

Public Opinion and the Middle Class

by Francis G. Wilson

I

TWO ancient symbols—public opinion and the middle class—have nearly always been associated in some degree. Public opinion has stood, first of all, for participation in the government of a society. Such participation has raised the issue of the quality of opinion or the quality of the participation in the government of *res populi*. From the time of the Greeks at least, the middle class has been regarded by certain conservatives, or let us say, Aristotelians, as having moderate, intelligent, and balanced opinion. Though public opinion and the middle class idea have been often associated, they have each had different and divergent lines of emergence; different theoretical problems have been presented, and some of this development is to be outlined here. Yet at the tense moments of the eighteenth-century revolution, the French Revolution and its children, they were joined together in close doctrinal union at the height of an historical crisis.

The significance of this doctrinal union between public opinion and the middle class is to be found in other ideas associated with it. These ideas will be referred to as "the associated doctrines." These doctrines make the problematic of the two primary ideas clear, and they illustrate the theoretical force that brought them together at a height of history. Such were the doctrines of progress, parliamentarism, the liberal or anti-Christian conceptions of ethics, and in times of crisis the principle of "dictatorship," which has seemed necessary since the days of the Roman Republic in order to meet the sterner contingencies of politics. For the English, as Donoso Cortés insisted, the dictatorship was included always within the power of Parliament. The Duke of Wellington understood this well in dealing with public disorders.

However, in the less mature parliamentarism of the Continental liberals it was necessary, not only to have a theory of crisis and dictatorship, but also to make some provision in public law, *i.e.*, the state of siege, to enable institutions to surmount their critical moments. The defense of Napoleon III, by some who might well

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be called conservatives, is a recognition of the need of such provisions in public law. Walter Bagehot and Donoso Cortés were both in Paris to watch the progress of the Third Napoleon, and they both looked with considerable favor on the course of events. Said Bagehot, concluding his letters on the *coup d'état* of 1851: "Mazzini sneers at the selfishness of shopkeepers—I am for shopkeepers against him. There are people who think because they are Republican there shall be no more 'cakes and ale.' Aye, verily, but there will though; or else stiffish ginger will be hot in the mouth. Legislative assemblies, leading articles, essay eloquence—such are good—very good,—useful—very useful. Yet they can be done without. We can want them. Not so with all things. The selling of fgs, the cobbling of shoes, the manufacture of nails,—these are the essence of life. And let whoso frameth a Constitution for his country think on these things."¹

Business men and scientists agree on one thing at least: too much interest in religion is bad for trade and for the bureaucratic position of the scientists. The associated doctrines held such a view. There was a vast optimism as to the intelligence of the middle class; in its capacity to express the best of public opinion; and in its willingness to stand for progress in industry, technology, empire, and the more balanced or sensible parties in parliamentary majorities. The proof of the intelligence of the middle class was to be found, it was thought, in the progress of the nineteenth century, and more especially in the commercial and industrial progress of Great Britain. However, the contemporary crisis is an era in which, for the first time since the rise of the idea, there is a general questioning of the inevitability of progress. It is the time of revolution and international war since August, 1914, that has produced the crisis of uncertainty. It suggests that both public opinion and the middle class have passed the zenith of their practical influence and the doctrinal support that they have received from the intellectuals of Western Europe.²

¹ Walter Bagehot, *Literary Studies* (Everyman's Library, 1911), Vol. I, p. 331. See also Juan Donoso Cortés, *Obras Completas*, ed. J. Juretschke (2 vols., Madrid, 1946), for Donoso's letters from Paris.

² Charles A. Micaud has spoken of the sense of guilt of the French intellectuals: "The guilt of the intellectual . . . is first the product of the intellectual's belief that he is a bourgeois by origin and way of life. He must atone for this original sin. He has economic and cultural privileges for which

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England was a model for the idea of public opinion in the nineteenth century. The Continental writer on the subject inevitably had to use material drawn from British experience, simply because of the success of the British Parliament, the British Empire, the British armed forces, the stability of the Crown in the face of European revolutions, and the liberties accorded the subject in the expression of ideas. One might say that the success of the British came to be looked upon by some as the success of the middle class, or that the public opinion of Great Britain was purely and simply the public opinion of the middle class. In any case, many Englishmen considered their country to be a kind of modern realization of the Periclean ideal, the exemplar of progress, political stability, and prosperity, as well as of intellectual and cultural achievement. The British Constitution became the model for conservatives on the Continent, just as English "parliamentarism" became the model for the critic and the liberal. But for the Englishman there was a particular philosophy—the Utilitarian system—that justified the power of public opinion in the emergent parliamentary democracy of Great Britain.

When Jeremy Bentham began writing on politics and ethics he spoke of "the Legislator" very much as the ancients or Rousseau might have spoken of him; the standards of public ethics were not, apparently, to arise from the public opinion of British or any other society, but from Bentham himself. Philosophic Radicalism³ spoke of "the popular sanction." Bentham referred in the 1823 edition of *The Principles of Morals and Legislation* to both the wide use and the French origin of the term "public opinion," though he preferred to use "popular sanction." Even when Bentham and his group moved over to the support of political democracy, it was ap-

he must be forgiven." See "French Intellectuals and Communism," *Social Research*, XXI (Autumn, 1954), 290.

