

# The Undefinable Bourgeoisie

## An Object of Study for Ethnologists

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An enigma in the research on the bourgeoisie is the lack of definition. Fieldwork as done by the two authors in Paris provides ample evidence of a specific social group answering to the popular acknowledgement of the word. The non-definition of the bourgeoisie is an intrinsic attribute of its structure, tied to change, and of its ideology, burdened with a derogatory term. The bourgeoisie should not be enclosed by boundaries contrary to its essence. Its existence cannot be denied and it can be reached by appropriate ethnological description and analysis.

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At first sight the bourgeoisie, an integral part of European society, appears to be a proper and important topic of study for local ethnology.

But, very soon, the problem of definition arises: "What is the bourgeoisie?", "Which bourgeoisie do you want to study?" It is enough for a social scientist to want to systematically tackle the concept for its reality to become blurred.

According to the dictionary Larousse, a definition is "the utterance of the essential properties of an object". History tells us that the properties attached to the bourgeoisie vary according to the time and the place considered. Everyone understands the term of *bourgeoisie* but it can evoke very different meanings. The vagueness of this popular word does, in fact, reflect the ambiguity of bourgeois reality.

The question becomes: is it justified for social scientists or humanists to study such an inconstant reality? Many historians have done it,<sup>1</sup> some ethnologists as well, including Jonas Frykman and Orvar Löfgren in Sweden (1979, 1985).

The two authors of this article started their

research independently on the upper middle class of Paris.<sup>2</sup> When comparing their fieldworks, meaningful details began to form a coherent social world. In the Paris of 1986, the bourgeoisie appeared as a clearly delimited entity. It is found within the larger statistical category of *cadres supérieurs*<sup>3</sup> but with characteristics of its own.

An ethnographical approach therefore seems appropriate for an investigation of this social category, which is so difficult to encompass by any definition.

First we would like to present evidence from our respective fieldworks. It will then be easier to analyse the obstacles to a clear definition. The study is focused on the French bourgeoisie.

### A coherent cultural world

Two portraits will introduce the reader to the bourgeoisie in Paris and lead him to some of the deeper structures as encountered in our research.

*When the cutlery is not straight, you cannot relax*

M. Guillaume, a high civil servant, comes home every day for lunch, boulevard Saint-Germain. His five children do the same. The table is laid in the dining-room. A blue linen table-cloth, plain white china plates, ordinary glasses, stainless steel cutlery of Scandinavian design, the setting is simple but neat and pleasant. "Quand les couverts sont de travers, ce n'est pas une détente", M. Guillaume likes to say.

Years of childhood in refined homes, the unexpressed assertion that "what is beautiful is often morally right" have shaped M. Guillaume's appeal for an orderly table-setting. It has become a second nature and he suffers if the meal is not correctly presented in the dining-room. *Correctly* for him means balance between aesthetics and simplicity, pleasure and duty. This can be a difficult balance to strike, difficulty which, in itself, becomes a token of *distinction* (Bourdieu, 1979). The cutlery has to be straight and of rather exclusive design but it can be of stainless steel to facilitate the washing. The plates are plain white but of china. The meal will be short and the food simple but it has to take place in the dining-room. The meal is a performance and it demands a proper scenery. The silver displayed on the sidetable, the pictures on the wall, the polished furniture, the order of the room call forth the ceremonial aspect of eating. The kitchen is too much linked to just plain food, the confusion of the preparation, smells, pots and pans; kitchen is nature while dining-room is culture.

*A pair of jeans and an emerald ring*

June 1986: a large house surrounded by a pleasant garden, with a gate at the entrance. We are in the suburbs of Paris, on the West side where many parks and castles remind of the greatness of the past, Saint-Cloud, Versailles, Saint Germain-en-Laye. One of the authors (B.L.W.) is on her way to an interview with Mme Armand, one of the fifty young women from a private school in Paris whom she is going to meet for her research.

