Distinction
A Social Critique of the
Judgement of Taste

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Introduction

You said it, my good knight! There ought to be laws to protect the body of acquired knowledge.

Take one of our good pupils, for example: modest and diligent, from his earliest grammar classes he's kept a little notebook full of phrases.

After hanging on the lips of his teachers for twenty years, he's managed to build up an intellectual stock in trade; doesn't it belong to him as if it were a house, or money?

Paul Claudel, *Le soulier de satin*, Day III, Scene ii

There is an economy of cultural goods, but it has a specific logic. Sociology endeavours to establish the conditions in which the consumers of cultural goods, and their taste for them, are produced, and at the same time to describe the different ways of appropriating such of these objects as are regarded at a particular moment as works of art, and the social conditions of the constitution of the mode of appropriation that is considered legitimate. But one cannot fully understand cultural practices unless 'culture', in the restricted, normative sense of ordinary usage, is brought back into 'culture' in the anthropological sense, and the elaborated taste for the most refined objects is reconnected with the elementary taste for the flavours of food.

Whereas the ideology of charisma regards taste in legitimate culture as a gift of nature, scientific observation shows that cultural needs are the product of upbringing and education: surveys establish that all cultural practices (museum visits, concert-going, reading etc.), and preferences in literature, painting or music, are closely linked to educational level (measured by qualifications or length of schooling) and secondarily to social origin. The relative weight of home background and of formal education (the effectiveness and duration of which are closely dependent on social origin) varies according to the extent to which the different cultural practices are recognized and taught by the educational system, and the influence of social origin is strongest—other things being equal—in 'extra-curricular' and avant-garde culture. To the socially recognized hierarchy of the arts, and within each of them, of genres, schools or periods, corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumers. This predisposes
tastes to function as markers of 'class'. The manner in which culture has been acquired lives on in the manner of using it: the importance attached to manners can be understood once it is seen that it is these imponderables of practice which distinguish the different—and ranked—modes of culture acquisition, early or late, domestic or scholastic, and the classes of individuals which they characterize (such as 'pedants' and 'mondaïns'). Culture also has its titles of nobility—awarded by the educational system—and its pedigrees, measured by seniority in admission to the nobility.

The definition of cultural nobility is the stake in a struggle which has gone on unceasingly, from the seventeenth century to the present day, between groups differing in their ideas of culture and of the legitimate relation to culture and to works of art, and therefore differing in the conditions of acquisition of which these dispositions are the product. Even in the classroom, the dominant definition of the legitimate way of appropriating culture and works of art favours those who have had easy access to legitimate culture, in a cultured household, outside of scholastic disciplines, since even within the educational system it devalues scholarly knowledge and interpretation as 'scholastic' or even 'pedantic' in favour of direct experience and simple delight.

The logic of what is called, in typically 'pedantic' language, the 'reading' of a work of art, offers an objective basis for this opposition. Consumption is, in this case, a stage in a process of communication, that is, an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code. In a sense, one can say that the capacity to see (voir) is a function of the knowledge (savoir), or concepts, that is, the words, that are available to name visible things, and which are, as it were, programmes for perception. A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded. The conscious or unconscious implementation of explicit or implicit schemes of perception and appreciation which constitutes pictorial or musical culture is the hidden condition for recognizing the styles characteristic of a period; a school or an author, and, more generally, for the familiarity with the internal logic of works that aesthetic enjoyment presupposes. A beholder who lacks the specific code feels lost in a chaos of sounds and rhythms, colours and lines, without rhyme or reason. Not having learnt to adopt the adequate disposition, he stops short at what Erwin Panofsky calls the 'sensible properties', perceiving a skin as dowdy or lace-work as delicate, or at the emotional resonances aroused by these properties, referring to 'austere' colours or a 'joyful' melody. He cannot move from the 'primary stratum of the meaning we can grasp on the basis of our ordinary experience' to the 'stratum of secondary meanings', i.e. the 'level of the meaning of what is signified', unless he possesses the concepts which go beyond the sensible properties and which identify the specifically stylistic properties of the

work. Thus the encounter with a work of art is not 'love at first sight' as is generally supposed, and the act of empathy, *Einfühlung*, which is the art-lover's pleasure, presupposes an act of cognition, a decoding operation, which implies the implementation of a cognitive acquirement, a cultural code.

This typically intellectualist theory of artistic perception directly contradicts the experience of the art-lovers closest to the legitimate definition; acquisition of legitimate culture by sensible familiarization within the family circle tends to favour an enchanted experience of culture which implies forgetting the acquisition. The 'eye' is a product of history reproduced by education. This is true of the mode of artistic perception now accepted as legitimate, that is, the aesthetic disposition, the capacity to consider in and for themselves, as form rather than function, not only the works designated for such apprehension, i.e., legitimate works of art, but everything in the world, including cultural objects which are not yet consecrated—such as, at one time, primitive arts, or, nowadays, popular photography or kitsch—and natural objects. The 'pure' gaze is a historical invention linked to the emergence of an autonomous field of artistic production, that is, a field capable of imposing its own norms on both the production and the consumption of its products. An art which, like all Post-Impressionist painting, is the product of an artistic intention which asserts the primacy of the mode of representation over the object of representation demands categorically an attention to form which previous art only demanded conditionally.

The pure intention of the artist is that of a producer who aims to be autonomous, that is, entirely the master of his product, who tends to reject not only the 'programmes' imposed a priori by scholars and critics, but also—following the old hierarchy of doing and saying—the interpretations superimposed a posteriori on his work. The production of an 'open work', intrinsically and deliberately polysemic, can thus be understood as the final stage in the conquest of artistic autonomy by poets and, following in their footsteps, by painters, who had long been reliant on writers and their work of 'showing' and 'illustrating'. To assert the autonomy of production is to give primacy to that of which the artist is master, i.e., form, manner, style, rather than the 'subject', the external referent, which involves subordination to functions—even if only the most elementary one, of that of representing, signifying, saying something. It also means a refusal to recognize any necessity other than that inscribed in the specific tradition of the artistic discipline in question: the shift from an art which imitates nature to an art which imitates art, deriving from its own history the exclusive source of its experiments and even of its breaks with tradition. An art which ever increasingly contains reference to its own history demands to be perceived historically; it asks to be referred not to an external referent, the represented or designated 'reality', but to the universe of past and present works of art. Like artistic produc-
tion, in that it is generated in a field, aesthetic perception is necessarily historical, inasmuch as it is differential, relational, attentive to the deviations (fürwahr) which make styles. Like the so-called naive painter who, operating outside the field and its specific traditions, remains external to the history of the art, the 'naive' spectator cannot attain a specific grasp of works of art which only have meaning—or value—in relation to the specific history of an artistic tradition. The aesthetic disposition demanded by the products of a highly autonomous field of production is inseparable from a specific cultural competence. This historical culture functions as a principle of pertinence which enables one to identify, among the elements offered to the gaze, all the distinctive features and only these, by referring them, consciously or unconsciously, to the universe of possible alternatives. This mastery is, for the most part, acquired simply by contact with works of art—that is, through an implicit learning analogous to that which makes it possible to recognize familiar faces without explicit rules or criteria—and it generally remains at a practical level; it is what makes it possible to identify styles, i.e., modes of expression characteristic of a period, a civilization or a school, without having to distinguish clearly, or state explicitly, the features which constitute their originality. Everything seems to suggest that even among professional valuers, the criteria which define the stylistic properties of the 'typical works' on which all their judgements are based usually remain implicit.

