

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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WESTERN EUROPEAN HISTORY – Social Structure

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ANCIENT PERIOD

The Fall of the Roman Empire, in the fifth century, was long in developing, and contingent on economic, social, and external pressures which had long been building. Consequently, the Fall itself was not as sharp as, say, that of the Berlin Wall, but was a product of gradual erosion. In the wake of the disintegration of long built social structures, there remained pockets of ethnic kingdoms, local governance areas, which were to be developmental areas, out of which emerged regional monarchies, with adherent social structures, in which structures the lives of both Church, which was growing, and the fields—we were in an essentially agrarian society—melded. In such an evolving setting, the formation of a new social world, that of the 'Middle Ages,' was taking a shape which would make history of the Roman practices of the *cursus honorum*, the knightly, administrative and senatorial roles which structured the social setting of the Roman citizen.

POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

Overview The period of time covered by the Western European Middle Ages is vast, over a millennium by any account, and the societies at play in that period vary greatly from one another. However there is a normative tenor to the social organizations of the period, itself rooted in the inheritance from the Roman Empire, the overwhelmingly agricultural demands of daily life, and the distinctive blend of the Catholic Church with aristocratic values. That normative tenor, traceable through the 'middle period,' is the static quality of the society of the time, a static quality embodied in the notion of 'estates,' or 'social roles' into which all members of civilized western society were divided. It is a static quality we will see yielding, as we move toward the High Middle Ages, 1300-1500, thanks to an increasing interest in commerce, middlemen, investment, and the entrepreneurial life of cities.

The three estates By a broad, and often repeated formula, mediaeval Western European society functioned around three 'estates,' or broad social conditions': the clergy, the warriors, the laborers; the *oratores*, the *bellatores*, and the *laboratores*. The large omission from this more or less indicative triad, which is otherwise intact, is the *nobility*: for European societies were consistently monarchical, depending on *father-kings* to make and enact the laws, *queens*--not infrequently the power behind the monarch, *princes*--forever jostling for the succession, *princesses*--bait for profitable foreign alliances and land consolidations, and a gaggle of aristocrats, self-interested advisors and ministers forever on the look-out for the good of the kingdom and the good of number one. Depending on the period of the Middle Ages, one would determine how effective the nobles were, and in what way; from the thirteenth century on, at their best, they proved to be exemplars of chivalry and 'elite Christian values of charity and responsibility'; of negligible society-building value in the early centuries of the post classical period.

Labor Ninety percent of both the populations and the GNP of mediaeval states --the first millennium, anyway--was based on agriculture. Mechanization was all the time on the rise--with ploughs, horse collars, horse shoes, and three field planting experiments--yet human labor was the overwhelming fact of life on the feudal estates of mediaeval Europe. It is roughly accurate--the reference is strongly to western

Europe-- to divide the providers of that labor into three groups of peasantry: *freemen, serfs, and slaves*. *Freemen* possessed some land, but worked for the feudal lord under whose sponsorship they owned their land. *Serfs* were landless servants of manorial lords. *Slaves*, less free than serfs, were simply possessions of the lords of the manor, to be disposed of at will. The prominence of one or the other of these groups depended on the region and the century.

The clergy The clergy were the active priesthood of the Roman Catholic Church, which from the early centuries of the postclassical era, as early as the third century C.E. in Rome, had acquired power and high administrative influence within the Roman Empire. The clergy, from Cardinals and Bishops of the Church to the humblest monks and nuns, were charged with the spiritual welfare of their people, and enjoined by Saint Paul to 'pray ceaselessly.' While the Church was by and large patriarchal, and while the highest church positions were usually reserved for the nobility, there were a large number of distinguished women—abbesses, administrators, and writer/mystics—who were enabled to find a voice in societies otherwise essentially deaf to women's inner lives.

