

**Aristotle, Diderot, Liberalism, and the Idea of ‘Middle Class’:
A Comparison of Two Contexts of Emergence of a Metaphorical Formation**

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Abstract:

This article seeks to contribute to the history of the idea of ‘middle class’. Fundamental to Aristotle’s philosophy, the idea of ‘middle class’ disappeared from the repertoire of political thinking for centuries, until it re-emerged shortly before the French Revolution. Denis Diderot was one of the first modern philosophers to develop such notion as part of a philosophical system. Later, the *doctrinaire* liberals made use of a similar system as part of their political discourse. In this article, the modern notion of ‘middle class’ will be compared with that of Aristotle. The similarities between the two contexts of emergence – the crisis of Ancient Greek democracy and that of the French *Ancien Régime*– will be explored. The comparison of these two formative moments may cast new light on the meaning and political function of that idea, and on the metaphorical operations it performs.

This article seeks to contribute to the history of the idea of ‘middle class’, an extremely important element of Western political thought, which, however, remains poorly studied. Fundamental to Aristotle’s philosophy, the idea of ‘middle class’ disappeared from the repertoire of political thinking for centuries, until it re-emerged shortly before the French Revolution. Denis Diderot was one of the first modern philosophers to develop the notion as part of a philosophical system. Later, other French liberals –the *doctrinaires* and Guizot in Particular– made use of a similar system as part of their political discourse. In this article, Diderot’s and other modern notions of ‘middle class’ will be compared with that of Aristotle. The similarities between the two contexts of emergence –the crisis of Ancient Greek democracy and that of the French *Ancien Régime*– will be explored. The comparison of these two formative moments may cast new light on the meaning and political function of the idea of middle class, and on the metaphorical operations it performs.

I ‘Middle Class’ as Metaphor

The most common current distinction of three social classes, ‘upper’, ‘middle’ and ‘lower’, is by no means necessary or obvious. Many methods and criteria by which to classify social groups can be (and have been) conceived. The criteria of social *function* and/or *status* are examples of this, as in the Middle Ages, when the main distinction was between ‘those who make war’, ‘those who pray’ and ‘those who work’, or between three social *estates*, the nobility, the clergy, and the People or *third estate*. Another

possible criterion is the *distribution of power*, as in the early modern distinction of ‘the *Grands*’ vs. ‘the people’, or in the anarchist ‘the oppressors’ vs. the ‘oppressed’, or the ancient ‘Patricians’ vs. ‘Plebeians’ (which also relates to *status* and *function*). If we prefer an economic criterion, then we can conceive society as divided according to different *interests*, that is, ‘the commercial interests’, ‘the financial interests’, ‘the industrial interests’ and so on. Or we can distinguish only *two* classes, ‘the rich’ and ‘the poor’ or, following the Marxist scheme, the ‘bourgeoisie’ and the ‘proletariat’. If we prefer to distinguish *three* classes rather than two, we can still divide society, as some of the Physiocrats did, into the ‘productive class’, the ‘propertied class’ and the ‘sterile class’. Many more examples can be added; the important conclusion, however, is that it cannot be taken for granted that society contains such a thing as a ‘middle class’. On the contrary, the naming of social groups always presupposes a certain hypothesis of how society works. Let us analyse the presuppositions behind the concept of ‘middle class’.

Unlike other expressions used to define social groupings –such as ‘working class’ or ‘businessmen’– the concept of ‘middle class’ does not refer to a directly observable condition of the people it comprises (for example, ‘working class’ = ‘the people who work’). It can be discussed whether those who work constitute a social class or not, but it is unquestionable that those people *do* work; working is part of their lives. But the same does not apply to ‘middle class’; on the contrary, together with the other two classes that the same expression evokes (the ‘upper’ and ‘lower’ classes), ‘middle class’ alludes to a specific mental image of society rather than to an observable feature.

But what does it mean to be ‘at the top’, ‘at the bottom’ or ‘in the middle’ of society? This question becomes relevant if we remember that what we call ‘society’ is a composite of different types of relationships between people, and between people and nature. Therefore, society does not have a *volume*; it is not a physical entity, of which we can distinguish a ‘top’, a ‘bottom’ and a ‘middle’. In sum, the idea of ‘middle class’ conveys a metaphorical operation, by means of which we understand society in terms of the physical world. There is nothing particularly strange in that; without noticing it, we make use of such metaphors all the time in our everyday language. For example, if a president is overthrown, we say ‘the president fell’, without meaning that he is actually lying on the floor. As we are proud of our condition as bipeds, and falling to the floor appears to us as an unfortunate incident and a sort of defeat, we transport that sense to other (non-physical) situations of disgrace and defeat. Metaphors, however, are one of the favourite loci of ideology, and the metaphor of the ‘middle class’ is a perfect example of that. It is in order to understand the ideological content of the idea of ‘middle class’ that we must go back to its ancient and modern contexts of emergence. Let us start with the latter.

II Inventing the Middle Class in Modern Times: Diderot’s Representations of Society

In Diderot’s early days, society was not perceived as a particular sphere. The modern conception of civil society as a third space, the locus of economic activities, social reproduction and social classes –

distinguishable from both individuals and the state—emerged in the thought of the Scottish Enlightenment, to be fully developed in Hegel’s idea of civil society in the 1820s.¹ This is not to say that earlier political thinkers did not perceive social conditions; these, however, were immediately ‘translated’ into political categories—notably in Montesquieu’s thought.² On the other hand, there was a long tradition of criticism of the extreme inequality between rich and poor, but this was part of moral or Christian concerns rather than political or social philosophy.³ In this section we shall analyse the shifts in Diderot’s representations of society (the issue of social inequalities in particular) and their relation to the *philosophe*’s perception of a class ‘in between’.

Diderot’s early political thought is somewhat unoriginal, and was taken mainly from Montesquieu and the Greek classics. As Jacques Proust has pointed out, his idea of equality was limited to the political sphere and was to some extent abstract. Thus, it was never for him a matter of rich and poor but rather of powerful and weak;⁴ his interest in equality was limited to the defence of the weak in terms of political power. Moreover, references to actual social groups and social distinctions are notably scanty in Diderot’s earlier works (the *Encyclopédie* included). As Jacques Proust has argued, the *philosophe* conceived social distinctions mainly in terms of ‘useful’ citizens vs. ‘privileged parasites’, the former group encompassing all the citizens who performed useful activities for society (and this might include nobles and priests). Thus, Diderot’s distinctions were somewhat vague and blurred, no longer part of the feudal categories but still not modern economic distinctions properly speaking.⁵

In order to understand the development of Diderot’s ideas on social inequality after the *Encyclopédie*, a particular fact must be taken into account: in 1755 Rousseau had produced one of the most radical denunciations of inequality then in existence in his famous *Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité parmi les hommes*, in which he goes as far as to attack private property. As will become evident, Diderot would also come to discover the awkward fact of social inequality, of which he would also become a critic. However, unlike his friend Rousseau, Diderot had to attack inequality on different grounds, for he was not ready to impugn the right to property or to adopt a primitivist standpoint.

At the beginning of the 1770s Diderot’s perception of the inequality of social conditions seems to increase. Thus, in the *Lettre de M. Denis Diderot sur l’Examen de l’Essai sur les préjugés* (c. 1771) or in the *Fragments divers* (1772) he distinguishes ‘high conditions’ from ‘subaltern conditions’, or ‘opulent men’ from ‘lower’ or ‘poor’ conditions.⁶ In those days Diderot also sided with the Helvetian ideal according to which ‘the happiness [*bonheur*] of the individual in society is placed in well-being [*aisance*], between extreme wealth and poverty’.⁷

Interestingly enough, in the *Mélanges... pour Catherine II*, written during his trip to Russia (1773-74), the concept of ‘class’ becomes more frequently used. In its modern sense—a social group defined by economic criteria—the concept of class was still somewhat unusual. For example, the article ‘Classe’ in the *Encyclopédie* does not include any reference to social groupings. In fact, until the

nineteenth century, the most common concepts used to allude to social distinctions were ‘rank’, ‘order’ and ‘estate’. However, the development of capitalism was affecting the social dynamics of the *Ancien Régime*. Social distinctions were becoming less stable and birth-related, and more fluctuating and variable. The introduction of the concept of class was then the sign of a new awareness of this fact.⁸ In France in particular, the new concept started to be used in its modern sense in the second half of the eighteenth century and was popular among the Physiocrats (as in their distinction between a ‘*classe laborieuse*’ and a ‘*classe stérile*’). However, the use of ‘class’ as denoting fixed social entities (as in ‘working class’ or ‘middle class’) would have to wait until the nineteenth century.⁹

The concept of class in Diderot’s works becomes frequent only in the 1770s. Nevertheless, until the end of his life he remained more likely to use the words ‘condition’, ‘estate’ and ‘rank’ to refer to all types of social groups (that is, professional groups, corporations, privileged orders, and groups with different levels of political or economic power). On the contrary, the use of ‘class’ was usually limited exclusively to economic groupings.

Also in the *Mélanges... pour Catherine II* Diderot introduces the so-called ‘debate on the two luxuries’.¹⁰ To understand the importance of this debate, a short digression is needed. The issue of luxury was widely debated not only among the French philosophers, but also in England, Italy and other nations during the Enlightenment. Luxury was traditionally condemned by Christian moralists –Rousseau followed this tradition– but also by aristocratic writers (as a sign of bourgeois pretension) and others. Against this condemnation, a group of writers concerned, like Mandeville, with economic issues, argued that luxury had positive effects for society, since it encouraged general prosperity by distributing wealth. In this debate, other writers such as Beccaria, Saint-Lambert, Deleyre and Condillac argued that there was a ‘good’ luxury and a ‘bad’ one, depending on the characteristics of different nations.¹¹

Diderot seems to have followed Saint-Lambert’s position.¹² In the article ‘Luxe’ in the *Encyclopédie* Saint-Lambert argued that luxury is not good or bad in itself, but depends on the productivity of a nation, that is, it must be commensurate with production. Governments must encourage in individuals the love of property and wealth, for it is advantageous for society. But a good government has to counterbalance this feeling with the ‘community or patriotic spirit’, so that no social group ends up subjugating another. Bad luxury emerges only when the patriotic spirit weakens, and this is the fault solely of the government. Moreover, if this is the case, the result is that wealth becomes unequally distributed and the gap between social groups grows. Thus, the ‘people’, the ‘intermediate estate’ and ‘the great’ become equally corrupt. On the contrary, if the government is good, then wealth and virtue are in accord and good luxury permits a more equitable distribution of both among the social ‘conditions’. The people will then work and love the law and the great will serve the state and cease to be inactive and corrupt. It is from the ‘intermediate estate’ or ‘second class of citizens’ that ‘enlightenment will spread down to the people and up to the great’.¹³ Thus, Saint-Lambert welcomes luxury as the desire to take

pleasure from material goods, because, if it is moderate and counterbalanced by patriotism, it benefits society as a whole.

