

`CLASS' AS METAPHOR

On the unreflexive transformation of a concept into an object*

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ABSTRACT

Some authors consider classes as *communities* (Schumpeter, Sorokin) or groupings of *families* (Erikson 1984). Others consider them as *conditions* (Dahrendorf 1959; Runciman 1969), positions, or *roles* (Gallino 1987) assumed in society. Such theoretical uncertainty is followed by a similarly uncertain empirical classification: Poulantzas (1973) says that society is divided in three classes; Roemer (1982) mentions five classes; Wright (1985, 120) draws a typology of twelve positions of class. Why this confusion? Probably because classes aren't, in first instance, ostensible objects but concepts, i.e. culturally-and-mutually-constructed cognitive schemas. In order to see classes scientists have to agree about the culturally framed discourse to use. But at the moment this hasn't happened yet. This seems the main cause of the endless conflict in the debate on social stratification.

Further the essay documents as 'class', before being scientific construct, was a 'folk category'. From ordinary language 'class' reaches the social sciences, passing through the natural sciences. Scientists would have done anything more than specialize non-scientific linguistic uses. In this way common-sense prejudices and stereotypes, which distinguished the concepts of 'class' in ordinary language, would have filtered into the sciences.

1. INTRODUCTION

The essay aims to provide argumentation to the opinion that 'class' is not, in first instance, an object but a concept - a particular type of concept, without an empirical referent. The term 'class' does not name a thing as the concepts of "tree", "hand" or "stone" can. Contrary to realistic conceptions, 'class' seems a totally cultural concept, and it exists in relation to a constellation of shared meanings <D'Andrade 1984>. If that is the case, then classes would not have their own life, would not be ostensible facts or things that observers discover, but concepts that they construct.

2. CONCEPTS AND CLASSIFICATIONS

2.1 A 'concept' can be defined as a cutting done by an observer on a whole of experiences. The cutting is done by considering a certain number of experiences totally, unifying for instance visual and tactile sensations in the concept of 'table', or some moods in the concept of 'anger'. The grouping of experiences in a concept is an operation which,

«isn't suggested in coercive way by intrinsic qualities of our sensations (or of the 'things as such', as scholastic philosophers thought), but depends in a wide amount on the practical necessities of a certain man, group, society, etc.» <Marradi 1980, 10>

Language, then, does not seem to refer directly to the real world or to the metaphysical one. No direct or natural connections seem to exist between a linguistic expression (the term) and the reference (extra-linguistic reality). Nor does a natural relation seem to exist between a concept and the

reference, itself, or between the concept and the respective term. The connection between the linguistic expression and the thing appears to be for the most part conventional, intersubjectively built, and cultural. But often we forget this. We consider it obvious. We overlook the social action we use to teach children so that they *learn* to associate the three distinct planes (concept, term, thing) as if they were the same.

2.2 In addition to concepts, Marradi <1990> asserts classifications, taxonomies and typologies are mental operations. Furthermore even the activity of classifying which appears natural to the human mind nowadays, is not an invariable trait of human reasoning. Students of oral cultures <Luria 1974; Goody & Watt 1963; Goody 1977>, noticed the absence of categorical or abstract classifications in oral-cultured populations and the *situational* characteristic of their members' reasoning. In Luria's experiments illiterate people identify concrete entities in abstract objects such as geometrical figures. A circle is called plate, sieve, clock or moon. In a square they see a door, a house, a mirror, etc. They do not seem able to give *definitions* of the observed objects, but they describe aspects of such objects. They do not set up *lists*, *rolls*, or anything else just because the information held in a list is information removed from the concrete context, singular and unrepeatable, where they have been gathered, and, through an *abstraction* process, put in a context (the list in a book) far from the original one: terms such as Italian doctors, qualified workers, industrial executives convey

transituational information. Lists and rolls only appear with the writing.

The first rudimentary classifications, then, seem to rise in a precise moment of human history - and not from scientists, as one may believe, but from the influence of common social actors as *technai* people (the breeder, the hunter, the fisherman, the slaughterer) <Vegetti 1979, 18>. These professional figures are the ones who open the way to the reifying distance of *technai*, to the elaboration of the first schemes which we would call taxonomical¹ by Aristotle, and possibly to the birth of modern science. In ancient Greek societies there do not seem to be terms indicating the *activity* of classifying as we mean it nowadays <see Gobo 1993>.

3. DISCOURSE AS ACTIVITIES CONSTITUTIVE OF OBJECTS

3.1 Mehan et al. <1986, 81-86> has proposed a triple division of objects: universally perceivable objects (e.g. stone, hand, etc.), partially cultural objects (e.g. infective diseases) and entirely cultural objects. The latter ones cannot exist independently of society members' actions. They are concepts which obtain life *only* through a complex of agreements shared and acknowledged by members/observers, a complex of meanings. Social institutions (marriage, divorce, etc.), psychiatric diseases (schizophrenia, dementia, psychoses, etc.), motivations, soul, intelligence, etc., would all belong to this class. Even if this triple classification does not seem completely satisfactory <Gobo 1993> it seems useful to underline the entirely cultural or

conventional nature of the concepts of terms used in sociologies such as `class', `conflict', `status', `integration', `role', etc. Talking, for example, about the phenomenon described as the object `collective movements', Melucci maintains that to it «is imposed in a fictitious way a sociological unity and a real consistence, which instead belong to the observer's presuppositions.» <1989, 10>

Social phenomena are primarily ideas (Hayek 1949, Jarvie 1972). Besides many sociological concepts seem "particular" metaphors, because while traditional metaphors are substitutions of a proper term with a transposition of images (`the sea howls' -as if it was a living being-; `he's gone' -as if the dead had left-; `to devour a book' -as if it was eaten-), many sociological concepts seem *only* figurative concepts because they don't have a proper term. Terms like `society', `system', `class', `elite', `organization', `culture', `power', `prestige', require a training or a co-ordination (Jarvie 1972, 94) before we can use them -i.e. a series of cultural instructions which allow us to see them as objects. Otherwise, they could not be mutually-recognized outside the communicative code in which the terms are used. Likewise, talking about the origin of the concept of `economy' Dumont (1977) states:

"It should be obvious that there is nothing like an economy out there, unless and until men construct such an object. Once it has been built, we are able to descry everywhere in some measure more or less corresponding aspects that we should in all rigor call `quasi-economic' or `would-be economic'. (...) Now, if the object -`the economy'- is a construct, and if the particular discipline that constructs it cannot tell us how it does it -if it cannot, that is, give us the essence of economics, the basic *presupposition(s)* on which it was built up- then we should find it in the *relation between economic thought and the global ideology,*" <ibi 24,> (which produced this new concept). (...)

