

CLASS, CONSCIOUSNESS, AND THE  
FALL OF THE BOURGEOIS REVOLUTION

ABSTRACT: *The Marxian vulgate, which long dominated the historiography of the French Revolution, and which was broadly accepted in the social sciences, is no longer sustainable. But newer attempts to frame the issue of class in entirely linguistic terms, producing the claim that France had no bourgeoisie because few people explicitly described themselves as “bourgeois,” are not entirely convincing. The Revolution brought into being, and helped to sustain, a new social group: the “state bourgeoisie,” which defined itself by its education and by state service, and which was socially cohesive and exclusive. Thus, the Revolution can be seen as “bourgeois” not in the sense of having been caused by a rising bourgeoisie, but in the sense that it caused one to rise.*

For 150 years, the French Revolution was a bourgeois revolution. By this I do not mean, of course, that an ongoing French Revolution had the characteristics of a bourgeois revolution for a century and a half. Rather, from roughly 1820 to 1970, the French Revolution was, throughout the world, predominantly *viewed as* a bourgeois revolution.

The history of early-modern France, so the story usually went, witnessed the expansion and enrichment of a distinct bourgeois class, which increasingly chafed at its lack of a degree of political power commensurate with its economic importance. Another distinct class, the ruling nobility, perceived this rising bourgeoisie as a threat, and worked

actively to repress it. The resulting antagonism gradually increased until finally revolution burst out in 1789, after which the victorious bourgeoisie enjoyed unquestioned predominance in French politics, society, and culture.

The thesis is in essence a Marxist one, yet it preceded the development of Marxism, and was widely accepted by many who did not consider themselves in the least Marxist. It is not exaggerating matters to say that in many parts of the world, it was long taken utterly for granted.

The fall of the “bourgeois revolution” thesis since roughly 1970 has had profound implications. It raises questions about the ways in which the social sciences can draw upon historical evidence, and the ways in which they can make historical claims. In this essay, I would like to explore these questions, focusing on the vexed topic of social class—that great optical puzzle, which so often seems to dissolve upon an observer’s close approach. I will not devote the bulk of this paper to the twentieth-century historiography of the French Revolution.<sup>1</sup> Rather, I will lay out, more schematically, the two principal problems that have emerged from that scholarship: the problem of social classification, and the problem of class politics—both of which revolve in close, tight orbit around the issue of class consciousness. Having addressed these points, I will sketch out a possible new way of envisioning class politics during the French Revolution, and conclude with a few brief remarks about the challenge of integrating social and intellectual history at the start of the twenty-first century.

### *Class and Classification*

Quotidian observation tells us that social class inspires just as much mendacity and exaggeration as sex. Both Bill Gates and his gardener are “middle class.” When I once asked the students in a lecture class at Yale to write down their social class, more than nine out of ten replied “middle class,” and none offered any version of “upper class” or “rich.” When I asked them for the social class of their best friend at the university, “middle class” shrank to 50 percent, with versions of “working class” and “upper class” evenly splitting the remainder.

In a similar move, three ambitious young lawyers in Old Regime France tried to pass themselves off as noble, signing their names with the prestigious French “particule” (“de”): Maximilien de Robespierre,

Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville, and Georges-Jacques d'Anton. Soon enough they would each shed this affectation to become the revolutionaries Robespierre, Brissot, and Danton. Moving in the other direction, radical but economically comfortable shop owners and legal clerks arrested by the Paris police during the Revolution defiantly gave their profession as simply "worker" (Andrews 1985).

These observations support the historian Dror Wahrman's observation that in important senses, social class lies in the eye of the beholder. Societies do not offer observers a single, obvious means of classifying their members, dictated by a single, overwhelmingly important set of facts.

As Wahrman (1995) has argued in *Imagining the Middle Class*, the vision of British society as divided into lower, middle, and upper classes became dominant only in the second and third decades of the nineteenth century, long after the emergence of the social groups that historians tend to bundle into a "middle class." Wahrman's colleague David Cannadine (1998) has suggested that throughout modern history, social observers have in fact alternated among three very different ways of representing the British body social: as starkly divided between "patricians" and "plebeians"; as a three-part structure with low, middle, and upper classes; and as a complex, organic, many-tiered hierarchy.

None of these schemas are any more "true to the facts" than the others. Depending on the questions being asked of the body social, one or the other may prove the most appropriate prism through which to envision the social structure. And, of course, each prism has its distinct political uses. The "patrician/plebeian" schema has repeatedly proven helpful to radical advocates of social change, while conservatives tend to favor the complex-hierarchy model. Wahrman's book convincingly demonstrated that the tripartite schema emerged in France as the result of an essentially political process in which certain groups found it useful to portray the "middle class" as a repository of moderation, stability, and virtue.

Before turning to the French Revolution, I would like to suggest, drawing on recent work on the "languages of class" in Britain and France, that it is useful to think not only about different schemes of classification, but about different ways or modes of going about the very process of classification.<sup>2</sup> In particular, it seems to me that historically, there are three broad modes that observers have employed in conceptualizing social divisions. The first of these is *functional*: A society is thought to be composed of different parts, each of which has a different

role in promoting some overall purpose. With all the parts working properly, the society can, theoretically, function as a cohesive, organic whole. The second is *conflictual*: A society is thought to be composed of different parts that naturally clash with each other, competing for power and resources. The history of the society can be told as a history of these conflicts. Finally, we can point to a *locational* mode of classifying: A society is thought to be divisible into different classes, but the relationship between the classes is seen as multifaceted and complex, and the identity of each class derives simply from its location in the social structure, rather than from its function in a greater social whole, or its conflicts with other classes.

The great example of the functional mode in European history is the idea of the society of orders or estates. In France, from the Middle Ages to 1788, society was formally and institutionally divided into the three estates of the clergy, the nobility, and the common people; these divisions were functional. The clergy were those who prayed, the nobility those who fought, and the common people those who toiled. The Old Regime's closest equivalent to a parliament, the Estates General, consisted of chambers of representatives from each estate, and the same pattern prevailed in the provincial Estates of large provinces such as Brittany and Languedoc.

Particularly in these assemblies, relations between the representatives of the three estates often turned conflictual. However, in the canonical works of such thinkers as the early modern jurist Charles Loyseau (1613), their relationships were always represented as essentially harmonious, with each estate a different and complementary piece of a greater, cohesive whole.