Mme Armand greets the ethnologist outside the entrance door. It is rather early in the

morning. She is dressed in jeans and sweater. The jeans are well-cut and classical, the sweater is made of Shetland wool, its soft grey colour in harmony with the pale pink of the collar of the blouse underneath. She wears low black leather shoes. Her chestnut hair is straight, half-long and held in place by a velvet ribbon. Hardly any make-up, a slight sunburn. On her finger, an emerald ring surrounded by diamonds.

The young woman gathers the distinctive signs of her group as often noticed by the field-worker. The casualty of the garments is neutralised by an array of subtle details: proper jeans, "there are jeans and jeans", as another young woman commented, not too fashionable, not too original; a comfortable sweater but with the refinement of quality and colour which gives a touch of elegance, an easy hairstyle but within limits; just enough make-up and sunburn to enhance the complexion but without any trace of exaggeration. The desired effect is a subtle play between comfort and elegance, femininity and neutrality, simplicity and distinction.

The engagement ring came back once, twice, many times, throughout the fieldwork. The same type but on different hands. It is a highly symbolic emblem. It symbolises alliance between two individuals and two families. It embodies a whole habitus in its esthetics. It expresses the personal feelings of the fiancé who offers it but his choice takes place within the range of the unexpressed rules of his group: diamonds as an expression of purity, a large coloured gem for elegance and value, a setting made of platinum or white gold for distinction. The stone is often given by the family, expressing its appurtenance to the Establishment. "Il ne suffit pas d'avoir de la fortune, il faut en avoir héritée", a respondent pointed out. Such a gem, transmitted from one generation of women to another one, creates a bond in-between these women, and between them and their new family.

From the precious ring to the sweater bought at the local shop, the whole figure of this representative of the bourgeoisie reflects an elaborated feeling for nuance. The subtlety of the signs are part of a strategy. It is meant

Already at the entrance a few antique objects designate the position of the family.



to rally the consecrated members and to exclude the uninitiated outsiders.

*Family and work, two pillars of the bourgeoisie*

These two portraits express a style of life which we have met again and again in our fieldwork. In this external picture we can denote a social category which maintains its boundaries by a requirement for nuance and sophistication.

But specific ways of eating and dressing would have no meaning without deeper struc-

tures to guarantee the elaboration of this social entity.

The bourgeoisie, being denied an official place, is doomed to renew itself at each generation. Its structures must therefore be dynamic. Two of the main components of the bourgeois structures evident in our fieldwork are family and work.

A large family is an essential asset in the high bourgeoisie. *Family* is a term referred to in everyday life, *il fait partie d'une grande famille*,

*les fêtes de famille, la famille éloignée*, and is therefore used in preference to the more exact term of *kinship*. It is not necessary to have many brothers and sisters to be part of a large family on account of the different practices combined to make use of family bonds: genealogical knowledge, common estates, celebrations and patronage.

Genealogy has become a contemporary pre-occupation after the success of *Roots*. But for the upper circles of the bourgeoisie, as for the aristocracy, it is an ancient practice.

B. Le Wita (1985: 15–26) has studied familial memory in two social categories in Paris. In a mixed social sample of 148 persons, from one of Paris districts, the 13th, more than half could give the name of 26 to 100 relatives and eight could quote more than 100. In this sample, ten families belonged to the upper class according to their way of living. In five of those the respondents could quote between 50 and 80 relatives, in the other five families, it was 150 to 300.

Peasantry keeps contact with a very large network of relatives of the same generations (Segalen, 1984, Zonabend, 1980) from whom it can draw direct benefit; the bourgeoisie goes up to four or five generations back into the past. To recall a great-grandfather as builder of a prosperous industry, Uncle Charles as a well-known writer and Aunt Lucie as organiser of care to the wounded in 1914 reaffirms the family status. It is much more than symbolic; it has practical consequences: the young member of such a family starts with a place in the society of today because of what happened yesterday. He will merely have to work to secure it for the rest of his life and to guarantee its transmission to the next generation.

When M. Georges got married he gave his wife a notebook with the name and address of 150 relatives. It was a way to rapidly make her familiar with all the persons she was going to meet or hear about in the years to come. Through a booklet she was introduced into the *habitus* of the familial community which was going to be hers for the rest of her life.

