Modern Intellectual History, 2, 1 (2005), pp. 87–107 © 2005 Cambridge University Press
doi:10.1017/S1479244304000332 Printed in the United Kingdom

OF MARKSMANSHIP AND MARX: REFLECTIONS ON THE LINGUISTIC CONSTRUCTION OF CLASS IN SOME RECENT HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP

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The historiographical trend that goes under the name of the "linguistic turn," or, more capaciously, the "new cultural history," has stressed the enormous plasticity and contingency of the human world. Its proponents have maintained that, instead of being determined by laws analogous to those that govern the physical world, human reality is to a large degree—just how large a degree is, of course, a hotly contested issue—autonomously constructed by the human manipulation of language. Language is, in this view, not confined to passively mirroring a prior social reality; rather, linguistically constituted entities can powerfully influence social life even in the absence of "real," objective referents. As Sarah Maza notes in the introduction to *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie: An Essay on the Social Imaginary, 1750–1850*,[1] cultural historians have, since the 1970s, enthusiastically embraced such an approach with respect to newer topics of investigation like gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Yet its application to the venerable historical category of class, while not altogether lacking, has lagged noticeably behind.

Maza situates her study of the bourgeoisie in France under the banner of this methodology. She finds predecessors and allies not among her colleagues in French history but rather among such historians of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain as Gareth Stedman Jones, Patrick Joyce, and Dror Wahrman. Of the works written by this group, she most frequently cites Wahrman's *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c. 1780–1840*

1 Sarah Maza, *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie: An Essay on the Social Imaginary, 1750–1850* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244304000332 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(1995),[2] which, as indicated in its title, shares her focus on the role of the "imaginary" (as opposed to the concretely material) in the formation of class. Hence I will follow my consideration of Maza's book with a briefer comment on Wahrman's and end with some general reflections on the effort to conceptualize class linguistically.

Maza's book-length essay draws inspiration from a marksmanship metaphor. As Maza quotes the literary critic Richard Klein, "'The validity of hyperbole, the truth that exaggeration may convey, depends on a principle well recognized by marksmen: there are times when aiming to overshoot the mark is the condition for hitting it'" (pp. 6–7). Maza thus frankly recognizes the hyperbolic nature of her "central thesis," which she states succinctly as "the French bourgeoisie did not exist" (p. 5). But on the model of a marksman, she nonetheless hopes to deploy this exaggeration with sufficient strategic finesse to arrive at the truth–or at least to provoke a salutary transformation of historical scholarship about France, one in which centuries of (in her view) unreflective and unfruitful allusion to some putative entity called the bourgeoisie will finally give way to a clearing of the field and a radical rethinking of basic assumptions.

Into the mix with marksmanship comes, euphoniously enough, Karl Marx, who has for so long dominated scholarly rumination on social class. Describing her perspective as "post-Marxian—though emphatically not anti-Marxian" (p. 12), Maza wishes to free herself both of the Marxist postulate that social class reflects some more fundamental development in the material realm of the economy and also of the very term "bourgeoisie," which has in her opinion been rendered ubiquitous and seemingly indispensable in historical scholarship by the commanding influence of Marx. Indeed, the reluctance of historians to apply to class the postmodern insights that so readily shaped their study of gender and race derives, she suggests, from a kind of knee-jerk obeisance to Marx. Maza speaks of her colleagues' fondness for the "security blanket of Marxian terminology" and their anxiety that abandoning it would stamp them as insensitive to poverty and exploitation (pp. 3–4).

As someone unfamiliar with rifles (and I suspect that Sarah Maza and Richard Klein share this trait), I have no opinion about the utility of overshooting the mark on the firing range. I can, in principle, see the value of hyperbole in certain rhetorical situations. But after reading Maza's thoughtful and spirited book, I strongly believe that her argument was ill served by her choice of rhetorical strategy. The very attention-getting quality of hyperbole, coupled with Maza's repeated attempts to sustain her hyperbolic thesis in the face of the varied

2 Dror Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c. 1780–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). For Maza's references to Wahrman, see *Myth*, 9, 14 n. 1, 101 n. 102, 132 n. 2, 158 n. 84.

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evidence she turns up across her hundred-year canvas, transforms her reader into a single-minded spectator at a zero-sum game: will Maza succeed in banishing the bourgeoisie to the realm of non-being, or will the perennially triumphant bourgeoisie manage to assert its existence after all? Riveting in itself, this stark black-or-white proposition is also contrived; and its unfortunate side-effect is to distract the reader from the subtler historical insights that Maza's inquiry has to offer.

At the same time that the wisdom of marksmanship fails to aid Maza's cause, her pledge to emancipate her inquiry from the specter of Marx backfires. Perhaps unwittingly, she imports certain Marxian habits of thought into the core of her own project, lending her account precisely the rigidity that recourse to the linguistic turn is supposed to avoid. In what follows, I try to explain and justify these criticisms and to point out the signal contributions that Maza, a superlatively talented and unfailingly stimulating historian, nonetheless makes. I should note that I would have preferred to follow the customary order of presentation, indicating the book's strengths *before* expatiating on my criticisms. But the rhetorical structure of Maza's book is so powerfully constraining that it forces both reader and reviewer to grapple first and foremost with her thesis about the non-existence of the bourgeoisie.

"Class," as a term for a component or subdivision of society, appeared in England and France during the eighteenth century, eventually displacing more metaphysically anchored terms like "order" and "estate." Like every key word with a long history and wide resonance, its meaning is hard to pin down. Indeed, it has several kinds of *generic* meanings. It can be a taxonomic concept, used from an external vantage point to describe the make-up of society and to analyze social processes. It can be an identity or identity-element, self-consciously and linguistically appropriated by a speaker to refer to a group to which he or she belongs and whose membership shapes the speaker's sense of purpose. Or it can be a *habitus*, in Pierre Bourdieu's term, in which case it is inhabited without linguistic self-consciousness but in a manner that shapes its possessor's mode of physical and mental being in the world and is recognizable to the observer.

