Metaphors of the Middle: The Discovery of the Petite Bourgeoisie 1880-1914

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METAPHORS OF THE MIDDLE: THE DISCOVERY OF THE PETITE BOURGEOISIE 1880–1914

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AFTER a long period of neglect, during which historians had looked towards the petite bourgeoisie primarily to heap upon it the responsibility for fascism, the last fifteen years has seen a growing research interest in the social and political history of the world of small retail, artisanal and manufacturing enterprise.[1] The result of this attention has been paradoxical, on the one hand establishing the petite bourgeoisie as a focus for sustained research, while on the other confirming how difficult it is to see the owners of small retail and manufacturing enterprise as a coherent social group or social class. The combination of the owner's labour and capital within family-centred enterprises might indicate a distinct position for the petite bourgeoisie within the social structure, but various forces militated against a social or demographic identity for the proprietors of small enterprise: the high rate of business turnover, the limited proportion of petits bourgeois who remain in that position through their careers, and the low rate of continuity between generations. Although political struggle was important in the formation of any class, one could go further with respect to the petite bourgeoisie and suggest that it was only at times of political crisis and action, only through the discourse and actions of its organisations, that a petit-bourgeois identity might emerge. It is not surprising, therefore, that research has focused above all on those years between the 1880s and the First World War, when the emergence of interest

[1] This growth of interest can first be seen in two special issues of *Le Mouvement social*: 'L'atelier et la boutique', 108 (1979), and 'Petite entreprise et politique', 114 (1979). Subsequent publications include *Shopkeepers and Master Artisans in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (eds.) Geoffrey Crossick and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt (1984); Philip G. Nord, *Paris Shopkeepers and the Politics of Resentment* (Princeton, 1986); *Splintered Classes: Politics and the Lower Middle Classes in Interwar Europe (ed.)* Rudy Koshar (New York, 1990); *L'univers politique des classes moyennes* (eds.) Georges Lavau et. al. (Paris, 1983); Steven M. Zdatny, *The Politics of Survival. Artisans in Twentieth-Century France* (New York, 1990); *Aux frontières des classes moyennes. La petite bourgeoisie belge avant 1914* (eds.) G. Kurgan and Serge Jaumain (Brussels, 1992); Jonathan Morris, *The political economy of shopkeeping in Milan 1886–1922* (Cambridge, 1993). I am grateful to Peter Heyrman, Serge Jaumain and Leen Van Molle for helpful discussions in the early stages of this research, and also to Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Sylvie Taschereau for valuable comments on an earlier version of this paper.

groups and increasing political mobilisation seemed to offer evidence of a real petit-bourgeois identity.

There are other ways, however, in which social groups can come into existence. The petite bourgeoisie may have been discovered by historians over the last decade, but they had been discovered before. While those studying the petite bourgeoisie in Britain have wrestled with patchy sources that were often only incidentally concerned with the world of small enterprise, those working on Germany, Belgium and France have been drawn to a substantial body of writings published in the quarter century before the First World War. The material on Germany is well known, for its connections to the process known as *Mittelstandspolitik* made it central to political analysis and formation. The discovery of the petite bourgeoisie in France and Belgium has been less well explored, yet in these countries too the petite bourgeoisie became an issue in social thought as well as political action in those years, and it is that process of discovery which is the concern of this paper.

More precisely, it is the discovery within particular strands of catholic and conservative thought upon which this paper focuses, for there were indeed other discourses. Liberals in Belgium, the Radical Party in France, and the more ambivalent and ultimately negative socialist groups in Belgium and then France, all struggled to shape a vision of the world of small enterprise. In these two countries, however, it was amongst social catholics and Le Playists that the most sustained and public analysis took place, constructing a discourse which was to influence not only the movements of petits bourgeois themselves, but also debates on these intermediary social groups in subsequent decades.[2] This paper is an exploration of that discovery. A necessary element in any act of discovery is the process of naming. The discourse upon which this paper focuses sometimes used the term *petite bourgeoisie* to describe the owners of small enterprise, primarily in Belgium, but the term *classes moyennes* was more common in both Belgium and France. Rather than translating it inaccurately as *middle classes*, it will be kept in its French form in quotations, thus retaining the resonances of both middle and average bound up in the French expression.

Georges Blondel, Parisian economist and a leading member of the *Société d'économie sociale*, the society devoted to following the ideas and methods of Frédéric Le Play, observed in 1908 that 'the problem of the *classes moyennes*, which nobody used to speak about some fifteen or

[2] These other strands of analysis have received little attention. For French radicalism and the *classe moyenne*, see Serge Berstein, 'Le Parti Radical-Socialiste, de la défense du peuple à celle des classes moyennes', in Lavau, *L'univers politique*, 71–93. For French socialists Madeleine Rebérioux, 'Les socialistes français et le petit commerce au tournant du siècle', *le mouvement social*, 114 (1981), 57–70.

twenty years ago, is beginning to concern a good number of people.'[3] A literature had developed during those years which argued insistently that the petite bourgeoisie was in crisis, that its very survival was at stale, and that it could be crushed beneath the wheels of the juggernaut of progress and economic concentration. It was a literature which saw the moral organisation of society as intricately bound up with the problems of the petite bourgeoisie, and which saw the individualisation of rights and relationships which flowed from 1789 as undermining the cohesive institutions of an ordered society, but pride of place in the analysis of petit-bourgeois problems was given to the economic trends of the previous fifty years. Large-scale capital was invading more and more branches of manufacturing, and it was now attacking retailing through the rise of department stores and multiple chains. Furthermore, the technological revolution in transport, together with the emergence of large-scale merchant activity, had also destroyed the protections that distance had once given to local producers and traders, and the subsequent decline in local markets and loyalties undermined the moral as well as the economic bases of viable small enterprise. Statistics that revealed numbers of small workshops rising at the start of this century provided little comfort, for the issue was not existence but prosperity, and an increasing proportion of small firms seemed no more than precarious outworkers for department stores.[4]

The problems faced by the petite bourgeoisie, it was argued in this literature, were exacerbated by the way that those seeking to reestablish social stability were concerned exclusively with the working class. Inquiries and research—such as the 1886 Labour Commission in Belgium that followed the riots of that year or the work of the Labour Department established by the French government in 1891—focused only on the situation of wage workers. Governments and social investigators had lost sight of the reality of *la question sociale*, the social question, and now confused it with *la question ouvrière*, the working-class question. Oscar Pyfferoen, the young Belgian social catholic whose work on the Ghent municipal enquiry into the petite bourgeoisie marked his conversion to the cause, wrote that 'for many years the attention of the intellectual and political worlds has been preoccupied

[3] Georges Blondel, 'Le problème des classes moyennes. Aperçus français', *Bulletin de l'Institut international pour l'étude du problème des classes moyennes*, May 1908, cited henceforward as *IICM Bulletin*. I have not succeeded in tracking down a complete set of this *Bulletin* for the period 1905–1914, though the combined holdings of the Catholic Documentation Centre (KADOC), at the Catholic University of Louvain, and Louvain Municipal Library between them cover most of these years.

[4] Victor Brants, *La petite industrie contemporaine* (2nd edition, Paris, 1902), 68 ff; Maurice Dufourmantelle, 'La défense des classes moyennes', *La réforme sociale*, LVII (1909), 765–6; Paul du Maroussem, *La question ouvrière* (4 vols., Paris, 1891–94).

with measures to help the working class. That is what is known as the social question. In truth it is only one aspect of that question, for workers do not constitute the whole of society ... Alongside the interests of workers are those of the petite bourgeoisie, the *classes moyennes*, who are no less worthy of being taken into consideration.[5] For Paul du Maroussem, whose studies of Parisian small trades for the Labour Department have provided a rich source for historians, the legislation and social benefits devised to help the working class served only to make life more difficult for small enterprise, so that 'each attempt to solve the *working-class question* serves only to deepen and to aggravate the *social question*.'[6] Within this analysis, only the strengthening of the *classes moyennes* could offer a solution to the social question, yet they seemed to be threatened with disappearance in the face of what both liberal and Marxist writers insisted upon seeing as progress.[7] Blondel concluded from the 1901 Congress of the Petite Bourgeoisie held in Namur that 'it is not only a matter of finding the means by which the *classes moyennes* might participate in progress; it is a matter of finding out whether progress itself is going to be the cause of their death.'[8]

Hector Lambrechts, the Belgian lawyer and civil servant who was an indefatigable presence formulating and publicising policy on behalf of the petite bourgeoisie and whose inelegant writings provide the most informative as well as the dullest point of entry to this literature, stressed that 'the *classes moyennes* ... are dying, and their disappearance will prove fatal to the social order, for their existence is a condition of both progress and peace'.[9] Here was the discourse of discovery, in which the world of small enterprise that was felt to be threatened with extinction was presented as the key to maintaining social order and building social peace. The vice-chairman of a catholic petit-bourgeois association in Brussels told the very first congress of the Petite Bourgeoisie held in Antwerp in 1899, that 'our only concern, our only programme is to

[5] Oscar Pyfferoen, 'La petite bourgeoisie d'après une enquête officielle à Gand (1)', *La réforme sociale*, XXXVII (1899), 285.

[6] Paul du Maroussem, *La question ouvrière*. vol 3: *Le jouet parisien. Grands magasins*. 'Sweating-system', (Paris, 1894), 202–3.