This mode, I would propose, is particularly common in highly religious societies, where the human community is represented as a terrestrial hierarchy seamlessly joined to a greater celestial hierarchy. Arguably, in these societies, in which humanity is defined by its relationship to a celestial telos, the functional mode is the only possible one. The modern concept of “society” itself—that is to say, of society as an autonomous ground of human existence—emerged only in the decades around 1700.<sup>3</sup> This development coincided with, and in palpable ways reflected, the “disenchantment” of European societies in those years (in the sense in which “disenchantment” is used by the French philosopher Marcel Gauchet [1998]), as well as attempts by early modern thinkers to imagine a purely terrestrial sphere entirely separate from a now-hidden God (Bell 2001a).

As for the conflictual mode, its principal exponent hardly needs much introduction: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.” But the representation of class relations as conflictual has predominated in the modern social sciences, and not just among those who feel an intellectual debt to Marx and Engels. Among historians, avowed anti-Marxists with ties to the political Right, such as Roland Mousnier (1973) and J.C.D. Clark (2000), have suggested that the transition to modernity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries consisted of a shift from a harmonious society of orders to a conflictual society of classes. Observers with a penchant for the conflictual mode generally define different classes as having different economic positions, occupying distinct ranges of professions and income brackets.

The locational mode is, almost by definition, more imprecise and difficult to pin down than the other two, and it therefore provides a much less satisfactory analytical category. I am applying the “locational” label both to avowedly neutral attempts to map society without implying either functional or conflictual relations between classes, and to more complex attempts to depict class relationships as inherently shifting and complex affairs that cannot easily be reduced either to function or conflict.<sup>4</sup> The contemporary use of the term “middle class” itself often signifies the use of this mode.

Strikingly, in most European languages there are today two separate terms applied to roughly the same social group: “bourgeoisie” (in French and English; also Spanish “*burguesía*,” Italian “*borghesia*,” German “*Bürgertum*,” Dutch “*burgerij*,” Polish “*burżuazja*,” etc.), and “middle class” (“*classe moyenne*,” “*clase media*,” “*ceto medio*,” “*Mittelstand*,” “*middenstand*,” “*mieszczanstwo*,” etc.). I would assert (in the compass of a short essay I cannot do more) that in these languages, the use of the term “bourgeoisie” generally implies an understanding of class relationships as conflictual, with the class in question defined fairly narrowly in terms of economic position.

The use of “middle class” or “middle classes” generally represents a departure—often an avowed departure—from that view, and the embrace of a more purportedly neutral schema. It might also be remarked that, in contemporary usage, a “middle” class by definition remains in the middle, while a “bourgeoisie” can, as a result of class conflict, come out on top (as illustration, consider the point that while John D. Rockefeller was by most definitions a “bourgeois,” it is hard to think of him as “middle class”).

At least in the news media, as indicated by a search of the Nexis

database, in recent years the term *middle class* and its cognates have prevailed by a large margin over “bourgeoisie” and its cognates throughout Europe. This is true even in France, the country that gave birth to the word *bourgeoisie*, and whose politics was long marked by its usage. The rise of “classe moyenne”—or, more frequently and even more neutrally, “les classes moyennes”—in French political usage, and the generally favorable connotations of these terms, marks a clear departure from an older politics of class that inflected French usage with Marxist presuppositions, and the embrace of an Anglo-American model in which the “middle class,” defined locationally rather than functionally or conflictually, occupies an admired and desired position.

### *The Origins of Marxist Assumptions*

In the social sciences, the conflictual mode of social classification is principally at issue. Today, few if any social scientists would adopt the functional mode, because few if any social scientists believe in a telos or overall purpose for society. The longstanding conflictualist tendency in social-scientific usage is increasingly facing competition from locational modes of classification. But these modes do not usually promise any clear understanding of historical change. Nor do they generally offer any clear means of integrating historical data into social theory. Thus, to return to eighteenth-century France, the historian David Garrioch (1997) has identified various “middling” groups of Parisians as parts of a “bourgeoisie,” but has not been able convincingly to portray this group as socially or politically cohesive, still less as a coherent collective actor on the political scene.

In applying the alternative, conflictual mode to the study of the French Revolution, however, as was so often done between 1820 and 1970, an obvious problem emerges. In the Revolutionary period itself, conflictual models were almost entirely absent; functional ones continued to prevail. The historian Sarah Maza (2003), in a compelling but problematic new book, argues that French authors of the period found it extraordinarily difficult to conceive of society as divided at all.<sup>5</sup> Even to *acknowledge* non-functional social divisions seemed, to them, actively to *promote* social conflict. Instead, representations of the body social glorified universalism: the hope that all the people of “France” might somehow fuse into a perfectly unified spiritual community. Distinct social groups that in one way or another defied or rejected this hope, by

that very stance placed themselves outside society, outside “the nation,” and therefore made themselves potential enemies of it.

This social language very clearly bears the imprint of Rousseau’s thought, and particularly his elaboration of the idea of the general will in *The Social Contract*. Not surprisingly, the most famous text of the Revolutionary era to address the question of class differences, Emmanuel Sieyès’s 1789 pamphlet *What Is the Third Estate?*, draws heavily and explicitly on Rousseau.

At first sight, Sieyès seems to acknowledge the existence of class differences in France between the nobility and commoners. However, on closer examination, it is clear that he considers these differences fundamentally illegitimate. It is the Third Estate that constitutes the nation, and any group that dares set itself apart from the Third Estate is not simply socially distinct, but legally alien: by its very self-definition, it forfeits its membership in the nation. Sieyès ([1789] 1982, 32) even asserts, half in jest, that if the nobility truly considers itself (as many of its apologists claimed) a separate, Germanic race with the hereditary right to rule over the descendants of Gallo-Romans, then its members should be chased “back to the forests of Franconia.”

With a few exceptions, this functional vision of French society remained dominant throughout the Revolutionary period and into the early nineteenth century. Although the radical *sans-culottes*, themselves drawn heavily from the ranks of shop owners and comfortable artisans, frequently denounced the “bourgeoisie,” they did so in the manner pioneered by Sieyès: the “bourgeoisie,” like the “aristocracy,” was simply another group that selfishly held onto privileges and wealth instead of integrating itself into the great family of the nation (see Soboul 1980). A vision of France as divided into competing classes remained almost entirely absent from French newspapers, pamphlets, the publications of political clubs, and the speeches of politicians, from 1789 until after Waterloo.

