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Class: stories of concepts. From ordinary language to scientific language

Introduction

Before becoming a construct of botany, mathematics, logic, geology, economics or sociology, the concept of "class" was a construct of ordinary language, corresponding to what might be called "folk categories". The present article is an attempt briefly to tell the tale of this process.

First of all, I argue that, on its way to the social sciences, the concept of "class" passed through the natural sciences. In both areas, however, scientists probably did nothing more than specialize already existing non-scientific uses. Furthermore, as the concept filtered into the sciences, it probably carried with it the common prejudices and stereotypes with which it was associated in ordinary language.

Second I assert that, even if the 19th-century concepts of "class" differ in many ways from earlier acceptations, they are all related in that they imply a sense of order. My aim is neither to trace the link between all the concepts of class nor to find historical antecedents for the 19th-century models, but to go back to the earliest cultural constructions, which presented social phenomena as ordered things and gave birth to the human activity of classifying. In this regard, one of the thorniest problems has been the reconstruction of the meanings the term "class" has assumed at various times in its history. As De Mauro notes:

If then, from the geographical and cultural point of view, we can refer to the isogloss *classis-classe-klasse* as a whole, from a strictly linguistic point of view

we are forced to note that, in spite of strong homophony and homosemy as well as common origin, the ground covered by each one of these terms is used in linguistic "games" which vary from language to language. (1958: 310)

In other words, the same term can represent different, and often incommensurable, "concepts" of class, while the same concept may be expressed with different "terms" which may not be present in all languages. At times the connection may seem tenuous between, for example, the concept of "class" as used by the Romans, by the natural sciences and by the social sciences. But we should not forget that our own concepts are constructions, situationally and historically bound, made by 20th-century scholars who do not use the terms "class", "bourgeois", "proletarian" in the same way as the 18th century did.¹ For us, Galileo is a scientist; Comte, a sociologist. And yet Galileo never defines himself as a "scientist" (the term did not exist until the 18th century), but as a "philosopher and astrologer". As for Auguste Comte,

... he founded and named the science of sociology, but he surely would have bridled at the idea he was a "sociologist", a title that would have cut down his stature as the High Priest of Humanity. (Manuel, 1962: 1).

For reasons of space, I will leave aside the epistemological debate on the *thing* "class", nor will I be going into the Marxist conception of class (Ossowsky's 1963 work is still fundamental reading on this point) or the adoption of this concept by sociologists, all of which I have developed elsewhere (Gobo, 1991).

The making of the concepts of "class" in ordinary language

In researching terms and meanings, we are accustomed to begin with the Greeks. The reason may be simply the difficulty of finding information about the ancient societies of India, China, Africa, etc. Or it may be that we believe that western thought originated on that very small Attic peninsula. Cambiano writes, in regard to the latter, that "the image of Greece as origin, is a product of modern philosophy" (1988: 4).

Considering the many differences between Greek and other currents of western thought, the contemporary philosophers' fond habit of constantly looking "back to the ancients" appears rather to

be an attempt at “remaking the past” in order to justify or support a thesis.²

The Athenian societies

Athens does not seem to have had a term for “class”. Even though Latin authors have suggested many Greek derivations (< *kalos*: “good”, < *klasis* and the verb form *kaleo*: “to call”,³ which refer to both a multitude of people or citizens called, assembled, gathered [Xenophon and Aristotle] and the denomination, name, designation; and finally < *klasis* and the verb form *klao*, which denote fracture, breaking). Evidence supports the claim that these are all etymologies lacking phonetic justification (De Mauro, 1958: 326); moreover, the term *klasis* is rarely used by Greek authors.

Not only the term, but even the concept of “class” seems to have been foreign to Athenian culture. The Athenians seem not to have conceived of the social world as divided into classes. The Greek *polis*, unlike the Roman *civitas*, was not thought of as articulated into distinct social levels. Although there seem to be physical distinctions (between men and women, between people who have dark skins because they work in the sun all day and other complexions), social distinctions (rich and poor, free and slave), political-legal distinctions (citizen and alien), technical-financial distinctions (according to income), military distinctions (according to functions in the army), and partitive distinctions (majority and minority, few and many), these do not seem to extend to a further generality: class. These classifications seem never to be carried beyond a phenomenological description. Even less do they seem to be connected with economic categories. Furthermore, the same terms are used to denote different concepts. For example, *poneroi* are simultaneously people who are poor, physically ugly and immoral. In his *Politics*, Aristotle includes among the poor an extremely varied population: free-men who work for their livelihood, share-croppers, independent craftsmen, store-keepers and, although he does not identify them with the indigent, beggars and loafers.

