

*Middle-Class Formation in
Eighteenth-Century North America*

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The editorial board of *Time Magazine* has been selecting a “Man of the Year” since 1927; in 1969 it selected not an emblematic individual but a symbolic social group, whom it called “The Middle Americans.” The choice was an unusual one, yet the editorial board struggled less to justify the aptness of its selection than to describe who comprised this nebulous group. They were “defined as much by what they are not as by what they are.” “Middle Americans” were *not* “the poor or the rich”; they *were* “a vast, unorganized fraternity bound together by a roughly similar way of seeing things.” How could such a shapeless social group come to personify an entire year in the cultural life of an imperial nation in the thick of a war in Viet Nam and a civil rights movement at home? “Middle Americans,” the magazine intoned, “physically and ideologically inhabit the battleground of change.” A loose amalgam of racial but especially class identity, they seemed not a force propelling change, so much as one reacting to it—reacting against every perceived manifestation of turbulence in the 1960s, whether black militancy, foreign war, generational tension, rising taxes, or declining “morals.” Largely sympathetic to their plight, the magazine granted “Middle Americans” the victim status for which they hungered.¹

However ridiculous this instance of cultural swaddling may now seem, it nevertheless reminds us of a once-powerful analytic move: to conjure up the cultural figure of the middle class and to locate it within a *battleground* of historical change. No matter how shapeless in reality, the *cultural figure* of the middle class was nevertheless commonly used for much of the twentieth century to explain the march of history. In the 1930s, for instance, some scholars sought to explain the rise of fascism in Italy and Nazism in Germany through the bitter resentments of the middle class.² In the 1950s, both triumphalist and cautionary scholars attributed the newfound global dominance

of the United States to the predominance of its middle class.³ Ironically, *Time Magazine* in 1969 may have helped usher in a real decline of the middle class in the United States,⁴ although the concern here is less with the relative standing of the middle class than with the explanatory power it has been, and can be, accorded.

Refocusing on the eighteenth-century Anglophone Atlantic World, this chapter seeks not to claim the origins of a middle class for that era, but instead to interrogate contemporary understandings of the process of historical change in relation to the “middling sort.” In eighteenth-century print culture circulating on both sides of the Anglophone Atlantic World, authors of several new genres of technical literature (that is, literature that taught skills) presented the “middling sort” as a cultural figure within an Atlantic economy, an economy growing increasingly commercialized as well as reliant on the practice of letter writing. Like scholars in the 1930s and again in the 1950s, and similar to the editorial board of *Time Magazine* in 1969, technical authors of the early eighteenth century sought to explain not how change had happened in the past, but how change *was happening* in the present. The energies of the ever-shapeless middle class served as a means to clarify broader historical transformations, whether the rise of Italian fascism in the 1930s, the rise of global dominance by the United States in the 1950s, the election of President Richard Nixon in 1968, or the commercialization of an Atlantic economy in the early eighteenth century. For watchful authors living in all of these eras, historical change could not be explained *without* invoking the middle class.

Yet this analytic move—explaining an interval of historical change through the energies of the middle class—no longer holds the sway it once had. Since the 1980s, historians concerned with either class or capitalism have encountered vigorous theoretical challenges that question the very concept of class, never mind the existence of a middle class.⁵ Class identity has been especially charged with being too fissured by competing identities such as gender and race to be of any analytic value in explaining historical change.⁶ (The fall of class analysis has meant the rise of race as the new central trope of North American history since the 1980s.) One spirited defense of the concept of class among Early Americanists has emanated from Seth Rockman, who argued that it is impossible to explain the power relations of capitalism without the concept of class. Still, he conceded that it is also impossible to explain such inequalities *solely* through the concept of class, that is, without using the concepts of race and gender as well. Rockman thus deftly sought to move the triad of race, gender, and class away from an unproductive zero-

sum game, a competition that the concept of class has been losing miserably, so that the phenomenon of capitalism has too often been removed from historical scrutiny since the 1980s.⁷

