

Notes toward a Sociological Definition of Sex Categories

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NOTES TOWARD A SOCIOLOGICAL  
DEFINITION OF SEX CATEGORIES

"As soon as we remember the possible fallibility of the observer, we have introduced the serpent into the behaviourist's paradise. The serpent whispers doubts, and has no difficulty in quoting scientific scripture for the purpose." Bertrand Russell, An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth

The object of this paper (1) — or rather of this series of remarks, each of which could be developed at length — is to draw attention to the bias imposed on knowledge in the social sciences by a structure of thought proper to the society that produces it.

Focused on the problem of the possibility of a sociological definition of sex categories, these remarks will deal in turn with the categories of age and social class that help us to throw light on some of the mechanisms of scientific knowledge when it confronts social reality. I shall try to suggest a parallel between the greater or lesser systematization of a sociological issue, the conditions of appearance of this issue, and the differ-

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ences of treatment applied by analysis to its various aspects.

### I. Three Fundamental Variables

Sex categories constitute one of the three fundamental variables constantly employed in empirical research in sociology and social psychology. Now these three variables — sex, age, and socio-occupational category or social class (depending on one's research angle) — are not equally rigorous with regard to the sociological criteria of their definition, nor do they possess the same status within general sociology with regard to the systematization of their subject matter. In the first part of this study I shall concentrate on social class and age, then in the second part I shall deal at greater length with sex categories.

#### Sociological Definition

Class and socioeconomic category possess a sociological significance and relevance: whether we are dealing with the elaboration of a code of socio-occupational categories or with the concept of social class, defined social criteria such as function in production, income, economic status, education "level," and so on are used together or separately. Parallel with studies of behavior or opinion in which the operation of this variable is examined, we find not only factual descriptions, both synchronic and diachronic, of the different social groups concerned (monographs on the working class, the bourgeoisie, teachers, farmers, and so on) but also an overall approach that tends to define and to consider these groups in their reciprocal relations (the internal logic of class structure or the ordering of strata and mobility problems) — all of them types of approach likely to facilitate the apprehension of the way in which membership in this or that category or class is liable to vary the behavior, attitudes, or opinions of the individuals under consideration.

Dealing next with age and sex, we shall observe a progressive decrease in the rigor of the sociological definition. Moreover, and this is not unrelated to the above remark, age and sex are

particular in that they are both recognized and conceived as actual biological categories, as well as being used as sociological variables. While class and occupation are recognized today as purely sociological data (2), an ambiguity nevertheless remains between the sociological and the biological realms in the case of the categories of age and sex — but to a lesser degree in the case of age — and leads, in actual fact, to their being used in the analysis of social facts without specifying too clearly whether one does or does not admit the role of biological determination.

Although problems of biological growth, psychophysiological development, maturity, and senescence find their corollary in sociological and sociopsychological analysis with the layering of age categories along a temporal dimension of the individual's social destiny (with such concepts as the socialization of the child, social maturing, initiation, age groups, legal minority and majority, and finally "retirement" for the "third age"), it can nevertheless be said that most sociological studies on age categories conform to the methodological rules defined by Durkheim: whether it be in the field of the sociology of childhood (still in its early stages), the sociology of youth, or the sociology of old age, these studies have chosen an object with reference to its social existence and concentrate on the social values and behavior that characterize that object, explaining them by sociological factors or situations. Thus on the subject of age we have passed from the more or less overt idea that it is a psychobiological or psychosocial individual "factor," which it is important to consider in empirical studies, to the strictly sociological study of a global reality proper to each "age section." This age section is considered to be defined mainly by its original mode of insertion in the social structure, with regard to its legal and institutional status, and is regarded as capable of revealing specific behavior and values, in short, as forming a "group," a "subculture" within society.

Certainly the notion of a subculture proper to youth as a whole has recently been challenged by certain sociologists, who regard it as a way of masking the more fundamental reality of

class division; in their view youth must first be defined within a particular class. (3) However, it is not my intention to discuss this problem here (at least for the present, for a similar problem occurs in the case of the sexes); what I should like to say about age categories, and thus initiate a comparison with sex categories, is that in dealing with these categories, sociology does make reference to a "social" notion of age (4), or better, to this or that social age. It is quite obvious, for example, that the notion of "third age" begins, as far as sociological analysis is concerned, at the point when the individual retires from economic activity. It is no less obvious that this point in time has nothing to do with physiological senescence, since it is precisely those societies which (by virtue of their high degree of economic development and, therefore, improved level of health) do most to prolong the lives and intellectual capacities of individuals, that by gradually lowering the age of retirement are creating the "problem of the third age." A problem indeed, due to this very lack of coincidence between biological age and social age.