After all... economics as science did not develop in a vacuum but in a field where unscientific, common-sense representations were already in existence. (...) In other words, the scientific object was not easy to construct, and the vagaries of its constructors show that it was not merely a matter of registering an externally given datum (... but a) mental constitution of modern man..." <ibi, 26>

4. THE MAKING OF THE CONCEPTS OF 'CLASS' IN ORDINARY LANGUAGES

After having pointed out the constitutive activity of discourse and suggested the idea that 'class' seems a entirely cultural thing only, I document where and how these concepts and thing arise in ordinary languages.

In another place <see Gobo 1993> I documented more extensively the genesis and develop, through the centuries, of the concepts of 'class'. Contemporary glottological research identifies the Etruscan derivation of the term 'class'. *Classis* is originally indicative of the hoplite phalanx, i.e. the army, in Rome, after the Etruscans' arrival. Subsequently, in VI century B.C., the term assumes a juridical sense too. In the imperial age the military and juridical meanings are extended to another social sphere: the school. Cicero, Horace, Apuleio, Plautus, Gellius, Quintilian use the term with a metaphorical meaning. In any case, since the first century B.C., in contrast with the term 'coetus', which meant a tumultuous crowd of people, 'classis'

«usually meant a whole of people, but a whole formed not occasionally or chaotically, rather according to pre-arranged criteria and for a certain aim, being it political or military.» <De Mauro 1958, 312>

Despite the term 'class' assuming, through the centuries, very different and incommensurate meanings, we can notice a constant

in the disparate uses which are made of this word in Europe. This constant is fixed upon to 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,

«all the protagonists of the linguistic history of `class', made use of this word every time there was a problem of rearrangement, of organization, so the notion of order which dominates the uses of *classis* in remote latinity endures still in modern times.» <ibi, 313>

5. FROM DISCOURSE OF ORDINARY LANGUAGE TO DISCOURSE OF SCIENTIFIC LANGUAGE

Now I document as the concept of `class' became a metaphor on the basis of the analogy between the military order and social one. I outline the main steps whom conducted in the science to transform a concept, used initially to point out the etruscan hoplite phalanx, in a metaphor used to classify members of society. The term, belonging to ordinary language and spread out in different environments of social interactions <Gobo 1993>, enter in the science probably through the botanic.

5.1 Controversies into botanic

The Linnaeus' *Systema Naturae* <1735> divided the vegetable kingdom into 24 classes. Il botanic concept arise within common-sense anthropocentric vision of the animal and vegetable world that conceived nature as an ordered `kingdom', with its `people',

its `races', its `families'. Paradoxically just this vision was fading away from philosophy, arts, literature because considered old. Therefore, it seems interesting to notice the analogical characteristic of the term `kingdom' used by Linnaeus. The reference to monarchy instead of republic, a political form rarely present in Europe in the first half of 1700's), indicates the common-sense foundations of the sciences. In the naturalistic science the use of the term `class' seems driven by a politically conservative conception of reality. Paradoxically, the same term will be used, in the following century, with revolutionary intent.

Foucault <1966, 150-179> has well documented the controversy that opposes Linnaeus against Buffon, Adanson, Bonnet. As we know the linnaean idea won and only with Darwin, a century later, prevailed the idea of conventionality of classifications. Buffon maintains that our general ideas nothing really exists in nature except *individuals*, and since genera, orders, and *classes* exist only scientist's imagination. And Bonnet (1794) states that the divisions into species and classes "are purely nominal", depending on what we want to accomplish with them; they represent no more than "means relative to our needs and to the limitations of our knowledge"» <quoted in Foucault 1966, 147>. The Linnaeus' *creationism* conceives the reality as an given and self-evident object, provided with a fixed and immutable inner order of its own, assigned by a creator who preforms the hierarchic levels of a reality that is substantially unique. So

«while the ontological and epistemological dimensions are regularly mingled, the axiological one is often added: Linnaeus'

taxonomy is also a hierarchy of degrees of perfection, topped by Man» <Marradi 1990, 149>

Linnaeus seems to determine a turning point in the use of the term *classis-classe*, giving to it a new vitality. So the term 'class', already used in the ordinary language, finds full legitimation for introduction in subjects of study which attend to social science just because it was used in the natural sciences. The fashion of that time dictates that

«everything must be *naturel*, even the complex human society; everything must be *scientifique*, even the study of man. (...) everything must have the *air scientifique*: the ideals of the beautiful words should be replaced with a new rethoric, that of *mots scientifiques*, which everyone must understand. Who answers these ideals are the *Philosophes*: and of the three sects of which the formations consist, beyond the *Encyclopédistes* and the *Patriotes*, the third is the most adequate, the one of the *Economistes*.» <De Mauro 1958, 316>

5.2 Economics

Leader of the *Economistes* is Quesnay. Reflecting on the organicistic foundation which baptize social sciences and most of all on their inferiority complex towards natural sciences, maybe we can understand the reasons of such emulation of the term. It recalls scientificity and non-evaluation which is supposed to distinguish the naturalistic systematics.