³ English writers contributed the word "radical" to the political vocabulary; "liberal" originated in Spain, it seems, around 1812, and spread rapidly to Western Europe. "Conservatism" was contributed by the French through Chateaubriand around 1818. "Socialism," "communism," as well as other words of this sort, are likewise French contributions. See G. Bastide, "Notes sur les Origines Anglaises de Notre Vocabulaire Politique," *Revue des Sciences Politiques*, 58 (1935), 524ff; Arthur E. Bestor, "The Evolution of the Socialist Vocabulary," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, IX (1948), 259ff.

parent that the public to be trusted was the English middle class, which in England was viewed as the most rational political class that had ever appeared in history. Consciousness of public opinion was, indeed, acute in England from the beginning of the nineteenth century; its organization, its manipulation, its use in politics, and the level of its perceptiveness, were all issues in the English consideration of the issue of political participation.⁴

In the sustained self-examination conducted by British thinkers following the French Revolution, new interpretations of society were proposed. As elsewhere, the struggle between the emergent and conscious conservatism of the new age and the critical, radical, or liberal trend clarified the issue and made inevitable a wider appeal to public opinion by all who considered political questions. In effect, such discussion meant that man's power to shape his own society, his standards of morality, and his ability to create his future were increasingly asserted. In an atmosphere in which the moral world was becoming subject to formal plebiscite, deterministic philosophies had difficulty in retaining their hold. Malthus might propose against Godwin the objective factors that determine the course of history, but neither Malthus nor climatic determinism could be warmly accepted in a day in which the middle class, especially, was being called upon to vote for one moral order against another. Whatever the forces might be which shape history and human character, they could be engineered. Such was the view of men like Robert Owen, but such also were in degree the views of those who lauded the public opinion of Englishmen.

Both the engineering concept of the environment and belief in the reason of men led to a deeper appreciation of Bentham's "popular sanction." But if the radicals and utopians moved ever

⁴ R. L. Hill, *Toryism and the People* (1929), 36, notes that between 1832-1846 the extra-parliamentary political association in England succeeded in mobilizing and regimenting public opinion. As public opinion thus became effective, the possibilities of the political campaign were realized. The reformers at the time of the Reform Bill in 1832 believed in universal suffrage, and to them middle class rule had become the rational ideal. Even James Mill, that great believer in the rationality of man, had contempt for popular movements. See Mill to Brougham, in Alexander Bain, *John Stuart Mill* (1882), 363-364. Robert Owen put some of his faith, as expressed in *The Crisis*, in the new public opinion that was arising in the world. On the influence of public opinion during the early nineteenth century, see Melvin M. Knight, "Liquidating Our War Illusions," *Journal of International Relations*, XII (1922), 485ff.

toward a sharper criticism of political institutions, they did not carry with them that new and powerful group of economists who, in many ways, symbolized for the world the achievements of Britain in industry and commerce. Broadly, the economists favored the mixed constitution, that is, the British system that had gradually taken shape after the Revolution of 1688. There was still at the time a strong tendency to regard the historical and chartered share of the people the proper democratic ingredient in a political system. They resisted, therefore, the ever-widening demand for an extension of the right to vote. Hume, Adam Smith, Malthus, McCulloch and Senior were for a widely extended economic freedom, but they did not propose to extend the same right to the people in politics. For the people were, or could be dangerous, if they had a power in voting that went beyond the established liberties of the British system.⁵ Yet, the democratic idea had been spreading in England since the time of the American Revolution through the labors of Price, Priestly, Cartwright, and others. The right to vote was increasingly argued to be the inalienable right of all, for personality and not property should be the basis of representation. More Englishmen than ever were asking the right to vote in addition to the assurance of civil liberties, such as freedom of the press, meetings, and associations.⁶

⁵ William D. Grampf, "On the Politics of the Classical Economists," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, LXII (1948), 714ff.

⁶ See Elie Halevy, *The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism*, trans. by Mary Morris (1928), 122ff., who stresses John Cartwright's *Take Your Choice* (1776). One may, of course, cite the various reform movements of the time in this connection, such as Spence's agrarian communism, Howard's prison reform movement, Wilberforce's criticism of slavery, and Robert Owen's proposals for the reorganization of human nature and economic society. It was significant, then, that by 1817 Bentham espoused the cause of parliamentary democracy in his *Plan for Parliamentary Reform*. Bentham favored, with the Radicals in general, universal suffrage, annual parliaments, and election by ballot. Bentham wanted secrecy, universality, equality, and annuality of the suffrage.

It is fairly clear that Bentham turned to democracy after he had discovered the existing ruling class was unwilling to accept his proposals for reform. In his *Constitutional Code*, Bentham wanted an omniscient legislator, with no bill of rights, since, if we have the sovereignty of public opinion, nothing should be regarded as definitive. A bill of rights is conservative, and it is against the reforming spirit. He rejected, of course, the idea of a mixed state and the separation of powers.

On the other hand, the pages of *Blackwood's Magazine* from the period immediately after the fall of Napoleon to far into the nineteenth century demonstrate the conservative fear of the new power of public opinion.

In the larger sense, however, Englishmen were becoming more enthusiastic about their public opinion, especially in contrast with other nations. William A. Mackinnon saw the test of civilization in the growth of the middle class, which exhibited particularly rational qualities. But, in turn, it was the British middle class which he took for his example.⁷ The task he set for himself was to answer the question: what is public opinion? And his answer was that public opinion "is a sentiment that depends on the degree of information and wealth, which together may be styled civilization, and also with a proper religious feeling that exists in any community." But the rise of the middle class is the test of the growth of civilization. Because of commerce and manufacturing, England had the greatest middle class, and nowhere else is public opinion as powerful. Now the power of public opinion rises in proportion to its information, proper religious feelings, the facility of communication, and the capital that exists among the individuals who compose the community. In turn, a government becomes liberal in exact proportion to the increase in the power of public opinion. Moreover, the increased use of machinery brings an extension of capital, and thus augments the middle class and the power of opinion. Mackinnon was convinced that machinery changes the relative position of classes by increasing the power of the middle group. But the security of liberal government and liberty (ideas that were not clearly defined) is the strength of what he chooses to call public opinion. By implication at least he seemed to think that only in Protestant England does one find a society as it ought to be. Catholic societies are simply lumped with all the other backward areas of the world. "Public opinion may be said to be that sentiment on any given subject which is entertained by

Rationality was not the primary quality of the masses, and yet the Tories were called on to pay more attention to the power of opinion in politics. Isaac Disraeli praised the ability of Elizabeth I in guiding public opinion. "This was the time of first beginning in the art of guiding public opinion. Ample volumes, like those of Fox, powerful organs of the feelings of the people were given them. . . . In the revelations of the Verulamian philosophy, it was a favourite axiom with its founder, that we subdue Nature by yielding to her." See Isaac Disraeli, *Amenities of Literature*, new ed. by his son Benjamin Disraeli (1867), 376, 380.