In Diderot's work, the theory of the two luxuries appears in the *Mélanges...*, but it is in the *Réfutation d'Helvétius*, written between 1773 and 1775, that we find the best formulation of it. Interestingly enough, Diderot inverts Saint-Lambert's argument, and the themes of the effect of bad governments and the need for patriotism disappear. Thus, the origin of bad luxury is not a fault of the government, but rather of the 'senselessness' in the use of wealth that comes with a 'too unequal distribution' of it. Where bad luxury prevails, it is because society is divided into just 'two classes, a narrow class of rich citizens and a numerous class of poor citizens'. On the contrary, nations where good luxury prevails are those in which there are 'three classes, the rich, the comfortably-off [*aisés*] and the poor'.¹⁴ Unlike Saint-Lambert, Diderot distinguishes two types of society in terms of social-economic characteristics, rather than by the mere wisdom of the rulers or the patriotism of the citizens. Moreover, social distinctions appear clearly as social classes (in the modern sense of the concept). Interestingly enough, the intermediate class not only appears in the 'good' society alone, but also constitutes the very criterion by which to distinguish a good society.¹⁵ Thus, luxury is good only in relatively egalitarian societies; in nations with greater class cleavage, it is just a sign of depravity and corruption. Good rulers must ensure that wealth remains fairly distributed without limiting people's freedom or disregarding the right to property.¹⁶

Diderot's ideas on luxury must be understood in the context of his projects for Russia, in which the creation of a 'third estate' was the most important of the measures recommended to 'civilise' that country.¹⁷ The optimum degree of civilization is located at an intermediate point, just as the right amount of wealth for an individual lies between the condition of the rich and the poor, as becomes evident in the following passage of Diderot's *Réfutation d'Helvétius*:

Had Rousseau taken care of imagining a half-polished, half-savage kind of society, instead of preaching a return to the forest, I believe it would have been worth responding him. Men have come together in order to gain predominance in their struggle against their constant enemy: nature. But they were not satisfied with only defeating it, they wanted to triumph. They have found the cottage more comfortable than the shack, so they have moved to the cottage. Fair enough. But what an enormous distance there is between the cottage and the palace! Do they live better in the palace than in the cottage? I doubt it. [...] I am convinced that man's industry has gone too far; had it been hindered at an earlier stage, so it was possible to simplify its work, we would not be worse now.

Interestingly enough, this optimum intermediate degree of civilization appears associated with a particular social group:

Helvétius has placed man's social happiness in mediocrity; I believe that there is a similar stage in civilization, a stage which is more in agreement with man's felicity in general, and which is less removed from the savage condition that we would imagine. But how to return to that stage once one has passed it, how to stay there once one has reached it? I ignore it. [...] The Ancient legislators have only known the savage condition. More enlightened than them, a modern legislator, who would set up a colony in a remote spot on earth, could probably find a middle ground between the savage stage and our wonderful polished stage, a middle ground which may delay the progress of the child of Prometheus [...] and fix civilized man between the savage's infancy and our decrepitude.¹⁸

The third estate embodies both civilization and the right balance of society. A marked social inequality is the characteristic of both barbarous nations and societies that went beyond the right level of civilization. Hence Diderot's concern for the division of wealth in Russia as it appears in the *Observations sur le Nakaz*, the *philosophe's* commentary, written after his trip to Russia, on the famous Instruction (*Nakaz*) that the Empress Catherine II had issued to the Legislative Commission elected in 1767 to design a new legal code for Russia. Large fortunes, Diderot argues, should be inherited on an equal basis by all children of the family (or other relatives in cases where there were no children). No other device is as effective 'to maintain political equality'.¹⁹

Interestingly, a disagreement between Diderot's and Catherine's ideas of a 'third estate' becomes apparent in the *philosophe's* commentary on articles 363 to 367 'On the Middle Estate [*état moyen*]' of the *Nakaz*. According to Catherine's Instruction, the 'middle estate' was the part of the population that belonged neither to the peasantry nor to the nobility. The responsibility of this group was to have 'good customs' and to devote themselves to their labours. If they failed to do this, they would be 'excluded' from this order.²⁰ In his *Observations sur le Nakaz* Diderot expresses confusion: '...will be excluded from this order... I cannot understand. Will they be turned into serfs?'.²¹

Diderot's 'confusion' is quite significant. In Russia, the legal status of a person did not necessarily correspond to his or her economic activities or place of residence, but was assigned from above, as a degree in a legal hierarchy that was based in the Russian principle of service to the state. The problem arises, then, how to classify that 'third estate' that Russia lacked. Was it a class or a rank *à la russe*? The full significance of this problem becomes clear when we look at the different ways in which the expression 'third estate' was translated into Russian. As David Griffiths has noted, when this concept was translated into Russian, it gained a hierarchical sense that the French original lacks. For example, the two most frequent translations in the 1760s were '*tretii chin*' and '*tretii rod liudei*', the latter being Catherine's and Ivan Betskoi's favourite. In Russian, '*chin*' means 'degree', 'rank', 'order' or 'position'

and has a characteristic hierarchical sense: it was the category used in Peter the Great's Table of Ranks. 'Rod', on the other hand, evokes familial or in-born characteristics. Other common translations were 'srednee sostoianie' ('middle element') or 'srednii shtat liudei' ('people of the middle estate'); both refer to a mean position between peasants and nobility.²² In the context of the Russian debates, all these translations give the idea of an intermediate rank between serfs and aristocracy, related to the urban space, and part of a state-defined hierarchy. This hierarchical sense is absent in the French *tiers-état*; likewise, it is worth noting that the expression 'middle class' was still unknown in France at this time.

Diderot developed his ideas on the importance of the third estate when thinking about Russia's civilization and in contact with Russian debates. When he started to relate the third estate to an *intermediate* group (the 'comfortably-off class [*classe aisée*]' between the rich and the poor), Diderot was not referring to a fixed intermediate administrative rank in a political hierarchy, but rather to an intermediate class in terms of a continuum of social-economic distinctions. Thus, although they often used the same expressions, Diderot's and Catherine's conceptual frames were completely different. Whilst Catherine II was trying to insert a new rank into the Russian social-administrative hierarchy, Diderot's 'comfortably-off class' foreshadowed the modern concept of 'middle class'. In the *Observations sur le Nakaz* Diderot seems to have realized that to some extent he and the Empress had been talking about different things.

Thus, in 'Sur la civilisation de la Russie', a fragment that is part of the *philosophe's* contribution to the third edition of Raynal's *Histoire des deux Indes* (1780), Diderot came to the conclusion that 'civilization' was a long and difficult project rather than the simple achievement of an enlightened monarch. Russia lacked the preconditions for civilization, for it was 'split into two classes' with 'opposite interests'; the creation of a 'third estate' to eliminate this cleavage, on the other hand, 'takes centuries'. For Diderot it was not just a matter of inserting an intermediate class in Russia, for the lack of such a class was at the same time cause and consequence of Russia's backwardness: 'the tyrants will never permit the extinction of serfdom'.²³ Thus, for Diderot, Russia is a space marked by an absence, an empty wasteland that lacks the indispensable 'yeast': the third estate as the intermediate 'comfortably-off class'.

Russia was only one point in Diderot's geographical imagination in these (his later) years. If Russia was a wasteland for civilization, France was in peril of decadence –interestingly enough, because of the unfair distribution of wealth. In the 'Apostrophe à Louis XVI', a contribution to the third edition of the *Histoire des deux Indes* (1780), Diderot implores the young king:

Cast your eyes over the capital of your empire and you will find two classes of citizens. Some, wallowing in wealth, flaunt a luxury which provokes indignation among those not corrupted by it. Others, overwhelmed with need, make their situation worse by the pretence of a prosperity which they do not have. For such is the power of gold, when it has become the god of a nation...²⁴

Disappointed with Russia and worried about France, Diderot now turned his eyes to the new space of the possible, post-revolutionary America. In the *Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron* (finished in 1778) he hopes that the ‘brave Americans’ will ‘prevent’ the aggravation of the ‘unequal distribution of wealth’, and therefore ‘preserve freedom’ and postpone the seemingly inevitable decadence of society.²⁵

As becomes apparent, the unequal distribution of wealth and power among social classes is at the core of Diderot’s concerns, from Russia to France, and from France to the United States. The presence of intermediate groups between the rich/powerful and the poor/weak constitutes the keystone of civilization, political freedom and happiness in general.

Thus, especially through his observations of Russia, Diderot in his later work developed a specific line of thought on social inequality and its importance for historical progress. Having taken up Montesquieu’s simple remark on the absence of a third estate in Russia in *De l’esprit des lois*²⁶ (and its ‘translation’ into the Russian debates), Diderot came to the conclusion that a third estate –defined as an urban independent class in between the rich and the poor– was at the same time a precondition for and an outcome of civilization. Moreover, his idea of civilization assimilated individual and social happiness; thus, individuals and nations should remain at an intermediate point (of wealth in the case of the former, and of economic development in the case of the latter). Diderot understands this *aurea mediocritas* as an unstable and fragile balance that requires social and political energy to maintain it.

As will become apparent, these kinds of ideas would develop as the core of French post-revolutionary liberalism. Suffice it to say for the moment that, by means of this formulation, Diderot was replying to Rousseau’s primitivism and to those who, by then, were already attacking private property as the source of social unhappiness.

II.1 Diderot’s ‘Intermediate’ as Metaphorical Formation²⁷

The theme of the virtue of ‘the intermediate’ appears time after time in Diderot’s later political philosophy. Be it in his argument that the best place for humankind is *between* wilderness and civilization, or his claim that the optimum place for the individual in society is *between* wealth and poverty or, finally, his assertion that the existence of an *intermediate* class in society guarantees economic progress and the maintenance of political freedom, the intermediate always appears as something virtuous, or something of positive effect. In this section, I will attempt to interpret the theme of ‘the intermediate’, which lies at the core of Diderot’s materialism. I will argue that this theme links Diderot’s social-political thought to his ideas about nature, in a materialistic and deeply unitary philosophy.