The term 'class' is not included in the *Encyclopedie* of Diderot (the first volume was published in 1751) even though two of the main collaborators, Quesnay and Turgot, use the term in their essays which are part in some items of the *Encyclopedie*. According to Benenson <1987, 22-25> the genesis of the concept of 'class' in Quesnay's thought follows four phases: in the

preparation of entries 'landowners' (January 1756) and 'wheat' (November 1757) he used the word 'state'; in entries 'men' and 'taxation' (1757) he abandons that term, simultaneously replacing it with 'classes'. In the entry 'men' there are two classes, landowners and hand-manufactures; in the entry 'taxation' four income categories are referred to as classes. We can notice the arbitrariness, and then construction, of such division. At the end of the *Tableau Economiques* (December 1758), class becomes a concept which combines an economic function with an income category. Quesnay applies to the distribution of wealth the analogy of the circulation of blood based on his medical experience. Social life, like the human body, is to Quesnay a large organism guided by universal principles which reflect the natural order of Providence. A theological foundation seems to be at the basis of making of economy as category independent from politics. As Schumpeter observes, we are in harmony with scholastic philosophy: within a theological order, man as free actor is not parted from nature.

5.3 At the dawning of social sciences: Saint-Simon

Saint-Simon <1760-1825> and, after him, his followers, seem to give a decisive impulse to achieve a new concept of 'class'. After 1822, in the final phases of the development of his doctrine, the author takes to the extreme the consequences of the

social implications of an idea which he had found for the first time in the work of physiologist Bichat (1771-1892)².

The new philosopher of society, convinced that physiology is the only solid basis on which a social theory can be built, constructs many schemes of social classification, until he reaches three mutually exclusive natural classes: the rational ability (the brain) is the fulcrum of the activity of scientists who have the task to discover the positive laws and express them as a guide for social actors; the motor ability of Bichat is transformed into the industrial class (managers and manufacturers); the third class, corresponding to the sensible man of Bichat, is made of artists, poets, religious leaders, ethic teachers, etc., who had the task of improving the morals of society.

The reemergence of the word bourgeois is due to Saint-Simon. The use of that term during the ancient regime was very common, but with the French Revolution it dropped into disuse <Furbank, 1985, 27>; Saint-Simon is among those who rescued this word. In his opinion the Revolution did not succeed in its plans (one of which was to elevate the condition of workers), because it was betrayed by a group made up of Girondistes, Jacobins and Bonapartistes, on whom workers relied instead of fighting in person 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*, *avocat*, metaphysicians, 'the Bonapartist feudality', or 'the intermediate class' - before, in 1823, settling upon the name '*bourgeois*'³.» <ibi, 26>

Even if the uncertainty seems situated on the terminological level, that is a conventional name labelled on a self-evident thing, I think this uncertainty as located overall at the level of the thing itself. While the French liberal thinkers identify the middle-class with the majority of the nation (the historian Thierry compares the middle-class to the whole of all workers), Saint-Simon conceives it as that small group thus changing an obsolete and ambiguous term and giving it new meanings. After his death Saintsimonians propagate the master's idea. From 1830 to 1831, they endeavor to impose the Saintsimonian definition of 'bourgeois', meaning a small group of exploiters, notwithstanding the completely different definition used by the liberals. In a few years the Saintsimonian definition gets the upper hand and the term bourgeois undergoes a third change of meaning. In addition, the Saintsimonians expand the valuative definition applied to the term by their master making the word 'bourgeois' even more of a disparaging expression.

5.4 The French political essay

In XVIII century the Enlightenment, naturalist and equalitarian ideology seems faded and the term 'class', that with it had new strength, faces an alternative: to be abandoned or transformed. The fascination of scientific ideology, that the new century inherited from the previous one, and that the word 'class' embodied seems very strong, so the second solution win out. And while in botanic it keeps its eighteenth century meaning, in politics and human sciences it assumes a conflictual

meaning which had been extraneous to it until that moment. The intensional property `conflict' attaches to the previous concept of class, transforming it. The main scholarly seems to be Mably <1770>, Ricardo (Saint-Simon's contemporaneous), Granier de Cassagnac <1838>, La Mennais and Guizot, but they specialize uses already present in ordinary language <see Gobo 1993>. Guizot conceives classes as historical and most of all political realities, contrary to Hegelian Stände, just historical and juridical realities. Once again, used to a revolutionary idea bound to `classes', may be surprised to find that it is also a conservative author who inaugurated a new definition (conflictual), next to the botanical one (organic and harmonic) that still exists.

5.5 Marx's conversion

«One can date reasonably precisely the moment at which Marx adopted the French term `bourgeois'. It occurred in the last months of 1843, the time of his arrival in Paris and his first encounter with French workers' associations - the time, indeed, when he formulated his whole characteristic `class' terminology: `bourgeois', `proletariat', and `class' itself.» <Furbank 1985, 33>

In the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* <1843, summer>, Marx still uses the term *stand* (rank) as Hegel used it. But just five months later, in the draft of the *Introduction* of a planned revision of the same *Critique* (called *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction*), he inserts the three new terms. Between the two moments Marx has been in Paris (november, 1843) and encountered the activity of

socialist, fourierist, proudhonian groups. This visit to the French capital and the fulguration that Marx has when he comes into contact with French workers are probable reasons for the sudden modification of the author's language⁴. We can say that the Marx who arrived from Germany is not the same Marx influenced by his French experience: even if physically they still are the same persons, cognitively they seem to be two different persons.⁵ However the three terms ('bourgeois', 'proletariat' and 'class') are French and precisely of saintsimonian derivation. Such influence seems also to be implied because Marx always uses the French term *bourgeois* instead of the German *bürgerlich*, that merely means civil or civic, very similar to its root, *bürger*, which means citizen or town-resident.

Saint-Simon's influence on the 25-years old German seems considerable, not only directly through writings, but even through the ideas that between 1830 and 1840 are greatly expanded even outside intellectual settings. Many Saintsimonian ideas penetrate into the programs of socialist parties as slogans <see Manuel 1962>.

