Class in Early Modern Europe: annotated bibliography

Class in Europe has been a subject of intense historical study for several decades. Historians have approached the study of class using a variety of methodologies, including quantitative analysis of social and economic data, textual analysis of various literary and legal sources, comparative studies of different regions and countries. Within these methodologies historians have focused on several aspects of class, including social mobility, material culture, gender and class relationships, and the relationship between political power and class. Historians generally argue that the early modern period in Europe (approximately 1500-1800 CE) is characterized by a complex shifting social hierarchy based on class. Some scholars have emphasized the continuity of class hierarchies and structures, while others have identified the emergence of new classes and the breakdown of traditional social distinctions. The early modern period saw the emergence of the middle class which consisted of merchants, artisans and other professionals who became increasingly important as the economy shifted from feudalism to capitalism. Historians often emphasize the importance of other factors in shaping class relations during the early modern period, such as religion, gender, and race. For example, the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation led to new religious divisions that at times reinforced existing class distinctions. The growth of European empires and the transatlantic slave trade brought new forms of racial inequality into play. With recent conversations in mind about the social order, belief systems, changing manners and questions of control and power, class in early modern Europe is an ever-pertinent topic.

The discussion of class as we know it began in the 19th century with Karl Marx, who largely wrote about class in terms of labor, production, and economic history rather than the history of the people that made up the different socioeconomic classes. Although Marx is the foundation of these discussions, not everyone involved today follows his method of focusing on economics and production. Norbert Elias, for instance, discusses class in The Civilizing Process, but focuses much more on the behavior of people in early modern Europe. He is especially concerned with the development of manners within Europe, and bow manners became a way to separate the rich from the poor. This difference is also visible in Natalie Zemon Davis’s The Return of Martin Guerre, where the peasants are shown as more rowdy and less refined, whereas the rich individuals are portrayed as very polite and put together. Both Katherine French and Paul Lloyd take a similar stance to Davis and Elias, focusing on how change in accessibility to various goods impacted class structure, especially for those in the lower classes. As noted previously, there are many different ways of looking at class and the history of class. Both Davis and Elias are focused on the social aspects, as opposed to the economic aspects which Marx focused so heavily on. There is no correct way to research class and its history, focusing on the social aspect and the economic aspect are both important, and there is space for all of these subjects and more within this study.


Davis’s The Return of Martin Guerre, an expansion of the author’s work on a film of the same name, offers an enjoyable and informative look into class dynamics in early modern Europe. Davis tells the real-life story of a 1540s French village that must decide if the man who calls himself Martin Guerre—the very man who abruptly left the village eight or nine years earlier—is, in fact, who he claims to be.

Questions of honor, imposture, and identity are raised as the villagers attempt to determine the validity of this newly-returned Martin’s claims. In addition to being an intriguing story, Davis’s book provides a window into the relationship between the upper and lower classes in sixteenth-century France. The villagers that the story revolves around are lower class, but the investigation and subsequent legal case attracted the attention of the upper class. We see an element of spectacle at play here, as more well-off members of society used Martin Guerre’s case as entertainment, a way for them to amuse themselves from the safety of their comfortable lives. This is representative of a larger inter-class dynamic, as those in the upper class saw an interesting distraction where lower-class people saw a life-altering trial. Davis’s book is incredibly useful for understanding the lives of non-elites, knowledge that has not been preserved nearly as well as that of the upper class, and serves as an excellent case study on the relationship between early modern peasants and nobles.