As we have seen, Diderot developed the ideal of a society ‘half polished, half wild’ by comparing nations to individuals. Thus, following Helvétius’ idea of the ‘happy mediocrity’ of the individual who is neither too rich nor too poor, Diderot argued that the process of ‘civilization’ should be stopped at an intermediate degree, after which decadence and decrepitude would begin.²⁸ This idea is related to the cyclical conception of history that he expressed, for example, in the *Salon de 1767* and later in the *Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron*, according to which ‘everything carries in itself the secret germ of destruction’, everything in this world is ‘condemned to be born, reach vigour, proceed to decrepitude, and then perish’.²⁹ Thus, the comparison of the cycles of individuals and nations results from the assimilation of biological and historical life, which leads Diderot to believe that to maintain an intermediate stage of development means to extend life.

Regarding social groupings, we have already noted that, in considering the case of Russia, Diderot became convinced of the importance of the third estate for the civilization of a barbarous nation. This class not only guarantees economic progress but also acts as the ‘yeast of freedom’.³⁰ In the *Réfutation d’Helvétius* the third estate is clearly defined through economic criteria as a ‘comfortably-off’ class between rich and poor. Again in this case, the social and biological criteria overlap: the intermediate place is best because both rich and poor ‘perish before the time established by nature, the former of indigestion, the latter of starvation’. This is another way of saying that the members of the intermediate class live longer, just as nations do that are stopped at an intermediate degree of civilization. In fact, the weakening of the intermediate class and the growth of the gap between rich and poor was for Diderot a clear symptom of national decadence.³¹

Similarly, in the later Diderot a strong concern for mediating institutions between the individual and the state becomes apparent. Thus, he proposed the idea of creating fixed and elective bodies or ‘intermediate powers’ in Russia, which would function as channels to communicate the general will to the sovereign, and where different ‘general wills’ and ‘particular wills’ would find a place to negotiate their interests. In Diderot’s projects for Russia, the theme of ‘intermediate powers’ overlaps with the creation of a third estate. Thus, the ‘intermediate powers’ (for example, Catherine’s Commission, if it were rendered permanent) would stimulate the creation of an intermediate social class, ‘amalgamating’ Russian society (a society that Diderot perceived as split into two opposite social classes and therefore despotic). It is the existence of such a social amalgam that permits a political constitution that guarantees freedom.³²

Interestingly enough, the theme of the virtues of the intermediate is also present in Diderot’s treatment of aesthetic issues. In the *Salon de 1767*, for example, Diderot praises ‘mediocrity’ and the ‘golden mean [*juste milieu*]’ in art, and considers that the secret of artistic success consists in sticking to the average ‘national taste’: those who attempt to go above that level will be called ‘bizarre men’, whilst those remaining below the national taste will be looked upon as ‘simpletons’.³³

In summary, several overlapping issues can be distinguished in Diderot’s understanding of ‘the intermediate’: the optimum intermediate degree of civilization; ‘mediocrity’ as the social condition that

guarantees the happiness of the individual; the intermediate social group acting as a stimulus of economic development and protector of freedom; intermediate bodies as constraints on the state's power and, finally, the intermediate as aesthetically beautiful.

So why then does 'the intermediate' assume so much importance in his philosophy? From where does it obtain its almost magical powers, enabling it to guarantee happiness, beauty, freedom, and economic progress? In order to answer these questions, a deeper analysis is required. Let us go back to Diderot's observations while in Russia.

On his trip to Russia, Diderot noted that St Petersburg had the appearance of a set of isolated palaces, and that it would be necessary, as a part of the civilization programme, 'to bring them together' by means of private houses owned by members of the third estate. This would transform the Russian capital, according to Diderot's hopes in 1773, into a more 'lively, active, and commercial' city. In an interesting comparison, Diderot then argued that the settlements of wild peoples were formed by isolated huts 'without order, continuity or bond'. If we have palaces instead of huts, as in St Petersburg, the image of wildness remains the same. A different picture emerges only when those houses are 'linked by intermediate houses', so that the settlement looks like a 'beehive'. Continuing this image, Diderot adds: 'You will have little honey as long as your bees remain unbound.'³⁴ Thus, the intermediate houses function here as symbols of the intermediate status of their owners, a status that brings the population together. Wildness and decadence, in which men are unbound, are the two extremes of this ideal situation. This perception is related to Diderot's ideas of history, in which the intermediate, as can be seen in the *Mélanges*, has exceptional value in that it gathers men together. Before society was established, Diderot argues, humans were like a multitude of 'isolated little springs'. These springs would from time to time bump into each other, thus harming themselves. Society was aimed at organizing the 'springs', so as to avoid those eventual collisions. However, by bringing the springs closer, social organization actually multiplied the risks. As the springs have 'diverse and opposite interests', society may turn into a 'continuous war' of terrible consequences. To prevent that from happening, Diderot argues, it is indispensable for men to remain together:

Isolated men have only one opponent: nature. Gathered together, men have two: men and nature. Thus, when they are gathered together, men have an even more urgent reason to come closer to each other [...] This becomes evident in the great maxim of tyranny: *divide and rule*. She wants individuals, but no corps; noblemen, but no nobility; priests, but no clergy; judges, but no magistracy; subjects, but no nation, that is –in the most absurd of consequences– society and isolated men.³⁵

Thus, Diderot's positive appraisal of the intermediate social classes is related to his particular vision of history (which recommends an intermediate stage of civilization) and to a political vision that assimilates the intermediate bodies that limit power to the intermediate classes. Diderot's representations of different aspects of human life can be seen to be integrated and operating within a greater scheme in which the 'comfortably-off class' or third estate is the foundation stone, the 'amalgam'³⁶ that binds men together, promotes economic development (the struggle against nature) and prevents the 'little springs' from destroying each other or from being tyrannized by a despot.

II.2 The 'Yeast of Freedom'

As now becomes apparent, the theme of the intermediate articulates a whole series of representations in a scheme that connects all the aspects of social life. However, the significance of the intermediate in Diderot's political philosophy can be properly understood only within the wider framework of his philosophy of nature. In this section, I will argue that the metaphor of the third estate as 'the yeast of freedom' connects Diderot's representations of social life to a vast coherent metaphorical system, in which social life is interpreted in terms of the natural world. As is well known, a metaphor permits the reader to understand one thing in terms of another, and far from being adventitious associations, metaphors (together with metonymies) can constitute vast coherent systems in terms of which we conceptualize our experiences.³⁷ Therefore, metaphors are particularly useful in transitional or formative periods of intellectual history, when thinkers are inventing new concepts or systems of ideas to express themselves. Likewise, metaphors are often at the core of ideologies. That is why the analysis of metaphors can be particularly revealing for the intellectual historian.

Let us begin with Diderot's ideas on the organization of Nature, and his idea of 'energy' in particular. As Jacques Chouillet has pointed out, in his philosophy of nature Diderot linked several areas that are usually thought of as being separate from each other –inertia and energy, matter and life, the contiguous and the continuous– in a deeply unitary thinking. In order to establish these links, Diderot had to answer the question of how transitions between these areas happen. As is well known, the *philosophe* resolved the first passage –from inertia to energy– by means of his theory of 'molecular energy'. This theory serves to abolish all contradictions between inertia and energy, for the former can thus be considered a force. Once the first transition was resolved, the other two became easier to unravel.³⁸ Thus, around 1769 Diderot found the solution to the second problem, by completely assimilating matter and life. In *Le rêve de d'Alembert*, the philosopher presented a vision of the world as an 'ocean of matter' in continuous fermentation, in which a series of animalcules form a continuous chain, thus linking without any breach the kingdoms of the inanimate with that of the most complex forms of living beings.³⁹ In his dream, d'Alembert 'sees' the spontaneous generation of life, that is, the passage from inert matter to animate beings.

The third problem (the transition from contiguous to continuous) was also resolved in *Le rêve*. The fundamental issue at this point consists in knowing how individual molecules gather together to form an organized whole. Diderot answers this question by comparing the individual molecules to drops of mercury: just as two mercury drops that are close to each other fuse, ‘the contact of two homogeneous molecules, perfectly homogeneous, forms continuity; this is the case of union, cohesion, combination, the most complete identity that can be imagined’.⁴⁰

One may readily imagine how Diderot’s conception of natural organization relates to the features of social life described above. As Geoffrey Bremner has pointed out, the theory of the natural sociability of man, which Diderot professed, is remarkably similar to the explanation of the passage from contiguous to continuous.⁴¹ However, the mystery we are trying to resolve here is that of the intermediate, and for this we need to go a little further. The key to this mystery can be found in Diderot’s *Éléments de Physiologie* (written between 1778 and 1780), in which the author echoes the ancient theory of the continuous chain of being linking all the realms of nature. According to the *philosophe*, ‘The chain of being is not interrupted by diversity of forms... The vegetal realm could well have been the primary source of the animal realm, and could well have found its source in the mineral realm; and the latter could have emanated from heterogeneous universal matter’.⁴² This is why at the time of the *Encyclopédie* Diderot was particularly interested in the ‘intermediate beings’, supposedly half vegetal and half animal, such as the polyp, the sensitive plants or the carnivorous plants, which he thought were the starting point of the transition linking both realms. But in the *Éléments* Diderot added recently discovered examples. As is well known, while writing the *Éléments* Diderot read the new scientific studies by Beccari (the discoverer of gluten), Keisser and Mayer (specialists in flour fermentation), and Macquer (specialist in starch). Diderot found the fermentation processes particularly striking, for they seemed to demonstrate his hypothesis of the connection between vegetal and animal, just as did fungi that grew on cereals.⁴³

Thus, in this picture of nature as a universal fermentation, in which the intermediate animalcules constitute the expression of the cosmic vitality,⁴⁴ the meaning of the metaphor of the ‘yeast’ or the ‘amalgam’ referring to the third estate becomes apparent. We are able to understand at last the deep secret of the intermediate’s magic: the third estate is a ferment that stimulates economic development, the arts, good mores and freedom; it is the ‘amalgam’ that gathers men together, and the ‘yeast’ that, applied on barren soil (such as Russia’s), gives rise to the marvel of civilization. At the same time, because of its intermediate nature, the third estate also serves to maintain the right equilibrium in society, by balancing the extremes of wealth and poverty. To put it in terms of Diderot’s philosophy of nature, the third estate brings both continuity and a higher stage in life.