This chapter proposes a different strategy for revivifying the concept of class, one focused not, à la Rockman, on material structures of inequality, but instead on discursive processes of historical explanation. One might account for our variant strategies simply by our differing objects of analysis: the early nineteenth-century working class in Rockman’s case, the early eighteenth-century middle class in mine.⁸ In both cases there has been another challenge to class analysis, this one gentler because from the inside, questioning not the concept of class itself, but the appropriate threshold for class consciousness. Some historians of the middle class raise the bar for class consciousness high and see voluntary associations or political organizations as the crucial indicators.⁹ Others set the bar lower and see cultural values and styles as fundamental to class formation.¹⁰ One lesson of this ongoing debate, though, is that there was no single origin for the “middle class” in the Atlantic World. Indeed a broad scholarly consensus grants that a middle strata of society has existed in Europe since the twelfth century and in the North and South American colonies since the sixteenth century. Yet the fact of economic position is inadequate to explain when, how, and why middle-class identity was imagined to be a force driving historical change. The activation of class identity fluctuates over time—sometimes class identity is quiescent and goes unnoticed, yet other times it becomes salient—as *Time Magazine* insisted in 1969, and as authors of technical literature urged in the early eighteenth century. Modes of class identity likewise vary—sometimes cultural life, other times political life may be the means to activate class identity. In this book, the chapters by Andrew Schocket and Lawrence Peskin emphasize institution building, for instance, whereas the chapters by Jennifer Goloboy and Susan Branson stress the circulation of values. Hence, the most useful premise for research would be to examine the varied historical specificity of class formation, rather than try to pinpoint a single theoretical template that purports to explain class formation in all times and all places. Beyond this, however, the ultimate goal is to interrogate those eras when class identity supposedly inhabited a battleground of historical change—when the energies of the middle class apparently drove a broader historical transformation. In other words, the ultimate analytic prize is not class formation in some real sense, but the historical transformations that the activation of class identity was at times imagined to propel.

Middle-class identity achieved a new plateau of cultural salience in the

early eighteenth century in England and its North American colonies, as articulated in several genres of technical books teaching the skills of arithmetic, accounting, penmanship, law, business, spelling, and letter writing. In England the authors of this technical literature gave a sudden concerted attention to their social audience, while in the North American colonies such books were avidly reprinted for the first time.¹¹ Both of these separate phenomena deserve scrutiny for us to decipher the cultural mission animating this efflorescence of technical literature on both sides of the Atlantic in the early eighteenth century. The historian should not merely seek references to a “middle class” in such technical literature because one would not expect the construction of a “middle class” to be the explicit cultural project of these books.¹² Instead, most crucial was how the books represented social space, cultural change, and personal agency. In addressing these dimensions of life, did the books activate class identity or some other kind of identity? If it was class identity, in what ways was it activated? Of highest priority is to historicize the concept of agency, precisely because it can facilitate a sufficiently flexible analysis that matches the variable activation of identities such as class, gender, or race. Once we detach agency from a facile association with free will or subaltern resistance, we can treat it as a set of both stated and unstated notions about possibilities and constraints for taking action in the world. Then we can begin to give agency a history of its own.¹³ Furthermore, we can then decipher the cultural projects undertaken in the past that had the effect of activating people in the middle stratum of society. If such projects were not explicitly about the formation of a “middle class,” what were they actually about?

Keeping this conceptual framework in mind— notions of agency, and activations of identity—can sharpen our analysis of the many new technical books about arithmetic, accounting, penmanship, law, business, spelling, and letter writing.¹⁴ Such books first became available in England in the mid-sixteenth century, but it was in the late seventeenth century when the number of competing imprints began to multiply dramatically. In 1684, the author of *The Merchant's Dayly Companion* offered a historical explanation to justify the publication of another new business manual, an explanation hinging upon a new sense of modernity in the era. He detected, for instance, a growing use of domestic and overseas postal service—“now so prodigiously great” compared to “our Ancestors days”—as one of many signs of visible change in English life necessitating the cultivation of technical expertise in the writing of letters and the handling of documents.¹⁵ To many authors mastery of technical skills did seem a matter of necessity in the face of a com-

mercializing economy. “Whoever would be a Man of Business, must be a Man of Correspondence,” insisted the author of a business training manual in 1716.¹⁶ Just as authors deemed technical skills such as letter writing as crucial to the capacity of middling young men, so did they deem business to be crucial to the capacity of the English nation in the late seventeenth century. “England is properly a Nation of Trade,” proclaimed an anonymous author in 1684.¹⁷ For authors of a variety of technical books, these were the two intertwined measures of English modernity by the early eighteenth century: a core workforce highly skilled in literacy and numeracy, and a nation highly effective in both domestic and overseas trade.

Equally notable for technical authors was the fact that the social audience of their books moved from background to foreground. The titles of these books might still mention a given technical skill, but increasingly they trumpeted the social audience seeking mastery of that skill—especially clerks, scribes, tradesmen, and the like. These occupations were strictly male domains, as can be seen in titles such as *The Young Man's Companion*,¹⁸ *The Young Secretary's Guide*,¹⁹ and *The Instructor, or Young Man's Best Companion*.²⁰ At the confluence of so many genres, so many imprints, and so many editions appearing in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was a concerted identification and activation of a loose strata in English and colonial Anglo-American society—middling young men. This did not amount to an explicit rhetoric or comprehensive vision of the “middle class” per se, but neither was it simply an inert position in the economic structure. All this new technical literature issued a call to identification, and to action.