Without entertaining the proposition that class has this spectrum of possible meanings, and that its different meanings might legitimately serve different scholarly purposes, Maza simply announces her preferred definition of the term in her introduction. "[C]lasses only exist if they are aware of their own existence, a knowledge which is inseparable from the ability to articulate an identity" (p. 6). It is, then, by equating class exclusively with class identity, and implicitly ruling out all other possible meanings of the term, that Maza will seek to prove the non-existence of the French bourgeoisie. Since this negative outcome is her goal, she not surprisingly proceeds to make her operant definition more stringent by immediately loading it with a host of additional criteria. First, she stipulates that

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to qualify as a class, the group in question must name itself, and do so in the most literal way. Maza's quarry can call itself either the "bourgeoisie" (the traditional name, going back to the eleventh or twelfth century) or the *classe moyenne* (a roughly synonymous name, probably translated from the English "middle class" and used from the 1820s on), but any other name cancels out its existence. Maza has no patience with those historians who, sympathetic to the Marxian plotline, profess to find the bourgeoisie hidden under other, usually universalistic, labels (p. 6). Furthermore, the traits associated with the name must be positive; the self-labeling must be a gesture of self-affirmation. Maza rejects "self-hatred" (p. 3) as an aspect of class identity. In addition, the group must have a story about itself, one in which it is cast as actor. That story must, finally, be a historical narrative which includes memories of the group's past and a vision for its future (p. 6).

It is useful to stop at this early point in Maza's argument and ask what this definition entails and how it relates to her avowed "cultural constructionism" (p. 7) and her "post-Marxian" position. In the first place, in keeping with her "non-existence" thesis, Maza has formulated the definition in rigorously ontological terms: as a checklist by which the investigator determines whether the thing under scrutiny is entitled to the attribute of being or not. This methodological choice encourages a mindset more akin to that of medieval scholastic philosophy or positivist science than to the fluidity and ambiguity tolerated, indeed prized, by the linguistic turn. When Maza says, "I endeavor to take language seriously *on its own terms*" (p. 7, my italics), or later, "Most recent approaches (including my own) . . . approach discourse as a system whose internal patterns need to be decoded *on their own terms*" (p. 118, my italics), she seems less to be advocating attention to the inevitable polyvalence of language than to be recommending literal-mindedness. Second, while Maza's definition is post-Marxian in its relative lack of concern about the "real" socio-economic basis of the group under consideration as a possible class, her insistence on class-consciousness as a sine qua non seems to bring Marx in through the back door. One hears echoes of the famous passage in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* about the likeness to a "sackful of potatoes" of the peasant constituency that supported the 1851 Bonapartist coup: "Insofar as there is merely a local interconnection among these small-holding peasants, and the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond, and no political organization among them, they do not form a class."[3] As we will see, Maza later imports other aspects of the Marxian conception as well. For all its apparent clarity and simplicity, then, her

3 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), 124.

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definition of class is actually quite eclectic. It does not seem entirely motivated by her stated methodological commitments.

There is yet another element in Maza's definition: the "social imaginary"[4] that figures in her subtitle. Maza suggests that three analytically separable components make up people's experience of the social world: social position (wealth, power, status); social practices (tilling a field, joining the army); and the "social imaginary," or "the cultural elements from which we construct our understanding of the social world." She faults social historians for investigating only the first two and sees her own study as redressing the balance. She never makes it clear whether social position and social practices—apparently empirical attributes—ought to figure in the historian's definition of class, whether they are relevant to the issue of the existence or non-existence of the French bourgeoisie. But since she regards linguistic markers as ultimately determinative of that ontological question, the social imaginary operates in her study as the effective locus of class formation. Hence the presumed contents of that hardly well-bounded entity will profoundly affect the outcome of Maza's investigation: she stocks it with political discourse, social commentary and literature, granting greatest weight to the first. Thus, indicating her accord with the historians who have sought to understand British class identities linguistically, she notes, "I would agree that politics is probably the most important source of social imagery in public life" (p. 9). Her weighting of the contents of the social imaginary foreshadows her conclusion in the book's last paragraph, that she has "hope[d] to draw attention to the importance of politics in the creation of social identities" (p. 204).

Armed with this methodological apparatus—briefly sketched out in a short introduction, perhaps too briefly, given the number of consequential choices that have been made—Maza turns to her six substantive chapters, two on the Old Regime, two on the Revolutionary era, and two on the first half of the nineteenth century.

Old Regime society is a special case in this study since it includes people who actually bore the label "bourgeois" as a designation of their juridical status. These were the non-noble elite of the towns, endowed with privileges that lent them

4 Maza does not supply information about the provenance of this term, which has lately become a regular feature of the vernacular of professional historians. It was originally coined by Cornelius Castoriadis in 1964 as a way to rid Marxist theory of its element of determinacy and to capture the infinite range of symbolic orientations of social institutions, which was said to build on but always exceed the material conditions of human life. On Castoriadis, see John B. Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 21–4, a selection reprinted, together with texts by Castoriadis, in Patrick Joyce, ed., *Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

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a tinge of nobility and that, by the eighteenth century, consisted mostly of tax exemptions and honorific entitlements; they often enjoyed municipal political rights as well. We may seem to have located an unmistakable bourgeoisie here. Yet, in the first of many comparable moves that she will make in the course of this book, Maza cites one of her ontological criteria to show that an apparently promising candidate ultimately disappoints us. In this case, that criterion is collective pride and favorable regard by others. The testimony of the social imaginary of the day—here instantiated in a bevy of dictionary entries and in plays like Molière's *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*—reveals strong disapprobation for the Old Regime bourgeoisie. They were depicted as ambitious upstarts who crudely aped noble manners; their liminal status between the pure types of noble and commoner made them appear repulsively "mongrelized" (p. 25).

Maza then considers another possible candidate for Old Regime bourgeois identity: "*cuisine bourgeoise*—the simple, satisfying four-course meal" (p. 26). Although this symbol of domestic comfort was cited by the historian Robert Darnton as a stable core of eighteenth-century bourgeois identity—and although, I might add, it must have figured in the French "social imaginary" of the period 1750–1850—Maza dismisses it as inadequate to the task of class formation. Its fatal flaw is that it pertained exclusively to the private, apolitical world. The positive sentiment it evoked indicated that the bourgeois was "implicitly gendered female, or at least subject to the same restrictions as women: praised when he confined his activity to the home, denounced and satirized when he dared step outside his designated realm" (ibid.). Surely Maza is bending her own criteria here. She stated in her introduction only that she would emphasize the political content of the social imaginary, not that a valid class identity had to assume a political form.

