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A CLASSIC REVISITED

THE WORLD OF LATE ANTIQUITY BY PETER BROWN AND THE NEED FOR A NEW SOCIOLOGY OF EMPIRE*

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Abstract

This essay provides a retrospective critique of Peter Brown's *The World of Late Antiquity* (1971), with special reference to a formative issue: its treatment of social fluidity. The essay examines the book's inspiration for, and handling of, the topic (II–III); sets the book's account in context of Brown's prior thinking on social fluidity (IV–VII); makes thematic observations, in context of both the time of composition and Brown's memoir (VIII); looks briefly at his subsequent thought on social fluidity (IX); and suggests that we need a new sociology of the later Roman empire, with observations about parameters (X).

I. Introduction

Widely recognised as the most distinctive and influential landmark in the emergence of Late Antiquity as a broad field, Peter Brown's *The World of Late Antiquity*, which appeared in 1971, is an acknowledged masterpiece of historical exposition: superbly succinct; insightful and ironic; beautifully adorned with instructive and memorable pictures and captions; an outstanding example of the art of covering a vast subject with awesome brevity. Opening with the Mediterranean world of the late 2nd century AD, and closing with a juxtaposition of the courts of Charlemagne and Harun al-Rashid in about 800, this book – in some 200 pages, half text and half illustrations – did more than any other to carve out a distinct period between Classical Antiquity and the Middle Ages.

The book's success is exemplified by the fact that its novel combination of individually unusual features has since moved into the learned mainstream. Today's specialist is no longer surprised by the linking of centuries from the notional zenith of Imperial Antiquity under the Antonines to the arrival of the Early Middle Ages; nor by the absence of lamentation

* Retrospective critique of Brown 1971a, henceforth *WLA* for parenthetical citations in the text and discursive observations in the notes. My discussion also responds to Brown 2023 – a memoir that is humane, enjoyable and instructive but also, perhaps more than some academic memoirs, artful and strategic. Having wrestled with *WLA* for over 30 years, the observations presented here can be laid at nobody's door but my own.

for the classical world; nor by the energetic charting of postclassical innovation; nor by the juxtaposition of social and religious history; nor by the shift of emphasis to the eastern Mediterranean seaboard, in place of a long-standing tendency to be mesmerised by Europe's own past; nor even – above all – by the combination of all these. It is, ironically, a tribute to the book's profound influence that what Brown said, in 1974, of Henri Pirenne's *Mahomet et Charlemagne* might now be said of *The World of Late Antiquity*: 'As with many a "classic", it is even possible for the specialist today to do without *Mahomet et Charlemagne*.'[1]

But in another respect, the two books are poles apart. Pirenne's classic, which appeared posthumously in 1937, largely amplified the evidence for an argument first adumbrated by Pirenne himself some two decades earlier. As a result, it 'was hailed less as a novelty than as the "historical testament" of the foremost interpreter of the social and economic development of medieval Europe.'[2] By contrast, *The World of Late Antiquity* was a fresh departure by a young author, whose teaching was already ranging widely but whose publications had largely concentrated on the western half of the Roman empire from the mid-4th century to the early 5th.[3] The character of the book, and the circumstances of its creation, allow it the part of a manifesto; and its influence over time has certainly prompted it to be seen in such a light.[4] But a manifesto is not a testament. The book was, in large measure, an experimental statement in print on certain questions. On these questions, and many others, scholars of Late Antiquity – Brown prolific among them – have been doing brisk business ever since.[5]

Acclamation and censure have duly abounded. Much has been said about *The World of Late Antiquity*'s boundary-busting chronological and geographical parameters, and conversely their idiosyncratic omissions; about the book's central role in advancing the lens of 'transformation' in place of 'decline', and whether this teeters into being Panglossian; and about its creative but confessedly lopsided emphasis on cultural themes, and how much history this necessarily leaves out. These issues do not need a recap here.[6]

[1] Brown 1974, quoting 25, reprinted in Brown 1982, 63–79, quoting 64, in retrospective critique of Pirenne 1937.

[2] See n. 1.

[3] Brown's 12 substantive papers to appear prior to *WLA*, from 1961 to 1970, are collected in Brown 1972. Eight out of ten research articles are western, focusing on Augustine, Rome and Roman Africa. Two research articles and two review articles (from 1967 to 1970) turn in large part eastward. Brown 1967a, his first book, is a biography of Augustine, in the setting of his life in Africa and Italy. Though themes of eastern origin – such as Neoplatonism and Manichaeism – are present in the book, its focus is western. Brown 2023, 293–303, discusses his eastward research turn from 1966. For his early teaching, which also took an eastward turn, see now Brown 2023, 211–12, 222–27, 256–58, 277–80 and 304–10.

[4] Brown 2023, 367–72; James 2008, 22: '*The World of Late Antiquity* was, in a sense, the manifesto for the Late Antiquity project.'

[5] For a recent indication of the range of the field, see Nicholson 2018, in which over 400 specialists (the present author among them) provide *aperçus* of over 5000 topics.

[6] See, for example, Brown *et al.* 1997 (amicable but informative); Liebeschuetz 2003, 2006 (balanced critiques by a major scholar); Ward-Perkins 2005 (a significantly different treatment, received badly by Brown himself, *viz.* Brown 2013, xxx–xxxii); Marcone 2008; James 2008; Ando 2008; Wood 2008.

Rather, I shall focus on a theme that is fundamental but far from resolution: 'Society'. This is partly because, by addressing the book's handling of the issue of social fluidity, we grapple directly with the manner in which *The World of Late Antiquity* finds analytical coherence. But it is also because the issue of fluidity is going to remain central in the study of the social history of the later Roman empire, and this is going to call for the greatest possible clarity about the historiography of that field.

I shall first set out the main springs of Brown's account of social fluidity: while the relevant scholarship can be recapped very briefly, the role of the French Revolution as a comparator deserves notice; and in relation to that, an element of one-upmanship over Edward Gibbon needs addressing carefully (II). Against that background, I shall recapitulate the key role of social fluidity and its consequences in the book (III). I shall then set that model of fluidity in the context of Brown's principal thought on the subject, as it evolved in print from 1963 to 1970. Brown's retrospective discussions since the 1990s, though illuminating, largely skate over that early trajectory. In reality, however, Brown's work shows ample signals of critique, ambivalence, rhetorical interest, historical qualification, experimental and schematic engagement; and his substantial recent memoir, *Journeys of the Mind: A Life in History*, offers sidelights (IV–VII).[7] In the light of that juxtaposition between the book itself, the prior development of its author's thought, and the memoir, I shall make some overall observations on the treatment of social fluidity and its impact in *The World of Late Antiquity*; and I shall address the book's odd but unmistakeable 'improvement' in the memoir (VIII). I shall go on briefly to note the direction that Brown's work took on the issue of fluidity after *The World of Late Antiquity* (IX). In closing, I shall propose that we need a new sociology of empire, and I shall briefly outline some parameters (X).

II. 'The Great Loosening Up': Radical Social Fluidity as Agent of Change, from Mazzarino to the French Revolution

The World of Late Antiquity is divided into two parts. Part One, 'The Late Roman Revolution', is divided into two sections – 'Society' and 'Religion'. Part Two turns to 'Divergent Legacies' – with three sections addressing 'The West', 'Byzantium' and 'The New Participants', the latter encompassing the emergence of Islam and the rise of the Caliphate. The five sections are in turn divided into a total of 16 short chapters.

The section on 'Society' is thus the launchpad and Brown has been frank, on more than one occasion, about the central role of the theme of social fluidity in shaping the book as a whole. In a discussion with specialists a quarter-century later, he observed:[8]

> The notion of newly-organized empires as agents of quickening fluidity, which might, in turn, provoke unexpected cultural and religious changes, gave to *The World of Late Antiquity* a narrative, and an implied analytic consistency, that enabled me to span

[7] Brown 2023, especially 215–33, *passim*.
[8] Brown 1997, 15.

> centuries and regions. … In the late 1960s, it seemed as if the past decades of scholarship on the social and cultural history of the later Roman empire had taken us … to the edge of a major discovery. It seemed as if it was possible to find, in the peculiar balance of fluidity and stability that characterized the social 'style' of the later empire, a clue to the unabated religious and cultural ferment which was so marked a feature of other aspects of the period.

Specialists will know, not least from a series of retrospective essays by Brown himself, that two particularly decisive influences in shaping this view were Mazzarino's *Aspetti sociali del quarto secolo. Ricerche di storia tardo-romana*, which Brown read in 1957, and Jones's paper on 'The Social Background of the Struggle between Paganism and Christianity', which Brown heard in 1958 when Jones delivered it at the Warburg Institute as part of a seminar series convened by Arnaldo Momigliano.[9]

Briefly, Mazzarino's view was that the establishment of a gold coinage (the *solidus*), being more resistant to inflation than the concurrent bronze and silver coinage, acted as a hard currency. This (so the theory goes) allowed *parvenu* imperial functionaries to acquire wealth – not least as they were in a position to extract fees and bribes in gold from landowners whereas landowners could scarcely hope to do so from most of their tenants. The corollary, in the fully fledged form of this thesis, is that the late empire saw the social and economic displacement of the councillors (*curiales*) who formed the traditional governing class of the provinces, by an emergent imperial service aristocracy recruited chiefly from 'sub-curial' origins.[10] Brown had been 'set on fire' by his reading of Mazzarino, leading his earliest Oxford lecturing, in 1958, to be 'an excited disquisition on the relation between social stratification and the circulation of the *solidus* in the post-Constantinian age'.[11]

In turn, attending Jones's paper at the Warburg, Brown was 'galvanized'; 'the lecture was electrifying'; Jones 'concluded with a suggestion … that the sudden rise of Christianity had been due to the unprecedented degree of upward social mobility that characterised Roman society at that time. … Fluidity, not rigidity, was the hallmark of the later empire. These few remarks of Jones, delivered with characteristic modesty, acted as a catalyst to my work in the coming years.'[12] Based mainly (though not only) on a literal reading of a speech by Libanius, Jones emphasised, for the East, radical social fluidity at the *top* of government and

[9] Mazzarino 1951; Jones 1963. For retrospective commentary on their impact on him, among other influences, see especially Brown 1997, 13–15; 2000a, 326–28; 2007, 1; 2010, 17–18, 22–23; 2023, 225–26.

[10] Mazzarino 1951, 110–18, 169–216. For a revival, see Banaji 2007, especially 37, 39–88, 101–33 and 216–17. For a very different view, see Skinner 2013.

[11] Brown 2007, 1. With disarming charm, Brown adds that the students 'did not return next week'. A more serious problem is that Mazzarino's thesis relies on the *solidus* being a currency that was materially in circulation. I am grateful to Michael Crawford for pointing out to me what is obvious to a numismatist: we are not in the habit of finding worn *solidi* because the Roman state tended to suck them straight back in (personal communication, 31 March and 2 April 2013).

[12] Brown 2023, 225.

high mobility in the senatorial echelon.[13] Conversely, he was very aware that the traditional aristocracies persisted; and he showed ambivalence about the relationship between the traditional provincial aristocracies and the imperial bureaucracy at middle and lower levels, being conscious that the bureaucracy was drawing personnel at least partly from those traditional aristocracies.[14]

The sociological account that Brown would produce, as we shall see in section III of this paper, was in large part an amalgam of Mazzarino's systemic view of mobility, which included bottom-up fluidity, and, conversely, Jones's view of radical mobility at the top coupled with survival of the traditional aristocracies. These principal influences were joined by other papers on Late Roman sociology. Notable among them were Keith Hopkins's paper on the evidence of Ausonius, which suggested that high fluidity might also be a feature of the West; Mazzarino on the 'democratization' of culture; and MacMullen on the evidence of the Theodosian Code.[15]

But another observable influence on Brown's treatment of the role of social fluidity has tended to be neglected. This was the French Revolution and its aftermath. In a valuable and enjoyable interview for a Latvian cultural magazine in 2017 – which repays attention, not least for its observations on cognition and causation – Brown had occasion to reflect, again, on the theme:[16]

> When I was writing *The World of Late Antiquity*, what impressed me most was that changes, to a very large extent, weren't only imposed externally – you know, a [b]arbarian invasion, which caused destruction, which created a need to change – and that's the normal way history, the end of the Roman Empire, tends to be written. External forces cause internal change. I was much more interested in how people changed their views of *what was possible* [original emphasis], that is, how they changed their mental horizons. And of course, to do a history of mental horizons the causation has to be of a very different kind. *I myself found that a principal cause was the great loosening up of what had been a very stratified society in Roman times* [my emphasis]. We forget something that I think Edward Gibbon entirely forgot because he was a member of the *ancien régime* and

[13] Jones 1963, especially 27–30. His model, however, could have done with clarification: at p. 28, 'there must have been a considerable number of senators whose fathers had started life as simple peasants'; but at p. 30, the 'great bulk of the eastern senators … came from the upper layer of the curial order'. In aggregate, these disjointed statements suggest the view that peasant fathers entered the curial order and their sons then advanced to the senate, vaulting ahead of more established curial families. Skinner 2013, 22–28, offers a detailed critique of the Libanian evidence used by Jones, with a different interpretation.