Another very meaningful landmark for a bourgeois is the family property. It can be a large house in a town or a country-house.

A district of Paris, the 6th arrondissement, was selected by one author (A.S.) as a bourgeois quarter because of such family properties. It presents many examples of houses bought by a successful ancestor and which are nowadays divided between the kins. During the enormous expansion of Paris in the second half of the 19th century, rows of high standard houses were built along the new boulevards. They were bought by the *grands bourgeois* of the time partly for their own family and partly for speculation. Still today several families of brothers and sisters, near and distant cousins, belonging to several generations, live next to one another. François Tollu (1972) writes about the *forteresses familiales*, and mentions *les Tollu de la rue Vaneau* and *les Tollu de la rue de Rennes*.

This proximity of housing gives many occasions for contacts, exchange of children, celebrating birthdays, common administration of the building. In the entrance hall of such a house, in June 1984, the announcement of the death of an uncle was pinned on the row of letter-boxes. It was the most effective way to inform the six kin families living in the house in time for the funeral. Internal telephones are sometimes installed so as to facilitate the care of young children or of sick parents. This kind of housing creates a kind of vertical village, with its solidarity but also with its potential for conflicts and friction. Several young women complained of the social control they were subjected to but added that it was very difficult to loosen these bounds. Besides the very great financial advantage offered by a family flat, their husbands who had been brought up in this collective, took it for granted. The children themselves became dependent on it at an early age. Edouard, friend of little Benoit who lives in such a family fortress, dreams of this kind of life. For him it appears like a perpetual summer, with lots of cousins around and a grandmother as an affectionate authority in the background. Whatever the positive and negative sides of this collective life, it contributes to the development of a common *habitus* but also of a feeling of self-sufficiency. The outside world seems further away and it is easier to forget its threats. The more people are to share



Several generations have been familiar to the daily use of silver and china in the dining-room. It now comes into use only for festive occasions but it is essential to feel at ease in this decor and every Sunday lunch, every child's birthday are such occasions.

a pattern of life, the stronger they feel. Jonas Frykman (1985) describes the children of the Swedish bourgeoisie before the war as being educated under a cheese-bell. A similar expression was used by an elderly woman of the *Sixième* to characterize her childhood in a family of solicitors gathered in some houses around the square Sèvres-Babylone: "Nous avons été élevés en serre". The children of today are more exposed to the world outside by mass-media, travelling and school than their grandparents, but the affective ties developed in childhood become an efficient device of segregation, however unconscious it can be.

Special occasions, like holidays or family celebrations, have an intensity which enhances their message. Family estates or large homes in town makes it easy to share these occasions with the extended family.

The informal atmosphere of summers spent

with large numbers of cousins creates a common capital of pleasant memories and small traditions. In old houses in the country it is usual to accumulate tokens from the past, the portraits of ancestors, a box of love-letters from the turn of the century or the last horse-carriage of 40 years ago. There are games and jokes connected with them and it binds the new generations together by the same references to a common past but also by the shared experience of good moments. F. Tollu devotes a whole chapter of his book on family reminiscences to a description of holidays at the estates of his grandparents on both sides. To have a past materialised in stones, objects, and in eminent ancestors has become especially valuable to the bourgeoisie. It plays the role that knowledge used to play as a means to distance this group from lower classes. Knowledge has become available to much larger categories but a past cannot be acquired.

Not only houses or estates gather cousins and friends, it can also be a resort as Houlgate or Villers in Normandy, so often quoted by these Parisian families. The seaside became fashionable at the turn of the century and many of the prosperous families who bought their house on the boulevard Saint-Germain or Malesherbes, rue de Rennes or rue de Rivoli, also acquired large villas on the coast. To have a part in such a family villa, still today, is a sign of appurtenance to the right circles. And, of course, it means weekends and summers spent with friends sharing the same background. "Combien de cousins, combien de capitaines sont partis là-bas joyeux passer un week-end de leurs fiançailles ou simplement une après-midi de tennis et sont revenus plus joyeux encore!" (Tollu, 1972: 164).

