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What Makes a Social Class? On The Theoretical and Practical Existence Of Groups*

By Pierre Bourdieu

It would be easy and tempting to deride the topic of this symposium and to uncover the presuppositions it conceals under its apparent neutrality. But if you will allow me just one criticism of the way it formulates the question of social class, it is that it misleads one to believe that this problem can be reduced to a simple choice and resolved by a few common-sense arguments.

In fact, behind the proposed alternative—is class an analytical construct or a folk category?—hides one of the most difficult of all theoretical problems, namely, the problem of knowledge, but in the very special form it assumes when the object of this knowledge is made *both of and by* knowing subjects.

One of the main obstacles to scientific sociology is the use we make of common oppositions, paired concepts, or what Bachelard calls “epistemological couples:” constructed by social reality, these are unthinkingly used to construct social reality. One of these fundamental antinomies is the opposition between objectivism and subjectivism or, in more current parlance, between structuralism and constructivism, which can be roughly characterized as follows. From the objectivist point of view, social agents can be “treated as things,” as in the old Durkheimian precept, that is, *classified* like objects: access to the objective classification presupposes here a *break* with naive subjective classifications, which are seen as “pre-notions” or “ideologies.” From the subjectivist point of view, as represented by phenomenology, ethnomethodology and constructivist sociology, agents construct social reality, which is itself understood as the product of the aggregation of these individual acts of construction. For this sort of sociological marginalism, there is no need to break with primary social experience, for the task of sociology is to give “an

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account of accounts.”

This is in fact a false opposition. In reality, agents are both classified and classifiers, but they classify according to (or depending upon) their position within classifications. To sum up what I mean by this, I can comment briefly on the notion of *point of view*: the point of view is a perspective, a partial subjective vision (subjectivist moment); but it is at the same time a view, a perspective, taken from a point, from a determinate position in an objective social space (objectivist moment). Let me develop each of these moments, the objectivist and the subjectivist, as they apply to the analysis of class, and show how they can and must be integrated.

**The objectivist moment—from social classes to social space:
Class as a well-founded theoretical construct**

The first question, close to the one assigned, is “Are classes a scientific construct or do they exist in reality?” This question is itself a euphemism for the more direct and more directly political question: “Do classes exist or do they not?” since this question arises in the very objectivity of the social world and of the social struggles that occur in it. The question of the existence or the non-existence of classes is, at least since the emergence of Marxism and of the political movements it has inspired, one of the major principles of division in the political arena. Thus one has every reason to suspect that whatever answer this question receives, it is based on political choices, even if the two possible stands on the existence of classes correspond to two probable stances on the mode of knowledge, realist or constructivist, of which the notion of class is the product.

Those who assert the existence of classes will tend to take a realist stand and, if they are empirically inclined, they will attempt to determine empirically the properties and boundaries of the various classes, sometimes going as far as to count, to the person, the members of this or that class. To this view of the problem one can oppose, and this has often been done, particularly by conservative sociologists, the idea that classes are nothing but constructs of the scientist, with no foundation whatsoever in reality, and that any attempt to demonstrate the existence of classes by the empirical measurement of objective indicators of social and economic position will come up against the fact that it is impossible to find, in the real world, clear-cut discontinuities: income, like most properties attached to individuals, shows a continuous distribution such that any discrete category one might construct on its basis appears as a mere statistical artefact. And Pareto’s formula, according to which it is no easier to draw a line between the rich and the poor than between the young and the old—one might add nowadays: between men and women—this formula will always delight those, and they are many, even

among sociologists, who want to convince themselves and others that social differences do not exist, or that they are withering away (as in the theme of the *embourgeoisement* of the working class or the homogenization of society) and who argue on this ground that no dominant principle of differentiation exists.