#### The Appearance of the Issue

It is important to note that the issue of social classes has a longer history in sociology than that of age, for knowledge follows (with a delay of a few decades) the appearance and awareness of a social phenomenon. It is obvious that the analyses of Saint-Simon and Marx could have been elaborated only with the development of large-scale industry and the formation of a working "mass." Similarly, the establishing of a sociology of youth can be paralleled with the gradual extension of school age in industrial societies, which produces an important group of individuals characterized by a maintained economic dependence at an age when their predecessors were producers, and often parents. If childhood, as Philippe Ariès has shown, was very short under the ancien régime, "youth," in the sociological sense, is a fortiori a relatively recent phenomenon. (5) The sociology of youth really began to develop after the Second

World War, at the same time as the demographic bulge and the problems of education and employment that it gave rise to. Similarly, old age was constituted as a field of sociological investigation only after its establishment as a real social group, brought about by the obligation, imposed by the rich societies, to retire from production at a given age.

### Differences of Treatment between the Groups Envisaged

To these remarks I shall add a third (which I shall develop at greater length in relation to sex categories) about the difference of treatment accorded by sociological analysis within a given subject (class or occupation, on the one hand, age on the other) to the social groups studied. It is indeed remarkable that, as far as description is concerned, there are more monographic studies on workers than on the bourgeoisie, on farmers than on bankers, on the young and old than on adults. Although theoretical and methodological reflection is capable of ordering the different social groups that it considers in terms of this or that question into an overall subject, factual descriptive studies, on the other hand — being closer to everyday reality — are concerned not so much with the question as with that which is in question. Now, what in social reality is more in question, or poses more of a problem, than groups other than those referential groups which are the economically and ideologically dominant ones? Even theoretical reflection, to which I am perhaps now being overgenerous, is not always exempt from this bias imposed on the social sciences by social reality: while since Marx the study of social classes has always regarded them as organically linked parts of the same total phenomenon, and not to be defined separately, it would seem that the study of age categories — which, as we have seen, is historically more recent — still needs to deepen its systematization by defining and making it possible to describe adult status.

And what about sex categories? They constitute, as we have said, one of the fundamental variables of the social sciences.

Yet do they possess a specifically sociological definition? If ambiguity still remains in this matter, how does it appear in analysis by the social sciences, and what is its meaning? To what historical and conjunctural conditions is the creation of a field of scientific investigation taking sex categories as its object subjected?

## II. Scientific Discourse around Sex Categories

To begin with I shall distinguish between anthropological and sociological writings, thus taking into account, provisionally at least, the controversial, but still existing, separation between these two sciences on the basis of the "object" with which they deal: industrial or complex societies, nonindustrial or tribal or nonliterate societies, and so on.

In dealing with societies differing profoundly from their own, Western anthropologists have usually been confronted with the evidence of two specific, exclusive subcultures, one male, the other female. They have thus described the strict division that appeared to exist in these societies in the most varied domains: division of labor, differentiated religious rites, forms of language proper to men and proper to women, male or female references in matters of filiation, residence, and so on. When intersected, such conditions build up to the impression of a truly dual system, a male/female duality that is one of the fundamental elements of the structure of myths, as well as of the material organization of space in certain villages. (6)

It would seem that this differentiated social treatment of sex categories is usually consciously referred to somatobiological difference by the members of the societies studied. As for anthropologists — possessing as they did a knowledge of a diversified set of societies — they were able to arrive at the notion of social sex by recognizing that a strict dichotomy of statuses and roles on the basis of sex is not universal, and even not always respected in practice by those societies where it is supposed to be imperative; and, above all, that its form and content vary from one society to another. This point of

view was systematized by Margaret Mead, who was the first anthropologist to attempt to present a general position on the subject. (7)

How are sex categories apprehended in the discourse of the social sciences applied to "our" societies?

Sociology of the family deals with a whole series of problems concerning sex categories qua sociological categories, such as the respective functions and roles of men and women according to different types of family, the relations between father and children or mother and children, and their respective roles in child rearing or upbringing, the interpersonal relations between husband and wife, and so on, all in terms of different social environments or of the structure of the society as a whole and its transformations.

However, in societies in which procreation is normally (in the sense of a social norm and in the statistical sense) envisaged only within the framework of marriage, the sociology of the family also plays an important part in the description and explanation of behavior and models relating to procreation. In this sense the science of family behavior is closely bound up with demography and economic planning. If nearly all demography today is social demography, research into the family, on the other hand, certainly embraces biological aspects as well (fertility, population policies).

What I mean is this: It should not be forgotten that in every society the family remains the social group that stands for the institutionalization of the biological, and therefore it becomes of some relevance to the subject of this article to note that the sociology of the family is the only domain to base an important part of its analysis on the man/woman distinction and on the dual system that they constitute. Thus sociology, in its description of the concrete differential relation between the sexes and of the totality that they constitute, has so far confined itself to only one of the many social expressions in which one might expect to meet them (given, in particular, the knowledge of other societies provided by anthropology): to the social group that preserves most fully a biological significance in sex categories.