There *were* writers in this period who described the French Revolution in terms of class conflict—but they were almost all British. Edmund Burke ([1790] 1984, 210–11) observed in France “a state of real . . . warfare between the noble ancient landed interest, and the new monied interest,” while pouring scorn on the revolutionary leadership for being composed of middle-class lawyers. James Mackintosh, taking a more sanguine approach, hailed the French Revolutionaries for deriving from “that middle rank among whom almost all the sense and virtue of society reside.”<sup>6</sup> Over the course of the Revolution, British

opinions of the French social conflict shifted many times, but continued to emphasize the key role of the French “middle class.” These opinions, however, constituted less a glimpse of a French reality to which the French were blind than the imposition of British political and social categories onto French politics.

It was only after the Restoration of 1815 that some French authors, influenced by the British example and less enamored of universalism than their revolutionary predecessors, began to adopt conflictual modes of social classification. It took that long for the vision of 1789 as a “bourgeois revolution” against the aristocracy to become widespread in France itself. Now, intellectuals and politicians such as François Guizot, Pierre-Paul Royer Collard, and Augustin Thierry began to locate the French Revolution within a long history of class conflict, which Thierry even traced back, in a manner reminiscent of the reactionary eighteenth-century aristocrat Boulainvilliers, to a primordial racial conflict between Franks and Gauls. As he put it, in lyrical terms: “We think we are a single nation, but we are two nations on a single soil, two nations at war in their memories and irreconcilable in their hopes for the future” (Thierry 1851, 237).<sup>7</sup> By the 1830s, the “rising bourgeoisie” had become an accepted feature of the French historical landscape, in a way that the revolutionaries of 1789 would have found utterly perplexing—and anathema.

It is quite clear that these French debates influenced Marx and Engels in the 1840s (see Furet 1986). Their defining innovation was less to conceptualize history in terms of class conflict, which Thierry and Guizot had already done, than to present class conflict as a contest between different and incompatible forms of society itself. As Marx (1975, 161) wrote in December, 1848, of the English Civil War and the French Revolution: “The bourgeoisie was victorious in these revolutions, but *the victory of the bourgeoisie* was at that time *the victory of a new social order*, the victory of bourgeois ownership over feudal ownership, of nationality over provincialism, of competition over the guild,” etc.

Needless to say, once Marx and Engels had ensconced the conflictual mode of social classification as a building block in their political program, it became not simply one of several possible prisms of social analysis, but an article of political faith for millions of their followers. And in large part because the most influential historians of the French Revolution numbered among those millions, the Revolution’s bourgeois character became enshrined in the history books as an entirely self-evident truth. From Jean Jaurès’s readable *Socialist History of the*



*French Revolution* (1922–24) through the works of Albert Mathiez, Georges Lefebvre, and Albert Soboul—all holders of the Sorbonne’s prestigious Chair of the History of the French Revolution, and all members of the French Communist Party—the basic “story” of the Revolution remained essentially unchanged.<sup>8</sup> To quote the first lines of an (otherwise excellent) book by one of Soboul’s students, Jean-Paul Bertaud (1979, 31): “1789: The bourgeoisie brought about the Revolution.” There follows a short footnote that dismisses all contending interpretations with contempt.

### *The Decay of the Marxist View*

Since 1970, however, this commonplace has once again come to seem, as in the years before 1820, less than obvious.

As far as questions of class are concerned, the work broadly referred to by specialists of the subject as “revisionism” has come in four distinct waves. First of all, starting in the 1950s, came a body of studies that challenged the empirical basis for judging the French Revolution as “bourgeois,” but without challenging the broader assumption that conflict among antagonistic social classes is the principal driving force of modern history. Thus the Briton Alfred Cobban (1964), the acknowledged progenitor of revisionism, accepted that eighteenth-century France was dominated by a mutually antagonistic aristocracy and bourgeoisie. However, with a sense of impish perversity, he argued that the Revolution came about because of the bourgeoisie’s *decline*.<sup>9</sup>

Later revisionists, such as Colin Lucas (1973) and George Taylor (1967), went much further than Cobban, for they challenged the notion that the bourgeoisie constituted a distinct social class in the eighteenth century. Drawing on a wide range of empirical evidence, Lucas argued that by 1789 the French bourgeoisie and nobility had combined to form a larger class of “notables.” Taylor demonstrated that “bourgeois” and “nobles” did not have fundamentally different relationships to the French economy: both derived their livelihoods almost exclusively from proprietary wealth, in the form of land, venal offices, and government annuities (*rentes*). Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret (1985) later reinforced this evidence, noting that, to the extent that eighteenth-century France had witnessed the beginnings of industrial capitalism, much of the capital lay in the hands of the nobility.

Yet in one sense, the break with the earlier orthodoxy was limited.

Lucas, in particular, presented evidence of social “stresses” within his class of “notables,” and, like Cobban, sought to provide an *alternative* social explanation of the Revolution—rather than a different sort of explanation altogether. The notion of conflictual social relations remained fundamental to his interpretation, even as the definition of social classes themselves grew blurred.

The second wave of revisionists, notably François Furet (1978), did seek a different sort of explanation. Furet returned to one of the few nineteenth-century observers of the Revolution who had *not* conceptualized history in terms of class conflict—Alexis de Tocqueville—and particularly to Tocqueville’s thesis of a fundamental continuity between the old regime and its Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary successors. If the structures of French society had not notably changed across the caesura of 1789, Furet argued, then the Revolution should be understood less as a social rupture than as a cultural and intellectual one.

Furet returned attention to the dynamics of the Revolutionary process itself, the influence of Enlightenment thought, and the heritage of absolute monarchy, suggesting that as early as the spring of 1789, the stage had been set for the Revolution’s inexorable slide into Terror. Furet derided Marxian explanations of the Revolution as nothing other than reworkings of the Jacobins’ original justifications for their own actions, and in his last years he became openly scornful of all attempts to offer “sociological” explanations for 1789.<sup>10</sup> Furet’s critique of class-based theories of the Revolution had tremendous influence, both in its own right and because of the way it was taken up by other leading historians, such as Lynn Hunt (1984) and Keith Michael Baker (1990).