[14] Jones 1964, for instance emphasising mobility at 537–39, 545–46, 548, 551 and 555–56; but conversely being more qualified at 546–47 (fleetingly), and more generally at 737–63, *passim* (especially 757–58).

[15] Hopkins 1961; Mazzarino 1960; MacMullen 1964. Note also Hopkins 1963; 1965. Skinner 2013, 29–32, provides a critique of Hopkins's use of the Ausonian evidence and offers a different view.

[16] Brown 2017, pp. 9–10 of 30.

> took a highly stratified society totally for granted. Only ten years afterwards it would have looked very different. …
> Twenty years afterwards you would have the fall of Napoleon. Fifty years afterwards you would have young men wanting to be like Napoleon. This is the horizons of the possible, that a society, which is in considerable continuity with its own past, can, nevertheless, change. And for me the question was how to get that: What causes that subtle shift in the horizons of the possible?

A comparative reference to Napoleonic marshals in the book itself (*WLA*, 26) and the phrasing in this interview indicate that the title of Part One, the 'Late Roman Revolution', was more than a nod to the French revolutionary era.[17] The point is reinforced by Brown's most significant retrospective discussion of the book, in which he remarks of his way of thinking when he wrote it: 'Put bluntly: from the point of view of religious and cultural creativity, "the shaking of an *ancien regime*" could do nothing but good to a traditional society.'[18] His essay then directly cites a page in the book wherein we find a description of a hierarchical society in which 'redress of grievances had to pass through a great man – a *patronus* – "the boss" (as in French, *le patron*), exercising his influence at court' (*WLA*, 37). It is worth remembering that Brown wrote *The World of Late Antiquity* at a time when he was still making his career in Oxford's Faculty of Modern History, and that the French Revolution has always been a point of reference for a wide, lay, Anglophone reading public.

We can place this observation alongside the extract from a draft of Brown's proposal to Thames and Hudson, now supplied in his memoir, which makes clear that – while Mikhail Rostovtzeff and E.R. Dodds were more immediate targets – he already had in mind a rebuttal of Gibbon's more expansive declinist account.[19]

The opportunity, but also the need, therefore arises to think carefully about our handling of comparative history and historiography.

[17] Brown 2023, 378, instead signals allusion to Syme 1939: 'In this choice of title [i.e., to call Part One 'The Late Roman Revolution'], I was consciously adapting the title of Sir Ronald Syme's classic study', *The Roman Revolution*. Naturally, the Augustan and French comparative references are not mutually exclusive; but one can hardly fail to note that the memoir thereby congenially renders Brown as a forerunner of other Syme-inspired references to 'revolution', which have lately found favour (Van Dam 2007; Wallace-Hadrill 2008; Kay 2014), whereas the French comparison has become sociologically outdated: n. 33 below highlights some signal studies.

[18] Brown 1997, 15.

[19] Brown 2023, 370–72 (p. 370: 'I made clear that this would not be a book like Edward Gibbon's'), in tandem with 129–30, 173–74, 223–24 and 373–78. Conversely, Brown 1997, 5–6, is shy of admitting to having had Gibbon in his sights: 'Edward Gibbon, by contrast, was a distant figure. His *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* was usually perceived as little more than a literary masterpiece … It was not until the bi-centenary of the publication of the first volumes of the *Decline and Fall* that I myself attempted, along with other scholars, to take the full measure of the range, the seriousness and the sad clarity of vision of Gibbon, the historian of religion and empire [Brown 1976] … Unlike the Olympian Gibbon, Rostovtzeff … was a living, disquieting presence for all young students.' See Rostovtzeff 1926, 344–487, especially 449–87; Dodds 1965.

The implication that we have the advantage over Gibbon because a 'highly stratified society' was something that he took 'totally for granted' is, in fact, mistaken. We need to think, not only of France, but also of America. Gibbon wrote the first volume of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* largely from 1773, with publication in February 1776.[20] By the time he started it, British troops had already been deployed to Massachusetts to repress growing colonial resistance. Gibbon began taking a serious interest in the American situation in 1774, before becoming a Member of Parliament later that year. By mid-1775, he was worried that British policy would fail.[21] Five and a half weeks before the volume was published, Thomas Paine's pamphlet, *Common Sense*, appeared, calling for American independence and egalitarian rule on Enlightenment principles. The pamphlet was a sensation, achieving high sales in Britain and France as well as America.[22] In going on to write the second and third volumes of *Decline and Fall*, published in 1781, Gibbon was in no position whatsoever to take a 'highly stratified society totally for granted': his penning fully coincided with the American Revolutionary War, which seems, in fact, to have discernibly influenced the published version of the 'General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West', with which the third volume closed.[23]

Conversely, the notion that things 'would have looked very different' ten, twenty or fifty years afterward – and therefore, again, that we have the advantage over Gibbon – must be met with a sense of reality. All too often, a revolution fails to redeem a people from their *misère*. In both America and France, the relationship between political radicalism and social equality proved elusive, not least because many revolutionaries were content that this should be so. American society in the 1780s saw a refashioning of the sense of gentility on the part of the new nation's socio-economic elite.[24] The limits of reform are well known.[25] George Washington and Thomas Jefferson continued to keep slaves, and the latter is now known to have relished the slave economy of his Monticello estate, where he also sired, in all likelihood, seven children by his slave woman, Sally Hemings.[26] A vested interest in slavery would lead to the American Civil War.[27] As for France, a 'highly stratified society' certainly did

[20] Gibbon 1776–89 I (1776).

[21] Wolloch 2022, 251–52.

[22] Paine 1776. For significant studies, see Foner 1976; Larkin 2005; Loughran 2006.

[23] Gibbon 1776–89 II–III (1781). Wolloch 2022, 252–56, especially 255–56 on the 'General Observations', identifies evidence of what is likely to have been subtle revision. Ghosh 1983 makes a good argument that Gibbon had drafted the 'General Observations' as early as 1773. See also Ghosh 1991. Early drafting does not, of course, preclude later revision.

[24] Cutterham 2017.

[25] Finkelman 2014, on the contradiction between the egalitarian rhetoric of the Founding and its failure to resolve slavery.

[26] Wiencek 2003 on Washington. On Jefferson's slave ownership and use of slave concubinage: Onuf 1993; Gordon-Reed 1997; Foster *et al.* 1998; 1999; Gordon-Reed 2008 (albeit too indulgent); Stanton 2012; Wiencek 2012 (flawed and controversial, but rightly seeking to press a case); and, for the driest sense of reality, Finkelman 2012, including apt characterisation of Jefferson as 'a creepy, brutal hypocrite'.

[27] Woods 2012.

not end with the guillotine, nor with the Napoleonic *carrière ouverte aux talents*. The vaunted Napoleonic meritocracy was in practice tightly circumscribed. The *grandes écoles* and *lycées* were academically selective; but this was irrelevant to the majority of the population who did not yet receive even a primary education.[28]

What, in that case, might Gibbon actually have lived to see and learn, had he not died at 56, in 1794? He tells us that he finished writing the sixth and final volume of *Decline and Fall* on 27 June 1787.[29] Notwithstanding that France's *ancien régime* had indeed largely been torn down within ten years of that, the country was then governed by the constitution of 1795, which continued to hard-wire a highly stratified society, not least by way of a demanding wealth qualification for electors. The Directory (1795–99) struggled to hold the centre. The April '97 election in France was a landslide victory for royalists, ultimately answered by their purging that September. Conversely, the neo-Jacobins would be purged in May '98.[30] The six presidents of the Directory, over its four inglorious years, included a titled nobleman, four members of the provincial gentry whose prior careers as lawyers required an elite education, and only one *bona fide* commoner, by contemporary standards, though even his father was a local official who claimed some drops of noble blood.[31]

Moreover, had Gibbon lived to be a plausible 78 and two months, he would have lasted long enough to observe that the failure of Napoleon's 'Hundred Days' brought, in July 1815, the arrival of the Second Bourbon Restoration. In sociological terms, this largely froze things where they stood, perpetuating a world whose social iniquities are perhaps most vividly immortalised, by a contemporary, in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*.[32] Indeed, even had Gibbon lived to be one of the 19th century's centenarians, he would still have been able to observe the irony of how *little* 'loosening up' of society the most tempestuous of revolutionary epochs had witnessed: as the historiography of the French revolution and the century that followed has shown, substantive growth in the nation's social fluidity – what we might perhaps, indeed, begin to call a 'great loosening up' – escalated only from the mid-19th century, particularly its third quarter, with industrialisation.[33]

[28] The scope of Napoleonic meritocracy is crisply cut down to size in Tombs 2021. See also Woloch 2002. Blaufarb 2002 is a significant study of officer commissioning, focused on the tension between privilege and merit, from the *ancien régime* to the Second Bourbon Restoration.

[29] Gibbon (ed. Murray) 1896, 333.

[30] Ackroyd 2022; H. Brown 2006. Woloch 1970 is a classic study of pro-democracy activism under the Directory.

[31] The commoner was, of course, the pivotal Abbé Sieyès. Recent re-evaluation of his political thought has brought into sharper focus his private views on social inequality, and the anti-democratic manner in which he sought to embed this inequality in structures of government: Fauré 2009; Lembcke and Weber 2014; A. Brown 2024.

[32] Hugo 1862. The subject matter was still highly contentious: see Bellos 2017; VanderWolk 2006.

[33] A wave of studies set the subject on a new footing. See Kaelble 1985; Price 1987; Charle 1994; Magraw 2002; McPhee 2004. Bonneuil and Rosental 1999 is remarkable in its use of data. Among excellent particular studies, rural and urban, see Singer 1983; Sewell 1985.

III. *The World of Late Antiquity*

What is striking, therefore, as we return to *The World of Late Antiquity*, is that its emphasis on a 'great loosening up', by combining Mazzarino, Jones and others to produce a maximalist view of fluidity, goes substantially further than even the French revolutionary analogy, as we can now understand it, would lead us to expect.

Let us look closely at this. The section on 'Society' is made up of three little chapters: an opening portrait of the notional heyday of the classical Roman empire in the late 2nd and early 3rd centuries, followed by an account of its crisis and re-modelling in the 3rd century ('The New Rulers: 240–350', *WLA*, 22–33) and then of the social contours of the distinctively 'late' Roman world ('A World Restored: Roman Society in the Fourth Century', *WLA*, 34–47).

Here we find the core.

Emphasis is first placed on the character and role of the allegedly sub-elite and labouring class origins of the emperors and their chief ministers, as the contours of the 'late' Roman empire stabilised in the later 3rd and early to mid-4th centuries (*WLA*, 26–27):

> The army was an artesian well of talent. By the end of the third century, its officers and administrators had ousted the traditional aristocracy from control of the empire. The great reforming emperor of the age, Diocletian, was the son of a freedman from Dalmatia; his nominee, Galerius (305–11) had herded cattle in the Carpathians; another of his colleagues, Constantius Chlorus (305–06), was an obscure country-gentleman from near Naissus (Niš). They were men whose rise to power was as spectacular and as well merited as was that of Napoleon's marshals. They, and their successors, chose servants of similar background. The son of a pork butcher, of a small-town notary, of a cloakroom attendant in the public baths, became the praetorian prefects on whom the prosperity and stability of the eastern parts of the empire depended under Constantine and Constantius II.[34]

Secondly, emphasis is placed on the broader entrenchment of an *arriviste* service aristocracy (*WLA*, 27–28):

> The ease with which Christianity gained control of the upper classes of the Roman empire in the fourth century was due to the revolution that had placed the imperial court at the centre of a society of 'new' men, who found it comparatively easy to abandon conservative beliefs in favour of the new faith of their masters.
>
> The new upper classes brought with them reminders of their brisk military origins. All officials wore uniform; … The Latin slang of the provinces was irremovably lodged in

[34] Brown's remark about 'the son of a pork butcher, of a small-town notary, of a cloakroom attendant in the public baths' is directly indebted to Jones's use of the evidence of Libanius in his Warburg lecture: see nn. 12–13 above. However, Brown's account amplifies the effect with his comments on Diocletian and Galerius, which similarly render the ancient evidence as if it is uncomplicated. As this view of these emperors is (broadly speaking) not unusual, the evidence will repay detailed scrutiny elsewhere.