5.6 Some of cognitive schemas in Marx's thought

The elements of contact with Saint-Simon's thought, even if not always of automatic influence, seem various. Sketching a picture, necessarily roughly and schematic, I stress a number of similarities.

The saintsimonian conception (also Babeuf's one, Guizot's, etc.) of society divided in classes penetrates the reflections of

the German; however different Marx's analysis of historical process may be (Marx conceives classes in an evolutionary way, while for Saint-Simon they are natural and permanent), their position seem similar about the type of society that would emerge from the last class conflict. In such society, power conflict among human beings would cease.

Both seem to consider aggression a temporary, rather than permanent, characteristic of the humans, an historical manifestation that would disappear with change in the actual society. Humans are by nature good, and humanity is naturally induced toward an universal association. This metaphysical and naturalistic foundation of goodness belongs to Quesnay before Marx and Saint-Simon.

Marx, assimilating Saint-Simon's and other French authors' radical positions, seems to puts the political and social project before analysis (as Quesnay also does). Emancipator intent leads his theory and his

"economical prospect is used to give a solid contour, a decisive character to what was already there.» <Dumont 1977, 114>

within a precise philosophy of history; Marx seems first a revolutionary, then a scientist. To this moral engagement he remains tied all his life. Marx, rejecting the concrete idea of a utopia ("the man who draws a program for the future is a reactionary" he wrote) in the *Critique* traces a distinction between what is human and what is not, between authentic and non-authentic needs, between needs and capacities, resorting to utopian thought.

Saint-Simon foresees that in the 'good society' government's action and command's function would be greatly reduced until they become nearly null. Also in Marx's idea, the dictatorship of proletariat, the last configuration of the State, would be surmounted.

Marx seems very attracted and impressed by the attacks of Saintsimonians on bourgeois habits; the marxist irony of bourgeois morals draws a lot from Saintsimonians' and Fourier's theses <Manuel 1962, 202>. Even though they do not know the Hegelian idea of alienation, the latter describe many of symptoms of the bourgeois spiritual illness which Marx discusses about ten years later.

Saintsimonians lead a bold attack against Malthus and the liberal economists with a violence unknown to their master (who was an admirer of Say and Dunoyer) reporting the miserable condition to which proletariat is condemned for the actual distribution of property. And we well know how such themes became the *leit-motive* of Marxist thought.

Saint-Simon recovers a defamatory meaning of the term 'bourgeois'. Marx, in turn, takes possession of it amplifying (as Saintsimonians do before him) the insulting meaning of the expression. Karl Schurz, who meets Marx at the end of the 1840's before becoming U.S. senator, writes:

«I remember most distinctly the cutting disdain with which he pronounced the word bourgeois: and as a bourgeois - that is, as a detestable example of the deepest mental and moral degeneracy - he denounced everyone who dared oppose his opinions.» <Schurz 1906, 138 quoted in Furbank 1985, 34>

That attitude is also very common among artists and writers of that time. At the beginning of the 1840's, Flaubert conceives some of his most famous works, attacking with vehemence bourgeois morals, defaming bourgeois psychology.

The young Marx imitates Saint-Simon's language taking from it

«a dictionary (social contradiction, industry, organization, etc.) that replaces the previous one (man, generic being in himself, objective and subjective, etc.)» <Santucci 1979: 16>.

Also, the marxist emphasis of "each according to his capacity" recalls the Saintsimonian slogan that founds the new order on the fact that each person has a natural position of his own.

Marx conceptualizes economy, as a totality and society as a system of interdependent relations. He approves of Quesnay's attempt to represent the whole process of the capital production and considers it as the most important intuition that economics produced up to that time.

Marx is engaged in the construction of an economic-social thought of scientific kind and as such his language is full of terms in use in the natural sciences (society's anatomy, discover, demonstrate, etc.). According to the ideology of natural sciences, Marx thinks that is possible to do neutral and objective analysis of social relations.

His analysis goes together with a *realistic* epistemology of the social world. To Marx classes exist, they are not a mere heuristic expedient only. They can be pointed out in the same way as physical objects because they are under everybody's eyes. Dahrendorf insists on the point that, in Marxist theory, classes

are a heuristic notion, a logical instrument, a way to explain the social change. But Marx does not seem to be conscious of or to agree with the metaphorical nature of the concept. Marx seems convinced that

«The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles». <Marx 1848, 55>

And he argues that the task of science is to discover the relations between essence and appearance of a phenomenon. If they were direct and evident, science would be unnecessary.

5.7 The concept of 'class' in Marx

After having traced some common-sense, scientific, and extra-scientific foundations in the stereotypes and prejudices expressed by Marx, we can begin to examine the details of his concept of class. It is known that the third volume of the *Capital* provided for a chapter on 'classes' never finished for the author's death. Only some initial phrases of it exist

«Considering the enormous importance of the concept of class in marxist doctrine, it is surprising that in his and Engels' works we never find a definition of this concept, constantly used by them.» <Ossowsky 1963, 81>

The term 'class' in Marx's works has changing connotations and it is anything but clear. He defines distinct groups at times in a political way, at times in an economic way, at times in a psychological way introducing the variable 'class-consciousness'. Maybe the semantic differences regarding the term 'class' are not important to Marx, because he projected further social development making them obsolete. In that context, he would have given a new definition of classes based not on of an ordinal criterion of

the income (since in this way we could get a variety of classes) but on their role in the production process. On the grounds, then, of relations of domination, classes change from merely economic entities (as they are in Quesnay's theories) to political entities (as in Guizot). In political terms just two classes exist: proletariat and bourgeoisie, which come from the three big social classes of modern society: workmen, capitalists and landowners.