In recent years, several historians have explicitly challenged Furet, calling for the return of class conflict to the interpretation of the Revolution. Yet the best of their works have fallen squarely within the bounds of cultural and intellectual history, rather than social or economic history. They have not challenged the conclusion that there was no distinct, self-conscious bourgeoisie in eighteenth-century France. Rather, they have studied the emergence of new ways of conceptualizing “the social” in eighteenth-century France, and tried to relate them, in a general way, to changes in economic structures. Thus, Colin Jones (1991) has detected the rise of a language of “civic professionalism” in the eighteenth century, and attributes it to the increasing commercialization of the economy and the growing opposition to the old regime’s corporate system of guilds and closed markets. William Sewell (1994),

meanwhile, has identified a “bourgeois” language in the work of Sieyès, grounded in a new valorization of economic production.

The irony of this work is that even while trying to bring social history back into the story of the French Revolution, Jones and Sewell demonstrate more firmly than ever the complete absence of any conventionally understood bourgeois class consciousness in the late eighteenth century, and the utter predominance of functional over conflictual modes of social classification. Jones’s “civic professionalism” was an important intellectual phenomenon, but it was not attached to any particular social class: it found some of its most important expressions in the noble magistrature and officer corps (as well as in the bourgeois professions). Sewell, meanwhile, had to admit that Sieyès’s language of economic production ultimately proved politically ineffective, as it had little permanent attraction for the *rentiers* and professionals who led the Revolution, and did not offer the heroic vision necessary to sustain the Revolutionaries in moments of severe trial. Following on Jones’s and Sewell’s work, moreover, Sarah Maza’s exhaustive survey of French social language in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Maza 2003, esp. 5) reaches a striking conclusion: not only was bourgeois class consciousness utterly lacking, but for this reason, the French bourgeoisie itself has never been anything but a “myth”!

### *From Class to “Identity”*

Should we accept this conclusion? From one point of view, it would seem unavoidable. As the revisionists of revolutionary history demonstrated, it is impossible to identify in the France of 1789 a “bourgeois” social group possessing a distinct relationship to the means of production. It is equally impossible to identify a group united by a common assertion of “bourgeois” identity.

If we really want to find a French “bourgeoisie” at the time of the Revolution, then, it would seem that we are obliged to move from a conflictual mode of social classification to a locational mode—marking off certain strata of the French population by wealth, income, or profession, and grouping them into a “middle class” without any assumption that they possessed in common a subjective identity or an objective relationship to the means of production. David Garrioch (1997) has proceeded in much this manner.

Identifying such a “middle class” might prove useful for many pur-

poses, but not for the historical one of understanding political change. Maza (2003, 6), drawing on the work of E. P. Thompson (1963)—as mediated by the “new cultural history” and by such British historians as Wahrman, Gareth Stedman Jones, and Patrick Joyce—argues that “the existence of social groups, while rooted in the material world, is shaped by language and more specifically by narrative,” and that “classes only exist if they are aware of their own existence.” If we accept these postulates, then a conflictual mode of social classification seemingly makes no sense for the France of 1789. Indeed, invoking “class conflict” may be senseless for any pre-industrial society, since any theory of history that attributes a fundamental causal role to such conflict would seem to be anachronistic.

There is, however, good reason to be suspicious of Maza’s central claim that “for a group to claim a role as actor in society and polity, it must have a story or stories about itself” (Maza 2003, 6). To begin with, if we took it literally, we would have to accept the existence of a contemporary American middle class numbering well in excess of 200,000,000 people—including both Bill Gates and his gardener. For another thing, Maza’s claim reflects with uncanny precision the central preoccupation of her own closely defined professional group—American professional historians—over the past generation. Since the 1970s, most of this group’s creative energies have gone precisely towards providing various constituencies—women; the working class; gays; African-Americans and other racial groups—with identity-affirming stories of their own. For instance, Maza’s excellent first book, a study of the heavily female profession of domestic service in eighteenth-century France (Maza 1983), grew in part out of a desire to restore to French women a neglected part of their history. The “linguistic turn,” in the American context, has been tightly bound up with the politics of identity—and also with the growing, salutary recognition that however urgent the political impulse, historians cannot simply project contemporary forms of consciousness back onto historical figures who thought in very different terms.

But do social groups need to talk explicitly about themselves as a group to be aware of themselves as a group? To put it another way: can there be an identity that dare not speak its name—or must it never shut up?

Arguably, Maza’s model holds for such groupings as nation-states, which seem to require a heavy apparatus of narrative history, myth, and legend to be going concerns (long before the era of identity politics,

history-writers took it upon themselves to supply developing “nations” with usable histories). It may also hold true for ethnic and racial groups, which have obvious similarities to nations in this regard. But social class is a very different sort of subject. Maza (2003, 7) justly pours scorn on the vulgar Marxist idea that the bourgeoisie deliberately concealed its true interests behind a universalist “mask”—“why should the bourgeoisie, if it existed, refuse to name itself?” she asks. But perhaps class “consciousness” need not take the form of class self-labeling.

### *Class and Class Action*

There are, in fact, many different ways in which a class can be “aware” of itself, and many different sorts of “stories” it can tell. There is the type of story told by figures like Guizot and Marx, which casts social classes as the principal personages of history, and which, in its likening of masses of people to individual actors, resembles the stories told by nationalist historians. But there is also another sort of story: the type encapsulated in such short, but enormously expressive, French sentences as the following: “*Il est de bonne famille*” (“He comes from a good family”); “*Sa mère est normalienne*” (“Her mother graduated from the *École Normale Supérieure*”); “*Il est inspecteur des finances*” (“He belongs to the corps of inspectors of finances”). And there is the type of story that tells itself through the perusal of a row of titles on a bookshelf; through observing the choice and arrangement of furniture in an apartment; through the manner of holding a knife and fork; or simply through the recital of a day’s leisure activities.

As a large body of sociological literature attests (esp. Bourdieu 1984), social groups have invented manifold and ingenious ways to signal inclusion and exclusion. These markers of difference function “below the level of consciousness and discourse” (ibid., 468), and are not formal claims to roles as social actors. Nonetheless, they are often more useful in delineating salient social boundaries than explicit narratives would be, because of the wide variety of “narratives” that individuals can recount and the rapidly shifting ways in which they consciously classify themselves, depending on the circumstances. It seems to me that, *a priori*, a classification scheme that tries to distinguish a middle class based on common tastes, habits, manners, and practices of exclusion has more analytical utility than one that accepts everyone from janitors to moguls as “middle class” because they so label themselves.