[7] For example, Théophile Funck-Brentano, *La Politique. Principes. Critiques. Réformes* (Paris, 1893), 186.

[8] Georges Blondel, 'La petite bourgeoisie', *La réforme sociale*, XLII (1901), 836.

[9] Hector Lambrechts, 'La concentration, commun dénominateur de la question sociale', *Revue sociale catholique*, XVII (1912–13), 186. Lambrechts published extensively in a variety of journals, including *La réforme sociale, Revue d'Economie Politique, Revue des Questions Scientifiques*, and *IICM Bulletin*. As *Hego* he wrote a series of interesting popular articles in the Antwerp newspaper *La métropole* between 1895 and 1906, many of which tackled questions relating to the petite bourgeoisie. His most important books include *Le problème social de la petite bourgeoisie envisagé au point de vue belge* (Brussels, 1902) and his institutional memoirs, *Trente années au service des Classes Moyennes* (Dison, 1931).

improve the lot of the *classes moyennes* of the petite bourgeoisie, such an interesting social stratum *which does exist* and which *we have not invented.*"[10] By the end of this paper we might disagree with him, and suggest that the *classe moyenne* which was invested with such importance in these years was indeed an invention, an idealised *classe moyenne* that was constructed to be used in argument and debate by intellectuals and reformers anguished at social developments which they sought to control.

It is a mistake to compartmentalise late nineteenth-century intellectual movements too closely, for those concerned with developing social science, as a means to manage a social world threatened by disorder, were eclectic in their contacts.[11] Nevertheless, this concern for the petite bourgeoisie was to be found primarily within the world of social catholicism and amongst the followers of the mid-century French metallurgist turned sociologist, Frédéric Le Play. Social catholicism, growing since mid-century but only becoming a major current of ideas from the 1870s, sought to resolve through catholic teaching the social problems born out of the industrial revolution and economic liberalism, problems that came to be designated the social question. Social catholicism contained a diverse range of reform ideas, from the corporatist theories of Albert de Mun and La Tour du Pin; through free associations and *cercles* in which workers might organise under the leadership of church and elite; to a commitment to traditional employer paternalism (*patronage*) in which employers' care for the material, moral and religious needs of their workforce would counter the demoralising individualism of modern employment relations and bridge the new gulf between rich and poor. The papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 drew together these threads in a critique of a world in which employers and workers, rich and poor faced each other across an abyss of incomprehension. Social catholics could read what they wanted to in the encyclical which, although serving to increase catholic commitment to social action, offered little coherent guidance to policy. The common thread of social catholicism remained a belief that collaboration between different social milieux in a moral and religious framework would provide the basis

[10] *Compte rendu sténographique du Congrès International de la Petite Bourgeoisie, tenu à Anvers le 17 et 18 septembre 1899* (Brussels, 1900), 713. Original emphasis. His words suggest an implicit response to discordant voices denying the reality of the *classes moyennes*.

[11] See for example the variety of intellectual tendencies gathered from the 1870s in Emile Boutmy's *Ecole libre des sciences politiques*: Christophe Prochason, *Les années électriques 1880–1910* (Paris, 1991), 212 ff. The coexistence of eclectic and even contradictory ideological groups in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French reform movements is a recurrent theme in Sanford Elwitt, *The Third Republic Defended. Bourgeois Reform in France, 1880–1914* (Baton Rouge, 1986), though his study reduces them to a single underlying project.

for social peace. This would constitute a third way between socialism and liberalism, one in which family, intermediary associations and catholic works would provide the alternative to individualised solutions on the one hand and collectivist ones on the other.[12]

Although Le Playism was not necessarily social catholic, it was there that it increasingly found its followers.[13] They drew from their master's ideas—both before and after his death in 1886—elements close to those of social catholicism: a belief that moral reform alone could resolve the social question; a rejection of both individualist and statist prescriptions; a strong attachment to the policy of *patronage*; and a special emphasis on the family, both its structure and its role in property transmission, in achieving social stability. Le Playists went beyond this however, taking Le Play's innovation in social science methodology, the monographic case study of workers' families, and constructing it as a scientific basis for the conditions of social peace.[14] These published monographs constituted in reality little more than anecdotes upon which an excessive ideological weight was loaded, to sustain the Le Playist belief that type of family and type of employment regime were the bases for analysing the conditions for social stability. The goal of Le Playist social science was social peace. As the first editor of *La Réforme sociale*, the principal Le Playist journal, explained in its inaugural issue in 1881, 'the main issue today, far less than that of increasing wealth, is to assure stability, social peace, in a word that sum of well-being to which man can legitimately aspire.'[15]

The *Société d'économie social*, founded by Le Play himself in 1856, and its monthly papers and discussions which were subsequently published in its journal, *La Réforme sociale*, constituted in France the institutional base for those interested in analysing the petite bourgeoisie. There was close interaction in these years between Belgian and French catholic

[12] Jean-Marie Mayeur, 'Catholicisme intransigent, catholicisme social, démocratie chrétienne', *Annales E. S. C.*, XXVII (1972), 483–99; Gérard Cholvy and Yves-Marie Hilaire, *Histoire religieuse de la France contemporaine, Vol 2 1880–1930* (Toulouse, 1986), 73 ff and 150 ff; *Een Kantelend Tijdperk. De wending van de Kerk naar het volk in Noord-West-Europe* (ed.) Emiel Lamberts (Louvain, 1992), especially essays by Mayeur on France and Paul Gérin on Belgium.

[13] On the ideas of Le Play and the Le Playist movement, see Michael Z. Brooke, *Le Play: engineer and social scientist. The life and work of Frédéric Le Play* (1970); Catherine Bodard Silver (ed.), *Frédéric Le Play on Family, Work and Social Change* (Chicago, 1982); Antoine Savoye, 'Les continuateurs de Le Play au tournant du siècle', *Revue française de sociologie*, XXII (1981), 315–44; Matthew H. Elbow, *French Corporative Theory, 1789–1948. A Chapter in the History of Ideas* (New York, 1953), 48 ff.

[14] Jean-René Tréanton, 'Faut-il exhumer Le Play? ou les héritiers abusifs', *Revue française de sociologie*, XXV (1984), 458–83.

[15] Edmond Demolins, 'L'école de la Réforme sociale. Son programme', *La Réforme sociale*, I (1881), 4.

intellectuals, and its Belgian sister organisation, the *Société belge d'économie sociale*, established in 1881 by the Louvain economist and historian Victor Brants, was the main channel of Le Playist ideas into Belgium, its *Revue social catholique* carrying regular articles on the petite bourgeoisie and the social crisis. One can appreciate the intellectual plausibility of embracing the cause of the middle as a solution to a polarised society, but it must be stressed that only a minority of social catholics, even of Le Playists did so.[16] A glance at the contents of these journals and the congresses of the two societies makes that clear, but so too does the almost total neglect of the petite bourgeoisie by the influential *Musée social* from its foundation in 1894. Its wide-ranging inquiries and discussions of the social question from both social catholic and solidarist perspectives were concerned almost exclusively with the world of labour, the working-class and social reform.[17]

Le Playist intellectuals straddled the worlds of social science and conservative politics, and their role in government social inquiries increased their connection to the state, above all in Belgium where a distinct political situation forced the petit-bourgeois question onto the agenda.[18] Not only was the Catholic Party in power in Belgium from 1884 to the end of our period, but its franchise reform of 1893 created universal manhood suffrage tempered by plural voting related to property and education. The petite bourgeoisie's consequent electoral importance could not be matched in France, where the question of the *classe moyenne*, surfacing only on the fringes of political debate, was never as closely linked to party politics or strategy, though the Nationalists' victory in the 1900 Paris elections warned French radicalism that its traditional social base was by no means secure, and alerted others to the potential for electoral organising amongst an increasingly disenchanted shopkeeper class. However much political circumstances pushed the issue of petits bourgeois—normally shopkeepers—intermittently into prominence, and however much political threads were wound around petit-bourgeois organisations, the petit-bourgeois dimension remained peri-

[16] The division amongst the followers of Le Play, which produced an alternative tendency around the journal *La Science sociale* (founded 1886), was as much to do with personalities as theories, but it is noteworthy that *La Science sociale*, which was explicitly concerned with the development of Le Playist theory rather than social action, gave relatively little attention to the *classes moyennes*.

[17] See the publications of the Musée social, its *Annales* as well as its *Memoires et Documents*. Étienne Martin Saint-Léon's report on '*Le III^e Congrès international des classes moyennes*' in *Le Musée social*, December 1911, 357–79 is a rare and low-key exception. On the institution itself, see Sanford Elwitt, 'Social reform and social order in late nineteenth-century France: the Musée Social and its friends', *French Historical Studies*, XI (1979–80), 431–51.

[18] Le Playists played a major role in the Belgian *Commission du Travail* (1886) and *Commission Nationale de la Petite Bourgeoisie* (1902–6) as well as in the enquiries undertaken by the *Office du Travail* in France from 1891.

pheral to the strategies of political parties, even to most catholic politicians.