The pure gaze implies a break with the ordinary attitude towards the world, which, given the conditions in which it is performed, is also a social separation. Ortega y Gasset can be believed when he attributes to modern art a systematic refusal of all that is 'human', i.e., generic, common—as opposed to distinctive, or distinguished—namely, the passions, emotions and feelings which 'ordinary' people invest in their 'ordinary' lives. It is as if the 'popular aesthetic' (the quotation marks are there to indicate that this is an aesthetic 'in itself' not 'for itself') were based on the affirmation of the continuity between art and life, which implies the subordination of form to function. This is seen clearly in the case of the novel and especially the theatre, where the working-class audience refuses any sort of formal experimentation and all the effects which, by introducing a distance from the accepted conventions (as regards scenery, plot etc.), tend to distance the spectator, preventing him from getting involved and fully identifying with the characters (I am thinking of Brechtian 'alienation' or the disruption of plot in the nouveau roman). In contrast to the detachment and disinterestedness which aesthetic theory regards as the only way of recognizing the work of art for what it is, i.e., autonomous, selvändig, the 'popular aesthetic' ignores or refuses the refusal of 'facile' involvement and 'vulgar' enjoyment, a refusal which is the basis of the taste for formal experiment. And popular judgements of paintings or photographs spring from an 'aesthetic' (in fact it is an ethos) which is the exact opposite of the Kantian aesthetic. Whereas, in order to grasp the specificity of the aesthetic judgement, Kant strove to distinguish that which pleases from that which gratifies and, more generally, to distinguish disinterestedness, the sole guarantor of the specifically aesthetic quality of contemplation, from the interest of reason which defines the Good, working-class people expect every image to explicitly perform a function, if only that of a sign, and their judgements make reference, often explicitly, to the norms of morality or agreeableness. Whether rejecting or praising, their appreciation always has an ethical basis.

Popular taste applies the schemes of the ethos, which pertain in the ordinary circumstances of life, to legitimate works of art, and so performs a systematic reduction of the things of art to the things of life. The very seriousness (or naivety) which this taste invests in fictions and representations demonstrates a contrario that pure taste performs a suspension of 'naive' involvement which is one dimension of a 'quasi-ludic' relationship with the necessities of the world. Intellectuals could be said to believe in the representation—literature, theatre, painting—more than in the things represented, whereas the people chiefly expect representations and the conventions which govern them to allow them to believe 'naively' in the things represented. The pure aesthetic is rooted in an ethic, or rather, an ethos of elective distance from the necessities of the natural and social world, which may take the form of moral agnosticism (visible when ethical transgression becomes an artistic parti pris) or of an aestheticism which presents the aesthetic disposition as a universally valid principle and takes the bourgeois denial of the social world to its limit. The detachment of the pure gaze cannot be dissociated from a general disposition towards the world which is the paradoxical product of conditioning by negative economic necessities—a life of ease—that tends to induce an active distance from necessity.

Although art obviously offers the greatest scope to the aesthetic disposition, there is no area of practice in which the aim of purifying, refining and sublimating primary needs and impulses cannot assert itself, no area in which the stylization of life, that is, the primacy of forms over function, of manner over matter, does not produce the same effects. And nothing is more distinctive, more distinguished, than the capacity to confer aesthetic status on objects that are banal or even 'common' (because the 'common' people make them their own, especially for aesthetic purposes), or the ability to apply the principles of a 'pure' aesthetic to the most everyday choices of everyday life, e.g., in cooking, clothing or decoration, completely reversing the popular disposition which annexe aesthetics to ethics.

In fact, through the economic and social conditions which they presuppose, the different ways of relating to realities and fictions, of believing in fictions and the realities they simulate, with more or less distance
and detachment, are very closely linked to the different possible positions in social space and, consequently, bound up with the systems of dispositions (habitus) characteristic of the different classes and class fractions. Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed. And statistical analysis does indeed show that oppositions similar in structure to those found in cultural practices also appear in eating habits. The antithesis between quantity and quality, substance and form, corresponds to the opposition—linked to different distances from necessity—between the taste of necessity, which favours the most 'filling' and most economical foods, and the taste of liberty—or luxury—which shifts the emphasis to the manner (of presenting, serving, eating etc.) and tends to use stylized forms to deny function.

The science of taste and of cultural consumption begins with a transgression that is in no way aesthetic: it has to abolish the sacred frontier which makes legitimate culture a separate universe, in order to discover the intelligible relations which unite apparently incommensurable 'choices', such as preferences in music and food, painting and sport, literature and hairstyle. This barbarous reintegration of aesthetic consumption into the world of ordinary consumption abolishes the opposition, which has been the basis of high aesthetics since Kant, between the 'taste of sense' and the 'taste of reflection', and between facile pleasure, pleasure reduced to a pleasure of the senses, and pure pleasure, pleasure purified of pleasure, which is predisposed to become a symbol of moral excellence and a measure of the capacity for sublimation which defines the truly human man. The culture which results from this magical division is sacred. Cultural consecration does indeed confer on the objects, persons and situations it touches, a sort of ontological promotion akin to a transubstantiation. Proof enough of this is found in the two following quotations, which might almost have been written for the delight of the sociologist:

'What struck me most is this: nothing could be obscene on the stage of our premier theatre, and the ballerinas of the Opera, even as naked dancers, sylphs, sprites or Baccia, retain an inviolable purity."

"There are obscene postures: the stimulated intercourse which offends the eye. Clearly, it is impossible to approve, although the interpolation of such gestures in dance routines does give them a symbolic and aesthetic quality which is absent from the intimate scenes the cinema daily flaunts before its spectators' eyes... As for the nude scene, what can one say, except that it is brief and theatrically not very effective? I will not say it is chaste or innocent, for nothing commercial can be so described. Let us say it is not shocking, and that the chief objection is that it serves as a box-office gimmick... In Hair, the nakedness fails to be symbolic."