For cultural historians trained to pay close attention to language, and living in societies where politics is largely conducted through assertions of identity, it may seem bizarre that a social group might have an awareness of itself without formulating explicit stories about itself. Maza's question springs from the assumption that social groups are naturally driven to *assert* their existence and purpose. But why should this be the case? Distinctions that function “below the level of consciousness and discourse” appear entirely natural, obvious, and in no need of positive reinforcement.

Social and political actors start to make positive assertions on behalf of groups only when they can accomplish a particular goal by doing so. In the France of 1789, with its powerful traditions of universalism and its generalized horror of social fragmentation, it is hard to see that a positive assertion of bourgeois identity could have served any useful purpose, so the absence of self-conscious “bourgeois manifestos” is quite understandable. This absence does not, however, necessarily testify to the absence of meaningful and even conflictual class distinctions.

There is certainly archival material with which one might survey the changing practices of social distinction in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France. The work of such scholars as Daniel Roche (1981, 1989, 1993, 1997) and Annik Pardailhé-Galabrun (1988) goes some distance towards achieving this goal, although an authoritative overview remains to be written.<sup>11</sup> Yet the mere mapping of possible class differences and practices of social inclusion and exclusion on the scale of individuals does not necessarily offer insight into the possible interaction of social classes on a larger scale, in national political life. Is there any way, without relying on practices of explicit self-identification, or on (usually elusive) “objective” economic identification, to distinguish *conflictual* social classes—as opposed simply to distinct social classes—in the historical sources?

Here, the only possible way to start, it seems to me, is by attempting to track political actions and reactions—identifying groups whose common political positions during the Revolution can be linked to the fact that they saw particular political changes, both actual and potential, as affecting them in the same manner.

To state the obvious, legislation and policy choices affect different social groups in different ways. A change in taxation that suddenly requires a particular group to pay much larger annual sums, or a reform

that suddenly grants a particular group admission to a prestigious institution, will create or reinforce bonds among members of this group, even if the prevailing political language did not hitherto identify the group *as* a group. Does the Revolution reveal any such basis for conflictual class politics?

In principle, it should not be especially difficult to discern. Consider, for instance, a comparison between the ruling governmental elites of France in 1788—the dominant figures in the ministries, the judiciary, the provincial administrations, and so forth—and their counterparts five years later. In 1788, these elites are drawn overwhelmingly—90 percent or higher—from the nobility, as it was then legally defined. In 1793, they are drawn in even more overwhelming proportion from commoners, and particularly from the “liberal professions” of the law, the middling magistracy, and government administration, with smaller percentages from other professions and from commercial circles (Hampson 1963, 155).

Now consider some of the fundamental policies enacted by the revolutionaries between 1789 and 1793: the abolition of most forms of legal privilege; the replacement of the closed guild economy by a free market; a ban on “combinations” of workers (the *Le Chapelier Law* of 1791); the beginnings of a comprehensive overhaul and simplification of France’s Augean Stable-like law codes. All these changes, it might seem, worked to facilitate the development of a free-market commercial economy, and therefore contributed directly to the prosperity of those whose economic well-being derived from such an economy—first and foremost those whom we might, with hindsight, label a commercial “bourgeoisie.” Precisely this connection was long assumed to exist by those who subscribed to a vision of the French Revolution as a class conflict.

And yet, once again, connections of this sort seem to dissolve the closer observers come to them. Let me start with a case with which I am particularly familiar: that of barristers (roughly, trial lawyers). The single largest professional group in each of the successive Revolutionary assemblies of the late eighteenth century were members of the bar (Bell 1994). But the French Revolution was an almost unmitigated economic disaster for them. The cleansing of the legal Augean Stables deprived them both of laws about which to argue, and of courts in which to argue them. The barrister Pierre-Nicolas Berryer (1839, I, 41) noted in his memoirs that his birthplace, Ste. Menehould, with a population of

only 3,000, had possessed nine different courts under the Ancien Régime, all of which the Revolution replaced with a single panel of four judges. The Revolution abolished the very title of barrister, and allowed any adult male to plead in court on behalf of anyone else. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the majority of legal practitioners in France's largest cities soon took sides *against* the Revolution, and to this day, as a direct result, the profession retains a powerfully conservative, counter-revolutionary attitude (Berlanstein 1975, esp. 183-86; Fitzsimmons 1987, 193-99).

The larger question of the abolition of legal privilege is no less a minefield for the class theorist. On the one hand, a generation of research has made it clear that well-to-do commoners were in no way excluded from the system of legal privilege under the old regime, and indeed depended upon it quite as much as the nobility did. On the other hand, in most cases, efforts in the 1760s and '70s to abolish the system originated with members of the nobility, notably the Controllers-General (i.e. Finance Ministers) Laverdy and Turgot and Chancellor Maupeou. It is true that Laverdy and Turgot hoped to increase economic activity, but they did not think of economic activity in class terms. And they, like Maupeou, were administrators serving a monarchy that sought to render its operations more streamlined and efficient. The abolition of legal privilege, as it is discussed in their writings, served the purposes of rational, enlightened government, not the interests of a class to which they themselves, in any case, did not belong, let alone one they recognized as having legitimate claims.

The abolition of the guild system, the ban on "combinations," and the establishment of a free market during the Revolution might seem to be the clearest cases of class legislation. Yet it has been convincingly argued that the proponents of the Le Chapelier law of 1791 did not have workers' combinations principally in mind, but instead were thinking of blocking any formation of intermediary powers whose weight in the economy, society, and politics as a whole might interfere with the operation of the general will (Sewell 1980, 88-91; Jaume 1989, 222). The abolition of the guilds (adumbrated, again, by the nobleman Turgot in the 1770s) fit a similar pattern. Moreover, the radical group of deputies known as the "Mountain" easily abandoned the principle of the free market when, in 1793, it became their predominant objective to ally with the radical *sans-culottes*, who demanded a "maximum" on the price of bread.



### *Cultural Means of Social Reproduction*

So are we back to Maza's claim that the French bourgeoisie, and the "bourgeois revolution," are mythical? Must we acknowledge that all attempts to invoke social class in explaining the extraordinary events of the French Revolution have failed?