Several paragraphs of the *Éléments de Physiologie* confirm that for Diderot social life and natural life function analogously. For example, Diderot uses examples taken from social life to explain how live organisms work. To begin with, the philosopher uses the word ‘society’ to designate the association of the organs that form a system or organism. Second, Diderot argues that for a living creature to live longer, the

strength of its organs must be ‘equal’, that is, there must be an ‘exact equilibrium’ among the organs. In fact, the ‘perfectibility’ of men compared to other animals resides in the relative weakness of all human organs compared to the ‘organ of reason’. Had men had a very specialized organ –such as the sight of the eagle, or the olfactory sense of dogs– they would not have developed reason.⁴⁵

The isomorphic character of these quotations and the statements that Diderot uses to support his positive appraisal of the intermediate class (a class that is able to avoid the huge gap and the consequent opposition between the interests of the poor and the rich, and thus to maintain equilibrium) is self-evident. An unevenly formed organism will die and disappear: something that Diderot appears to dread in observing the increasing inequality in his own nation. Finally, Diderot seems to prefer a not very specialized organism. ‘Perfectibility’ (‘evolution’, we would say today) is a feature of humans, which derives from the weakness of their senses; paradoxically, organisms that have developed one of these senses to its maximum capacity (to the neglect of others) are inferior. This is yet another reason for favouring an intermediate degree of civilization, before ‘gold becomes a nation’s God’.

If more evidence of the physiological and social analogies in Diderot’s thought were needed, the *Éléments...* present the following explanation of diseases:

There are two kinds of disease. One is produced by an external cause that brings disorder; the other, by a part that is too vigorous and, therefore, causes troubles to the whole machine: it is a too powerful citizen for democracy. The matrix is healthy, but his action is too strong for the rest.⁴⁶

Thus, ‘democracy’ is assimilated with the only truly organic form of living creatures’ operation. Inequality is the cause of diseases in society in the same way as in living organisms, yet another reason to praise the intermediate. As Elisabeth de Fontenay has pointed out, Diderot’s metaphor of society as a body is the metaphor of a spontaneously anarchic society that establishes itself as a republic; this image allows for a new conception of the body as an organism that is always in a precarious balance, and whose vital principle resides in a balanced plurality.⁴⁷ Diderot’s idea of civilization and his image of society can also be interpreted as the precarious balance of a plurality of forces or elements. In fact, much of the liberal tradition is based on a similar assumption.

In summary, the intermediate/equality/life/evolution (ferment), as opposed to extremes/inequality/death/stagnation, appears as a vast system of oppositions through which Diderot interprets both the social and the natural worlds. In the making of this system (in which the mental structures for understanding nature and society are isomorphic), the metaphor of the yeast is the clue that connects the meaning of the intermediate in society to the intermediate in nature. In both realms the intermediate is the key to balance, and the spark of new life. By ‘carving’ an intermediate class between the extremely rich and the poor, and by assigning to the third estate the extraordinary virtues of being in

between, Diderot was anticipating the invention of the modern idea of ‘middle class’ and responding to Rousseau’s critique of private property with a theoretical justification of (a ‘moderate’ level of) inequality. This theoretical move, as will become evident in the last part of this article, became a fundamental component in the liberal tradition’s shift from aristocratic to bourgeois.

III Inventing the Middle Class in Ancient Times: Aristotle’s Politics and the Doctrine of the Mean

Although Diderot had no way of knowing it, many centuries before, Aristotle had constructed his idea of ‘middle class’ by means of a similar metaphorical operation, and in order to address comparable political challenges. As many commentators have argued, Aristotle’s ethics and political philosophy cannot be understood without taking into account the peculiar political circumstances in which he (as did the Socratics in general) produced his work. In Aristotle’s times the traditional landed aristocracy of Athens was rapidly losing its formerly unchallenged place as the head of society. As citizenship expanded and urban economic prosperity increased, democracy became more dynamic, and a growing number of traders, manufacturers, artisans, shopkeepers and wage labourers posed a strong threat to the aristocratic world. Hence the social struggles and political instability characteristic of this period (*stasis*). In this context, some aristocrats developed a renewed aristocratic consciousness, so as to distinguish themselves from the *nouveaux riches* and reinforce their sense of identity and pride, and their belief in their mission. Thus, they endeavoured to rescue, reform and revitalize rural aristocratic values, ‘in order to stem the levelling tide of democracy, the tyranny of the majority, and the vulgar commercialism that they felt were engulfing Athens and the whole of Greece’.⁴⁸ An aristocrat himself, Aristotle, together with other Socratic philosophers such as Plato, played a central role in this movement; moreover, as Osvaldo Guariglia has argued, Aristotle’s political and ethical philosophy expresses the ‘ideology’ of the aristocratic ‘patriarchal order’.⁴⁹ However, unlike Plato’s openly authoritarian ‘solution’, Aristotle developed a more subtle political thinking, which formally accepted Athenian democracy and egalitarianism, but only after reintroducing them into a conservative and elitist frame.

Aristotle’s contempt for the lower classes and for democracy is well known. In his famous scheme of six forms of government, ‘democracy’ appears as one of the ‘bad constitutions’. His own ideal for the *Polis*, given that the ‘aristocracy’ was ‘too perfect’ for most peoples, was the ‘polity’, a mixed constitution (a mixture of oligarchic and democratic institutions) by means of which, Aristotle imagined, the *stasis* could be resolved without affecting the status of the aristocracy. What is important for our purposes is that, in Aristotle’s opinion, that *political* arrangement should preferably be based on a certain *social* order, namely, a society with a large ‘middle class’. When such a class does not exist or is not strong enough, ‘the rich and the poor struggle’ with each other, and the party that wins rules for its own benefit and not for society as a whole. On the contrary, the presence of a middle class ‘re-establishes

equilibrium and impedes any excessive preponderance' in the *Polis*. Besides, the 'middle class' is more inclined to 'follow the voice of wisdom' than are the rich or the poor, who are more prone to excesses and negative passions such as perversion, arrogance, insolence, envy, greed, servility and so on. The relationship between the 'middle class' and Aristotle's reinterpretation of the meaning of 'equality' becomes evident in the last book of his *Politics*, on the sources of 'revolutions'. Whilst the rich often want to 'amass privileges and thus increase inequality', the poor frequently pursue the false idea of 'absolute equality'; these are the two most common causes of revolutions. But equality, Aristotle argues, must be understood as 'proportional equality'; needless to say, this *political* proportionality finds its correlation in the *social* middle ground that the 'middle class' embodies.⁵⁰ In this way, as Eric Havelock has argued, Aristotle does not directly reject equality, but re-appropriates it in a hierarchical frame, thus obliterating its meaning. So, 'proportional equality' means a 'correspondence' or 'proportion' of the social benefits or attributions that each person must enjoy, which must accord with the fundamental inequalities that actually exist among men.⁵¹ Thus, in a first metaphorical move, social happiness is equated to (physical or chemical) equilibrium or proportion between unequal parts or elements, the 'middle class' being a crucial component to achieve the right state. As Romano García has argued, the medical and scientific environment in which Aristotle grew up provided him with the basis for understanding other fields. Thus, medical analogies are a prominent feature of his *Politics*, the idea of the 'mixed constitution' being a translation of the humoral equilibrium of the human body to the realm of social life.⁵²

But the question remains: why is the 'middle class' supposed to act in a more virtuous way than the mob or the *nouveaux riches*? The answer must be looked for in Aristotle's *Ethics*, for, as John Creed has argued, the philosopher concludes that the 'middle class' has the best moral disposition for social life 'by a not very rigorous extension from his ethical theory'.⁵³

Let us begin with a brief account of Aristotle's ideas about political virtue and virtue in general. As Stephen Salkever has argued, Aristotle considers that the best political judgments are those free from personal or party bias, that look to the good of the *polis* as a whole. On the contrary, political mistakes or injustices are the result of *pleonexia* or passion generally, but more specifically of the human passions: as we are mortals rather than gods, 'spiritedness (*thumos*) distorts the rule of even the best'. The cure for this deficiency is the rule of law, since even though there may surely be bad laws, law as such is a sort of reason without desire.⁵⁴ But if the law is written by humans, the same danger of injustice obviously reappears in that sphere. It was in order to resolve this issue that the Socratics introduced one of the most influential principles in the history of Western philosophy: the foundationalist approach to knowledge, virtue and the law; that is, the idea that there is a sort of cosmic order, beyond the realm of the people's opinions and decisions, which indicates what is true, virtuous, and fair.⁵⁵ Thus, regarding knowledge and the discernment of the truth, the Socratics distinguished between 'sensible existence' and 'metaphysical reality'. Our opinions and observations belong to the former, that is, the superficial, ever-changing,

unreliable and disputable realm of sensory perceptions or appearances. On the contrary, the truth belongs to the latter, that is, the essence, being, or nature of things, which is external to and independent from the human mind. In order to reach metaphysical reality behind its confusing manifestations, the rigorous analytical effort of a dispassionate mind was indispensable; not everybody was ready for such an effort.⁵⁶ Similarly, as Alasdair MacIntyre has argued, from the Socratics' idea of the unity of virtue –that is, the presupposition 'that there exists a cosmic order which dictates the place of each virtue in a total harmonious scheme of human life'– it follows that 'truth in the moral sphere consists in the conformity of moral judgement to the order of this scheme'.⁵⁷ Likewise, laws and political decisions were considered right and fair if they corresponded to a sort of eternal human nature. As Eric Havelock has argued, this principle represents a serious shift away from the egalitarian and universalistic approach to the law and political decisions formerly predominant in Greek thought. The Greeks tended to consider the rules 'less as principles than as conventional patterns, embodying not eternal laws written in heaven or printed on man's spiritual nature, but rather common agreements elaborated by man himself in a response to collective need.' By means of this shift, Aristotle was able to redefine the political notion of 'common interest', which was not to be interpreted as the egalitarian harmonization of all personal interests, but rather as attachment to an abstract principle of fairness supposedly emanating from human nature.⁵⁸

