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Conceptual Modalities of Social Classifications in
Eighteenth-century France:

Reasoning on a Natural Order or Observing
Individuals

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Abstract

This article aims to measure the transition from a theological way of classifying to the initiation of political thinking in an aristocratic and well-read bourgeois milieu. The shift is from an essentialist conceptualization of social identities (where qualities of the parts were logically deduced from a postulated natural and divine quality of the whole) to an anxious bewilderment in the face of individual cases which did not fit into the old classifications. The analysis relies mostly on a comparison between two academic competitions (Dijon in 1754 and Berlin in 1780) but checks for possible generalization by using examples from the use of categories by the judiciary and an inquiry into a new literary trend patronized by the salons in the 1770's.

Keywords

Social classifications – Enlightenment – Aristocracy – Poor – Individuals – Academies - France

*Conceptual Modalities of Social Classifications in Eighteenth-century France:
Reasoning on a Natural Order or Observing Individuals*

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This article aims to analyze how, in the second half of the eighteenth century, well-read milieus changed their way of conceptualizing social realities. For this comparison to be rigorous, it is necessary to deal with precise milieus and types of discourses that were equivalent, but to take them at two different moments in time. The choice is to analyze academic discourses which offer the possibility of building a corpus of texts written at the same time, for the same purpose and on the same issue. Yet, to counter the risk that the discourse produced might be the idiosyncratic result of a competition and not part of a global evolution, checks have been made against other sources coming from the same social milieu.

I will compare the answers brought to the Academy of Dijon in 1754, and those received in 1780 by the Berliner Academy. The former asked, “what is the source of inequality among human beings, and is it governed by natural law?” and the latter, “Is it useful to the lower orders to fool them, either by misleading them or by failing to put them straight?” Even if the questions were different, both answers nonetheless disclosed conceptions of the social world and manners of classifying. Those conceptions, set apart by thirty years, are what I aim to compare.

The academic discourse: a place for social compromise among the elite

The social background of those men who, at some point in their lives, decided to answer the question set by an academy, cannot be traced with certainty. But we do have some clues. By and large, the anonymity which preceded selection has not been broken for those who were not selected and we still don't know their names and status. Sometimes, when we do have this information, any attempt to go further and learn more about these people is impossible. Yet, Daniel Roche has given a general picture of this world of the participants in academic competitions, and we can use this information. Roche has shown that this was a social milieu whose lowest limit was drawn by the possession of the rules of language, and refined language at that, since the electing committees were particularly keen on rhetorical values. The great majority of the participants belonged then to a learned or at least to a literary milieu dominated by bourgeois talents, as well as to those of the clergy, of magistrates, of doctors and writers. These represented 70% of the candidates¹. The answers given to academic competitions can then be understood as an expression of a rising elite, one expecting the personal advantages granted by prizes, and which believed in a compromise between "the new social order" and "the old society of orders and corporations". They were men brought up in colleges – and particularly Jesuit colleges, where the pedagogical methods (based on debating techniques) influenced academic questions². As another example of this compromise, underlined by Daniel Roche, we see that one or another man of letters or a philosopher well-known in the Parisian milieu of the academies appeared in the midst of unknown competitors. Thus, Antoine-René de Voyer d'Argenson, member of the French Academy since 1748, participated in the Dijon competition of 1754³.

The rules for writing a short discourse (generally a dozen pages) produced in the context of a fashion-sensitive competition leads to a certain clarity of the paradigms with which the different texts were in line. Those academic discourses are then interesting types of texts for anyone who wants to trace the main themes of well-read thinking of the time.

In 1754, Dijon academicians received twelve texts and we still have eleven of them, among which is the text entered by Rousseau – who did not get the prize on this occasion. The editorial life of Rousseau's text shows a swift withdrawal from the academic world and a success which was by no means linked to it. Yet the position of the philosopher from Geneva is interesting for us here, not for the text itself but because, different as it was, it underlines in contrast the homogeneity of the other texts. We do not know much about the other participants (d'Argenson excepted): lawyers were represented by a professor, M. Lerbet, and a student from Rennes, M. Etasse; medicine appeared with M. Marteau, from Aumale; and from the clergy we have the abbot Talbert, from Besançon, and M. de la Serre, from the Oratory. M. Baulos Bournan, whose status we do not know, does not upset this very "normal" picture of an academic competition. The 1780 Berlin competition was more successful than any other, and it received forty-two answers. The prize was won by Castillon, a professor of

¹ Daniel Roche, *Les Républicains des lettres. Gens de cultures et Lumières au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1988). p. 169.

² *Le siècle des Lumières en province. Académies et académiciens provinciaux, 1680-1789*, 1ère éd. 1978 ed. (Paris, 1989). p. 327.

³ Condorcet, in 1780 already quite nicely set up (he would be elected as member of the French Academy two years later) had written a text on the subject, but without taking part in the competition of Berlin.

mathematics at the Académie Royale des Gentilshommes, and his rivals were as representative as himself of the usual milieu of the academic respondents: for example Lorinet was a doctor from Montpellier and the earl of Martimprey was an aristocrat from Lorraine⁴. Apart from a greater openness to men of science and to the discourses of science (as Castillon's election proves), the milieu remained quite sociologically stable. Its discourse had nonetheless significantly changed.

Academic rhetoric: from theological logic to an observation of the social world.