The suggestion of a middle class (*tò meson*) appears merely as an ideal imperative, with no concrete empirical references to Aristotle’s doctrine that the right and the natural are always found in the middle, far from the excesses which bring disorder. Even Solon’s references are too fragmented for us to deduce whether he divided

his citizens into *Thetes*, *Zeugites*, *Hippeis* and *Pentakosiomedimni* according to their financial ability to contribute personally to the formation of an army if necessary. Athenians used the same military metaphor to describe the political composition of the *polis*. This may suggest a similarity between the Greek *taxis* and the Roman *classis*. However, the Athenians rarely used *taxis*, unlike the Romans, who were more aware of social distinctions, so much so that they institutionalized them in the rules for admission to the *senatus*. For all these reasons, it seems it would be misleading to talk about classes in Greek societies. As Finley writes:

What we commonly call "class conflict" is invariably between "rich" and "poor", not between landowners and manufacturers, or between labor and capital, or between masters and slaves. Discussions of property and property ownership are only about land. Although they distinguished between gentlemen-farmers, living in the town, and working farmers in the countryside, that was a distinction between men of leisure, who were alone capable of the good life, and men who worked for their livelihood, again not a town-country distinction. The working farmer ranked higher on the scale than the artisan, but that was a matter of morality. (1981: 5)

There was no struggle between small farmer and usurer or between landowner and merchant capitalist (Finley, 1981: 76).

The Roman societies

Archaic meanings

Contemporary glottological research identifies an Etruscan derivation of the term "class". *Classis* originally indicated the hoplite phalanx, i.e. the army, after the Etruscan arrival in Rome. Ogilvie adds:

. . . there is, however, evidence for an earlier stage which divided the citizen-body into two, the *classis* (those eligible for military service on grounds of wealth) and those *infra classem*. (1976: 46)

Class, then, originated in military language and referred to the rapid organization of an army to defend the city. Subsequently, in the 6th century BC, the term acquired a juridical sense as well. Servius Tullius divides Romans into five levels according to the relative amount of taxes paid to finance a *legio* (enlistment) for war. The *classis* was the register in which all of the necessary qualifications were listed.

At first "classis" meant simply the first of the five groups, and only later, weakening the military value of Servius' system, did it come to mean the other four. (De Mauro, 1958: 327-8)

Those who could not pay, and therefore did not belong to any of these categories, are called "proletarians". But in archaic Roman societies, the concept of social classification seems so all-pervasive (see Finley, 1983: 3) that even those who owned nothing formed in some sense a class. In any case, in this period the classes represented the *collegium nominum* (taxpayers), those who had electoral functions. The exercise of certain rights was based on whether one paid taxes or not.

The imperial age

It is in the imperial age that the first evidence appears for a non juridical-military use of the term "class". As well as being used in technical and military senses (at this time *classis* extended to the navy and not merely the army), we find it used ironically by Cicero (1st century BC): "to be the first class of citizens" (Cic. Phil. 2, 827); "*quintae classis [esse]*", to be of the lowest rank (Cic. Ac. 2, 73); and, at the same time, by Horace (Sat. I 2, 47). It subsequently appears in Apuleio (2nd century AD), who, paraphrasing the Scholastic use, applies it to a disciplined column of ants. In the 2nd century BC, *classicus* and *proletarius* become antonyms; *classicus* means the first class of citizens and, later, a first-class person: exemplary in his kind, excellent, a model citizen. *Proletarius* becomes a synonym of "vulgar", "trivial", "plebian", as in Plautus (Mil. 752) and Gellius (2nd century AD).

In the 1st century AD, the term is also extended to the educational system. Quintillian (1, 2, 23-4) speaks of arranging children in classes and uses the expression *classem ducere* to mean to be at the head of the class. Preceptors, on the grounds of their evaluation of children's performance, placed the pupils in different classes. In any case, since the 1st century BC, in contrast to the term *coetus*, which means a disorderly crowd, *classis*

. . . usually meant a group of people, but a group formed not accidentally or chaotically, but according to pre-arranged criteria and for a certain purpose, be it political or military. (De Mauro, 1958: 312)

The notion of order seems particularly present when *classis* is used with verbs like *divido*, *discribo*; and

. . . without doubt such a notion [of order] furthered the assumption of class in education and science terminology in the modern age, and from this draws new strength. (De Mauro, 1958: 329)

Despite the very different and incommensurable meanings carried by the term “class” down through the centuries, we see a constant in the uses of this word in Europe. This constant centres on a vision of the world as ordered reality, as introduced by the legislator Servius Tullius (or whoever introduced it). It inaugurates a lasting tradition carried on by teachers, Jesuits, booksellers, biologists, economists, politicians, Hegelians, revolutionaries, historians, sociologists. . .