Does this mean that this characteristic of established sociological knowledge corresponds entirely to social reality in our societies? In other words, does the man/woman dual system exist (and therefore merit study) only within the family group — including both biological and social aspects — and not outside the family group and the individual sexual behavior of which that group is the social culmination?

Of course, sociologists and social psychologists have not failed to notice that sex membership is to be found in many social activities besides those proper to sexual or family behavior. Furthermore, as I have said, few if any surveys have been done that do not take sex as a variable, whether the phenomenon to be studied is political opinion in general or the attitude of the public to the problem of the artichoke in Brittany. This virtually systematic use of the sex variable in empirical sociology in fact rests on the intuition of a subjacent sociological reality. Very often there is nothing to justify it but common sense: we know from everyday experience that there are far more women than men who buy enzyme detergents, and market researchers manage quite well in this matter without the aid of general sociology. And sociologists themselves may sometimes resort to facts of everyday knowledge, to common sense, to intuition, in constructing their samples on the sex variable.

Without touching for the moment on the problem of the existence or nonexistence of a possible sociological reality sustaining the use of this criterion, let us see whether the uses of theoretical or descriptive sociology are identical with those of empirical research.

Most theoretical or general descriptive writings (a general study in the sociology of knowledge, for example, or a global economic analysis of production) make no reference to sex categories. What is described in such studies is a human process in its generality, without regard to the sex of individuals. This is perfectly justified from the methodological point of view, and indeed no one would imagine that sex membership had anything whatever to do with the problem under review.

Yet it often happens that in these works there suddenly appears

a "comment" (five lines after four pages of neutral description, a paragraph in small type, or a chapter added at the end of the book) that reorientates the whole problem in terms of sexual categorization: "We know less about how women are affected in this matter . . ." or "It would also be useful to examine in what ways women are affected. . . ." The reader, naturally enough, becomes perplexed as to the generality of what he has been reading up to that point, especially as it had never been made clear that the reference was to men, and in fact, methodologically, the problem had not been examined by the author in reference (consciously at least) to a possible category called "man." Thus in such writings either the sexual dichotomy is not used, or only one of the sex categories is supposed to give a new, specific direction to a problem, the general description of which did not itself make use of this dichotomy.

Next to this, one finds a whole series of studies that make this sexual specification within a problem the very object of their discourse, setting out to describe the particular modalities of sexual membership in a given domain: women in work, women and politics, and so on.

Lastly, some studies make this sexual category a central reference and try to define its legal, juridical, or everyday status in the main aspects of social reality: the matrimonial, civic status of woman; woman's "condition," work, role, and so on.

One can therefore distinguish four levels, ranging from generality devoid of any concern with sex duality to an entirely particularized treatment, with, in between, two ways of integrating the criterion of sex — in each case, a criterion reduced to one of its terms.

It might be thought surprising that I have not referred earlier to that part of sociological knowledge "devoted to women," but it seemed to me more logical to mention it last on account of its secondary character — secondary on several counts.

It is secondary in volume, in that although it is fashionable and covers an increasing number of pages, it constitutes only a small part of sociological writing as a whole; and it is pre-

cisely this knowledge as a whole that interests me (or rather the whole of that part of knowledge that is, or should be, concerned with the categories of sex).

It is secondary, too, in the temporal sense, since it is much more recent than sociological science itself and even than sociology of the family; in France it really began to develop only in the 1960s.

Lastly, and above all, it is secondary in relation to the logical system, that is to say, from the point of view of the theory of discourse. Reason, in fact, makes us conceptualize two sex categories (at least two, for we should remember that certain societies have elaborated three social sex categories – men, women, and a third sort of individual that is neither man nor woman, or both man and woman – not only in their myths, but also in social behavior). (8) Our societies basically recognize only two categories. The cases of so-called intersexual states are illuminating in this respect, as witness the juridical and psychological problems of the androgyne, whom society obliges to opt for one or the other social sex. (Certain European languages, it is true, possess a neutral category that may be applied in certain cases to people: children in English and German, for example; in French, this possibility does not exist.) We have, therefore, two sex categories from the logical as well as the linguistic and institutional point of view. (9) But apart from sociology of the family and sociology of sexuality, only one of these categories is explicitly taken as an object of study, whereas the "idea" of a social dichotomy of the sexes runs through almost all statistics and sociological work. In short, although we are witnessing an attempt to describe or to give form to the "peculiar" conditions that mark the mode of belonging of the second sex to the social formation, there is, unlike in anthropology, no description of the "peculiar" insertion of the first.