Those who claim to discover “ready-made” classes already constituted in objective reality and those who hold classes to be nothing more than pure theoretical artefacts (scholarly or “popular”), obtained by arbitrarily cutting up the otherwise undifferentiated continuum of the social world, have this in common, that they accept a substantialist philosophy, in Cassirer’s sense of the term, which recognizes no other reality than that which is directly given to the intuition of ordinary experience. In fact, it is possible to deny the existence of classes as homogeneous sets of economically and socially differentiated individuals objectively constituted into groups, and to assert at the same time the existence of a space of differences based on a principle of economic and social differentiation. In order to do so, one needs only to take up the relational or structural mode of thinking characteristic of modern mathematics and physics, which identifies the real not with substances but with relationships. From this point of view, the “social reality” spoken of in objectivist sociology (that of Marx, but also Durkheim’s) consists of a set of invisible relationships, those precisely which constitute a space of positions external to one another and defined by their relative distance to one another. For this realism of the relation, the real is the relational; reality is nothing other than the structure, as a set of constant relationships which are often invisible, because they are obscured by the realities of ordinary sense-experience, and by individuals in particular, at which substantialist realism stops. It is this very same substantialism which vindicates both the assertion and the denial of classes. From a scientific standpoint, what exists is not “social classes” as understood in the realist, substantialist and empiricist mode of thinking adopted by both opponents and proponents of the existence of class, but rather a *social space* in the true sense of the term, if we admit, with Strawson, that the fundamental property of a space is the reciprocal externality of the objects it encloses.

The task of science, then, is to construct the space which allows us to explain and to predict the largest possible number of differences observed between individuals, or, what is the same, to determine the main principles of differentiation necessary or sufficient to explain or predict the totality of the characteristics observed in a given set of individuals.

The social world can be conceived as a multi-dimensional space that can be constructed empirically by discovering the main factors of differentiation which account for the differences observed

in a given social universe, or, in other words, by discovering the powers or *forms of capital* which are or can become efficient, like aces in a game of cards, in this particular universe, that is, in the struggle (or competition) for the appropriation of scarce goods of which this universe is the site. It follows that the structure of this space is given by the distribution of the various forms of capital, that is, by the distribution of the properties which are active within the universe under study—those properties capable of conferring strength, power and consequently profit on their holder.

In a social universe like French society, and no doubt in the American society of today, these fundamental social powers are, according to my empirical investigations, firstly *economic capital*, in its various kinds; secondly *cultural capital* or better, informational capital, again in its different kinds; and thirdly two forms of capital that are very strongly correlated, *social capital*, which consists of resources based on connections and group membership, and *symbolic capital*, which is the form the different types of capital take once they are perceived and recognized as legitimate. Thus agents are distributed in the overall social space, in the first dimension according to the global *volume* of capital they possess, in the second dimension according to the *composition* of their capital, that is, according to the relative weight in their overall capital of the various forms of capital, especially economic and cultural, and in the third dimension according to the evolution in time of the volume and composition of their capital, that is, according to their *trajectory* in social space. Agents and sets of agents are assigned a position, a location or a precise class of neighboring positions, i.e., a particular area within that space; they are thus defined by their relative position in terms of a multi-dimensional system of coordinates whose values correspond to the values of the different pertinent variables. (Occupation is generally a good and economical indicator of position in social space and, in addition, provides valuable information on occupational effects, i.e., effects of the nature of work, of the occupational milieu, with its cultural and organizational specificities, etc.)

But this is where things get complicated: it is in effect quite likely that the product of the relational mode of thinking (like the three-dimensional diagram in factor analysis) will be interpreted in a realist and “substantialist” way: “classes” as logical classes—analytical constructs obtained by theoretically dividing a theoretical space—are then seen as real, objectively constituted groups. Ironically, the more accurate the theoretical construction of theoretical classes, the greater the chance that they will be seen as real groups. Indeed, these classes are based on the principles of differentiation which are actually the most effective in reality, i.e., the most capable of providing the fullest explanation of the largest number of differences observed between agents. The construction of the space is

the basis of a division into classes which are only analytical constructs, but constructs well-founded in reality (*cum fundamento in re*). With the set of common principles which measure the relative distance between individuals, we acquire the means of regrouping individuals into classes in such a way that agents in the same class are as similar as possible in the greatest possible number of respects (and all the more so as the number of classes thus defined is large and the area they occupy in social space is small), and in such a way that the classes are as distinct as possible from one another—or, in other words, we secure the possibility of obtaining the largest possible separation between classes of the greatest possible homogeneity.