Family celebrations have a similar effect, renewal of social contacts between kins, elaboration of common behaviour and tastes. In the spring 1985, a class of twelve-year old pupils in a school of the *Sixième* was asked to write about their favourite meal. Many choose a large family meeting, a christening, Christmas or the New Year, at the grandmother's home. Stéphanie concludes her essay: "Ce que j'aime bien dans ces repas c'est de se réunir tous en famille car dans ma famille on est 8 enfants et 25 petits enfants alors on peut pas se voir tout le temps il y a beaucoup de cousins que je ne connais pas et chaque année avec ce repas on se connaît un peu mieux".

This liking for large family meetings is not special to the bourgeoisie but the privilege of this class is to be able to keep large houses or flats making such family gatherings easier.

Another effect of a large family is the value of the contact network it represents. M. Imard, for example, enumerates among his relatives a physician and a surgeon, both used as medical advisers by the family, an *inspecteur des finances* who can act as tax consultant and an *architecte en chef des Monuments Historiques* who gave valuable advice for the renovation of the family castle.

One of the authors (B.L.W.) witnessed a case of effective help due to the existence of a large family network. One evening a young man in

his thirties came to his father to tell him he had just been put out of work. An intensive exchange of telephone calls ensued putting to use the expertise of members of the family, i.e. a judge, a lawyer and a personnel officer. Within two hours a strategy for the search of a new position had been laid out. "In such cases", the father explained, "you have to act pretty quickly. It does not take long for an unemployed young man to lose confidence and become passive".

Family networks are kept effective with the help of the three above quoted devices. The genealogical memory is a steadfast reminder of *Who is who*. Living in the same building gives opportunity to meet informally and celebrating together makes it easier to ask for favors.

The social capital represented by the family is noteworthy but it would be inadequate if not combined with work. The bourgeoisie is not the aristocracy of ancient times. It is not enough to be born. A member who fails is easily ejected. The status of the bourgeois is questioned at each generation. Nowadays more than ever. The family gives the young bourgeois a structure to stand on but it is his personal achievement which guarantees a successful continuation of his status. The fate of the Parisian bourgeois of today is to work, and to work very hard. The dividends can then be enormous.

Work can be considered under two main aspects, education and profession. The authors being women have directed their fieldwork in the first place towards women and, for those, education comes before profession. The educative concern of the bourgeois family is therefore in focus in our study.

The value of work, most often presented as a moral duty, is first instilled in the child under the form of scholarly education. His mother has a decisive role in this process. Both her methods of education and the level of her knowledge will be put to the test to insure a proper schooling.

In the *Sixième*, a part of Paris with a strong intellectual tradition, it is no exaggeration to say that the mother's success in life is in direct relation to the success of her children at school. To lay out a proper educative strategy for each child is one of her main concerns. Every year in February–March an intense activity develops





The family daily meals have been moved to the kitchen. The rustic oak lends a warmth to the otherwise chilly atmosphere of kitchen equipment.

among mothers in order to prepare for next year's schoolstart. Nine years old Pierre has had three comfortable years in a nice little school. Now it is time for him to apply to *Collège Stanislas*, a much tougher one, so as to increase his chances to get into one of the *grandes écoles* when he is nineteen or twenty. Amélie will leave her friends and move to *Paul Claudel* to get first-range intellectual and social training. Excellency in mathematics has replaced fluency in Latin as the symbol of the élite at school. Marie, now studying to be a low-grade teacher, has had to work very hard at school; she was expected to get her final exams in the mathematics section so as to follow the family tradition. Her five brothers and sisters had done it before her.