The fighters The clergy were deputed to pray for the community, the laborers to feed the community, and the warriors--among whom the horse riding knights were the symbol of mediaeval prowess and protectiveness--were expected to defend the community. There was, of course, a long story to be told, of the development of military skills throughout the Middle Ages, but no other sector of the military won the supreme symbolic attention reserved for the cavalry riding nobility constituting the institution of *chivalry*, from its intimate association with the culture of the *horse, cheval* in French. (One can think ahead to Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, in the sixteenth century, for a satire on the conflation of nobility with *chevalerie*; not every nobleman could stick to a horse's back.) From 1170-1220 dates the high period of Chivalry, promoted by Church concerns for moral improvement, fine ladies' longing for finer relations between the sexes, and the nobility's general interest in fine poetry and song, which were products of Chivalry and the cult of woman.

EARLY MODERN PERIOD

Individualism. The very concept of the High Middle Ages, the period bridging from the Middle Ages properly speaking to that long development that leads into the early modern, is fragile and ambiguous. During the Renaissance, say in fifteenth century Northern Italy, there is an explosion of artistic personality, scientific inventiveness, and political astuteness—Cf. Macchiavelli's thought, in *The Prince*—yet the estates of faith, labor, and war were embedded life-concepts which shaped even the most individualistic behaviors. Individualism, within the world of the estates, was won at the cost of stepping into the modern market, with all its risks and challenges.

Markets. As we observe, in the development of international trade, the contact of persons from other cultures, the development of national products under increasingly industrial conditions, and the innovations in agricultural technology, which led to richer crops to feed rapidly growing urban populations—in all these milestones of a new economy and culture the validation of market culture is prominent. The full bloom of the estate-culture, in Western Europe, needed to fade—giving way in the High Middle period to a diversification of wage earning modalities. 'The general category of those who labour (specifically, those who were not knightly warriors or nobles) diversified rapidly after the eleventh century into the lively and energetic worlds of peasants, skilled artisans, merchants, financiers, lay professionals and entrepreneurs, which together drove the European economy to its greatest achievements.'

The Middle Class. The early modern period is marked by the growth of a mercantile class, for which the old estates, of the Middle Ages, are being replaced by competitive enterprises in business, military affairs, diplomacy, and in which one's class origins are increasingly irrelevant. At the same time, though, the older world has not been forgotten. Literature, as often, helps us to see what the class climate of the time—the early modern climate—is. Examples drawn from writers like Cervantes, Moliere, Shakespeare, or Ben Jonson bring this point to the stage, where public opinion and taste are most clearly on display; the characters they display for us show us persons enacting the tensions of class change.

Literature. Don Quixote is an early modern man playing at being a man of the High Middle Ages, and as he moves among his pretensions and dreams we see both the dynamics of the early modern, and the irrelevance of the now passé estates world. No middle class figure, the Don, and yet in his breakthroughs of self-awareness, he is enabled to see himself in a newer and freer world than that of the 'knight' himself. He is becoming a middle class man in his mind. Jonson, Shakespeare, and Moliere all use the shifting gazes of early modernity to reflect bits of the mediaeval. Shakespeare is the most complex of these depictees of the mediaeval, for he is the least time bound of these great writers. Polonius wants to clear his conscience in confession, before he passes away; the friar *really* wants to guarantee Romeo and Juliet a Christian marriage; Prince Hal truly wants his father to bless him, before he inherits the Kingship. The same vestiges of the mediaeval adhere to the character formations of playwrights like Jonson and Moliere. Think of *Volpone*, or *The Alchemist* or *Every Man in his Humour*, in which stock characters, embodiments of mediaeval humours, play out into stylized (but subtle) plot resolutions; or of Moliere's *Tartuffe*, say, who 'embodies' the idea of the hypocrite, picking it up from the tradition of Theophrastus' *Characters*, a formative text for the middle ages.

19TH CENTURY

French Revolution. By the nineteenth century a revolutionary war had been fought, which represented all that Britain feared in the way of advanced and disruptive democracy. And yet the British and French joined in the same path of gradual modernization, as the century unfolded into increasing industrialization, urbanization, and the professions of commerce. The mirror of this change can quite expectably be seen again in the novel, which by this stage had become the most sensitive barometer of social change and class mode. The nineteenth century novel, in France and England, provides a lens through which to see images of what daily life really was.