. . . the protagonists of the linguistic history of “class” made use of this word every time there was a problem of rearrangement, or organization, such that the notion of order which dominates the uses of *classis* in remote Latinity continues in modern times. (De Mauro, 1958: 313)

From the Middle Ages to the 19th century

In the Middle Ages, besides being used in ordinary language, the term *classis* is used by jurists and men of learning, both with the meaning of “collegium” and, most often, that of “fleet”. Dante uses it poetically in the latter sense, but this use subsequently disappears entirely. As for the first sense, Machiavelli seems to be the first to have used it in Italian (De Mauro, 1958: 331). In the Renaissance, thanks to the Jesuits, *classis* once again takes on the Latin scholastic meaning, which is subsequently extended to all Europe. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the term is used by booksellers in cataloguing publications: e.g. “writers’ class”, “poets’ class”, thus preceding its use in naturalistic nomenclature. In England, “class” is used in relation to booksellers, and is thus beginning to be linked with a profession, a goal, prior to its use in a functional sense (De Mauro, 1958: 333). This sense is common in England throughout the 17th and 18th centuries to refer to rank, to social function. Class seems to be synonymous with *order*, *rank*, *state*, *condition*. In the 18th century, the idea of middle class reappears. Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Richardson’s *Clarissa* (1748) both use the term, which became very popular after 1770. The term “middle class” begins to assume a positive value, with many virtues ascribed to it. At the end of the century, this terminology is supplanted; but, while

the other terms disappear, "class" remains, perhaps because it has not compromised itself with terminology of the *ancien régime*. It is still used in mathematical logic and in the natural sciences, once again giving the impression of "value neutrality". By this time, human beings have acquired juridical equality (formally, according to Marx). There seems to be a need for a neutral term to account for visible social differences. Hence there ensues a period of transition during which old terms disappear and new ones appear, albeit in some disarray. At the end of the 18th century, expressions like "lowest class", "working class members", "middling class" are frequent. However Furbank (1985) writes that it is only

. . . in the 1820s [that] people started to talk in terms of a "class" system, composed of three classes arranged by relative position or "height"; and equally important, that they showed themselves ready, on occasion at least, to ascribe themselves to a "class". (Furbank, 1985: 6)⁴

Furbank notes the conventional nature of such expressions, remarking that "middle class" is still a concept used mainly by those who consider themselves members of such a class.

Middle-class people talk about "the working class", but — at any rate in this formative period — "working class" people do not talk about "the middle class". (1985: 11)

Around 1830, class became an essentially relational concept, a social epithet aimed at establishing distance in interactions, at including or excluding people as belonging or not belonging to the speaker's world. The concept of "class" plays a role in social shibboleths, i.e.

. . . the theory that social origin can be inferred from certain small indicators. . . . Thus it was at this moment that certain famous and classic shibboleths were institutionalized. The so-called "dropped h" was one of these . . . and it is worth briefly tracing how h-dropping acquired its symbolic status. (1985: 103)⁵

In France, in the second half of the 18th century, the term is commonly used by writers to mean "category", as opposed to "order" and "state", which were considered to have hierarchical connotations (and therefore to be highly evaluative) and to be the foundations of a theory of society, as found in Great Britain. The concept

of "class", then, seems to be a precursor of the egalitarian ideals of the French Revolution. This meaning remains in effect for a long time. Sewell, in his study of the language of French workers during the 1848 revolution, emphasizes that it

. . . was laced with seemingly archaic terminology dating from the guild or corporate system of the old regime . . . the new socialist vision of the worker . . . was founded on a very old sense of craft community. (1980: ix)

Until 1830, the values and practices of urban workers were to some extent corporative. Workers organized into occupational corporations and did not necessarily actively oppose the political regime, as did the republican opposition. Instead, they opposed the individualistic and economic tendencies of the new system brought about by the French Revolution. The opposition of the corporations was mainly economic, not political. In those days, class was a term used to indicate social categories of every kind, and workers often used it as a synonym for "job" or "profession" (e.g. the typographers' and "printers'" class).

Between 1830 and 1834, the first change in workers' ideology occurred. Their linguistic code redefines the trade corporations as

. . . free and voluntary societies based on the common will of producers in the trade, and it projected the development of associative ownership of the means of production. (Sewell, 1980)

Imbued with this spirit of fraternal solidarity, many workers took part in a wave of strikes aiming to reintroduce some kind of collective control over the exercise of the trades. The ordinal sense of "class" was still often used.

As late as 1848 the term "class", and even the term "working class" remained simply a descriptive designation; "proletarian" or "aristocrat" or "association" carried powerful political and emotional charges, but "class" did not. (Sewell, 1980: 283)

The term "class", then, seems alien to the moralistic and utopian significations brought in later by the French workers' movement during the revolution of 1848. During the 1840s, and in particular in 1848, every manner of opposition slowly began to coalesce around the opposition between working class and middle class,

between an individualistic vision of social order identified with an affluent class of owners and the solidarity of a collective vision identified with a "proletarian" class who owned nothing. But this distinction remained confused and was adopted by only some parts of the workers' movement. Also, in 1848, workers' values seem to have been reflected by terms which involved unity — i.e. "associations" — rather than by those which underlined distinctions, like "class". As Sewell writes, working-class values were marked by universalist morality, and the conflict was not regarded as a matter between workers and employers. The workers' socialist projects did not provide for expropriation of owners' capital, but the creation of brotherhoods which would abolish distinctions between employers and workers, associating all participants with the means of production. Thus owners were considered potential members of future trade organizations. The workers' hostility was not aimed at the immediate employers, but at the broader social, political and juridical system which legitimated exploitation.