The denial of lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile—in a word, natural—enjoyment, which constitutes the sacred sphere of culture, implies an affirmation of the superiority of those who can be satisfied with the sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasures forever closed to the profane. That is why art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences.
Conclusion: Classes and Classifications

If I have to choose the lesser of two evils, I choose neither.
Karl Kraus

Taste is an acquired disposition to 'differentiate' and 'appreciate', as Kant says—in other words, to establish and mark differences by a process of distinction which is not (or not necessarily) a distinct knowledge, in Leibniz's sense, since it ensures recognition (in the ordinary sense) of the object without implying knowledge of the distinctive features which define it. The schemes of the habitus, the primary forms of classification, owe their specific efficacy to the fact that they function below the level of consciousness and language, beyond the reach of retrospective scrutiny or control by the will. Orienting practices practically, they embed what some would mistakenly call values in the most automatic gestures or the apparently most insignificant techniques of the body—ways of walking or blowing one's nose, ways of eating or talking—and engage the most fundamental principles of construction and evaluation of the social world, those which most directly express the division of labour (between the classes, the age groups and the sexes) or the division of the work of domination, in divisions between bodies and between relations to the body which borrow more features than one, as if to give them the appearances of naturalness, from the sexual division of labour and the division of sexual labour. Taste is a practical mastery of distributions which makes it possible to sense or intuit what is likely (or unlikely) to befall—and therefore to befit—an individual occupying a given position in social space. It functions as a sort of social orientation, a 'sense of one's place', guiding the occupants of a given place in social space towards the social positions adjusted to their properties, and towards the practices or goods which befit the occupants of that position. It implies a practical anticipa-

tion of what the social meaning and value of the chosen practice or thing will probably be, given their distribution in social space and the practical knowledge the other agents have of the correspondence between goods and groups.

Thus, the social agents whom the sociologist classifies are producers not only of classifiable acts but also of acts of classification which are themselves classified. Knowledge of the social world has to take into account a practical knowledge of this world which pre-exists it and which it must not fail to include in its object, although, as a first stage, this knowledge has to be constituted against the partial and interested representations provided by practical knowledge. To speak of habitus is to include in the object the knowledge which the agents, who are part of the object, have of the object, and the contribution this knowledge makes to the reality of the object. But it is not only a matter of putting back into the real world that one is endeavouring to know, a knowledge of the real world that contributes to its reality (and also to the force it exerts). It means conferring on this knowledge a genuinely constitutive power, the very power it is denied when, in the name of an objectivist conception of objectivity, one makes common knowledge or theoretical knowledge a mere reflection of the real world.

Those who suppose they are producing a materialist theory of knowledge when they make knowledge a passive recording and abandon the 'active aspect' of knowledge to idealism, as Marx complains in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, forget that all knowledge, and in particular all knowledge of the social world, is an act of construction implementing schemes of thought and expression, and that between conditions of existence and practices or representations there intervenes the structuring activity of the agents, who, far from reacting mechanically to mechanical stimulations, respond to the invitations or threats of a world whose meaning they have helped to produce. However, the principle of this structuring activity is not, as an intellectualist and anti-genetic idealism would have it, a system of universal forms and categories but a system of internalized, embodied schemes which, having been constituted in the course of collective history, are acquired in the course of individual history and function in their practical state, for practice (and not for the sake of pure knowledge).

Embodied Social Structures

This means, in the first place, that social science, in constructing the social world, takes note of the fact that agents are, in their ordinary practice, the subjects of acts of construction of the social world; but also that it aims, among other things, to describe the social genesis of the principles of construction and seeks the basis of these principles in the social world. Breaking with the anti-genetic prejudice which often accom-
panies recognition of the active aspect of knowledge, it seeks in the objective distributions of properties, especially material ones (brought to light by censuses and surveys which all presuppose selection and classification), the basis of the systems of classification which agents apply to every sort of thing, not least to the distributions themselves. In contrast to what is sometimes called the 'cognitive' approach, which, both in its ethnological form (structural anthropology, ethnoscience, ethnoseamantics, ethnobotany etc.) and in its sociological form (interactionism, ethnomethodology etc.), ignores the question of the genesis of mental structures and classifications, social science enquires into the relationship between the principles of division and the social divisions (between the generations, the sexes etc.) on which they are based, and into the variations of the use made of these principles according to the position occupied in the distributions (questions which all require the use of statistics).

The cognitive structures which social agents implement in their practical knowledge of the social world are internalized, 'embodied' social structures. The practical knowledge of the social world that is presupposed by 'reasonable' behaviour within it implements classificatory schemes (or 'forms of classification', 'mental structures' or 'symbolic forms'—apart from their connotations, these expressions are virtually interchangeable), historical schemes of perception and appreciation which are the product of the objective division into classes (age groups, genders, social classes) and which function below the level of consciousness and discourse. Being the product of the incorporation of the fundamental structures of a society, these principles of division are common to all the agents of the society and make possible the production of a common, meaningful world, a common-sense world.

All the agents in a given social formation share a set of basic perceptual schemes, which receive the beginnings of objectification in the pairs of antagonistic adjectives commonly used to classify and qualify persons or objects in the most varied areas of practice. The network of oppositions between high (sublime, elevated, pure) and low (vulgar, low, modest), spiritual and material, fine (refined, elegant) and coarse (heavy, fat, crude, brutal), light (subtle, lively, sharp, adroit) and heavy (slow, thick, blunt, laborious, clumsy), free and forced, broad and narrow, or, in another dimension, between unique (rare, different, distinguished, exclusive, exceptional, singular, novel) and common (ordinary, banal, commonplace, trivial, routine), brilliant (intelligent) and dull (obscure, grey, mediocre), is the matrix of all the commonplaces which find such ready acceptance because behind them lies the whole social order. The network has its ultimate source in the opposition between the 'elite' of the dominant and the 'mass' of the dominated, a contingent, disorganized multiplicity, interchangeable and innumerable, existing only statistically. These mythic roots only have to be allowed to take their course in order to generate, at will, one or another of the tirelessly repeated themes of the eternal sociodicy, such as apocalyptic denunciations of all forms of levelling,' trivialization' or 'massification', which identify the decline of societies with the decadence of bourgeois houses, i.e., a fall into the homogeneous, the undifferentiated, and betray an obsessive fear of number, of undifferentiated hordes indifferent to difference and constantly threatening to submerge the private spaces of bourgeois exclusiveness.