«Marx as revolutionary, economist and sociologist, thus inherits all three fundamental ways to conceive the class's structure which we find in the history of European thought: dichotomic scheme, gradation scheme and functional scheme. At the same time he introduces a fourth, peculiar way to conceive this structure: through the crossing of two or three dichotomic divisions. This is the way that became for us the classic marxist scheme, although this is not the scheme Marx uses in the reflections about the concept of class made in the last pages of his main work.» <ibi, 93>

In reality there are other classes like the middle classes, and the sub proletariat, but over time they necessarily join one of the two classes.

«While in Marx as revolutionary prevails the dichotomic conception of social structure, in Marx as theorist, close to the tripartite scheme, with the middle class between the two opposing classes, there sometimes appears a scheme that forms a scientific heritage of bourgeois economy». <ibi, 90>

Marx's cultural model, after the Parisian experience, seems deeply led by the revolutionary mission to emancipate exploited people so that its aim is to expand the consciousness of such people, and to make them *think of themselves* as class united by particular characteristics, having a unity of intentions and convincing itself to liberate not just of itself, but of all humanity.

«The task Marx is concerned with when speaking of `classes' is not that of identifying `classes' but that of bringing `classes' into being.» <Furbank 1985, 21>

Behind the intent to bring to consciousness to something supposed already to exist, seems to hide an attempt (not so intentional as Furbank seems to think) to create ex-novo something that does not yet exist, but that could come to exist in the moment that people recognize it. Thus, Marx moved by political intent (as Saint-Simon, Flaubert, and other writers of that time) is changing some metaphors in concrete and self-evident entities. A further testimony of the emotional connotation of the concept of `class' can be found in the *Introduction* and in the *On the Jewish Question* published in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* <1844> where he frankly asserts his new vision of the world. The aim is not formal political emancipation, which French revolution had already realized, but human emancipation. Humans don't have to be only formally free but completely free. Human emancipation presupposes negation of human self-alienation, and creation of a substantially new order of society. But who could be the emancipator subject? Marx seems to answer: the proletariat, seen not as a simple class; but as

«a sphere which has a universal character by its universal suffering and claims no particular rights because no particular wrong, but wrong, generally, is perpetrated against it; which can no longer invoke a historical but only a human title... can only emancipate itself by emancipating itself, thereby the complete re-winning of man.» <Marx 1844, quoted in Furbank 1985, 47>

To Marx no revolution is possible without a class offering itself as the *general* representative of all dissatisfied people. Thus, in Marx, paradoxically, there is a transformation of the

concept class in non-classiest terms, just as French workers intended it until 1848 <Sewell 1980, 427-3>: the particular (proletarian class) becomes the general (all humanity). The proletariat then would be a class that *is not* a... class. Even the supposed scientificness of such concept is still confused; in natural sciences it is assumed that it's not possible to go from one class to another. However, to Marx (through consciousness raising processes), this is possible. But Marx makes another step; he transforms class in a species: the human species.

6. `CLASS' AS INTERACTIONAL METAPHOR AND RHETORICAL TOOL

6.1 Each concept is abstract. To talk about *concrete* concept appears improper. It would be better to say that concepts are differentiated by the things they index and by their degree of inner generality. Concepts can be classified along a `scale of generality' <Marradi 1980, 14-17>. Logically speaking between the concept of `class' and the concepts of `worker', `employer', `contractor', `proletarian', `poor', `man', `woman' there is no continuum or semantic link. On their scales of generality to the lower level of concept of `class' we could meet, for example, the concept of `political class', and at an even lower level the concept, for example, of `american political class'. But going up or down the levels we shall never meet the concepts `worker', `master', etc. The connection between the concept of `class' and the other concepts seems, once again, merely cultural.

Resuming my earlier discussion, class thus becomes a concept indexing an entirely cultural object⁶, a concept whose referent does not exist independent from naming ('class in itself' as Marx says distinguishing it from the 'class for itself'), but *is constituted* through both the concept and the members' practices. Classes and strata seem to be social representations, images which people project on the other people (Jarvie 1972, 126). Such projections differentiate only according to the utterer of the term, to her/his aims, and to the circumstances of the discourse⁷. For example, in many countries fees for transports, shows, social services, etc. are not equal for all. Pensioners, children, soldiers and conscious objectors pay reduced prices. But this is rarely cited as an inequality. If one dares to complaint about this, s/he gets a series of accounts whose aim is to persuade her/him (rethoric). Yet, the different treatment of various group of people seems plain and self-evident. The question remains: what makes the event or the action of 'fee reduction' seen not to be a social inequality? In accordance to a theory constitutive of discourses, we can answer: a complex of culturally-framed concepts, conventions and practices, which present the inequality of 'fee reduction' as a small compensation in direction of a larger equality.

Using another example

«...there are many ways in which a certain group of people can be formulated: 'guest workers', 'potential citizens', 'illegal aliens', 'undocumented workers'. Each formulation or way of representing this group of people does not simply reflect their characteristics. Each mode of representation defines the person making the representation and constitutes the group of people, and does so in different way." <Mehan 1989, 1>

There does not seem to be anything in people that could naturally bind them to one of those categories since the categories (concepts) themselves, with conventions and practices, constitute such groups. To see such groups under these labels has social and political effects.

6.2 Thus the concept of `class' seems a *interactional metaphor*. It is a metaphor because it borrows a properly military term (the Roman *classis*) to create another concept and thing. The English language of `class', as Williams emphasizes, contains the remains of two contrasting conceptions: the spatial metaphor `of height' (high/medium/low), which introduces the themes of power and dominion, and the Saint-Simon productive metaphor. The term, usually used to underline comparisons, distinctions or conflicts, contains two different meanings.