Norbert Elias’s *The Civilizing Process* is a seminal text for understanding class and manners in early modern Europe. He investigates the shifting notions around social standing through the lens of civility and etiquette, situating them in their larger historical context. Questions about the evolving nature of civility guide his work as he seeks to understand whether the process can be measured “with any degree of precision.” In undertaking this investigation, Elias turns to the genre of courtesy books, short treatises filled with instructions on how one should behave in order to appear “civilized” that were extremely popular in the early modern era. In practice, these books were often aimed at middle class people, who, taking advantage of the era’s new opportunities for class mobility, were looking to blend in with the upper class. Elias uses excerpts from these courtesy books to offer his readers a glimpse into how questions of class were being discussed at the time. Bad manners were often equated with a boorish lower class, while good manners became a way to exemplify one’s higher status. In the highly influential *On Civility in Boys* by Erasmus of Rotterdam, it is noted that “[t]o dip bread you have bitten into the sauce is to behave like a peasant,” and Tannhäuser’s thirteenth century poem of good manners notes that “[a] man who clears his throat when he eats and one who blows his nose in the tablecloth are both ill-bred.” Elias explores these class distinctions within the context of the early modern period, and then looks at them as part of a larger, overarching “civilizing process.” He notes that many of the pointers included in these courtesy books may seem obvious to modern audiences, and it may even be embarrassing to think of a time when people ate with their hands rather than with clean forks. This, Elias explains, is indicative of a larger trend, wherein human behavior appears to become more and more refined over time. The *Civilizing Process* is a fascinating look into a turbulent time in European history, one that echoes every time someone today lifts a fork or folds a napkin.


Katherine French, in her book *Household Goods and Good Households*, examines what changes followed the Black Death and how those who survived needed to adapt to new times and new material goods. In particular, chapters 3 and 4 look closely at class, specifically, how people decided to use the many houses left behind by the deceased and what employment people could find taking care of upper-class homes. Suddenly, there was much more space for families to spread out, if they decided to take over the now cheap homes next door. They needed to find a way to fill that space and so decorating and luxury goods became important, regardless of class. Merchants and artisans started moving up in the world and the implications of having a large home changed and rooms were given more specialized purposes. French also addresses changing gender roles and what was expected of workers, now that the workforce had been so brutally cut down.

This collection of fairy tales collected and edited by Joseph Jacobs allows for a glimpse of what stories might have been told at large gatherings of lower-class people. Of course, for them it was a mostly oral tradition so it’s natural that some of these stories have changed significantly by later scribes, but they were always changing by nature of oral literature. The author begins the anthology with a rousing discussion of how readers should treat his stories and understand how little is known about where they’re from and how they’ve been changed for their many audiences. These stories tell of both upper- and lower-class people, but only rarely do the classes mix in any real sense. Instead, for the most part the poor folk stay poor but (often) happy and the rich stay rich and (often) happy. The stories can also indicate what kind of problems certain people were perceived to have. Questions of marriage and child-rearing are universal while livestock is more of a lower-class theme while balls and parties remain upper-class. This anthology is a valuable tool to examine the class systems of England through a viewpoint of oral narration.


In Food and Identity In England, 1540-1640: Eating to Impress, Paul Lloyd discusses how the consumption of food impacted the lives of those living in early modern England. Throughout the book, he notes the changes to dining culture that occurred throughout the early modern period, and how those changes impacted people. In the specific sections that pertain to HIST 412, Lords, Peasants, and Pig Trials, he talks about how luxury was initially a negative rather than a positive, indicating consumption beyond what was prudent, and how consumption changed throughout the early modern period as access to different items. Items that were imported from various colonies across the globe, for example, were beginning to be more common. This did not make them cheaper, as things like tobacco or sugar were both still very much upper-class resources, but they were making their way into the culture of Europe. Another example was the rise of good quality meats, as the poor were able to purchase better cuts than they previously had been. Paul Lloyd’s Food and Identity in England can also be put in conversation with The Civilizing Process by Norbert Elias, which discusses the rise of manners in European culture.


Pieter Spierenburg’s chapter titled “Knife Fighting and Popular Codes of Honor in Early Modern Amsterdam,” is a part of the edited volume Men and Violence: Gender, Honor, and Rituals in Modern Europe and America. In this chapter, Spierenburg examines the culture of knife fighting in early modern Amsterdam and the role it played in shaping popular codes of honor. He provides an in-depth analysis of the different forms of knife fighting, the reasons behind its prevalence and the cultural codes of honor that were shaped by it. This piece is particularly important because the restraint of violence is what marks the civilizing process, at least according to Norbert Elias.

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