The seemingly most formal oppositions within this social mythology always derive their ideological strength from the fact that they refer back, more or less discreetly, to the most fundamental oppositions within the social order: the opposition between the dominant and the dominated, which is inscribed in the division of labour, and the opposition, rooted in the division of the labour of domination, between two principles of domination, two powers, dominant and dominated, temporal and spiritual, material and intellectual etc. It follows that the map of social space previously put forward can also be read as a strict table of the historically constituted and acquired categories which organize the idea of the social world in the minds of all the subjects belonging to that world and shaped by it. The same classificatory schemes (and the oppositions in which they are expressed) can function, by being specified, in fields organized around polar positions, whether in the field of the dominant class, organized around an opposition homologous to the opposition constituting the field of the social classes, or in the field of cultural production, which is itself organized around oppositions which reproduce the structure of the dominant class and are homologous to it (e.g., the opposition between bourgeois and avant-garde theatre). So the fundamental opposition constantly supports second, third or nth rank oppositions (those which underlie the 'purer' ethical or aesthetic judgements, with their high or low sentiments, their facile or difficult notions of beauty, their light or heavy styles etc.), while euphemizing itself to the point of misconceivability.

Thus, the opposition between the heavy and the light, which, in a number of its uses, especially scholastic ones, serves to distinguish popular or petit-bourgeois tastes from bourgeois tastes, can be used by theatre criticism aimed at the dominant fraction of the dominant class to express the relationship between 'intellectual' theatre, which is condemned for its 'fabulous' pretensions and 'oppressive' didacticism, and 'bourgeois' theatre, which is praised for its tact and its art of skimming over surfaces. By contrast, 'intellectual' criticism, by a simple inversion of values, expresses the relationship in a scarcely modified form of the same opposition, with lightness, identified with frivolity, being opposed to profundity. Similarly, it can be shown that the opposition between right and left, which, in its basic form, concerns the relationship between the dominant and the dominated, can also, by means of a first transformation,
designate the relations between dominated fractions and dominant fractions within the dominant class; the words right and left then take on a meaning close to the meaning they have in expressions like ‘right-bank’ theatre or ‘left-bank’ theatre. With a further degree of ‘de-realization’, it can even serve to distinguish two rival tendencies within an avant-garde artistic or literary group, and so on.

It follows that, when considered in each of their uses, the pairs of qualifiers, the system of which constitutes the conceptual equipment of the judgement of taste, are extremely poor, almost indefinite, but, precisely for this reason, capable of eliciting or expressing the sense of the indefinable. Each particular use of one of these pairs only takes on its full meaning in relation to a universe of discourse that is different each time and usually implicit—since it is a question of the system of self-evidences and presuppositions that are taken for granted in the field in relation to which the speakers’ strategies are defined. But each of the couples specified by usage has for undertones all the other uses it might have—because of the homologies between the fields which allow transfers from one field to another—and also all the other couples which are interchangeable with it, within a nuance or two (e.g., fine/crude for light/heavy), that is, in slightly different contexts.

The fact that the semi-codified oppositions contained in ordinary language reappear, with very similar values, as the basis of the dominant vision of the social world, in all class-divided social formations (consider the tendency to see the ‘people’ as the site of totally uncontrollable appetites and sexuality) can be understood once one knows that, reduced to their formal structure, the same fundamental relationships, precisely those which express the major relations of order (high/low, strong/weak etc.) reappear in all class-divided societies. And the recurrence of the triadic structure studied by Georges Dumézil, which Georges Duby shows in the case of feudal society to be rooted in the social structures it legittimates, may well be, like the invariant oppositions in which the relationship of domination is expressed, simply a necessary outcome of the intersection of the two principles of division which are at work in all class-divided societies—the division between the dominant and the dominated, and the division between the different fractions competing for dominance in the name of different principles, bellatores (warriors) and oratores (scholars) in feudal society, businessmen and intellectuals now.7

Knowledge without Concepts

Thus, through the differentiated and differentiating conditionings associated with the different conditions of existence, through the exclusions and inclusions, unions (marriages, affairs, alliances etc.) and divisions (incompatibilities, separations, struggles etc.) which govern the social structure and the structuring force it exerts, through all the hierarchies and classifications inscribed in objects (especially cultural products), in institutions (for example, the educational system) or simply in language, and through all the judgements, verdicts, gradings and warnings imposed by the institutions specially designed for this purpose, such as the family or the educational system, or constantly arising from the meetings and interactions of everyday life, the social order is progressively inscribed in people’s minds. Social divisions become principles of division, organizing the image of the social world. Objective limits become a sense of limits, a practical anticipation of objective limits acquired by experience of objective limits, a ‘sense of one’s place’ which leads one to exclude oneself from the goods, persons, places and so forth from which one is excluded.

The sense of limits implies forgetting the limits. One of the most important effects of the correspondence between real divisions and practical principles of division, between social structures and mental structures, is undoubtedly the fact that primary experience of the social world is that of doxa, an adherence to relations of order which, because they structure inseparably both the real world and the thought world, are accepted as self-evident. Primary perception of the social world, far from being a simple mechanical reflection, is always an act of cognition involving principles of construction that are external to the constructed object grasped in its immediacy; but at the same time it is an act of misconception, implying the most absolute form of recognition of the social order. Dominated agents, who assess the value of their position and their characteristics by applying a system of schemes of perception and appreciation which is the embodiment of the objective laws whereby their value is objectively constituted, tend to attribute to themselves what the distribution attributes to them, refusing what they are refused (‘That’s not for the likes of us’), adjusting their expectations to their chances, defining themselves as the established order defines them, reproducing in their verdict on themselves the verdict the economy pronounces on them, in a word, condemning themselves to what is in any case their lot, la beauté, as Plato put it, consenting to be what they have to be, ‘modest’, ‘humble’ and ‘obscure’. Thus the conservation of the social order is decisively reinforced by what Durkheim called ‘logical conformity’, i.e., the orchestration of categories of perception of the social world, which, being adjusted to the divisions of the established order (and thereby to the interests of those who dominate it) and common to all minds structured in accordance with those structures, present every appearance of objective necessity.

The system of classificatory schemes is opposed to a taxonomy based on explicit and explicitly concerted principles in the same way that the dispositions constituting taste or ethos (which are dimensions of it) are opposed to aesthetics or ethics. The sense of social realities that is acquired in the confrontation with a particular form of social necessity is
what makes it possible to act as if one knew the structure of the social world, one's place within it and the distances that need to be kept.

The ideology of the utopian thinker, rootless and unattached, 'free-floating', without interests or profits, together with the correlative refusal of that supreme form of materialistic vulgarisitic, the reduction of the unique to the class, the explanation of the higher by the lower, the application to the world of unclassifiable of explanatory models fit only for the 'bourgeois', the petit-bourgeois, the limited and common, scarcely inclines intellectuals to conceptualize the sense of social position, still less their own position and the perverse relation to the social world it forces on them. (The perfect example is Sartre, whose work and whole existence revolve around this affirmation of the intellectual's subversive point of honour. This is seen particularly clearly in the passage in *Being and Nothingness* on the psychology of Flaubert, which can be read as a desperate effort to save the person, in the person of the intellectual, an uncreated creator, begotten by his own works, haunted by 'the project of being God', from every sort of reduction to the general, the type, the class, and to affirm the transcendence of the ego against 'what Comte called materialism, that is, explaining the higher by the lower'.)