The main sphere of action for the intellectuals, lawyers, writers and reformers who engaged with the question of the petite bourgeoisie in these years was the Le Playist societies and journals already referred to, and the national and international congresses, beginning at Antwerp in 1899, at which the needs of small enterprise could be debated, and at which the leaders of petit-bourgeois organisations could be taught the means by which their class could be saved. The International Institute for the Study of the Problem of the *Classes Moyennes*, founded in 1903 and based in Brussels, had the tireless Hector Lambrechts as its Secretary. It was the organisational base for a succession of congresses, but above all for the spread of information on matters such as comparative legislation and self-help associations that were so dear to the heart of those who were defining a social role and a route to social survival for the *classes moyennes*.[19]

Yet as one reads the early writings in *la Réforme sociale* and elsewhere, and as one considers the imperatives of catholic social reform, the less inevitable it appears that the petite bourgeoisie would be discovered as a major force for stability. Indeed, the world of small enterprise could appear as an obstacle rather than an aid to strategies for social peace. Consumer cooperative societies formed one stumbling block. Although Belgian social catholics were still hesitant about cooperatives in the 1880s, fearful of workers' autonomy and socialist ideas, the 1890s saw them become a major part of catholic strategy for working-class (as well as agrarian) improvement.[20] Oscar Pyfferoen praised them in 1892 as the only way for workers to obtain the material benefits of lower prices, and the moral benefits of the absence of credit and an encouragement to thrift. For Pyfferoen, the excessive number of small shops all too often meant high prices and low quality, and other social catholics agreed.[21] Socialist cooperatives might be regretted on political

[19] For the development of the International Institute, see its own publications, above all the *IICM Bulletin*; Lambrechts, *Trentes années*; M. Dufourmantelle, 'Le Decennium de l'Institut International des Classes Moyennes', *La Réforme sociale*, LXVII (1914), 56–61; Serge Jaumain, 'Les petits commerçants belges face à la modernité 1880–1914', Doctoral thesis, Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1991; 395–400.

[20] Paul Gérin, 'Les mouvements populaires en Belgique', in Lamberts *Kantelend Tijdperk*, 159. At its 1893 Congress, the Catholic *Ligue démocratique belge* formally supported the spread of consumer cooperation: *Congrès International de la Petite Bourgeoisie 1899*, 124. For agrarian cooperatives, see the excellent study by Leen Van Molle, *Chacun pour tous. Le Boerenbond Belge 1890–1990* (Louvain, 1990).

[21] Oscar Pyfferoen, 'Les boulangeries coopératives', *La Réforme sociale*, XXIII (1892), 340–53; though compare Pyfferoen's changed tone just seven years later in 'La petite bourgeoisie'. Hubert-Valleroux similarly defended consumer cooperatives, and questioned the proliferation of individual retailers, in 'Les origines de la co-opération en France et en Angleterre et les tendances actueles des coopérateurs', *La Réforme sociale*, XXV (1893), 445–65. The early Le Playist attraction to consumer cooperation is most clearly shown

grounds, especially the *Vooruit* in Ghent, but even their benefits were acknowledged. Small shopkeepers may have been an obvious target, but criticism of bad working conditions in small enterprise extended to artisanal workshops. *Patronage*, paternalism under enlightened catholic large employers, seemed a far better prospect for creating decent conditions and moralising communities, and the power of *patronage* amongst those influenced by Le Play made the attractions of small enterprise seem limited. The annual meeting of the *Société d'économie sociale* took a trip to the Louvre department store in 1891, one of the targets of the shopkeeper movement, and the members were impressed by what they saw on their tour and by a clever speech by the Director who laid great emphasis on the possibilities for *patronage* offered by businesses such as his: good pay, retirement benefits, medical services, savings banks, canteens, supervision by employers.[22] The department store's potential for *patronage* seemed at this stage far more attractive than the myriad of small shopkeepers it threatened to displace. From the perspective of the early 1890s, the commitment of even these sections of social catholicism was clearly not fixed, and few would have argued with the view expressed by Brants in his 1885 lectures on political economy that, given doubts about how effectively small enterprise could be saved, the real need was to attend to the situation of factory labour.[23]

Nevertheless, to sections of catholic conservatism, the *classe moyenne* gradually emerged as a force that was essential to the health of society and to the social peace that was the goal of Le Playist social science. As a meeting in Lyon was told, 'history teaches us ... that when, in a nation, the *classe moyenne* ceases to exist, that nation loses it vitality, and loses little time before it too disappears.'[24] It was essential to social peace because it was the middle, the average, the *moyenne*. Here was an insistently used metaphor which came to pervade the discourse—the metaphor of the middle. There was not one but many such

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in the *Société d'économie sociale*'s discussion on the subject at the 1890 annual meeting. Whereas Dr Goddyn's savage onslaught on consumer cooperatives as the work of socialists and anarchists was excluded from the full report, M. Gruner's moderate assessment of their advantages, given the exploitation of workers by overnumerous intermediaries, was reproduced in full. Compare the report of the working session in 'Les sociétés coopératives en Belgique. La coopération, son domaine, ses limites,' *La Réforme sociale*, XX (1890), 33–37, with the full report 'La coopération. Son domaine et ses limites', *ibid.*, 577–98.

[22] J. Angots des Retours, 'Les Grands Magasins du Louvre', *La Réforme sociale*, XXII (1891), 95–9. See also Demolins' defence of the department store in his 'La question des grands magasins', *La Science sociale*, IX (1890), 289–319.

[23] Victor Brants, *La Lutte pour le Pain Quotidien. Précis des leçons d'économie politique* (Paris, 1885), 195.

[24] Max Turmann, 'Un aspect du problème des classes moyennes', *La Chronique sociale du France*, XVIII (1909), 461.

metaphors, and all rested on the presence of a middle which would prevent the polarisation of classes and the consequent destruction of the social order. 'The day will come,' wrote Théophile Funck-Brentano, 'when the working classes, whose demands are already overwhelming us, and the *classes moyennes* will form but a single class, the poor, and that day will see reborn the horrors of ancient Greece and Rome.' Decline in the ancient world was evoked with striking frequency, often citing Fustel de Coulanges on the horrors that followed, their polarised societies producing a decadence that seemed matched in the present. Paul du Maroussem's analysis of the cabinet-makers of the faubourg Saint-Antoine in Paris led him to observe that the Greek republics declined when they lost 'the intermediary stages on the social scale, those classes which united wealth to poverty'.[25]

There were many metaphors of the middle. The first placed it within a spatially conceived social structure, a scale that saw the socially mobile move in and out of the middle. For Pyfferoen, the worker could hope to become a small shopkeeper or small manufacturer, and 'thus raise himself towards wealth by passing through the *classes moyennes*'.[26] Here was one of the most recurrent images, but so too was the second sense, of the middle as a buffer between the classes. Du Maroussem told the 1910 Congress of the *Société d'économie sociale* which devoted itself to the *classes moyennes* that they consulted *un état de milieu*, 'a middling estate, a group of classes which form a buffer between the rich and the poor'.[27] For Pyfferoen they 'absorb the shocks between the social extremes'.[28] The Aristotelian middle constituted the third sense of the metaphor, the ideal which was such precisely because it avoided the extremes—Martin Saint-Léon referred explicitly to the *classes moyennes* as a *juste milieu* within contemporary society.[29] Formal references to Aristotle were not surprising, given the subject and given the neo-Thomist revival in social catholic thought.[30] Georges Duplat cited Aristotle's praise of the *moyenne*, arguing that there is a force, in society as much as in biology, whose natural tendency is to maintain or reestablish equilibrium. That force was 'the *moyenne* which separates

[25] Th. Funck-Brentano, *Politique*, 141; Paul du Maroussem, *La Question ouvrière. vol 2 Ebénistes du Faubourg St-Antoine* (Paris, 1892), 277. See also *Congrès International de la Petite Bourgeoisie 1899*, 92 (Frantz Funck-Brentano) and 231 (G. Verbiest).

[26] Oscar Pyfferoen, 'La formation technique des classes moyennes', *La Réforme sociale*, L (1905), 838.

[27] Paul du Maroussem at Closing Banquet, *Les Classes Moyennes dans le Commerce et l'Industrie. XXIX^e Congrès de la Société internationale d'économie sociale* (Paris, 1910), 128.

[28] Pyfferoen, 'Formation technique', 838.

[29] Étienne Martin Saint-Léon, 'L'organisation corporative des classes moyennes', *La Réforme sociale*, LX (1910), 204.

[30] The classic statement in Aristotle's own writings is in *The Politics* Book 4, Chapter 11.

antagonistic extremes'.[31] The fourth sense is the normative definition, in which the social location produced moderate social and political values, in which the average nature of the class's virtues constituted its value. Blondel wrote of 'the ideas of moderation and good sense to which they are naturally inclined'.[32] These moderate values flowed from the fifth sense of the middle, the fact that it mixed together elements such as labour and capital, property and work, production and consumption, which were dangerous when concentrated yet wholesome when mixed. Duplat asked why they were called *moyennes*. He answered that it was because 'the support of possessions is not enough for carrying out of their economic function. They must add labour. Furthermore, it is because this union of labour and property ... produces an average (*moyenne*) between possessions and labour which is the basis of social equilibrium.'[33] Finally, there was the middle as 'the necessary links in the chain'.[34] As, Brants wrote, the *classe moyenne* 'represents the personal and moral link between employers and workers, it is a personal link between producer and customer, it is, as one says, a system of social peace.'[35]

This praise of the middle as a force for moderation and stability, and the attachment of a group defined by moral criteria to a specific location in the social structure, had a long heritage. The struggle by constitutional radicals in the Britain of the 1790s against Pitt's assessed taxes proposal spoke in defence of a social middle that was ground down by government policies, a group whose virtues and independence made them the core of the social order. Yet these middle groups were rarely defined in other than moral and educational terms.[36] Similarly with the appeals of Guizot and Orléanist discourse in France or of the reform Whigs in the 1820s and 1830s, seeking the rule of the middle groups, the *juste milieu*, for this was a political and ideological centre which was only implicitly social.[37] Indeed, in the Orléanist case, the

[31] Georges Duplat, *La classe moyenne. Son rôle social. Son action politique. Sa situation économique. Les réformes urgentes* (Brussels, 1914), 97–8. See also Frantz Funck-Brentano, *Grandeur et décadences des classes moyennes* (Paris, 1903), 48–9; Lambrechts, *Trente Années*, 79.