While her cultural constructionism does not compel Maza to examine the socio-economic underpinnings of a possible bourgeoisie, she nonetheless surveys the secondary literature on that subject. Historians have long recognized that, *pace* Marx, no "industrial revolution"—that is, no widespread adoption of steam-powered factory production—occurred in France until after 1850. But neither was the country economically somnolent during the period covered by Maza's study. In the second half of the eighteenth century, she notes, French commerce increased fivefold and industrial output sevenfold. A wave of new building in Paris produced apartments that were larger and more comfortable than before; fashion became commercialized, stimulating people of all ranks to purchase more clothing. Since these economic indicators could, logically, have supported an optimistic rise-of-the-bourgeoisie narrative, Maza regards it as all the more striking that the French at the end of the Old Regime had virtually nothing good to say about that group of townsfolk. Moreover, instead of welcoming the new consumption patterns, French commentators coded them negatively, as an

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alarming and morally reprehensible taste for "luxury." Once again, Maza's search for a positively valued bourgeoisie turns up empty-handed.

Absence continues to be the hallmark of Maza's investigation as it enters the well-studied terrain of the 1789 Revolution, famously dubbed by Marx and by countless historians after him as a "bourgeois revolution." Turning her attention to the flood of political speech and writing unleashed by the collapse of the absolute monarchy, Maza finds that no one at the time identified the social force behind the revolutionary events as the bourgeoisie. When, in his influential 1789 pamphlet *What is the Third Estate?*, the abbé Sieyès called for the third estate to become precisely that decisive social force and, what is more, defined it in terms of its economic productivity (contrasted to noble idleness), we might seem to have a genuine candidate for the French bourgeoisie. But Maza's stringent naming criterion kicks in here. Not only is "third estate" the wrong set of words (we are looking only for "bourgeoisie" or "middle class"), but Sieyès uses it to refer to a vast swath of the population, including manual laborers, who clearly do not all belong to the social middle. When, in the debates over the 1791 constitution, property qualifications for voting rule the day, we might seem to have found our elusive bourgeoisie behind this measure. But again Maza invokes her stringent naming criterion: the opponents of this measure called its advocates the "aristocracy of wealth," not the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie, she concludes, had no independent political identity during the Revolution but remained "trapped in what has always been its role in the social imaginary: that of a lackluster understudy to the nobility." (p. 100)

After Thermidor, the politicians of the Directory, another revolutionary regime committed to a restricted suffrage based on property qualifications, represented themselves as speaking for all the people. Historians of Marxian persuasion have located the bourgeoisie here, in its supposedly signature maneuver of hiding particular class interests behind universalistic rhetoric. But Maza rejects this assertion out of hand. Her methodological precepts hold that language plainly says what it means, that it does not engage in coy games of concealment.

And so, still bourgeois-less, we arrive in the nineteenth century where, in the period of the two constitutional monarchies (1815–48), Maza at last discovers references to the "bourgeoisie" and the "middle class" in political discourse. The context is again parliamentary debates over suffrage qualifications, first in 1817 and then in 1820. In 1817, the ultra-royalist Restoration minister Villèle, bristling at the proposal that 300 francs in taxes might suffice for the vote, scornfully characterizes individuals who pay that sum as "middle class" and hence ineligible for political responsibility. They have, he says, not yet made their fortune; the middle class is by definition mobile and hence unstable. In response, Pierre-Paul Royer-Collard, the spokesman for the moderate liberal bloc called the Doctrinaires, defends the middle class by name and in Aristotelian terms, as an ethically superior

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"golden mean" between the extremes of noble arrogance and popular ignorance. We have almost grasped the bourgeoisie we've been seeking, but not quite. The apotheosis comes in 1820 when the Doctrinaires, faced with a reactionary bill that would magnify the power of the rural electorate, now defend the *classes moyennes* more lavishly, specifying their economic foundation as "industrial" and lauding their conduct as "industrious." The royalists, they argue, have erred in depicting mobile capital as less politically trustworthy than its landed counterpart; the possessors of mobile capital have just as great a stake in the stability of the polity, and they love liberty more.

Royer-Collard has pulled off an exercise in unambiguously self-affirmative bourgeois self-labeling. Then, seemingly fulfilling all of Maza's criteria, he supplements that self-labeling with the requisite historical narrative of bourgeois triumph that he lacked in 1817, one that begins with the emancipation of the medieval towns and culminates in the 1789 Revolution. The reader might at this point think that the bourgeoisie existed after all, at least briefly in 1820. But the reader soon learns that this would-be bourgeoisie, too, suffers from certain ontological defects. The Doctrinaires' willingness to support a highly restricted franchise, Maza observes, shows that their political program did not really serve the middling elements of society. Moreover, their justification for this franchise reveals that they did not conceive parliamentary representation as an expression of any class interest, bourgeois or otherwise, but rather as a capacity to perceive and serve the general interest (pp. 146–8). Maza's previously announced criteria do not entirely support this latter objection. Her concept of linguistic transparency had led her to reject historians' efforts to locate a bourgeoisie behind the universalistic rhetoric of speakers bearing no class label. But a self-labeled bourgeoisie which depicts itself as representing the general interest is a different political animal; it would seem to qualify as a bourgeoisie to all but the most exigent judge.

Maza then turns to François Guizot, well known as the unabashed political spokesman of the bourgeoisie from the 1820s until the 1848 Revolution and as the historian whose Sorbonne lectures additionally gave canonical form to the narrative of the rise of the bourgeoisie. If anyone can make the grade, the reader thinks, surely it is Guizot. But Maza finds something lacking in him, too. Although he names, praises and identifies with the bourgeoisie, he does not depict the archetypal "bourgeois as bustling *homo economicus*" (p. 149), but rather as dedicated public servant. We have reencountered, in somewhat altered guise, the problem Maza had with Royer-Collard: that he aligned the bourgeoisie not with class interests particular to it but with the general interest.