As they understood it, theirs was the consciousness of enlightened humanity, not the consciousness of the class. And their socialism was not a revenge on their exploiters but a means of transcending exploitation and creating a just society. (Sewell, 1980: 284)

From ordinary discourse to scientific discourse

In the foregoing I have tried to document the emergence of "class" in ordinary language together with the stereotypes that accompanied the term. I shall now describe how I think these stereotypes made their way into the sciences.

A "systematic" concept of class

Controversies in botany

In 1735, Linnaeus published his *Systema Naturae*, in which he explicitly divided the plant kingdom into 24 classes. His classification was hierarchical: at the top there were three natural kingdoms, then classes, orders, genera and, at the bottom, species. It is interesting to note the analogical nature of his term "kingdom". The reference to a monarchy instead of a republic, a political form rarely

found in Europe in the first half of the 18th century, indicates the role of “common sense” in scientific language. As De Mauro says:

. . . while the European conscience was going through a crisis, and the old anthropomorphic image of the world was fading from hearts and minds, . . . intent on their work and oblivious of everything else, the first naturalists revived the natural sciences, and they were going to hand them on to the following generations . . . firmly anchored in a “political” anthropocentric vision of the animal and plant kingdoms: . . . following nearly from the outset in Aristotle’s footsteps, they conceived nature as a well-ordered “realm”, with its “people”, its “races”, its “families”. (1958: 314)

In the natural sciences, then, the use of the term “class” seems to have been guided by a politically conservative conception of reality. Paradoxically, the same term would be used, on to the following century, with revolutionary intent.

Throughout the Renaissance, the dominant paradigm was the human body. The anatomical analogy provided guidelines for observing, understanding and explaining phenomena. But in the 16th and 17th centuries, the anatomical analogy lost its prominence and was replaced by another analogy with nature, and botany assumed epistemological priority. At the same time, the monopoly of oral culture yielded to writing and printing. The textual force of learned Latin used in scientific discourse, and the materializing and objectifying power of printing (Ong, 1982) may have contributed greatly to the epistemological changes of the time.

Michel Foucault (1966: 150–79) has outlined the development and the consequences of the botanical paradigm. Linnaeus, Buffon, Tournefort, Adanson, Bonnet used the same cognitive models: plants, animals and human beings were bearers of a mark; such marks were said to be directly perceptible, they offered themselves directly to sight and touch and were to be analysed “simply as they appeared”. Description was portrayed as a pure and simple designation of the obvious, of what was before everyone’s eyes. Therefore anything that looked vague and ill defined must be rejected.

The first step in wisdom is to know the things themselves; this notion consists in having a true idea of the object; objects are distinguished and known by classifying them methodically and giving them appropriate names. Therefore classification and name-giving will be the foundation of our science. (Linnaeus, 1735: 19)

Thus the fundamental aim of natural history was disposition and denomination. To accomplish these tasks, naturalists of the time adopted two different and opposing techniques: the System (Linnaeus) and the Method (Buffon, Adanson, Bonnet). I will not detail the differences between the two techniques, already well described by Foucault (1966: 142ff), but I would like to point out some epistemological criticisms of the concept of "class". In the controversy with Linnaeus, Buffon maintained that our general ideas

. . . are relative to a continuous scale of objects of which we can clearly perceive only the middle rungs and whose extremities increasingly flee from and escape our considerations. . . . The more we increase the number of divisions in the productions of nature, the closer we shall approach to the true, since nothing really exists in nature except *individuals*, and since genera, orders and *classes* exist only in our imaginations. (Cited in Foucault, 1966: 146-7)

Bonnet seems no less resolute:

There are no leaps in nature: everything in it is graduated, shaded. If there were an empty space between any two beings, what reason would there be for proceeding from one to the other? There is thus no being above and below which there are not other beings that are connected to it by some characteristics and separated from it by others. (Cited in Foucault, 1966: 147)

It is therefore always possible to discover "intermediate productions", such as the polyp between animal and plant, the flying squirrel between bird and quadruped, the monkey between quadruped and man. Consequently our divisions into species and classes are "purely nominal", in Bonnet's words they represent no more than

. . . means relative to our needs and to the limitations of our knowledge. (Cited in Foucault, 1966: 147)

Their difference notwithstanding, the two techniques are epistemologically based on the same chirographic and typographical preconception: the self-evidence of objects and the existence of a natural order of things. It is probably Linnaeus who was the turning point in the use of the term *classis-classe*, endowing it with a new vitality. Linnaeus was convinced that the universe is a fixed and perfectly ordered machine, and *classis* is well suited to this notion, since it contains the military connotations of order discussed above. The botanical concept of class extends Servius' *classis* to another

context used in ordinary and juridical language without substantially changing its meaning.