> their official vocabulary: a classical Roman would have called the new gold piece an *aureus*; nobody called it anything but a *solidus* – a 'solid bit'.
> Thus a new element, drawn from far beyond the traditional aristocracies of the empire, had come to stay in the governing class.

We should note that, although this treatment is evidently influenced by Jones's notion that social fluidity fostered the Christianisation of the eastern governing class, it amplifies the role of fluidity because it goes far beyond Jones's own emphasis on radical fluidity at the very top. Jones, as I noted earlier, showed ambivalence about the recruitment of personnel to the imperial bureaucracy, clearly recognising that, to some degree at least, the 'traditional aristocracies' were staffing the bureaucracy.[35] Brown's account does not say this. It characterises the imperial service aristocracy in counterpoint to the 'traditional aristocracies'. First, the court is '*at the centre* [my emphasis] of a society of "new" men', clearly implying that the society of new men extended substantially beyond the court itself. Secondly, the service aristocracy is generalised in *military* terms; as users of slang; as a 'new element' from 'far beyond' the empire's 'traditional aristocracies'. In this, Brown's treatment seems considerably indebted to the more systemic model of fluidity, at the bottom as well as the top, associated with Mazzarino; and to have drawn, also, on Hopkins's treatment of the case for fluidity in the West.[36]

It will help, therefore, to address a potential ambiguity. Brown remarks (*WLA*, 28):

> Yet the social fluidity that had forced such men [the service aristocracy] to the top was neither indiscriminate, nor did it embrace all of Roman society. In the East, for instance, Constantinople was an isolated whirlpool of change, whose currents only gradually affected the traditional upper-class society of the provinces.

Is this a contradiction, implying that the court was *not*, after all, at the 'centre' of a wider society of new men in imperial service? What does it mean that social fluidity was not 'indiscriminate', that it did not 'embrace all of Roman society'? Where does this leave the large segment of imperial bureaucracy that was situated in the provinces?

It is possible that the ambiguity is deliberate. But in fact, it seems to be resolved if one takes the passage in context. The continuation to this passage goes on directly to present both alien imperial servants, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the continuity of the 'traditional aristocracies' in the midst of the new, revolutionary world. We are given Libanius, the 4th-century Antiochene rhetor, performing before 'Latin-speaking soldiers' but also able to 'retire to find more congenial company' in Nicomedia, where 'he could still find "well-born men", "lovers of the Muses"' (*WLA*, 28–29, quoting 29).

We are *not* given to understand that these more congenial, well-born men were themselves doubling up as imperial administrators. On the contrary, the model that we are

[35] See nn. 13–14 above.
[36] See nn. 9–10, and discussion in the text at n. 15, above.

presented with is one of *juxtaposition* between distinct elements in the overall social structure (*WLA*, 29):

> Like the opposed vaults of a single arch, the 'new' society of imperial servants came to rest against the more rooted and backward-looking society of the educated upper classes.

This is a treatment that revels in the sheer survival of the 'traditional aristocracies' as well as in the rise of new men through imperial service. In the emphasis on survival, one detects a distinct note of Jones, tempering the more dramatic notion of displacement implied by Mazzarino's model.[37] But it is not a treatment of the 'Late Roman revolution' that suggests, at any point, that there was a substantive overlap between these 'opposed vaults' of the governing class. Rather, it is the tension to be found in the juxtaposition that is key.[38]

It is against this social background that Brown aims to understand the more conservative aspects of the cultural character of the age. Classical culture, we are told, served as a 'bridgehead between the two worlds', providing 'a *trompe l'œil* against which the new man could merge' (*WLA*, 29–30). It is the new men that are held to characterise the 4th century, socially and culturally: 'The newly formed governing class that had emerged throughout the empire by 350' (*WLA*, 34); 'a new aristocracy sprang up in Gaul like mushrooms after rain' (*WLA*, 34); 'the society of the early fourth century was exceptionally open to currents from below' (*WLA*, 36); 'The new élites were exceptionally open', and hence, 'The splendid new art of the age, for instance, is the work of craftsmen and patrons who felt themselves shaken free from the restraints of previous generations' (*WLA*, 38).

There is no way to mistake this. First, we are looking at a social model that is expressly geared around the notion that senior positions in imperial government – indeed, the throne itself – could be attained by people who had not even been born into their *local* aristocracy. This is vertical social mobility of the dramatically vaulting kind. Secondly, such persons are presented not merely as isolated cases but rather (as we might say today) as a 'new normal' in the late 3rd and early to mid-4th centuries, reflected broadly in a service aristocracy recruited from far outside the traditional governing class. Thirdly, this social setting is presented as the analytic key to the cultural ferment of the broad age.

When one moves to the second section, 'Religion', we see the unfolding of this 'implied analytic consistency': 'a world obscurely prepared among humble men … was able to come to the fore in the form of an organized Christian Church' (*WLA*, 57); 'Imperceptibly, the Roman empire dissolved in the lower classes that sense of tradition and local loyalties on which its upper class depended' (*WLA*, 60, though one might pause to wonder what that phrasing actually means); 'a new public of half-educated men needed to feel in control of a life whose pace had quickened' (*WLA*, 63, cf. 64–65); 'The rise of Christianity cannot be isolated from the social changes we have been describing' (*WLA*, 65); 'an age when the

[37] See again nn. 13–14 above. Note also Brown 2007, 6–7, on the subject of how Jones, 'sucking his pipe', would 'think aloud' in the 'deserted Common Room' of a Gaudy night at All Souls College in the early 1960s: 'Did I know, Brown, that … *curiales* were still to be seen in seventh-century Spain?'

[38] See, further, in section VIII below.

barriers separating the successful freedman from the *déclassé* senator were increasingly unreal' (*WLA*, 66); 'With the return of peace after the accession of Diocletian, the wound began to close between the new, military governing class and the urban civilization of the Mediterranean' (*WLA*, 86).

Of the emperor Constantine (*WLA*, 88–89):

> The bishops could accept an uncultivated emperor. They were used to autodidacts … Constantine, one should remember, was the younger contemporary of the first Christian hermit, St Anthony. Neither the Latin-speaking soldier nor the Coptic-speaking farmer's son would have been regarded as acceptable human material for a classical schoolmaster … It was over the wide bridge of a 'middlebrow' identification of Christianity with the lowest common denominator of classical culture, and not through the narrow gate of a pagan aristocracy of letters, that Constantine and his successors entered the civilian civilization of the Mediterranean.

By contrast, the emperor Julian 'had found himself free to gain a proper education … the first emperor of genuine education for a century' (*WLA*, 91). He 'reminded the upper classes of landmarks that had been washed away by the social fluidity of the early fourth century' (*WLA*, 92). Indeed, the closing chapter in the section on 'Religion' is tellingly entitled 'The New Men: Monasticism and the Expansion of Christianity, 300–400' (*WLA*, 96–113) – dwelling principally on the ascetic movement and its 'outsider' qualities, and suggesting that 'it was paradoxically just these eccentrics who turned Christianity into a mass religion' (*WLA*, 107).

Turning to the 'Divergent Legacies' of Part Two, with its vast panorama of polities and centuries, it comes as no surprise that the theme of social fluidity and its impact becomes more diffuse. Yet it remains apparent.

In the West, 'barbarians' were the newcomers *par excellence*: their 'invasions were not perpetual, destructive raids; still less were they organized campaigns of conquest. Rather, they were a "gold rush" of immigrants from the underdeveloped countries of the north into the rich lands of the Mediterranean' (*WLA*, 122). It was the 'wall of dumb hatred' and 'intolerance' that greeted the barbarians which 'led directly to the formation of the barbarian kingdoms' (*WLA*, 124). Perhaps the most autobiographical sentence in the book, given its author's childhood in the southern Irish Protestant community of the 1930s and 1940s, is the remark that, 'To be tacitly disliked by 98 per cent of one's fellow men is no mean stimulus to preserving one's identity as a ruling class' (*WLA*, 124–25).[39] The Franks were the exception because 'they had infiltrated in small numbers, as mercenaries. Above all, they kept clear of the highly articulate populations round the Mediterranean' (*WLA*, 125). Their consequent acceptance meant that they 'felt free to become Catholics' (*WLA*, 125). It was Christianity, and ultimately Catholicism in particular, that came to provide a 'new religious

[39] Brown 2023, especially 70–71; also 3–34 and 49–79, *passim*.

solidarity' and 'strengthening of local ties' across the West (*WLA*, 126). It is against this background that the Roman aristocracies of the dying western empire went to work for their new masters.

Byzantium experienced its own patterns of migration and assimilation, here firmly emphasised. 'The history of Constantinople in the late fifth century was shaped by such gifted immigrants' as the ascetic Daniel from Mesopotamia (*WLA*, 141). In the provinces, 'Egypt, for instance, had entered the mainstream of cultural life. Its richer peasants and small-town notables were typical provincials of a new east Roman society' (*WLA*, 143). Music was affected: for example, 'Romanos the Melodist came to Constantinople from Edessa' (*WLA*, 144). Also affected were mobility of both trade and literary life: 'It was possible for a merchant from Alexandria to cash a cheque in a bank at Constantinople … The culture of the empire had few deep barriers. Men felt free to move from the provinces to the capital without losing touch with their roots. Scratch a Greek poet like Cyrus of Panopolis, and we find an Egyptian devoted to the martyr-saint of his home-town' (*WLA*, 145).

Of the emperor Justinian (*WLA*, 150):

> Justinian … was a *nouveau riche* of east Roman culture. With his uncle Justin, he had drifted into the 'Ruling City' from a Balkan village: his native language was Latin … It was in Constantinople, one suspects, and not in his village, that Justinian first learnt to value Latin as the imperial language. … In Constantinople, also, he dabbled in the *demi-monde*: he played politics with the Circus-factions and he took his wife, Theodora, from a family connected with the racing-stables. As a young man, he was anxious to conform to the backward-looking ethos of the resident aristocracy … When Justinian succeeded his uneducated uncle in 527, it seemed as if the 'Ruling City' had absorbed yet another zealous *parvenu*.

But something has now changed. Cultural fluidity, linked to geographical mobility, has taken precedence over vertical social mobility. Constantinople, in the early years of Justinian, is no longer, in this treatment, the central node of a *parvenu* bureaucracy of imperial servants. Instead, it has itself become the seat of a 'backward-looking' aristocracy. Taking a long view of the Roman imperial governing class, from the late 3rd century to the 6th, the treatment involves a lacuna: we are not told whether the *parvenus* of the 'Late Roman Revolution' *became* the traditional aristocracy of 6th-century Constantinople or whether their kind had instead been bundled off the stage back in the later 4th or 5th centuries. Either way, however, we have lost sight of the 'opposed vaults', the juxtaposition of *arriviste* imperial servants and traditional aristocrats that had (on this account) marked the 'Late Roman Revolution'.