In this fashion, the Socratics placed the definition of truth, virtue, justice, common interest, and so on, in a metaphysical sphere, far away from the opinions and sovereign decisions of ordinary people. And here the elitist bias of their philosophy becomes evident. For, as Socrates argued, those most capable of attaining the knowledge of virtue (and, therefore, those who would make the best political decisions) were those with a 'dispassionate' mind. In turn, the acquisition of such a mind depended on constant self-analysis, which required an abundance of free time. Those who were too busy with economic activities were not so likely to achieve access to the knowledge of virtue in its highest degree, because they did not have enough free time, but, more important, because they were too close to the sensual and material world, which impedes the achievement of disinterest, temperance and dispassion. The ordinary people inhabited the superficial world of necessity and appearance, and knowledge requires first of all liberation from necessity, bodily needs and sensory confusion. The philosophers and the traditional aristocracy were the only two groups that fulfilled Socrates' expectations. This is not to say that other groups could not live a moral life, but they would do so on a level inferior to the Socratic ideal.⁵⁹

As Ellen Meiksins Wood and Neal Wood have argued, a similar elitist bias can be found in the positive definitions of virtue. For example, the virtues that Plato appreciated the most were gentility, grace, refinement, cultivation and so on, whilst the most regrettable vices were vulgarity, commonness, coarseness, insolence and presumption. Virtues and vices thus defined correspond to the stereotypes of Plato's own aristocratic class. A similar elitist bias appears in Aristotle's list of the eleven fundamental virtues: courage, self-control, liberality or generosity, magnanimity, great souledness or high-mindedness, a nameless virtue between ambition and its lack, gentleness, friendliness, truthfulness, wittiness, and

shame. Of this list, at least two virtues –liberality and magnanimity– are unattainable (or less attainable) for a common person. Moreover, the list of opposite vices often appears in Aristotle’s depiction of the common people. In this point, as Osvaldo Guariglia has argued, Aristotle’s ethical theory becomes *ideology*, by presenting the particular interests of one class as universally correct.⁶⁰

What is important for our purposes is to understand the ideological procedure by which Aristotle naturalized those particular virtues (that is, converted them into a universal ideal for all men), and assigned to the ‘middle class’ the role of the most politically virtuous of social classes. Regarding the first issue, it must be remembered that, according to Aristotle, each virtue represents a *mean* –the famous ‘golden mean’– between excess and deficiency; hence a life in accord with them is a life of *moderation*. So, for example, Aristotle considers the virtue of ‘courage’ to be the golden mean between the vices of cowardice (too little courage) and temerity (too much courage). Scholars have debated intensely about the validity of this doctrine, known as the ‘doctrine of the mean’.⁶¹ This is because, as Rosalind Hursthouse has argued, there is no logical reason to assume that there is such an extraordinary symmetry, so as to believe that there are two and only two vices per virtue, that they are opposite vices, and that the corresponding virtue lies right in the middle of them. On the contrary, virtue means to feel and act in the *right* way, in the *right* moment, for the *right* reason. For example, getting angry for a foolish reason is not a vice because it shows excessive anger, but because anger is expressed in an inappropriate situation. In this situation, *any* amount of anger is excessive. Wrong behaviours are usually wrong not because of their proportion (too much/too little), but just plain wrong according to an external rule. In other words, moral behaviour does not derive internally from Aristotle’s logic, but externally from traditional customs and laws. Besides, Aristotle puts the order of explanation the wrong way round. In a certain circumstance we do not decide to act courageously by calculating a middle point from the knowledge we already have about what the extremes of fear and temerity would mean in that context. In fact, we first know what is expected from us in that situation, and from that knowledge we decide what a cowardly or an excessively risky behaviour would be. Thus, our internal struggle in that situation is not between the vices of cowardice and temerity, but between our natural fear and the moral imperative to do the right thing. If we finally overcome fear and act courageously, that does not mean that we have behaved in a moderate way, but in the *right* way.⁶²

But why would Aristotle endorse such an apparently senseless doctrine? It must be said that Aristotle was not the only one who held these kinds kind of beliefs. The doctrine of the mean can be found, in different formulations, in the works of other Greek philosophers and even in other civilizations, such as ancient China.⁶³ The appeal of such a formulation of ethical rules lies in that it permits the naturalization of those norms by means of a metaphorical operation. By stating that certain attitudes, behaviours or feelings are a mean between two extremes, the doctrine of the mean implies that they are measured, balanced, moderate. But, again in this case, the ethical realm does not have a volume, nor is it a

mathematical quantity of which we can distinguish the middle or find a position of equilibrium. Thus, the doctrine of the mean performs a metaphorical operation that transfers our understanding of the physical world to the realm of ethics. In this way, a certain image of physical reality as a stable, balanced and ordered unity provides the basis for the claim that society (including norms about what is good or bad) works similarly. After the completion of this metaphorical operation, a pattern of behaviour –that is, a social convention– appears as a measured or balanced conduct, whilst a different pattern can be labelled as deviant, extreme, unreasonable, intemperate. And this happens without the need of the rational negotiation of differences between individuals, for the distinction of good and evil has been naturalized. Indeed, this metaphorical operation seems to be part of a wider structure that can be traced in the philological origin of some of the words we still use. Thus, notions such as mean or middle, moderation, measure, medicine, to think (meditate), to govern, and to judge are all related to the same Indo-European root ‘*med-*’ and its equivalent ‘*ius*’, which mean driving something back to its measure.⁶⁴ In any case, scholars have pointed out the similarity between Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean and his ideas about physiology and nature in general. For example, George Terzis has noted that in his *Partibus Animalium* Aristotle developed an idea of homeostasis, according to which ‘all influences require to be counterbalanced, so that they may be reduced to moderation and brought to the mean [...] nature has contrived the brain as a counterpoise to the region of the heart with its contained heat, and has given it to animals to moderate the latter, combining in it the properties of earth and water.’⁶⁵

In summary, Aristotle’s ethical quest for virtue understood as a mean that avoids the danger of extremes was inspired by his idea of nature’s tendency towards equilibrium by means of the combination of elements and their moderation. The mean is the locus of equilibrium, balance, harmony and serenity; for that reason, the mean also represents the teleological object of natural and human perfection. The connection between these ideas and Aristotle’s political thought becomes clear. The ideal of the mixed constitution as the combination of democratic and oligarchic institutions and the idea of the moderating role of the ‘middle class’ also stem from the same source, thus configuring a vast metaphorical system in which the different aspects of reality have an isomorphic constitution. If virtue lies in a mean, it is not surprising that *middling* people are the most necessary for the maintenance of a virtuous state.

However, as pointed out earlier, societies do not really have a middle. We have examined the role of the ‘middle class’ as the locus of moderation and as counterweight to the sovereignty of the majority in Aristotle’s political thought. But who was ‘middle class’ according to the philosopher? By ‘middle class’ Aristotle probably meant the group of ‘self-sufficient landed proprietors who evidently work their land with the help of a few slaves or part-time labourers’.⁶⁶ To a great extent, this definition is arbitrary. Why should that group be considered the ‘middle class’, to the exclusion of other sections of the population, such as merchants, shopkeepers or artisans? Were these groups not also in between the rich and the poor (at least in terms of economic wealth)? Aristotle’s attribution of a ‘middling’ role to the yeoman alone probably lies in his contempt for urban economic activities, and his preference for the rural lifestyle and

the values of his own class. To his mind, merchants, shopkeepers and labourers were all part of the urban multitude that was threatening the supremacy of the well-born; in that context, Aristotle concluded, the yeoman could probably be mobilized in support of the landed aristocracy or, at least, in defence of the (reformed, if necessary) status quo. This was one of the central items of the political programme with which Aristotle sought to face the challenge of democracy and egalitarianism.

IV The Idea of ‘Middle Class’ in Perspective: Aristotle and Modern Liberalism

In this respect, Aristotle’s political programme strongly resembles that of the French doctrinaires in the first half of the nineteenth century, when they made use of a discourse of ‘middle class’ for the first time in order to mobilize the higher bourgeoisie against the tide of democracy and egalitarianism unleashed by the French Revolution. As François Guizot conceded in a paragraph of his memoirs recalling his early political years:

It was real dangers that we were facing while discussing the electoral regime for France in 1817. We perceived that the most legitimate principles and the most obscure interests of the new society were equally threatened by a violent reaction. We felt, at the same time, that the revolutionary spirit was being reborn and was fermenting around us, making use, as usually, of noble passions to conceal the march and to prepare the victory of the worst. Due to their disposition and interest, the middle classes were the most likely to fight against both dangers [...] To turn this anti-revolutionary situation of the middle classes to the benefit of the ancient monarchy –now constitutional– and to ensure that monarchy the support and help of those, while granting the middle classes a large role in government: that was the politics that the spiritual and factual reality clearly indicated; that was the politics of the electoral law of 1817.⁶⁷

It is not surprising that a similar political device appeared when a social order based on birth and fixed social conditions was being replaced by mobile social classes and threatened by egalitarianism, be it in modern Europe or ancient Greece. Indeed, the very expression ‘middle class’ was almost completely unknown in Europe’s political vocabulary until the French Revolution of 1789. Some years before that revolution, a few authors had already toyed with the idea of there being such a thing as a class in between rich and poor, for example Diderot’s ‘comfortably-off class’ and Saint-Lambert’s ‘intermediate estate’, Rousseau’s ‘middle order’ (1764) and Volney’s ‘middling order’ (1787).⁶⁸ In some of these cases the idea that the middling people are more prone to moderation had already appeared –for example, in 1748