This absence expresses a theoretical uncertainty, proof of which is to be found in the fact that knowledge about the sexes (about one of the sexes) is still secondary, in the hierarchical sense, since it is not recognized as officially constituting a "part" of sociology. (10) Existing information has to be divided

up and appears, in sociological treatises, for example, either in the chapter on the family or in any other section dealing with a given problem, or else — as is shown by the program of this Seventh Congress — in the chapter on "race relations," which, moreover, represents a relatively new and very interesting position from the methodological point of view. (11)

Thus it can be seen that there does not exist a constituted field of sociology with sex categories as its object. There is no sociology of the sexes.

To sum up, there now exists a sociology of social classes (and, from a different point of view, a theoretical framework on social stratification). That is to say that, on the one hand, we have the subject of the interdependence of classes or strata, and on the other hand we have monographs on this or that class, this or that socio-occupational category. As far as age is concerned, we have seen that there is a sociology of youth, though only very recently constituted as a domain in its own right, and a social gerontology; but no sociology of adults. Next to this, age categories tend more and more to depart from their biological meanings and to achieve the status of a true sociological concept. In the case of sex it would seem that its conceptualization as social and not biological sex remains doubtful. Secondly, there is no general subject matter concerning the social or cultural categorization of the sexes; and in any case studies existing (though not as a separate corpus within scientific knowledge) and which do have sex categories as their object are distributed in a very precise way: in anthropology we have more documents concerning a specific social membership for the category "man" than for the category "woman" (12); in sociology we have a growing body of documents concerned with membership of the social category "woman," and nothing concerning "man."

Let us add a remark on the producers of knowledge. If we set aside the fact that cultural productions (to which scientific writings belong) are the work of a majority of men and a minority of women, I would observe more particularly that the beginnings of a cultural topic of sex categories appeared among

anthropologists (who, as we have seen, tend to be more aware of these problems than sociologists) and, moreover, in the work of a woman anthropologist (Margaret Mead). Similarly, it is chiefly women sociologists who originate and produce these studies devoted exclusively to only one of the sexual categories (their own). On the other hand, we find a majority of men sociologists in the part of knowledge already described — general theoretical or descriptive studies in which no reference is made to the sociological categorization of the sexes (whereas a true general analysis would sometimes demand one), and studies in which a sexual category (the category of the other sex) is treated separately, in addition to the main body of the work. Thus sex categories could no doubt constitute one of the dimensions of the sociology of knowledge, along with social classes and other forms of "social framework."

When confronted with such a situation, one can advance the following hypothesis as to the discourse that orders the work of male scientists (who outweigh women in the profession in both number and seniority): when I analyze my own society, the general problem with which I am dealing is my own problem, and conversely, my own problem is a general one. There is no need to specify the subject, since I am myself the subject. Either I totally ignore the other, or if I acknowledge that my other has something to do with the problem, I mention him; but by specifying him, and him (that is to say, her) alone. When I analyze a society other than my own, it is relatively easier for me to perceive, in certain aspects of the reality I am describing, two social actors: the group of men and the group of women. Secondly, the subject no longer being myself, I must name him. In which case I choose as subject preferably the one that — although in an alien society — is still myself, that is to say, men, either by devoting a greater number of studies to this category or by generalizations referring to men, thus running counter to what elsewhere, at the level of description, I could not entirely obliterate, i. e., the existence of two subjects.

A systematic analysis of scientific discourse with reference to this phenomenon would make a useful contribution to the

critique of knowledge and to knowledge itself. This analysis has not been effectuated, and I should like to quote just a few examples by way of illustration.

Analysis might be carried out from two complementary points of view: on the one hand, the analysis of distortions in conceptualizations of the problems; on the other, in language.

### 1. Conceptualizations

Economic analysis considers the economic individual, the individual as producer, and as such has no reference to the sex of that individual. Primary, secondary, tertiary sectors, active population and nonactive population, labor costs, and so on are all apparently neutral notions.

But let us take the notion of "labor costs," which includes that of the minimum wage necessary to assure the worker's working capacity, social security (industrial accidents, occupational diseases), and so on. The daily work of maintaining working capacity (the buying and preparing of food, laundry, cleaning), which is almost entirely carried out by women (whether or not they have jobs), is not included. Now when in a household only the man works, the minimum wage that is needed to maintain his working capacity is also used to remunerate the woman, who maintains her husband's working capacity (means, clothes, and so on). This minimum wage, attributed in theory to the worker alone, with a view to maintaining his working capacity, in fact no longer has the same signification (since it is shared) as when both the man and the woman work (in which case the two wages serve to maintain two working capacities).

The notion of active population, for its part, embraces the totality of individuals who provide productive work and receive the product of their work (in the form of money or goods) — a "product" that gives rise to general analyses and enters into the calculation of the national income, for example. The non-active population is "dependent on" the active one, and women who are not employed (approximately half of all adult women) were, until recently, classified simply as belonging to the non-

active population, on the same level as children and old people.