From the rhetorical point of view, the texts in competition showed great homogeneity, especially when one comes to the method of proving. In 1754, almost all candidates chose to take the line of the Old Testament both as a source of examples (especially for the winner of the prize, excellent in portraying time before the Fall) and as a model of writing. Almost all candidates marked clearly the line before and after the Fall – which is used as a turning point for the use of reason. The Fall is what leads from equality, from an absence of classification, to an inequality that justifies classification. One can then see how different Rousseau was: by choosing to “leave all facts aside”⁵ (that is to say all those biblical “facts”), he departed from the line taken by the rest of the participants, and signalled his rejection from the competition. All other competitors basically agreed on this narrative of a humanity that began in the innocence of an earthly Paradise with no class, then fell, giving free rein to its passions, and therefore required laws to make social life possible. Laws, constraining passions, established two categories: the worthy protectors, and the less worthy and obedient protected. The first and second prizes were given to those who translated this schema with the greatest clarity. A rejected anonymous discourse, judged as “the product of a false and illogical reasoning”, although it presented some strange gaps between social inequality and inequality of birth, certainly had as its main defect - in the eyes of the judging academicians - its refusal of this rhetorical schema. It did not even reject the theological explanation (since it relied on the idea of an inequality resulting from immemorial and God created laws), but it began by refusing to examine “centuries blurred by their great distance”⁶. The author rejected traditional religious rhetoric, and wanted to study “men in the light of reason”⁷ - whereas reason and the Old Testament did not seem incompatible to his rivals. The competitors of 1754 did not think outside pure theological logic and considered it self-evident. For M. Lerbet, “the obviousness of the thing will make up for the brevity of the demonstration”⁸. This obviousness is that of the pure rationality of the principles. What you see is not the whole truth. All discourses of 1754 are built on a reversal from perceptible obviousness to rational obviousness, from what appears at first glance to what can be understood according to the laws of

⁴ All the texts of the 1754 competition (Rousseau's text excepted) have been republished: Académie de Dijon, *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité. Concours de 1754* (Paris, 2000). By contrast, only a selection of the texts of 1780 is available, republished by Werner Krauss, éd., *Est-il utile de tromper le peuple ? Concours de la classe de philosophie speculative de l'Académie des Sciences et des Belles-Lettres de Berlin pour l'année 1780* (Berlin, 1966).

⁵ He claimed that he wanted to « écarter tous les faits ». Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes," in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, 1966), p. 132.

⁶ Dijon. p. 144.

⁷ Ibid., p. 143.

⁸ Dijon. p. 19.

reason. Inequality in classification may *seem* a scandal, but it *is* wise and equitable: for M. Baulos Bourman, “as at fault as may appear the sources of this inequality among men, it is nonetheless reasonable and authorized by natural law”⁹. For the winner of the prize, one should not “condemn an arrangement the only defect of which may be an appearance”¹⁰; and the runner-up wanted to help the great majority to “perceive wisdom and equity in a social design that appears to them so contradictory with primitive rights of nature”¹¹.

The discourses of 1780, on the contrary, looked for examples in contemporary facts (or recent history, with the exception of Antiquity). Their descriptions were not those of an Eden any more, but those of the social landscape they had in front of them. “Here is a being, who used to be human, who goes begging in our beautiful capital, rummaging among the garbage”, wrote Lorinet to support his reasoning¹². The discourse was rooted in contemporary society and appealed to its inhabitants: “Great Lords!” shouted out Castillon¹³, while Lorinet warned the “idiotic tyrants of human beings”¹⁴ or Fouquet d’Auxonne exclaimed that he was writing “for you, ha! Withered and miserable portion of humanity!”¹⁵. Henceforth, there was a bonus for all “reality effects”. The anonymous student advertising that “one should not expect in the discourse those flowers of eloquence which please and seduce”, had well understood the new wave. He insisted, on the contrary, on a factual knowledge and on the advantage that he had to “have frequent discussions with the lower orders”: “I write from what I have seen”, he claimed. He avowed that to answer the question precisely, it would have been necessary to “travel through all lands, to visit the so abandoned Poor, to examine their customs and mistakes (...), to judge of the consequences from experience. It would be”, he added, “by doing so and by seeing everything with one’s proper eyes that the so desired point could be reached”¹⁶. The well-read and well-to-do class of the last third of the eighteenth century felt disturbed by a social situation it was just beginning to observe. An egalitarian society was still denounced as a wild dream or a lost paradise, but the discrepancy between estates was beginning to be called into question. “One does not need to be very perspicacious” – wrote the abbot Briatte in the same year as the Berliner competition, “to show that some individuals possess everything, and that others have nothing; that the higher class overflows with wealth, and that the lower class is deprived. Where facts speak, reasoning is superfluous”¹⁷.

If theological reasoning directed researches in 1754, in 1780 the leading element was a capacity to perceive. This was linked to a promotion of feeling. The tone of 1780 was apostrophic, exclamatory, and the personally involved the author who was giving his

⁹ Ibid. p. 40.

¹⁰ Ibid. p 122.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 131.

¹² Krauss, éd. p. 53.

¹³ Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 52.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 59.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 88-89.