It is possible to make an argument for class politics in the Revolution, but only by ceasing to define classes in the traditional way—by reference to their economic function. Consider, instead, defining them by their relationship to two very different things: the state, as a source of employment and power; and the educational system, as a means of entry into, and prestige attached to, state employment. Think of them, in other words, not in relation to the means of economic production, but in relation to (cultural) means of (political and social) *reproduction*. What follows here are some tentative speculations on this theme.

Out of the great body of research on eighteenth-century French social history that was conducted from the 1960s to the present—much of it with an eye to explaining the origins of the French Revolution—several striking facts have emerged about France's social elites. First, they thought of social advancement not as an individual project, but as a family one, stretching over several generations.<sup>12</sup> Second, they had very little interest in mobile wealth for its own sake. In nearly every case that social historians have studied, fortunes accumulated in commerce or finance were converted as quickly as possible into the three principal forms of safe investment identified by Taylor (1967): land, government annuities, and venal offices (government offices legally owned by individuals as a form of property). Venal offices, in particular, were crucial: such offices as that of magistrate, or *secrétaire du roi* (a purely honorific post), carried with them titles of nobility. Third, once families had bought their way into the nobility in this manner, their strategies for further advancement were largely bound to state service. Families might hope to climb the hierarchy of the sovereign courts known as *parlements*, moving in three or four generations from the relatively humble position of *président à mortier* in a provincial city like Pau or Nancy to the glory of being a *premier président* in Paris. Alternatively, they might seek to have their children enter the elite corps of *maîtres de requêtes*, with the hope of seeing their descendants one day as the powerful *intendants* of a large, prosperous province. Families dreamed of seeing their most talented offspring catch the eye of the king, as Jean-Baptiste

Colbert had done with Louis XIV, and being rewarded with elevation even to the ducal heights of the nobility, and offices that opened the way to immense fortunes (see Smith 1996). Since each step up the state hierarchy could bring increased wealth, power, and status alike, it makes little sense to try to distinguish strictly between the three when considering family strategies.

These family strategies, it should be noted, were not at all unrealistic. France's elite was very much an open one—far more so than England's, in all likelihood (Stone and Stone 1984)—and many families did manage to acquire nobility and elevated position. Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret (1985, 39–64) has estimated that as of 1789, a quarter of all French noble families had been ennobled since 1700, and fully two-thirds since 1600.

Yet it is clear that by the end of the eighteenth century, the system could no longer accommodate all comers. While the crown could and did expand the number of honorific venal offices to accommodate purchasers, it would not do the same with the magistracy. In 1781 the army, which had long provided an avenue of mobility for newly ennobled families, required candidates for the military academies to prove that their nobility went back four generations, so as to safeguard positions for members of older, but impoverished, noble households (Bien 1974). I would not go so far as to attribute the coming of the Revolution to the frustration of the ambitious. I *would* argue, however, that the Revolution worked to the immense advantage of families that dreamed of advancement through state service, but that, in 1789, had not possessed the wealth or the connections to pursue this path.

The Revolutionary and Napoleonic catchphrase, “*la carrière ouverte aux talents*,” referred overwhelmingly to careers in state service—especially in the administration and in the military. The Revolution did away with the system of venality that had turned high positions in much of the state service into pieces of very expensive property, restricted to a narrow range of potential buyers. It did away with the organization of many state officials into closed *corps* that, like guilds of tradesmen, restricted entry into their ranks. It maintained others *corps*, however, such as the *Corps des Mines* and the *Corps des Ponts et Chaussées*, which gave the state control over the elite of the engineering profession. In its later stages, the Revolution created a coherent system by which entry to these *corps*, and in general to the highest levels of state service, was by competitive examination; and a system of elite state schools—the ancestors of the present-day elite *grandes écoles* (see Kaplan

1999), which French political, business and academic elites still attend in preference to the university system, which has open admissions. And throughout the Revolution and the Napoleonic period, the prestige of elite state servants was maintained through perks, pay, and constant praise in the pages of state-controlled periodicals and in the curriculum of the educational system.

Although in theory open to all applicants, in practice this new system of selection for state service benefitted a limited and well-defined social group: those with sufficient wealth to acquire the secondary education necessary for initial entry (the large majority of the French population was *ipso facto* excluded), but lacking the position within the old-regime hierarchy that had been necessary before 1789. Members of this group did not possess anything that we could recognize as “class consciousness” in the familiar Marxist terms. In one sense, they subsumed their own identity within that of the state itself. Nor did they possess any common relationship to the means of production, coming as they did indiscriminately from the commercial classes, the liberal professions, and the lower nobility (and increasingly, in the nineteenth century, from industry). But they nonetheless constituted a stable and easily identifiable set of families, one we might call a state bourgeoisie, identified by its commitment to the institutions of the state rather than to any particular regime; and to the preservation of the system of advancement through education and exam—the means of its reproduction.

This set of families by no means constituted the entire French middle class. It remained distinct from the commercial (and later, industrial) elites of major provincial cities, to take just one example. But it was certainly the most visible and prestigious segment of those who fell between poverty and nobility. This visible, prestigious group survives to the present day; its members can be located in large part by consulting the lists of alumni of the *grandes écoles*. It remains a group that, whatever the overt political divisions within it, can usually be counted on to defend, ferociously, its privileged access to elite state service. When Jacques Chirac became Prime Minister in 1986, his first official act was to repeal reforms introduced by President Mitterrand that had diluted the prestige of the elite school of state administration by expanding the student body and offering a separate admissions track to members of unions and other syndical bodies (see Gaillard 1987 and Schifres 1987).

Maza (2003, 129) has explored this issue, too. “In the aftermath of the Revolution, the social group that expanded most conspicuously *and* was invested with the greatest social recognition was that of civil servants.”

She refuses, however, to identify civil servants with the bourgeoisie. In fact, echoing Hegel's classic contrast between *bourgeois* and *citoyen*, she sees civil servants and members of the bourgeoisie as conceptually antithetical. The latter, to her mind, are enmeshed in the private sphere, the world of (female) domesticity and (male) profit and private interest; the former in the public sphere and selflessness. By instituting the cult of public service, she argues, the French once again demonstrated their universalism and their revulsion for any cohesive, self-aware middle class.