However, it is beginning to be thought that the problem of the nonwork of half the women of working age could be referred to the potential working force that they represent. (13) Thus an overall view leading to the idea of "missing work" with regard to the development of the economy leaves behind the static notion of a nonactive population dependent on the active population and limited to a mere collection of concrete economic agents (or rather nonagents).

In sociology, furthermore, in the distinction made between "working life" and "nonworking life," there is a system of thought at work similar to that referred to in economy, whereby such elements as social obligations, leisure, and the activities involved in the biological and domestic maintenance of the family are sometimes placed side by side, as belonging to the same subtopic of facts in the nonworking life! And yet various studies long ago revealed the "double working day" of a large number of women. (14) But the domestic working "day" remained on the fringe of the overall work area, without ever being included in it. (15)

## 2. Language

Distortion of reality is also to be found in the peculiarities and even the illogicalities of language, the extreme frequency of which cannot escape the attentive reader. A few examples — out of hundreds — may give some idea of a phenomenon that would require a detailed sociolinguistic analysis (16):

1) "The sexual function is, therefore, the biological function of reproduction, which necessarily implies a female partner for its realization."

2) "... repetitive, divided tasks leave the individual time to ruminate over domestic and marital troubles, his wife or his sick children . . . ."

3) "... when one of the married partners, usually the woman, practices no remunerative activity and is in fact dependent on her husband . . . ."

We can observe that the general and the masculine are quite simply identified – unconsciously, moreover – thus obliterating the female category as a social subject. (17)

In type 1 ("sexual function . . . reproduction . . . a female partner [une partenaire]") we have an illogicality: a general process "necessarily" implying two sexes is in fact conceived on the basis of the masculine, since the "partner" is feminine (une partenaire). The logic of the language and of thought would demand whether "sexual function . . . reproduction . . ." implies a partner [un partenaire, the category of the general] or "two partners of the opposite sex."

In type 2 ("the individual . . . his wife") we have the same process of identifying the general and the masculine, but this time in the case of a general phenomenon implying both sexes, not from the point of view of logic but in fact in the phenomenon studied (the passage is taken from a general statement on the individual at work). Since one-third of the working population is made up of women, who have not so far been married to women, we can choose between unreality, since the term "individual" refers here only to men, and illogicality, if the term "individual" is to be understood in the general sense (and the reader might well regard it in this way, since it has not been specified that this generic term applied only to male workers).

Moreover, example 2 presents not only the overall characteristic of identifying the male and the general in the unconscious system of thought (which was also the case in example 1), but this characteristic is here reinforced by the social norm: not only does individual = man, but the individual who works = man.

This is immediately confirmed by example 3, which shows the effects of the corresponding social norm for the category of women: "One of the married partners . . . dependent on her husband." We have a new illogicality: the words "usually the woman," which were merely in apposition to the subject, itself indeterminate as to sex, carry with them the rest of the sentence in the feminine sense – "her husband," instead of "his or her spouse." But the "usually the woman" segment made it



quite clear that statistically the woman is more often dependent on her husband than the reverse. The end of the sentence, with its feminine reference, is in fact determined by the norm imposed in this respect on that category: to be one's husband's dependent. What we have here is an accentuation of the category woman through the influence of the social norm.

The comparison with example 2 allows us to say that in each case the representation of a social "norm" – man/work, woman/nonwork – is in operation. It should nonetheless not be forgotten that upon this phenomenon is superposed the much more fundamental phenomenon of the masculine/general identification. This leads one to reinforce the other, giving in example 2: individual (overall term) = man = work, whereas in example 3 we have: one of the married partners (the distinction has already been made) = woman = nonwork.

Thus at the level of language we find the same ways of treating sex categories as we observed in the structure of scientific writings; namely: first, there are those studies intended to be general (18), which make no explicit reference to sex categories in the main body of the discourse but, by the supplementary remarks that they include on the woman category, reveal that in fact it had been excluded from the general discourse, constituting no more than an often embarrassing excrescence of the fundamental processes analyzed on the basis of the man category; then secondly, there are those studies that view "women" as an object of scientific study that is not supposed to reflect the generality.

The state of sociological knowledge concerning sex categories might be summed up in the following formulae:

1) As a specified sociological category the category man does not exist. (19) Not that it never serves as a reference in descriptive studies of the most varied phenomena or in general theories; quite the reverse. But this functioning of thought remains unconscious. One thinks one is speaking in general when in fact one is speaking in the masculine gender.

2) The category woman:

– either women do not exist, as a result of the preceding sys-

tem of thought; this is a real obliteration, not a hidden presence as in the case of men;

– or women appear as an appendage of the main discourse, emerging from the back of the house, discreet, unknown, enigmatic, and silent, to disturb for a moment the reflection of man on man (20);

– or they exist alone, isolated.

We have seen that the first two types of discourse are statistically due rather to men and the last almost entirely to women.