[32] Blondel, 'Le problème', *IICM Bulletin*, May 1908.

[33] Duplat, *Classe moyenne*, 12.

[34] Edouard Aynard, 'Le petit commerce et l'industrie', in *Les Classes Moyennes dans le Commerce et l'Industrie*, 12.

[35] Brants, *Petite industrie*, 30. For an interesting critical discussion of the implications of the word *moyenne*, see Henri Mougin, 'Un projet d'enquête sur les classes moyennes', in R. Aron *et. al.*, *Inventaires III: Classes Moyennes* (Paris, 1939), 296 ff.

[36] Dror Wahrman, 'Virtual representation: parliamentary reporting and languages of class in the 1790s', *Past and Present*, 136 (1992), 83–113.

[37] Vincent E. Starzinger, *Middlingness. Juste Milieu Political Theory in France and England, 1815–1848* (Charlottesville, 1965); Klaus-Peter Sick, 'Le concept de classes moyennes. Notion sociologique ou slogan politique?', *Vingtième siècle*, XXXVII (1993), 16–18.

concept of the *classe moyenne* designated the conclusion of historical evolution, as that part of society which was the embodiment of French liberty and order finally came to power. Appeals to the virtues and qualities of the middle thus had many precedents. The difference with social catholic and Le Playist discourse, apart from the fact that the idea of the middle was now firmly attached to the cause of conservatism, was that the late-nineteenth century invention of this middle did not rest with its normative definitions but pinned it to precise occupational categories. The problem then became, as we shall see, the need to escape from the fact that these precisely identified groups did not always meet the requirements of the ideology that had designated them.

What were the supposed characteristics of the world of small enterprise? The Comte de Boissieu painted an attractive picture. 'In the course of our inquiries', he wrote, 'more than one of us has come across the normal, prosperous, family workshop, providing the moralising qualities that the factory could never offer, however Christian it might be. This workshop teaches its members the value of the family home, maintains an intimacy between husband and wife and within the family which is always endangered by factory life, and ensures the recruitment of an elite of workers, endowed with the happy qualities of initiative and independence.'[38] At the heart of the idealised world of the *classes moyennes* lay the intimate interaction of workplace, family and enterprise from which so many of the moral benefits flowed. Étienne Martin Saint-Léon's portrait of the independent shop told of 'the owner who, with the help of his son or daughter, attends to the practical side of the job; the owner's wife is on the till; family life and professional life coincide. As for the young employee, the shopgirl, the female assistant, they work under the eye of their master.'[39] The family provided the natural setting for work, for the master could move between home and work without disruption, and because the employees ate at the family table. Workers were not abandoned to individual pleasures, but embraced the stabilities of family life. The women of the family were bound into the enterprise, which prevented the deformation and corruption of their character that followed work outside the home, while at the same time allowing their natural character to suffuse the world of workshop

[38] Le Comte de Boissieu, 'Le moteur éléctrique et l'industrie à domicile dans la région lyonnaise', *La Réforme sociale*, LV (1908), 656. For an enthusiastic description of harmonious family life in a shoemaker's workshop, see René Beckers, 'La cordonnerie à Louvain', in Commission Nationale de la Petite Bourgeoisie (Belgium), *Enquêtes écrites, Monographies*, I (1904), 284–6.

[39] Etienne Martin Saint-Léon, *Le Petit Commerce français. Sa lutte pour la vie* (Paris, 1911), 97–8.

or shop. As the 1910 Congress was told, 'women have a substantial presence in small enterprise; they play a major role, with their ingenuity, their love of order, and the charm of their relations with customers.'[40] The nature of an occupation and its setting was a key determinant of moral well-being, and small enterprise provided the ideal setting. Pyfferoen wrote of the *classes moyennes*' 'spirit of work and of order, their honest and simple habits, their calm and modest tastes'.[41] These were no chance qualities, for they were the natural consequence of a life of independence where savings, hard work and frugality were the only basis for success, and they were deeply engrained in the moral character of the *classes moyennes*. In Martin Saint-Léon's words, 'all the faculties of the mind are brought into play, all the force of the will is directed towards a single goal, and when the human spirit is subjected to such a test, to this moral gymnastics, it develops, grows, learns under the stimulus of necessity.'[42] And here was a life to which others could aspire, for only small enterprise could offer resourceful and intelligent workers the opportunity to escape their lot. As Frantz Funck-Brentano explained, 'the *classe moyenne* is the broad and open road by which the frugal, skillful and diligent worker can become an employer. Even those who do not get there can keep alive the hope, for them and for their children. And everyone knows that man lives by hope more than he does by reality.' If denied the opportunity of upward mobility, it was repeatedly argued, intelligent and ambitious workers would become the leaders of revolutionary politics.[43]

These were the characteristics of a social group whose survival and renewal would provide the solution to the social question, a question which was redefined to focus it upon their presence. Joseph Bernard, writing of French shopkeepers, spoke of 'their social role whose importance, I must admit, is much greater than their economic value'.[44] It was for these social and moral reasons that they had to survive. The problem was that this was an idealisation of the world of small enterprise which continually threatened to unravel, as it faced the tensions within its own ideas as well as the reality of small enterprise. At the heart of the discourse lay its most serious problem: the world that it described was one cast in an artisanal mould, yet the petite bourgeoisie which was organising in France and Belgium to overcome is problems was primarily made up of shopkeepers. The greatest pressure on *artisans* in

[40] Aynard, 'Le petit commerce et l'industrie', 23.

[41] Pyfferoen, 'La petite bourgeoisie', 292.

[42] Martin Saint-Léon, *Le Petite Commerce français*, 93–4.

[43] Frantz Funck-Brentano in *Congrès International de la Petite Bourgeoisie 1899*, 91. See also Pyfferoen, 'La petite bourgeoisie', 293.

[44] Joseph Bernard and Louis Hoffmann, 'Le petit commerce et les grands magasins', *La Réforme sociale* LXI (1911), 303.

industrialising western Europe was experienced during the middle third of the nineteenth century, at a time when the structure of politics generally kept them within the radical popular milieu to which they had been historically committed. For independent *retailers*, however, these were generally optimistic decades of growth, and economic and social difficulties for them grew only in the later nineteenth century, and in a very different political context. If the process of discovery took some impetus from petit-bourgeois movements, as it certainly did, then it was largely shopkeeper movements to which it was compelled to respond. The pattern was significantly different in Germany, where artisans played the major role in organisations as well as in the responses of parties and government. In this context, the influence of Germany on Belgian and French ideas was especially important. When Hector Lambrechts was charged by the Belgian government in 1896 with setting up a service for the *classe moyenne* within the Labour Department, his first step was to tour German and Austrian towns to learn what was being done there.[45] Key figures from German state bureaucracies, chambers and associations participated in both the International Institute and the major petit-bourgeois congresses. The footnotes of the main figures in the intellectual movement—Brants, Lambrechts, Martin Saint-Léon and the rest—reveal how much, as well as how circumspectly, they drew on the German experience.[46]

However, the German and Austrian situations were seen as deriving from different historical conditions, and rarely accepted uncritically, especially with respect to the corporatist ambitions of German reformers. Victor Brants spoke for many when he recognised the benefits of corporations, which had once delivered many of the resources that were now needed, such as technical education, apprenticeship, moral regulation, and solidarity of the trade. Like others, he saw the attractiveness of the advance in trade organisation in the German countries, advances of which he was perhaps the most effective publicist in Belgium. He was clear, however, that the past could not be reconstructed in the present.[47] Le Playists were not of one opinion on the question of corporations. A lecture on Limousin corporations in the three centuries before their abolition saw them as nothing but selfish monopolies—in the speaker's view the good relations in the Limousin trades on the eve

[45] Lambrechts, *Trente années*, xiv.

[46] The German example is a continuing thread in Brants, *Petite industrie*, but one over which he is cautious.

[47] Brants, *La petite industrie*, 67–8 and his 'La petite industrie et la restauration corporative (Loi du 15 mars 1883)', *La Réforme sociale*, XVII (1889), 224–37. Georges Blondel, more acquainted with German and Austrian developments than others in France, was vigorous in his rejection of corporate legislation in Austria: 'Le problème', *IICM Bulletin*, May 1908.

of the Revolution were the result not of corporations but of the natural benefits of the small workshop and sound religion. Most recognised that the individualism introduced by the French Revolution had been destructive of order and morality in economic and therefore social life.[48] 'The Revolution,' wrote Edmond Demolins, 'in substituting the spirit of individualism for the old spirit of association, has created a society destined for weakness and discord.'[49] Although some like Martin Saint-Léon were more tempted by the corporatist vision, most rejected the backward-looking solutions it seemed to offer, solutions unsuited to the economic and political world in which they lived. Lambrechts was not alone in finding the statist and centralising approach of the German reforms disturbing. Free associations and private initiative were the only way forward, and in this respect the Le Playists increasingly stood out from the corporatist emphases which came to dominate French (though not Belgian) social catholicism.[50] In France, corporatism carried an implicit challenge to the Republic and its removal of privileged bodies separating the citizen from the state. Le Playists, on the liberal wing of social catholicism, were unwilling to commit themselves to the political implications of such a position.