⁷ William A. Mackinnon, *On the Rise, Progress and Present State of Public Opinion in Great Britain and Other Parts of the World* (2nd ed., 1928), *passim*.

the best informed, most intelligent, and most moral persons in the community, which is gradually spread and adopted by nearly all persons of any education or proper feeling in a civilized state."⁸

Negatively, Mackinnon ventured that popular clamor is not public opinion. Clamor is strong as the lower classes are ignorant and numerous in comparison with other strata in the community. And one might easily see that he thought popular clamor had less power in England than in any country of Europe. He did not believe, considering the framework of his definition, there was any public in the ancient republics, and it was, therefore, unfruitful to discuss them. English history is, thus, the greatest illustration of the growth of public opinion. With improved means of communication, the spread of education, a free press, and the development of transportation, public opinion emerges. Liberty and freedom increase and governments become more liberal and popular.⁹ Prejudice and superstition vanish before proper religious sentiments, information, and civilization. Magna Carta attained little result because there was no middle class, and the rise of the middle class in England explains the acceptance of the Reformation. Capitalism, commerce, and manufactures arose, likewise, because of the spread of the Reformed religions. Writing before the Reform Bill, he insisted that the House of Commons does represent the public opinion of the community more effectually than if it were elected by universal suffrage and by ballot. The Commons represents the property of the country, that is, the middle and upper classes. Universal suffrage would simply substitute the lower classes and popular clamor for public opinion. As the lower orders rise into the middle class, they will share in the existing representation of public opinion. In England, all persons share an equality of opportunity, and all classes are open to the talent and industry of each individual. Hence, any conflict between classes is impossible. Still, a larger upper class would provide added security for the British Constitution, the most perfect ever contrived by man.

England has been fortunate while the Continent lags far behind. With the rise of a middle class, like that of the British, a new

⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁹ The similarity of these ideas to those of Tönnies, who found public opinion in the commercial and contractual *Gesellschaft* may be readily noted.

public opinion will foster peace between nations. The rise and fall of nations may be traced in the rise and fall of the middle classes, for when the nourishment of the middle class fails the power of a society declines. Despotism emerges from an expanding lower class. Moreover, if the French lower orders had been Protestant, the excesses of the Revolution would not have been so great, since there would have been more moral restraint. French public opinion was not sufficiently strong to withstand the lower class.

James Mill and John Stuart Mill can, however, be regarded as the great formulators of the Radical and liberal view in England. It was a view that demanded, indeed, the freedom and education of public opinion. Perhaps the Philosophic Radicals believed as much as any other group ever has in the rationality of man, and in the ease with which rational political principles and practice may be attained. It is said that James Mill converted Bentham to political liberalism in about 1808, and then to Philosophic Radicalism. But the summation of James Mill's position may be found in his article on Government in 1820 for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Man can be rational, and if he is let alone in the pursuit of his rational ends, a free society can be achieved. John Stuart Mill records that his father had such faith in reason that he considered all would be gained if the whole population were taught to read, if all kinds of opinions were addressed to it, and if it could through the suffrage nominate a legislature to give effect to the opinions it adopted. If a new legislature should abandon the representation of the customary class interests, it would reflect the general interests, honestly, and with sufficient wisdom.¹⁰ James Mill was opposed to the power of the landowning families, and he favored the middle class. But John Stuart Mill was concerned with limiting the power of political groups. His *Representative Government* solved the problem by insisting on legislative control of the executive, and on the establishment of an identity of interest between the representatives and the country by short terms and by an enlarged suffrage. He proposed a rationalization of the modern system of democracy and the power of public opinion that is, in general, accepted in our times. His essential proposition seemed to be, not that any particular expression of public opinion will be rational,

¹⁰ J. S. Mill, *Autobiography* (1873), Ch. IV.

but that the trend is in the direction of progress.

In John Stuart Mill's *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive* one may find much of the credo of modern social science. But in it, too, one may find an argument for the long-run trend toward progress, a progress that can justify an immediate and broad faith in the right of all individuals to have a share in political decisions. Mill must not be accused, however, of having too much of an immediate confidence in men, nor in having any unlimited faith in the justice of the majority. And in *Liberty*, he said: "Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians. . . ." Circumstances must conspire with ideas to bring them into a rational and scientific system. Men are stupid and selfish as individuals and stodgy as a mass.¹¹ Moreover, in his idea of representative government, there should be ample safeguard against the tyranny of the majority, a principle he drew from Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, as he recounts in his *Autobiography*. Still, the principle of a science of society prevails. The hope of the growth of rationalism and the justification of the new system must rest finally on the progress of society through the stages of August Comte, from the religious to the metaphysical, and from the metaphysical to the positive or the scientific period.

Having rejected the concept of the historical cycle as found in Vico, Mill took instead the idea of a trajectory of progress. Progress is, in the long view, a linear march of men toward a rational perception of the interests and the laws of society. Properly understood, history does afford empirical laws for society. Progress, under this view, is a kind of rational necessity, though great men may determine the celerity of the progressive movement. It is, in the end, the intellectual element that is predominant in bringing about progress. "The intellectual changes are the most conspicuous agents in history. . . ." History must be either cycle or progress, and Mill, like his Utilitarian associates, took progress.

But A. D. Lindsay has raised this question: can a public opinion as intolerant as Mill describes it be induced to pass tolerant laws without itself being converted to tolerance? Such laws, in

¹¹ *On Liberty*, Ch. iii; *Dissertations and Discussions*, II, 269, "The Claims of Labor."