What we see under Justinian, in this treatment, is a hint of the old tension return. We see the early Byzantine state, in the 6th century, settle down to a rhythm of canny survival, as Justinian 'turned his back on the traditionalist elements in Constantinople' (*WLA*, 150). The 'scholar-administrators of the early sixth century … had fostered the participation in government of the educated governing classes of the Greek world'; but with the advent of

'Justinian's gifted professionals', the 'steady press of talented young gentlemen to Constantinople came to a halt' (*WLA*, 156).[40]

The theme of new men heralding change plays out further afield, both in the Sasanian empire and the Caliphate. The section on 'Byzantium' includes an interlude on its Sasanian neighbour. Here we find that the death of shah Firūz in 484, and 'the total defeat of Persia by the nomads of Central Asia', marked 'the end of the Iranian *ancien régime*' (*WLA*, 165). It was a time of famine, and of '*jacqueries*' prompted by the teachings of Mazdak; but Khusro I stabilised the regime, and a 'new class of professionals gradually took over the administration', many being Christians from Mesopotamia (*WLA*, 166). As a result, the 'caste-ridden, aristocratic structure of the fifth-century world was loosened' with the advent of the *dekkan*, though the *dekkan* (one should note) was nevertheless a 'courtier-gentleman … a substantial landowner' (*WLA*, 166). The book closes with the 'New Participants': 'Muhammad cut the inhabitants of the Hijaz loose from the ties of tribal custom and threw them into the Fertile Crescent' (*WLA*, 190). He 'was called upon to cure the *malaise* of an "emergent" society. In the towns, the tribal style of life was losing its hold on the *nouveaux riches* of the merchant-dynasties' (*WLA*, 191). Ultimately, however, the 'Arab aristocracy could not maintain its hold on the government'; by the 8th and 9th centuries, 'the absorption of Arabic, and of an Arab style of life, opened the court to the provincials of the Near East', just as had happened in the Roman empire centuries before (*WLA*, 198).

IV. Hypothesis in Context: Ambivalence in 1963

In many respects, the analytical thread is more successful for Part Two than it is for Part One. The geopolitical upheavals and sheer scale of these 'Divergent Legacies' do indeed mean that new kinds of person became fundamentally influential. This is self-evidently true in the case of barbarian migration in the Latin West; and it is all the more apparent in the emergence of Muslim Arabs as a force that toppled Sasanian rule, down-sized Byzantium and split the Mediterranean south from north.

But the treatment in Part One of the sociology of the later Roman empire, and its notional consequences, is a very different matter. On these issues, the book's tone of magisterial certitude about the role of 'new' men is, to be frank, a mirage.

[40] There is, however, a pronounced obscurity, if not inconsistency, regarding the sociology of this change and its cultural impact.

On the one hand: 'In Byzantium, a classical élite survived. It constantly re-created itself throughout the Middle Ages. … The classical Greek culture that we know, is the Greek culture that continued to hold the interest of the upper classes of Constantinople throughout the Middle Ages' (*WLA*, 177).

On the other hand: 'The autocracy of Justinian fatally weakened the aristocratic basis of Late Antique culture: the traditional bureaucracy was weakened by personal government, and the independent life of the provincial cities, for centuries the recruiting ground of the Greek scholar-gentry, was sapped by centralization. The collapse of an independent, classical élite followed swiftly: in the late sixth century the culture of the governing class of the empire finally became indistinguishable from the Christian culture of the average man' (*WLA*, 180).

Let us look at this more closely.

When the Warburg seminar papers, to which Jones had contributed, were published in 1963, Brown wrote a lean review (under 1500 words) but a model of its kind, that engaged with the authors' arguments and took the occasion to present his own observations.[41] Brown's memoir mentions the review in relation to the theme of religious coercion; but it passes over what the review has to say about Jones and social fluidity.[42] Yet the review gave Jones's paper a substantial paragraph – more than its share – and it is noticeable that Brown was, by this stage, certainly not bowled over by Jones's argument. Whatever galvanising and electrifying effect Brown had felt on hearing the paper in 1958, this had evidently been channelled into a significantly thoughtful critique.

Brown opens his remarks with a courteous welcoming of the Jonesian thesis:[43]

> In his [Jones's] opinion, the conversion of the Emperors coincided with a change in Roman society, by which the traditional governing classes were replaced by new men, dependent for their position on their relations with the Imperial bureaucracy. Such a society of new men was less prepared to resist the new religion of their benefactors. This view is only advanced as an hypothesis; but it carries conviction, and is destined to have a long and fruitful life.

However, the qualifications then get underway immediately, as Brown emphasises the limitations of Jones's evidence:

> It [Jones's view] may need to be qualified in some of its ramifications. The most explicit evidence reflects the perspective of one man only – of Libanius, the pagan sophist of Antioch. I doubt whether Libanius could have seen the changes around him in any other terms. The 'new' society of Constantinople, whose bizarre senators he describes, may well have appeared blatant only by contrast to more settled areas.

Elaborating on the contrast that he proposes here, Brown offers a striking judgment, illustrated from his own research expertise:

> Thus, in Africa, there is no evidence that the social pressures, which Jones describes so well for Constantinople, were operative, at this time, in the transition between paganism and Christianity.

Spectacularly too, in hindsight, Brown's peroration on Jones adds the following broadly sceptical judgment on the religious implications:

> Nor is it possible to predict the religious effects of such fluidity. *Anomie* of this kind can often create its own braking-forces. In a fluid society, education plays a greater role as

[41] Brown 1963, 300–01; reprinted in Brown 1972, 147–50, from which it is hereafter cited.
[42] Brown 2023, 244.
[43] Brown 1972, 149, for this and other quotations in the present section IV.

> a mark of status; and this education was pagan in form and 'soundproof' to Christianity in effect. Many men wanted to stand still: a few barbarian generals even went out of their way to become classical pagans; and some of the spokesmen of Roman paganism may possibly have been more recent arrivals in the Senate than the Christian family of Paulinus of Nola. Late Roman history i[s] full of such unpredictable eddies.

I dwell on these remarks because, aside from their residual intrinsic interest, they offer a valuable 'temperature check' on the development of Brown's thought. When these comments were delivered in 1963, it was the half-way point between Brown hearing Jones at the Warburg (1958) and receiving the commission (1968) to write *The World of Late Antiquity*. At that stage, what we are evidently looking at is a very broad-ranging set of qualifications and caveats. The direction of travel, far from being towards an exuberant confluence of radical social mobility and cultural ferment, is instead leading – if only in an exploratory manner – to a more complex, balanced and, in some respects, quite opposite vision.

V. Social Fluidity as Rhetoric, 1962–66: Africa, Ireland and 'Squireens'

Brown's observation in the short review of 1963 that, in the process of Christianisation in Africa at the time, there is 'no evidence that the social pressures, which Jones describes so well for Constantinople, were operative' takes an interesting turn in his biography of Augustine, which he wrote from 1962 to 1966.[44] When we move to Augustine's Africa, we are met by remarkably elastic language. Let us take the treatment of Augustine's family background:[45]

> To be a full member of a Roman town, Augustine had to be free and civilized: he did not have to be rich. His father, Patricius, was a poor man, a *tenuis municeps*, a burgess of slender means. … A classical education was one of the only passports to success for such men; … His [Augustine's] early life will be overshadowed by the sacrifices his father made to give him this vital education: Patricius and his family had to go poorly-dressed; he had to scrape; … His cousins were less fortunate: they remained without a proper education; and would have to face the poverty and boredom of a narrow world of unlettered squireens.
>
> Yet Patricius could claim, perhaps as a relative, the patronage of a local grandee, Romanianus. Romanianus would go frequently to Italy to defend his property at the Imperial court. He would return to Thagaste to show his power by giving wild-beast shows, and by patronizing young men such as Augustine. He would receive speeches and statues from his fellow-townsmen. He could expect titles and administrative positions from the Emperor. In the very fluid world of the fourth century, luck and talent could close the gap between a Patricius and a Romanianus.

[44] Brown 1967a = Brown 2000b. The creation of the book is charted, in context, in Brown 2023, 247–84.

[45] Brown 1967a, 21 = Brown 2000b, 9.

The rhetoric of high social fluidity is thereby co-opted. The formal status of Patricius, almost certainly a councillor, and thus part of the local governing class in Thagaste, is obscured. Instead, the impression is created that Patricius was merely a town inhabitant: 'member' of a town; 'burgess'. These are not words for a local aristocrat.[46]

Much of the language is impressionistic, as it often is in the ancient source material too. What does 'rich' mean? What does 'poor' mean? What counts as having 'slender means'? What is 'poorly-dressed'? And what are we to make of Augustine's cousins, the 'squireens'? Where do we place a 'squireen' in the sociology of the later Roman empire? What are we to understand by their 'poverty'?

With 'squireens' we have a clue, but it is problematic.

When Brown uses the word 'squireens' in his memoir, he applies it to the Warren family – the family of his maternal grandfather. The Warrens 'were different from the Greys', the family of his maternal grandmother. The Warrens were 'an Anglo-Norman family, descended from the first wave of settlers who arrived in Ireland with the Normans in the twelfth century. … Unlike the Greys, they had few connections with the empire … My mother always regarded them as somehow less grand and more comfortably "Irish".'[47] Brown recounts that, in 1770, John Grant Warren had built a family seat, described in a family history by a Warren, who was also 'Reverend', as 'a substantial stone house and offices, suitable for a gentleman farmer'.[48]

His estate, Brown relays, had run to 200 acres:

> He was what would be called a 'squireen' – half way between a farmer and a country gentleman.[49]

But 'squireen' is itself an elastic term.

In the 1903 novel, *The Squireen*, by the Irish writer John William Bullock, writing as Shan F. Bullock, set in his native County Fermanagh, the novel's flawed and tragic hero, Martin Hynes, is a gentleman racked by debts. Of Hynes's family seat, Hillside House, Bullock tells us: 'Ruin and desolation have made Hillside their own, and its former glory remains now but tradition and memories'.[50] Of Hynes's family background: 'One grandfather had been a schoolmaster, the other a land-steward; … his father had been a bailiff, had acquired Hillside and died a magistrate.'[51] Thus the Hynes family had gently advanced, and

[46] One senses that Hopkins 1961 (on fluidity in the West) and Mazzarino 1960 (on 'democratisation' of culture), in particular, influenced the perspective of this passage: see discussion at nn. 9–15 above. Note, however, that '*municeps*' evolved in meaning over time: Pinsent 1954 and 1957 remain useful. By the late empire, it was particularly associated with council obligations. Patricius is aptly characterised as a 'middling landowner' in Frend 1987, 138. Shaw 1987, especially 8–10, is important on Patricius' wealth.

[47] Brown 2023, 21.

[48] Brown 2023, 21.

[49] Brown 2023, 22.

[50] Bullock 1903, 6, with 7–8.

[51] Bullock 1903, 9.

acquired a small estate that had been neglected. Hynes himself 'had the look somewhat of a country gentleman, somewhat of a sporting farmer. Locally he was known as the Squire; really he was an Ulster form of Squireen'; he had 'a couple of servants'.[52]

Thus, Brown's wording about the 'poverty and boredom of a narrow world of unlettered squireens' leaves open a wide range of possibility. Were the cousins of Augustine persons like John Grant Warren, capable of building a family seat and enjoying the equivalent of two hundred Irish acres? Or were they like Bullock's hero, Martin Hynes, comfortable on a day-to-day basis but with far more modest means and facing a future of ruin? Or were they barely managing even to subsist, as one might normally associate with 'poverty'?

To describe Patricius, flatly, as being 'poor' and having 'slender means', having to go 'poorly-dressed' to fund a son's education, does not suggest that we are in a metaphorical space; it suggests, instead, a discussion about actual wealth and the lack of it. In the ordinary sense of the words, the 'poverty' of Augustine's cousin 'squireens' is apt, in that case, to be construed as cash poverty on the part of minor freeholders.

Conversely, if the cousins were squireens in the way that John Grant Warren was a squireen, then they were far inside the governing class. Irish acres are about 62% bigger than standard English acres. Thus 200 Irish acres are about 324 English acres. This equates to 131 ha, or, in Roman terms, 520 *iugera*. By comparison, at least in parts of the mid-4th century East, and perhaps more widely, new entrants to replenish the councils of the *civitates* were being sought at a freeholding threshold of 25 *iugera* (*Codex Theodosianus* 12. 1. 33) Thus the estate of a squireen, on these terms, might be understood as standing at more than 20 times the threshold for belonging to the provincial governing class – a governing class, nuclear families included, that made up a mere 1% of the empire's population.[53] For comparison, in 4th-century Gaul, Ausonius inherited an estate of over 700 acres, which is upwards of 432 Irish acres, or somewhat more than twice the estate of John Grant Warren. Certainly, Ausonius felt it diplomatic to talk diffidently about the 'mediocrity' of his origins. But Ausonius, let us remember, became an emperor's chief minister and a leading senator at Rome. His diffidence must be seen in context.[54]

Elastic language, on the part of modern scholars and ancient persons alike, allows for evocation. But evocation is not analysis. Brown's biography of Augustine evokes a more modest social standing, and more modest means, than is likely to have been the case because it strongly implies sub-curial status, cash poverty and a small freeholding. But Brown's recent memoir heavily overcompensates by bringing a substantially affluent tone to what a 'squireen' might be.