The practical mastery of classification has nothing in common with the reflexive mastery that is required in order to construct a taxonomy that is simultaneously coherent and adequate to social reality. The practical 'science' of positions in social space is the competence presupposed by the art of behaving comme il faut with persons and things that have and give 'class' ('smart' or 'unsmart'), finding the right distance, by a sort of practical calculation, neither too close ('getting familiar') nor too far ('being distant'), playing with objective distance by emphasizing it (being 'aloof', 'stand-offish') or symbolically denying it (being 'approachable', 'hobnobbing'). It in no way implies the capacity to situate oneself explicitly in the classification (as so many surveys on social class ask people to do), still less to describe this classification in any systematic way and state its principles.

There is no better opportunity to observe the functioning of this sense of the place one occupies than in condensation strategies, which presuppose both in the author of the strategy and in the victims a practical knowledge of the gap between the place really occupied and the place fictitiously indicated by the behaviour adopted (e.g., in French, use of the familiar tu). When the person 'naturally' identified with a Rolls Royce, a top hat or golf (see appendix 4) takes the metro, sports a flat cap (or a polo neck) or plays football, his practices take on their meaning in relation to this attribution by status, which continues to colour the real practices, as if by superimposition. But one could also point to the variations that Charles Bally observed in the style of speech according to the social gap between the interlocutors, or the variations in pronunciation according to the addressee: the speaker may, as appropriate, move closer to the 'accent' of an addressee of (presumed) higher status or move away from it by 'accentuating' his ordinary accent.

The practical 'attributive judgement' whereby one puts someone in a class by speaking to him in a certain way (thereby putting oneself in a class at the same time) has nothing to do with an intellectual operation implying conscious reference to explicit indices and the immanence of classes produced by and for the concept. The same classification opposition (rich/poor, young/old etc.) can be applied at any point in the distribution and reproduce its whole range within any of its segments (common sense tells us that one is always richer or poorer than someone, superior or inferior to someone, more right-wing or left-wing than someone—but this does not entail an elementary relativism).

In a series of interviews (n = 30) on the social classes, based on a test which involved classifying thirty occupations (written on cards), the respondents often first asked how many classes the set should be divided into, and then several times modified the number of classes and the criteria of classification, so as to take account of the different dimensions of each occupation and therefore the different respects in which it could be evaluated; or they spontaneously suggested that they could carry on sub-dividing indefinitely. (They thereby exposed the artificiality of the situation created by a theoretical inquiry which called for the adoption of a theoretical attitude to which, as their initial uncertainty indicated, the respondents were quite unaccustomed.) And yet they almost always agreed on the ranks of the different occupations when taken two by two. (Lenski made similar observations in an experiment in which the respondents were asked to rank the families in a small town in New England.)

It is not surprising that it is possible to fault the practical sense of social space which lies behind class-attributive judgement; the sociologists who use their respondents' self-contradictions as an argument for denying the existence of classes simply reveal that they understand nothing of how this 'sense' works or of the artificial situation in which they are making it work. In fact, whether it is used to situate oneself in social space or to place others, the sense of social space, like every practical sense, always refers to the particular situation in which it has to orient practices. This explains, for example, the divergences between surveys of the representation of the classes in a small town ('community studies') and surveys of class on a nation-wide scale. But if, as has often been observed, respondents do not agree either on the number of divisions they make within the group in question, or on the limits of the 'strata' and the criteria used to define them, this is not simply due to the fuzziness inherent in all practical logics. It is also because people's image of the classification is a function of their position within it.
So nothing is further removed from an act of cognition, as conceived by the intellectualist tradition, than this sense of the social structure, which, as is so well put by the word taste—simultaneously 'the faculty of perceiving flavours' and 'the capacity to discern aesthetic values'—is social necessity made second nature, turned into muscular patterns and bodily automatons. Everything takes place as if the social conditionings linked to a social condition tended to inscribe the relation to the social world in a lasting, generalized relation to one's own body, a way of bearing one's body, presenting it to others, moving it, making space for it, which gives the body its social physiognomy. Bodily hexis, a basic dimension of the sense of social orientation, is a practical way of experiencing and expressing one's own sense of social value. One's relationship to the social world and to one's proper place in it is never more clearly expressed than in the space and time one feels entitled to take from others; more precisely, in the space one claims with one's body in physical space, through a bearing and gesture that are self-assured or reserved, expansive or constricted ('presence' or 'insignificance') and with one's speech in time, through the interaction time one appropriates and the self-assured or aggressive, careless or unconscious way one appropriates it.12

There is no better image of the logic of socialization, which treats the body as a 'memory-jogger', than those complexes of gestures, postures and words—simple interjections or favourite clichés—which only have to be slipped into, like a theatrical costume, to awaken, by the evocative power of bodily mimesis, a universe of ready-made feelings and experiences. The elementary actions of bodily gymnastics, especially the specifically sexual, biologically pre-constructed aspect of it, charged with social meanings and values, function as the most basic of metaphors, capable of evoking a whole relationship to the world, 'lofty' or 'submissive', 'expansive' or 'narrow', and through it a whole world. The practical 'choices' of the sense of social orientation no more presuppose a representation of the range of possibilities than does the choice of phonemes; these enacted choices imply no acts of choosing. The logoscentrism and intellectualism of intellectuals, combined with the prejudice inherent in the science which takes as its object the psyche, the soul, the mind, consciousness, representations, not to mention the petit-bourgeois pretension to the status of 'person', have prevented us from seeing that, as Leibniz put it, 'we are automatons in three-quarters of what we do', and that the ultimate values, as they are called, are never anything other than the primary, primitive dispositions of the body, 'visceral' tastes and distastes, in which the group's most vital interests are embedded, the things on which one is prepared to stake one's own and other people's bodies. The sense of distinction, the discrétion (discrimination) which demands that certain things be brought together and others kept apart, which excludes all misalliances and all unnatural unions—i.e., all unions contrary to the common classification, to the diacronie (separation) which is the basis of collective and individual identity—responds with visceral, murderous horror, absolute disgust, metaphysical fury, to everything which lies in Plato's 'hybrid zone', everything which passes understanding, that is, the embodied taxonomy, which, by challenging the principles of the incarnate social order, especially the socially constituted principles of the sexual division of labour and the division of sexual labour, violates the mental order, scandalously flouting common sense.