Paradoxically, the means used to construct and to exhibit the social space tend to obscure it from view; the populations it is necessary to constitute in order to objectify the positions they occupy hide these very positions. This is all the more true when the space is constructed in a way that the closer the individual agents in it, the greater their probable number of common properties, and conversely, the farther they are from each other, the fewer properties they will have in common. To be more precise, the agents who occupy neighboring positions in this space are placed in similar conditions and are therefore subject to similar conditioning factors: consequently they have every chance of having similar dispositions and interests, and thus of producing practices and representations of a similar kind. Those who occupy the same positions have every chance of having the same habitus, at least insofar as the trajectories which have brought them to these positions are themselves similar.

The dispositions acquired in the position occupied involve an adjustment to this position—what Erving Goffman calls the “*sense of one’s place*.” It is this sense of one’s place which, in a situation of interaction, prompts those whom we call in French *les gens humbles*, literally “humble people”—perhaps “common folks” in English—to remain “humbly” in their place, and which prompts the others to “keep their distance,” or to “keep their station in life.” It should be said in passing that these strategies may be totally unconscious and take the form of what we commonly call timidity or arrogance. In fact, these social distances are inscribed in the body. It follows that objective distances tend to reproduce themselves in the subjective experience of distance, remoteness in space being associated with a form of aversion or lack of understanding, while nearness is lived as a more or less unconscious form of complicity. This sense of one’s place is at the same time a sense of the place of others, and, together with the affinities of habitus experienced in the form of personal attraction or revulsion, is at the root of all processes of cooptation, friendship, love, association, etc., and thereby provides the principle of all durable alliances and connections, including legally sanctioned relationships.

Thus although the logical class, as an analytical construct founded in reality, is nothing other than the set of occupants of the same position in a space, these agents are as such affected in their social being by the effects of the condition and of the conditionings corresponding to their position as defined *intrinsically* (that is to say, by a certain class of material conditions of existence, of primeval experiences of the social world, etc.), and *relationally* (that is, in its relation to other positions, as being above or below them, or between them as in the case of those positions that are "in the middle," intermediate, neutral, neither dominant nor dominated).

The homogenizing effect of homogeneous conditionings is at the basis of those dispositions which favor the development of relationships, formal or informal (like homogamy), which tend to increase this very homogeneity. In simple terms, constructed classes theoretically assemble agents who, being subject to similar conditions, tend to resemble one another and, as a result, are inclined to assemble practically, to come together as a practical group, and thus to reinforce their points of resemblance.

To sum up so far: constructed classes can be characterized in a certain way as sets of agents who, by virtue of the fact that they occupy similar positions in social space (that is, in the distribution of powers), are subject to similar conditions of existence and conditioning factors and, as a result, are endowed with similar dispositions which prompt them to develop similar practices. In this respect, such classes meet all the requirements of a scientific taxonomy, at once predictive and descriptive, which allows us to get the greatest amount of information for the least cost: the categories obtained by cutting up sets characterized by the similarity of their occupational conditions within a three-dimensional space have a very high predictive capacity for a relatively small cognitive expense (that is, relatively little information is necessary to determine the position in that space: one needs three coordinates, global volume of capital, composition of capital and social trajectory). This use of the notion of class is inseparable from the ambition to describe and classify agents and their conditions of existence in such a way that the cutting-up of social space into classes might account for variations in practices. This project is expressed in a particularly lucid form by Maurice Halbwachs, whose book, published in 1955 under the title *Outline of a Psychology of Social Classes*, first appeared in 1938, a full decade before Richard Centers' influential volume on *The Psychology of Social Classes* in this country, under the revealing title: "Dominant motives orienting individual activity in social life." By gathering together in one set agents characterized by the "same permanent collective conditions," as Halbwachs put it, our aim is to explain and predict the practices of the various categories thus constituted.