The term "class", already used in book professions and in scholastic contexts of everyday interactions, becomes fully legitimated by its use in the natural sciences and ready for introduction into the social sciences. The fashion of the day dictated that:

. . . everything must be *naturel*, even complex human society; everything must be *scientifique*, even the study of man . . . everything must have an *air scientifique*: beautifully expressed ideals must be replaced with a new rhetoric, *mots scientifiques*, which must be understood by everyone. These ideals are represented by the *Philosophes* and by the three currents that comprise the movement, the *Encyclopédistes*, *Patriotes* and above all, the *Economistes*. (De Mauro, 1958: 316)

The emergence of the term "class" in economics

The leader of the *Economistes* is Quesnay. If one reflects on the organicistic foundations which characterize the beginnings of the social sciences and even more on their inferiority complex with respect to the natural sciences, perhaps the reasons for the adoption of the term "class" can be understood. "Class" is reminiscent of the scientific, neutral attitude which is supposed to distinguish naturalist systematics.

"Class" does not figure as an entry in Diderot's *Encyclopédie* (the first volume was published in 1751), even though two of the main collaborators, Quesnay and Turgot, use the term in their contributions. According to Benenson (1987: 22-5), the genesis of the concept of "class" in Quesnay's thought can be divided into four phases: in the preparation of the entries "landowners" (January 1756) and "wheat" (November 1757), he uses the word "State" (*Etat*); in the entries "men" and "taxation" (1757), he abandons that term, replacing it with "classes". In the entry "men", two classes are mentioned: landowners and hand-manufacturers; in the entry "taxation", four income categories are referred to as classes. We can see first the arbitrariness and then the construction of these divisions. At the end of the *Tableaux économiques* (December 1758), class becomes a concept which combines an economic function with an income category.

For the first time, a European scholar tries to represent the public as bound just to the market, rather than to the common dependence relations. (Benenson, 1987: 25)

Quesnay states that nations can be reduced to three classes of citizen: the productive class, the owning class and the sterile class. He argues that he has built a scientific theory of society, a precise system to describe an objective reality according to nature rather than according to a hierarchical division created by men. He uses the term “class” in emulation of the natural sciences in order to found a science of economic relations with similar scientific bases. Quesnay, Louis XV’s personal physician, calls upon his medical experience and uses the analogy of the circulation of blood to describe the distribution of wealth. Society, like the human body, is a large organism governed by universal principles which reflect the natural order of Providence. In that context, he argues, economic policy should seek to respect this order by abstaining from intervening in economic activity. The French physiologist’s doctrine intends to be not only a scientific theory, but a political programme as well (Marx will follow suit), with precise aims such as: the free trade of grain and, at a deeper level, the realignment of the absolute state. He wants to bind the French monarchy to the agricultural entrepreneurs. De Mauro writes that Quesnay’s distinctions:

. . . do not mention inequality, since men are equal by nature, but simply different productive functions. . . . Thus, after a biological parenthesis, but now with a scientific sense of its own, an ability to designate certain organic and functional groups, the term “class” is inflected anew to denote a human, social reality. (1958: 317)

With the *Philosophes*, the term spread throughout Europe. Smith and other English economists seem to have been deeply influenced by it. According to Schumpeter (1954: 223–43), Quesnay was the first to conceive of the economy as a totality, a whole made up of interrelated and interdependent parts.

. . . such a holistic idea could not be reached initially from within the economic point of view itself — insofar as the latter can be said to have existed before Quesnay’s invention — but had to be derived from outside it, had to result, so to speak, from the *projection on the economic plane of the general conception of the universe as an ordered whole*. (Dumont, 1977: 41, italics in original)

The idea of economics as a category independent from politics seems to rest upon a theological foundation.⁶ As Schumpeter observes, we are in harmony with scholastic philosophy: within a theological order, man, as free actor, is not separate from nature.

The dawn of the social sciences: Saint-Simon

Saint-Simon (1760–1825) and his followers seem to give a decisive impulse to a new concept of “class”. According to Manuel’s construction (1962), during the Restoration, at the age of 54, Saint-Simon became an active political polemicist, a kind of official propagandist for the middle class, organizing its campaigns to raise funds among bankers and industrialists. But he often overstepped the limits set by his patrons, mainly in regard to the Catholic church, for which he had harsh words. Therefore, around 1820, the most respectable of his middle-class patrons abandoned him. After 1822, as he was developing the final stage of his doctrine, the author drew the logical conclusions from the social implications of an idea he had come across for the first time in the work of the physiologist, Bichat (1771–1802).⁷