There was a mission spurring the call to action. What was new and energizing in the world was a social constituency of young middling men finding themselves newly involved in a commercializing economy (“Business in Merchandize” and “Trade”), newly interacting with their social superiors (“Persons of Quality”), newly investing in literacy and knowledge (“as well Tradesmen, Farmers, Husbandmen, as Young Gentlemen, Ladies, and others, that can Read and Write”), and newly included in the audience of technical books (“all Ranks and Conditions of People” and “all Capacities”).²¹ This aura of inclusiveness was extended to newly literate tradesmen and farmers, but no thought was given to those men (and women) who were not literate, rendering the cavalier language of universalism (“all”) more rhetorical than real. The aim of these books was to absorb a strata of middling young men into a world of literacy and numeracy and business and decorum and duty, a strata we could retrospectively label the lower middle class. For instance, a

business manual from 1699 listed the following A-C trades: “apothecary, attorney, baker, barber, bayliff, brasier, blacksmith, bricklayer, butcher, book-binder, chyrurgeon, carpenter, carrier, carver, chandler, cheesemonger, clock-maker, cloothier, collier, coomb-maker, confectioner, cook, copper-smith, coach-man, currier, cutler, cordwainer. . . .”²² The list goes on and on in this vein, sketching a social milieu weighted toward those in the service rather than the patronage end of a commercializing economy.

Although addressed to middling young men, these books remained remarkably preoccupied with the top of the social hierarchy. “In directing your Letters you must be very wary,” one letter manual warned in 1713, “for a little mistake may give disgust and spoil all, especially with those of the higher Rank.”²³ In this obsession with the social elite, colonial imprints seemed the most surreal. Even a colonial letter manual that claimed in 1748 to be “better adapted to these American colonies, than any other Book of the like Kind” nonetheless devoted several pages to detailed instructions on how to write letters to rarefied “Persons of Quality”: king and queen, prince and princess, duke and duchess, marquis and marchioness, earl, viscount, baron, and their consorts, knight and lady, mayor, justice of the peace, and esquire.²⁴ Of course, the colonies contained almost none of such people who stood perched at the apex of the social hierarchy in faraway England.²⁵ Meanwhile, colonial letter manuals offered almost no guidance on how to address people lower down the social scale, the very kinds of people who did predominate in the colonies. These manuals were certainly marketed to such middling folk, aiming to benefit young men who would not mind identifying themselves as possessing “ordinary Learning & Capacity,” but they were designed to guide such young men in their potential interactions with social superiors.²⁶ At the same time, colonial editors of English books treated horizontal interactions with “Persons of other Ranks” with the same briskness and flippancy as English authors: “you may dignifie them with Master or Mistress, according as your Humour suits you.”²⁷

So, this new technical literature of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries did articulate an explicit cultural project—to help literate young middling men pursuing service occupations to navigate a commercializing economy and an elite social realm with which they were already intersecting, but which was nonetheless new to them and thus fraught with uncertainty. The books devoted many pages to the mastery of an array of technical skills, but they offered no systematic image of how the economy worked or what the social order looked like. Such a significant blind spot betrays the early and experimental moment of these books, which were reach-

ing toward something they did not fully apprehend or comprehend, indeed reaching toward something that was still undergoing development in the early eighteenth century—a commercial Atlantic economy. The cultural mission was not to construct a complete “middle class” *per se*, but it was clearly to activate an identity that can only be interpreted as class identity. This is not to say that other identity categories were not invoked—gender certainly was—but that such other identities did not carry the same burden of purposefulness and activation that class identity did, at least in these genres of technical literature, in the early eighteenth century.²⁸ This mission was still too inchoate to amount to a full-fledged cultural style or political program—which are the thresholds of class formation favored by historians—but it would begin the process of identifying and activating a social constituency that would ultimately contribute mightily to the commercialization of the economy in England and its North American colonies.²⁹ Appreciating both the energy and the uncertainty voiced in the technical literature enables us to narrate the story of this commercialization not merely in terms of people’s reaction to it. This reactive stance is often how historians narrate the “great awakening” and “consumer revolution,” as unhappy or happy reactions to a commercialized economy that already existed.³⁰ Instead, we can move toward narrating the early eighteenth century in terms of an intertwined process of commercialization and consumerism, and in terms of the action (rather than reaction) of people, even if those people did not know precisely what they were generating, or what the outcome would eventually be.