Montesquieu had presented the Aristotelian idea that the ‘mediocre people’ were the basis of a wise constitution—. ⁶⁹ But until 1789 these expressions remained at the theoretical level, without contaminating the political vocabulary. ⁷⁰ As Jacques Guilhaumou and others have argued, the language used to designate classes and parties in 1789 was still mainly binary. The appearance of the modern expression ‘middle class’ or ‘middling class’ [*classe moyenne* or *mitoyenne*], from 1789 onwards, was related to the necessity to mobilize a group of supporters who were ready to defend some of the achievements of the revolution, but reject the most radical claims of the populace. Thus, the politician Philippe-Antoine Grouvelle, who was interested in the creation of a third party of the ‘moderate’, launched in 1789 an appeal to the ‘middling class’, for that class alone would save France ‘from the tyranny of the *Grands* and the excesses of the populace’. Interestingly enough, Grouvelle also rediscovered the utility of Montesquieu’s ideas in his *De l’autorité de Montesquieu* (1789). ⁷¹ In the first years of the revolution, the new expression ‘middle class’ was also present in writings and speeches of moderate leaders –including moderate Jacobins– and in the new translations of Aristotle’s *Politics* (in previous editions of that work, ‘middle class’ had been rendered as ‘*les médiocres*’). ⁷² Moreover, the Aristotelian inspiration of that brand of ‘moderate’ politics can be found in leaders such as Lafayette, who argued in favour of a mixed government combining old and new institutions. ⁷³ The anti-egalitarian tendency of this supposedly ‘moderate’ programme did not pass unnoticed by leaders such as Brissot or Robespierre; in 1792 the latter denounced Lafayette because he

wanted to create a middling party between the hideous aristocracy of the Ancien Régime and the people, and to support it by all the royal power, by letting Louis XVI participate in the project. In order to accomplish this, it was indispensable to present the party of the people itself as a faction. It was indispensable to invert the morality of equality and social justice into a system of destruction and anarchy. By means of this system of defamation, all the bad citizens, who are too cautious or too coward to raise high the ensign of the aristocracy openly, are provided the means to combat liberty without seeming to abandon its banner. All the shy, the weak, and the prudent are thus detached from the people’s class. The rich, the civil servants, the selfish, the ambitious and intriguers, and those who play the role of authorities, get together under the banner of this hypocritical faction known as ‘moderates’, who have put the Revolution in jeopardy. ⁷⁴

But it was only some years later that the discourse of ‘middle class’ became more visible, in the political programme of Guizot and the doctrinaires. Since then, liberal political programmes have been presented as ‘*juste milieu*’ or ‘moderate’, that is, the ‘centre’ between ‘extremes’ equally inadequate, harmful or even evil. ⁷⁵ And it should be obvious by now that the measures that the liberals usually recommend are not in the ‘middle’ of anything; nor are they the balanced combination of all other political programmes. There are many different ways to organize social life. Liberal measures are just one set among many

thinkable measures; it is debatable whether they are better for the people or not, but it can be said that they represent the right equilibrium or the ‘centre’ only by use of the cunning metaphorical device that we have analyzed in this article. By saying that liberal measures are at the ‘centre’ of the political spectrum, the liberal ideology naturalizes them. In other words, liberal ideology makes use of the ancient metaphorical formation of the golden mean in order to present a particular political programme (‘moderate’, ‘centre’, ‘middle way’ and so on) and the interests of a certain social (‘middle’) class as the common good and as common sense. In this way, liberal choices appear validated not merely by the opinion of individuals, but by the law of nature; once the public has accepted this ‘common sense’ as neutral, all other interests and programmes appear as ‘ideological’, interested, partial, immoderate, excessive, extreme, deviant and even evil.

In sum, the concept of ‘middle class’ (and generally the metaphorical formation of the golden mean as applied to politics) has been a typical element of elitist ideologies; it seems to appear when mobile social categories pose a threat to the authority of the elite. As such, the concept of ‘middle class’ always remains partially ‘open’ and changeable, for if society, as I have already argued, has no ‘middle’ of its own, it follows that a certain group can be called ‘middle class’ only by virtue of a cultural convention. Who then belongs to the ‘middle class’? To put it simply, the delimitation of the ‘middle’ of society depends on the question of who must be brought in, in order to keep whom out. Thus, Aristotle chose to convince his fellow aristocrats to accept the yeoman, in order to keep the urban mob out; so, the yeomen were named the ‘middle class’. In Guizot’s times, the issue was to accept the fact of the social predominance of the higher bourgeoisie and to keep the people out; so, in Guizot’s mind the bourgeoisie was the new ‘middle class’. Later on, under the pressure of a better-organized and radical working class, the ‘middle class’ had to open its lower ranks to the *‘nouvelles couches sociales’*, as the French republican politician Gambetta liked to say in the early 1870s. Thus, towards the turn of the century ‘middle class’ included in France not only the bourgeoisie, but also the petty shopkeepers and, later on, some categories of independent workers and even some types of wage-earners.⁷⁶

In this respect, despite the defeat of the exclusive and openly bourgeois regime of the doctrinaires in 1848, their political project was victorious at the deeper level inhabited by ideologies. Thus, under the pressure of radical republicanism and socialism, after 1848 the new generation of liberal politicians finally accepted universal suffrage and republicanism as facts, and distanced themselves from Guizot and from any explicit appeal to the bourgeoisie. However, this ‘dissimulation’ of the role ascribed to the bourgeoisie after *‘le moment Guizot’*, as Pierre Rosanvallon argues, constitutes the step through which ‘bourgeois ideology’ finally crystallized. True, the bourgeoisie could no longer present or think of itself as a separate class (not to mention a privileged class); but the counterpart of this move was the projection of its own image upon the rest of society, as an abstract and universal ideal of the good (bourgeois) society. If disguising particular interests as *the* general interest is the basic function of ideologies, Guizot was no longer convenient, because far from masking the rule of the bourgeoisie, he had openly

proclaimed it. His role, however, was fundamental to the consolidation of bourgeois ideology, for he provided in his works the basic narrative and political account of the new society. Indeed, despite all their criticism of Guizot, the thinkers and politicians who led France in the second half of the nineteenth century shared his conservatism. However, they re-inscribed the elitist and typically liberal idea of ‘capacity’ (that is, the idea that individuals can make use of certain rights only if they show the capacity to do so in a rational way) in a different frame. Thus, this elitist dimension was dissociated from any direct sociological reference (such as ‘the pre-eminence of the middle class’), and related now to a cult of science and intelligence. The founders of the Third Republic in particular resolved the typically *doctrinaire* issue of the gap between the sovereignty of the people and the sovereignty of Reason –that is, the distance between what the liberals consider is right, and people’s decisions– by means of two subtle shifts. First, they ascribed a fundamental role to education, for it expands political ‘capacity’ downwards (Ferry), and, second, they advocated expanding small property ownership and incorporating the ‘*nouvelles couches sociales*’ as a key element of democracy (Gambetta). To these aspects should be added the permanence of an institutional design aimed at counterbalancing the will of the majority. In sum, for all the critical remarks on Guizot and doctrinaire liberalism, the politics of the Third Republic represented less of a change than its leaders would have liked to accept: the elitist dimension of political life remained untouched.⁷⁷

What is important for our purposes is to visualise the line of continuity that unites Aristotle’s elitist political thinking and modern liberalism, and the importance of both in the making of bourgeois ideology.⁷⁸ For all the claims of liberalism’s moral neutrality, existing liberalism actually shares with Aristotle’s philosophy the belief in a universal ethics, beyond the realm of human choice. In both cases, in fact, ‘universal’ ethics is actually marked by the projection of the elite’s particular values and code of behaviour. Hence the importance of (elitist) moral education for Aristotle and for most modern liberals (for example, Tocqueville).⁷⁹ For *liberal* democracy –to put it in the words of a contemporary liberal theoretician who argues for an Aristotelian ethical turn in liberal philosophy– does not mean the sovereignty of *any* people, nor freedom the protection of the interest of *any* individual. On the contrary, the modern agreement between the sovereignty of the majority and the protection of the individuals’ rights presupposes the existence of a *particular type* of citizen (as opposed to any human being as such), for whom virtue and interest are not opposed. Thus, for this author, *liberal* democracy means ‘rule by the kind of people who are primarily concerned with personal independence and an income adequate to achieve this comfortably’ (or, to put it in the words Stephen Salkever borrows from Ralph Lerner, ‘the American commercial republican as the new-model man’).⁸⁰

In summary, the transition from overt bourgeois discourse (Guizot) to bourgeois ideology means the social internalization of bourgeois values and patterns of behaviour usually ascribed to the ‘middle class’: ‘moderation’ understood as acceptance of the status quo, self-restraint with regards to other persons’ established rights and privileges, and so on. The de-politicization of the interests and aspirations

of a group of society by means of the metaphorical formation of the ‘golden mean’, and the projection onto it of the values of the elite, can be conceived as the first step towards the naturalization of the elite’s way of life as the norm for society as a whole. The invention of the idea of ‘middle class’ was a fundamental part of that process.⁸¹

V Conclusion

We have explored the political uses of the idea of ‘middle class’, and the metaphorical operation it performs. Through the comparison of its two formative periods –ancient Greece and modern Europe– it became apparent that the idea of ‘middle class’ belongs to a wider metaphorical formation, which transports our understanding of nature to our conceptualization of social life. The metaphorical nature of the idea of ‘middle class’ was identified in the works of Aristotle and Diderot, in which comparisons to physical, chemical and biological realities became evident. By means of that metaphorical operation, the idea of ‘middle class’ helps to naturalize and universalize certain aspects of society. Thus, a number of facts, values and political preferences ascribed to a ‘middle class’ are discursively constructed as ‘balanced’, ‘equilibrated’, in sum, ‘moderate’. By the same token, other political preferences appear as ‘extreme’ and, therefore, dangerous for social ‘equilibrium’ (and, therefore, for society as a whole).

The ideological function of this metaphorical operation was also explored. The idea of ‘middle class’ was used, in both ancient Greece and modern France, as a way to face the challenge of social equality and radical democracy. The idea of a ‘middle class’ social order permits acceptance of some elements of the critique of inequality, while maintaining, however, an elitist society. ‘Middle class’ always remains an ‘empty significant’, whose specific content –that is, the concrete social groups who will be defined as ‘middling’– is defined historically, according to the challenges ‘from below’ and the possible strategies to counter those challenges ‘from above’.

We do not know how influential Aristotle’s formulation of the ‘middle class’ *polity* was in his own epoch. It is clear, however, that a very similar idea, adopted and further developed by modern liberalism, proved extraordinarily effective in our time.

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¹ John Ehrenberg, *Civil Society: the Critical History of an Idea* (New York & London, 1999), pp. 88-97, 124.

² Norberto Bobbio, *La teoría de las formas de gobierno en la historia del pensamiento político* (México, 1994), p. 163.

³ See for example the articles ‘Pauvre’ and ‘Richesse’ in Diderot’s and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie*.

⁴ A possible exception to this statement can be found in his article ‘Homme’ (1765) in the *Encyclopédie*.

⁵ Jacques Proust, *Diderot et l’Encyclopédie* (Paris, 1962), p. 480.

⁶ Denis Diderot, *Œuvres*, edited by Laurent Versini, 5 vols (Paris, 1994), III, pp. 165, 168, 604, 610. Hereafter LV.