¹² See A. D. Lindsay's introduction to the Everyman edition of John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism, Liberty, and Representative Government*, xviii-xx

Mill's theory, might be the work of an enlightened minority; or, even if the public is intolerant, it may be convinced that intolerant laws will defeat its own ends. There are limits on the power of the state, especially when one realizes that coercion is often a useless and a dangerous instrument in affairs of the human spirit. So Lindsay concludes that the *Representative Government* combines Mill's enthusiasm for democratic government with the most pessimistic apprehensions as to what public opinion is likely to be.

In *Utilitarianism* we are assured that the influences working for the improvement of the human mind are on the increase: these tendencies will generate greater feelings of unity and happiness with the rest of the community. But *On Liberty* tells us that "the majority have not yet learnt to feel the power of the government as their power, or its opinions their opinions. When they do so, individual liberty will probably be as much exposed to invasion from the government, as already it is from public opinion." The doctrine of liberty, Mill argued, applies only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties; the tendency of the modern world is "to stretch unduly the powers of society over the individual, both by the force of opinion and even by that of legislation." People tend to "like in crowds," the mind bows to the customary, and mediocrity is ascendant. Even in England where the public is primarily the middle class, public opinion is still the opinion of the mass, "that is to say, collective mediocrity."

Mill's argument for liberty tends to become, thus, a searching criticism and a condemnation of much that has been prevalent in modern society. Liberty was in increasing danger; public opinion seemed to be all-powerful; and the public was "an overruling majority." By the Hare system of minority representation Mill believed that "the very elite of the country" could be brought into Parliament in order that the basic tendencies of public opinion could be checked. Since mediocrity is implied in an extensive franchise, the system of proportional representation might reverse the trend of the times. "The modern regime of public opinion," said Mill in *Liberty*, "is, in an unorganized form, what the Chinese education and political systems are in an organized; and unless individuality shall be able successfully to assert itself against the yoke, Europe, notwithstanding its noble antecedents and its pro-

fessed Christianity, will tend to become another China." Yet the defense of representative government is strong; it educates the people, and Mill's enthusiasm for a common and general participation in the affairs of government seems unstinted.

Among the significant treatments of public opinion during the last century, one must rank high the labors of James Bryce. Much was said of public opinion by Englishmen; Coleridge, Carlyle, Bagehot, Acton, H. S. Maine, and others might point to the immaturity of public opinion; they might urge caution, and show hope for the future emergence of popular intelligence; but they did not write extended treatises on the nature of public opinion, such as one may find in the pages of Bryce's *American Commonwealth*.¹³

For Bryce, a central theme was the sovereignty of public opinion in a democracy, especially in the United States. He viewed that sovereignty then with no fear; rather, he welcomed it and saw in it one of the foundations of American greatness. Yet in Bryce one can discover the distinction that in subsequent years has so troubled the students of public opinion, the distinction between opinion and "real" opinion. There is little individuality in American opinion, Bryce thought; because of the lack of substance in opinion, it is rather sentiment than thought that the masses can contribute. The upper classes know their interests better than the lower groups, where sentiment predominates. Though aristocrats furnish the people with ideas, nearly all the great political causes have made their way first among the middle or humbler classes. The trouble with mere sentiment, as Bryce saw, was its passive character, its inability to spring to the leadership of democratic movements. What leaders know of public opinion is, therefore, largely sentiment. And "the longer public opinion has ruled, the more absolute is the authority of the majority likely to become, the less likely are energetic majorities to arise, the more politicians are likely to occupy themselves, not in forming opinion, but in discovering and hastening to obey it." Thus, in the United States, where there is no formal ruling class, public opinion has as much power as it has ever had, even as the citizens in the Assembly at Athens or Syracuse.

¹³ See the author's article, "James Bryce on Public Opinion: Fifty Years Later," *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, III (1939), 420-435.

During the last century, those like Bryce who saw the middle class as the vehicle for the sovereignty of the "proper" public opinion, believed, likewise, that the fundamental issues of society had been resolved. There was to be no conflict on fundamentals in the future; indeed, it would be the age of internal peace and international security. Bryce was unimpressed with the forebodings of Tocqueville, and he could not accept the prophetic analysis of Alexander Hamilton. Until late in his life, he seemed unaware of the portentous issue of propaganda, especially by governments. To Bryce, the newspapers were the chief organs of public opinion, and papers in the United States contained "more domestic political intelligence than any, except perhaps two or three of the chief English journals." The American press served the expression of public opinion and subserved the formation of opinion better than did the press of any part of the European Continent. Our newspapers, he insisted, are above the level of the machine politicians. While in Europe the public meeting, discussion, and conversation are more important than in the United States, our general habit of reading papers makes this less necessary. After World War I Bryce discovered propaganda. The press came to be viewed as an agency of propaganda, rather than as the true mirror of public opinion. And it was in international relations that he came most to fear the press.

The discovery of propaganda and the reality of class conflict, especially as a result of the Russian Revolution and the rise of socialism, came too late in his life for him to examine its consequences for middle-class public opinion. To have understood the full force of these two political realities would have meant the desertion of much of his nineteenth-century optimism about the future of democratic government. Neither Tocqueville, nor Mill, nor Bryce could ever realize that the minority can be even more tyrannical than the majority, though Bryce felt that in America the majority was never the tyrant that Tocqueville believed it to be.

III

In the most optimistic of nineteenth-century thought the perfection of the British Constitution was associated with the perfection of middle-class opinion. The middle classes were aligned with the aristocracy, and both were allied against the lower orders of

society, which were excluded from participation in the political system under the mixed constitution. In Greek theory, however, the middle class was a balance between extremes; and the mixed constitution was, in Aristotle, a system that was possible of attainment. The political balance was between oligarchy and democracy, the political energies of the rich and the poor. Nor should one confuse the philosophical perfection of the "mean state" in Aristotle's *Ethics* with the average city or the middle range in the possession of wealth. The whole political community might attain some greater ethical perfection, as indicated in a mean state of virtue, but it would not imply that the middle class had any monopoly on virtue. For virtue is something in which all might share, and the man of perfect virtue was outside of any class in an economic sense; he was the realization of philosophic perfection.