Daily life. The classes had by this time been thoroughly shaken up, and while economic disparity was sharp, in both England and France, and elites, like the Victorian landed aristocracy, the Bloomsbury Circle, or the irrepressible *cercles litteraires*, which continued to circulate the latest literary trends of the Parisian milieu, retained their trademark centrality to their cultures, and while the peasantry, which had not quite died out, continued to plough and hoe in the corners, the great mass of French and English people had become householders, with insurance and taxes to pay, and considerable freedom in mapping out career, marriage, and reproductive powers for themselves. We were truly in the modern period of class-free mobility, beginning to see our societies in terms of what kinds of skill deserves admiration in them: the dexterous diplomat; the scientific genius, perhaps a hero of vaccines; the poet who takes the age in hand, like Wordsworth; or the unseen Milton, mouldering in a country churchyard. Charles and Emma Bovary belong to many a nineteenth century French family, the *marriages de convenance* who conclude by perishing on their own misunderstanding.

20TH CENTURY

Class structure. From the firm but changeable social class structures, of the Roman Empire, and then the estate-based social classes of the mediaeval period, we have hastily surveyed the advent, in the Early Modern period, of what we would have to consider the dwindling vestiges of a class system, as they morph into a more fluid skill and contribution based society, with, for its historical roots, the industrialization and globalization of the early nineteenth century. Few class rigidities adhere to the twentieth century societies of France and England.

Norms. If Victorian England developed norms of behavior—middle class norms of decency, prudishness, honesty, and uprightness—it was in part because the world in which those norms were being formed was on the whole peaceful and disciplined, even in France, which experienced a wide variety of political positionings. What, conversely, could be expected for the class structures of nations, in the twentieth century, which experienced two World Wars and a great Depression in the course of thirty

years, and in the second half of whose century sexual experimentation, women's liberation, incessant global bushfires, unprecedented storms of migration, and a wide tolerance for individuality have thoroughly modified the design of social relationships, both in the world and in the Western European corner of it.

Literature. What better mirror to hold up to the quick kaleidoscope of twentieth century culture than the novel? The Early Modern World reflected bright facets of its inner spirit in Cervantes, Moliere, Jonson. We could equally well have called in Balzac, Flaubert, Jane Austen, or George Eliot to help us clarify the tenor of nineteenth century social classes. When it comes to the century we have just lived, and can see slowly retreating in the rear view mirror, we could find in the world of English and French novelists camera shots deeply reminiscent of the world we have been and the class roles we have been playing in it: *Ulysses*, ourselves fractured into the social role of what we say, ourselves as language; Camus' *The Stranger*, ourselves as our own disorientation; Proust, *Swann's Way*, the wandering corridors of memory as it constructs us, making us citizens of time. The deep class participant I, not simply a rebel but a new birth from language and risk, becomes the social participant to whom I once belonged like the definition of my name.

Readings

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Discussion questions

On the whole, would you consider the Mediaeval class structure mobile and flexible? Or stiff and unyielding? Who was able to move up the social ladder--and under what circumstances? What changes did the Early Modern period bring to this Mediaeval structure?

How were slaves acquired in the Middle Ages? Were there regulations, say from the Church, about 'proper treatment of slaves'? What led to the fading away of the mediaeval slave system?

How were ordinary knights converted into 'chivalric gentlemen'? What kinds of efforts did courtly ladies make, to 'civilize their men'? Were courtly ladies also part of the equine culture? Why was the horse such a key player in the drama of the mediaeval court?

What kind of 'pockets of ethnic kingdoms' survived the Fall of the Roman Empire? Can you imagine the process by which the categories of Roman citizenship—knights, quaestors, consuls—gave way to the estates? Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* remains a wonderful evocation of the pagan world of the Roman Empire, after it has yielded to 'barbarian forces,' and returned to its pre classical condition.'

In the fourteenth century Western monarchs conferred many titles of nobility in their kingdoms. (The first English duke, for instance, was created in 1337). The systems of aristocracy, of special privilege and special obligation—*noblesse oblige*—were not born sui generis, but sprang from the monarch's need for cohorts of support in the high altitude of rulership. What is the status today of such honorific class titles? Have they been replaced by new titles, in Western Europe?