¹⁷ Jean-Baptiste Briatte, *Offrande à l’humanité, ou Traité sur les causes de la Misère en général, et de la Mendicité en particulier et sur les moyens de tarir la Première; et de détruire la Seconde* (A Amsterdam, 1780). p.2. Published in the same year as the Berliner competition, the text opened an explicit dialog with the Academy, whose question it nonetheless denounced. See especially on pp. 180 and 185.

reasons¹⁸. Those two rhetorical patterns involved two divergent ways of producing classifications in the social world.

Social classifications as natural principles: the competition of 1754 in its context

Conforming to the theological model described above, the dissertations sent to Dijon in 1754 offered a vision in which social classifications were also determined by natural principles. The division of labor was justified by nature. “Each art demands a proper artist”, M. Lerbet stated twice¹⁹. What existed is what should be and it was impossible to think outside existing categories. For the abbot Talbert, canon of the church of Besançon and a member of the Academy of that city:

it is important not to change spheres, since the differences are too wide between the different classes which divide citizens, and since each has its own customs, the seeds of which have to be conceived by birth²⁰.

It was then impossible to think outside the existing framework of social divisions. Everyone's social place and the differentiation of status were supposed to match an equilibrium in the world designed by God. The argument could be used in very concrete conflicts: it appeared for example in the discourse of the Marquis of Rougemont in his quarrel with the parson of Vieu-en-Valromey who, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, refused the Marquis a seat on the lord's bench and wanted to relegate his family to the nave with the lower orders. The Marquis protested against what he considered an attempt to eliminate the distinction between a lord and his subordinates, as an encroachment on the “hierarchical order that God has established in heaven and earth”, an attempt to “mix with the dregs of society, those who Providence has placed in a more distinguished state”²¹. If social classifications matched a divine plan, it was of course impossible to pass from one to another without committing a crime against the divine (and consequently perfect) order of the world. Any upward social mobility was unthinkable, as was any downward mobility. The idea of the “deserving poor” also relied on this system of classification – those who should not be such, according to the natural order. As a promoter of the idea of a social classification that would also be a natural hierarchy, Méry de la Canorgue, had, in 1767, exactly the same words as the Marquis de Rougemont: pleading in favor of the poor, he was particularly interested in those families that “are truly noble”. He asked for their reestablishment “if possible; or at least to retrieve them from disgrace and misery which force them to merge with the common people and with the dregs of society”²². In effect, through those impoverished noblemen, the category of nobility itself appeared as accidentally but scandalously detached from its natural and defining characteristics.

¹⁸ “I am twenty five”, wrote an anonymous author. “I have taken up the condition the most favorable to knowledge, and I am always occupied with it. Yet, I still have some leisure, and I write in those moments. I am animated by an ardent desire to be useful to my country and to my fellows.” Krauss, éd. p. 89.

¹⁹ Dijon. p. 18.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 122.

²¹ Quoted by Jean Nicolas, *La rébellion française. Mouvements populaires et conscience sociale 1661-1789*, L'Univers historique (Paris, 2002). p. 198.

²² Joseph Méry de la Canorgue, *L'Ami de ceux qui n'en ont point, ou Système oeconomique, politique et moral pour le régime des pauvres et des mendians dans tout le Royaume* (Paris, 1767). p.242-243.

From these analyses, we understand that, for the elite of the time, there was no difference between the abstract category and each of the human elements that were part of it. The word was equivalent to the thing and encompassed it absolutely: it was already a definition and a description. “*Le peuple est peuple par tout*”, wrote Furetière in his *Dictionnaire* of 1690: that is to say, “the lower orders are lower in everything”. The name is also a qualifying adjective; the category already bears its qualities. In such a configuration, the lower orders were thought of as a category *naturally* deprived of all the good qualities attributed to noble and wealthy persons. “The lower orders are lower in everything, that is to say stupid, rowdy, fond of novelty and change”. Furetière’s definition put together the main characteristics that were generally understood as being part of the nature of the lower ranks. Silliness was the first point, but also evil and a readiness to rebel. This last element could be found quite late in the century, in the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie*, which tended to fossilize old usage rather than register recent changes. The edition of 1762 was still giving, as one of the main usages of the word “*peuple*”, expressions such as “the lower orders entered into a riot”, or “to cause riots among the lower orders”.

Social classifications in general and the lower orders in particular, were thus thought of according to an essentialist pattern, which was not based on experience but on pre-established knowledge. The discourse was not only *a priori* but also generalizing. There was a general reluctance to think in individualizing terms, but this process was even stronger when one came to the lower orders, since they were defined as a multitude. Minimal definitions saw the lower orders as “the most numerous part”²³ of the population. For the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie*, subordinates were always assimilated as a “multitude”. They were not dealing with men and women from the lower orders, but with masses, groups, and jumbles. No single person was taken into account, but a homogenous mass was postulated and individual characteristics were deduced from the supposed characters of the class they belonged to. There was no possible thought of the individual. This rhetoric was not only present in dictionaries and academic discourses, but was so well anchored in people’s minds that it could be used in everyday life. There was pragmatic use of this idea of a similitude between social classifications and supposedly natural categories. For example, it was possible to use it in a judicial context, to render credible an accusation against any man or woman from the lowest ranks. It was the attitude of the Viscount of Forceville in 1751. The Viscount had made passionate declarations to his wigmaker’s wife but had been turned down. The rejected seducer decided to have his revenge by denouncing the husband for slandering the government. The husband was jailed and his wife went about explaining her own version of the story and doubts began to be raised. There were whispers about the Viscount; people said he was not living with his own wife, that he was in debt and was in trouble with the law for having endorsed a letter of exchange from someone also in trouble. To put an end to this, Forceville wrote to the Earl of d’Argenson, Minister of War, asking for his help and complaining:

I have been menaced and I had to listen to horrible and silly accounts in the presence of a bishop at the house of a friend of mine. There is nothing as dangerous as villains: they always follow their first idea, which is to do harm²⁴.