Following the French Revolution, however, there was for a time a passionate admiration and laudation of the middle class. None were quite sure just who the middle classes were, but somehow the English Constitution both before and after the Reform Bill of 1832 gave the world the model of balance, mixture, and the attainment of a middle-class society that was increasingly prosperous and enlightened. That time has passed—the day of middle class perfection is gone—but its sincerity and its hope for progress were deeply real to the minds of another generation. The British Constitution stood to the European of the day as the model of mixture, stability, and of the proper amount of popular participation to be allowed in government. In such an atmosphere, the attempt to restrict the suffrage to the middle class was also an attempt to preserve the mixture and balance of the Constitution. It was with Mackinnon the defense of the British system and the condemnation of any extension of the right of suffrage to the working class. It was a theory of alliance between the aristocracy and the middle class that he had in mind, for the government was a joint enterprise between them. It was a doctrine of moderation, of political perfection, and almost the perfection of the British middle class itself.

Perhaps it is the principle of moderation that is the element of historical continuity between the ancient world and the modern. Social stability, moderation, the middle class (which implies a wide

distribution of wealth), and the mixed or balanced constitution, have marched through the pages of doctrine from ancient times to the present. Aristotle's polity was not a democracy in his view, because the people did not alone have an unrestricted supreme power. The modern American democracy is rather like the Aristotelian polity or balanced constitution of the city. Aristotle sought to base his moderation on the general distribution of wealth, and the restriction of the numbers of the very rich and the very poor. Yet moderation in politics requires more than a mere distribution of wealth; it is not merely a question of economics and politics. Ultimately, moderation for the ancient world, as for every generation, must be a question of virtue and reason, as Cicero saw when he summarized the philosophy of previous generations. The Ciceronic *res publica* was to be built on the mixture and balance of the Roman Constitution, but it was still to be a republic of reason and virtue; it was again a matter of philosophic moderation as the foundation for a political arrangement of offices.¹⁴ Can we not see also the virtue of moderation as the principle of St. Thomas' mixture and justice in the constitution? Yet, one can hardly find the middle class in St. Thomas, for virtue, reason and law are broader and more fundamental than any class; they transcend all classes, and they deny the sovereignty of any class, since they affirm the sovereignty of law and of people who have certain qualities of intellect and will. Though one must show responsibility in the ordering of his wealth, still the mere distribution of wealth is not going to achieve justice in the state that lacks a Christian character. Without just individuals, there will be no moderation in the social personality. Moreover, virtue and reason, not mere class, would be the foundation for any commendable political opinions, and for the popular political participation that inevitably stands forth in the Thomistic conception of government.

It was, let us say, frankly a Thomistic balance and a Christian system of moderation that Richard Hooker sought in England at the end of the sixteenth century. It was at this time he rejected the excesses of the Puritan movements, the mass and Gnostic movements of revolution that would first reform the church and then

¹⁴ See Cicero, *De Officiis*, trans. by Walter Miller (1913), I, xl, 142ff. for a discussion of "moderation." Moderation and temperance are frequently discussed by Cicero.

overturn the state. Hooker wanted to turn to the professional classes, not just the shopkeepers, many of whom happened to be Puritans. Instead of shopkeepers he would turn to the lawyers, to the universities, and to the well-trained clergy, for sanity in ideology and for the support of the Constitution. Moderation would come, here, from the classes of skill and virtue, the professional and functional classes, and not merely from those who stood in wealth between the rich and the poor. And writers today have discovered Hooker to be the founder of British conservatism.¹⁵ Surely, it is the defense of the mixed constitution, the moderation of the educated, the rationality of the Anglican clergy, and the service of the professions, rather than of a mere middle class that gave him his claim to be a conservative. To Hooker, the Roman republican ideal would not be strange; he might with Cicero look to its restoration, but also to its reincarnation in the Constitution of the Tudor period, or the system of the Elizabethan Settlement.

In the end, this conclusion can be reached: the search for moderation, as shown in the literature of politics, is too broad for the middle class. The search for moderation includes all men, from the philosophers of the ancient world to those of the renaissance, but not to the immoderate Jacobins of the age of liberalism. When one searches for moderation in politics, he may well defend the mixture and balance of the constitution; he may well defend a census for the suffrage, but he cannot remain contented with the middle class, either in the liberal formulation of the ideal or with the middle class as it has been exemplified in history.

Indeed, the seeker for moderation in politics and in public opinion may well join with some of the socialists in their classical excesses when they rejected the middle classes both high and petty. Aristocrats and proletarians have denounced the middle class from the time of its modern emergence to social influence; the aristocrats, because the bourgeoisie lacked culture, a fine sense of responsibility, and moderation in politics; and the socialists, like Karl Kautsky, because the middle class men were the victims of all political or ideological absurdities. It is just as the Communists say today: the middle class people are Fascists at heart. Christians often say the middle class people are the epitome of greed, and

¹⁵ Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind* (1953), 6, 18, 33.

they have, in the hardness of their hearts, no charity. The ancients let the middle class stand between those who are natural or normal participants in the class struggle, but they did not assume it was the function of the bourgeoisie to rule. One can accept the historic theory of balance in the constitution, as Polybius did, without being committed to the sovereignty of a class, middle or otherwise. Let us seek for moderation, for the constitutional ideal; let us recognize elements in a social structure that exhibit moderation and competence in opinion. The problem is to find such elements of a social structure, and to determine which of them come closer to practicing the ideal one may have for public policy. But it should be remembered that the middle class, or any "class," can never be more than just a part of the state, while public opinion is by definition a universal idea.

The middle class in literature is, of course, far from the complexities of a situation. It is in its literary form a typical liberal concept of the aggregate or group, a statistical character, which takes no account of the existential. It knows no individuals, but it characterizes a great mass of them without individual differentiation. It is social rather than existential. The middle class in England that the Utilitarians, the Bagehots, the Mackinnons and many others discovered was the middle class of the eighteenth century. It was a time of expanding empire and the rise of new social types, while the theory of balance and mixture in the Constitution was discovered to have existed for generations. De Lolme and Blackstone may be called to witness, as well as Hume and the classical economists. Students have listed them, the new types and the new middle class, that was universalized and idealized in the nineteenth century during its short reign, that is, down to the wars and disasters of the twentieth century. And the types were more than shopkeepers who were used to symbolize lamely the England of the middle class.