The entrance into a *grande école*, the university élite schools of the university, either private or public, is equivalent to an admission to nobility in the 18th century. Once there, a place in the sun is secured for life with the difference that the effort has to be repeated by

each generation. Mme Dardois, wife, daughter and granddaughter of *polytechniciens* (Polytechnique is considered the first among these schools) is as near as one can be to a complete success as a mother in the *Sixième*: of her four sons, three are, or have been accepted at some *grande école*, *Polytechnique*, *Centrale* and *l'Agro*, while the fourth is on his way to the one for economy, *H.E.C.*

Mme Renaud, a lively and charming old lady of eighty, takes paying-guests when none of her own grandchildren needs the available student room. She extends her educative preoccupation to these foreign students: the monthly fee includes the obligation to talk culture at the dining-table. Of her eight children, all the boys went to élite schools but none of the girls. She considered it unnecessary.

The young girls of today take exams. The *baccalauréat* is a must, an élite school afterwards is applauded, but a good intellectual, rather than professional, training on university level is considered sufficient by most par-

ents. In the traditional bourgeois families, even today, marriage remains the predominant aim for the girls and few will carry on with a full-time profession once they are married. Nevertheless the demanding intellectual education they will have gone through is not considered unnecessary. It has two essential effects. It is an important asset in the matrimonial strategy and, secondly but no less important, it helps them to educate their children in a scholarly tradition.

If besides caring for her husband and her children, the young woman can afford some time for an occupation, so much the better. It can be paid work or not, this is not so important. Mme Biron is doing interior decoration; at first it was on an amateur basis, just for her friends, but it has now developed into professional work on a free-lance basis. Mme Tallier, who has a university degree in economics, has a part-time work with her brother-in-law. Mme Adémard makes *smocks* (embroidery) for dresses which she sells to her friends. Mme Bourdon organises lectures and guided tours to great houses around Paris. For all these women, professional work never holds priority over their duties as wife and mother. As a mother, a woman must be there when her child needs extra help with his schoolwork. As a wife, she has to be able to go along with her husband when he travels. And, of course, during the summer spending two months at the family's estate in the country is imperative in order to guarantee pleasant and meaningful holidays to all members of the family. Availability is a major duty for a woman. Mme Naulin summarizes it in an interview: "La femme doit être rigoureusement présente quand la famille est présente". It is an essential factor in the strategy of transmission.

Exceptions are, and always have been, accepted but, as Mme Rateau points out, "If a married woman works, it really must be in a high position". She quotes a pediatrician and a museum intendant, women of the bourgeoisie now retired but who both had a profession and a family.

In the progressive section of the same bourgeoisie, the order of priority has been changed but not entirely upset. The woman of today

should have a profession, preferably as a lawyer, a physician, a psychologist or a journalist. The easiness for social contacts given by a bourgeois education and the availability of large homes and country houses uphold nets of friendship among these young professional women. This in turn is a most valuable help for the care of the children and the recurrent problem of holidays.

Family and work, two interrelated means of perpetuating the bourgeoisie. The aristocrat was born, the bourgeois is trained. He is taught to be a leader.

Numerous signs of everyday life betray a bourgeois, a bourgeois home, a bourgeois family. They constitutes the raw material from which the habits emerges, slightly different at each generation. A controlled association of tradition and change guarantees the continued existence of the bourgeoisie. Seen in the streets, in the schools, in the homes, the bourgeoisie is a reality. But the term corresponds to different realities depending by whom it is used. There is a dissociation between the subjective experience of the bourgeois identity by the bourgeoisie itself and the image the external world has of it.

## The impossible definition

The ethnologist, when writing on the bourgeoisie, presents an outsider's image. At first sight, it should not be difficult to give an appropriate definition as it is usual with any main concept connected with a research project. The question here is that it might be better not to define one's object of study. The obstacles to a definition of the bourgeoisie relate both to the structure of this social group and its ideology.

### *An elusive structure*

The term of *bourgeoisie* as a specific denomination has never been officially accepted by the group it currently represents. Such a designation would enclose it into a definite structure, contrary to its essence. When we study the history of the bourgeoisie, we can only ascertain its variability through time and space (Pernoud, 1981). The conditions required to be



considered a bourgeois according to the popular sense of the word have successively given priority to different attributes. In the Middle Ages, participation in the affairs of the town was essential. In the XVIIth century, a rising merchant class appeared while in the XVIIIth education and social standard was adamant (Barber, 1955). The industrial era pushed forward the image of the good family father, having the security of money but anxious over his status.<sup>4</sup> Nowadays, more than money and social standards, it is the consciousness of belonging to the proper circles, *un bon milieu*, which would rather denote a bourgeois.