²³ Gabriel-François (abbé) Coyer, *Dissertations pour être lues: la première sur le vieux mot de patrie: la seconde sur la nature du peuple* (La Haye, 1755). p. 46.

²⁴ AB 11 741, fol. 163.

The young woman was then judged bearing in mind her social background. Her personality was expunged and she was judged by her membership of a group; her particular action was not examined but understood from the point of view of a general scheme.

Social classifications drew lines perceived as anchored in a bodily nature, almost differentiating different species. D'Argenson criticized the fact that “nobility has pretended to be in reality of another species to that of commoners”²⁵ and declared that nature was hurt by some discrepancies between merit and social status. But he himself had to come back to the idea that to define the noble race there was “something more physical”²⁶, a correlation between nature and social divisions. Among the elements supposedly characteristic of each class, physical appearances were important: noble men must also be more handsome – which was the exterior sign of a godly premeditated superiority. In fairy tales, whenever the peasant woman is beautiful it is always because she is a hidden, lost, forgotten princess: being handsome and belonging to the lower orders are two incompatible things. In this respect, Florise's story, as told by Fénelon, is quite typical. A fairy offers Florise's mother a choice between two possibilities for her daughter: to be beautiful, intelligent and a queen, but unhappy, or to be “ugly, a peasant like you, but happy with her condition”. At the beginning, the first solution is chosen. But the situation turns utterly sour. Florise asks the fairy to give her back her peasant appearance: “immediately her features became coarse again, and lost all proportion”, wrote Fénelon, who was thus linking a physical aspect with social status²⁷. In a similar manner, in Marivaux's novel, M. de Climal to whom the young orphan Marianne is presented, exclaims: “from her physiognomy, I expect the best from her heart and spirit: one is even prone to believe that she was well born”, whereas the heroine laments: “there was such a divergence between my physiognomy and my poor state”²⁸. This will to anchor the social hierarchy in a natural order and to have the social and the physical correspond was deeply inscribed in the classifying manners of the Ancien Régime, but it was never as strong as during periods when the ordinary social order was actually undermined. During the period of John Law, the Princess Palatine saw clearly that principles of social order were quite destabilized: “Gold”, she wrote in a letter of December 9th 1719, “has become a divinity here, there is no other preoccupation any more. This wild silliness seems horrible to me...”²⁹. It was then urgent to reaffirm the natural anchorage of the social order. To do so, the princess told the following story, in a letter of December 3rd 1719:

Strange stories are being told. Some days ago, a lady was at the Opera. She saw another coming, much more ugly but with the most beautiful clothes in the world, and bedecked with diamonds. Mrs. Bégon's daughter said to her mother: “Mother, look carefully at that well dressed woman: it seems to me that she is our cook Marie”. – “Eh, be quiet, my daughter”, answered the mother, “this cannot be”. – “Eh mother”, goes on the daughter, “for God's sake, look !” She stares at her and says: “I do

²⁵ Dijon. p. 98.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 97.

²⁷ Fénelon, fable IV, quoted by Pierre Ronzeaud, *Peuple et représentations sous le règne de Louis XIV* (Aix-en-Provence, 1988). p. 258.

²⁸ Marivaux, *La vie de Marianne ou les aventures de Madame la comtesse de **** (Paris, 1963). Respectivement p. 27 et p. 70.

²⁹ Madame Duchesse d'Orléans Princesse Palatine, *Lettres*, Edition établie par Olivier Amel ed. (Paris, 1985). p. 597-598.

not know what to think anymore; in effect, she does look very much like her". Everybody in the amphitheater begins to murmur "Marie the cook". This latter stands up and says loudly: "Yes, I am Marie, Mrs. Begond's cook. I have become rich, I dress in my finery: I do not owe these to anybody; I like to dress up so I do it. It is no harm to anyone. What can you criticize?" You can imagine how we laughed...³⁰.

The cook may have become rich, she nonetheless remains "very ugly" in spite of her finery. The juxtaposition in the very same sentence of the two elements aims at opposing the natural hierarchy (beauty / ugliness) and artifices that are not, contrary to the cook's belief, the basis of the social order but should be its consequence (clothes and diamonds). The Princess Palatine's letter is a sort of reversed fairy tale. Everything begins as in a tale: we are promised "weird stories", the narration begins with a "some days ago", very similar to a "once upon a time". But the tale ends up with a demystifying laugh. Effectively, in tales (as in reality as imagined by the time) no one can become a princess without being one right from the beginning, even if a veiled one. Marie's story is then but a farce, an aborted tale, since Marie is not a *real* and *natural* lady from the Opera's world.