### III. Toward an Overall Approach to the Sociological Definition of Sex Categories?

Although sociological works on "women" have the methodological advantage of tending to greater scientific rigor by viewing them increasingly as a sociological category, instead of a physiologico-psychologico-sociological mixture (21); and although they have the further merit of revealing realities hitherto passed over in silence (22), they nevertheless run the risk – contrary to their own intention – of being reintegrated and reappropriated by the system of thought of society in general, one of whose fundamental mechanisms is this particularization of women. More than in the writings themselves, this danger is to be found in the assimilation, in social discourse, of a biological reality and social modalities elaborated by a society on the pattern of the biological schema.

On the other hand, since in our societies it takes the two sex categories to cover the whole of the social field, it would seem to be logical that any specificity in one would be defined only in its relation to a specificity in the other, and that neither could be studied in isolation, at least without their having previously been fully conceptualized as elements in a single structural system.

Certain researchers have already tried to place themselves within an overall approach in studies on male and female roles, or on the representations of both sexes in society. (23) There are still far too few of them, and one can only hope that they

will be joined by studies on the social categorization of the sexes.

I said earlier that it seemed to be "logical," from a theoretical point of view, that any specificity of one category should refer to the specificity of the other. But we are not on the plane of logic alone here; and since any analysis of social reality is inseparable from that reality, we must ask ourselves:

1) What is the relation between the form of sociological knowledge (differential treatment in the definition and analysis of sex categories) and social structures?

2) What are the conditions of appearance of a sociological definition of both sex categories in an overall approach?

So, to conclude, I shall ask a few questions simply as research hypotheses.

Does the apparent distortion of knowledge concerning the sexes correspond to the occultation of the sociological reality of sex categories? That is to say, are there in our societies, as in those described by anthropology, two social groups, characterizable by particular criteria but, for reasons that are as yet unclear, only one of which is actually named in sociological descriptions? (Or, on the contrary, should one think that men and women do not exist as sociological groups and simply constitute a collection of individuals possessing the individual characteristic of being "man" or "woman"?)

But again: Since scientific knowledge, like the overall system of thought, tends to say that women — and only women — are to be defined socially by "specific conditions" of life, a "female condition," since they alone are to be found at the center of studies on sex categories, must one infer from this the existence in our societies of a female subculture and, in turn, the non-existence of a male subculture, which is then identified with culture as a whole? In other words, is there a social "woman" group yet no social "man" group? (Or is there, nevertheless, a male subculture; and if so, does it have the same sociological consistency as the possible female subculture?) (24)

The form of sociological (and even anthropological) knowledge certainly seems, in the field that concerns us here, to re-

flect a system of thought peculiar to Western societies, and in particular to French society (since my analysis is based on French studies). This system of thought is quite obviously bound up with the concrete structures of the society, structures which by excluding women, by placing them in the second rank, or by excessively particularizing them, have begun during the last ten years or so to become fairly well known in France, thanks to studies on the sociological situation of women which I referred to above. It appears that economic, juridical, and political power belongs to the male category, and that all change is *de facto* referred to that category. But the relation between social structures and the system of thought in question has been analyzed much less deeply.

In short, just as in the subject area of age we find no studies on the adult as such, so in the sociological topic of the sexes we find no studies on man as such; similarly, there have always been more studies on workers than on the bourgeoisie (and, initially, only on workers). In other words, the dominated are studied before the dominators, and to a greater degree; and, with the appearance of the subject, they alone are characterized, they alone are specified (through their "peculiar" living conditions and behavior, for example), as if they alone within the global society possessed a "subculture."

Now in the case of social classes, for example, one can observe two parallel historical movements: on the one hand, on the level of analysis, the passage from the description of workers' "living conditions" — and theirs alone — (Villermé, *Le Play*) to the Marxist analysis of class relations (proletariat/bourgeoisie); on the other hand, on the level of facts, the gradual passage from the association of workers into mere mutual assistance societies to more politicized associations, leading ultimately to the trade unions, the expression of the organization of the working class as a group conscious of itself.

At this point the whole discussion about the existence of a social group with or without group consciousness, and on class existence and class consciousness, might throw some light on the sociological problematics of the sexes.

Could one compare the formation of "class consciousness" (in the sense of a consciousness of forming a class) among workers with "consciousness of self as a social being," which has so far been apparent in writings about women, whether of a sociological or a literary kind, and which has quite recently begun to assume importance?