However, we should avoid narrating history purely through the stated purposes of people in the past. We also need to interrogate what people left buried within assumption, myopia, or foreclosure. In this way, scholars can discern not only stated cultural projects undertaken by people in the past, but also unstated cultural work enacted by people even as they concentrated their aims and energies on specific purposes. Indeed, that unstated cultural work was crucial in providing the discursive framing around cultural projects, and it helps us register an image of the middling sort in the early eighteenth century standing innocently apart from any social disruption, conflict, or inequality.

For all its filigree detail, the technical literature of the early eighteenth century omitted much. The many technical books articulated a new in-between social space—a commercializing economy that lured young middling men some distance away from their families and communities and into contact with the social elite. The novelty and challenge of the situation came not only from mastering technical skills, but also from an alertness to old

imperatives of family duty as well as new imperatives of social decorum. For instance, the 1748 edition of *The American Instructor* featured not only detailed instructions about penmanship and accounting, but also sample letters home from nephew to uncle and from brother to sister.³¹ Yet the technical books portrayed no ambition for young middling men to emulate the social elite, only to master protocols of deference whenever young middling men interacted with the elite. The elite remained apart and above. At the same time, almost no thought was given to the lower ranks of society, never mind any effort to distance middling young men from them. The lower sort was mostly unmentioned and invisible. In other words, the technical books articulated no sense either of social competition among middling young men, or of social conflict with people higher or lower on the social scale. There were no boundaries to be enforced or to be crossed.³² The higher ranks were securely higher, the lower ranks were vaguely lower, and the middling ranks would remain middling even after technical skills were mastered and a service occupation was secured. All this placidity was certainly not the stated cultural project of the technical books, but it was the cultural work they did in the early eighteenth century—to leave both the fact and the principle of social hierarchy unchallenged.

This image of social inertia connects, in turn, to a peculiar sense of cultural change. The technical books voiced neither resentment toward former disempowerment nor hope for future empowerment on behalf of young middling men. Instead, novelty and challenge came paradoxically from the already-ness of the situation—from the immediacy of already being involved in a commercializing economy, already interacting with social superiors, already investing in literacy and knowledge. There was no sense of any dramatic or pressing process of historical transformation, only of a vaguely new and slightly unfamiliar circumstance that presented modest opportunities and provoked mild anxieties. “In every thing be circumspect and cautious to please,” the author of *The Young Secretary’s Guide* exhorted in 1713, “that you may have your Expectations answered.”³³ Here and everywhere in the technical literature the stakes were made to seem relatively low, more episodic than structural. In turn, no significant impact was expected from the actions of the middling young men beyond occupying their economic niche, tending service skills, satisfying family duty, and not offending their social superiors. Failure to meet these expectations might cause them to lose their access to and place in the commercializing economy, but the fortunes of that economy were not dependent upon anyone’s individual mastery or any group’s collective participation. Even if the young man might not personally “thrive in the World”

(more rather low stakes), “Trade and Traffick” would apparently simply go on, just as the social hierarchy would apparently simply carry forward, both somewhere safely beyond the scope of human intervention.³⁴ This too was the unstated cultural work done by the technical books—to activate young middling men, yet to make almost nothing in the world contingent upon their activity—no success, no jeopardy, no harmony, and no conflict.

This image of historical inertia raises the vital question of personal agency. The technical literature of the early eighteenth century encouraged young middling men to step forward into a slightly mysterious social space between family and social elite and to apply due skill, decorum, and duty, enabling them to fit into an already happening cultural change. Yet these steps and actions were repeatedly presented as “necessary Expedients,” as a baseline of expectation apart from any exercise of choice or expression of desire.³⁵ All this talk of necessity entailed limited ambition, limited empowerment, and limited impact. The books afforded young middling men the prospect of new technical skills, but not any claim to effective power over others. They afforded social access, but not any claim to authority. They afforded protocols of deference, but not any claim to social superiority. Moreover, they afforded self-improvement, but not any claim to benefiting society. Indeed, this set of limited effects amounted to a cultural premium upon “agency” rather than “power.” The distinction between these two concepts is critical—“agency” involves an ability alongside an imperative to accomplish personal goals in the world, without thought to broader dynamics of domination or resistance in society, the purview of “power.” This, then, was more unstated cultural work done by the technical literature, so that the activation of class identity in the early eighteenth century was enacted through an attention to horizontal social linkages, not vertical conflicts; an attention to cultural participation, not transformation; and an attention to limited agency, not arrant instrumental power. It would be a privilege of the middle class—in contrast to people we might consider subaltern—to become activated without a perception that any power was at stake in their ambitions or endeavors. All this did not amount to a *battleground* of historical change, yet young middling men remained the key cultural figures represented in the new technical literature of the early eighteenth century. In advancing an image of a commercializing Atlantic economy, the authors of the new technical books at the same time depicted the transformation of the economy as eerily without social disruption, conflict, or inequality.