Even beyond the question of appearance, their supposed ugliness would render the lower orders close to beasts. The naturalization of social classification was such, that the hierarchy 'lower orders / elite' was even somehow thought of as equivalent to the hierarchy 'animals / humans'. The lower orders were almost of another nature, closer to beasts than to humans. In his *Dictionnaire*, Furetière introduced a forged etymology which linked the French word *canaille* to the Latin *canis*³¹. Collectively the lower orders are a thousand-headed Hydra when rioting, a swarm of bees or a group of ants when submissive; individually, they can be donkeys, mules, horses, camels, oxen because of the physical tasks they do and that are in their nature. People from the lower classes are also described as sheep, goats, ewes - because of their supposed herd instincts -, pigs – because of their lives in mud -, but also rabbits, hares etc.³². The abbot Coyer, although he could not go as far as to speak seriously of an equality of all humans, attacked his contemporaries' incapacity to envisage this possibility with a certain violence. "A humanity of the lower orders?" he exclaimed, "the finest, the most important part of the State, the part which joins spirit to wealth, does not believe in it: who am I to contradict them?"³³. And he described how these enlightened people dealt with the lower orders:

People have porters as they have mules. The whip is always given to a restive animal: where is the gentleman who does not use his stick on a scoundrel when need be? At the head of his coach, an elegant lord puts a "coureur" and a dog. When hunting, it seems quite equal to work a horse or a stableman into the ground; and after a battle dead soldiers are not counted any more than dead horses. All those facts show me but animals disguised as humans. Things are going so far that the lower orders themselves ask of their state: *Are we but beasts?*³⁴

³⁰ Ibid. p. 598.

³¹ Furetière (1690): « Ce mot vient, selon Menage, de *canalia*, comme qui dirait une *bande de chiens*. D'autres le dérivent de *canicola*, ou *canalis*, qui était un lieu à Rome où les gens de basse condition s'assemblaient. Lipse dit qu'il vient du mot de *chien*, à cause d'une vieille coutume qui voulait que ceux qui étaient condamnés au supplice portassent un chien pour marque d'infamie ».

³² See Ronzeaud.

³³ Coyer. p. 55.

³⁴ Ibid. p. 56.

Quite early in the century, Coyer was then questioning this naturalization of social categories and underlining its possible unpleasant outcomes. Yet, if his irony was necessary, it was because the way of reasoning he criticized was still prevalent.

May social classifications be inadequate? Traces of anguish when faced with individual cases

The Berlin competition allows us to see clearly how new interests, for example, and sentimentalism combined to draw attention to individuals from the lower orders. In 1754 no one was dealing with individuals, but with the Universe, the World, sometimes with Man, but in a very general way. M. Lerbet summarized his position clearly, and that of his competitors':

Once we have found the purpose of the Universe, it will guide us to understand the purpose of Man; and the purpose of Man, in its turn, known and proved, can by itself explain this inequality that reigns among us³⁵.

The situation of some individuals, even though they might be in the great majority, could not influence a judgment which was interested in the order of the world, in the common good; global categories should not be questioned by what only appeared as individual dross. For Talbert (who won the competition) common good and natural law were all the same³⁶; likewise, M. de la Serre thought that "always wise Nature wants us all as members of the same body, to contribute to the common good; and as our needs are various, it wants us to occupy various positions"³⁷. There was no pity for those who had less prestigious positions. Real classifications and right classifications are all the same. The images that were used were that of a mechanism "which requires parts of different strengths and different sizes"³⁸: they were dealing with "parts", not with sensitive and suffering people. This classical bodily metaphor could also be found in the author of the anonymous discourse XI, for whom "all conditions sustain one another and are members of the same Body: Society is but a Commerce of Duties and reciprocal Obligations"³⁹. Thinking about the whole and its functioning veiled the possibility of envisaging the parts. Classes hid their constitutive elements.

In an interesting and symptomatic way, when the bodily metaphor was used in 1780, it was with the idea (which would have been unthinkable thirty years before) of a reciprocal relation between the whole and the parts. The goal could no longer be the sole functioning of the whole, it had to take individuals into account: "those who govern must have the perfection and happiness of the governed as an object, as a goal of their government". The anonymous memoir not only took into account "the interest of the whole body in general" (as the competitors of 1754 did), but also "each member's interest taken separately", since "it is the private happiness of all society's members which makes the common happiness of society as a whole; exactly as the soundness and good health of all members of the body form the good shape or, one could say, the well-being of the whole body"⁴⁰. A concern with the individual had emerged.

³⁵ Dijon. p. 12.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 126.

³⁷ Ibid. p. 169.

³⁸ Talbert, Ibid. p. 126.

³⁹ Ibid. p. 180.

⁴⁰ Krauss, éd. p. 114.

It appears that what really changed things, what brought to the forefront a new way of considering the social world, was the fact of taking the individual into account: from now on it was necessary, as Castillon wrote, to “notice that among the lower orders there might be individuals who, in spite of their estate, have more judgment than those who despise them”. And the abbot Briatte wrote in the same way that “all poor citizens are not vicious or despicable. The Affluence which shows contempt, or spurns them, dares nonetheless believe it”⁴¹. In 1754 most candidates were preoccupied by the question of the best possible regime; this problem was no longer tackled in the texts of 1780 that have been read. Where there was a pre-constituted thinking about society, there was henceforth an intellectual quest for configurations that would be molded by making groups with individuals. Justice was no longer in a pretend parallel between the order of the world and the social order, but had to be created from an encounter between social classes, anchored in the concreteness of society. But this was artificial (for example, the category of “great lords”, to which Castillon referred), and the abstract classifications were as yet reasonable and constituted possible ways of grouping people who shared similar characteristics.