In contemporary French society (25) old laws are being challenged and altered (laws relating to marriage, parental authority, contraception, abortion); new institutions are being proposed (changes in military service, civic service for girls); everyday behavior (such as the tendency to uniformity in young people's clothes) expresses an important change in the social forms of differentiation. Now all these changes, in which, of course, one can still easily detect the weight of the old system of thought, are nevertheless accompanied by a new phenomenon of consciousness: the spreading among women in general (and not only in a few small intellectual circles) of an awareness of being determined socially as a woman, and above all the birth of a veritable malaise among men that is finding expression first of all in the language of politicians and journalists. Some people have a bad conscience, for example, when using the masculine for the general form (as prescribed by the French language). They will say, consequently, "Françaises, Français . . ." or "The men and women of this country . . ."; and an advertisement asks for "Personne . . . [possessing this or that qualification]. . . ." (26) Similarly, they sometimes feel obliged to specify that women too will be accepted: a request is made for "Un (une) responsable de . . ."; conversely, when an employer wishes to avoid female candidates, he will say "Man required. . . ."

As we can see, the question for everyday culture is still whether or not to admit that one category should enter into generality, side by side with men (and, indeed, the changes referred to above are presented by the mass media and generally thought of by everyone as an access by women to "equality" (27) and not as an overall process involving both men and women). But, in turn, one sometimes feels obliged to specify the other cate-

gory, the male one, and this represents a new fact.

Are we now witnessing the beginnings of a "group consciousness" among women? And among men the beginnings of self-definition in reference to the sociological situation that they occupy in relation to women – in other words the beginnings of a social specification of the male category?

It would certainly seem so. Is this not what happened to a certain extent in the case of the bourgeoisie, and what is happening episodically in the case of adults? Parallel with these phenomena, as we have seen, first a subject matter of social classes and then a truly sociological subject matter of age have been constituted. We must now elaborate a sociological subject matter of the sexes.

#### Notes

1) This article is an amended version of a paper read at the Seventh World Congress of Sociology (Research Committee on Sociology of Knowledge), held at Varna, Bulgaria, in September 1970. (First published in Epistémologie Sociologique 11, 1 semestre, 1971, pp. 19-39, as "Notes pour une définition sociologique des catégories de sexe.")

2) This has not always been the case. See, in particular, Gumplovicz's Social Darwinism (Der Rassenkampf, 1883), which crystallizes the development of all nineteenth-century thought (Balzac, Gobineau, and so on).

3) See, for example, Jean-Claude Chamboredon, "La société française et sa jeunesse," in Darras, Le Partage des bénéfices (Paris: Minuit, 1966).

4) This point of view is not so obvious at first sight, as an article with the significant title "Essai d'une définition sociologique de l'âge" could be written by A. Davidovitch (1961). Quoted by Jacques Jenny, "La maturation sociale – thème de recherche psycho-sociologique appliqué à l'étude de la jeunesse (approche bibliographique)," Revue française de sociologie, III: 2 (1962).

5) See Philippe Ariès, L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous

l' Ancien Régime (Paris: Plon, 1960), and "Le rôle nouveau de la mère et de l'enfant dans la famille moderne," Les Carnets de l'Enfance/Assignment Children, 10 (June 1969) (FISE-UNICEF).

6) See, in particular, Claude Lévi-Strauss, La Pensée Sauvage (Paris: Plon, 1962), and "Les organisations dualistes existent-elles?" Anthropologie structurale (Paris: Plon, 1958), ch. VIII.

7) Margaret Mead, Male and Female: a Study of the Sexes in a Changing World (New York: Morrow, 1948).

8) On the Berdaches, see, for example, Alfred W. Bowers, Hidatsa Social and Ceremonial Organization, Bulletin 194 (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology, 1965), pp. 166-68, 326.

Anne-Marie Rocheblave-Spenlé gives other examples of this type in her book Les Rôles masculins et féminins (les stéréotypes — la famille — les états intersexuels) (Paris: PUF, 1964, pp. 197-98).

9) On this subject, see Roland Barthes's analysis of Balzac's short story "Sarrasine" in "Masculin, féminin, neutre," Échanges et Communications. Mélanges offerts à Claude Lévi-Strauss, Vol. II (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), section VI, pp. 893-907. "Balzac, however, constantly needs a third sex, or an absence of sex; all that remains to him is therefore to define castration either as a simultaneous mixture of male and female, or as a succession of the one after the other . . ." (p. 900).

10) However, the first stage in institutionalization may be detected in the appearance of university lectures on "the sociology of women" (especially in North America). Similarly, during the Varna Congress a number of sociologists met to demand the setting up of a "working group on the study of sex roles in society." Although the use of the term "role" may strike us as still inadequate to define a real frame of reference on social sex, we must recognize that the program was intended to take into account "the whole range of behavior in society." (Since June 1973 this working group has become officially a regular research committee of the International Sociological Associa-

tion, which will hold sessions at the Eighth Congress in Toronto, August 1974.)