⁷ LV, III, pp. 588-89. The theme of happiness (*bonheur*) as ‘*aurea mediocritas*’ was taken from Greek classical philosophy and widely discussed in eighteenth-century France. Particularly, in the philosophical-political debate on ‘luxury’ a particular conception of a ‘bonheur bourgeois’ –a ‘*mediocrité*’ between luxury and asceticism– emerged. On the theme of ‘*aurea mediocritas*’ see my discussion of Aristotle’s ideas below, and Robert Mauzi, *L’idée du Bonheur dans la littérature et la pensée françaises au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1960), pp. 175-79.

⁸ See Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London, 1988), pp. 60-62.

⁹ Dallas Cloutare, ‘The Concept of Class in French Culture Prior to the Revolution’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. XLV (2), April-June 1984, pp. 219-44, pp. 227-44; see also Peter Calvert, *The Concept of Class* (London & New York, 1982), and Marie-France Piguët, *Classe: Histoire du mot et genèse du concept des Physiocrates aux historiens de la Restauration* (Lyon, 1996).

¹⁰ Diderot had already given attention to this debate in his *Salon de 1767*. See Denis Diderot, *Œuvres Complètes*, 20 vols, edited by Jules Assézat & Maurice Tourneux (Paris, 1875-1877), XI, p. 87. Hereafter A-T.

¹¹ Dominique Margairaz, ‘La querelle du luxe au XVIIIe siècle’, in *Le Luxe en France, du siècle des ‘Lumières’ à nos jours*, edited by Jacques Marseille (Paris, 1999), pp. 25-37; see also John Sekora, *Luxury: the Concept in Western Thought, from Eden to Smollett* (Baltimore, 1977); Carlo Borghero, *La polemica sul lusso nel settecento francese* (Turin, 1973); R. Galiani, *Rousseau, le luxe et l’idéologie nobiliaire: Étude socio-historique* (Oxford, 1989); Philippe Perrot, *Le luxe: une richesse entre faste et confort XVIIIe-XIXe siècles* (Paris, 1995); J.-P. Goubert, *Du luxe au confort* (Paris, 1988); André Morize, *L’apologie du luxe au XVIIIe siècle et ‘Le Mondain’ de Voltaire* (Genève, 1970).

¹² As G. Goggi has argued, another possible influence may have been that of Alexandre Deleyre. Gianluigi Goggi, ‘Alexandre Deleyre et le *Voyage en Sibérie* de Chappe d’Auteroche: la Russie, les pays du Nord et la question de la civilisation’, in *Le mirage russe au XVIIIe siècle*, edited by Sergei Karp & Larry Wolff (Ferney-Voltaire, 2001), pp. 75-134, pp. 100-01.

¹³ A-T, XVI, p. 14-24. ‘Luxe’ was mistakenly included in this edition of Diderot’s works, but it was written by Saint-Lambert.

¹⁴ LV, I, p. 889.

¹⁵ It is worth remembering that, in its Latin root (*luxus*), ‘luxury’ means ‘excess’ or ‘deviation’ from a norm. The opposite was *mediocritas*, attachment to the norm. As will become evident, Diderot’s idea of an intermediate class is deeply connected to the ancient idea of *aurea mediocritas*.

¹⁶ LV, I, p. 892.

¹⁷ On Diderot and Russia see my article ‘Diderot en Rusia, Rusia en Diderot. El papel de la imagen de Rusia en la evolución del pensamiento político del último Diderot’, *Studia Historica: Historia Moderna*, 22, 2000, pp. 245-82.

¹⁸ LV, I, p. 903. Diderot had expressed some of these ideas before, in a contribution for the second edition of the *Histoire des Deux Indes* (1774). See LV, III, pp. 588-589.

¹⁹ LV, III, p. 563.

²⁰ Catherine II, *Instructions adressées par sa Majesté l’Impératrice de toutes les Russies à la Commission établie pour travailler à l’exécution du projet d’un nouveau code de lois* (Pétersbourg, 1769), pp. 174-76.

²¹ LV, III, p. 561.

²² David Griffiths, 'Eighteenth-century Perceptions of Backwardness: Projects for the Creation of a Third Estate in Catherinean Russia', *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, 13 (4), Winter 1979, pp. 452-72; see also Robert Jones, 'Jacob Sievers, Enlightened Reform and the Development of a 'Third Estate' in Russia', *The Russian Review*, vol. 36 (4), Oct. 1977, pp. 424-37.

²³ LV, III, p. 662.

²⁴ LV, III, p. 638.

²⁵ LV, I, p. 1197. Similar opinions can also be found in a text for the *Histoire des deux Indes*: see LV, III, p. 722.

²⁶ Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des lois*, 2 vols (Paris, 1995), p. 732.

²⁷ The hypothesis set out here and in II.2 has been presented at length in my article 'Presencias intermedias: la "clase media" y el tema de lo intermedio en la filosofía de Diderot', *Revista Latinoamericana de Filosofía*, vol. XXVII, no. 1, Otoño 2001, pp. 31-58.

²⁸ LV, I, p. 903.

²⁹ A-T, XI, pp. 93-94; LV, I, p. 1197.

³⁰ LV, III, pp. 326-27, 609-11.

³¹ LV, I, p. 902; III, p. 638; I, p. 1197.

³² LV, III, pp. 518, 277, 280-81.

³³ A-T, XI, pp. 125, 293-94. It must be said, however, that in some other texts Diderot advanced completely opposite aesthetic opinions, and praised pieces of art which were out of the ordinary. See Jacques Chouillet, *La formation des idées esthétiques de Diderot, 1745-63* (Paris, 1973).

³⁴ LV, III, pp. 239, 325.

³⁵ LV, III, pp. 311-13.

³⁶ LV, III, p. 281.

³⁷ See G. Lakoff & M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, 1980).

³⁸ See Jacques Chouillet, *Diderot poète de l'énergie* (Paris, 1984), pp. 227-28.

³⁹ LV, I, p. 631.

⁴⁰ LV, I, p. 626; see also Merle Perkins, *Diderot and the Time-Space Continuum: His Philosophy, Aesthetics and Politics* (*Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* no. 211)(Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1982), pp. 40-43, 61, 69, 144-46.

⁴¹ Geoffrey Bremner, *Order and Chance: The Pattern of Diderot's Thought* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 92-93.

⁴² LV, I, pp. 1261-62.

⁴³ See the remarks of the editor in LV I, pp. 1262-64. On the importance of the idea of spontaneous generation and universal fermentation in Diderot's thought, see Gerhardt Stenger, *Nature et Liberté chez Diderot après l'Encyclopédie* (Paris, 1994), pp. 140ff.; Annie Ibrahim, 'Diderot ou le paradoxe du développement aléatoire', in Olivier Bloch et al. (eds), *Entre forme et histoire: La formation de la notion de développement à l'âge classique* (Paris: Meridiens Klincksieck, 1988), pp. 145-58; B. Lynne Dixon, *Diderot, Philosopher of Energy: The Development of his Concept of Physical Energy 1745-1769* (*Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* no. 255)(Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1988), pp. 11-13, 21-23, 149-52. It is worth noting that Aristotle was already

interested in the ‘intermediate beings’, the zoophytes, which seemed to prove the idea of a Great Chain of Being; see the classic study by Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (New York, 1960), pp. 56-59.

⁴⁴ See LV, I, p. 1257.

⁴⁵ LV, I, pp. 1270, 1311, 1271, 1277-79.

⁴⁶ LV, I, p. 1313.

⁴⁷ Elisabeth de Fontenay, *Diderot o el materialismo encantado* (México, 1988), p. 212.

⁴⁸ Ellen Meiksins Wood & Neal Wood, *Class Ideology and Ancient Political Theory: Socrates, Plato and Aristotle in Social Context* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 2-5.

⁴⁹ Osvaldo Guariglia, *Ética y política según Aristóteles* (Buenos Aires, 1992), pp. 251ff.

⁵⁰ Aristotle, *La Política* (Madrid, 1996), pp. 187-89 and 219-21; see also Romano García, ‘Estado y clase media en Aristóteles’, *Pensamiento*, vol. 44, no. 174, 1988, pp. 163-87; Stephen Salkever, *Finding the Mean: Theory and Practice in Aristotelian Political Philosophy* (Princeton, 1990), pp. 224-25. There is disagreement among commentators about the relationship between the *Polity* and what Aristotle calls the ‘middle constitution’. Whilst for most authors the two labels refer to the same thing, John Creed has argued that the latter constitutes the best type of the *Polity*. Moreover, whilst the *Polity* is conceived as a mixture of the institutions representing the rich and the poor (that is, a sort of *political device* that balances oligarchy and democracy), ‘middle constitution’ seems to refer to the situation in which the predominance of the ‘middle class’ already embodies that equilibrium *in society*, beyond institutional devices; see John Creed, ‘Aristotle’s Middle Constitution’, *Polis: Newsletter of the Society for the Study of Greek Political Thought*, vol. 8, no. 2, Autumn 1989, pp. 2-27. For our purposes it is enough to note that Aristotle conceived social happiness as equilibrium between the rich and the poor, and that the ‘middle class’ embodies that equilibrium and is assumed to act in the most virtuous way, because of its intermediate economic status.

⁵¹ Eric A. Havelock, *The Liberal Temper in Greek Politics* (New Haven & London, 1964), p. 328.

⁵² García, ‘Estado y clase media’, p. 167. Like everything else in the field of Aristotelian studies, the idea that the philosopher found inspiration in the physical realm for his conceptions about ethics and social life is far from undisputed. Early commentators were more convinced by the idea than were later scholars, who tended to reject it; see W.F.R. Hardie, *Aristotle’s Ethical Theory* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 142-51. However, George Terzis has recently provided a very convincing revalidation of the earlier positions; see G. Terzis, ‘Homeostasis and the Mean in Aristotle’s Ethics’, in Richard Bosley et al. (eds), *Aristotle, Virtue and the Mean* (Edmonton, 1995), pp. 175-89.

⁵³ Creed, ‘Aristotle’s Middle Constitution’, p. 4.

⁵⁴ Salkever, *Finding the Mean*, p. 223.

⁵⁵ On this issue see Havelock, *The Liberal Temper*, and Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN, 1981).

⁵⁶ See Meiksins Wood & Wood, *Class Ideology and Ancient Political Theory*, pp. 101-105.

⁵⁷ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 133.

⁵⁸ Havelock, *The Liberal Temper*, pp. 29-30, 393-94.