From the 1770’s on, a certain anxiety in the face of the possible lack of coincidence between social and natural categories was also perceptible in a new literary genre using *exempla*, that is to say presenting a series of anecdotes to illustrate an idea. Quite often the medium was the periodical: *Journal encyclopédique*, *Journal de politique et de littérature*, *Bouillon’s Journal politique*, *Courrier du Bas-Rhin*, *Mercure historique et politique*. But this form was also found in books. Very often this showed sovereigns or noblemen distinguished by a generous action. At first passive objects of this generosity, the lower orders turned finally to be subjects of actions. The interest in concrete details and the mixture of misery and virtuous wealth led to a multiplication of popular characters: they have a name, a life story, they act and speak, whereas the traditional discourse used to take them as a uniform group.

These texts were the expression of a fashionable society. Salons just loved witty anecdotes and their capacity to quickly sum up a moral lesson: this literature was written for them. It came from the same predilection for short accounts as “Bibliothèques”, that were flourishing by this time. The *Bibliothèque universelle des romans*, for example, has been studied by Roger Poirier who believes it was read by affluent merchants, traders or financiers⁴². Daniel Mornet has also found many *Bibliothèques de Campagne*, *Bibliothèques enjouées* or *amusantes* in the library catalogues of the aristocracy and the magistrature⁴³. What is particularly interesting with this newly fashionable form of demonstration through anecdotes, is that very often it was a common meeting point for authors belonging to the same world of the salons, but separated by their ideological declarations. The *exemplum* was used by authors belonging to the Enlightenment, as well as by anti-philosophical authors (nobles, sometimes influenced by the agrarian trend, or bourgeois with local influence). On the

⁴¹ Briatte, p. 4.

⁴² Roger Poirier, *La Bibliothèque universelle des romans. Rédacteurs, Textes, Public* (Genève, 1977).

⁴³ Daniel Mornet, "Les enseignements des bibliothèques privées (1750-1780)," *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* (1910).

enlightened side, there is Bérenger⁴⁴, who quoted Rousseau and his *Lettres sur les spectacles*. The anonymous *École du Bonheur* could represent the other side, since its aim was to “destroy the seed of this unfortunate selfishness which perverts the habits of those who give themselves to the dangerous precepts of secular philosophy”⁴⁵. Dagues de Clairfontaine⁴⁶, dedicating his text to Monsieur le Comte Wielhorski, was on the opposite side, compared to Hardy, a bookseller who came from a long tradition of Parisian bourgeois, playing the role of “officious historiographer of the Third-Estate”⁴⁷. In this literature of *exempla* can be included numerous dialogs, characterized by the same social and ideological heterogeneity: those of the very Christian Marie Le Prince de Beaumont⁴⁸ as well as those of the very Rousseauist Jean-Jacques Filassier⁴⁹.

Part of this literature aimed at giving value to individuals from the lower orders, whose admirable moral actions were totally unexpected according to the old essentialist definitions of social categories. Yet, the perfect beings whose adventures were told did not stand there to oppose social prejudices. They might demonstrate singular injustices and aberrations, but never challenged the social order in general. On the contrary, to be spicy the anecdote needed a reaffirmation of the common situation from which it differed. The story of the so-called Voirey was interesting insofar as, continuing to serve his ruined master, “he is not an ordinary man anymore”, even though he belongs (and this reminder gives sense to the thing) to the class that is “the most corrupted, perhaps the lowest of the nation”⁵⁰. Faced with these singular cases two attitudes were represented: incredulity and pain. Besides, neither one of these attitudes excluded the other. We find for example incredulity when Madame de *** listens to a friend telling the story of one of the “populace” whose “generosity and delicacy” were supposed to “stun” her. The friend explains how Richer, a poor rabbit pelt vendor, uses “all his profits to provide aid for the destitute”. “The lady was amazed: “- but is it possible? ... Were you told the truth?”⁵¹. So, Madame de *** responded to the astonishment of the anonymous author of *L’Ecole du bonheur* and of Bérenger who both told the same story of the integrity and generosity of a domestic burglar: condemned to death in Bar-sur-Aube, the man escaped the four soldiers bringing him to Paris. Arriving without their prisoner, the four soldiers were put in jail. They were about to be put on trial, when “the criminal, who could not refrain from a feeling of remorse, came generously to free them at the price of his life”. This act was judged “all the more surprising that it came from someone who should have appeared as incapable of it”. Precisely because of its supposed exceptionality, the fact was even reported to the Regent⁵². Surprise is a *topos*

⁴⁴ P.L Bérenger, *Le Peuple instruit par ses propres vertus ; ou Cours complet d'instructions et d'anecdotes recueillies dans nos meilleurs Auteurs, et rassemblées pour consacrer les belles actions du peuple, et l'encourager à en renouveler les exemples.*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Paris, 1787a).

⁴⁵ Anonymous, *L'école du Bonheur* (Paris, 1782). p. xiii.

⁴⁶ S.A Dagues de Clairfontaine, *Bienfaisance française ou Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de ce siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1778).

⁴⁷ The expression is from Ch. Aubertin, *Revue des deux mondes*, nov 1871.