Nonetheless, the German influence reinforced the tendency to trace the image of the *classes moyennes* from an artisanal template, in much the same way that those who sought to ridicule the *classes moyennes* tended to ignore artisans and write of shopkeepers.[51] The character of the *classe moyenne* upon which its special role rested was constructed upon an image of the artisanal family enterprise that was fashioned out of the past more than the present. It was not always clear in the discourse whether the artisanal character being described represented a present condition or a potential drawn from a retrievable past. One only needs to set the admittedly extreme case of the degraded Parisian small producers examined by Paul du Maroussem against the artisanal past presented by Albert Babeau and a clutch of lesser mythologisers, whose widely-read histories of artisanship written in just these years helped fas-

[48] Louis Guibert, 'Les anciennes corporations de métiers en Limousin', *La Réforme sociale*, VI (1883), 445–54.

[49] Edmond Demolins, report on 'Une conférence sur le mouvement corporatif', *La Réforme sociale*, V (1883), 519–20.

[50] Hector Lambrechts, 'L'œuvre sociale du Reichstag allemand en 1886', *Revue des Questions Scientifiques*, XLI (1897), 104 ff. Le Play himself had admired the guilds of the *ancien régime*, but a concern for freedom of occupation made him unwilling to accept a continued role in the nineteenth century: Elbow, *French Corporative Theory*, 48–9. A more corporatist social catholic concern for small enterprise can be found in the *Union fraternelle du commerce et de l'industrie* set up by Léon Harmel in 1891. See Nord, *Paris Shopkeepers*, 395 ff.

[51] E.g. Georges Deherme, *Les classes moyenne. Etude sur le parasitisme social* (Paris, 1912), which stressed not only shopkeepers but civil servants as well for the purpose of ridicule.

hion the artisanal ideal. Babeau wove together such elements as the home, patriarchy, continuity of place, personal relations with clientèle, simple and honest traders, care for apprentices, workplace discipline, economy, the wife's lack of vanity and her involvement in the business, religion, and the sociability of the trade. It was not only Victor Brants who saw this idealised picture of what once existed as a description of what could still be found in small towns, and which could be built again everywhere, given the importance of historical identity for small-scale industry.[52]

The image of the shopkeeper, on the other hand, was too uncomfortable to make him an attractive model, especially if one dwelt on his relationship with working-class customers. When Louis Rivière gave one of the opening lectures at the *Société d'économie sociale*'s 1910 Congress, he spoke of artisans when discussing the qualities of the *classes moyennes*, but concentrated on small shopkeepers when examining their faults.[53] It was a tension which repeatedly surfaced, for the social value of small retailers was so much more difficult to construct. Stress could be laid on their local identity and commitment, and their service to working-class customers was identified, providing credit in times of hardship, but even that was a two-edged weapon, for credit was seen as an obstacle to working-class frugality.[54] The solution was also found, as we shall see, by setting the value of shopkeepers as the obverse of the dangers and immorality encouraged by the institutions of large capital which threatened them. Most of all, however, shopkeepers were presented as part of a wider *classe moyenne* with shared characteristics, largely assuming that what was written about the qualities of artisans applied to everyone in small enterprise.[55]

The idealisation of the role of the *classes moyennes*—artisans as well as shopkeepers—was thus in tension with the reality, in which neither was the character lived up to nor the role fulfilled. As Henry Clément observed in 1912, 'if these *classes moyennes* have a necessary role to play in society, it is clear that in general they are fulfilling it very badly.[56]

[52] Albert Babeau, *Les Artisans et les Domestiques d'autrefois* (Paris, 1886). For such atempts to root the image of artisans in their past, see François Husson, *Artisans français. Les serruriers. Etude historique* (Paris, 1902). Examples of the uses of Babeau's influential study include Brants, *La petite industrie*, 27 ff and Rivière, 'La notion des classes moyennes', in *Les Classes Moyennes dans le Commerce et l'Industrie*, 4.

[53] Louis Rivière, 'La notion', 8.

[54] Victor de Clerck, 'Les co-opératives d'achats en gros entre petit commerçants et petits industriels', *La Réforme sociale*, LX (1910), 648.

[55] This was an assumption which shopkeeper representatives might contest, as when they insisted that associations could not bring to retailers the benefits which artisans might enjoy. See the interventions by Moens and Attout-Van Cutsem too the session on associations at the 1899 Congress, *Congrès International de la Petite Bourgeoisie 1899*, 363–8.

[56] Henry Clement, 'Les classes moyennes', *La Réforme sociale*, LXIV (1912), 706. The essay is a review of the book by Georges Deherme referred to above.

Criticisms may have taken second place to the idealisations on which I have concentrated, but they were nonetheless evident. Victor Brants was more explicit than most, for he was not only a perceptive commentator but also a tardy and never complete convert to the cause of the *classes moyennes*. 'It would be puerile to represent the *classe moyenne* as a paragon of virtue', he argued. 'We have already spoken of abuses in the workplace. Irreligion, avarice, harshness, pride, and unfair commercial practices can be found amongst them as amongst all classes, as well as sensuality, vanity, jealousy. We certainly do not dispute the merits which the *classes moyennes* could possess, but it is false and ridiculous to attach these to them as some kind of fundamental privilege, and to attribute to them a sort of social immunity.'[57] The criticisms did not end with retailers who overcharged or defrauded customers, but pointed out that, notwithstanding expectations of harmony, work conditions were poor in many small workshops.[58] The very individualism which the *classes moyennes* were supposed to correct appeared at times to be more deeply rooted amongst them than amongst any other social class. 'Its egoism and narrowness of spirit are faults which are very apparent and far too common,' a meeting of Lyonnais social catholics was told.[59] The charge of egoism became more insistent after 1900 as petits bourgeois seemed resistant to the advice to associate that was so insistently directed at them. P.-J. de Clercq explained that the characteristics of those workers who sought to set up for themselves—resistance to authority, stubborn pride, vigorous independence—were precisely those which made it hard for them subsequently to cooperate.[60]

There was a further problem, expressed neatly by Henry Clément. 'Their goal,' he wrote of the petite bourgeoisie, 'is not to defeat those who are creating problems for them, but to suppress them with the help of the public authorities.'[61] In the eyes of social catholics, the demands of petit-bourgeois organisations amounted to little more than asking the state to legislate against their large-scale competitors or to tax them out of existence. This was particularly uncomfortable for Le Playists, concerned to accommodate many liberal economic ideas, reluctant to countenance the accretion of yet more power to the state, and convinced of the moralising power of associational solidarity. The demand of many organisations—not least the fragile but threatening autonomous petit-bourgeois movement in Belgium during the 1890s—for simple legislative solutions to complex economic problems was

[57] Brants, *La petite industrie*, 167.
[58] *ibid.*, 159; Fr. Funck-Brentano in *Congrès International de la Petite Bourgeoisie 1899*, 94.
[59] Turmann, 'Un aspect du problème', 461.
[60] P.-J. de Clercq, 'Les Artisans', *IICM Bulletin*, December 1908.
[61] Clement, 'Classes moyennes', 707

unacceptable: prohibitions on consumer co-operatives, the ban on civil servants joining or running co-operatives, taxing large-scale retailers out of existence. M. Geûens told the *Société d'économie sociale belge* that 'two tendencies divide the Belgian petite bourgeoisie ... Firstly there are the malcontents who never cease complaining and moaning ... The second group, on the other hand, tells them that they are the principal architects of their own salvation. In the first system, the state is expected to organise and save the petite bourgeoisie almost in spite of itself; according to the second school, the principle of renewing the *classe moyenne* lies above all with the *classe moyenne* itself.'[62] The origins of this distrust were various, not least the political conjuncture where, in Belgium, those lauding the petite bourgeoisie were involved with a ruling Catholic Party that needed to avoid the divisions that would have followed strong intervention on behalf of small enterprise. The roots in social catholic ideology, however, did not require the specificities of the Belgian situation: there was the belief in subsidiarity, that social and political health rested on allowing the maximum to be done by levels below that of the central state, especially by self-organised voluntary associations. As Brants observed, 'the State has a strong capacity to destroy, but it is weak when it has to build.'[63] The state's role was to support associations rather than replace them. Duplat argued that 'if the state's legislation rests on two forces, local associations and communal authorities, it will create a harmony that is both valuable and effective, because it will be maintaining and confirming industrial and commercial relations in their true centre which, for the *classe moyenne*, is the corporation and the town.'[64] The localism of the petite bourgeoisie seemed to make them a natural agent of subsidiarity, if they could only be dissuaded from their demands of the state.

Tensions such as these need not have inhibited the emergence of a discourse which idealised the *classe moyenne*, and they did not do so. Nevertheless, as discussion of the world of small enterprise and the ideal of the *classe moyenne* grew from the 1890s, so there emerged a variety of means by which those tensions were rendered less significant. One was to look to the future and recast the *classe moyenne* in broader terms, to incorporate the old petite bourgeoisie within a redefined middle that included managers and heads of department in large enterprises, white-collar workers, minor civil servants, even shareholders. Nowhere did the conceptual weakness of the metaphor of the middle become more apparent than in these debates, where the middle

[62] M. Geûens, 'Le crédit à la petite bourgeoisie. La loi et l'initiative privée', *La revue sociale catholique*, XVII (1912–13), 35.