Furthermore, it would be the good fortune of the middle class ultimately to effect far more than it would aim for, at least in this early moment

of the eighteenth century. Looking forward from the appearance of the first new breed of technical books in England in the 1680s, vast material consequences had increasingly pervaded everyday life on both sides of the Atlantic by the 1760s. These included attending and staffing innumerable schools; making, selling, and buying books, stationery supplies, and desks; and incessant writing, conveying, and reading letters, manuscripts, and documents. The components of that material culture extended beyond the Atlantic World to a global economy. Unknown to consumers, writing quills, for instance, could come to North America all the way from Germany or Hudson Bay; writing ink included ingredients from Syria and Sudan; sealing wax derived from shellac from India.³⁶ The technical literature not only promoted a new and distinctive cultural and social thrust for middling young men but also contributed to a new and decisive historical juncture in the formation of a thickening consumer culture and communications infrastructure in the early eighteenth century.³⁷ Middling young men noted opportunities and cultivated them: they stepped some way into social spaces; they embraced a measure of cultural change; they claimed a bit of personal agency; they reinforced the social hierarchy. Above all, they commercialized the transatlantic economy, not only staffing but also patronizing an array of business services. The ranks of the middling sort filled up with new occupations, the commercial landscape filled up with new businesses (schools, printshops, bookshops, paper mills, furniture shops, post offices, and so forth), and households and workplaces filled up with new consumer goods, in both England and the colonies in the first half of the eighteenth century.

All this activity in print, commercial, and consumer culture comprised an interval in the history of a middle class marked by an increasingly purposeful economic and cultural life, if not political consciousness. Yet all of this historical change emanated from only one cultural domain—technical books related to epistolary culture and the management of documents—where class identity seemed to become salient and activated in the early eighteenth century. There were many other domains of life in the Atlantic World where class identity was not so salient in this same era.³⁸ However, some notion of personal agency is always embedded in whatever identity category may be salient, which testifies to the utility of agency as an analytic concept across identity categories. Were there commonalities, then, across cultural domains? Was the primacy of personal agency and social participation—as opposed to instrumental power and domination—unique to the arena of letter writing, or unique to class identity, or unique to the middle class, or unique to the eighteenth century?

Danckaerts, 1679–1680 (New York, 1941), 239–44. Although Danckaerts met with local notables, he spent most of his time in the company of small-time traders and artisans, men such as Arnoldus de la Grange, who “had a small shop, as almost all the people here have, who gain their living by trade, namely in tobacco, liquours, thread and pins, and other knick knacks,” and the carpenters Gerrit Evertsen van Dun and Jacob Swarts, who had worked in the city for more than thirty years.

26. *Ibid.*, 244.

27. These suspicions might have been enhanced by the knowledge that Frederick Philipse, who was well known as one of Andros’s closest confidants, began shipping large numbers of raw hides to England in the late 1670s and 1680s Philipse. See Patricia Bonomi, *A Factious People: Politics and Society in Colonial New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 61.

28. The surviving text of the examination of the coopers who had all signed a document agreeing pricing for standard work further highlights the evasive tactics adopted by the powerless when called to account. The coopers were summoned to appear before Andros and the council, where they “acknowledge[d] their subscription, but pretend[ed] no ill intent.” Richard Elliot (the official culler) “first pretends great Ignorance saith nothing to the purpose,” Evert Wessels testifies “that it [the agreement] was writt at Peter Stevensen[’s house],” William Waldron says “that Crookes bro: (a seaman) writte it.” Christoph and Christoph, *The Andros Papers*, 2:185.

29. “Humble Petition of the company of carters belonging to the city of New York,” in *New York Colonial Manuscripts*, 80 vols. (Albany, N.Y. State Archives), 39:109. For a similarly brusque treatment of a group of disobedient city porters who were dismissed in September 1685, see MCC, 1:169. See also Graham Hodges, *New York City Cartmen* (New York: New York University Press, 1987).

30. “Thomas Dongan’s Report to the Committee of Trade on the Province of New York, 22 February 1687,” in *DHSNY*, 1:150, 161. For civil disturbances, introduction of military patrols, new Sabbath laws, and closer regulation of strangers and movement into and out of the city, see MCC, 1:27, 28, 90, 147, 266, and 390. In 1684, following the reorganization of the city into five wards, the common councilmen instructed each of the constables to hire eight additional watchmen at twelve pence per night, making New York more closely policed than English towns with four times the population. See Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness: The First Century of Urban Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), 76–77, 80.