VI. *The Later Roman Empire* by Jones: Taking the Full Measure, 1964–67

Brown signed the preface to his biography of Augustine in June 1966 and the book was published the following year. In the meantime, in 1964, Jones's multi-volume juggernaut

[52] Bullock 1903, 9–10.
[53] For the aristocratic percentile, see Skinner 2013, 34–37.
[54] Skinner 2013, 29–32.

on *The Later Roman Empire* had been published. Brown wrote a long review article on it for the *Economic History Review*, published, like his Augustine biography, in 1967.[55] In a major review article on several of Brown's books, Alexander Murray remarked in 1983 that, if he were to give a prize to one of the papers in Brown's first collection, it would be to that long review of Jones.[56] Unfortunately, although Brown's memoir devotes whole chapters to contextualising individual, early papers that were reprinted in that collection, the review article is only fleetingly mentioned, and we get no substantive comment on what it meant, between 1964 and 1967, to 'take the full measure' of the late empire by way of critiquing Jones's *magnum opus* at length.[57]

Let us briefly address this now, so far as the issue of social fluidity is concerned.

Brown remarks of Jones's book that 'certain crucial developments have been passed over lightly … because the evidence for them, being less explicit, has to be mobilised and assessed by different methods from those used by Jones.'[58] This is followed by identification of four topical areas – two concerning barbarians, while the fourth concerns wealth and the economy. The third, however, relates precisely to the matter at hand: in Brown's words, 'the extent to which the continuity of traditional social groupings hindered the initiative of the state, by preventing the growth of a distinct bureaucratic class.'[59]

Turning to the relevant section of the review, we find a treatment that is strikingly different in tone from the portrait of the 'Late Roman Revolution' in *The World of Late Antiquity*. Brown promptly zeroes in on the problem of the sociological impact of the imperial bureaucracy with a catena of hard-boiled historical questions:[60]

> The more precise problem remains: the place which a newly created and powerful bureaucracy had gained in Roman society from the fourth century onwards: to what extent, for instance, its regulations on the colonate colluded with the needs of the great landowners, to what extent its demand for payment in kind damaged the interests of important classes; to what extent the structure and methods of the tax system encouraged the rapid accumulation of wealth through profiteering by privileged members of the bureaucracy; to what extent the salaries and standards of living of public servants could compete with those of private individuals: to what extent, generally, it is possible to regard the Late Roman period as marked by the formation of a new class, a 'nobility of service', sensitive to the initiative of the Emperors, and so providing the sociological foundations of the Imperial absolutism.

What is presented in *The World of Late Antiquity* as a confidently settled problem of the radical agency of a *parvenu* bureaucracy is thus instead raised, in this review, as a challenging and multifaceted array of questions in need of considerable further research. But not only

[55] Brown 1967b, reprinted in Brown 1972, 46–73, from which it is hereafter cited.

[56] Murray 1983, 192.

[57] Brown 2023, 298.

[58] Brown 1972, 52.

[59] Brown 1972, 52. Each of the four topics then receives a section in the review (II–V), this third topic (section IV) at 62–67.

[60] Brown 1972, 62–63.

that. Rather, the manner in which Brown's book settles the issue is at significant variance, and reductively so, with the instincts shown in his review article as to how the problem *might* be settled.

As we have seen (section III above), *The World of Late Antiquity* treats the 'Late Roman Revolution' of the late 3rd to mid-4th centuries expressly in terms of the juxtaposition of the 'opposed vaults' of a *parvenu* bureaucracy and the traditional aristocracies; and it is only later, for the 6th century, that Brown's narrative offers us a bureaucracy that was itself drawn from the established aristocracies, with which a *parvenu* Justinian would in turn butt heads.[61] Moreover, in *The World of Late Antiquity*, notwithstanding the role of classical culture as 'a *trompe l'œil* against which the new man could merge' (*WLA*, 29–30), it is precisely the precocious energy of the bureaucracy's 'new men' that serves as the primary driver of change and, in doing so, sets the overall tone.

By contrast, in reviewing Jones, Brown performs a more careful balancing act, in which his overall caution about the sociological impact of the bureaucracy is ultimately weightier than his sense of its dynamism.

Noting Jones's emphasis on fluidity in the East, Brown is sympathetic but comments on the need for 'continued study of the "speed" and the "area" of such mobility'.[62] Noting (this being the 1960s) 'the very difficult problem of the continuity of the provincial aristocracies in the third and fourth centuries', we find Brown rightly making a case for their tenacity:[63]

> I find it difficult to believe that the 'crisis' of the third century created a *tabula rasa* in every province of the Empire. … If anything, it was the power of the State and not the traditional way of life of the provincial upper classes of the Western Empire which had been weakened by the 'crisis' of the third century.
> Even in the Eastern Empire, the creation of a continuous 'administrative' governing class was a 'dam' close-run thing'. Spectacular instances of social mobility and genuine administrative efficiency among the Praetorian Prefects *should not blind us to the slow and unremitting pressure of the average, well-educated member of the Greek urban upper classes on the lower reaches of the bureaucracy and on the provincial administration* [my emphasis].

What form did this 'slow and unremitting pressure' take? The phraseology does not quite state expressly that this extended, in any substantial degree, to the *staffing* of the bureaucracy by traditional aristocrats, though the inference is obviously possible. Conversely, Brown implies that such pressure can better be understood in terms of culture and sheer leverage, rather than recruitment. He closes this part of his review by noting:[64]

> Altogether, the Late Roman bureaucracy remained dangerously embedded in the aristocratic values of the ancient world. … *The standard of living of its members always fell below*

[61] See discussion at nn. 34–40 above.
[62] Brown 1972, 63.
[63] Brown 1972, 64–65.
[64] Brown 1972, 66–67.

> *that of the possessors of inherited wealth* [my emphasis]. Its inflated titles and notorious corruption merely reflect an uphill struggle to maintain its position. Its frontiers were never, for a moment, secure against the encroachments of the traditional upper classes of the Empire; as the Emperor was forced to admit, 'the collection of [tax] arrears flags when the exactor pays deference to the debtor'.

We are left with a sense that the bureaucracy, overall, was indeed more *parvenu* than the traditional aristocracies – 'the possessors of inherited wealth' – and that the 'pressure' and 'encroachments' of these traditional aristocracies were less a matter of staffing the bureaucracy than of influencing its culture and constraining its field of manoeuvre. Nevertheless, this in itself is radically different in tone from *The World of Late Antiquity*, in which, as we have seen, a bureaucracy of 'new men' is invested with transformative force.

VII. Sorcery, 1968

The stage at which one can spot a more fully formed view on Brown's part is when we turn to his 'Sorcery' paper, published in 1970. This important new departure in Brown's work did not gestate for long, being largely created between his formative meeting with the anthropologist Mary Douglas in December 1967 and his draft of February 1968, revised in the light of her feedback ahead of its conference delivery that April and submitted in final form that June.[65] It appears from Brown's account that it was Douglas's insistence on consequentialism that did most to push him to take a position on social structures, in order to develop his analysis of sorcery accusations.[66]

The paper receives close attention in the memoir as a formative step into anthropological thinking by Brown; but it repays attention with an eye specifically on its sociological model:

> My thesis … is that a precise *malaise* in the structure of the governing classes of the Roman empire (especially in its eastern, Greek-speaking half) forced the ubiquitous sorcery beliefs of ancient man to a flash-point of accusations in the mid-fourth century A.D. The incidence of these accusations synchronizes with changes within the structure of the governing class: thus they reach a peak at a time of maximum uncertainty and conflict in the 'new' society of the mid-fourth century: they are substantially reduced as occasions for conflict and uncertainty are progressively restricted, by a growth of political and social stability, whose results are best documented for the sixth century A.D. …[67]

In order to define the nature of the '*malaise*' in the structure of the governing class, Brown proposes that this 'can be grasped most easily by contrasting the views of two schools of modern social historians, describing the society of the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries A.D.' The first of these schools represents the traditional, rather negative received wisdom about

[65] Brown 1970, reprinted in Brown 1972, 119–46, from which it is hereafter cited. For reflections on the paper's development, see Brown 2023, 319–31.

[66] Brown 1997, 21; Brown 2023, 329–30.

[67] Brown 1972, 122–23.

Late Roman society as 'an oriental despotism; … stagnant and hierarchical – divided into rigid castes with little hope of personal advancement'. The other school of thought, which is most notably exemplified, of course, by Mazzarino and Jones, he summarises as stressing 'the fact that many individuals in this society enjoyed a remarkable degree of social fluidity; … and that its dominant religion, Christianity, had seeped triumphantly upwards, at just this time, from the lower middle classes into a court aristocracy of *parvenus*.'[68]

It is against that background that Brown proposes his own position, which now turns more expressly on the notion of juxtaposition between *parvenu* imperial bureaucrats and traditional aristocracies:[69]

> I would suggest that, far from the one view replacing the other, we should work with both. Late Roman society was dominated by the problem of the conflict between change and stability in a traditional society.
> … On the one hand, there is *articulate* power [original emphasis] … authority vested in precise persons; admiration and success gained by recognized channels. Running counter to this there may be other forms of influence less easy to pin down – *inarticulate* power [original emphasis] … Where these two systems overlap, we may expect to find the sorcerer. …
> The best-documented aspect of this problem is the conflict in the governing class of the Later Roman Empire between fixed vested roles, on the one hand, and the holders of ambiguous positions of personal power, on the other. This personal power was based largely on skills, such as rhetoric, which, in turn, associated the man of skill with the ill-defined, inherited prestige of the traditional aristocracies. Thus we find men whose positions in society were plainly delimited as servants of the emperor lodging accusations against men whose positions and whose successes were less easy to define, based as they were on the imponderable, almost numinous prestige of classical culture and aristocratic values in Late Roman society. …
> For these accusations are rarely made by the *parvenus* of the court among themselves: they are usually made by such groups against the holders of ill-defined, traditional status – to 'shake the pillars of the patrician class'.

The idea of a boundary between the two social groups that formed the governing class as a whole – *parvenu* imperial servants on the one hand, and traditional aristocracies on the other – is underscored:[70]

> In the fourth century, the boundary between the court and the traditional aristocracy coincided, generally, with a boundary between Christianity and paganism. … However, the boundary between court and aristocracy long survives the disappearance of the boundary between Christianity and paganism; in the sixth century, the falls of two great patricians, good Christians both – Boethius in Italy and Mummolus of Bordeaux in Gaul – are accompanied by charges of sorcery.

[68] Brown 1972, 123, for the quotations in this paragraph.
[69] Brown 1972, 123–26.
[70] Brown 1972, 126–27.

But where does this leave the substantial body of staff of the imperial bureaucracy in the provinces? This, after all, is where most imperial servants were based. In the characterisation that Brown presents, are they to be bracketed with what he has to say about the 'court' and its '*parvenus*', with 'court' being understood as a synecdoche for the imperial administration; or are they to be bracketed with the 'traditional aristocracies' who were the social leaders of provincial society? Or how else are they to be construed?

One has to look very carefully to find the answer because Brown's foremost concern was not to answer sociological problems but, rather, to use a given sociological context in order to answer problems of religious history. That being so, his social analysis is less overt where the aim of his discussion does not require full clarity.

But there are, nevertheless, moments where his underlying assumptions show through. Most notably, the notion (as we have seen) that Christianity had 'seeped triumphantly upwards … from the lower middle classes into a court aristocracy of *parvenus*' makes no sense unless one sees the process of upward seepage as one in which a *parvenu* court did not simply materialise directly by recruitment of *parvenus* at the top but was – either as an alternative or in conjunction – fed from below as 'lower middle class' persons colonised the ranks of the imperial administration from the bottom upwards.[71]

Sociologically, therefore, the 'Sorcery' paper is broadly consistent with Brown's long review article on Jones, but the contours are more starkly drawn. The bureaucracy is more overtly drawn as *parvenu* and stands, therefore, even more overtly in juxtaposition with the traditional aristocracies. Indeed, overlap is now rendered problematic, as a flashpoint for sorcery allegations. But we can also detect one further crucial shift. Whereas the review article had tended to question the autonomy of the bureaucracy and its sociological impact, noting the 'pressure' and 'encroachments' of the traditional provincial aristocracies on the bureaucracy's field of manoeuvre, the 'Sorcery' paper levels the bureaucracy upward, as it is here that we see the articulation of a substantive sense of agency on the part of the bureaucracy. Indeed, insofar as 'pressure' and 'encroachments' might be observed, it is, in something of a role reversal, now the *parvenu* bureaucracy's shaking of traditional aristocratic pillars that is most marked.