It can be shown that socialization tends to constitute the body as an analogical operator establishing all sorts of practical equivalences between the different divisions of the social world—divisions between the sexes, between the age groups and between the social classes—or, more precisely, between the meanings and values associated with the individuals occupying practically equivalent positions in the spaces defined by these divisions. And it can be shown that it does so by integrating the symbolism of social domination and submission and the symbolism of sexual domination and submission into the same body language—as is seen in etiquette, which uses the opposition between the straight and the curved or, which amounts to the same thing, between raising (oneself) and lowering (oneself), as one of the generative principles of the marks (of respect, contempt etc.) used to symbolize hierarchical relations.

**Advantageous Attributions**

The basis of the pertinence principle which is implemented in perceiving the social world and which defines all the characteristics of persons or things which can be perceived, and perceived as positively or negatively interesting, by all those who apply these schemes (another definition of common sense), is based on nothing other than the interest the individuals or groups in question have in recognizing a feature and in identifying the individual in question as a member of the set defined by that feature; interest in the aspect observed is never completely independent of the advantage of observing it. This can be clearly seen in all the classifications built around a stigmatized feature which, like the everyday opposition between homosexuals and heterosexuals, isolate the interesting trait from all the rest (i.e., all other forms of sexuality), which remain indifferent and undifferentiated. It is even clearer in all 'labelling judgements', which are in fact accusations, catégories in the original Aristotelian sense, and which, like insults, only wish to know one of the properties constituting the social identity of an individual or group (You're just a ...), regarding, for example, the married homosexual or converted Jew as a 'closet queen' or covert Jew, and thereby in a sense doubly Jewish or homosexual. The logic of the stigma remind us that social identity is the stake in a struggle in which the stigmatized individual or group, and, more generally, any individual or group insofar as he or it is a potential
object of categorization, can only retaliate against the partial perception which limits it to one of its characteristics by highlighting, in its self-definition, the best of its characteristics, and, more generally, by struggling to impose the taxonomy most favourable to its characteristics, or at least to give to the dominant taxonomy the content most flattering to what it has and what it is.

Those who are surprised by the paradoxes that ordinary logic and language engender when they apply their divisions to continuous magnitudes forget the paradoxes inherent in treating language as a purely logical instrument and also forget the social situation in which such a relationship to language is possible. The contradictions or paradoxes to which ordinary language classifications lead do not derive, as all forms of positivism suppose, from some essential inadequacy of ordinary language, but from the fact that these socio-logical acts are not directed towards the pursuit of logical coherence and that, unlike philological, logical or linguistic uses of language—which ought really to be called scholastic, since they all presuppose \textit{schola}, i.e., leisure, distance from urgency and necessity, the absence of vital stakes, and the scholastic institution which in most social universes is the only institution capable of providing all these—they obey the logic of the parti pris, which, as in a court-room, juxtaposes not logical judgements, subject to the sole criterion of coherence, but charges and defences. Quite apart from all that is implied in the oppositions, which logicians and even linguists manage to forget, between the art of convincing and the art of persuading, it is clear that scholastic usage of language is to the orator's, advocate's or politician's usage what the classificatory systems devised by the logician or statistician concerned with coherence and empirical adequacy are to the categorizations and catechisms of daily life. As the etymology suggests, the latter belong to the logic of the trial.\textsuperscript{15} Every real inquiry into the divisions of the social world has to analyze the interests associated with membership or non-membership. As is shown by the attention devoted to strategic, 'frontier' groups such as the 'labour aristocracy', which hesitates between class struggle and class collaboration, or the 'cadres', a category of bureaucratic statistics, whose nominal, doubly negative unity conceals its real dispersion both from the 'interested parties' and from their opponents and most observers, the laying down of boundaries between the classes is inspired by the strategic aim of 'counting in' or 'being counted in', 'cataloguing' or 'annexing', when it is not the simple recording of a legally guaranteed state of the power relation between the classified groups.

Leaving aside all cases in which the statutory imposition of an arbitrary boundary (such as a 30-kilo limit on baggage or the rule that a vehicle over two tons is a van) suffices to eliminate the difficulties that arise from the sophism of the heap of grain,\textsuperscript{14} boundaries—even the most formal-looking ones, such as those between age-groups—do indeed freeze a particular state of social struggles, i.e., a given state of the distribution of advantages and obligations, such as the right to pensions or cheap fares, compulsory schooling or military service. And if we are amused by Alphonse Allais's story of the father who pulls the communication cord to stop the train at the very moment his child becomes three years old (and so needs a ticket to travel), it is because we immediately see the sociological absurdity of an imaginary variation which is as impeccably logical as those on which logicians base their beloved paradoxes. Here the limits are frontiers to be attacked or defended with all one's strength, and the classificatory systems which fix them are not so much means of knowledge as means of power, harnessed to social functions and overtly or covertly aimed at satisfying the interests of a group.

A number of ethical, aesthetic, psychiatric or forensic classifications that are produced by the 'institutional sciences', not to mention those produced and inculcated by the educational system, are similarly subordinated to social functions, although they derive their specific efficacy from their apparent neutrality. They are produced in accordance with the specific logic, and in the specific language, of relatively autonomous fields, and they combine a real dependence on the classificatory schemes of the dominant habitus (and ultimately on the social structures of which these are the product) with an apparent independence. The latter enables them to help to legitimize a particular state of the classification struggle and the class struggle. Perhaps the most typical example of these semi-autonomous systems of classification is the system of adjectives which underpins scholastic 'appreciations'.\textsuperscript{16}

