chosen to explore these sources, he might have discovered some very different uses of the language of middle class.

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Christian Petersen. *Bread and the British Economy, c.1770–1870*. Edited by Andrew Jenkins. Aldershot, U.K.: Scolar Press; distributed by Ashgate Publishing Company, Brookfield, Vt. 1995. Pp. xv, 346. \$84.95. ISBN 1-85928-117-6.

Christian Petersen, the late author of this work, set out to write a wide-ranging study that describes and quantifies the importance of bread in the British economy. He succeeded admirably, and this book contains a wealth of information gathered together for easy reference by economic and social historians.

Petersen begins with an explanation for why wheaten bread was chosen as the staple food for a large and increasing share of the British population. He argues that wheat, although more expensive per bushel than rye, barley, or oats, was a relative bargain after taking into account the physical and nutritional yields of the various grains. Likewise, white bread, although scorned today in an era when our diets are deficient in fiber, arguably was a more cost effective loaf than browner varieties when ease of digestion is considered. This explains the insistence of the poorer classes on the seeming luxury of white bread, and bought bread as well, as it was cheaper to buy from a baker than to make it at home.

Where did the wheaten loaf come from, and how was it made? Petersen explores the milling and baking trades and provides a wealth of interesting details that are needed to understand the big picture of bread production. Petersen writes about the various grades of flours, the changing technology of milling, and the evolving national market for flour. He is also informative concerning the working life of bakers, wages, and working conditions for workers, and the financial return for masters. How the wheaten loaf was priced depended in part on the local operation of the assize of bread up to its abolition in 1836. Although the fact of the assize, by which the price of wheat governed the retail price of the wheaten loaf, is well known to historians, many readers will find something new in Petersen's summary of the many facets of the assize as it was practiced by the patchwork of local authorities in Britain.

The last half of the book provides the raw material for an estimate of the annual value of bread consumed in Britain. Such an estimate could draw on data from the demand side or the supply side of the market for wheat and bread. The supply side is not neglected in that the author discusses such matters as the various grades of wheat that could be grown in Britain depending on the local climate, the international trade in wheat, and the role of water transportation in the increasing national integration of the wheat and flour markets. Most of the emphasis is on the demand side, however, as Petersen builds his estimates of bread consumption.

Petersen begins with an estimate of per capita consumption of wheat for that part of the population that ate only wheaten bread, after taking into account differences in consumption due to age and gender. The estimates of per capita consumption are combined with