At this critical point in her text, Maza has tacitly changed the rules of the game, adding criteria to the ones she announced in the introduction. Nowhere did the introduction require that bourgeois identity entail embracing a particular set of economic values and activities, nor, indeed, that it have any specific *content*;

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hitherto, Maza's criteria for the existence of the bourgeoisie, or of any other class, had all been purely formal. In addition, since Maza is explicitly distancing herself from Marx and denying Marx's indissoluble link between certain economic activities and certain modes of class-consciousness, it seems arbitrary for her suddenly to require that the bourgeoisie conceive of itself in terms of its relation to the means of production and that it announce its assent to the behavioral norms of the marketplace.

Maza's adherence to a conception of the bourgeoisie that is in many respects Marxian continues. She observes that the "elements of Marx's definition [of the bourgeoisie] were all available by the 1820s" in France, but that the definition still failed to materialize because the elements were divided between two separate discourses. The Saint-Simonians promoted "industry without bourgeoisie," equating the productive classes with the entire social spectrum comprised by the Old Regime third estate; Guizot, on the other hand, promoted (as we have seen) "bourgeoisie without industry." The "opposite pulls of these traditions," Maza suggests, may well help to account for the fact that "no ideal of bourgeoisie ever really took hold in France" (pp. 157–8). But why, especially after one has frankly discarded the basic assumptions of Marxism, must every bourgeois ideal worth its salt be the one that corresponds to the Marxian definition?

Some of Maza's reasoning on this point can perhaps be found in a comment that, couched in different words, occurs twice in the book. It conveys her opinion that, separated from the Marxian system, the bourgeoisie is a fundamentally pallid and uninteresting category. Thus, in the introduction:

> Once you uncouple the bourgeoisie from the rise of capitalism, however, there is no real reason to use the word at all, except as a shorthand for middle and upper-middle class. *To state that the elite of postrevolutionary France was the bourgeoisie means very little beyond saying that they were not noble*, and it is problematic because of the assumptions and associations that the term always drags along in its wake. (p. 4, my italics)

And in Chapter 4: "Once the concept of bourgeois revolution is cut loose from a Marxian framework, it loses its interpretive power and becomes a rather toothless descriptive phrase" (pp. 109–10). This argument fails to persuade me. One might reply to Maza's dismissive comments that (as she well knows) Marx hardly invented the term "bourgeoisie." He used it because it was deeply entrenched in French language and culture and, as *Bürgertum*, entrenched in his own German language and culture as well. The Marxian definition of the term is, to be sure, *part* of its history in France, but only from about the 1880s on when, under the aegis of Jules Guesde, Marxism entered French discourse.[5] In the period covered

5 See Claude Willard, *Le mouvement socialiste en France (1893–1905): Les guesdistes* (Paris: Editions sociales, 1965), chap. 1: "La pénétration du marxisme en France."

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by Maza's book, the term had no Marxian denotation or connotation; it dragged along no interpretive scheme, Marxian or otherwise. Why shouldn't the historian continue to use it and find out what it meant to those who used it in the past? Why shouldn't the historian ask what characterized the bourgeoisie, taken to mean, simply and at a first approximation, the non-noble elite of postrevolutionary France–that is, the very definition that Maza scorns?

Surely Frenchmen of Maza's period routinely employed the term in just this neutral, taxonomical register. To cite one such example, an article entitled "Les classes moyennes en Angleterre et la bourgeoisie en France" appeared in the *Revue des deux mondes*, the leading periodical of the day, in 1849; its author, Désiré Nisard, was a literary critic, professor of literature at the Ecole normale and the Collège de France, and a member of the Chamber of Deputies during the last six years of the July Monarchy. The article used its key terms, "classes moyennes" and "bourgeoisie," merely to refer, with neither high praise nor barbed satire, to the governing classes of each country. Not a thoroughly detached taxonomist, Nisard frankly identified himself as bourgeois ("We alone, yes, we bourgeois make and unmake governments"). He even-handedly assessed the strengths and weaknesses of the English middle classes and the French bourgeoisie, mourning the recent passing of a French constitutional monarchy modeled on the English one, observing that the French possessed an "intelligence de la politique" that enabled them to analyze political questions theoretically but not a practical "intelligence politique," faulting English society for its hierarchical character and adherence to the law of primogeniture, and faulting the French bourgeoisie for showing less concern for the working classes than its English counterpart.[6] This matter-of-fact, classificatory usage of the term bourgeoisie, which was surely quite common in the nineteenth century, is curiously absent from Maza's book.

Maza's self-contradictory position—that she is discarding the Marxian interpretive framework but is still obliged to employ a basically Marxian definition of the bourgeoisie–leads her to reject candidates for bourgeois-ness that might pass muster even by her stringent formalist criteria. Guizot's bourgeoisie (or *classes moyennes*) is an obvious case in point. It is certainly true that the toppling of the self-described "bourgeois monarchy" of the Orléanist dynasty in 1848 ended Guizot's political career. But aspects of his social vision survived. The history

6 D. Nisard, "Les classes moyennes en Angleterre at la bourgeoisie en France," in *Etudes de critique littéraire* (Paris: Michel Lévy, 1858), 199–247, quotation on 239 ("Nous seuls, oui, nous bourgeois, nous faisons et défaisons les gouvernements"). The article originally appeared in the *Revue des deux mondes* n.s. 4 (Oct.–Dec. 1849), 968–97, and, under the same title, was additionally published as a separate brochure (Paris: Michel Lévy frères, 1850). I happened upon the title of this text in a footnote in Stéphane Gerson, *The Pride of Place: Local Memories and Political Culture in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244304000332 Published online by Cambridge University Press

lectures of 1828 in which Guizot famously articulated his narrative of bourgeois triumph, later published under the title *Histoire de la civilisation en Europe*, continued to be reprinted throughout the later decades of the nineteenth century,[7] a testimony to the lasting influence of their author's discursive crystallization of a certain bourgeois identity in France.