The criteria vary, the model changes, two constants remain: the non-definition coupled with the awareness of belonging to a better world.

The non-definition of the bourgeois is bypassed by references to what are the obvious characteristics of a bourgeois at a given time and place. Molière makes a caricature of the “Bourgeois Gentilhomme” through his way of speaking, dressing and behaving. When in the

XVIIIth century a bourgeois of Montpellier wants to describe his town and its internal hierarchies, he can only place the bourgeoisie in relation to the aristocracy and to the common people, still not hesitating to use the term. Robert Darton (1985) comments that this anonymous author from Montpellier uses a concept of social class in which meals are more significant than work in identifying the new leaders of the town.

Roland Barthes (1970: 224) writes that the bourgeoisie has submitted its status to an operation of *ex-nomination*, “la bourgeoisie se définit comme *la classe sociale qui ne veut pas être nommée*”.

What is accepted on a national level as the French way of living is in fact the bourgeois norm, the norm of the dominant culture:

“Les normes bourgeoises sont vécues comme les lois évidentes d’un ordre naturel ...

La défection du nom bourgeois n’est donc pas un phénomène illusoire, accidentel, accessoire, naturel ou insignifiant: il est l’idéologie même, le mouvement par lequel la bourgeoisie trans-



Balance between modern comfort and classical refinement characterises the sitting-room of a bourgeois home.

forme la réalité du monde en image du monde, l'Histoire en Nature" (id.: 229).

The bourgeoisie as a class is ambiguous, both open and closed. It is an open class in the way it has gone through deep changes in social, economic and political life, maintaining its privileges while proclaiming the non-hereditary essence of human life and, thus, compelled to reascertain its status at each generation. As the conditions of appurtenance are not official, the rules of admission cannot be official either. Recruitment is a constant process but it is not free. The bourgeoisie is a closed society in its way of raising an insidious system of signs of belonging, the well-known *distinction*. This system establishes the norms for what is considered as proper, norms which become an ideal for all social classes. It is *la fondation du goût légitime* (Bourdieu, 1979). It is taught to children as early as possible so as to become part of the primary habitus, i.e. the most basic part in the formation of personality. This is an effective way to restrict the membership. Few learn to master the proper codes as adult. An easier path is to provide one's own children with the required structures and in this way guarantee the access of the young generation to the status of bourgeois. Moving up the social ladder is part of the bourgeois system.

Once at the higher levels, it becomes important to mark the distance to those further down. The process of distinguishing oneself is then presented as part of the essence, *se distinguer* becomes *être distingué*. At the time of the *noblesse de robe*, it was easy; the bourgeois could buy a title and was then on the safe side; the descendants would be *bien nés*. Without a system of this form, to differentiate oneself has to be done by alterable details in the way of living, table-manners, speech, taste ... An essential aspect of the strategy is never to tie the destiny of the group to only one époque or to one form of government or power.

If the bourgeoisie has survived as a privileged group through the centuries it is due both to its capacity for adaptation and to alternating between times of creativity and times of conservatism. It is very bourgeois to keep to the tradition built up by previous generations in a prosperous family. But it is no less

bourgeois to find new ways and to innovate. We have examples in the French Revolution, bourgeois if anything, in the new industrial development of the XIXth century, or in many of the humanistic or scientific achievements of recent centuries.

*"I, a bourgeois? You are mistaken!"*

Several ideological standpoints also raise obstacles to a definition of the bourgeoisie.

"Le mot bourgeois est devenu pour les bourgeois une injure. Ils veulent une définition qui ménagent, sur la sortie, une belle porte à tambour, avec blunt et groom. Le mot de Flaubert, "le bourgeois pense d'une façon basse", les satisfait pleinement. "Façon basse, dit le notaire, il n'est donc pas question de moi!" (Berl, 1931).