VIII. Looking Back on the Gambit: the 'Late Roman Revolution' in 1968–69 and Reinvented in *Journeys of the Mind* (2023)

In parallel with the conference delivery and manuscript submission of the 'Sorcery' paper, in April and June 1968, Brown received commissioning letters for *The World of Late Antiquity* from Geoffrey Barraclough, as series editor, in April and from Thames and Hudson's Thomas Neurath (dated 30 May) – Barraclough and Neurath establishing, in the process, the book's title. Brown prepared a synopsis and draft preface by 12 July 1968, and

[71] See text at n. 68 above.

completed the manuscript itself in November 1969. Picture assembly followed and the book was published in June 1971.[72]

As one compares the book itself (section III above) with the development of Brown's published thought on social fluidity up to that point (sections IV–VII above), some overall observations on the book's treatment of society in the 'Late Roman Revolution' come to mind. Three notable step-changes can be identified.

First, on the issue of the social profile of the governing class during the 'Late Roman Revolution', we see an increased commitment to the counterpoint between a *parvenu* imperial bureaucracy and the traditional aristocracies; and with this, we see a dramatic new sense of agency on the part of the 'new' men. The different social profiles of the two elements of the governing class as a whole was implicit in the long review of Jones in 1967, which had ended on this point by remarking of the bureaucracy that the 'standard of living of its members always fell below that of the possessors of inherited wealth'; but there we encounter the bureaucracy as a fragile component, 'dangerously embedded in the aristocratic values of the ancient world'.[73] It is the 'Sorcery' paper, as I have noted, that levels up the bureaucracy and gives it sufficient agency that it can '"shake the pillars of the patrician class"'.[74] In turn, it is *The World of Late Antiquity*, in a decisive further step-change, that makes these 'new' men into a revolutionary force of sweeping consequence.

Secondly, against that background, the scepticism that Brown had shown in 1963 about the connection between social fluidity and religious change, is now spun firmly into reverse. Jones's 'hypothesis' about fluidity and its impact, as Brown had aptly called it in 1963, far from being 'qualified' as he had then suggested, is abundantly amplified. It is in *The World of Late Antiquity* itself that Brown unambiguously reads across from social history to both religious and cultural history as a whole, so that the social fluidity that he posits becomes vastly wide-ranging in the scope of its impact. Hence, the 'new' men who made the notional 'Revolution' did not simply reconstruct the state; they appear as a dynamic force, up-ending a wide religious and cultural landscape. Bracing as this is, what we have lost, in this essentially linear analysis, is the sense of 'unpredictable eddies' that Brown had wanted to highlight in 1963.[75]

Thirdly, the geographical application of this model is maximised. The notion of East-West contrast in the degree of fluidity, to which Brown had still offered a qualified nod in the 'Sorcery' paper, is largely screened out.[76] While it has been widely remarked that the book is less interested in the western Roman world, it nevertheless includes significant

[72] Ward-Perkins 2021, especially 7–8; Brown 1997, 17; Brown 2023, 367–70. It is possible that Brown was identified to Barraclough as a prospective author by Hugh Trevor-Roper: Ward-Perkins 2021, 7, n. 6.

[73] See discussion at n. 64 above.

[74] See discussion at nn. 69–70 above.

[75] See section IV above.

[76] Brown 1970, reprinted in Brown 1972, 119–46, at 122–23: 'a precise *malaise* in the structure of the governing classes of the Roman Empire (especially in its eastern, Greek-speaking half)'. See further in section VII above.

western coverage. Yet if social fluidity were markedly less a feature of the West in the later 3rd and 4th centuries, one would expect that the cultural ferment it notionally fostered was less pronounced in the West, which might (indeed should) have amounted to an important overt strand in the treatment. The fact that such a strand is essentially absent marks a clear choice.

To sum up, therefore, it seems clear to me that the sociological model of the 'Late Roman Revolution', which provided the launchpad and 'implied analytic consistency' for *The World of Late Antiquity*, was by no means the self-evident result of a settled meditation, less still of any epiphanies as early in Brown's career as 1957–58. Notwithstanding his being 'set on fire' by Mazzarino in 1957, and 'galvanized' by Jones in 1958, what Brown's retrospective essays, though certainly informative, have increasingly telescoped or omitted is the fact that, on crucial issues, he was thereafter variously sceptical and undecided. The reviews of 1963 and 1967, in particular, show that Brown recognised very well that scholarship on the later Roman empire was in no position to take for granted either the sociological judgments that had by then been proffered, or the direct reading across from these judgments to changes in religion and culture. Partly, of course, this is because the research foundation for such arguments was lacunose and *sub judice*. But one also frequently senses that Brown (rightly, I would add) had objective reservations: this is certainly so in 1963; but it remains to some degree the case in the long review of 1967.[77] That Brown shortly went on to suspend his observable reservations, for the writing of *The World of Late Antiquity*, is perhaps best understood as an act of compromise: better, overall, to seize a good opportunity to rebut the miserabilist declinism of the received wisdom about the later Roman empire than to let that received wisdom pass unanswered while waiting for scholarly research to thrash its way through a jungle of detailed problems.[78] Douglas's influence on the 'Sorcery' paper, with its instrumentalisation of a relatively schematic treatment of Late Roman sociology, is palpably a stepping-stone.[79]

Seen on these terms, the book must be understood less, even, as a manifesto, than as a gambit. Its argumentation about the sociology of the 'Late Roman Revolution', and the religious and cultural impact of that sociology, should be understood, not as the expression of settled convictions, but rather in terms of tactical choices, made largely at the time of

[77] See sections IV and VI above discussing Brown 1963 and 1967b, which are reprinted in Brown 1972, 147–50 and 46–73. Note also Brown 1997, 16: '*The World of Late Antiquity* did not arise as the result of the tranquil working out of a long-premeditated agenda, like the orderly advance of a regiment complete, from the start, in all its units. Far from it. As I re-read the book, I am struck by the raw electric "charge" that runs through it, generated by the sudden onrush of new ideas, new problems and new methods, in the very years in which it came to be written. The book itself marked a new departure for me.' See also, regarding Barraclough's letter of invitation in April 1968, Brown 2023, 367: 'The letter came out of the blue, … and at that time I had no plans to write a work of synthesis.'

[78] On motivations to accept the commission by Thames and Hudson, see Brown 2023, 367–68 (more immediate motives); and, on a climate of negative received wisdom about the period, particularly 176–78, 180–82, 223–25, 337–38, 369–71.

[79] See discussion at nn. 65–66, and section VII in general.

writing, about which elements in the historiography to prioritise in order to serve that gambit. It is on these terms, I suggest, that we see both the decision to emphasise radical social fluidity, a 'great loosening up', via the bureaucracy, and the decision to invest that fluidity with transformative religious and cultural consequence.

It is all the more striking, therefore, that, of all Brown's retrospective commentaries, his memoir, *Journeys of the Mind*, does more than telescope. On the issue of the sociology of the 'Late Roman Revolution', I am constrained to say that it misleads us – whether by accident or design. While the memoir has much of value to offer on the manner in which *The World of Late Antiquity* was a rebuttal (and rightly so, on the whole) of E.R. Dodds's emphasis on the 3rd century as an 'age of anxiety', it takes – to say the least – a very odd tack indeed on the issue of social fluidity.[80]

We meet some very sparse and allusive summary:[81]

> The chapters on late Roman society were an attempt to do justice to the tension between change and continuity that made late antiquity such a distinctive period. I tried, region by region and generation by generation, to conjure up the social basis on which this intriguing balance of the new and old depended. It seemed to me that widespread social mobility explained the tension that lay at the root of East Roman upper-class society from the days of Constantine (306–337) to the reign of Justinian (527–565).

The reader of the memoir who has not also read *The World of Late Antiquity* itself will capture, from this rather anodyne statement, almost nothing of the substance, tone and energy of the book's argument, in its opening section, about new men in imperial service, being 'drawn from far beyond the traditional aristocracies of the empire' with direct, profound consequences for religion and culture. Nor, conversely, would one sense the very different tone of the book's 'Byzantium' section, in which, by the time of Justinian's accession, we find Constantinople dominated by the 'backward-looking ethos of the resident aristocracy'.[82]

Instead, Brown goes on to place a rather eye-popping 'spin' on the manner in which the book presented its argument:

> From AD 300 onward, the Roman bureaucracy and court absorbed talent like a sponge. But this upward movement was not indiscriminate. *It drew largely on the educated elites of the Greek world – a basically conservative scholar-gentry still rooted in the ancient cities and groomed by the ancient* paideia *associated with a classical education* [my emphasis]. As a result, there was more mobility at the very top of imperial society (among the generals and the top administrators) than halfway down – in the more numerous ranks of the bureaucracy proper. Hence an enduring tension: 'Like the opposed vaults of a single arch, the 'new' society of imperial servants came to rest against the more rooted and backward-looking society of the educated upper classes.'[83]

[80] On rebutting Dodds 1965, see Brown 1997, 19–21, and Brown 2023, 373–78.
[81] Brown 2023, 378–79, quoting 378.
[82] See section III, *passim*, above.
[83] Brown 2023, 378–79.

But this commentary is an improvement, indeed a reinvention, not a summary.[84]

First, *The World of Late Antiquity*'s account of the 'Late Roman Revolution', like the 'Sorcery' paper and the long review of Jones before it, provides absolutely no material account of sociological differentiation *within* the bureaucracy. In its handling of the 'Late Roman Revolution', *The World of Late Antiquity* does indeed emphasise radical mobility at the very top, as we have seen, even amplifying Jones's treatment of the issue. But to be blunt, the book simply does not temper that account by suggesting that the wider imperial bureaucracy of the 4th century 'drew largely on the educated elites of the Greek world – a basically conservative scholar-gentry'. No such statement about provincial bureaucratic recruitment during the late 3rd and 4th centuries is to be found. On the contrary, the book abundantly indicates the opposite by repeatedly offering a general view that the service aristocracy at that time was one of 'new' men; that the court was 'at the centre' of their world, not that their world was confined to the court; that they were men of 'military' roots; users of 'slang'; men who can then be seen in juxtaposition with, not recruited from, the traditional aristocracies; indeed, to highlight again, that they were 'drawn from far beyond the traditional aristocracies of the empire'.[85] It is this same pattern of juxtaposition between a *parvenu* bureaucracy and the traditional aristocracies that Brown had tended to imply in his long review article on Jones (see section VI above) and had just articulated in his 'Sorcery' paper (see section VII above) – and it is patently for *this* reason of juxtaposition between the bureaucratic and traditional elements of the governing class as a whole, and *not* because of sociological differentiation *within* the bureaucracy, that Brown refers in *The World of Late Antiquity* (*WLA*, 29, noted above in section III) to 'the opposed vaults of a single arch'. Quoting that sentence in his memoir to the effect that he does, Brown in fact very significantly repurposes it.

Secondly, what the memoir seeks to do, by bracketing as one period the whole arc from Constantine to Justinian, is evidently to create an elision between two different sections of *The World of Late Antiquity* – the 'Society' section in Part One on 'The Late Roman Revolution', which covers the late 3rd and 4th centuries, and the 'Byzantium' section in Part Two

[84] For what follows in the next two paragraphs, see particularly section III above. However, one precise point can be highlighted here before going further. The observation in Brown 2023, 378, that 'this upward movement was not indiscriminate' **appears,** at first sight, to echo the phrasing in *WLA*, 28, that 'the social fluidity that had forced such men [the service aristocracy] to the top was neither indiscriminate, nor did it embrace all of Roman society'. But, to borrow Umberto Eco's notion of *intentio operis* (Eco 1992, 45–88), the intention of the phrasing evidently changes between books. In Brown 2023, 378, the notion that upward mobility was 'not indiscriminate' prefaces the observation that the bureaucracy 'drew largely on the educated elites of the Greek world' – in other words that, by being discriminate in its recruitment, the bureaucracy was 'largely' **screening out** *parvenus* from beyond the 'educated elites'. Conversely, in the context of *WLA*, 28–29, the notion that upward mobility 'was neither indiscriminate, nor did it embrace all of Roman society' has effectively the opposite effect, with the bureaucracy of the late 3rd and 4th centuries **screening in** new men – the imperial service aristocracy of **that** time being consistently described in terms of *parvenu* origins, with no discussion of social stratification within it, nor of recruitment to it (unlike in the 6th century) from among 'educated elites'.