And what of the civil service that, according to Maza, Guizot saw as the natural vocational destiny of the bourgeois? The civil servant may conceivably be, by Marxian standards, not as thoroughly bourgeois as the "bustling *homo economicus*"—although, since bureaucracy is the infrastructure of the modern state, and since Marx's bourgeoisie inexorably captured control of that state, even a Marxist might well see the post-1789 civil service as generically bourgeois in character. For Maza, however, the civil servant functions in modern French history as the very *antitype* of the bourgeois. As she sums up her argument in the conclusion, "I have proposed in this book that we might profitably think of the civil service as modern France's universal class and dominant social norm." Furthermore, "it is from the perspective of the idealized civil servant, whose honor springs from devotion to the state, that the bourgeois became the quintessential other" (p. 197). But who if not the bourgeoisie—defined "toothlessly" and taxonomically as the non-noble elite of postrevolutionary France—populated the ranks of the civil service, ranks that, Maza notes (p. 101), swelled immediately in the years following 1789? Why not see this civil service as a characteristic occupational preserve of the post-1789 French bourgeoisie, a move made just that much easier if one has shed Marxist suppositions? A career guide of 1842 stated the affinity plainly: "The career of public service (*emplois publics*) has been eagerly sought after by those whose birth or education places them in the upper or middle class (*la classe élevée ou moyenne*)." It went on to note that the appeal of such careers was, at the lower ranks, job security and, at the upper ranks, high salaries.[8]

Closely linked to the civil service as bourgeois preserve is the postrevolutionary French commitment to state-supported education, especially the *grandes écoles* (the Ecole normale supérieure and the Ecole polytechnique) founded under the Revolution itself and the *lycées* of Napoleonic foundation. It was, in part, precisely to staff the bureaucracy of a new constitutional state that these educational institutions were originally created. As a middle class desirous of climbing socially,

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7 The online catalogue of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France lists, after the initial publication of the lectures in 1828 and 1829–32 under the title *Cours d'histoire moderne*, a new edition of 1840 under the title *Histoire de la civilisation en Europe*, with reprintings, some of them multiple, in 1843, 1846, 1851, 1856, 1857, 1860, 1864, 1871, and 1884.

8 Edouard Charton, ed., *Guide pour le choix d'un état, ou, Dictionnaire des professions*, 2nd edn (Paris: F. Chamerot, 1851), 287. The first edition was published in 1842 and a third edition in 1880. The comment appears in the article "Employé."

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the bourgeoisie has always put great store by education; and hence Maza's neglect of education in a book seeking to map the contours of that class is more than a little surprising. Guizot may not have portrayed the bourgeois in his histories as a "bustling *homo economicus*," but, once in power under the July Monarchy, he and his Doctrinaire colleagues implemented a supremely class-conscious educational policy, one indicative of their conviction that education was an essential condition of bourgeois existence. By setting up a special, limited track of post-primary education for the popular classes, they explicitly aimed at keeping them out of the *lycées*, thus protecting the *lycées* as the launching pad of the bourgeois career.[9]

Maza's surprising omission of education from her study is of a piece with the omission of the theoretical perspective of Pierre Bourdieu. A sociologist who attempted to explain class in cultural rather than Marxist terms—a project with which Maza should surely be sympathetic—Bourdieu accorded education a prominent role in class formation. One of his earliest works, *Les héritiers, les étudiants et la culture* (1964), exploded the prevailing and reassuring belief that the higher reaches of the late twentieth-century French educational system were effectively open to the children of the working class. And in crafting the concept of the *habitus*—the set of durable and transposable dispositions and internalized possibilities that are acquired by a process of inculcation, that enable people to orient themselves in the social world, and that tend to reproduce the conditions of existence of which they are themselves the product—he theorized the inscription of class distinctions on the body and gave formal education a large share in their production.[10] Of course, Maza's definition of class solely in terms of linguistically articulated identity would have turned her away from the Bourdieusian *habitus*; but her cultural constructionism should, on the other hand, have turned her toward it.

To sum up: I have been arguing that Maza's attempt to sustain the avowedly hyperbolic thesis that "The French bourgeoisie did not exist" has engaged her in a mode of argument in which the criteria keep shifting to suit the needs of an a priori conclusion. It has also led to an odd form of linguistic constructionism which looks only at the literal meaning of words and denies the ambiguity and ambivalence that inevitably inhere in language. It has led, furthermore, to an insufficiently examined narrowing of the definition of class so that only class as articulated identity, and not as taxonomical category or *habitus*, has validity. And it has led to an inconsistent stance on the relationship of Marxism to the concept

9 See Douglas Johnson, *Guizot: Aspects of French History, 1787–1874* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), 128–9.

10 For an overview, see Niilo Kauppi, *The Politics of Embodiment: Habits, Power and Pierre Bourdieu's Theory* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2000); and Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology*, 53–5, a selection reprinted in Joyce, ed., *Class*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244304000332 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the bourgeoisie. Finally, Maza's stern ontological emphasis sits uneasily with her emphasis on the intrinsically elastic concept of the "social imaginary." For if Maza has shown anything, she has shown that the bourgeoisie had a commanding presence in the French "social imaginary"—commanding enough, for example, to generate bohemianism by way of reaction in the 1840s (p. 182)—even if the negative valence so often attached to it debarred it from some putatively higher level of being. All of these criticisms, it should be stressed, pertain to Maza's attempted justification of her claim about bourgeois non-existence. If, however, one pries oneself away from that (in my view) misguided rhetorical device and simply brackets the ontological argument that Maza has herself showcased, the book's real, eye-opening contributions become apparent.