There he found a separation of all men into three natural classes, psychophysiological types so to speak, in each of which one quality predominated, the motor, the rational, the emotive. During his last years Saint-Simon adopted this triadic division as the ideal structuring of the good society of the future as contrasted with the existing unnatural roles into which men were cast by the status of their birth and by haphazard. (Manuel, 1962: 121)

The new philosopher of society, convinced that physiology was the only solid basis on which a social theory could be built, worked out many systems of social classification until he arrived at three mutually exclusive natural classes: the rational ability (the brain) becomes the fulcrum of the activity of scientists, whose task is to discover positive laws and express them as a guide for social actors; Bichat’s motor ability becomes the industrial class (managers and manufacturers); the third class, corresponding to Bichat’s “sensitive man”, comes to include artists, poets, religious leaders, ethics teachers, etc., whose task it is to improve the morals of society. One of the assumptions underlying this typology is that human physiological and psychological differences are simply functional differences within a harmonious totality made up of mutually indispensable parts.

Following the ideas of the *Philosophes*, and then the Restoration theorists, Manuel is convinced that

. . . men by nature desired not equality with others but the expression of their intrinsic and immutable psychological aptitudes. . . . In Saint-Simon’s world outlook, organic inequality among men, inequality in the social hierarchy, and

difference of social function were natural and beneficent, wholly superior to the *égalité turque* of the Jacobin revolutionaries, which was an equality of slavery beneath an omnipotent state authority. (1962: 126)

The re-emergence of the word "bourgeois" is due to Saint-Simon. The term was very common during the Ancien Régime, but with the French Revolution it fell into disuse;⁸ Saint-Simon was among those who rescued the word. In his opinion the Revolution did not succeed in its aims (one of which was to improve the condition of workers), because it was betrayed by a group made up of Girondins, Jacobins and Bonapartistes, on whom the workers relied instead of themselves fighting for their own cause.

This small but dangerous group, according to Saint-Simon, was really no more than an offshoot of feudalism. And he tried out various names for it, "légistes", "avocats", "metaphysicians", "the Bonapartist feudality", or "the intermediate class" — before, in 1823, settling upon the name "*bourgeois*". (Manuel, 1962: 26)⁹

Even if the uncertainty seems to be located on the terminological level, that is, a conventional label tacked on to a self-evident thing, I think this uncertainty is located overall at the level of the thing itself. While French liberal thinkers identified the middle class with the majority of the nation (the historian Thierry compares the middle class to workers as a whole), Saint-Simon conceived of it as a small group, thus changing an obsolete and ambiguous term and giving it new meaning. After Saint-Simon's death, his disciples propagated the master's idea. Between 1830 and 1831, Saintsimonians endeavoured to impose his definition of "bourgeois" as a small group of exploiters, notwithstanding the entirely different definition used by the liberals. For a few years the Saintsimonian definition held sway, and the term bourgeois underwent a third change of meaning.

In addition, the Saintsimonians further loaded their master's definition of the term, making the word "bourgeois" even more disparaging. Enfantin and Transon violently attacked bourgeois morality in their sermons on egoism, jealousy and indifference towards the poor. They also spoke of human liberation, the nature of love and sexuality, women's emancipation. They opposed the imposition of monogamy because it was based on the tacit acceptance of adultery and prostitution. Such religious and political positions seem to have had some influence, judging by the number

of sons of nobles, engineers, bankers, notaries and lawyers who joined the Saintsimonians. The social danger represented by this coalition of politically subversive and religious groups forced Louis Philippe to have them arrested in August 1832 and sentenced to one year in prison. That, to all intents and purposes, marked the end of the Saintsimonian movement.

An "oppositional" concept of "class"

The French political essay

By the 18th century, Enlightenment, naturalist and egalitarian ideology seem to have faded, and the term "class" was faced with a choice: to be abandoned or transformed. The fascination with scientific ideology, inherited from the previous century and embodied in the word "class", seems to have remained strong; and so the second solution won out. While in botany it retained its 18th-century meaning, in politics and the human sciences it took on a conflictual meaning which had, until then, been alien to it.

The 19th-century concept of "class" no longer corresponds closely to the Roman "classis".¹⁰ The Romans saw society as a body, and classes as its limbs; their attention seems to have been directed more towards the need for harmony between classes than towards contrast.¹¹ The belief in the irremediable existence of opposition and conflict seems to develop only in the 19th century. The intentional property "conflict" attaches to the 19th-century concept of class and transforms it.