31. Gary S. DeKrey, “Radicals, Reformers, and Republicans: Academic Language and Political Discourse in Restoration London,” in *A Nation Transformed: England after the Restoration*, ed. Alan Houston and Steve Pincus (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 71–100; and Jacob Price, *Holland and the Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), part 1.

Chapter 7. Middle-Class Formation in Eighteenth-Century North America

I thank Constance Furey, Sarah Knott, Seth Rockman, Alexandra Shepard, and especially the editors, Simon Middleton and Billy Smith, for their helpful suggestions.

1. “Man and Woman of the Year: The Middle Americans,” *Time Magazine*, January 5, 1970, 10–17; now “Middle Class” on the *Time Magazine* website: <http://www.time.com/time/personoftheyear/archive/stories/index.html> (as of March 6, 2007). *Time Magazine* was not the first to notice the rising discontent of the middle class. See also Richard N. Goodwin, “Sources of the Public Unhappiness,” *New Yorker*, January 4, 1969, 38–58; Peter Schrag, “The Forgotten American,” *Harper’s Magazine*, August 1969, 27–34; and “The Troubled American: A Special Report on the White Majority,” *Newsweek*, October 6, 1969, 29–73.

2. See, for example, Harold D. Lasswell, “The Psychology of Hitlerism as a Response of the Lower Middle Classes to Continuing Insecurity,” *Political Quarterly* 4 (1933): 373–84; David J. Saposs, “The Role of the Middle Class in Social Development: Fascism, Populism, Communism, Socialism,” in *Economic Essays in Honor of Wesley Clair Mitchell* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935), 393–424; and Svend Ranulf, *Moral Indignation and Middle Class Psychology: A Sociological Study* (Copenhagen: Levin and Munksgaard, 1938).

3. For negative and positive assessments of mid-twentieth-century American culture centered on the middle class, see Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1952); and Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1955).

4. The middle class would serve as the proverbial canary in the coal mine for scholars surveying the damage inflicted upon the American economy by “Reaganomics” in the 1980s. See, for example, Katherine S. Newman, *Falling from Grace: The Experience of Downward Mobility in the American Middle Class* (New York: Free Press, 1988); Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989); and Frederick R. Strobel, *Upward Dreams, Downward Mobility: The Economic Decline of the American Middle Class* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1993).

5. For recent theoretical reassessments of the concept of class, see Wai Chee Dimock and Michael T. Gilmore, eds., *Rethinking Class: Literary Studies and Social Formations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1996); John R. Hall, ed., *Reworking Class* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997); J. K. Gibson-Graham, Stephen Resnick, and Richard D. Wolff, eds., *Re/Presenting Class: Essays in Postmodern Marxism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001); Stanley Aronowitz, *How Class Works: Power and Social Movement* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003); and Sherry B. Ortner, *New Jersey Dreaming: Capital, Culture, and the Class of ‘58* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003).

6. This is the standard “liberal” critique of class; the standard “conservative” critique of class instead stresses the supposed fluidity of social mobility in the United States.

7. Rockman’s monograph will be the fruition of a series of seminal articles. See Seth Rockman, “The Contours of Class in the Early Republic City,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 1, no. 4 (2004): 91–107; Seth Rockman, “Class and the History of Working People in the Early Republic,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 25 (2005): 527–35; and Seth Rockman, “The Unfree Origins of American Capitalism,”

in *The Economy of Early America: Historical Perspectives and New Directions*, ed. Cathy Matson (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 335–61.

8. Rockman's strategy tends toward a synchronic analysis of the working class, but I know it to be attentive to historical change as well. In turn, my strategy tends toward a diachronic analysis of the middle class, but it is also attentive to material structures.

9. See John S. Gilkeson, Jr., *Middle-Class Providence, 1820–1940* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986); Stuart M. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760–1900* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989); Theodore Koditschek, *Class Formation and Urban-Industrial Society: Bradford, 1750–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); R. J. Morris, *Class, Sect, and Party: The Making of the British Middle Class, Leeds, 1820–1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990); Dror Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c. 1780–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); David Garrioch, *The Formation of the Parisian Bourgeoisie, 1690–1830* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996); D. S. Parker, *The Idea of the Middle Class: White-Collar Workers and Peruvian Society, 1900–1950* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998); Carol E. Harrison, *The Bourgeois Citizen in Nineteenth-Century France: Gender, Sociability, and the Uses of Emulation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Robert D. Johnston, *The Radical Middle Class: Populist Democracy and the Question of Capitalism in Progressive Era Portland, Oregon* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003).