⁵⁹ Meiksins Wood & Wood, *Class Ideology and Ancient Political Theory*, pp. 103-105.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 155, 223-24; Guariglia, *Ética y política*, pp. 236-40, 253.

⁶¹ Some scholars still believe that the doctrine of the mean is consistent. Often in this debate scholars dispute the correct translation and meaning of Aristotle's words; at this level of subtlety it is impossible for a non-specialist to decide for or against a position. As a historian of ideas, I have chosen the interpretation that I present here because it seems to correspond to modern uses of the doctrine of the mean as well. For this debate, see Salkever, *Finding the Mean*; Hardie, *Aristotle's Ethical Theory*, pp. 129-151; Guariglia, *Ética y política*, pp. 180-82; J. O. Urmson, 'Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean', in Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley, 1980), pp. 157-70; Rosalind Hursthouse, 'A False Doctrine of the Mean', in Nancy Sherman (ed.), *Aristotle's Ethics: Critical Essays* (Lanham & Oxford, 1999), pp. 105-19; Ioannis Evrigenis, 'The Doctrine of the Mean in Aristotle's Ethical and Political Theory', *History of Political Thought*, vol. XX, no. 3, Autumn 1999, pp. 393-416; Richard Bosley et al. (eds), *Aristotle, Virtue and the Mean* (Edmonton, 1995); Stephen A. White, *Sovereign Virtue: Aristotle on the Relation Between Happiness and Prosperity* (Stanford, 1992).

⁶² Hursthouse, 'A False Doctrine of the Mean'; see also Hardie, *Aristotle's Ethical Theory*, pp. 129-51, and Guariglia, *Ética y política*, pp. 180-82, 224, 247.

⁶³ See Richard Bosley, *On Virtue and Vice: The Metaphysical Foundations of the Doctrine of the Mean* (New York, 1991).

⁶⁴ See Émile Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, 2 vols (Paris, 1969), II, pp. 123-32.

⁶⁵ Terzis, 'Homeostasis and the Mean in Aristotle's Ethics', p. 181; see also Richard Bosley, 'Aristotle's Use of the Theory of the Mean: How Adaptable and Flexible is the Theory?', in Bosley et al. (eds), *Aristotle, Virtue and the Mean*, pp. 35-66, 49-50; Evrigenis, 'The Doctrine of the Mean'; García, 'Estado y clase media'.

⁶⁶ Meiksins Wood & Wood, *Class Ideology and Ancient Political Theory*, p. 222; see also Creed, 'Aristotle's Middle Constitution', p. 7.

⁶⁷ François Guizot, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de mon temps*, 8 vols (Paris, 1858-1867), I, pp. 170-71.

⁶⁸ See Willibald Steinmetz, 'Gemeineuropäische Tradition und nationale Besonderheiten im Begriff der 'Mittelklasse'. Ein Vergleich zwischen Deutschland, Frankreich und England', in Reinhart Koselleck & Klaus Schreiner (eds), *Bürgerschaft. Rezeption und Innovation der Begrifflichkeit vom Hohen Mittelalter bis ins 19. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart, 1994), pp. 161-236; Marie-France Piguët, *Classe: Histoire du mot et genèse du concept des Physiocrates aux historiens de la Restauration* (Lyon, 1996).

⁶⁹ See Klaus-Peter Sick, 'Le concept de Classes Moyennes. Notion sociologique ou slogan politique?', *Vingtième siècle*, no. 37, January-March 1993, pp.13-33, p. 14.

⁷⁰ It must be said, however, that similar expressions –such as 'the middle sort of men'– were to some extent part of the English political vocabulary already in the second half of the seventeenth century. See Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution 1603-1714* (London, 1980), p. 105.

⁷¹ Jacques Guilhaumou, *L'avènement des porte-parole de la République (1789-1792): Essai de synthèse sur les langages de la Révolution française* (Villeneuve-d'Ascq, 1998), pp. 215-16.

⁷² See Steinmetz, 'Gemeineuropäische Tradition'; Piguët, *Classe: Histoire du mot*, p. 102; Sick, 'Le concept de Classes Moyennes'.

⁷³ See Georges Benrekassa, 'Modéré, modération, modérantisme: le concept de modération, de l'âge classique à l'âge bourgeois', in G. Benrekassa, *Le langage des Lumières: Concepts et savoir de la langue* (Paris, 1995), pp. 125-64, pp. 141-43.

⁷⁴ Quoted in Benrekassa, 'Modéré, modération, modérantisme', pp. 144-45.

⁷⁵ See Mechtild Fischer, *Mittelklasse als politischer Begriff in Frankreich seit der Revolution* (Göttingen, 1974).

⁷⁶ See Sick, 'Le concept de Classes Moyennes'; Gilles LeBéguec, 'Prélude à un syndicalisme bourgeois: l'Association de défense des classes moyennes (1907-1939)', *Vingtième Siècle*, no. 37, January-March 1993, pp. 93-104; Jean Ruhlmann, *Ni bourgeois ni prolétaires: La défense des classes moyennes en France au XXe. siècle* (Paris, 2001). The emergence and evolution of the concept of 'middle class' in Britain seems to have followed a similar scheme. As in France, after 1789 the concept of 'middle class' was introduced and used in Britain with anti-egalitarian purposes; see Dror Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c. 1780-1840* (Cambridge, 1995); Vincent E. Starzinger, *Middlingness: Juste milieu Political Theory in France and England 1815-1848* (Charlottesville, 1965). Similar anti-egalitarian uses of 'middle class' can be found elsewhere, from the policies of the United States in Latin America during the Cold War, to the social and political ideas that the Catholic Church favoured in various countries in the 1940s and after. See Michael F. Jiménez, 'The Elision of the Middle Classes and Beyond: History, Politics, and Development Studies in Latin America's "Short Twentieth Century"', in Jeremy Adelman (ed.), *Colonial Legacies. The Problem of Persistence in Latin American History* (New York & London, 1999), pp. 207-28; also Fr. Marion Habig, 'The Golden Mean', *Franciscan Studies*, vol. 22, no. 4, December 1941, pp. 122-35; J. Roberto Bonamino, 'El comunismo y la clase media', *Boletín de la Acción Católica Argentina*, no. 340, Oct. 1950, pp. 151-55; Pope Pio XII, 'All'Istituto Internazionale delle Classi Medie', in *Discorsi e Radiomessaggi di Sua Santità Pio XII*, 20 vols, Tipografia Poliglotta Vaticana, n./d., XVIII, pp. 603-05.

⁷⁷ Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le moment Guizot* (Paris, 1985), pp. 344-48, 354-70; see also George A. Kelly, 'Liberalism and Aristocracy in the French Restoration', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. XXVI, no. 4, Oct.-Dec. 1965, pp. 509-30.

⁷⁸ The close resemblance of Aristotelian philosophy and liberalism has been pointed out by many scholars –some of whom are liberals themselves, the perfect examples being Leo Strauss and his school. See Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York & London, 1968). For example, David Lowenthal has explored the deep influence of Aristotle on Montesquieu's political philosophy. Similarly, Stephen Salkever has argued that Tocqueville's political philosophy has much in common with Aristotle's. Alan Kahan has found in Aristotle one of the main sources of 'aristocratic liberalism', in that they share a similar teleological definition of human nature, with which political decisions should agree. Ronald Beiner and Stephen Macedo have argued that, despite the opinion of many liberals, liberalism does have a particular definition of virtue, and in that respect is related to Aristotle's philosophy. Finally, Eric Havelock goes as far as to argue that 'Aristotle has exercised over the Western mind a moral authority not unlike that which has been wielded by the Old Testament...'. See David Lowenthal, 'Montesquieu and the Classics: Republican Government in The Spirit of the Laws', in Joseph Cropsey (ed.), *Ancients and Moderns: Essays on the Tradition of Political Philosophy in Honor of Leo Strauss* (New York & London, 1964, pp. 258-87; Salkever, *Finding the Mean*, pp. 227-35; Alan S. Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism: The Social and Political Thought*

of Jacob Burckhardt, John Stuart Mill, and Alexis de Tocqueville (Oxford, 1992), pp. 83-84; Ronald Beiner, 'The Moral Vocabulary of Liberalism', in John W. Chapman & William A. Galston (eds), *Virtue* (New York, 1992), pp. 145-84; Stephen Macedo, 'Charting Liberal Virtues', in Chapman & Galston (eds), *Virtue*, pp. 204-232; Havelock, *The Liberal Temper*, p. 376. On this issue see also García, 'Estado y clase media', p. 179; R. Bolgar (ed.), *Classical Influences on Western Thought, A.D. 1650-1870, Proceedings of an International Conference Held at King's College, Cambridge, March 1977* (Cambridge, 1979).

⁷⁹ As the prominent scholar and liberal theoretician Leo Strauss argued, 'A democracy is a regime in which all or most adults are men of virtue, and since virtue seems to require wisdom, a regime in which all or most adults are virtuous and wise, or the society in which all or most adults have developed their reason to a high degree, or *the* rational society. Democracy, in a word, is meant to be an aristocracy, which has broadened into a universal aristocracy... Liberal education is the counterpoison to mass culture, to the corroding effects of mass culture, to its inherent tendency to produce nothing but "specialists without spirit or vision and voluptuaries without heart". Liberal education is the ladder by which we try to ascend from mass democracy to democracy as originally meant. Liberal education is the necessary endeavour to found an aristocracy within democratic mass society.' Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, p. 6. The connection between elitism, teleological virtue, liberal education and restrictive political rights could not be clearer.

⁸⁰ Salkever, *Finding the Mean*, pp. 218-19. It is worth pointing out that this implicit, class-biased model of the 'democratic' individual has effects that go beyond the theoretical sphere. It has often served, in modern and contemporary times, overtly or tacitly to ignore or limit the political rights of those without the 'right' disposition regarding the (bourgeois) ethical or behavioural code; the relationship between Western liberal democracies and their colonial subjects is a good example of that.

⁸¹ Another example of this can be found in the following statement: 'The linkage between liberalism and middle-class society is not that of ideology to infrastructure, but a kind of synthesis of theory and practice. Liberalism is the political expression of the middling, centrist view of life. It is the humanism of moderation, modesty, and morality. It is the expression of a desire to live above the brute existence of the poorest and below the idle luxury of the richest.' William Logue, *From Philosophy to Sociology: The Evolution of French Liberalism, 1870-1914* (DeKalb, IL, 1983), p. 9.