There were five main scholarly influences. In 1770, Mably, in a debate concerning the organicistic vision of the physiocrats, maintained the presence of antagonisms between classes (Letters II and III). In general, though, the term "class" appears very rarely in this text (Ossowsky, 1963: 137). However Ricardo, following in the footsteps of his contemporary Saint-Simon, abandoned the optimistic idea of a natural harmony among classes and pointed out the existence of class interests which are often in conflict (Ossowsky, 1963: 347). Furthermore, Granier de Cassagnac (1838) anticipated many of Marx's ideas on class, especially those dealing with the unavoidable revolutionary outcome of class struggle (Ossowsky, 1963: 343, 346).¹² Ossowsky adds:

Guizot, who saw in the "war" between classes (and not among individuals) the central datum of the French political situation, gave historiographic dignity to

such ideas, putting classes at the center of French history and raising to one of these, the middle class, a hymn whose substance and terms were surely present in Marx. (1963: 322)

Guizot conceived of classes as historical and, above all, political realities, contrary to Hegelian *Stände*, which are merely historical and juridical realities. Those used to a revolutionary connotation of “class” may be surprised to find that it was also a conservative author who inaugurated a new definition, in addition to the still existing botanical one. Le Mennais, who began with a traditionalist, Restoration point of view in the 1820s, finally set his feet in the footsteps of Saint-Simon in the 1830s and adopted a Christian socialist view, attacking the Church and the bourgeoisie as exploiters (Ossowsky, 1963: 346).

Conclusion

Surveying the centuries, I have documented some common-sense foundations of the scientific concepts of “class”, I have argued that they seem deeply rooted in the structures of ordinary language, for which reason I think they are still “folk categories” (Bourdieu, 1987). These concepts of “class”, because of the way they imply a sense of order, seem to be military *metaphors* (by metaphor, I mean the attribution to one thing of the proper term for another) coming from the Roman *classis* and carrying with them the idea of society as an arena objectively divided into different social groups.

Alternatively, as the controversies in botany have shown, classification (i.e. putting things into classes), taxonomy and typology appear as merely activities practised by scientists, i.e. they stem from the observer rather than being ontological dimensions of a thing (Marradi, 1990: 14). Similarly, a concept can be defined as a “cutting” of observer experience instead of reality, a result which

. . . isn't suggested in a coercive way by the intrinsic qualities of our sensations (or of the “things as such”, as scholastic philosophers thought), but depends to a large extent, on the practical needs of a certain man, group, society, etc. (Marradi, 1980: 10)

Furthermore, even the activity of classifying, which appears natural to the human mind nowadays, does not seem to be an invariable trait of human reasoning, but a product of literate society. Students of oral cultures (Luria, 1974; also Goody and

Watt, 1968; Goody, 1977) have noted the absence of categorical or abstract classifications in oral-culture populations and in the *situational* character of their reasoning.

This is an invitation, therefore, to consider our classifications as products of chirographic and typographic societies (Ong, 1982), as *constructions*, scientific *representations*, of reality instead of its copy.

Recapitulation

Any table is usually a trivialization of more precise descriptions. Tables reinforce the coherence of each account and reduce the distance between concepts: but they can be useful for clarifying ideas. The secret is not to believe them too much. In the foregoing historical reconstruction of the concepts of "class", I selected a priori four *fundamenta divisionis* (features or properties), which delineate a typology of what I feel to be the most important mean-

TABLE 1
Concepts of "class"

Type	Speakers	Setting
Taxonomic	English booksellers	Bookshops
	English writers	Literature
	Roman teachers	Scholastics
	Jesuits	Scholastics
	English railway workers	Transportation
	Greek zoologists	Science
	Mathematical logicians	Science
Systematic	Roman jurists (4th century)	Law
	French workers (end 18th century)	Industry and craftwork
	French essayists	Essay
	Botanists (18th century)	Science
	French economists	Science
Oppositional	French workers from 1840s	Industry and craftwork
	English workers (19th century)	Industry and craftwork
	European sociologists	Science
Residual	Roman soldiers (7th century)	Army
	Roman writers (1st century BC)	Literature
	English writers (18th century)	Literature
	French intellectuals	Essay
	English writers (19th century)	Literature

ings of the term "class" (see Table 1). I believe that typology is only the construction of some researcher; moreover, it can be changed by adding or subtracting other *fundamenta*.

Another difficulty I encountered was finding appropriate terms with which to define the different meanings of class. The existing terms (meaning of class as "categorical", "nominalist", "generic", "technical", "classificatory", "descriptive", "evaluative", "interpretative") seemed imprecise and too vague because each concept is a category, a name, etc. and bearer of an evaluation, interpretation, etc. Instead of inventing neologisms (perhaps it would have been preferable), I utilized terms not often used in the literature on class, terms that were not too heavily compromised. The four *fundamenta divisionis* I used were:

1. the kind of relationship among classes (conflictual vs collaborative);
2. the existence of a link of interdependence among classes;
3. the existence of hierarchical relationships among classes;
4. the kind of ranking used (ordinal vs categorical, continuous vs discrete).

The typology that emerges covers three meanings of class (which I labelled as "taxonomic", "systematic" and "oppositional") and a residual category of meanings that did not fit well into the other three.

By "*taxonomic*", I mean a hierarchical, ordinal, contiguous and not mutually interdependent concept of class. This concept could be close to the meaning of the ancient Greek *eide* and *ghenos*, where Aristotelian zoological classification probably arose, and to the ordinary language of English society in the second half of the 18th century. In the sciences, the taxonomic concept seems to be used in crystallography and mathematical logic and may be close to the concept of "stratum" as used in Anglo-American functionalist sociology.