[85] See discussion in section III above, particularly at nn. 34–38.

on 'Divergent Legacies', which addresses the 5th and 6th centuries. The repurposed sentence about 'opposed vaults' is drawn (as we have seen) from the opening 'Society' section. But Brown then goes on seamlessly, in his memoir, to refer to his treatment of Olympiodorus of Thebes, to the poets studied by Alan Cameron, and to Averil Cameron's early work on Procopius – elements that all belong to the latter, 'Byzantium' section.[86] Yet as one can clearly see from the pages of *The World of Late Antiquity* itself, the treatment of the sociology of the governing class starkly differs between these two sections, in a manner that the memoir screens out. Briefly put: whereas the earlier section is characterised by the juxtaposition of *parvenu* bureaucrats and traditional aristocracies, the latter section sets Justinian and his father as *parvenu* arrivals into what has itself become a conservative aristocratic *milieu*; and as I noted earlier, there is a lacuna in the sociological treatment that makes it difficult to know what (if anything) Brown had in mind as a view of the 5th century, in particular as regards whether the 6th century's 'backward-looking' *milieu* at Constantinople were the heirs of the 4th century's *parvenus* or drawn, instead, from the traditional provincial aristocracies.[87]

The overall effect of the memoir's treatment of this topic is thus very evident. Despite briefly alluding to 'widespread social mobility', the memoir in practice neuters the point. The model of a 'great loosening up' of society, and the concomitant cultural ferment brought about by 'new' men, 'drawn from far beyond the traditional aristocracies' during the 'Late Roman Revolution', which is basic to *The World of Late Antiquity* and on which Brown has reflected even in very recent years, is now replaced by a substantially intra-aristocratic view, applied broadly across the period, which thus retrojects to the early 4th century what was in fact a much less prominent aspect of his account, chiefly focused on the early 6th century.[88]

Why does the memoir behave as it does?

One is of course confined to inference. One obvious inference from reading the memoir is that its author has a long and sharp memory, and that his statements are deliberate. Another inference, by way of corollary, is that the memoir's author wishes us now to understand the sociological model of the 'Late Roman Revolution' presented in *The World of Late Antiquity* on terms that are patently at variance with the text that stands indelibly on the pages of the book itself. A third inference is therefore that Brown has changed (or since made up) his mind. A fourth inference, alas, is that he is reticent of saying so. Frankly, as it stands, it would not be difficult to suspect that the author has favoured a touch of legerdemain – a *retractatio* that prefers not to speak its name. But however one might wish to characterise the matter – and forgetfulness is possible – a decisive change of presentation is evident. With a *retractatio*, one would expect a coherent statement of the author's current

[86] Brown 2023, 379, referring to A.D.E. Cameron 1965 and A.M. Cameron 1966.

[87] See discussion running up to n. 40 above.

[88] To be clear, I consider the intra-aristocratic analysis in many respects better: see Skinner 2013 for a statement of argument in that direction.

thinking. As it is, we have a highly problematic statement of what the author would like us to think he was thinking several decades ago. It might have to suffice.

At a distance of more than half a century, *The World of Late Antiquity* continues to be the go-to *vade mecum* in the field, not simply because it is a historiographical artefact, but because nothing else to date has matched its charm, energy and cogency. It will always be an irreducibly exquisite book, a masterpiece of craft. It could only be re-written by its original author. There can be no imitation of the book's voice. But as historians know better than anyone else, even the finest works of history grow moss. The text that stands on the page cannot be saved by retrospective imposition (wilfully or by accident) of meanings that demand special pleading. The book's point of departure was a notion of 'Late Roman Revolution' that rested on a sociological model of juxtaposition between the rise of a *parvenu* imperial bureaucracy and the survival of the traditional aristocracies of the provinces. In this way, the book posited a 'great loosening up' of society in the late 3rd and 4th centuries, and a concomitant 'peculiar balance of fluidity and stability'; and it invested that 'loosening up' with vast religious and cultural consequence.[89] I have observed here that, even for the book's author at the time, this argument involved a suspension of reservations. On the sociology of the 'Late Roman Revolution', the pages of the memoir that refer most directly to it now lay a jarring claim to a different, unwritten book – a 'World of Late Antiquity' as it might have been, in which the substance of that particular 'Revolution' is largely screened out.

IX. The Governing Class, from Juxtaposition to Fragmentation: Social Fluidity Tamed, 1972 to 2012

And indeed, in a sense, the *retractatio* that is tacitly implied by Brown, in *Journeys of the Mind*, had been offered very early on, albeit tacitly too.

Evidence of a possible shift first comes through a noticeable muting of the theme of vertical mobility. Social fluidity still flits in the background of Brown's profoundly influential 'Holy Man' paper of 1971 – though largely as metaphor and, again, without sociological precision: 'The labours of the holy man echo the "sweat" – the *sudor* – of the new nobility of service of the East Roman state.'[90] But when we reach soon after the engaging introduction that he wrote for his first collection of papers, *Religion and Society in the Age of St Augustine*, Brown largely screens out the topic: we have a brief reference to 'many' of the era's 'great experiments in social living' being 'the new creations of new men';[91] but the essay makes a range of elegant and penetrating observations about what he sees as the overall hallmarks of Late Roman society, and vertical mobility is largely notable by its absence.

As the 1970s progress, moreover, we see an axiomatic shift to what is clearly a much more considered position, expressly stated. The model of juxtaposition between *parvenu*

[89] See sections II–III above for discussion of the conceptual framing of the book and a survey of the presentation of its historical argument.

[90] Brown 1971b, 94, reprinted in Brown 1982, 103–52, at 137.

[91] Brown 1972, 9–21, at 13.

bureaucracy and traditional aristocracies – which Brown had placed at the foundation of his 'Sorcery' paper and *The World of Late Antiquity*, between December 1967 and November 1969 – is, in all effect, set aside. In its place appears a model of fragmentation *within* the traditional governing class. This latter model has proven vastly more durable in Brown's work.

We first clearly see this shift of sociological models in *The Making of Late Antiquity*.[92] The book straddles the period from the mid-2nd to the mid-5th century, with a focus on the East, and again seeks, characteristically, to set religious change against a social background. But the aristocratic social contexts that we see here are (rightly, I would add) rooted in the traditional aristocracies of provincial life. The outsiders whose impact Brown seeks to chart are not peasants and proletarians vaulting into the imperial ministries and senate. Rather, they are the outsiders of the desert, the monks, who are able to impose their imaginative horizons on the traditional aristocracies – not least because of internecine tensions within those aristocracies themselves.

Central to those tensions within the traditional aristocracies is precisely, in Brown's account, the rift that opened up as a result of the stimulus of imperial service and recognition:[93]

> Indeed, of all the developments in the social history of the Roman Empire, the process by which local families from the larger cities of the Greek East in the fourth century were drained upwards and away to the senate and court of Constantinople, leaving behind them a rump of resentful and vociferously impoverished colleagues, is the most predictable.

This sharply contrasts with *The World of Late Antiquity*'s emphasis on a service aristocracy of persons 'drawn from far beyond the traditional aristocracies of the empire' (*WLA*, 28, with section III above). The sons of pork butchers have slipped away. Napoleonic marshals have left the field. We have lost the juxtaposition of two very different demographics – a slang-talking, cohort of new men of military roots versus the 'traditional aristocracies' of educated, civilian provincial life.[94]

Though it has not been widely remarked, one thing that *The Making of Late Antiquity* thereby did was effectively to re-write Part One of *The World of Late Antiquity*, amplifying

[92] Brown 1978.

[93] Brown 1978, 32–33.

[94] This is not the place for a close discussion of *why* Brown shifted from one sociological model to another: it is sufficient here to note the change. But briefly, a major element is a degree of internal inconsistency in A.H.M. Jones's accounts of the sociological context – for which see, very briefly, n. 14 above – which evidently drew Brown in different directions at different times. Another element is further work, particularly in the early 1970s, particularly (but not only) by Peter Garnsey and Fergus Millar. See Brown 1978, 31–33, including the accompanying citations at nn. 22–28. One should here note particularly Millar 1977, the writing of which largely took place while Brown and Millar were both still at Oxford, and friends, up to 1975.

the coverage of monks with which Part One had closed while substituting a profoundly different social context.

The model of fragmentation within the traditional aristocracies remains a hallmark of Brown's subsequent studies, wherever the sociology of the Late Roman governing class is relevant. I shall touch on this here only very briefly indeed. In his *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity*, again focused on the East, we explicitly see the model of 'an eastern senatorial order, recruited from among the notables of Greek provincial cities', with an approving quotation of Fergus Millar's remark that, 'In the end, the Empire and its constituent cities were in direct and continuous competition for the same human and financial resources.'[95] We are told that 'the most obvious result' of the 'abrupt centralization of power' that marked Late Roman rule 'was a fracturing of the elite'.[96] That is to say: 'The more the Roman government invaded local society, the more effectively it was colonized by representatives of Greek culture.'[97] In *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*, still focused on the East, 'the fragmentation of the traditional upper classes' is seen as 'the most fully documented and significant development in the public life of the later Empire'.[98] In his monumental return to the Late Roman West in *Through the Eye of a Needle* – Brown's finest book – we similarly encounter 'a fractured elite', one that is 'fragmented and highly factionalized', in a world marked by 'the widespread and abrasive fracturing and reconstitution of the upper classes'.[99]

Seen in hindsight, the sociological premise of *The World of Late Antiquity*, the basis of its 'implied analytic consistency', was (for the most part) the product of a relatively momentary experiment over a two-year period after tea with Mary Douglas.[100] It is plain to see, from the short and long reviews of Jones, that the book might well have taken very different form, even at the time.[101] And it is plain from *The Making of Late Antiquity*, and subsequent books, that that experiment was promptly and consistently left behind. In this light, it is interesting and worthwhile to repeat Brown's own evaluation of *The Making of Late Antiquity* – perhaps his most underrated book: 'As I look back, it strikes me as my most adventurous book. It was a reappraisal of the well-known "crisis" of the third century and its later repercussions.'[102] A reappraisal and, already, a *retractatio*.

X. The Need for a New Sociology of Empire

So whither now? I shall conclude by entering three critical judgments and then offering three positive proposals.

[95] Brown 1992, 19, citing (at n. 49) Millar 1983, 96.
[96] Brown 1992, 19.
[97] Brown 1992, 38.
[98] Brown 2002, 84.
[99] Brown 2012, 26, 29, 47.
[100] See discussion at n. 66 above, and sections VII–VIII in general.
[101] See sections IV and VI above.
[102] Brown 2023, 477. The memoir, however, passes over the sociological issue.

My first critical judgment – of all my concluding observations – is the one that is most to be expected from the discussion in this paper. The modern historian of the later Roman empire can, and should, be willing to do without the notion that there was a 'great loosening up' of society as a result of unprecedented vertical social mobility in the later Roman empire, and concomitantly, that this powered a broad 'Late Roman revolution'. Brown's increasingly telescoped retrospective discussions have tended, progressively, to paint that notion chiefly as the product of epiphanic moments in 1957–58. Intentionally or not, this fosters the implication that this view was presented in *The World of Late Antiquity* as a settled conviction. But it is, by now I think, patently clear that, by the time of writing the book in 1968–69, such a treatment was largely a tool of convenience, with which to bring coherence to a work of self-conscious provocation.[103]

Furthermore, while an account that emphasised vertical social mobility was arguably a viable choice of presentation, notwithstanding its hazards, to a chiefly lay audience at the time, it is certainly a great deal less viable now for any audience. It involves a staggering scale of presumption, not only about the degree of fluidity in the late empire, but conversely about the relative degree of rigidity in the earlier empire. The notion of a 'great loosening up' was a direct inversion of the previously received wisdom that a relatively fluid *earlier* empire became rigidified in the *later* period.[104] Yet this inversion, while stimulating as a rhetorical posture, has never been sustained as a serious analysis of the changing degree of vertical mobility between the earlier and later periods. Any historian of the earlier, classical, Roman empire would be quite entitled to feel that their turf had been rather presumptuously intruded upon by such glib treatment at the hands of the Late Roman historian. For this reason, serious work on the economy and society of the Roman world, from the Late Roman Republic to the Late Roman Empire, is greatly to be welcomed. The numerous volumes of the Oxford Roman Economy Project, masterminded by Alan Bowman and Andrew Wilson, together form a fine example of important contextual work.[105] These and other contributions to our understanding of the real substance of lived experience in Roman imperial society are vital.[106]

My second critique – which I have touched on elsewhere and about which I shall therefore be somewhat briefer – concerns the notion of a fracturing or fragmentation of the traditional governing class, which Brown took up from the 1970s onward, notably in *The Making of Late Antiquity* and subsequent treatments.[107] Emphasis on fragmentation within

[103] See sections II–VIII, and IX as backlight, above.