The term *bourgeois* has a derogatory connotation. "Paysanne tant qu'on voudra, bourgeoise jamais!", a lady of the high society is said to have exclaimed at the time of the French Revolution, when she was advised to retire to a small town (Babeau, 1886: 389). From Molière to May 1968, French society has found many occasions to accuse the bourgeois not so much for its economical privileges as for the affected character of its way of life. This critique has become so banal that, at times, the non-conformists have tried to rehabilitate the term *bourgeois*. In a programme on French television,<sup>5</sup> the producer, Jacques Merlino, gathered several persons who explained in which way they considered themselves to be bourgeois. The work was purposely given a provocative content. It was fifteen years after 1968 and one felt the need to measure the distance achieved in social evolution.

In fact the bourgeoisie is, and this again is part of its ambiguity, the class which is trying to impose its rule of life as the norm while its problem is that it has no legal ground for existence.

Historically, the bourgeoisie is seen by the aristocracy as a usurper without natural or legitimate rights. This basic weakness determines its attitude and consequently its place in the economic world. For several centuries the bourgeoisie compared itself to the aristocracy. As the aristocracy refused to share the value of



Regularity for the gathering of all members of the family around the dining-table is based no longer on a daily rhythm but on a weekly one and Sunday is often the elected day.

honour, the bourgeoisie embraced work and duty instead. The author of the most successful cooking-book in the XVIIIth century, François Pierre Varenne, writes in this introduction: "Bien que ma condition ne me rende pas capable d'un coeur *heroïque* (our italics), elle me donne pourtant assez de ressentiment pour ne pas oublier mon devoir" (Varenne, 1651, 1983: 110). Two hundred years later, Albert Babeau (1886: IV) sees honesty as a kind of vulgarisation of honour, typical of the bourgeois: "Toutes leurs vertus ne se résument-elles pas dans l'honnêteté, cette forme journalière de l'honneur, qui ne se révèle point par des saillies extraordinaires, mais par la continuité sans défaillance d'une conduite droite et régulière".

The same kind of justification is used to counter the attacks from the working-class. There the bourgeois is not an usurper but an exploiter. The bourgeois cannot deny his prosperity. To be what he is requires three sorts of capital: a financial capital which guarantees him the necessary standard of living; a social

capital which ties him to power and, finally, a cultural capital which makes possible the use of financial and social assets and its transmission to the next generation. Pierre Bourdieu (1985) makes use of the concept of different sorts of capital; Herbert Gans (1974) states that the three characters of "high culture" are income, occupation and education whereas Anthony Giddens (1981) underlines the importance of differential life chances and educational mobility. The different presentations of the same reality by these three sociologists underline the uncontested privileges of this social class. And in fact the bourgeois sees himself as an essential part of the economical, social and cultural machine. But he sees this situation as a justification more than as an accusation. In the same way as the notary could ignore the accusation of Flaubert, the hard-working capitalist can argue: "Exploiter? Rentier? then it is not my case, I work hard". The bourgeois legitimates himself by his attachment to the values of work and moral, in fact puritanism.



From the little schoolgirl's embroidered dress to the emerald engagement ring an acquired elegance is part of the strategy of distinction.

The bourgeois, not being imprisoned by the limits of a definition, does not fit any more the picture of the capitalist, which is still being thrust in his face today. He sees no contradiction between possessing a certain amount of capital and receiving a salary. It is possible that some members of the *new class*, which would correspond to *cadres supérieurs* in France might see the bourgeois style of life as an antithesis to their position as wage-earners.<sup>6</sup> But the true bourgeois does not consider it in this manner, his capacity for adaptation and assimilation has taught him that no setting is definitive.

Faced with the contradictory accusations from the aristocracy – striving to social brilliance – and of the working-class – making the others work instead of him –, the bourgeois has to keep an unstable balance: to distinguish oneself without showing off, to maintain an increasing wealth within morally acceptable limits, and to manipulate power without monopoly. Studies about the bourgeoisie makes a great use of terms such as *balance*, *middle way*, *in-between*. The American sociologists, Peter and Brigitte Berger (1984), have as under-titel to their book about the bourgeois family: *Capturing the Middle Ground*. The bourgeois is a man of compromise.