[63] Brants, *La lutte*, 262.

[64] Duplat, *Classe moyenne*, 74.

was identified less by occupation than by such criteria as income and character. For Charles Morisseaux, director of the Belgian Labour Department in 1895, precise occupations were not the issue, asking 'what is it that constitutes this class, if not a certain degree of morality, of foresight, of education, of well-being?'[65] Although most writers concerned with the petite bourgeoisie did at times play with the idea of a wider *classe moyenne*, they resisted until the more serious attempts to construct a conceptual unity appeared during the inter-war period.[66] Autonomy built on labour and capital remained the requirement if this class were to play its appointed role. As Brants observed, including white-collar occupations assumed that middling incomes and middling social rank were the issue, but these professions lacked the independence which gave pride, strength, and social endurance.[67] Paul du Maroussem asked whether one could see in the employees of department stores 'a new *classe moyenne* which seems to have been reborn on the ruins of the old,' but concluded that without heredity or independence, even for the minority of employees who did climb the career ladder, there could be no real reconstruction of the *classe moyenne*.[68] It was in fact defenders of the new commercial and industrial order who held most firmly to the idea that new occupations were broadening the *classe moyenne*, writers such as Pierre Moride who was so impressed by the new retail chains. They could not be destroying the *classes moyennes*, he insisted, because 'the *classes moyennes*, in our sense, does not include only small shopkeepers. The term *classes moyennes* means "classes which enjoy—thanks to their labour or their capital—an average income."' That meant white-collar workers, small shopkeepers, civil servants, and the managers of shops in retail chains.[69] Voices such as these, however, were very

[65] Charles Morisseaux, *La législation du travail*, I (Brussels, 1895), 292–3. See also Armand Julin, 'Les industries à domicile et les moteurs éléctriques', *La Réforme sociale*, XLIV (1902), 322.

[66] Luc Boltanski, *Les cadres. La formation d'un groupe social* (Paris, 1982); Maurice Halbwachs, 'Les caractéristiques des classes moyennes', in Aron, *Inventaires III*, 28–52. See also a discussion rooted in the debates of the interwar period, Leo Moulin and Luc Aerts, 'Les classes moyennes. Essai de bibliographie critique d'une définition', *Revue d'histoire économique et sociale*, (1954), 168–186, 293–309.

[67] Victor Brants, 'Les employés', *La Réforme sociale*, LVIII (1909), 619. As early as 1883 Feyeux was rejecting the possibility that managers and employees could play such a role: A. Feyeux, 'La question des grands et des petits magasins', *La Réforme sociale*, V (1883), 361.

[68] Du Maroussem, *La question ouvrière. vol 3: Le jouet parisien*, 37 and 241–62.

[69] Pierre Moride, *Les Maisons à succursales multiples en France et à l'étranger* (Paris, 1913), 192–3. Note the *or*, in 'their labour or their capital', removing the key linkage that described the classic petite bourgeoisie. For a similar argument, this time from the Director of the *Statistique générale de la France*, see Lucien March, 'La concentration dans les industries de fabrication, d'entretien, etc', in *La Concentration des entreprises industrielles et commerciales. Conférences faites à l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes sociales* (ed.) A. Fontaine (Paris, 1913), 71. Social catholic defenders of consumer co-operatives followed an equivalent path,

much the minority. For the defenders of the petite bourgeoisie, on the other hand, the idealisations of the middle required that it rest upon small, independent and family-centred enterprise. Indeed, their savage criticisms of the growth of *fonctionnarisme*, of minor civil servants, rendered impossible their acceptance within the *classe moyenne*. Civil servants were anathema to these critics of the modern state, an incubus that weighed down the independence of society and distorted the nature of ambition. The fact that the children of shopkeepers and small masters flocked to such posts (as they increasingly did) was a sign of pessimism and degradation. In Frantz Funck-Brentano's words, 'they are forced by necessity to seek not a trade but a career.'[70] The distinction was important.

If looking to the future to recast the *classes moyennes* had only limited success in these years, another solution to the tensions within the discourse was to look to the past and assert the historic role of the petite bourgeoisie in the struggle for communal freedoms and public liberty. 'In former times they have constituted the rampart of our communal liberties', claimed Pyfferoen with respect to Belgium.[71] Louis Rivière's opening address to the 1910 Congress presented the *classes moyennes* as central to France's national traditions of freedom and moderation, seeing them amongst those who established the communal liberties of fifth-century urban centres, and tracing them from the freemen at the foot of the feudal chateau or abbey, through the medieval artisanat, to the emerging Third Estate.[72] Theophile Funck-Brentano gave them an even greater lineage, tracing the *classes moyennes* through 'the equestrian order under the Romans, the free citizen of the Greek city-state, the corporations and masters of the middle ages, the Third Estate during the Renaissance, and the modern small proprietors, manufacturers and shopkeepers'.[73] Here then was a historic commitment to liberty and independence, to communal rights and local liberties, which gave the *classes moyennes* an identity in the past which might take precedence over tensions in the present, and which could reinforce the local attachments that were seen as fundamental to the moralising qualities of the *classes moyennes*.

Far more important than these forward-looking or backward-looking

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presenting the managers of co-operative stores and the workers who accumulated savings through their dividend as forces constructing a new *classe moyenne*. See the contributions of Welche and Récamier to the discussion on consumer co-operation at the *Société d'Economie sociale*, in *La Réforme sociale*, XXV (1893), 461–4.

[70] *Congrès International de la Petite Bourgeoisie 1899*, 89.

[71] Pyfferoen, 'La petite bourgeoisie', 292.

[72] Rivière, 'La notion', 4–5.

[73] Th. Funck-Brentano, *Politique*, 53–4.

approaches, however, were three distinct perspectives which strengthened the place of an idealised middle and helped it to prevail within the discourse: optimism about the direction of economic processes was the first, articulated above all through an electrical utopianism; the *classe moyenne* as moral inversion the second; and a strategy to encourage small enterprise towards modernisation though association the third. Optimism about the direction of economic processes was necessary to the ideology, explicitly pitted as it was against both Marxist and liberal economic assertions of the inexorable character of economic concentration.[74] It was not enough to find a continuing but subordinate role for small enterprise, for example through the corner ship or artistic production, for such economic marginalisation could not sustain the social role of the middle. Signs were therefore sought that concentration was not inevitable. As early as 1883 the *Société d'économie sociale* had been told that overcoming the problems of distributing power to small workshops would soon produce a flourishing industrial peasantry, and the electric motor was subsequently seized upon as the solution.[75] In a flourish of electrical utopianism, the first form of artificial energy capable of being transmitted over long distances to drive small motors was presented as the force which would reverse the process of industrial concentration. One writer claimed that with electricity 'the end of factory concentration and the rebirth of the family workshop were no longer mere hopes but tangible possibilities.'[76] Opening the pavilion on artisanal technology at the 1905 International Exhibition in Liège, the director of the Institut Montefiore declared that with better equipment and cheap power small masters would be able 'to regain their place in the sun'.[77] Here was a faith in the potential of electricity which fitted poorly to the reality, but it was an incantation regularly repeated. When Henry Morel-Journel lectured to the *Société d'économie politique et économie sociale* of Lyon on the awakening of the *classes moyennes* he spoke almost entirely about shopkeepers, but the subsequent discussion was

[74] For an explicit challenge from Victor Brants to the supposedly inexorable nature of economic laws, see Brants, *La petite industrie*, 5–9.

[75] M. Denayrouze, 'La décentralisation des forces motrices et la reconstitution des ateliers domestiques', *La Réforme sociale*, V (1883), 613–18.

[76] E. Dusaugey, Director of the *Société d'énergie électrique de Grenoble*, quoted in Ernest Dubois and Armand Julin, *Les Moteurs électriques dans les industries à domicile* (Brussels, 1902), 274. Optimistic faith in the power of electricity was widespread in these years—one historian has written of an 'electromania' seizing French society in the last twenty years of the nineteenth century. See Alain Beltran, 'Du luxe au coeur du système. Electricité et société dans la région parisienne (1880–1939)', *Annales E. S. C.* (1989), 1114. It is interesting to note how this enthusiasm was used by different groups to sustain such very varying views of progress.

[77] *IICM Bulletin*, August 1905

dominated by the way the electric motor could save the artisan.[78]

The reality was far more limited than the utopian dreams, as the investigators sent out by the Belgian government to explore the potential of the electric motor in small workshops regularly reported. Julin and Dubois insisted that it should not be seen as 'a sort of panacea, as a magic wand capable of changing into an idyllic form the conditions of labour in large and small-scale industry'.[79] Their comparative studies of Swiss watchmaking, and the silk trades of Lyon and Saint-Étienne, concluded that the electric motor could neither save nor revitalise workshop production where the situation was not favourable, but that where there were other economic reasons favouring dispersed production (as in the Stéphanois ribbon-weaving trades) then it could play a positive role. Even here they concluded that the benefit was less in increasing competitiveness than in reducing the physical strain of work. 'One must not see the electric motor as the instrument to liberate decentralised production.'[80] Or as Victor Brants warned, 'do not cry Eureka too soon.'[81] Such warnings did not prevent the widespread faith that electricity would save small-scale production, and with it the *classe moyenne*.