«On the one hand *middle implied hierarchy and therefore implied `lower class': not only theoretically but in repeated practice. On the other hand working implied productive or useful activity, which would leave all who were not `working class' unproductive or useless (easy enough for an aristocracy, but hardly accepted by a productive `middle class')*. To this day this confusion reverberates". <Williams 1976, quoted in Furbank 1985, 12>

and many sociological and political science term's uses of `class' seem still based on this confusion coming from the common-sense foundations. The use of `class', in the social sense, seems to rise as a relational resource. Assigning people, ourselves included, to `higher class', `lower class', is a *social action*. Therefore, classes seem *processes* instead of structures. They seem to exist contemporaneously as concepts and as things

only within a social relation between the observers (those who classify) and the observed. To socially classify someone means simultaneously, *ipso facto* and tacitly, to put one-self in a sphere, in a perspective in relation to that person. The neutral observer seems to be a myth of scientism, which is also the source of the systematic concept of 'class'. As Bourdieu maintains:

"In reality, agents are both classified and classifiers, but they classify according to (or depending upon) their positions within classifications." <1987, 3>

When Engels <1845>, before knowing Marx, analyses social inequalities in England, he inconsistently talks of three and then of two classes (just as Quesnay does).

«In speaking of the bourgeoisie I include the so-called aristocracy, for this is a privileged class, an aristocracy, only in contrast with the bourgeoisie, not in contrast with the proletariat. The proletariat sees in both only the property-holder - i.e., the bourgeois. Before the privilege of property all other privileges vanish." <p. 301, quoted in Furbank 1985, 23>

We can notice how the number of social classes depends on the perspective of the observer. Engels adopts the proletariat's perspective⁸. At the beginning of the 1800's, workers do not distinguish between middle-class and upper-class - a distinction that comes into use only later. One may argue that the distinction is not made because these two classes do not exist yet, but they will form later. Many professions that will be later categorized as bourgeois and aristocra(have in existence for a long time, but are not recognized as parts of the two classes. They seems to be just professions. In my opinion they become classes when social actors mutually involved in negotiations,

both collaborative and conflictual, begin to label themselves with these terms indexing new concepts and meanings. Such terms are then definitions of the frames or *cognitive perspectives* to be negotiated. The views prevailing re-coded and created new meanings of social relations making people see injustice and inequalities where before only harmonious functional differences had been seen. A new social representation replaced the ones that has been dominant until that time. Recently the competition between constitutive interpretations of reality has been called 'politics of representation' <Holquist 1983; Shapiro 1987>. A new representation affects not only the present, but retrospectively, affects notions of the past. It re-writes history, in a certain way. Thus, Marx and Engels are able to say that the history of all societies is the history of class-warfare. In a certain way, conscious of how paradoxical may seem my statement, we could assert that English and French workers (followed by political essayists) are co-authors of social inequalities when they started to see them where before had not been seen. Inequalities and classes could not exist *independently* of the representational discourse of members that constitute such notions and objects.

6.3 The relational aspect of *perspective* as part of classification has also been noticed also in some contemporary research on social classes <Nowak 1964; Bott 1957; Melucci 1971>. It is frequently observed that the middle-classes have an open, multivariate vision of social stratification, while manual workers

«are more inclined to see inequality's structure in dichotomic terms or of class in ordinary sense.» <Elchardus 1981, quoted in Mongardini and Maniscalco 1987, 39-40>

Such differing perspectives apply not only to workers. Furbank asserts <1985, 19> that the aristocracy in the Victorian age also apply a binary scheme of classification based on the distinction between those who are 'gentlemen' and all the others (the 'non-gentlemen'). These different visions of the world are bearers both of a social evaluation and of precise interactional aims (at least at their birth), i.e. they give to the speakers a discourse to represent the sense of their actions⁹ and to persuade (rhetoric) an interlocutor of the reasonableness of their needs and requests. Thus, aristocratic distinctions originate in the rhetorical attempt to stem and defend itself from the ascent of those who are not of noble origins. 'Gentleman' becomes a concept whose aim is social approval and exclusion at the same time. The socialist concept of 'bourgeois' originates with a defamatory and insulting aim. Similarly, the concepts of 'upper-middle-class' and 'lower-middle-class' (which initially are joined in the sole concept of 'middle-class') are used by those who want to separate themselves from others belonging to the 'middle-class'. It is strange that

«no one ever, except for purposes of irony, called himself or herself 'lower middle class'; it is a concept purely for others. (People may say that they were *born* into the 'lower middle class', but that will mean precisely that they no longer belong to it)". <Furbank 1985, 24>

The implication is that nobody seems inclined to admit to be at the 'bottom' because s/he will look over her/his shoulders and keep on making distinctions¹⁰. The concept of 'class' was also

successful because it was ambiguous, it played and it moved constantly between evaluative and non-evaluative, between social and ethical. Behind an apparently non-evaluative term are interests that seem deeply evaluative.

7. CONCEPTS OF `CLASS' AND CONTROVERSIES IN SOCIOLOGY

7.1. After having framed class in a `interactional' perspective I construct how class is treated in sociology. The terms `class' and `social class' enter the discourse of social sciences not only due to Marx, but also as a consequence of the debate developed by authors like Tocqueville, Weber and Schumpeter.

Not only this. Jarvie points out the common-sense foundation of the sociologists' discourse:

"literature on social class is largely written in terms of popular theories about social class which have been uncritically absorbed by sociologists" (1972, 92)

Subsequently in the 1940's and 1950's a sharp debate arises among those who considered such terms obsolete for the study of social inequalities in contemporary capitalistic societies, preferring the term `stratum' <Davis and Moore 1945; Parsons 1954; Barber 1957>, and the supporters of such terms's utility. The latter assert that strata rarely represent real social groupings. Rather they are purely conventional aggregates, simple ranks arbitrarily built by the researchers. Researchers decide whether the variation in the possession of a good, or a complex of goods, has reached such a level so that it does note a different social situation. Paradoxically, the same critique is made by Parsons, Davis and Moore to those who use the concept of class:

«...the criterion of demarcation between one class and another stays undefined, or, when it's shown, it's arbitrary.» <Gallino 1978, 123>

7.2. Secondly, as Jarvie states, some conventions are more clearly recognized or acknowledged as conventions than social class:

"An example is money, and yet, in a funny way, money is taken to be a much firmer and clearer reality than class. Since the end of the gold standard, but even before that, money was a convention and seen to be a convention, yet there was a high degree of co-ordination between people's ideas about, for example, its value, even internationally. I suggest that this acceptance of the conventionality of money has allowed for a better co-ordination of our ideas about it than is possible with our ideas about class, which differ widely in their degree of naturalism as well as other things, and therefore are poorly co-ordinated and rather fuzzy". (1972, 94)

Jarvie concludes:

"These conventions can be distinguished as having differing degrees of reality, depending on different degrees of intersubjective co-ordination. Those better co-ordinated are more real than those poorly co-ordinated. Money is well co-ordinated and therefore more real than class, which is poorly co-ordinated". (*ibi*, 95)

This poor co-ordination hang over the sociologists. Those who use the concept of 'class' portray classes as entities, real collectivities, real and proper social groups. In this literature there are a number of rival schemes for defining the concept and rarely two definitions coincide. Infact

«among those who maintain the central position of classes, even in late-capitalistic systems, subsist many differences of opinion about the basis of such entities and their actual configuration» <Schizzerotto 1988, 6>

so much so that it seems

«...difficult, if not impossible, to find a definition of the term social class which finds the agreement of students who go

back to different political and intellectual traditions...»
<Cavalli 1983, 158>.

Because of the poor co-ordination some consider them concretely, as *communities* <Schumpeter, Sorokin> or groupings of *families* <Erikson 1984; Barbagli 1986>. Others consider them abstractly, as *conditions* <Dahrendorf 1959; Runciman 1969>, positions, or *roles* <Gallino 1987> assumed in society¹¹. Such theoretical uncertainty is followed by a similarly uncertain empirical classification: Poulantzas <1973> says that post-industrial society is divided in three large social classes and that there exist two kinds of *petit bourgeoisie*; Roemer <1982>, in contrast, mentions five classes; Wright <1985, 120> draws a typology of twelve positions of class in capitalistic society.

7.3. Ultimately many authors at times discuss classes as *concepts*, notions and analytical categories, adequate to explain objective and systematic phenomena of social inequality; and at either times they discuss classes as real *objects* and visible collectivities. Even replacing 'class' with 'strata' does not solve the problem of such inconsistency. It merely substitute one metaphor for another (a 'geological' term, as usual, coming from natural sciences).

«The charm of the words 'strata' and 'stratification' is that they seem to suggest a structure which is visibly and indisputably *there -so many social layers, superimposed like basalt and clay and coal- merely leaving it to the scholar to analyze what the layers are made of and how they came to be there and in that order.*» <Furbank 1985, 57>

As suggested above classes and strata seem not to be something we discover, but something we construct mutually (Jarvie 1972).

In order to see them, observers have to come to an agreement about the culturally framed discourse to use and they must develop a facility with it, since the chance to find an objective criterions commensurable between observers, to define social classes, seems unlikely. Because such schemes are expressions of different constructions of reality, there are ideological, cultural and even political reasons to apply to observed phenomena a dichotomous rather than tripartite or an ordinal instead of organicistic scheme. It does not seem reasonable for political scientists, sociologists or historians put themselves in an objectivistic perspective maintaining that certain social classes existed once upon a time but that, due to social changes, they have disappeared. Research should be addressed at the *concept* of `class', and not at the reified object `class'. The concept of `class' seems to originate when social actors begin to use the term to represent their reality and their social relations as being divided into classes. If sociologists or historians (observers) use the *oppositional* concept of social class, then classes seem to originate towards the end of the first half of XIX century, since it was in that period that many members used the term with dichotomous and conflictual meanings. If, in contrast students use the *taxonomic* concept of class, classes seem beginning to exist in the English society of the second half of XVIII century. If social scientists use the *systematic* concept of `class', it seems beginning to live in the Roman world and it becomes stronger in the French society of the

second half of XVIII century¹². All that the sociologist and the historian can aim at is to reconstruct

«...the manner in which men in the past have represented to themselves the society in which they lived, how they saw its various elements and perceived the hierarchy ordering them. The answer to such question... illuminates social structures, to the extent to which society and the image which individuals and groups form of that society influence each other and interpenetrate". <Jouanna 1977, 7 quoted in Furbank 1985, 53>

So, in regard to the concepts of `class', `stratum', `order', `state', it does not seem epistemologically possible to go beyond the type of analysis which Williams and Thompson undertake of the ideas developed by societies contemporary to such concepts. In that context, sociologies of social stratification seem nothing but

«professional sociologist's ways of seeing some practices of members of human collectivities as sociologically analyzable practices. As such, they are, simultaneously, ways of doing the stratification that organizes the particular collectivity that is professional sociology." <Filmer 1975, 149>

So, through such professional practices, sociologists constitute a shapeless body of people as stratified collectivities:
«in short, they, too, are practicing stratification» <*ibi*, 150>

In this way a reflexive relationship is established between concepts and objects, and between "words and things" <Foucault 1966>, in which things are not independent of practices of members who let them exist through their discourse. As Jarvie underlines:

"'The' class system does not exist at all; (...) all that exists is our differing and poorly co-ordinated theorie of how the social class system is constituted". (1972, 127)

8. SOME MODEST PROPOSALS ABOUT THE USE OF THE TERM AND CONCEPTS OF `CLASS'

Further research to examine `class' as a social phenomenon might simultaneously move in two directions: towards the observers/sociologists and towards the social actors.