⁴⁸ Madame Marie Le Prince de Beaumont, *Le Magasin des pauvres, artisans, et gens de la campagne* (Lyon, 1768).

⁴⁹ Jean-Jacques Filassier, *Eraste ou l'ami de la jeunesse* (Paris, 1773).

⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 256.

⁵¹ François-Thomas-Marie de Baculard d' Arnaud, *Délassements de l'homme sensible, ou anecdotes diverses* (Paris, 1785). p.87-88.

⁵² Anonymous. p.198-199 ; P.L Bérenger, *Le Peuple instruit par ses propres vertus ; ou Cours complet d'instructions et d'anecdotes recueillies dans nos meilleurs Auteurs, et rassemblées pour consacrer les*

in this literature. One of the most frequently used examples is that of Molière confronted by the honesty of a beggar giving back a gold piece mistakenly handed to him. Confronted by a poor man sending money to his adoptive mother but refusing all alms, the narrator exclaimed “with Molière I say, ‘where on earth does honesty dwell?’”⁵³. Considering individual cases revealed the fact that the social division which, according to the old schema, was allegedly equivalent to a moral and natural division, in reality undermined this proposed coincidence. Everything happens as if class division was fundamentally just and corresponded to a moral hierarchy of people, but also as if this perfect and just system had some failures. A ruined aristocrat to whom her servant had sacrificed everything, including his own health, exclaimed: “Ambroise, virtuous Ambroise, you have been placed in an estate so unworthy of you!”⁵⁴. Admiration for individuals from the lower classes did not lead to revised generalizing prejudices about the class, but to regret for the single individual who belonged to it by mistake. Some doubts were yet instilled about this idea of an equivalence between social and natural orders.

Castillon’s text, which won the academic competition of 1780, gives testimony to this very decline of the idea of a perfect correlation between nature and society. There is an attempt to think of society through categories distinct from those that could be directly observed. Castillon invented a category of “*peuple*”, which was by no means equivalent to any existing social classification. His definition went through the already established classifications:

Usually, what is meant by *peuple* is the most numerous part of the nation who, being continuously occupied with mechanical, coarse and painful work, has no part in the government nor in any position; no attention is paid as to whether among this *peuple* there might be individuals who, in spite of their estate have more judgment, more uprightness than one who despises them and puts them in a class that would be more suitable for himself⁵⁵.

Castillon depicted the opposition between a minister and an artisan; the first being very far away from the lowest ranks (that is to say from the “*peuple*” as usually defined), the second set aside by prejudices. But if the second happened to be superior to the first in terms of reason and in his capacity to dominate his passions, for Castillon this very reason had to “render to its right place what human arrangements had disturbed”. This reason then had to create a category which would give a place to those who had none in the social order

Let us call *peuple*, with no respect to rank or to wealth, those who have received from nature a weak and narrow mind: all those who, naturally gifted with judgment and penetration, do not use or do not know how to use them, either because of a poor education or because they are restrained by their indolence or their passions; all those who, having cultivated pleasant talents have left their reason uncultivated; finally all those who, like the Blind, need a guide and cannot do without the Enlightened, in fear that they would fall from precipice to precipice if they persisted in doing without; in a word, all those for whom it would be

belles actions du peuple, et l’encourager à en renouveler les exemples., 2 vols., vol. 2 (Paris, 1787b). p. 203.

⁵³ Anonymous. p.147 ; Bérenger, *Le peuple instruit*. p. 203.

⁵⁴ Bérenger, *Le peuple instruit*. p. 74.

⁵⁵ Krauss, éd. p. 22.

better to be led rather than to lead themselves, although they often persist in doing so with an invincible and fatal doggedness⁵⁶.

Thus, this new category of the “*peuple*” did not match a purely natural order (since education was taken into account), nor a purely social order (whoever is submerged by his laziness or his passions can be put in the category “*peuple*” however high-ranking he might be). Two classifications that were once thought of as parallel or coinciding in the 1754’s texts, no longer matched but were overlapping. One paradigm was being abandoned for another. Castillon was not isolated. His definition had an equivalent in the very same Berlin competition. An anonymous author declared that “fortune or rank, those ordinary sources of distinction” were not adequate to draw the line between “*peuple*” and those who did not belong to it. And he added: “one has already seen genius shining in civil obscurity, and greatness demeaned by those whose faculties had not been exalted by this elevation strange to their soul.” This invention of a new category, and of new social hierarchy, was particularly provocative if one compares it to the reasoning of the 1750’s. And it remains so, even if we have to note that Castillon’s discourse still contained ambiguities, which are testimony to the difficulty of departing from the old ways of thinking about the social world. In effect, almost at the end of the text, he noted that “only a few individuals from the ‘*peuple*’, gifted by nature with an extraordinary genius, will be raised beyond their class and understanding where darkness was enshrined”⁵⁷. But, according to his category of “*peuple*”, the individuals he was dealing with in this sentence should not have been encompassed in this popular class: by definition their genius excluded them from it. But Castillon seems here to have forgotten that his category was abstract and was transcending social differences; he seems to be influenced by the habitual vision for which “*peuple*” (understood as the lower class) is equivalent to darkness. Still, as a whole, his dissertation testifies that the old way of understanding the “*peuple*” as a category both natural and social was dying. If the author of this proposition got the first prize in the academic competition of 1780, it means that the idea had become acceptable in the last few decades of the Ancien Régime. The *Dictionnaire universel françois et latin, vulgairement appelé Dictionnaire de Trévoux* also testifies to this evolution in the manners of classifying the social world. Although it partly copied Furetière, the Trévoux, in the 1771 edition, did not include any mention of any riot-prone characteristic of the lower orders, nor any allusion to physical features. The lower orders and the wealthy were still confronted one with the other, by quoting Montesquieu and his *Persian Letters*: “The ‘*peuple*’ is an animal who sees and hears, but who never thinks”⁵⁸. Here we are still in the heart of the naturalizing model, with the adoption of the animal pattern and the exclusion of reason. Yet, the aphorism was counterbalanced by La Bruyère’s: in the moralist one could find again the destabilization of classifications given value by Castillon and by the Jesuit dictionary. “People from the Court despise the “*peuple*”, wrote the Trévoux, and very often they are *peuple* themselves”⁵⁹. It is not surprising that the idea came out quite early in the text of a moralist, whose task is, by definition, to observe individual characteristics. But such questioning of the coincidence between the natural and the social order is more

⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 23.

⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 42.

⁵⁸ 2^e édition, lettre CXI.

⁵⁹ La Bruyère’s exact expression went like this : « Ces hommes si grands ou par leur naissance, ou par leur faveur, ou par leurs dignités, ces têtes si fortes et si habiles, ces femmes si polies et si spirituelles, tous méprisent le peuple, et ils sont peuple ». *Les Caractères*, « Des Grands », 53.

intriguing in a dissertation and in a normative text (as eighteenth-century dictionaries are).

The end of the theological model is also clear in a new way of understanding nature and human laws. All in all, in the two academic competitions, there was the idea of manipulation – a trick played by nature for the competitors of 1754, but a possible trick played by human beings for those of 1780. In 1754, the greater majority of the candidates considered that human laws were a necessary answer to a natural order: they were like a remedy for natural human weaknesses, for human passions and unlimited desires. Laws were not understood as a choice given to humans in general and to rulers in particular; they came close to being inevitable, necessary and had no autonomy but a fake one, faced with a natural order whose accomplishment they permitted. The strange discourse IX pursued this logic to its end, by illustrating this development with the example of ceremonial laws, which the anonymous author considered as “having always existed”. For him, “God is the author of Laws”⁶⁰: he limited the channel between nature and law to the smallest size possible, but was not even satisfied with the idea that the latter was a consequence of the first, he even put them in a direct equivalence. Through a subtle manipulation, by compelling man to establish laws (this would create classifications and inequality), nature completed its own ends – which is the equilibrium of the world. Human laws and institutions were involved in this process and had to undergo this manipulation. In 1780, on the contrary, the question of a trick being played was relocated and the manipulative process was no more in nature’s power but in men’s hands, by the intermediary of their laws. “Is it useful to fool the people?” – that is to say: is it legitimate for men to use their manipulative powers to organize society? At this point, law was no more understood as a consequence of nature but as what could structure nature. Lorinet expressed this new idea strongly:

One of the most mischievous ideas that has been spread among the lower orders is that God would like to have Poor and Wealthy. (...) Cruel governments do not bring dishonor on our poverty which is your responsibility⁶¹.

It was then clear that laws were human decisions and that social classifications, far from being natural necessities, corresponded to political choices.

Romulus’ story, told by an unknown author in 1754 and by Castillon in 1780, exemplifies this evolution since it was very differently told at the two dates. In 1754, Romulus was an ambitious man, led by the desire to rule by himself⁶²: the whole story relied then on necessary passions. For Castillon, a quarter of a century later, Romulus was no more the slave of his passions, instead he was a clever legislator who resorted to a lie (his invented descent from the god Mars) in order to organize a nation of heroes: he was the one who invented and gave laws to discipline and classify some shepherds and undisciplined bandits⁶³. A human history thought out according to the model of a natural or divine history (where classifications cannot then be challenged) had been succeeded by a history that was to be made.

⁶⁰ Dijon. p. 160.

⁶¹ Krauss, éd. p. 54.

⁶² Dijon. p. 54.

⁶³ Krauss, éd. p. 26.

Conclusion

Between the beginning of the 1750's and the beginning of the 1780's, in the eyes of the aristocracy and well-read bourgeoisie, the social world had thus lost its transparency: social categories were not sufficient anymore to describe the nature of the people who were part of them. One had gone from an essentialist conceptualization of social identities (where qualities of the parts were logically deduced from a postulated natural and divine quality of the whole) to an anxious bewilderment in the face of individual cases which – as it was observed – did not fit the old classifications. New categories, molded from individual characteristics, had to be found. We move from a theological classification to the beginnings of political thought, from natural history to a society to be built.

The gap was wide and this article does not pretend to do more than show its existence in an homogeneous corpus of academic dissertations – the results however are nonetheless supported by comparisons with everyday life discourses or with a new literature of *exempla*. It has been argued that one of the sources of this evolution could have been the new taste for observation and the sentimental movement which both carried a new interest for observation and single facts, single instances – which was at the basis of the destabilization of the postulated coincidence between natural categories and social classifications. Yet, the detailed elucidation, of paths and reasons which have led from modalities of classifications used in the 1750's to those we observed in the 1780's, is still to be done.