By "*systematic*", I mean something in part similar to the preceding definition, but with an additional organicistic feature, an emphasis on anatomical physiology. The systematic concept, a specialization of the Servian concept, frames classes as mutually interdependent parts of a whole system. This concept seems to come from the ancient Roman world; in the 1700s, it seems close to botanical classification, it appears in medicine and is one of the guiding con-

cepts of economics (Quesnay); in the early 1800s it is used by the French workers' movements and essayists (Saint-Simon). I prefer to attribute to botany the systematic rather than the taxonomic concept, as is usually done, not only because the "System" was the technique chosen by Linnaeus, but because the systematic concept includes properties not directly traceable in taxonomy.

By "oppositional", I intend a conflictual, categorical and discrete meaning with some residual organicistic features. This meaning seems common to Saint-Simon, some French historians, a large part of the French workers' movement from 1840, to Marx and Engels and, generally speaking, to European sociology, that is, not only to Marxist sociology.

In my research I encountered other concepts of "class" (see Table 1) but they seemed to me to have had only a minor influence on the natural and social sciences. The different sociological meanings of "social class" seem to be the product of the convergence of different models of social relations: hierarchical, functional-productive and oppositional. Nor are we forgetting the social epithets of the *shibboleth*, which claim to deduce, through interactional social indicators, the class to which a person belongs.

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Notes

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1. Our knowledge (or perhaps more correctly "beliefs") seem to be the product of our ways of knowing (Phillips, 1973). In a way, we can consider ourselves prisoners of our cultural categories.

2. I am very likely going to perform the same ritual; but perhaps it is impossible to avoid this circularity. I shall therefore try to use a less "assertive", positive writing style, relying on the conditional tense, the verb "to seem", the forms "I think that, I believe that", and other such tools in order to construct a "doubtful" style.

3. Concerning this derivation, De Mauro argues that “in the Latin tradition ‘classis’ always appears as a ‘nomen rei’, never as a ‘nomen actionis’” (1958: 327). It is therefore much more likely that the verb “to classify” and the abstract noun “classification” come from the noun “classis”, and not the opposite.

4. This three-part cultural model seems to lead to the distinction of classes in English trains. To this period belongs the first railway, Darlington–Stockton, opened in 1825.

5. These could be the common-sense antecedents of the epistemological model (or paradigm) that emerged tacitly in the humanities around the end of the 18th century – which Ginsburg (1979) traces and calls a “presumptive” or “semiotic paradigm”.

6. In the 17th and 18th centuries, writers called “mercantilists” confused the categories of “economic” and “political”. Economics was a particular subordinate branch of politics.

7. French doctor and anatomist, precursor of the “Cellular theory” developed by Rudolf Virchow (1821–1902), a German pathologist whose theories influenced many doctrines of the 19th century (for a contrary opinion, see Sontag, 1988: 6). For example, he conceived of the state as a living animal. He also used the term “apparatus” as a physiological metaphor. It is interesting to note that the revivers of the concept of “class” were two physicians (Linnaeus and Quesnay).

8. It could be interesting to look at how a term (in this case, “bourgeois”) takes on different meanings; in the 16th century it meant a resident of the city, i.e. of the borough:

There was not automatically implied opposition to noble, and a nobleman might apply to become the bourgeois of a city. In the seventeenth century, the word “bourgeois” suffers its first major vicissitude. The word, in its adjectival form, grows controversial, and in a certain context and on the lips of certain speakers, becomes a sneer. What seems to have happened is that the nobility, finding themselves tamed and humiliated by Richelieu and Mazarin, decided to take out their resentment on the non-noble. (They were further aggrieved by the fact that in 1614 la noblesse de robe, i.e. nobility conferred on holders of high legal office, was made hereditary.) . . . This pejorative of the adjective “bourgeois” grows common in the latter half of the century and reaches Richelet’s Dictionary in 1680. (Furbank, 1985: 27)

The next important event in the history of the term takes place in 1789, and it is a negative one – but none the less significant for that. The word bourgeois suddenly drops into disuse . . . [it] had suddenly acquired an archaic flavor, relating it to the ancien regime. (1985: 29–30)

9. See also Gruner (1968).

10. The Roman term was mainly of juridical and administrative importance. However, the 19th-century concept of “class” retains some characteristics of the Roman meaning: as “ordo” and “status”, “classis” indicates an empirical collectivity. It seems that the use of the term in scholastic contexts has contributed to its *personalization*.

11. In the Menenio Agrippa’s apologue, class is not felt as an individual dynamic force, but as a function of community.

12. Granier de Cassagnac is disqualified morally and politically by Marx, who defines him as a "penny-a-liner" (Marx, November 1850: 293).

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