Commonplaces and classificatory systems are thus the stake of struggles between the groups they characterize and counterpose, who fight over them while striving to turn them to their own advantage. Georges Duby shows how the model of the three orders, which fixed a state of the social structure and aimed to make it permanent by codifying it, was able to be used simultaneously and successively by antagonistic groups: first by the bishops, who had devised it, against the heretics, the monks and the knights; then by the aristocracy, against the bishops and the king; and finally by the king, who, by setting himself up as the absolute subject of the existing operation, as a principle external and superior to the classes it generated (unlike the three orders, who were subjects but also objects, judges but also parties), assigned each group its place in the social order, and established himself as an unassailable vantage-point.\textsuperscript{16} In the same way it can be shown that the schemes and commonplaces which provide images of the different forms of domination, the opposition between the sexes and age-groups as well as the opposition between the generations, are similarly manipulated. The 'young' can accept the definition that their elders offer them, take advantage of the temporary licence they are allowed in many societies ('Youth must have its fling'), do what
is assigned to them, revel in the 'specific virtues' of youth, virtù, virility, enthusiasm, and get on with their own business—knighthood for the sons of the medieaval aristocracy, 17 love and violence for the youth of Renaissance Florence, and every form of regulated, ludic wildness (sport, rock etc.) for contemporary adolescents—in short, allow themselves to be kept in the state of 'youth', that is, irresponsibility, enjoying the freedom of irresponsible behaviour in return for renouncing responsibility.18 In situations of specific crisis, when the order of successions is threatened, 'young people', refusing to remain consigned to 'youth', tend to consign the 'old' to 'old age'. Wanting to take the responsibilities which define adults (in the sense of socially complete persons), they must push the holders of responsibilities into that form of irresponsibility which defines old age, or rather retirement. The wisdom and prudence claimed by the elders then collapse into conservativism, archaism or, quite simply, senile irresponsibility. The newcomers, who are likely to be also the biologically youngest, but who bring with them many other distinctive properties, stemming from changes in the social conditions of production of the producers (i.e., principally the family and the educational system), escape the more rapidly from 'youth' (irresponsibility) the-readier they are to break with the irresponsible behaviour assigned to them and, freeing themselves from the internalized limits (those which may make a 50-year-old feel 'too young reasonably to aspire to a position or an honour'), do not hesitate to push forward, 'leap-frog' and 'take the escalator' to precipitate their predecessors fall into the past, the outdated, in short, social death. But they have no chance of winning the struggles over the limits which break out between the age-groups when the sense of the limits is lost, unless they manage to impose a new definition of the socially complete person, including in it characteristics normally (i.e., in terms of the prevailing classificatory principle) associated with youth (enthusiasm, energy and so on) or characteristics that can supplant the virtues normally associated with adulthood.

In short, what individuals and groups invest in the particular meaning they give to common classificatory systems by the use they make of them is infinitely more than their 'interest' in the usual sense of the term, it is their whole social being, everything which defines their own idea of themselves, the primordial, tacit contract whereby they define 'us' as opposed to 'them', 'other people', and which is the basis of the exclusions ('not for the likes of us') and inclusions they perform among the characteristics produced by the common classificatory system.

Social psychologists have observed that any division of a population into two groups, however arbitrary, induces discriminatory behaviour favourable to members of the agents' own group and hostile to members of the other group, even if it has adverse effects for the former group. 19 More generally, they describe under the term 'category differentiation' the operations whereby agents construct their perception of reality, in particular the process of accentuating differences vis-à-vis 'outsiders' (dissimilation) and reinforcing similarities with insiders (assimilation). 20 Similarly, studies of racism have shown that whenever different groups are juxtaposed, a definition of the approved, valorized behaviour tends to be contrasted with the despised, rejected behaviour of the other group. 21 Social identity lies in difference, and difference is asserted against what is closest, which represents the greatest threat. Analysis of stereotyping, the propensity to assume a correspondence between membership of a category (e.g., Nordic or Mediterranean, Western or Oriental) and possession of a particular property, so that knowledge of a person's category strongly influences judgements of him, is in line with analysis that thus sort of social stereotyping in which all the members of a social formation tend to concur in attributing certain properties to members of the different social classes (see appendix 4).

The fact that, in their relationship to the dominant classes, the dominated classes attribute to themselves strength in the sense of labour power and fighting strength—physical strength and also strength of character, courage, manliness—does not prevent the dominant groups from similarly conceiving the relationship in terms of the scheme strong/weak; but they reduce the strength which the dominated (or the young, or women) ascribe to themselves to brute strength, passion and instinct, a blind, unpredictable force of nature, the unreasoning violence of desire, and they attribute to themselves spiritual and intellectual strength, a self-control that predisposes them to control others, a strength of soul or spirit which allows them to conceive their relationship to the dominated—the 'masses', women, the young—as that of the soul to the body, understanding to sensibility, culture to nature.

The Classification Struggle

Principles of division, inextricably logical and sociological, function within and for the purposes of the struggle between social groups; in producing concepts, they produce groups, the very groups which produce the principles and the groups against which they are produced. What is at stake in the struggles about the meaning of the social world is power over the classificatory schemes and systems which are the basis of the representations of the groups and therefore of their mobilization and demobilization: the evocative power of an utterance which puts things in a different light (as happens, for example, when a single word, such as 'paternalism', changes the whole experience of a social relationship) or which modifies the schemes of perception, shows something else, other properties, previously unnoticed or relegated to the background (such as common interests hitherto masked by ethnic or national differences); a separative power, a distinction, divisus, disentio, drawing discrete units out of indivisible continuity, difference out of the undifferentiated.
Only in and through the struggle do the internalized limits become boundaries, barriers that have to be moved. And indeed, the system of classificatory schemes is constituted as an objectified, institutionalized system of classification only when it has ceased to function as a sense of limits so that the guardians of the established order must enunciate, systematize and codify the principles of production of that order, both real and represented, so as to defend them against heresy; in short, they must constitute the doxa as orthodoxy. Official systems of classification, such as the theory of the three orders, do explicitly and systematically what the classificatory schemes did tacitly and practically. Attributes, in the sense of predicates, thereby become attributions, powers, capacities, privileges, prerogatives, attributed to the holder of a post, so that war is no longer what the warrior does, but the officium, the specific function, the raison d'être, of the bellator. Classificatory discretion, like law, freezes a certain state of the power relations which it aims to fix forever by enunciating and codifying it. The classificatory system as a principle of logical and political division only exists and functions because it reproduces, in a transfigured form, in the symbolic logic of differential gaps, i.e., of discontinuity, the generally gradual and continuous differences which structure the established order; and it makes its own, that is, specifically symbolic, contribution to the maintenance of that order only because it has the specifically symbolic power to make people see and believe which is given by the imposition of mental structures.

Systems of classification would not be such a decisive object of struggle if they did not contribute to the existence of classes by enhancing the efficacy of the objective mechanisms with the reinforcement supplied by representations structured in accordance with the classification. The imposition of a recognized name is an act of recognition of full social existence which transmutes the thing named. It no longer exists merely de facto, as a tolerated, illegal or illegitimate practice, but becomes a social function, i.e., a mandate, a mission (Beruf), a task, a role—all words which express the difference between authorized activity, which is assigned to an individual or group by tacit or explicit delegation, and mere usurpation, which creates a 'state of affairs' awaiting institutionalization. But the specific effect of 'collective representations', which, contrary to what the Durkheimian connotations might suggest, may be the product of the application of the same scheme of perception or a common system of classification while still being subject to antagonistic social uses, is most clearly seen when the word precedes the thing, as with voluntary associations that turn into recognized professions or corporate defence groups (such as the trade union of the 'cadres'), which progressively impose the representation of their existence and their unity, both on their own members and on other groups.