For the child of the bourgeoisie to be able to play at ease in pretty clothes and in the sitting-room is part of education.

It is this very middle way which is the core of another recurrent criticism, this time from the intellectuals. The world of consensus, of unexpressed truths, of common sense, of comfort and tradition which secures the survival of the bourgeoisie is in direct opposition to the ideology of creativity, originality and favoured by the intellectuals. In most cases, they themselves come from the bourgeoisie. Heir and user of its cultural capital, the intellectual often is in opposition to the way of life of his group of origin which appears to him as a impediment quenching his creative needs. He legitimises the distance he takes from his peers by making a caricature of the bourgeois and, worse, puts a label on them. Jacques Ellul calls the different chapters of his book, *La métamorphose du bourgeois*, with such expressions: *le grotesque*, *le vautour*, *le salaud*.

The intellectuals have an active part in perpetuating the bourgeoisie. By putting into question the established order, they force the dynamic members of this group to find new ways of living, to achieve a new balance of power, to put on a new costume, better adapted to the present day. In return, the traditional section of the bourgeoisie keeps alive the old structures. In case of failure in his search for new ways the rebel can always return to the

core. He knows the codes, his primary habitus is still there and he usually has kept affective ties. Whatever the means of criticism, perspicuous distance, plain aggression or elegant satire, there is a highly sentimental involvement between the critic and his object of criticism, as it is a part of himself. Hence the character of taboo and fascination attached to the study of the bourgeoisie.

The aim of the bourgeoisie is to perpetuate its existence as a privileged group with access to power and to an agreeable life, parted between interesting work and not excessive leisure.

Its means for achieving it are work and family which secure the ownership of the three sorts of capital, financial, social and cultural.

The methods used are based on distinction and adaptation. Keep one's distance to the others but never cling unreasonably to principles and traditions. Yesterday is only at the service of today. Control and balance are the best tools for facing the challenges of tomorrow.

The main condition for belonging to the bourgeoisie is *time*, i.e. several generations. It is a most exclusive condition. Time cannot be fabricated. It is like blood for the aristocracy.

In short what we describe is the bourgeois habitus, i.e., in Bourdieu's words (1985), "a community of dispositions", a "matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions", a "product of history which produces individual and collective practices, and hence history, in accordance with the schemes engendered by history".

As ethnologists we believe that the best way to get at this habitus is to by-pass the impossible definition and to go directly to the observation of the practices, starting from the popular implication of the concept.

The bourgeoisie can be described, not defined.

## Notes

1. Two historians of the bourgeoisie have given very detailed bibliographies on the subject: Peter Gay (1985) and Régine Pernoud (1981).
2. Béatrix Le Wita investigates the genealogical memory and the processes of reproduction in families of the Parisian upper class.

Annick Sjögren works on the meals in the bourgeoisie of the 6th arrondissement in Paris.

3. *Cadres supérieurs* is an official category according to the French National Institute of Statistics, I.N.S.E.E. Its definition (1982) is: senior intellectual and administrative professions and senior management.
4. The introduction of Peter Gay's work on the bourgeoisie has one heading called *The Strain of Definition*. It refers to the dilemma which faced the bourgeois at the turn of the century: enjoying privileges while rejecting the principle of privileged classes.
5. Programme on French television *Où sont passés les bourgeois?*, antenne 2, 29 April 1983. *Le Monde* devoted a whole page to the subject the day before the programme.
6. One of the questions set by the research project of the *Institut de Sociologie Urbaine* (Haumont 1980) was: "Peut-on être salarié et à la fois posséder et inculquer les valeurs de la classe propriétaire?". The observations from our fieldworks make us answer by a definite *yes*. As a sociologist, N. Haumont argues to the contrary. The bourgeoisie indeed does not fit into any sociological category.

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