But one can go still further and, from this same objectivist understanding of the social world, postulate, as Marx did, that theoretical classes are real classes, real groups of individuals moved by the consciousness of the identity of their condition and interests, a consciousness which simultaneously unites them and opposes them to other classes. In fact, the Marxist tradition commits the very same theoreticist fallacy of which Marx himself accused Hegel: by equating constructed classes, which only exist as such on paper, with real classes constituted in the form of mobilized groups possessing absolute and relational self-consciousness, the Marxist tradition confuses the things of logic with the logic of things. The illusion which leads us to believe that theoretical classes are *automatically* real classes—groups made of individuals united by the consciousness and the knowledge of their commonality of condition and ready to mobilize in pursuit of their common interests—will try to ground itself in one of several ways. On the one hand, one may invoke the mechanical effect of the identity of conditions which, presumably, must inevitably assert itself with time. Or, following a completely different logic, one may invoke the effect of an “awakening of consciousness” (*prise de conscience*) conceived as the realization of the objective truth; or any combination of these two. Or better still, this illusion will seek to find a basis in a reconciliation, brought about under the enlightened guidance of the Party (with a capital P), of the popular vision and the scholarly vision, so that in the end the analytical construct is made into a folk category.

The theoreticist illusion which grants reality to abstractions hides a whole series of major problems, those which the very construction of well-founded theoretical classes allows us to pose when it is epistemologically controlled: a theoretical class, or a “class on paper,” might be considered as a *probable* real class, or as the probability of a real class, whose constituents are likely to be brought closer and mobilized (but are not actually mobilized) on the basis of their similarities (of interest and dispositions). Likewise the social space may be construed as a structure of probabilities of drawing individuals together or apart, a structure of affinity and aversion between them. It remains nonetheless that, contrary to what Marxist theory assumes, the movement from probability to reality, from theoretical class to practical class, is never given: even though they are supported by the “sense of one’s place” and by the affinity of habitus, the principles of vision and division of the social world at work in the construction of theoretical classes have to compete, *in reality*, with other principles, ethnic, racial or national, and more concretely still, with principles imposed by the ordinary experience of occupational, communal and local divisions and rivalries. The perspective taken in the construction of theoretical classes may well be the most “realistic,” in that it relies on the real underlying principles of practices; it still does

not impose itself upon agents in a self-evident manner. The individual and collective representation that agents may acquire of the social world and of their place in it may well be constructed according to completely different categories, even if, in their everyday practices, these agents follow the laws immanent in that universe through the mediation of their sense of place.

In short, by assuming that actions and interactions could somehow be deduced from the structure, one dispenses with the question of the *movement from theoretical group to practical group*, that is to say, the question of the politics and of the political work required to impose a principle of vision and division of the social world, even when this principle is well-founded in reality. By maintaining a sharp distinction between the logic of things and the things of logic, even those which are best adjusted to the logic of things (as with well-founded theoretical classes), we can establish at once several propositions: firstly that classes realized and mobilized by and for class struggle, "classes-in-struggle," as Marx would have them, do not exist; secondly that classes can assent to a definite form of existence only at the cost of a specific work, of which the specifically theoretical production of a representation of the divisions is a decisive element; and thirdly that this political labor is all the more likely to succeed when it is armed with a theory well-founded in reality, since the effect that this theory can exert is all the more powerful when what it makes one see and believe is more present, in a potential state, in reality itself. In other words, an adequate theory of theoretical classes (and of their boundaries) leads one to pose that the political work aimed at producing classes in the form of objective institutions, at once expressed and constituted by permanent organs of representation, by symbols, acronyms and constituents, has its own specific logic, that of all symbolic production. And this political work of *classmaking* is all the more likely to be effective when the agents whose unity it strives to manifest are close to one another in social space and therefore belong to the same theoretical class.