There is a risk, however, in applying this dialectic literally to a society in which the private/public dichotomy existed more as a theoretical construct than a pervasive social fact. In practice, the public sphere of the bureaucracy was seen as intimately bound to the private sphere of the family, because the latter was thought to prepare young French men properly for the former. As the revolutionary Boissy d'Anglas (quoted in Hesse 2001, 111) put it in 1795: "We must be governed by the best; the best are those who are best educated and most interested in the maintenance of the laws."

### *Cultural Effects of Functionalist Views of Class*

This statement, it is worth remarking, indicates a desire to continue portraying the division of society in functional terms. The "best"—who, Boissy went on to specify, almost always came from the ranks of property-holders—were those best suited to public service. He might have called them "those who govern."

In keeping with this functional schema, French observers from what I am calling the state bourgeoisie saw a natural and obvious connection between three separate levels of social experience: first, the practices of distinction by which they identified each other as homologues; second, the (dare I say) classic "bourgeois" values of diligence, restraint, modesty, and respect for education; and, third, the proper qualifications for public service. While they tended to apply the label "bourgeois" itself, derisively, to the excessive pursuit of self-interest incarnated by Balzac's antiheroes, and while they overtly subsumed their own identity within the larger universal of the French state, they had a very precise awareness of their own status as a distinct group.

The connections between a "bourgeois" upbringing and a career in public service go even deeper. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) has famously ar-

gued that “bourgeois taste” in contemporary France consists largely of a focus on style and form, as opposed to content. Children from what he identifies as “bourgeois” families are taught from an early age to appreciate works of art and literature for their style and skill of execution, rather than for the story or message being conveyed. In language, a severe emphasis is placed on the “clarity,” “precision,” and “purity” of vocabulary and grammar; on logical thinking; and on the ability to compose a well-structured argument. Not coincidentally, the elite branches of the French civil service similarly place an extraordinary emphasis on general intellectual competence, as opposed to specific knowledge and skills, in selecting who will rise to the top of their heaps.

In a departure from American and British practice, top civil servants are not identified with any particular branch of government. Instead they belong to the previously mentioned *corps*—the “Inspection of Finances,” the “State Council,” the “Chamber of Accounts”—whose actual function in government is, quite deliberately, vague and difficult to define. The members are then assigned to particular ministries, and usually rotate through many different sectors of the government in the course of a career (and, especially since the 1980s, through private enterprises as well). A frequent term of praise for talented practitioners is “*homme de l’art*”—which might be roughly translated as “talented generalist.” Developing a particular expertise—in environmental science, say, or the politics of organized labor—tends to be dismissed as unnecessary, and even looked down upon (see esp. Gaillard 1987). Similarly with the elite engineering corps, the names of which—the *Corps des Mines*, and that of the *Ponts et Chaussées*—have long ceased to describe what their members actually do (which can be almost anything related to publicly managed infrastructure). Moreover, in many cases, admission to the *grandes écoles*, which leads to these careers, depends in part on an examination of the candidate’s “general culture,” which is heavily weighted toward the ability to appreciate style and form in art and literature.

The criterion, in short, that distinguishes successful members of the French state bourgeoisie is none other than universalism. Aspiring members of this elite must be able to abstract universal principles from the world they see around them—principles of style, of form, of manners, of law—and they must obtain universally applicable skills. This universalism precisely correlates with the political universalism that characterizes them ideologically. But—and here is the crucial, ironic catch—it is also believed that not everyone is capable of this universal-

ism. To be able to discern the proper principles and to develop the proper skills in the proper manner demands the proper education, even the proper family background. And for this reason, the children of the existing state bourgeoisie retain, if not a monopoly, then a strong advantage in the competition to select the next generation.

The close relationship, and, indeed, structural parallel between the social skills imparted by a French “bourgeois” upbringing and the professional skills demanded of elite civil servants, can be demonstrated most thoroughly for the period from the 1960s to the present. It is not difficult, however, to trace its origins to the Revolutionary period. If anything, the emphasis on general intellectual competence in the civil service was all the more pronounced before the creation of the *Ecole Nationale d'Administration* in the twentieth-century postwar period. Throughout much of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth, instead of going to this now-dominant “administration school,” top civil servants tended to graduate from the *Ecole Polytechnique* and the *Ecole Normale Supérieure*, which taught engineering, the physical sciences, and the humanities. Therefore, throughout the entire post-Revolutionary period, the qualities required for entry into the civil service have been difficult to acquire without a proper bourgeois upbringing. And so the ENA has gone a certain distance towards returning France to that early-nineteenth century setup, in which, just as under the old regime, a functional scheme of social classification masks a very real and relatively rigid system of social exclusion. “*Il est de bonne famille . . .*” (Bourdieu and Passaron 1970).

\* \* \*

In this brief essay I have tried to show, first, that the category of “bourgeoisie,” as traditionally defined, has proven to be essentially useless for understanding the origins of the French Revolution. No group in France possessed the objective, material characteristics of a “bourgeoisie” in the Marxist sense, and no group either saw itself as a bourgeoisie, or forged itself into one, in the manner of E. P. Thompson’s self-made working class. Attempts to identify “bourgeois” political languages in the period have singularly failed to link these languages to the fortunes or ambitions of any defined social group.

At the end of this intellectual odyssey, therefore, historians face a stark choice. On the one hand they can proceed in an essentially de-

scriptive vein, identifying certain groups as constituents of a “middle class,” tracking their emergence and development, but without attempting to place this research into a large-scale story of political, social, and cultural change.<sup>13</sup> A bourgeoisie—in that limited, tautological sense—may have arisen, but its rise does not explain much beyond itself, and certainly not such events as the French Revolution. Alternatively, historians can abandon the empirical study of class altogether and proceed to investigate it, as Wahrman and Maza have done, as nothing more than a fiction, a linguistic construct. In this case, its historical importance is held to reside exclusively in the role the fiction itself plays, rather than in any social “reality” it might invoke as a referent.

In both cases, fundamental questions are raised about the ways that history and the social sciences can draw on each other, and indeed about the extent to which they *should* draw on each other. In France, a large and influential school of historians of the French Revolution, led by Furet, answered this question in a radical manner by essentially forswearing “sociological” approaches and returning to the study of history as the study of politics and political ideas. Not surprisingly, this move led directly to a massive *crise de conscience* in the *Annales* school, which had been built on the idea of an intimate alliance between history and the social sciences. In the late 1980s, *Annales* (1988 and 1989; cf. Stedman Jones 1998) published two agonized editorials calling that alliance into question. Since then, attempts to forge a new relationship between the two have been, in my opinion, more suggestive than successful.