In the first place, Maza has convincingly shown that, despite the stunning success routinely imputed to the bourgeoisie by historians of modern France, French bourgeois identity during the period 1750–1850 was a highly charged affair, deeply tinged with ambivalence and prone to moments of outright self-loathing. The attributes that the Old Regime bourgeoisie shared with the nobility and that resulted in what Maza calls the "mongrelized" appearance of the former no doubt set the pattern in this regard. Further clouding the public image and self-image of the bourgeoisie was the fact that the norms of the marketplace remained highly suspect in France even as the marketplace itself flourished. Maza is certainly right to point out that the institutionally supervised rivalry that the French call *émulation* was far more acceptable in the hexagon than the no-holds-barred competition that the English readily adopted. Indeed, Maza's work suggests that a study of the precise meaning and operationalization of the concept of *émulation* in France over the *longue durée* would be well worth undertaking.[11]

Maza's search for a French political language praising the middle classes and claiming to act in their name is probably her most significant contribution. She is correct to point out (p. 69) that historians before her have, "rather astonishingly," not thought to pose this particular question. Her novel and intriguing contention that the French bourgeoisie was reluctant to speak its own name in the political arena[12]—by comparison with their English counterparts, whose political

11 Maza, *Myth*, 197–8. Maza notes the work on this topic already undertaken by Thomas Crow, *Emulation: Making Artists for Revolutionary France* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995) and Carol Harrison, *The Bourgeois Citizen in Nineteenth-Century France: Gender, Sociability, and the Uses of Emulation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

12 Novel, at least, among academic historians. Pointing out that the bourgeoisie named itself in economic enterprise but not in politics ("there are no bourgeois parties in the Chamber"), Roland Barthes wittily discussed the same phenomenon under the terms "ex-nomination," "défection du nom," and "la bourgeoisie comme société anonyme." See his *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957), 211–16, esp. 211–12, 215.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244304000332 Published online by Cambridge University Press

language has been minutely tracked in Wahrman's *Imagining the Middle Class* (p. 101)—could well have formed the central thesis of her book. Maza astutely suggests that the difficulty of conducting politics in the name of the bourgeoisie, or in the name of any other particular interest, derived from a longstanding French belief in the sanctity of national unity. This ideal dated back to the royal absolutism of the Old Regime and was decisively reconfigured for French republicanism by Rousseau. The abiding French suspicion of particular interests also fed the misgivings about unbridled competition in the laissez-faire marketplace. The paucity of self-identified bourgeois political language in France would thus seem to be an overdetermined outcome, the result (as Maza puts it in another context) of "a profound and specific historical and cultural logic" (p. 3).

Once this logic is recognized, many features of nineteenth-century French life not specifically mentioned by Maza fall into place. For example, the emphasis on bourgeois advancement through education—that is, by means of the carefully managed, meritocratic competition in state-run schools—fits well with the premium on national unity. So does the nineteenth-century French preference for bourgeois occupations not directly linked to the marketplace. Both of these features are readily confirmed by a glance at the career guide mentioned earlier. In the second edition of 1851, more than 20 percent of its pages were filled with entries beginning "School" (*Ecole*), and the initial portion of its long subtitle read "indicating the prerequisites of time and money needed to succeed in each occupation, the courses of study to follow, the curricula of the special schools, the examinations to take . . ." The article "Tradesman" (*Commerçant*) pointed out that "commerce is a science." The small shopkeeper, to be sure, needed little knowledge; but the would-be wholesale merchant, or *négociant*, whose work concerned such matters as navigation, exchange rates, and tariffs, would do well to seek out one of the *écoles de commerce* that the French were lately founding. Such schooling wasn't necessary "in countries where the habits of business are natural and familiar to everyone . . . [and] each great commercial house is a veritable school" for apprentices and employees. But, the author implied, France was no such country.[13] The article additionally portrayed commercial competition in the most brutal terms as "a battlefield that one should refrain from entering unless fully armed, ready, and resolute." In the very last sentence of the article, sweet *émulation* briefly triumphed over ruthless competition: the author stressed the importance of probity in commerce, quoting to this effect an 1838 address at the awards ceremony of a commercial school![14]

Another revealing article, "Clerk at the Council of State" (*Auditeur au Conseil d'Etat*), described a plum of a job, the most direct mode of access to the

13 Charton, ed., *Guide*, 2nd edn, 132, quoting the political economist Adolphe Blanqui.

14 Ibid., 143.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244304000332 Published online by Cambridge University Press

coveted administrative career. Noting that before 1848, this secular "novitiate" was "reserved almost exclusively for young men born into rich families or those whose fathers occupied high positions," the article began by minutely detailing the evolution of the laws regulating entrance into it. It always required an advanced degree, but in 1839 the income requirement was dropped and in 1845 informal screening by a specially appointed jury added. With the establishment of the Second Republic, however, the competition for entrance was regularized in the way the author most approved: through a formal state examination, or *concours*. In this case, the career guide expressed French cultural preferences by showing how *émulation* triumphed over privilege.[15]

As I hope this brief digression demonstrates, Maza's recognition of bourgeois political reticence, and of the larger cultural logic in which it participates, has enormous heuristic potential. Whether or not the bourgeoisie "really" existed, that double recognition ensures the importance of her study.

Maza's book has a comparative dimension throughout. Her expectations about the way a "proper" middle class ought to comport itself are shaped by the English and (to a lesser extent) American cases (p. 2). Hence the surprise that awaits the reader who turns to Dror Wahrman's study and learns that the very paragon of middle classes—the British middle class of the heroic period of industrialization—was itself something of a weak reed, enjoying only a tenuous, intermittent existence for most of the period 1780–1840.

Wahrman does not employ a marksmanship metaphor in *Imagining the Middle Class*, but he does seek to demonstrate a thesis that is, in my view, exaggerated. Like Maza, his main methodological impulse is to liberate himself from the axiom that economic formations and transformations determine class categories. He claims as his warrant to do so "a generation of historical revision" which showed that the so-called industrial revolution in Britain, formerly dated as occurring between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, was in fact far more gradual and protracted, as well as uneven in its impact, than previously thought. As he sums up the paragraph devoted to this topic, "the industrialization of this period could not by itself bear responsibility for an overall restructuring of British society" (pp. 2–3). Vastly lengthening the period of relevant social change so that it spans the mid-seventeenth through the mid-nineteenth centuries, and insisting on a "space of possibilities between social reality and its representations" (p. 8), Wahrman asserts that there was nothing *socially* foreordained about the centrality of the middle class in Britons' depictions of their own society between 1780 and 1840; or as he puts it, "the choice between a 'middle-class'-based or a 'middle-class'-less conceptualization of society fell precisely into this space" (p. 7).