Whether they have an occupational basis as in our societies or a genealogical basis as in pre-capitalist societies, groups are not found ready-made in reality. And even when they present themselves with this air of eternity that is the hallmark of naturalized history, they are always the product of a complex historical work of construction, as Luc Boltanski has shown in the case of the typically French category of "*cadres*" (engineers and executives, or the managerial class). The title of E. P. Thompson's famous book, *The Making of the English Working Class*, should be taken quite literally: the working class as we perceive it today through the words used to name it, such as "working class," "proletariat," "workers" (*travailleurs*), "labor," etc., and through the organizations supposed to represent it, with their acronyms, offices, councils, flags, and so on, this class is a well-

founded historical artefact (in the same way that Durkheim spoke of religion as a “well-founded illusion”). The same is true of a group like the elderly, your “senior citizens,” which Patrick Champagne and Rémi Lenoir have shown to be a genuine historical invention born of the action of interest groups and sanctioned by legal consecration. But it is the family itself, in the nuclear form in which we know it today, which can best be described as the product of the action, again sanctioned by legal arrangements, of a whole series of agents and institutions, such as lobbies in the area of family planning and policy.

Thus although we are now far from the original question, we might try to reconsider the terms in which it was formulated. Social classes, or more precisely, the class which is tacitly referred to when we speak of social classes, namely, “the working class” exists sufficiently to make us question or at least deny its existence, even in the most secure academic spheres, only inasmuch as all sorts of historical agents, starting with social scientists such as Marx, have succeeded in transforming what could have remained an “analytical construct” into a “folk category,” that is, into one of those impeccably real social fictions produced and reproduced by the magic of social belief.

**The subjectivist moment—field of forces and field of struggles:
The work of class-making**

The existence or non-existence of classes is one of the major stakes in the political struggle. This much suffices to remind us that, like any group, collectives having an economic and social base, be they occupational groups or “classes,” are symbolic constructions oriented by the pursuit of individual and collective interests (and, first of all, by the pursuit of the specific interests of their spokespersons). The social scientist deals with an object which is itself the object, and the subject, of cognitive struggles—struggles not only between scholars, but also between laymen and, among these, between the various professionals in the representation of the social world. The social scientist might thus be tempted to set himself up as a referee, capable of adjudicating with supreme authority between rival constructions, between those plain folk theories he excludes from his theoretic discourse without realizing that they are part and parcel of reality and that, to a certain degree, they are constitutive of the reality of the social world.

This theoreticist epistemocentrism leads one to forget that the *criteria* used in the construction of the objective space and of the well-founded classifications it makes possible are also instruments—I should say weapons—and stakes in the classification struggle which determines the making and un-making of the classifications currently

in use. For instance, the relative value of the different species of capital, economic and cultural, or among the various kinds of cultural capital, legal-economic capital and scientific capital, is continually being brought into question, reassessed, through struggles aimed at inflating or deflating the value of one or the other type of capital. Consider, in the American context, the historically changing relative values, at once economic, social and symbolic, of economic titles, stocks, bonds, IRAs, and educational credentials; and among the latter, of the MBA versus the Master of Arts in Anthropology or in Comparative Literature. A good many criteria used in scientific analysis as instruments of knowledge, including the most neutral ones and those that seem most "natural" such as age or sex, operate in real practices as classificatory schemes (think of the use of such pairs as old and young, paleo/neo, etc.). The representations which agents produce to meet the exigencies of their day-to-day existence, and particularly the names of groups and all the vocabulary available to name and think the social, owe their specific, strictly practical, logic to the fact that they are often polemical and invariably oriented by practical considerations. It follows that practical classifications are never totally coherent or logical in the sense of logic; they necessarily involve a degree of loose-fitting, owing to the fact that they must remain "practical" or convenient. Because an operation of classification depends on the practical function it fulfills, it can be based on different criteria, depending on the situation, and it can yield highly variable taxonomies. For the same reasons, a classification can operate at varying levels of aggregation. The level of aggregation will be highest when the classification is applied to a region of social space that is distant, and therefore, less well-known—in the same way that a city-dweller's perception of trees is less clearly differentiated than the perception of a country-dweller. In addition, like connoisseurs who classify paintings by reference to a characteristic or prototypical member of the category in question, rather than by scanning all the individual members of the category or by considering all the formal criteria required to determine that an object indeed belongs to the category, social agents use as their reference points in establishing social positions the figures typical of a position in social space with which they are familiar.