These hopes vested in the electric motor not only serve to remind us of the extent to which the artisan rather than the shopkeeper was the model for those who espoused the cause of the *classe moyenne*—after all, with respect to retailing, electricity was mostly referred to disparagingly in describing the seductive bright lights of the department stores—but they also lead us back to the nature of Le Playist interest in small enterprise. For Frédéric Le Play, there were two models of employment relationships which would harmonise industrial society. The first was to be found in the French tradition of *patronage*, in which the devout and enlightened large employer provided the institutions and influences to moralise and stabilise his workforce. The other was

[78] Henry Morel-Journel, 'Le Réveil des classes moyennes en France', in Société d'Economie politique et d'Economie sociale de Lyon, *Compte Rendu Analytique des Séances de l'Année 1910–1911* (Lyon, 1911), 54–103.

[79] Julin and Dubois, *Moteurs électriques*, 274.

[80] Julin, 'Les industries à domicile', 232. See also Julin and Dubois, *Moteurs électriques;* de Boissieu, 'Le moteur éléctrique'; Armand Julin and Ernest Dubois, 'Les moteurs électriques dans les industries à domicile', *La Revue sociale catholique*, VI (1901–2), 158–66; Armand Julin, 'L'outillage mécanique de l'atelier familial', *La Revue sociale catholique*, IX (1904–5), 289–317; Le Comte de Boissieu, 'L'emploi du moteur mécanique dans la petite industrie parisienne', *La science sociale*, XXXVI (1903), 314–33.

[81] Brants, *La petite industrie*, 151. Indeed, Brants took Lambrechts to task for making concentration the common denominator of the social question. Brants insisted that it was not concentration but the moral order that was the essential issue, for all techniques and all forms of enterprise had both advantages and disadvantages. See the discussion of Lambrechts, 'Commun dénominateur', 187.

the *fabrique collective*, in which dispersed domestic artisans, preferably with a small plot of land, produced for the merchant-capitalist (*fabricant*) who organised the industry. Interest in the latter revived from the 1890s, as the electric motor seemed to make family-based dispersed production once again possible.[82] It was not so much the independent workshop master as the domestic producer who was the hero of electrical utopianism, though talk of the *classes moyennes* rarely acknowledged the distinction. A specific Le Playist attachment to domestic industry and to an associated package of values thus came to be transmuted into a distinct interest in a larger *classe moyenne*.

The second perspective which helped the idealised middle to prevail within the discourse was the *classe moyenne* as moral inversion. It was not simply that the petite bourgeoisie itself was a source of good within the social order, but that the forces which were undermining the petite bourgeoisie were at the same time introducing into society values and practices that damaged morality and social peace. Some of these—such as the granting of long-term credit to bourgeois customers—directly hurt small enterprise. Pyfferoen devoted almost all of his opening address to the 1901 petit-bourgeois Congress to the way the rich abused credit, and he called for the creation of a *Ligue des honnêtes gens* to eradicate such practices.[83] Here was a sign of moral decline, as the well-to-do's decision to spend on pleasure, rather than paying their tradesmen, consigned small business to repeated crises.[84] Most moral critiques of this kind, however, were directed at the competitors rather than the customers of small enterprise. The demoralising nature of the factory came under attack. The transition from workshop to factory brought with it the uprooting of people from '*le clocher, la terre, le foyer*' (parish, land and home). Whereas workshops and small towns were conducive to 'good morality', factories saw the workers unsupervised

[82] Julin, 'L'outillage mécanique', 310; Julin and Dubois, *Moteurs électriques*, 13; Armand Julin, 'Le travail des femmes belges dans la grande et la petite industrie', *La Réforme sociale*, XLII (1901), 381–408; Robert Picot in *Les Classes Moyennes dans le Commerce et l'Industrie*, 85. Brants was, as ever, more careful about these distinctions: Brants, *La Lutte*, 192.

[83] Oscar Pyfferoen in *Comte rendu sténographique du 2ème Congrès international de la Petite Bourgeoisie, tenu à Namur le 15 et 16 septembre 1901* (Namur, 1902), 64–5. The brief emergence of consumer associations directed to encouraging ethical shopping practices, such as the responsible settlement of debts to shopkeepers and the purchase only of produce manufactured without sweated labour, responded to the same anxieties. See Maurice Deslandres, *L'Acheteur, son rôle économique et social: les ligues sociales d'achteurs* (Paris, 1911); the report of *La Ligue nationale du paiement comptant* (Belgium) in *Compte Rendu Sténographique du IVème Congrès national de la petite bourgeoisie tenu à Saint-Trond les 4, 5 et 6 août 1907* (Saint-Trond, 1907), 87–94; and the brief discussion in Rosalind H. Williams, *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley, 1982), 303–10.

[84] Hego (Hector Lambrechts), 'Vous dépensez trop', *La Métropole*, 6 September 1900.

and family ties weakened. As Maurice Vanlaer concluded in his lectures to students at the Catholic Institute in Paris, economic progress had been favoured at the expense of moral.[85] The rise of mass production and the decline of quality were similarly denounced. 'Industry kills arts', concluded Hector Lambrechts. With mass production, 'the public aesthetic sense has been lost'.[86] One consequence was the morally corrosive impact of modern consumerism, a force created by mass production and large-scale distribution. Lambrechts argued that if one examined modern consumer psychology one would find 'in the lowering of the level of morality, in the substitution of appearance for reality, and in the intense desire for pleasure, the ideal cultural terrain for the first stage of mass production—imitations and junk—to take over'.[87] Albert Feyeux bemoaned the changes in the bakery trade, with fancy breads and elaborate displays everywhere, compared with his childhood when the baker had no more than a simple wooden counter, with a parrot in a wire cage as the only touch of ornamentation. 'Simple morals developed easily in such modest but adequate establishments.'[88] People now bought for excitement and display rather than need as the consumer frenzy took control, and the greatest culprit was that bête noire of both shopkeeper movements and those lauding small enterprise, the department store. Its moral faults were overwhelming. Paul du Maroussem graphically showed the way direct purchasing by Parisian department stores constructed the sweating system where an independent artisanat had once stood.[89]

Most criticism, however, centred on the moral consequences of department stores for customers and employees alike. With their bright lights, exotic displays, seasonal novelty and endless sales, they replaced the wholesome acquisition of necessities with a passion for excitement and newness, for shopping for its own sake. They created 'illusory needs' and 'a hysteria for buying'.[90] Their employees, regimented in an unhealthy environment, forced to leave home for long hours of work, and to bow to every caprice of their customers as they competed for their sales bonuses, were denied the moral certainties of family life

[85] Maurie Vanlaer, 'L'atelier moderne et l'évolution économique', *La Réforme sociale*, XLVII (1904), 440–3.

[86] Hector Lambrechts, 'De l'Avenir des Classes Moyennes', *IICM Bulletin*, February 1911. See also Théophile Funck-Brentano, 'Préface', in Paul du Maroussem, *La Question ouvrière. vol. 1. Charpentiers de Paris. Companons et Indépendents* (Paris, 1891), 16.

[87] *IICM Bulletin*, June/July 1911, 456. See also Martin Saint-Léon, *Petit commerce*, 16.

[88] Albert Feyeux, 'Un nouveau livre des métiers—1. La boulangerie parisienne', *La science sociale*, IV (1887), 341.

[89] Du Maroussem, *Question ouvriere*, passim.

[90] Blondel, 'Le problème', *IICM Bulletin*, April 1908. For contemporary critiques of the department store, see Michael B. Miller, *The Bon Marché. Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869–1920* (Princeton, 1981), 190 ff.

and the family work unit.[91] The image of women in this catholic discourse was an essentially passive one, with the assistants portrayed as victims and the shoppers as weak and impressionable. The moral role of women in society was undermined in many ways—female employees were unprotected, and the delights of shopping not only diverted female customers from their home responsibilities, the enticement to wasteful purchases and even shoplifting also destroyed their intrinsic feminine moral qualities. Funck-Brentano told the graphic tale of Mlle Marguerite Boulanger, a virtuous young woman destroyed by the power of the department store. She was accused of stealing a small piece of lace which had been caught up in her belongings, forced to endure a distressing interrogation in which she was stripped naked, and the search of her home while her elderly mother looked on in a state of shock. 'The next day,' he told his audience, 'she died in atrocious pain, proclaiming her innocence ... and covered with the tears of her helpless mother, sister and brother.' This was more than a sad tale. It was evidence of the consequences of the disorganisation of society that followed when the old traditions of work, production and sale were lost.[92] In the critique of the morally corrosive influence of department stores, one sees the reverse of the moral qualities of the *classe moyenne*, which was erected as an ideal with which to beat the undesirable aspects of modern life, while presenting that ideal as if it were the description of a real social group. Disorder in work and exchange could only be defeated by a new order for human tastes and desires, and the nature of consumption therefore needed to be reconstituted if the *classes moyennes* were to be saved. The first petit-bourgeois Congress was told that in the face of the individualism of modern taste, only the family and 'local solidarity' could provide the orderly setting for consumption.[93] Saving the *classes moyennes* required saving the moral order of society.