The first direction could aim to explicate the categorizing practices of the researchers, i.e. their making stratification, their culturally-framed discourse. Furbank admits

«But then I look into my own breast and find... Well, what do I find? A strange assortment of things actually: a readiness to be dishonest on the subject of the `class', and some quite cunning techniques for this purpose; and then again a mass of ideas on the `class', acquired mainly in childhood, some of which are plainly the foolishest folklore, but of which others seem as if they might be fragments of a coherent theory, or perhaps of several distinct and coherent theories. (...) Then in separate compartment of my breast I find ideas drawn from books by historians and sociologists, and especially a number from Marx. (...) Again, ought I to allow my thoughts on `class' to be separated into compartments/ One thing seems clear: if one is to study `class', the human breast is a very good place to study it -that is to say, it must be done very considerably by introspection; (...) We use, shall we say, the phrase `middle-class housing', and a convincing vision flashes before our mental eye: polished doorknockers, perhaps, or windows with Staffordshire dogs in them and the *Guardian* on the doorstep. However, if we are honest with ourselves, the confidence is only momentary: press with any weight on the concept `middle-class housing', try to follow it through as a viable sociological or architectural description, and it flies to pieces, the vision dissolves." <1985, 4-5>

The intent of this approach is not to destroy the concept of `class' in social science, as Furbank would like. Rather, it allows observers to recognize the common-sense foundations of their reasoning, which, together with emotional reactions to the studied object, seem not eliminable and not separable by scientific reasoning. If we cannot avoid the influence of common-sense, we can at least recognize and, partially, control some

effects <Cicourel 1968, xx>. We need to recognize that sociologists are still looking for a God (even if a laical one), that is they want an "orderly framework of concepts" (Bendix and Berger 1959, 2 quoted in Jarvie 1972, 119) for their investigations, or a sort of Muse who constantly reassures them about the outdoor existence of reality.

In the second direction we can move to investigate, as Thompson <1963>, Williams <1976>, Jouanna <1977> do, the practices of stratification of the social actors, their ways to sort people. Such as, if (and which of them), use the term 'class' in their discourse, and if they imagine society divided into classes. If they do so, *then classes exist* and the analysis can, in next step, reconstruct social actor's cognitive schemas and which 'concepts' of class is connected to the 'term' used by a subject. Every other remedy that includes the sociologist as observer *super partes* seems a scientific myth. The observer seems always, *malgré lui*, taking a part.

The debate over classes and/or strata, if based on structuralist and transcendental assumptions, seems without solution because, as I have tried to document, it does not seem possible to pointed out 'class' as an thing independent of the influence of observer's perspective. Without such epistemological and methodological turn in our researches, the scientific concepts of 'class' still remain 'folk' categories.

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¹. Aristotle seems never to define his activity in this way, because *taxonomy* is a term which does not exist in the Greek and Latin world, but has been coined in modern times. Besides "the taxonomy is *never* the principal purpose of Aristotelian zoology" <Vegetti 1979, 36>

². French doctor and anatomist, precursor of the 'Cellular theory' developed by Rudolf Virchow (1821-1902), German pathologist, who influenced his theories with many doctrinaire bases of XIX century (for a contrary opinion, see Sontang <1988, 6>). For example, he conceived of the State as an animal organism. He also used the term 'apparatus' as a physiological metaphor. It is interesting to note that the revivers of the concept of 'class' are two physicians (Linnaeus and Quesnay).

³. See Gruner <1968>.

⁴. Lukàcs also notices this event:

"...at the end of 1843 he arrives in France where (...) he gives himself up to the study of Restoration's French historians who, first, exposed history as class-warfare history. In this way, in a very short time, the historic mission of the proletariat opens before him, a vision that, from that moment on, determined all his decisions in political and social fields, the total praxis of his revolutionary activity, the total character of his theoretical contribution... but then also the study and critical elaboration of English classical political economy." <Lukàcs 1954, 84>

The Hungarian scholar underlines how, in the years '43-'44, the theoretical change took place in Marx

"from the class point of view... the passage to the final scientific conception of proletarian socialism took place just during 1844. (...) The comprehension of the historical mission of the proletariat was not present yet in the correspondence with Ruge, Feurbach and Bakunin (March - September 1843) and not even in his writing about the 'On the Jewish Question' (fall 1843): that mission was asserted only in the 'Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction' (beginning '44)..." <*ibi*, 85>

⁵. I owe this idea to Bruno Latour.

⁶. Thompson asserts that

"class itself is not a thing, it is a happening" <1963, 939>, a process".

"Class is a relationship, and not a thing... if we stop history at a given point, then there are not classes but simply a multitude of individuals with a multitude of experiences. But if we watch these men over an adequate period of social change, we observe patterns in their relationship, their ideas and their institutions. Class is defined by men as they live their own history, and, in the end, this is its only definition." <*ibi*, 11>

Even in Marx, through the hegelian dialectic slave-master, seem to exit the basis' for a "relational" idea of classes; but it does not seem this idea was stressed by marxist tradition.

⁷. Within this perspective Bourdieu operates too:

"...occupational groups or `classes', are symbolic constructions oriented... (by the pursuit of the specific interests of their spokespersons)." <1987, 9>

And, further, giving an answer to the question if `class' was an analytical construct or a folk category, he says that it

"...exists there are agents capable of imposing themselves, as authorized to speak and to act officially in its place and in its name, upon those who, by recognizing themselves in these plenipotentiaries..." <ibi, 15>

⁸. Engels seems to borrow social representations from the *ordinary language* of English workers rather than from economists who still talked about `orders'.

⁹. Williams formulates the notion of class as

"a collective mode (of being, feeling, acting) of that part of a group of people, similarly circumstanced, which is become conscious of its own position and its own attitude to this position." <1958, 313>.

A similar definition is proposed by Thompson too <1963, 939>.

¹⁰. This could explain the large percentage of people that, in answers to questionnaires, define themselves as members of the middle-class.

¹¹. A methodologically paradoxical aspect is that empirical researches use individual indicators and variables, i.e. they interview individuals singly because interviewing groups or getting reliable information about the social-economical situation of families is difficult. Thus, classes as such are never interviewed but built *ex-post*.

¹². For details regarding the features of these three different concepts of class see Gobo 1993.