One can and must transcend the opposition between the vision which we can indifferently label realist, objectivist or structuralist on the one hand, and the constructivist, subjectivist, spontaneist vision on the other. Any theory of the social universe must include the representation that agents have of the social world and, more precisely, the contribution they make to the construction of the vision of that world, and consequently, to the very construction of that world. It must take into account the symbolic work of fabrication of groups, of group-making. It is through this endless work of representation (in

every sense of the term) that social agents try to impose their vision of the world or the vision of their own position in that world, and to define their social identity. Such a theory must take as an incontrovertible truth that the truth of the social world is the stake of a struggle. And, by the same token, it must recognize that, depending on their position in social space, that is, in the distributions of the various species of capital, the agents involved in this struggle are very unequally armed in the fight to impose their truth, and have very different, and even opposed aims.

Thus the “ideologies,” “preconceptions,” and folk theories that the objectivist rupture had to set aside in the first place to construct the objective space of social positions, must be brought back into the model of reality. This model must take into account the fact that, contrary to the theoreticist illusion, the sense of the social world does not assert itself in a univocal and universal fashion; it is subject, in objectivity itself, to a plurality of visions. The existence of a plurality of visions and divisions that are different, or even antagonistic, is due, on the “objective” side, to the relative indeterminacy of the reality which offers itself to perception. On the side of the perceiving subjects, it is due to the plurality of the principles of vision and division available at any given moment (religious, ethnic or national principles of division, for instance, are liable to compete with political principles based on economic or occupational criteria). It also stems from the diversity of viewpoints implied by the diversity of positions, of points in space from which the various views are taken. In fact, social “reality” presents itself neither as completely determined, nor as completely indeterminate. From a certain angle, it presents itself as strongly structured, essentially because the social space presents itself in the form of agents and institutions endowed with different properties which have very unequal probabilities of appearing in combinations: in the same way that animals with feathers are more likely to have wings than animals with fur, people who have a perfect command of their language are more likely to be found in concert halls and museums than those who do not. In other words, the space of objective differences (with regard to economic and cultural capital) finds an expression in a *symbolic space* of visible distinctions, of distinctive signs which are so many symbols of distinction. For agents endowed with the pertinent categories of perception, i.e., with a practical intuition of the homology between the space of distinctive signs and the space of positions, social positions are immediately discernible through their visible manifestations (“*ça fait intellectuel*,” “that looks intellectual”). This being said, the specificity of symbolic strategies and in particular, strategies which, like bluffs or symbolic inversions (the intellectual’s Volkswagen Beetle), use the practical mastery of the correspondences between the two spaces to produce all sorts of semantic jamming, consists in

introducing, in the very objectivity of the perceived practices or properties, a sort of semantic fuzziness which does not facilitate the direct deciphering of social signs. All these strategies find additional strength in the fact that even the most constant and most reliable combinations of properties are only founded on statistical connections and are subject to variations in time.

This, however, is not all. While it is true that the principles of differentiation which are objectively the most powerful, like economic and cultural capital, produce clear-cut differences between agents situated at extreme ends of the distributions, they are evidently less effective in the intermediate zones of the space in question. It is in these intermediate or middle positions of the social space that the indeterminacy and the fuzziness of the relationship between practices and positions are the greatest, and that the room left open for symbolic strategies designed to jam this relationship is the largest. One understands why this region of the social universe provided the symbolic interactionists, especially Goffman, with a field uniquely suited to the observation of the various forms of *presentation of self* through which agents strive to construct their social identity. And we must add to these the strategies aimed at manipulating the most reliable symbols of social position, those which sociologists are fond of using as indicators, such as occupation and social origin. It is the case for instance, in France, with the *instituteurs*, primary school teachers, who call themselves *enseignants*, which can mean high school teacher or even university professor; and with bishops and intellectuals who tend to underreport their social origins, while other categories tend to exaggerate theirs. Along these same lines, we should also mention all those strategies designed to manipulate relations of group membership, whether family, ethnic, religious, political, occupational or sexual, to display or to conceal them according to practical interests and functions defined in each case by reference to the concrete situation at hand, by playing, according to the needs of the moment, on the possibilities offered by simultaneous membership in a plurality of collectives. (Such strategies have their equivalent, in relatively undifferentiated societies, in the way agents play on and play with genealogical, family, clan and tribal affiliations.)