10. See Mary P. Ryan, *The Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790–1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Bonnie G. Smith, *Ladies of the Leisure Class: The Bourgeoisies of Northern France in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981); Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1930* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1982); Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Peter Earle, *The Making of the English Middle Class: Business, Society, and Family Life in London, 1660–1730* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727–1783* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); John Seed, "From 'Middling Sort' to Middle Class in Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century England," in *Social Orders and Social Classes in Europe since 1500: Studies in Social Stratification*, ed. M. L. Bush (London: Longman, 1992), 114–35; Jonathan Barry, "Introduction," in *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, Society, and Politics in England, 1550–1800*, ed. Jonathan Barry and Christopher Brooks (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 1–27; John Smail, *The Origins of Middle-Class Culture: Halifax, Yorkshire, 1660–1780* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994); Margaret Hunt, *The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender, and the Family in England, 1660–1750* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Alan Kidd and David Nicholls, "Introduction: The Making of the British Middle Class?," in *The Making of the British Middle Class?: Studies of Regional and Cultural Diversity since the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Alan Kidd and David Nicholls (Phoenix Mill, Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing,

1998), xv–xl; Catherine E. Kelly, *In the New England Fashion: Reshaping Women's Lives in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999); Christine Adams, *A Taste for Comfort and Status: A Bourgeois Family in Eighteenth-Century France* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000); Burton J. Bledstein and Robert D. Johnston, eds., *The Middling Sorts: Explorations in the History of the American Middle Class* (London: Routledge, 2001); Brian P. Owensby, *Intimate Ironies: Modernity and the Making of Middle-Class Lives in Brazil* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999); Margaret C. Jacob and Matthew Kadane, "Missing, Now Found in the Eighteenth Century: Weber's Protestant Capitalist," *American Historical Review* 108 (2003): 20–49; and Amy Schrager Lang, *The Syntax of Class: Writing Inequality in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003).

11. This chapter interrogates the intended audience and stated content of these books, without considering their authors (mostly anonymous or obscure) or their readers. Original American books in these genres were not authored before the 1780s.

12. On the social terminology of "class" in eighteenth-century England, see Mary Poovey, "The Social Constitution of 'Class': Towards a History of Classificatory Thinking," in *Rethinking Class: Literary Studies and Social Formations*, ed. Wai Chee Dimock and Michael T. Gilmore (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 15–56; Keith Wrightson, "'Sorts of People' in Tudor and Stuart England," in *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, Society, and Politics in England, 1550–1800*, ed. Jonathan Barry and Christopher Brooks (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 28–51; John Seed, "From 'Middling Sort' to Middle Class in Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century England," in *Social Orders and Social Classes in Europe since 1500*, ed. M. L. Bush (London: Longman, 1992), 114–35; Penelope J. Corfield, "Class by Name and Number in Eighteenth-Century Britain," in *Language, History, and Class*, ed. Penelope J. Corfield (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 101–30; Keith Wrightson, "Estates, Degrees, and Sorts: Changing Perceptions of Society in Tudor and Stuart England," in *Language, History, and Class*, ed. Penelope J. Corfield (London: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 30–52; Keith Wrightson, "The Social Order of Early Modern England: Three Approaches," in *The World We Have Gained: Histories of Population and Social Structure*, ed. Lloyd Bonfield, Richard M. Smith, and Keith Wrightson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 177–202; Steven Wallach, "'Class Versus Rank': The Transformation of Eighteenth-Century English Social Terms and Theories of Production," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 57 (1986): 409–31; David Cressy, "Describing the Social Order of Elizabethan and Stuart England," *Literature and History* 3 (1976): 29–44; and Asa Briggs, "The Language of 'Class' in Early Nineteenth-Century England," in *Essays in Social History*, ed. M. W. Flinn and T. C. Smout (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), 154–77.

13. For recent work conceptualizing agency, see Walter Johnson, "On Agency," *Journal of Social History* 37 (2003): 113–24; Sherry B. Ortner, "Specifying Agency: The Comaroffs and Their Critics," *Interventions* 3 (2001): 76–84; Laura M. Ahearn, *Invitations to Love: Literacy, Love Letters, and Social Change in Nepal* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001); Special Issue, *History and Theory* 40, no. 4 (December 2001); Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000); Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische, "What Is Agency?," *American Journal of Sociology* 103 (1998): 962–1023; and Ellen

Messer-Davidow, "Acting Otherwise," in *Provoking Agents: Gender and Agency in Theory and Practice*, ed. Judith Kegan Gardiner (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 23–51. For a recent, exceptionalist account of "agency culture" and "agency civilization" in American history, see James E. Block, *A Nation of Agents: The American Path to a Modern Self and Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

14. The following analysis is based on my examination of hundreds of English and colonial American imprints spanning the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, as held in the Newberry Library (Chicago), the Huntington Library (Pasadena), Digital Evans, Eighteenth-Century Collections Online, and Early English Books Online.