Among the “Anglo-Saxons,” the same move dovetailed neatly with the “linguistic turn.” Not coincidentally, the most influential Anglo-American historians of the Revolution over the past 20 years—Hunt and Baker—both acknowledge heavy debts to Furet on the one hand, and to the theoreticians of the linguistic turn on the other.

I have elsewhere outlined my own thoughts, based on recent American historiography, on how a new integration of social and intellectual history may yet take shape (Bell 2001b). Regarding the more specific question of social class, it has become entirely clear that any new approach must necessarily start with the language and ideas of the historical actors themselves, rather than dismissing these as one or another variety of false consciousness. But it seems equally clear that one should not *stop* with the language and ideas of the historical actors. The texts they produced should be studied so as to reveal the ambitions and motivations of those who produced them. But once these ambitions and

motivations are identified, it becomes possible to ask how historical changes of all sorts—social, legal, cultural, and also economic—affected their ideas, and politically aligned people who shared similar ambitions, motivations, and practices of status distinction.

My own brief speculations about the “state bourgeoisie” are meant as one possible example of this approach, and as a call for further research. The political language of the French Revolution was in large measure republican, centered on the ideal of service to the nation and, more specifically, to the institutions of the French state. Such service, not coincidentally, represented the most important traditional means of social mobility in France, but also means that were slow, uncertain, and increasingly unavailable to those not already close to the top of the ladder. The French Revolution, destroying as it did the older, generational model of ascent through venal office, and replacing it with a new one based on education and “merit,” worked to the benefit of particular professional groups. Their ambitions were in no sense narrowly material, and cannot be understood if the families in question are regarded purely as selfish economic actors. The rewards they sought were in large part the symbolic and psychological rewards of glory and recognition that, thanks to the educational and cultural media the state controlled, accrued to the state’s leading servants—although, especially after the Terror gave way to the Directory and the Napoleonic regimes, material rewards followed closely upon these others.

The state bourgeoisie did not *make* the French Revolution. In large part, it was made *by* the Revolution. But in its turn, arguably, it shaped the Revolution—and the history of France over the next two centuries. It was not a group that possessed “class consciousness.” It spoke the language of universalism, and, in theory, practiced universalism, in the sense that the *grandes écoles* that served as its nursery were open to all qualified applicants. But in practice there existed a sharp delimitation, known to and accepted as “obvious” by members of this class, between those who were capable of joining its august ranks and those who were not. This capacity was rarely discussed explicitly, still less made the basis for an identity-affirming narrative. But only a very few members of the peasantry and urban poor were judged capable—enough to testify to the promise of universalism, but not enough to call into question the privileges of the state bourgeoisie itself.

So it may still be possible to interpret the French Revolution as a “bourgeois revolution.” But, of course, this bourgeois revolution differs enormously from traditional varieties. Most importantly, the bour-



geoisie in question is not a universal phenomenon, obeying extraterritorial laws of economic and social development; it therefore does not offer much insight into such laws, or into any grand narrative of Western history. It is a creature of local, national contexts—of particular institutions and particular discursive climates. And it cannot be understood without employing the tools of cultural and political, as well as social and economic, history. In short, the history of this bourgeoisie is a history that remains in dialogue with the social sciences—but a humbler, less certain sort of social science than prevailed in the days when the French Revolution was *the bourgeois revolution par excellence*.

#### ENDNOTES

1. On this subject, see most recently, Desan 2000; Popkin 2002; and Spang 2003. Earlier syntheses include Censer 1989 and Doyle 1980.
2. Stedman Jones 1983; Joyce 1991; Sewell 1980; Reddy 1987; and Mayfield and Thorne 1992.
3. See Baker 1992 and Gordon 1994, esp. 43–85.
4. For good examples, see Lamont 1992 and Owensby 1999.
5. See also Maza 1997 and 2002. I sketched out some friendly criticisms of Maza's work in Bell 2003.
6. James Mackintosh, quoted in Wahrman 1995, 24.
7. In general, on this shift in French thought, see Wahrman 1995, 273–88, and Maza 2003, 131–60.
8. For a critical view of the Sorbonne tradition, see Furet 1988, 979–99.
9. In general on this wave of revisionism, see Doyle 1980, 7–40.
10. See particularly the introduction to Furet and Halévi 1989.
11. See also Daumard 1963.
12. See Giesey 1977, 271–89. For more concrete examples, see, for instance, Gresset 1978 and Forster 1980.
13. See Garrioch 1997, and, for the English case, Earle 1989; and Barry and Brooks 1994.

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# INSTITUTE FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

The Institute for the Advancement of the Social Sciences (IASS) was created by Professor Liah Greenfeld in September 2003, under the auspices of the University Professors of Boston University. Its goal is to return to the original purpose of the social sciences: to provide an empirical understanding of humanity.

Human reality is cultural, i.e., a symbolically constructed reality, or reality of the mind. The first task of the IASS is therefore to promote the building of a coherent conceptual framework for the social sciences as sciences of culture and the mind.

The Institute also hosts and pursues research on specific areas of culture, divided as follows:

1. **Civilizational spheres:** specific emphasis is given to the understanding of modernity and nationalism as the characteristic forms of contemporary culture. Great emphasis will also be given to comparison between civilizations reflecting different forms of culture, such as Ancient Greece, Rome, Ancient Israel, Egypt, feudal Europe, medieval Islam, medieval through Tokugawa Japan, India, China, and so on.
2. **Institutional spheres:** the economy, politics, social stratification, science, religion, art, etc.
3. **Levels of symbolic systems:** the mind (particular attention will be given to the interaction between symbolic mental processes and the brain, on the one hand, and to imagination on the other); the specific logics of language, social relations, economic processes, art, etc.; individual cultures; and cultural processes (cultural change, gradual vs. revolutionary, tradition, etc.).

The Institute is currently seeking funding for its activities in general and, specifically, for studies of religion and nationalism in areas of Arab Middle East (Islam and Arab nationalism) and both Greek and Russian Christian Orthodoxy; nationalism and international terrorism; the creative imagination in comparative perspective; and human mind, culture, and neuroscience.

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