15 Ibid., 42–50.

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Who or what, then, exercised the "choice"? Wahrman will not assign that role to the impersonal logic of discourse itself (or, as he makes the point in the passive voice and in uncharacteristically ungainly prose, "Yet it is not suggested that the specific form, content, timing and evolution of this 'middle-class'-based social understanding were spontaneously generated in an internal development wholly contained within this autonomous space of possible representations.") Neither a "discursive process" nor a "social process" was responsible, Wahrman continues, but neither will he totally rule out their potential input. "[B]oth could still influence [this development]." The decisive role instead falls to the "effects of politics" (p. 9). Here the methodological positions of Maza and Wahrman more or less converge. She entrusts the decisive role in class formation to a "social imaginary" in which politics figures more prominently than any other content; he entrusts it to politics *tout court*. She sees language, construed performatively, as the producer of class categories (pp. 6–7); he scans the British political landscape in search of "the *language* of 'middle class'" and "the middle-class *idiom*" (pp. 14, 46, my italics). In fact, so relentlessly linguistic is his focus that he admits that "the present discussion at times appears to convey an image of languages combating each other in the battlefield of lexical warfare," and duly cautions his reader to keep in mind that words alone have no agency and that the agents in his story are the human beings who use words in the service of adversarial politics (p. 107).

Unlike Maza's brisk, self-described essay, Wahrman's book presents a mountain of textual detail, the result of copious original research in the newspapers, periodicals, pamphlets, and parliamentary debates of the day. But for all his documentation, Wahrman diachronically traces only *political* language about the middle class, and hence his hypothesis that politics virtually created that class is, in a sense, self-fulfilling. While, as we have seen, he endorses the proposition that social processes could have contributed to middle-class prominence, he never looks systematically at sources that might reveal or help to specify that contribution—for example, the discourse of political economy,[16] or the interpretation of the statistical data produced by the national census instituted in 1801.[17] Working from his political sources, Wahrman teases out a dense and tortuous but ultimately plausible account of the emergence of a political discourse

16 Wahrman certainly mentions political economy, but he treats it only episodically: its popularization in the 1820s (pp. 230–33); the place of the middle class in the work of Thomas Malthus (pp. 241–4); and the writings of Thomas Rowe Edmonds (pp. 365–6).

17 The widespread citation and interpretation of census data in the British media of the first half of the nineteenth century and its use in social commentary is being studied by Kathrin Levitan in her University of Chicago dissertation, "Counting and Creating the Nation: The British Census, 1801–1861" (in progress).

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that opportunistically imagined a society centered on the middle class. Let me summarize his findings schematically here.

Composed of three separate moments, the account is marked by a spatial accent; as Wahrman puts it (distinguishing himself from earlier historians of Britain who were passionately interested in how the old word "order" got replaced by the new word "class"), "the emphasis here is on 'middle' rather than on 'class'" (p. 14). As he tells it, the middle class first became widely talked about in Britain in the 1790s, as a result of the sharp political polarization that greeted the news of the French Revolution. At the one extreme was Burke, who detested the Revolution and favored the maintenance of social hierarchy and aristocratic political leadership; at the other extreme was Paine, who embraced the natural rights philosophy of the French revolutionaries and hoped to move English society in a radically egalitarian direction. According to Wahrman, those who wanted to chart a course of moderate reform between these extremes "needed to vindicate the legitimacy and merits of an increasingly unfashionable *political* middle," and they accomplished their rhetorical goal by "an encomiastic emphasis on the *social* middle" (p. 41). Moving the middle ranks of society into the spotlight, they depicted them as the repository of all social virtue, the glue that held society together; and they moreover asserted that the natural political proclivities of the social middle were analogously middling. This discourse seems to have turned on its abstract spatial properties alone. Wahrman observes that its proponents preferred to keep the middle classes vague, declining to identify them by occupation, economic activities, or assets (pp. 55–6, 63).

The decade of the 1790s thus formed the first discrete moment of middle-class language in politics. Not until the 1820s, in the aftermath of the Peterloo massacre of 1819, did the middle class again surface as a highly charged political topos. Since political circumstances had changed, so too had the attributes of the imagined middle class. In the 1790s, when the issue had been what, if anything, Britain would borrow from the French Revolution, the language of the middle class had carried a progressive valence. Accordingly, the chief virtues of the middle class were said to be its independence of mind and its stubborn defense of liberty; the lines of the social map were drawn so that the middle class naturally allied with those beneath it and assumed responsibility for protecting the lower classes from the political encroachment of the upper classes. After Peterloo, the issue was the disorderly conduct of the radical popular movement. Now the imagined middle class, stripped of its earlier independence of mind, could be counted on to side loyally with the establishment. Its chief virtues were its usefulness, respectability and intelligence, and it sought no longer to defend the lower classes but to bring about their moral correction.

The third, last, and most significant political appearance of the language of middle class during the period covered by Wahrman's study occurred in the 1830s,

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when the revolutions on the Continent produced an urgently renewed call for parliamentary reform at home. Under these circumstances the political goal of those who imagined and invoked the middle class was to enact limited reform in the least destabilizing manner possible. They needed, in Wahrman's phrase, "a new social constituency that could justify an adjustment of constitutional arrangements without tampering with constitutional principles" (p. 267). Thus was born the now-familiar historical narrative of the ever-rising middle class. This class had purportedly been gaining strength through its activities in the burgeoning commercial and manufacturing sectors, and its robust condition cried out for commensurate political recognition. The British constitution, which could be simply stretched to accommodate this new historical reality, would emerge intact from the reform. This third imagining of the middle class served as the Whig argument for the Great Reform Bill of 1832. With the passage of that bill, it entrenched itself in British consciousness, subsequently aided by historians of both liberal and Marxist stripe (p. 413). It has been taken for a fact of life ever since, and it is the aim of Wahrman's book to demonstrate its status as "imaginary" (see, e.g., p. 272).