15. J. P., *The Merchant's Dayly Companion* (London: H. Clark, 1684), 388.

16. Thomas Watts, *An Essay on the Proper Method for Forming the Man of Business* (London, 1716), 16–19.

17. N. H., *The Compleat Tradesman, or, the Exact Dealers Daily Companion* (London, 1684), 2.

18. First English imprint, 1681; first colonial imprint, 1710.

19. First English imprint, 1687; first colonial imprint, 1703.

20. First English imprint, 1727; first colonial imprint, 1748.

21. Quotes from the title page and preface of Thomas Hill, *The Young Secretary's Guide: or, A Speedy Help to Learning*, 3rd ed. (Boston: B. Green and J. Allen, 1703).

22. See a complete list of occupations in William Mather, *The Young Man's Companion: or, Arithmetick Made Easie*, 5th ed. (London: J. Mayos, 1699), 5–6.

23. See Thomas Hill, *The Young Secretary's Guide: or, A Speedy Help to Learning*, 4th ed. (Boston: T. Fleet, 1713), 33.

24. See George Fisher, *The American Instructor: Or, Young Man's Best Companion*, 9th ed. (Philadelphia: B. Franklin and D. Hall, 1748), 54.

25. On the truncated social hierarchy in the North American colonies relative to England, see Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), chapter 7.

26. See the unpaginated preface to [John Hill], *The Young Secretary's Guide: or, A Speedy Help to Learning* (Boston: B. Green, for Nicholas Buttolph, 1707).

27. See Hill, *The Young Secretary's Guide*, 4th ed., 35.

28. My book manuscript, *In My Power: Letter Writing in Early America*, includes a fuller range of identity categories. The category of gender, for instance, would move from cultural background to foreground in the mid-eighteenth century with respect to epistolary culture.

29. The best synthetic account of the commercializing colonial economy is John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607–1789*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

30. On commercialization and the "Great Awakening" in early America, see Richard L. Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690–1765* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), parts 3–4; and John L. Brooke, *The Heart of the Commonwealth: Society and Political Culture in Worcester County, Massachusetts, 1713–1861* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), chapters 2–3. On commercialization and the "consumer revolution" in early America, see Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), chapters 1–6; and Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman,

and Peter J. Albert, eds., *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994).

31. See, for example, Fisher, *The American Instructor*.

32. A compelling account of intense boundary work, with respect to race and gender in the latter eighteenth-century America, is Mechal Sobel, *Teach Me Dreams: The Search for Self in the Revolutionary Era* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

33. See Hill, *The Young Secretary's Guide*, 4th ed., 35–36.

34. See the title page to N. H., *The Compleat Tradesman, or, the Exact Dealers Daily Companion*, 2nd ed. (London, 1684).

35. See, for example, the unpaginated preface to Hill, *The Young Secretary's Guide*, 4th ed.

36. On the material culture of letter writing, see Konstantin Dierks, "Letter Writing, Stationery Supplies, and Consumer Modernity in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World," *Early American Literature* 41 (2006): 474–94.

37. The maritime dimension of this communications infrastructure is discussed in Ian K. Steele, *The English Atlantic 1675–1740: An Exploration in Communication and Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); and Kenneth I. Banks, *Chasing Empire Across the Sea: Communications and the State in the French Atlantic, 1713–1763* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002).

38. The canonical book on the variable and shifting salience of identity categories in early America, especially gender and race, is Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

Chapter 8. Business Friendships and Individualism in a Mercantile Class of Citizens in Charleston

I thank the organizers and other attendees of the Class and Class Struggle conference for the comments on this chapter. I also appreciate the assistance of my family—particularly my son, Matthew Sigmond, who was the smallest conference participant.

1. Charles Machin Memoir, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan. I silently modernized the punctuation in this quote.

2. By "merchant," I mean an individual engaged in international trade, either on his own account or on commission. Since these men were often extremely mobile, I include letters dating from before and after their sojourns in Charleston. In the memoir previously cited, for example, Machin was based in Savannah during the incident in question, and only later did he move to work in Charleston, where he was nearly immediately imprisoned for debt. This chapter relies primarily on letters written by and to merchants based in Charleston from 1763 to 1833. For a complete bibliography, see Jennifer Lee Goloboy, "Success to Trade": Charleston's Merchants in the Revolutionary Era" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2003), 191–97. This chapter draws from arguments, evidence, and language in my dissertation.