A group's presence or absence in the official classification depends on its capacity to get itself recognized, to get itself noticed and admitted, and so to win a place in the social order. It thus escapes from the shadowy existence of the 'nameless crafts' of which Emile Benveniste speaks: business in antiquity and the Middle Ages, or illegitimate activities, such as those of the modern healer (formerly called an 'empiric'), bone-setter or prostitute. The fate of groups is bound up with the words that designate them: the power to impose recognition depends on the capacity to mobilize around a name, 'proletariat', 'working class', 'cadre', etc., to appropriate a common name and to commune in a proper name, and so to mobilize the union that makes them strong, around the unifying power of a word.22

In fact, the order of words never exactly reproduces the order of things. It is the relative independence of the structure of the system of classifying, classified words (within which the distinct value of each particular label is defined) in relation to the structure of the distribution of capital, and more precisely, it is the time-lag (partly resulting from the inertia inherent in classifying systems as quasi-legal institutions sanctioning a state of a power relation) between changes in jobs, linked to changes in the productive apparatus, and changes in titles, which creates the space for symbolic strategies aimed at exploiting the discrepancies between the nominal and the real, appropriating words so as to get the things they designate, or appropriating things while waiting to get the words that sanction them; exercising responsibilities without having entitlement to do so, in order to acquire the right to claim the legitimate titles, or, conversely, declining the material advantages associated with devalued titles so as to avoid losing the symbolic advantages bestowed by more prestigious labels or, at least, vaguer and more manipulable ones; donning the most flattering of the available insignia, verging on impropriety if need be—like the potters who call themselves 'art craftsmen', or technicians who claim to be engineers—or inventing new labels, like physiotherapists (kinésithérapeutes) who count on this new title to separate them from mere masseurs and bring them closer to doctors. All these strategies, like all processes of competition, a paper-chase aimed at ensuring constant distinctive gaps, tend to produce a steady inflation of titles—restrained by the inertia of the institutionalized taxonomies (collective agreements, salary scales etc.)—to which legal guarantees are attached. The negotiations between antagonistic interest groups, which arise from the establishment of collective agreements and which concern, inseparably, the tasks entailed by a given job, the properties required of its occupants (e.g., diplomas) and the corresponding advantages, both material and symbolic (the name), are an institutionalized, theatrical version of the incessant struggles over the classifications which help to produce the classes, although these classifications are the product of the struggles between the classes and depend on the power relations between them.
The Reality of Representation and the Representation of Reality

The classifying subjects who classify the properties and practices of others, or their own, are also classifiable objects which classify themselves (in the eyes of others) by appropriating practices and properties that are already classified (as vulgar or distinguished, high or low, heavy or light etc.—in other words, in the last analysis, as popular or bourgeois) according to their probable distribution between groups that are themselves classified. The most classifying and best classified of these properties are, of course, those which are overtly designated to function as signs of distinction or marks of infamy, stigmata, especially the names and titles expressing class membership whose intersection defines social identity at any given time—the name of a nation, a region, an ethnic group, a family name, the name of an occupation, an educational qualification, honorific titles and so on. Those who classify themselves or others, by appropriating or classifying practices or properties that are classified and classifying, cannot be unaware that, through distinctive objects or practices in which their 'powers' are expressed and which, being appropriated by and appropriate to classes, classify those who appropriate them, they classify themselves in the eyes of other classifying (but also classifiable) subjects, endowed with classificatory schemes analogous to those which enable them more or less adequately to anticipate their own classification.

Social subjects comprehend the social world which comprehends them. This means that they cannot be characterized simply in terms of material properties, starting with the body, which can be counted and measured like any other object in the physical world. In fact, each of these properties, be it the height or volume of the body or the extent of landed property, when perceived and appreciated in relation to other properties of the same class by agents equipped with socially constituted schemes of perception and appreciation, functions as a symbolic property. It is therefore necessary to move beyond the opposition between a 'social physics'—which uses statistics in objectivist fashion to establish distributions (in both the statistical and economic senses), quantified expressions of the differential appropriation of a finite quantity of social energy by a large number of competing individuals, identified through 'objective indicators'—and a 'social semiology' which seeks to decipher meanings and bring to light the cognitive operations whereby agents produce and decipher them. We have to refuse the dichotomy between, on the one hand, the aim of arriving at an objective 'reality', 'independent of individual consciousnesses and wills', by breaking with common representations of the social world (Durkheim's 'pre-notions'), and of uncovering 'laws'—that is, significant (in the sense of non-random) relationships between distributions—and, on the other hand, the aim of grasping, not 'reality', but agents' representations of it, which are the whole 'reality' of a social world conceived 'as will and representation'.

In short, social science does not have to choose between that form of social physics, represented by Durkheim—who agrees with social semiology in acknowledging that one can only know 'reality' by applying logical instruments of classification—and the idealist semiology which, undertaking to construct 'an account of accounts', as Harold Garfinkel puts it, can do no more than record the recordings of a social world which is ultimately no more than the product of mental, i.e., linguistic, structures. What we have to do is to bring into the science of scarcity, and of competition for scarce goods, the practical knowledge which the agents obtain for themselves by producing—on the basis of their experience of the distributions, itself dependent on their position in the distributions—divisions and classifications which are no less objective than those of the balance-sheets of social physics. In other words, we have to move beyond the opposition between objectivist theories which identify the social classes (but also the sex or age classes) with discrete groups, simple countable populations separated by boundaries objectively drawn in reality, and subjectivist (or marginalist) theories which reduce the 'social order' to a sort of collective classification obtained by aggregating the individual classifications or, more precisely, the individual strategies, classified and classifying, through which agents class themselves and others.  

One only has to bear in mind that goods are converted into distinctive signs, which may be signs of distinction but also of vulgarities, as soon as they are perceived relationally, to see that the representation which individuals and groups inevitably project through their practices and properties is an integral part of social reality. A class is defined as much by its being-perceived as by its being, by its consumption—which need not be conspicuous in order to be symbolic—as much as by its position in the relations of production (even if it is true that the latter governs the former). The Berkeleyan—i.e., petit-bourgeois—vision which reduces social being to perceived being, to seeming, and which, forgetting that there is no need to give theatrical performances (représentations) in order to be the object of mental representations, reduces the social world to the sum of the (mental) representations which the various groups have of the theatrical performances put on by the other groups, has the virtue of insisting on the relatively autonomy of the logic of symbolic representations with respect to the material determinants of socio-economic condition. The individual or collective classification struggles aimed at transforming the categories of perception and appreciation of the social world and, through this, the social world itself, are indeed a forgotten dimension of the class struggle. But one only has to realize that the classificatory schemes which underlie agents' practical relationship to their condition and the representation they have of it are themselves the product of that
condition, in order to see the limits of this autonomy. Position in the classification struggle depends on position in the class structure; and social subjects—including intellectuals, who are not those best placed to grasp that which defines the limits of their thought of the social world, that is, the illusion of the absence of limits—are perhaps never less likely to transcend 'the limits of their minds' than in the representation they have and give of their position, which defines those limits.