Wahrman's careful, descriptive account of the vicissitudes of the middle class in the political discourse of the period 1790–1840 has an impressive cogency, and the correlation he discerns between political and social middlingness is fascinating. He enters the realm of dubious hyperbole, I think, only when he makes causal claims about the forces that determined the arrival on the British scene of the language of middle class. Foreshadowed in his introduction, those claims are clearly stated later in the book when Wahrman depicts the "growing belief [in the 1820s] in the existence of a newly risen 'middle-class' constituency" as "*driven by* the strong impulse for limited parliamentary reform" (p. 267, my italics). Politics, in other words, creates usable social categories. Wahrman is at pains to acknowledge that social input was not entirely absent from the scene of this particular creation. The decades of the 1810s and 1820s were notable for "what was probably an unprecedented qualitative leap in Britons' awareness of the processes of social change" swirling around them and "in their articulation and comprehension" of what was happening (p. 228). Still, Wahrman will grant only that such awareness lent additional verisimilitude to the narrative of the rising middle class. "Its primary origin and logic remained the political configuration, not the social one" (p. 268).

Wahrman's chapter-long excursus into early nineteenth-century French history clinches this point, at least to its author's satisfaction. There Wahrman maintains—stunningly, in the retrospective light of Maza's book—that the decisive implantation of the language of middle class in France actually *antedated* its decisive implantation in Britain, the former coinciding with the Restoration of 1815, the latter only with the passage of the Great Reform Bill in 1832. Since French

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industrialization lagged so markedly behind the British, Wahrman reads the French experience as showing once again that political circumstances, not social ones, were the crucial, dynamic factor in the discursive birth of the European middle class (pp. 293–4, 297).

For all his assertion, however, Wahrman never *demonstrates* the causal priority of the political over the social; he does not even design his project to try to demonstrate that conclusion. Rather, as noted above, he scrutinizes only political discourse. Nor does he consider what constitutes the political and whether the (purely) political is even a meaningful category. As he acknowledges, the pan-European effect of the French Revolution was precisely to politicize social structure (p. 35). Hence, we might infer, post-1789 political opinions were necessarily and from the start bound up with social perceptions and preferences. To conceptualize the former as initially isolated from the latter, to argue that a "pure" political choice came first and subsequently necessitated a justificatory construction of society, presses an analytical distinction entirely too far.

Both Wahrman and Maza impute a "mythic" status to the nineteenth-century middle class. For Wahrman, it is Roland Barthes's sense of myth that is in play. The British middle class has, in other words, long been perceived as a thoroughly natural phenomenon, the corollary of the unquestioned, presumably objective process of socio-economic growth associated with industrialization; as a result, the highly contingent, political nature of its true invention has been shrouded—that is, until Wahrman undertook the unmasking operation in his book (pp. 18, 376). While Maza, too, cites Barthes's definition of myth as one of the usages relevant to *The Myth of the Bourgeoisie* that forms her title, her discussion leans much more heavily on what could be called Auguste Comte's definition of myth: "an ill-founded belief held uncritically," as she quotes it from the dictionary (p. 12).

For both historians, the mythic nature of the bourgeoisie rests on an epistemological error that likewise needs to be exposed: the categories by which human beings organize the social world are not, they both contend, the necessary products of prior, objective social realities. While I strongly agree with that epistemological intervention—and, like Maza, would happily endorse Wahrman's fine formulation about a "space of possibilities between social reality and its representations"—I think that the less than satisfactory aspects of these books stem from both authors' sense that the most effective way to advance their epistemological program is to substitute a linguistico-political determinism for a socio-economic one. Wanting to break with the old Marxist historiography, both go to the opposite extreme; they take their preferred part for the whole and consequently truncate the social dimension of human life. Maza, to be sure, studies the *social* imaginary, but, in order to sustain her hyperbolic claim about bourgeois non-existence, she is highly selective about its contents; she also avoids

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the social in the form of practices. Indeed, the absence of education from her account seems to stem precisely from her classification of "schooling" as one of the culturally inflected "social *practices*" that is favored for study by social historians but that does not belong to the "social imaginary" that forms the conceptual anchor of her own book (p. 10, my italics). For his part, Wahrman largely avoids not only social practices but also the discourse of the social. The conclusions of both authors apply to the portion of the complex of class that they study; yet they exaggerate those conclusions, asserting their applicability to class as a whole. Thus, "the French bourgeoisie did not exist," or the British belief in a rising middle class was "driven by" politics.

My consideration of these two highly intelligent books suggests the pitfalls of a linguistic (or, for these two authors, linguistico-political) approach to class. Though a vast and indispensable object of inquiry, political language fails to capture the full scope of the concept of class. To be sure, scholarship tends to progress dialectically, benefiting from the replacement of one extreme position by another; and the books under review here have, through their linguistic focus, deepened our understanding of the way class operates in society. But the time for *Aufhebung* in this branch of scholarship has come. I do not have a recipe for achieving that *Aufhebung*. But my analysis of the work of Maza and Wahrman suggests that the path toward the goal is twofold: a broadening of the linguistic dimension of class beyond politics, so that the multitude of non-political, social languages constituting class (e.g. the science of political economy, the discourse of career choice, the language of everyday life that produced the locution *cuisine bourgeoise*) are given their due; and an attention to the social practices that exceed language and that likewise contribute palpably to the constitution of class (e.g. the rituals of schooling, workplace behaviors).

The tripartite scheme of generic definitions of class that I proposed toward the beginning of this essay might provide a useful guide in attempting to capture the full scope of class; indeed, it roughly maps onto the tripartite analysis of components of the social that Maza offered in her introduction but subsequently left undeveloped. The historian of class, I would suggest, should seek a conceptualization that in some manner incorporates all three: the taxonomical sense of class (roughly, Maza's social position), the linguistic sense of class as identity or identity-element (roughly, Maza's social imaginary), and the experiential and embodied sense of class as *habitus* (roughly, Maza's social practices). The advantage of my trio is the diversity it represents with respect to medium and subject position. Taxonomy, which surveys conceptual schemes concerning the component divisions of society and their mutual articulation, is linguistic in medium and described from the vantage point of the external observer; identity is likewise linguistic but is described from within, from the vantage point of the "classed" subject; *habitus* is non-linguistic and is perceived

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from both without and within. In seeking new ways to conceptualize class, it should be kept in mind that the old, now-discarded Marxian position was not as narrow as is sometimes claimed. It included both class-consciousness, or class-for-itself—which can be readily understood as linguistic—and the objective, socio-economic formation of class-in-itself. However contemporary historians sensitized to the creative powers of language choose to construe that "objective" element, the operant definition of class should be at least as rich and embracing as the one left behind.

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