[104] For older views of rigidification, see notably Bury 1889 I, 27–31, and Seeck 1897–1920 II, especially 301–02.

[105] Oxford Roman Economy Project, 2005–2025: *https://www.romaneconomy.ox.ac.uk* (consulted 16 March 2025).

[106] Among a growing body of excellent studies, see for example: on slavery, Harper 2011; on the colonate, Sirks 2024; on peasant communities, Dossey 2010, Grey 2011, Bowes 2020–21, and, one anticipates, Bowes 2025; on popular culture, Grig 2024.

[107] See discussion in section IX above. See the second of my three concluding observations in Skinner 2013, 50–52, on the notion of fragmentation.

the traditional governing class was certainly a step forward from the notion that tension lay with a juxtaposition between traditional aristocracies and a parvenu bureaucracy of new men. But we are, again, confronted with the problem that this involves a vastly sweeping and – I strongly take leave to suggest – very odd judgment, in this instance, about a supposed contrast between the earlier, classical, Roman empire and the later empire.

No serious historian of the later Roman empire can doubt that the governing class was highly stratified and indeed, in some ways, fragmented – though in other ways also coherent, when set in relation to wider society.[108] But the problem with the concept of a *peculiarly* Late Roman phenomenon of aristocratic fragmentation is the notion that this is, overall, a decisively increased state of being, as against an earlier, classical, homogeneity of provincial governing aristocracies.[109] In light of our long-standing appreciation of the importance of internecine aristocratic competition in shaping some of the most decisive features of provincial life in the classical empire, especially in the 2nd century AD, I find the notion that that was anything other than an already profoundly fractured and stratified elite frankly baffling. What I have thus suggested previously, and would reiterate here, is that Late Roman conditions tend, in fact, to follow, and thus reinforce, the pre-existing lines of stratification. It is not at all clear to me that there is any net increase in competition: only that it is reoriented more heavily around the opportunities offered by the imperial regime.[110]

My third critique concerns the procedure of approaching problems of religious history, as primary questions, by means of setting them against a social 'background'. No serious historian can be anything other than delighted that the barriers between Patristics and History have come down – Brown's biography of Augustine being an exemplary case.[111] As is well known, the study of the rise of Christianity in Roman society, and in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages more broadly, has thus been released from the tendency to be treated by classical scholars as a 'decline-and-fall' Bad Thing, and by ecclesiastical scholars as a 'drum-and-trumpet' Good Thing. Though Brown was by no means the first to lead the way – one important precursor, among others, being Norman Hepburn Baynes – it is certainly true to say that the rise of Christianity is now strongly established as a properly historical subject in a manner that was still only very patchily the case in the 1950s.[112]

[108] See Skinner 2013, 32–37, on the duality of stratification and coherence within the aristocratic percentile that encompassed everyone from senators to low-ranking councillors of local *civitates*, including nuclear families.

[109] Brown 1992, 19, for the notion that 'a relatively homogeneous class of urban notables' in the high empire gave way, in the 4th century, to 'increased infighting among members of the local elites'.

[110] Skinner 2013, 49–52.

[111] Brown 1967a. Brown (2023, 283) quotes the apt praise by Richard Southern, long-used as blurb in reprints (Southern 1967, albeit the magazine is misdated in Brown 2023 to the 2nd rather than the 22nd September): 'I salute Mr. Brown's achievement in bringing Augustine out of the tomb of theological doctrine, and setting his mind and emotions working before our eyes.'

[112] Properly historical treatment has in turn allowed a measure of realism to take root as regards some of the many unedifying features that Christianity, as a socially and politically legitimised religion, carried with it. To take only the thought and the world of the sinister Augustine, see, for example,

But while a sense of social 'background' has undoubtedly helped to power a revolution in the study of the religious history of Late Antiquity, I would observe that preoccupation with what we might, in that case, call the *religious* historian's 'foreground' – most notably, the problem of Christianisation – has not proven particularly productive for the study of social history itself. In Brown's own case, as we have seen, employment of an instrumentalist analysis, under Mary Douglas's influence, led for a time to a highly reductive handling of causation in a manner that shoe-horned the analysis of social structures to fit the religious and cultural problems under scrutiny.[113] Conversely, one of the things that makes *Through the Eye of a Needle* Brown's best book, and by any standard a masterpiece, is that it gives us an account that brings the social dimension out of the 'background' and firmly into the foreground – so much so that religious history, *per se*, is in fact seen (rightly) to be very much an outcome of other elements that need to be understood, first and fully, on their own terms.[114] Brown has been its ablest exponent; but given the sheer amount of religious history being done in the broad field of Late Antiquity, the results, when seen from the angle of the social historian, are at best rather mixed.

So much, then, for critique. Let us turn to new directions.

Reflecting once again on Jones's paper at the Warburg in 1958, and on where the field might go, Brown proposed in 2010 that: 'Altogether, we still need a more nuanced sociology of the later empire.'[115] I would go further. What we need is a revolution in our treatment of the social history of the late empire, comparable in scale and complexity to the revolution in the treatment of its cultural and religious history that characterised the half-century of scholarship from about 1950.

One of the first things we must do, I suggest, is learn to be more adept and wide-ranging in our handling of the issue of mobility. The field of Late Antiquity has prided itself, not without justice, on its engagement with insights from psychology and anthropology. But it has been relatively weak in its engagement with sociology. This is an oversight, and one notices the impact of that oversight. Much of what used to be (and sometimes still is) seen as evidence for social mobility – such as advancement from the lower levels of the provincial governing stratum to the higher echelons of imperial administration and senate – in fact concerns only the ups and downs of persons who already belonged to the single most privileged percentile of imperial population. Yet it is not particularly useful, in any sociologically meaningful sense, to consider this in terms of social mobility, and I have suggested elsewhere that we can think of it more accurately as political mobility.[116]

Conversely, this is not to say that social mobility, properly speaking, did not exist. We need, however, to find social mobility where it was really happening. In vertical terms, we need to think more about entry from below, by freeholders, into the local, provincial

Alimi 2024 on the reaffirmation of slavery; and Shaw 2011 on religious violence against fellow Christians deemed to be 'heretical'.

[113] See sections VII–VIII above.

[114] Brown 2012; Skinner 2014, 68–69, 72–75.

[115] Brown 2010, 22.

[116] Skinner 2013.

governing class.[117] We need to think more about the transitions from employment to proprietorship in urban contexts; from tenancy to freeholding (often mixed, in practice) among peasants; about the colonate; about freed persons and their children; and about slave manumission. In horizontal terms, we need, particularly, to think about the capacity of individuals to change locations and occupations.

Nor should we limit ourselves to political and social mobility. Movements up and down the register of the governing percentile – political mobility – were often associated with vast shifts in wealth. But gains and losses in cash and property are better diagnosed, in their own right, in terms of economic mobility. And of course, economic mobility occurred throughout the social spectrum. By thinking more systematically about what that looked like in practice, we can more clearly address important questions about the fixed and liquid assets of people in a wide range of circumstances. Given that the great majority of Late Roman persons were peasant farmers, and that the local governing classes were replenished in substantial measure from such persons, there is a great deal that we might still want to learn, by no means least, about the economics of farming. The continuing assimilation of an ever-richer body of archaeological evidence into social history is thus vital.

No less so than with other mobilities, we can also delineate cultural mobility as a major area of interest. Conversion to Christianity, and the Christianisation of lifestyles, are prime examples of cultural mobility, and much of modern scholarship on the late empire thus already, in effect, focuses on the subject. But there are many other cultural aspects of Late Roman life on which we might focus more: to take only a few, we might want to know considerably more about educational access and choices, language learning, recreations across the social spectrum, and the challenges of assimilation.

In summary, therefore, I suggest first that we think much more articulately about the *varieties* of mobility. We might find, in doing so, that the old problem of the relative fluidity and rigidity of the earlier and later empires can yet take on, not only a much more complex and multifaceted form, but also a new analytical coherence.

My second suggestion is that we spend more time with the provincial governing class. I shall return for a moment to Brown's reflections in 2010:[118]

> … we have almost unconsciously committed ourselves, in the past half century, to an excessively "aristocratized" view of late Roman society. We look for Roman senators everywhere. We often fail to see the little big men, whose proliferation in every province of the empire is one of the most blatant features of the remodeling of Roman society to which A.H.M. Jones already drew attention in his path-breaking lecture in 1958.

I have, unsurprisingly, some caveats: I doubt that the 'little big' persons of the provinces proliferated in any major statistical sense, as against the earlier empire; there are significant problems with the way in which Jones approached the subject, which this paper has noted

[117] Perhaps the most well-known case currently is the 'Harvester of Mactar': Shaw 2013, especially 281–98; Brown 2012, 3–8.

[118] Brown 2010, 22.

in passing;[119] and the phrase 'little big men' itself, though well-intentioned, perpetuates the tendency to sociological smudging, by way of elastic language, that this essay has noted as being problematic.

But I am, essentially, in agreement with Brown's main thrust on this point. We should indeed pay considerably more attention to the 'little big' people of provincial life.

Here, I would argue that we can gain significantly by thinking seriously in terms of provincial 'gentry'. The word 'gentry' has often been used in Anglophone scholarship on Roman – and especially Roman imperial – society, and indeed in other contexts such as imperial Russia, imperial China and plantation America. But it has been used primarily in a common-sense manner, without any methodological buttress, sprinkled in scholarly prose and left to speak for itself. I would suggest that this should change, so that we address the 'gentry', in a disciplined manner, as something like a Weberian ideal type. In saying this, I am conscious, quite specifically, of an important paper, now thirty years ago, by the English mediaevalist, Peter Coss.[120] Coss argues (rightly enough) that historians have tended to use the term 'very largely within the realms of dictionary or commonsense study'.[121] Unsatisfied with this, he seeks to bring analytical precision to the term by developing, from its original English medieval context, six abstract criteria for the 'gentry' as a 'type'. These criteria focus on notions of gentility, shared by the gentry, or lesser aristocrats, with greater aristocrats, as a means of maintaining their collective social distance from others; the prevalence of landownership, albeit alongside other sources of wealth; the existence of horizontal status gradations within territorially defined aristocracies; the importance of service on behalf of royal government; the exercise of collective social control over a local population; and the expression of collective interests and identity through specific fora.[122]

I would argue that all these criteria are fully recognisable features of the provincial aristocracies in the later Roman empire. I would furthermore argue that we can gain in the precision of our analysis of the Late Roman context by examining these defining characteristics in a more consciously realised way. And I would add that a particular advantage of studying the Late Roman 'gentry' is their Janus-like quality – always looking, in one direction, upwards towards 'empire', yet always looking, in the other direction, downward into local society.

My third and final suggestion, which I shall make only very briefly indeed, returns to the fact that *The World of Late Antiquity* was intended as a riposte to the negativity that had long framed perceptions of the age, and conversely the fact that the resulting positivity of Brown's treatment has itself been the object of critique.[123] It might suffice to say that late antiquity offers us a sufficiently vast and diverse expanse of time and space that any singular, overarching framework of negative or positive judgment will frankly have little (if any) meaningful value. But insofar as it does remain worthwhile to attempt such a judgment, we

[119] See nn. 13–14, 94.
[120] Coss 1995.
[121] Coss 1995, 39.
[122] Coss 1995, *passim*, and summarised at 50.
[123] See discussion at n. 6 above.

can scarcely expect to arrive at an apt conclusion unless we consider fully both the many lived experiences of the age and its many legacies for future ages. To privilege either approach unduly – whether by hailing a half-millennium's cultural attainments or lamenting its miseries – can only place a limitation upon our own reflections on the past and on our sense of what it is to be human.

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