11) Feminist movements are now taking up the analogy between the blacks, the Jews, and women, which was already made by Simone de Beauvoir in the introduction to Le Deuxième sexe (Paris: Gallimard, 1949). Albert Memmi also includes a number of dominated categories under the concept of oppression: see, in particular, L'Homme dominé (Paris: Gallimard, 1969). Finally, Colette Guillaumin, in her work L'Idéologie raciste — Genèse et langage actuel (The Hague: Mouton, 1972), shows that the somatobiological system of apprehension, which is the specific characteristic of the racist ideology, extends to many social categories.

12) As Paul Mercier remarks in his contribution, "Anthropologie sociale et culturelle," in Ethnologie générale (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), p. 953.

13) See, for example, Régis Paraque, La Semaine de trente heures (Paris: Le Seuil, 1967) (collection "Société"), or Pierre Naville (dealing with part-time employment), in G. Friedmann and P. Naville, Traité de sociologie du travail, Vol. I (Paris: A. Colin, 1961), pp. 170-71.

14) These studies were carried out in particular by the Institut National d'Études Démographiques. One of the first to point out this fact was, to my knowledge, the article by Jean Stoetzel, "Une étude du budget-temps de la femme dans les agglomérations urbaines," Population, 1 (1948). See also, more recently, Alain Girard, Population, 4 (1958) (on cities), and A. Girard and H. Bastide, Population, 2 (1959) (on rural areas).

15) As Jacques Dofny remarks in G. Friedmann and P. Naville, op. cit., p. 324, ". . . must the sociology of work stop at the analysis of the active population? . . . This restrictive definition of work excludes a substantial part of the work carried out in social life, more specifically unpaid work, such as housework or active participation in any association without a lucrative end in view." But, he continues, ". . . from this point of view (the analysis by the sociologist of the division of social labor) the enumeration of all the many activities that take place



outside the economic circuit remains to be done" [ my emphasis ]. Carrying out the analysis further, a recent article (Christine Dupont, "L'ennemi principal," Partisans, 54-55 [1970], pp. 157-72) shows that housework is an inseparable part of overall production: in fact there are two modes of production, the industrial mode and the domestic mode (unpaid work that has long been the prerogative not only of women but also of the junior members of peasant families and of children); but there is a continuity, and not a difference of nature, between commercialized production and domestic production.

16) I have not given the references for the following sentences taken from sociological works, since it is quite clear that they are quoted here as being representative only of social and not of an individual discourse.

17) The term "obliteration" is to be understood in its dual, apparently paradoxical sense: (1) effacing and obstructing, in this case by forgetting the feminine subject; (2) annulling by the apposition of a mark (as in canceling of stamps), in this case the particularization of one category only.

18) Certain studies, of course, do not have to refer to sex because of the generality of their subject matter; but one can observe in a number of general studies that the absence of any reference to the sexes simply means the omission of women. Thus studies in historicopolitical sociology may not mention the introduction of female suffrage, a fact of some importance, as it doubles the population concerned. On the other hand, there are many studies that make use of sex categories when their relevance is by no means clear.

19) Except, perhaps, where the family is concerned. But see my remarks above.

20) See in this respect the recent short story by Julien Gracq, "Le roi Cophetua," in La presqu'île (Paris: Corti, 1970), a marvelous cultural illustration of this form of discourse and thought.

21) The inadequacy of the conceptualization and description of sex categories in the social sciences rebounds onto the sciences of the individual (sexology, differential psychology of the

sexes, psychoanalysis), particularly by means of the confusion that they help to maintain, in analysis, between the biological and the social spheres – a confusion that does not fail, when faced with the slightest "anomaly" in psychological or social behavior, to turn into metaphysical perplexity.

22) I hope there will be no misunderstanding here. If Africans had not tried to reconstruct and teach their own history, who would have done so? From this point of view, studies such as Madeleine Guilbert, Les Femmes et l'organisation syndicale avant 1914 (Paris: CNRS, 1966); Evelyne Sullerot, Histoire et sociologie du travail féminin (Paris: Gonthier, 1968); or Andrée Michel and Germaine Texier, La Condition de la Française aujourd' hui (Paris: Gonthier, 1964), to mention only a few, are particularly important.

23) See, for example, Anne-Marie Rocheblave-Spenlé, *op. cit.*, and P. H. and M. J. Chombart de Lauwe et al., La Femme dans la société, son image dans différents milieux sociaux (Paris: CNRS, 1963).

24) A comparison with other data is of the utmost importance in elucidating such questions, particularly with anthropological data (which, as we have seen, provide an image of different situations), but also with historical data on French culture, and especially on the working-class subculture prior to 1914.

Another question: In either case what would be the position of each of these subcultures in its intersection with class membership – a problem which, as we have seen, arose in the case of youth?

25) With some delay, it would seem, in comparison to other Western societies, judging by what we know of the Scandinavian countries and the United States.

26) In French personne means both "someone" (a person) and "nobody" . . . .

27) But don't the founding texts of the Second International (1864) speak of the "emancipation" of the workers?