This symbolic manipulation of groups finds a paradigmatic form in political strategies: thus, by virtue of their objective position situated half-way between the two poles of the space, standing in a state of unstable equilibrium and wavering between two opposed alliances, the occupants of the intermediate positions of the social field are the object of completely contradictory classifications by those who try, in the political struggle, to win them over to their side. (The French *cadres*, for instance, can be sent packing among "class enemies" and treated as mere "servants of capital," or on the contrary merged into the dominated class, as victims of exploitation.)

In the reality of the social world, there are no more clear-cut boundaries, no more absolute breaks, than there are in the physical world. The boundaries between theoretical classes which scientific investigation allows us to construct on the basis of a plurality of criteria are similar, to use a metaphor of Rapoport's, to the boundaries of a cloud or a forest. These boundaries can thus be conceived of as lines or as imaginary planes, such that the density (of the trees or of the water vapour) is higher on the one side and lower on the other, or above a certain value on the one side and below it on the other. (In fact, a more appropriate image would be that of a flame whose edges are in constant movement, oscillating around a line or surface.) Now, the construction of (mobilized or "mobilizable") groups, that is, the institutionalization of a permanent organization capable of *representing them*, tends to induce durable and recognized divisions which, in the extreme case, i.e., at the highest degree of objectification and institutionalization, could take on the form of *legal frontiers*. Objects in the social world always involve a degree of indeterminacy and fuzziness, and thus present a definite degree of semantic elasticity. This element of uncertainty, is what provides a ground for differing or antagonistic perceptions and constructions which confront each other and which can be objectivized in the form of durable institutions. One of the major stakes in these struggles is the definition of the boundaries between groups, that is to say, the very definition of the groups which, by asserting and manifesting themselves as such, can become political forces capable of imposing their own vision of divisions, and thus capable of ensuring the triumph of such dispositions and interests as are associated with their position in social space. Thus, alongside the individual struggles of daily life in which agents continually contribute to changing the social world by striving to impose a representation of themselves through strategies of presentation of self, are the properly political collective struggles. In these struggles whose ultimate aim, in modern societies, is the power to nominate held by the state, i.e., the monopoly over legitimate symbolic violence, agents—who in this case are almost always specialists, such as politicians—struggle to impose representations (e.g., demonstrations) which create the very things represented, which make them exist publicly, officially. Their goal is to turn their own vision of the social world, and the principles of division upon which it is based, into the official vision, into *nomos*, the official principle of vision and division.

What is at stake in symbolic struggles is the imposition of the legitimate vision of the social world and of its divisions, that is to say, symbolic power as *worldmaking* power, to use Nelson Goodman's word, the power to impose and to inculcate principles of construction of reality, and particularly to preserve or transform established principles of union and separation, of association and

disassociation already at work in the social world such as current classifications in matters of gender, age, ethnicity, region or nation, that is, essentially, power over *words* used to describe groups or the institutions which represent them. Symbolic power, whose form *par excellence* is the power to make groups and to consecrate or institute them (in particular through rites of institution, the paradigm here being marriage), consists in the power to make something exist in the objectified, public, formal state which only previously existed in an implicit state, as with the constellation which, according to Goodman, begins to exist only when it is selected and designated as such. When it is applied to a social collective, even one which is potentially defined in the manner of the cloud, the performative power of naming, which almost always comes with a power of *representation*, brings into existence in an instituted form, i.e., as a corporate body, what hitherto existed only as a serial collection of juxtaposed individuals. Here one would need to pursue more fully the implications of the fact that the symbolic struggle between agents is for the most part carried out through the mediation of professionals of representation who, acting as spokespersons for the groups at whose service they place their specific competence, confront each other within a closed, relatively autonomous field, namely, the field of politics.