A professional group is not a mere statistical conception, adopted for methodological purposes. Such a group is an observable fact in any society, and it is the kind of group on which a pluralistic theory of social organization can be built. Yet in the abstract, the discussion of the "middle class" suggests the statistical conception rather than the total and observable social fact. May

not one say that a fatal weakness of the whole middle class theory is that it has always been statistical and that as a "class" it has not been such a group one might use to construct a pluralistic theory of human society? Moreover, it is easy to confuse the useful or mechanic professions, and those based on the *artes liberales* with a class, or the statistical aggregate called a class, such as the middle class. It is obvious, also, that when the ancient writers distinguished the "useful" occupations from those based on knowledge, such as the labors of a gentleman, they were not then thinking of the middle class, which was essentially and merely a statistical notion of the distribution of wealth. The scholar who included among his students the public benefactors was above and beyond a simplified class allegiance, a notion so characteristic of our time. Inevitably, criticism of the shopkeeper, the merchant, or the industrialist leads to a rejection of the middle conception of society.¹⁶

In the England of the eighteenth century there were adventurers, philosophers, economists, literary men, merchants or shopkeepers, industrial leaders or the members of management as we would now say, journalists and the periodical writers, bureaucrats or the civil servants, clubmen, the Methodists, and Freemasons. Some were approved here and others there, but hardly could the opinion of all of them agree or be approved by others. The recognition of the function in social life of these groups led, quite naturally, to class collaboration rather than to an accentuation of class conflict. Collaboration meant in turn moderation in politics, and a rejection of the mass movements for the terrestrial salvation of all men without distinction or discrimination.¹⁷ Each of these might be approved or disapproved separately, but one could not effectively throw them all together into what some would call a statistical middle class. One group might fit into the historic Constitution

¹⁶ Cicero, *De Officiis*, I, xlii, 150ff; I, xlv, 155. T. R. Malthus may be cited as one who was both friendly and critical of the middle class. He was critical, for example, of merchants and industrialists. See Richard B. Simons, "T. R. Malthus on British Society," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XVI (January, 1955), 64-65. To argue that the middle class should "rule" society is, no doubt, as fallacious as arguing that the working class should be sovereign. A conservative doctrine finds a place for both, and extends to both a share in political power.

¹⁷ See Mario Hernández Sánchez-Barba, "Los Fundamentos Sociológicos del Imperialismo Histórico Británico (1765-1786)," *Revista de Estudios Políticos*, No. 76 (July-August, 1954), 61-113.

more easily than others; one group might show more political moderation than others. But it is certain that leadership and primacy of function did not of necessity go to a business man, a manufacturer, or to another group of any kind just as a matter of course.

One can say, it would seem, that the defense of the mixed constitution and the role assigned to public opinion in it, is different from a defense simply considered of the middle class. The mixed constitution goes far back into history, before the rise of anything like a modern middle class group. The mixture of the Roman Constitution, moreover, does not resemble the arrangements of the Greek city state, where a balance between oligarchy and the *hoi polloi* was sought. The Greek conception of a middle class was an ideal to be sought, rather than the recognition of a social fact in political organization. The balance in the city constitution was different from the Roman, and from the British and American systems of mixture and check and balance, established for the preservation of moderation in politics. Neither is it possible to say that a middle class, noted for its late eighteenth-century revolutionary inclinations, could be relied on to preserve mixture, balance, moderation, or any degree of political serenity. The primary search has been for moderation and competence in public opinion, or rather a virtuous and free public opinion; and the idea that the middle class would provide such opinion was only hypothesis rather than social fact. That public opinion might be restrained by a complicated constitutional arrangement was obvious. But it was not certain that such arrangements accorded with the wishes of a middle class. A mixed constitution may assist in the expression of restraint, competence, moderation, and order in popular participation. Such qualities, however, must rest finally on the educability of men. They must rest on the assumption that individuals may be taught virtue and reasonableness, as Socrates, Aristotle, the Stoics, and the Christians have believed.

IV

We may say today there is a crisis in the middle class; and if we consider the middle class as an economic group, there is and has been one indeed. We say there is a crisis in government by public opinion; and if we consider dictatorship, or the waning of moderation and democratic techniques in government, there is in-

deed. But whether the crisis of public opinion and the crisis of the middle class is the same crisis is another issue. The crisis may mean the final separation of the sometimes coinciding evolutions of public opinion and the middle class. A restoration of freedom in government may not restore the idea of a middle class society as a social ideal, and the restoration of some form of middle class may not in fact restore the mixed or balanced constitution in its historical form.

A revolutionary bourgeoisie once created the symbols of revolutionary progress, and the sovereignty of the class; another revolution by the proletariat, which tried to overthrow the middle class at the moment of its triumph, has now, no doubt destroyed the promise of the middle class theory of society. Revolution today stands against the middle class, and it would destroy the constitutional system that the triumphant bourgeoisie learned to love,—the balanced constitution modified by the parliamentary system of responsible government. The crisis raises questions about the liberal illusion of the free market system, and the free competition of any kind of ideas, including those of the contemporary conspirators. The revolution suggests a Hobbesian concentration of power, the loss of balance and civil rights, and in turn the loss of moderation in the massacres and forced labor of the modern dictatorship. Into a new system of political illusion, in which the middle class plays little or no part, has come the principle of equality established by law, and a conformity in idea under a benevolent civil service that goes beyond anything appropriate to an earlier theory of the middle class.¹⁸

In retrospect, the defense of the middle class appears a transitional stage that has passed more quickly than many other political ideas that have been put into modern practice. The very defense of the "middle class" implied another class that might seize its political power. If not this, then the substitution of unpolitical functional groups where forceful opinion on other than purely professional matters is difficult to generate. In other words, such groups follow the leadership of the "political class" on the assumption that their own status is recognized.