The final strategy was the most active, for it meant the construction of a concrete programme by which the movements of the petite bourgeoisie could be directed away from appeals to the state and attacks on large-scale economic activity, and towards a constructive programme for improvement. Books and articles, lectures and debates were repeatedly structured around a single polarity—'the appeal to the state' on the one hand, 'free initiative' on the other. Oscar Pyfferoen identified the strategy clearly. A certain number of men of science, he explained, have collaborated with the petit-bourgeois movement to

[91] Du Maroussem, *La question ouvrière. vol 3: Le jouet parisien*, 254; Martin Saint-Léon, *Petit commerce*, 98; Joseph Bernard, *Du mouvement d'organisation et de défense du petit commerce français*, Thèse de droit, University of Paris (1906), 51–3.

[92] Fr. Funck-Brentano, *Congrès International de la Petite Bourgeoisie 1899*, 81–3.

[93] G. Verbiest, *ibid.*, 219–33.

open its eyes to what he termed 'the true remedy' for their problems: associations, credit, technical education.[94] This process of persuasion from outside was directed above all at the associational solution—a powerful social catholic ideal that was given substance and encouragement, especially in Belgium, by the success of agrarian self-help associations such as the *Boerenbond belge*.[95] Intermediate bodies between the individual and the state were needed but, as Victor Brants argued, the role once played by commune and corporation would now have to be fulfilled by voluntary associations.[96] After a lack of focus in the 1890s, the turn of the century saw a clear programme directed at the petite bourgeoisie. It was a programme embodied in books and articles about small business, and repeated almost *ad nauseam* in the themes and structure of the many national and international congresses of the petite bourgeoisie, animated and directed by that milieu of social catholics and Le Playists which has been the subject of this paper.[97] Concessions were certainly granted to petit-bourgeois demands for state support, calling for greater fairness in taxation, and over the law on such matters as bankruptcy and credit, together with closer regulation of itinerant traders. The real strategy, however, sought to divert the organisations of small enterprise away from more extravagant demands of the state, and towards using associations to achieve an improvement in the competitive position of small enterprise.[98] 'One can say without exaggeration,' proclaimed Hector Lambrechts, 'that upon a rapid and compact process of organisation of the petite bourgeoisie rests its principal chance of survival and, without doubt, its entire prospects for technical and commercial progress'.[99] Trade associations would provide professional education, co-operatives for credit as well as purchasing, and technical improvement. When one shopkeepers' association had the temerity to tell the 1899 Congress that too much was being expected

[94] Pyfferoen, 'Formation technique', 840–1.

[95] Van Molle, *Chacun pour tous*. For France, *Les Classes Moyennes dans le Commerce et l'Industrie*, 71–2.

[96] Brants, *La Lutte*, 263–5.

[97] In addition to the international congresses of 1899 and 1901 cited above, the *Institut international pour l'étude des problèmes des classes moyennes* organised further congresses including one in Munich in 1911, whose proceedings were published as *III. Congrès international des classes moyennes* (Munich, 1912). The Belgian *Association nationale pour l'étude et la défense des intérêts de la petite bourgeoisie*, founded in 1900 as a result of the 1899 Antwerp congress, organised a series of national congresses, all of whose proceedings were published. The proceedings of the 4th Congress at Saint-Trond are cited above.

[98] For the operation of that strategy in Belgium, see Serge Jaumain and Lucia Gaiardo, '"Aide-toi et le gouvernement t'aidera"'. Les responses de l'état à la crise de la petite bourgeoisie (1880–1914)', *Revue belge d'histoire contemporaine*, XIX (1988), 417–71. Bernard, *Du mouvement d'organisation* is a detailed study directed at just such a strategy of turning shopkeepers away from demands of the state.

[99] Lambrechts, *Le problème social*, 254.

of associations as a way to combat consumer co-operatives, it was firmly put in its place by the chairman.[100] The association was more than simply instrumental, however, for it was a moral device for social catholics—the way to create social cohesion and solidarity in a domain where individualism and isolation reigned.

As this paper has shown, a complex discourse took shape which for the first time made the fate of small enterprise and the fate of the middling groups a major social question. It was a discourse which presented a social group and described its identity. The many debates about what to call them indicate a real terminological uncertainty,[101] and if *classe moyenne* (whether singular or plural) came to prevail, it was partly because of its historic resonances, drawing on an older vision which saw the *classe moyenne* as the force for liberty and independence in French and Belgian life. In this sense the term narrowed in a similar way to that of the *Mittelstand* in Germany, focusing on only a part of what had once been a larger group. The term was above all attractive, however, because the concept of the *moyenne*—the average and the middle—provided the metaphorical purchase needed for a group that was to moderate and stabilise society.

The identity of small enterprise did not come from a single discourse, however insistently that was diffused in the fifteen years before the First World War. A social group was indeed constructed in the discourse of these years, one whose character and role were both ambiguous and mythologised, and it is in this sense that one can talk of the invention, and not simply the discovery, of the petite bourgeoisie. As Edouard Aynard told the 1910 Congress, 'the *classes moyennes*, educated by your school, will learn what they are and what they are worth.'[102] There was another process of construction going on, however, for these were the years during which the owners of small enterprise were themselves being increasingly sought as voters, and in which they were increasingly organised in economic associations and pressure groups, in trade congresses, and in fragile national federations.[103] Sections of small

[100] A note from the *Association des commerçants de la Louvière* was read out by the Chairman of the session on co-operatives: *Congrès International de la Petite Bourgeoisie 1899*, 217–19.

[101] Hector Labrechts was later to recall 'the fluctuating terminology at the time'. Lambrechts, *Trente Années*, 316.

[102] Edouard Aynard, at Closing Banquet, *Les Classes Moyennes dans le Commerce et l'Industrie*, 124.

[103] Brants acknowledged this, writing that 'it is the movement, the agitation which has provoked the research, and we are sure that this time it has not been without value to science.' Brants, *La petite industrie*, 5–6.

enterprise in these countries were now asserting themselves.[104] It was in the interaction between these various spheres that a petit-bourgeois identity took shape—the political conjuncture that made middling independents more relevant electorally, the process of organising that gave small enterprise a more public presence, and the discourse of those who invested the *classe moyenne* with a new role and a new significance. The discoverers spread their ideas to petit-bourgeois organisations whenever they could—visiting and addressing them, and seeking to direct their efforts into appropriate activities. Occasionally, summoned to congresses to be preached at, leaders of local associations of shopkeepers and master artisans expressed their resentment. One Brussels baker, angry at the way opening and working hours were on the agenda at a congress, complained that 'it is thoroughly regrettable to see that the spokesmen and flag-bearers ... are gentlemen who are not petits bourgeois at all and who understand not the slightest aspect of commercial affairs.'[105] Vander Cruyssen, of the Ghent carpet-makers association, resented an opening speaker at the 1901 Congress who had told them that 'we are the doctors and we wish to cure the sick, even in spite of themselves.' Vander Cruyssen called such outsiders 'you others, who designate yourselves the defenders of the petite bourgeoisie'.[106] Such outbursts were not common, for the congresses were too carefully managed for that,[107] but the distance between those who described and those whom they described was a continuing tension within the discourse as it has been within this paper. If the organised petite bourgeoisie increasingly drew on a larger discourse to assert its importance to the health of society, it is a cautionary note to see that a more prosaic terminology existed at the level of local organisations, one that rarely talked of petits bourgeois or *classes moyennes*, but spoke of bakers and ironmongers, at best of small shopkeepers.[108] Petits

[104] There is an increasing literature on these movements, of which the most important works are Nord, *Paris Shopkeepers*, Jaumain, 'Petits commerçants', 473–527. See also various essays, especially the national surveys, in Crossick & Haupt, *Shopkeepers and Master Artisans*.

[105] M. Lebon, to *Congrès international de la boulangerie, 28 & 29 août 1910* (Louvain, 1910), 90.

[106] *Congrès international de la Petite Bourgeoisie 1901*, 114–15.

[107] For this careful management, see Jaumain, 'Petits commerçants', 456 ff.

[108] The terminology of description merits further attention, distinguishing not only between countries and languages, but also between different actors, such as outside observers, national leaders, local organisations and so on. For some preliminary findings on Belgium, see G. Kurgan-Van Hentenryk, 'A la recherche de la petite bourgeoisie: l'enquête orale de 1902–1904', *Revue belge d'histoire contemporaine*, XIV (1983), 295–7. The generalisation on self-description rests upon my reading of various shopkeeper newspapers for Lyon in the decade or so before the First World War, especially *L'Alliance* and *Le Courier du Commerce*. Geoffrey Crossick, 'From gentleman to the residuum: languages of social description in Victorian Britain', in *Language, History and Class* (ed.) Penelope J. Corfield (Oxford), 1991), 150–78, a general discussion of the vocabulary of social

bourgeois were perhaps thus fated to constitute a *classe objet* in the sense which Pierre Bourdieu applied to the peasantry—a social group constructed and defined far more firmly from the outside than it ever was from within.[109] The process by which the question of the *classe moyenne*—its social role and the threat to its survival—was placed on the agenda in these countries is a complex one. The academics, churchmen, politicians and civil servants whose discovery of the petite bourgeoisie as a major social question has been explored in this paper, invented neither small enterprise nor its owners. In their idealised notion of the *classe moyenne*, however, they constructed a vision which was to resonate in both politics and ideology in the decades that were to follow.

description in Britain, contains brief comments on the English terminology of lower middle class, 173–4.

[109] Pierre Bourdieu, 'La paysannerie, une classe objet', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 17–18 (1977), 2–5.