It is here that we would find again, but in a completely transfigured form, the problem of the ontological status of social class, and, for that matter, of all social groups. And, following Kantorovicz, we could draw on the reflection of the canonists who wondered, as we do here with regard to class, what was the status of that which medieval Latin called *corporatio*, constituted body, "corporate body." In this case, they concluded, as did Hobbes who, in this respect, followed the very same logic, that the group represented is nothing other than what represents it, or the fact of the representation itself, here the signature or the seal which authenticates the signature, *sigillum authenticum*, from which the French word *sigle* (acronym, logo) is derived; or, more directly, the representative, the individual who represents the group, in every sense of the term, who conceives it mentally and expresses it verbally, names it, who acts and speaks in its name, who gives it a concrete incarnation, embodies it in and through his very person; the individual who, by making the group seen, by making himself seen in its place, and above all, by speaking in its place, makes it exist. (All of this can be seen when the leader, being the repository of the whole belief of the group, becomes the object of the cult which the group renders unto itself, the so-called "personality cult".) In short, the signified, that is, the group, is identified with the signifier, the individual, the spokesperson, or with the bureau, the local, the committee, or the council which represent it. This is what the same canonists called the mystery of "ministry," the *mysterium of ministerium*. This mystery can be summed up in

two equations. The first one establishes an equivalence between mandators and mandated: the Church is the Pope; *Status est magistratus*; the post is the magistrate who holds it, or according to Louis XIV: “*L’Etat c’est moi*,” or further still, the General Secretary is the Party—which is the class, and so on. Then the second equation poses that the confirmed existence of the mandated implies the existence of the group of mandators. The “class,” or the “people” (“*Je suis le peuple*,” says Robespierre), or the gender, or the age group, or the Nation, or any otherwise elusive social collective exists, *if and only if* there exists one (or several) agent(s) who can assert with a reasonable chance of being taken seriously (contrary to the madman who takes himself for the Nation) that they are the “class,” the “people,” the “Nation,” the “State” and so on.

So in order to give a brief answer to the question posed, we will say that a “class,” be it social, sexual, ethnic, or otherwise, exists when there are agents capable of imposing themselves, as authorized to speak and to act officially in its place and in its name, upon those who, by recognizing themselves in these plenipotentiaries, by recognizing them as endowed with full power to speak and act in their name, recognize themselves as members of the class, and in doing so, confer upon it the only form of existence a group can possess. But for this analysis to be thorough, it would be necessary to show that this logic of existence by delegation, which involves an obvious dispossession, imposes itself all the more brutally when the singular agents who are to pass from a state of serial existence—*collectio personarum plurium*, as the canonists put it—to a state of unified group, capable of speaking and acting as one, through a spokesperson endowed with *plena potentia agendi et loquendi*, lack any individual means of action and expression. So that in fact, depending on their position in social space, the various agents do not have equal opportunity of acceding to the various forms of collective existence: the ones are doomed to the diminished form of existence, more often than not acquired at the cost of dispossession, afforded by the “movements” that are supposed to represent what we call in this case a class (as in the expression “the English working class”); the others are likely to accede to the full accomplishment of singularity through the elective aggregation of those of equal privilege afforded by these groupings represented in exemplary and paradigmatic form by the select club (such as coteries, academies, boards of directors, or boards of trustees).

In the struggle to make a vision of the world universally known and recognized, the balance of power depends on the symbolic capital accumulated by those who aim at imposing the various visions in contention, and on the extent to which these visions are themselves grounded in reality. This in turn raises the question of the conditions under which dominated visions can be constituted and prevail.

First, one can posit that an action aimed at transforming the social world is all the more likely to succeed when it is founded in reality. Now the vision of the dominated is doubly distorted in this respect: first because the categories of perception that they use are imposed upon them by the objective structures of the world, and hence tend to foster a form of doxic acceptance of its given order; second because the dominant strive to impose their own vision and to develop representations which offer a "theodicy of their privilege." But the dominated have a practical mastery, a practical knowledge of the social world upon which nomination can exert a theoretical effect, an effect of revelation: when it is well-founded in reality, naming involves a truly creative power. As we have seen with Goodman's metaphor of the constellation, revelation creates what already exists by placing it onto a different level, that of theoretical mastery. Thus the mystery of ministry can exert a true magical effect by giving power to truth: words can make things and, by joining in the objectivized symbolization of the group they designate, they can, if only for a time, make exist *as groups* collectives which already existed, but only in a potential state.

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