What, then, can be the relation of the middle class and public opinion, when ideas or symbols have been radically changing dur-

¹⁸ Bertrand de Jouvenel, *The Ethics of Redistribution* (1951).

ing the last forty years of revolution and war? Public opinion is ceasing to be the rational ideal of reforming liberals or utilitarians; instead, it is becoming a series of symbols directed at the individual by the techniques of mass communication. Liberal intellectuals once turned to public opinion, as did the Utilitarians of the last century. But today it seems increasingly clear that the intellectuals fear public opinion, try to destroy the potential leaders of the masses, and believe that government should control the media of general communication. It is mass communication usually in close agreement with the government, especially if such means of communication are owned by the government and run by the political class. Propaganda is directed at the mass man, the ordinary man, the man of the lonely crowd, in which control may be highly oligarchical. People think less of the middle class these days, and more of the mass man who has mass propaganda directed at him through mass communication by a political oligarchy.

Moreover, the middle class is ceasing to be the wealth producing class that it was once at the onset of industrialization. Instead of business men and owners of property, the middle class is becoming a group of people engaged in the professions, seeking government contracts and employment, and in various ways trying to assure themselves of security in old-age. The poverty of the broad world is encroaching on the wealthier political systems, and in the process the middle class as a propertied class is finding its position weakened, or the future solution of its problems increasingly uncertain. Production and the common man is the symbol of the future, not the rational sovereignty of the middle class.¹⁹

If one may say the middle class theory of public opinion has been given unhealable wounds by the new revolutionary movements that use the techniques of mass communication to establish or to stabilize their own power, we may say also that the political idea which fostered such a theory of public opinion in the last century is now in full decay in most of the world. What is meant is that the idea of balance, of Attic moderation, of restraint in the action of government, and of the mixed constitution, is passing also. The new revolution is against the "parliament" as an ideal

¹⁹ See by way of further analysis, Alfred Sauvy, "On the Relation Between Domination and the Numbers of Men," *Diogenes*, No. 3, Summer, 1953, pp. 31ff.

of discussion, and against the transmission of the sum of political power on the outcome of a division in the House of Commons. It is commonly said that European intellectuals are against both capitalism and parliamentarism. The parliament itself has represented a multiclass system, in which there was some balance in the divergent interest groups, and some compromise directed under the art and skill of the politicians. There could be no sovereignty of class in the theory of the mixed constitution and its technical symbols, the check and balance system and the two-house legislature. Our critical days suggest then, not only the failure of the middle class theory, but also the failure of the idealized parliament of the nineteenth century. Socialism as a whole has proposed that the power of the middle class be destroyed, and in its stead it has promised the dominance of the workers, under new political leaders.²⁰ Here is the end of balanced government as the expression of public opinion, and as the just expression of the mind of the common man.

A new formula of life is, thus, emerging against the old theory of a universalized middle class, which was the carrier of intelligence in public opinion and the sustainer of the parliamentary order. Public opinion as the expression of the middle class failed, just as the middle class, with its classical liberalism, failed to retain the loyalty of the masses of men for the new economic order and the parliament. Once the sovereignty of public opinion meant the middle class, the free market economy, and the parliament; but it does not, nor has it since the great revolutions of the West began in August, 1914. When the nineteenth-century middle classes began rising to power, it was a rebellion against the religious principle of the universality of morality, which was in its theory always more important than any particular class relation, because eternal life would depend on its observance. Before the emergence of the transitory sovereignty of the middle class, there was an ideal of functional groups which the French revolutionary leaders sought to destroy. The individual was governed by groups in which he functioned, and the groups were governed in turn by political society. The modern revolution seems to be approaching something like the older feudal system: the individual will be a member of a

²⁰ See G. D. H. Cole, *A History of Socialist Thought* (2 vols., 1953-1954), *passim*.

group (not a potential member of a middle class), and the group will govern in some degree, while the state governs the group. Perhaps this should be called the "new middle class" system, or perhaps it should not, but that some such arrangement seems to be suggested by the dimly perceptible outlines of the future is as clear as it can be.

Public opinion is weakened and has perhaps passed the peak of its influence; the middle class is weakened in many sections of the world in the decline of the parliament and the free market as the generator of just prices. Instead, the functional group seems to be the sovereign of the future. So the issue becomes again the freedom of groups in society, as it has been in the times of the French and Russian revolutions. The Jacobinical and total democracy would deny pluralism in order to have society itself completely and totally dominated by the state. Here is the context in which freedom may or may not grow, and it is the context in which public opinion must be generated in its course toward the government, toward influencing the conduct of political affairs. Intermediate bodies, as Tocqueville says, played an important role in expressing the meaning of the individual to the state; and again there may be emphasis on the intermediate group, embedded in the structure of society, over against the state which may or may not grant freedom to any group.

Balance within a government may be preserved, and the mixed constitution may continue to be a symbol of the conservative spirit in the preservation of liberty, but we may return to Polybius rather than to Aristotle for its defense, and to the Stoic and universal virtue of Cicero rather than to the Aristotelian "mean state." We may well preserve liberty by the preservation of a Christian, rather than a liberal doctrine of the nature of man; we may forget the middle class theory of public opinion, seeking moderation in both groups and their leaders instead. Progress, too, may be re-interpreted to take account of the moral responsibilities of the individual, as well as the material advances of industrial and urban society. Freedom may be preserved in the liberty of the social group, rather than in the dominance of a class. Freedom may, thus, mean local and group autonomy; it may mean subsidiarity, rather than the centralization of power.

V

Let us indicate some possible conclusions. (1) In an age of mass communication, the ideal of "middle class communication" can be little more than a kind of reactionary aspiration. It is an effort to retain a nineteenth-century belief in the rightful rulership of the middle class. Indeed, the whole theory of generalized and democratic education rejects the idea of a monopoly of political intelligence and political sovereignty in the middle ranges of economic society.

