During the last quarter of the thirteenth century, the French jurist Philippe de Remi, known as de Beaumanoir, who hailed from the middle ranks of the nobility in the Beauvais region, codified local customary law and entitled his work *Coutumes de Beauvaisis*. In that major work he applied two different social stratification criteria: birth, which determined how free or unfree people were, and fortune, which he viewed as the sole criterion for differentiating city dwellers. On the one hand, he disclosed a social vision where the legal condition of individuals determined their social status, placing the traditional elite—the aristocracy—at the top. On the other hand, he took into account the specific reality of urban societies where ownership of material goods was decisive, which he expressed by distinguishing three social categories: the rich, the poor, and *les moyens* (the middle classes).\(^1\) Going back far enough in history reveals that de Beaumanoir was not presenting great news. In *Politics* Aristotle had already argued that ‘in every city the people are divided into three sorts: the very rich, the very poor, and those who are between them’; since he defined virtue as an average between two extremes, in his view the best political community consisted of citizens from the middle class.\(^2\) Thomas Aquinas disagreed with Aristotle’s ‘virtuous social mean’ vision but nonetheless adopted the triadic model in his *Summa Theologiae*, written between 1265 and 1274: ‘Even though there are many orders in a single city, they can nonetheless be reduced to three, since every complete multitude has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Hence, in cities there are three orders of men. For some are the highest, viz., the aristocrats (*optimates*), whereas others are the lowest, viz., the common people (*vilis populus*), and still others are in the middle, viz., the ‘respectable’ people (*populus honorabilis*).’\(^3\)

De Beaumanoir was, however, the first in the Middle Ages to divide city dwellers into groups that differed from the Three Orders. He did so because the social composition of cities was becoming more complex,

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especially where demographic growth coincided with economic expansion. In addition, here and there broader groups were demanding a say in local decision-making. These mediocres were a very heterogeneous category. Contemporaries might have substantially different views as to who did, and who did not pertain to this group, and their definitions are very difficult for historians to interpret. The problem becomes impossible to solve, if universal standards are the objective (i.e. criteria that apply at all times and places). Not only did the social composition of the urban population vary considerably across time and space, but groups that were comparable with respect to socio-economic status might have very different roles in local politics, which obviously affected their perception and self-definition as well. Complicating matters further, individuals who were not among the elite but wished to distinguish themselves from the minores—the inferior social groups—may have had identities that enabled them to shift between different and sometimes even opposite self-definitions, depending on the context. The terms and models used by contemporaries to characterize social positions and identities were often polemical or rhetorical tools, implying that their statements generally reveal more about the perspective of the concerned witness than about the group on which he was commenting.

Regardless of their heritage, cultural background, or specific objective, most late-medieval and early-modern authors describing urban society tended to place the large merchants in the middle part of their model, subordinate to the elite—which they defined in entirely different ways—but always superior to the broad group of manual artisans. In her treatise Livre du corps de policié (1407), Christine de Pisan, Europe’s first professional woman writer, who spent most of her life in Paris, explained that urban society comprised three orders: the clergy (by which she in fact meant the intelligentsia), the bourgeois et marchands, and, finally, le commun, the commoners, especially artisans. Three quarters of a century later the Dominican friar Felix Faber described the population of Ulm, focusing mainly on the separate and superior position of the patriciate. He identified seven ordines, of which three operated outside the ordo civilis (the community of citizens): the clergy, the landed nobility associated with the city, and inhabitants without citizens’ rights. The ordo civilis, in turn, comprised four groups. In first and second place, respectively, were the