(2) Balanced government as a middle class government seems to be on the way out with the rise of mass communication, the proletarian movement, and the resurgence of Christian social theory. Group structure, or free corporate life in a free society, is yet an ideal; group structure is hardly strong enough today to control the new bureaucratic state. Yet it is here that the future of balance and moderation is to be sought.

(3) The doctrines associated with middle class theories of public opinion are strikingly weakened in the present condition of society. With the shadow of fission warfare hanging over whole nations, the principle of progress seems more in question than it has since its formulation two hundred years ago. Parliaments have in many cases failed completely and in others their inability to deal with pressing questions had led to the view that "parliamentarism" is unsuited to the present day. Utilitarian and pragmatic ethics do not inspire human hope as they once did, and whether a Christian theory of the middle class is at all possible remains very much in doubt. Middle class theory is, in the end, a moderate but aristocratic theory of morals which comports ill with the duties of charity to all men. Nor does the barren idea of "the human animal" seem suitable to a continuing view of progress and parliamentary or party life. It is precisely in ages of trouble and disaster that we can most clearly see more than mere animality in the human race.²¹

²¹ Of course, the idea of material progress is still central in liberal thought. When Henry R. Luce spoke at the fortieth anniversary dinner of the *New Republic* in Washington, D. C., November 17, 1954, he said, among other things: "One thing clearly foreseeable in the future of the Republic of the human race is an immense increase in the world's wealth and standard of living. Even to call it an Age of Plenty may soon seem old-fashioned. Could there be any such thing as the Age of Too Much? . . . As for the rest of the

(4) The public opinion ideal and objective of the future would seem to be a free mass opinion, rather than a free middle class opinion. The history of the century suggests that utilitarian and pragmatic ethics are highly unlikely to attain any such goal, for they cannot even preserve the middle classes or the social structures that gave such ideas power in modern society. Yet a Christian ethic may be capable of such an achievement, for such an ethic would foster autonomous groups in social life, and correspondingly a free group opinion which could be the foundation of a free mass opinion. It would be the opinion of groups, however, in a reconstructed society, in which the principle of subsidiarity would find significant expression. In the balance of free groups there may be found the "new mixed constitution" of a limited state; here one may, perhaps, find the moderation and sanity in public opinion which it was once thought would be the office of the middle class to provide.

Much hangs in the balance. There is little "moderation at white heat" in our Western world. The middle class in its historic form, and public opinion in its middle-class-liberal version seem to have passed their commanding heights of influence. New social structures, however, are not mature in the free world, and hence one awaits as well the newer forms of public opinion and its system of expression. The modern bureaucracy can overwhelm all before it and military necessity is like a flood that knows neither bank nor dike. The middle class that the Philosophic Radicals thought of as leaders of public opinion is not highly regarded; in its newer forms, it is often almost unpolitical, being interested in security, and a prey to all of the fears of the salaried classes of the urban commercial and industrial system.²² Groups approve of the views of the professions, and we may consider the professional men, the civil servant, and the ranges of management, the newer middle class, if the term can still be applied with any propriety. Though Tocqueville saw that the American middle class was essentially religious, his strictures on the bourgeoisie in Europe were savage;

world, most of it is a wretchedly poor place; yet it surely cannot escape the prospering impact of an American Age of Plenty." Reprint from the *New Republic*, December 6, 1954.

²² C. Wright Mills, *White Collar* (1951).

it could not be accused of charity or of social generosity in any form.²³ Both the proletarians and the aristocrats have damned it as unimaginative, harsh, and greedy. Charles Dickens in his *A Christmas Carol* had love disappear when "business" entered in, and his middle-class men are surely no model for the rest of us. The Christian may look at the history of the European middle class and say: "when the middle class comes in our God departs."

²³ See J. P. Mayer, *Alexis de Tocqueville*, trans. by M. M. Bozman and C. Hahn (1940), 14, 134ff. Tocqueville's judgment on the French middle class was expressed most forcefully in the early pages of the *Souvenirs*. One of the elements in the prophetic quality of Tocqueville's mind was that as a conservative he could yet reject the middle class. Here is the source of fruitful conservatism.

A Plea for Political History

by Raymond P. Stearns

"I am not a politician, and my other habits are good." This statement appeared almost twenty years ago in a serious book about *The American Political Scene*,¹ and it reflects a widespread opinion in the United States today. The term "politician" widely connotes evil, corruption, and crass self-aggrandizement at public expense. Politics is frequently looked upon as a disreputable profession; and political history is often considered dull, meaningless, and insignificant, especially when compared with economic history, intellectual history, or that unpredictable mosaic called social history. This state of things appears curious in view of these facts: that government plays a larger role in our lives than ever before and that politics is the process by means of which governmental policies are formulated. Indeed, it might well be argued that it is a regrettable and even an indefensible state of things if, as seems likely, "big government" is here to stay.

The depreciation of political history² is more than a mere reaction against the old narrow belief of the disciples of E. A. Freeman that "history is past politics and politics is present history";³ it is more than the baneful effects of "progressive" educationalists who would push aside nearly all history in order to "commit a social science";⁴ and it is more than the result of the competition of new disciplines, such as sociology, social psychology, anthropology, and the like—although all of these have been contributory factors. The depreciation of political history is a consequence of crises through which historiography, including the philosophy of history, has been passing during the past century or so. Some of these crises have originated within the study of history itself and others have arisen outside of history. Taken together, they have often confused historians so that they misdirected their efforts, misconstrued their

¹ J. T. Slater, "The Politician and the Voter," in E. B. Logan (ed.), *The American Political Scene* (New York, 1936), p. 90.

² Depreciation of political history is more evident in the lower schools than at the college level, although in the latter it appears to be growing, with economic, intellectual, and social history gaining the ascendancy.

³ E. A. Freeman, *The Methods of Historical Study* (London, 1866), p. 44.

⁴ In *Harper's Magazine*, Vol. 194, No. 1165 (June, 1947), pp. 508-509.