
INTRODUCTION

The bourgeoisie is always a copy of the court, said the seventeenth-century burlesque writer Paul Scarron, and French dictionaries, anxious to pass on the national heritage, have echoed him ever since. So be it. Three centuries on, however, we can presumably credit bourgeois culture with a degree of autonomy. Moreover, surely the bourgeois themselves lay claim to a culture nowadays, asserting their right to a separate identity? In fact, this long-drawn-out process of legitimation is not so very different, in terms of how it has happened, from the one that governed the 'making' of the nobility.

Let us not forget that, in France, the word *noblesse* did not supplant *gentilhomme*, *magnat* or *riche homme* until quite late on, namely in the first half of the fourteenth century. In the eleventh century, reference to one's ancestors did not define this wealthy personage. Horizontality only gradually gave way to verticality (G. Duby; see references, p. 162). Generally speaking, historians all agree on the extreme diversity of the nobility, even if socially its members very soon came to feel that they belonged to an immutable, hereditary body (Contamine 1976).

In the 1950s the French bourgeoisie too endowed itself with genealogical albums. In the process it was able to take stock of its own legitimacy, one based not on blood but on antiquity. Moreover, such genealogies began to be drawn up at the point where a certain continuity of bourgeois status made itself felt. The path from labourer to chairman of the board of a major company would seem to take us some way from the privilege of birth or hereditary quality. It is not the labourer that is important, however, but the three or four generations preceding the chairman of the board. Manufacturers, persons of private means, graduates of the *grandes écoles*,¹ the sequence of one's ancestors establishes one's legitimacy. 'Breeding' is replaced by 'civilisation'. Nowadays these 'legitimately' ancient families no longer necessarily occupy the seats of power. They are left with their quality of being civilised. And the bourgeois fits the definition of the cultural heir in that the idea of superior competence does not inhibit him:

¹ France's university-level colleges specialising in professional training [Tr.: footnotes and parentheses in square brackets are contributed by the translator].

An heir is someone who knows there are no mysteries: he assumes he is capable of doing as much as his parents managed to do and, had there been mysteries, his parents would have had access to them. (Veyne 1983)

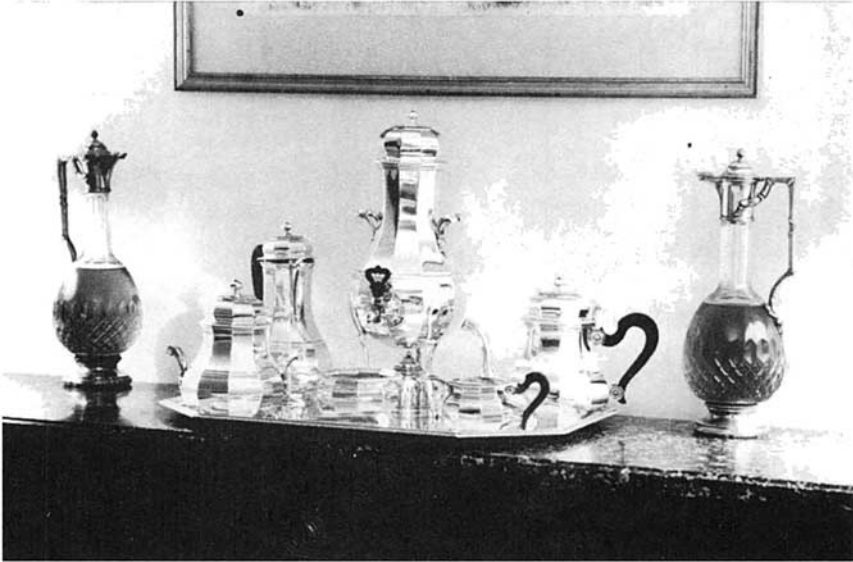
Despite their diversity, then, these men and women recognise one another in a culture that is their own. That culture has long been a butt of caricature. Neither nobleman nor rustic, the bourgeois is somewhere in between, average, mediocre. Taken literally, that would make the bourgeois the man in the middle, his ecological niche this fine balance between extremes (the social metaphor of a law of physics, perhaps?). On the analogy of the balance, the bourgeois tends always to return to the middle position. It is a delicate, unstable situation, with the attraction of opposite poles giving rise, retroactively, to an attraction towards the centre.

We shall seek to give an account of this 'middleness', placing the emphasis on the trivial details that make what Foucault called the man of modern humanism (Foucault 1975).

The bourgeoisie eludes any kind of categorisation. Just when you think you have it, it slips through your fingers. Just when you feel you can put a name to it, it defies definition. To tackle these constant evasions and construct a problematic, we had to start from the word. Analysing the definitions of *bourgeoisie* and *bourgeois* in various [French] dictionaries suggested certain lines of thought. Oddly, all definitions of the words appear to involve some kind of wilful misrepresentation. Noting this malevolent eye that French society casts on a part of itself, we went on to examine the circumstances that such denigration has in its sights. What factors does this misrepresentation feed on? Paradoxically, the answer brought out certain values that together make up a culture. The task narrowed down to giving an account of that culture by studying the individual bourgeois. How, in short, does a person become a bourgeois? Is it enough to be born one, or does a person have to learn?

Seeking to ascribe a specific culture to the bourgeoisie would be hugely presumptuous without some very strong reference to the limitations of the present work.

Firstly, this is a personal journey through what for the author is unknown territory. The methodological approach gives some indication of the nature of that ignorance in a society in which the different social groups nevertheless rub shoulders with one another. The bourgeois are not packed into a corner of the *seizième* [Paris's wealthy sixteenth district]. However, to find some it was first necessary to meet some. The process was complicated by the fact that those who agreed to act as intermediaries with their peers belonged for the most part to the world of academic research. But getting to know a handful of people who admit to being 'bourgeois in inverted commas' is not the same as penetrating their family, social and cultural sphere and even less the 'milieu' from which they come and of which they form part.



1 The silverware

Flaubert's 'the bourgeois thinks in a low fashion' satisfies them completely. 'Low fashion?' said the solicitor, 'that rules me out, then!' (Berl 1931)

There are those who will be shocked by this mention of 'milieu', my academic intermediaries first among them, because for ages now cultural spaces have had to be thought of in terms of relationships, interpenetrations, resistances and borrowings rather than in terms of milieu, which is a product of the illusion of a certain closedness on the part of social groups or cultures. But my informants will also be shocked. The bourgeois refuse to be categorised. Even if they do, in passing, talk about 'our milieu', they will declare that they are 'open to others' or 'just like everyone else'. A person is always somebody's bourgeois:

The word bourgeois has, for the bourgeois, become an insult. They want a definition that has a splendid revolving-door at the exit complete with both automatic door-stopper and footman. Flaubert's 'the bourgeois thinks in a low fashion' satisfies them completely. 'Low fashion?' said the solicitor, 'that rules me out, then!' (Berl 1931)

However, the existential reality of an original milieu compelled recognition right from the start of the investigation in terms of the décor of large apartments, collections of ducks or onyx eggs, vast and ancient family seats, paintings and ancestral portraits on the walls, the ritual of tea in the drawing-room, the inevitable silverware, strolls in the garden, the life-style of these urbane men and women who converse with such subtlety or such irony, seeking all the time to control the conversational game, mentioning the Xs or



2 The ducks

'The two finest are the Korean duck and the Mexican silver duck. This collection was started about fifteen years ago. I'm bored with it, I'm collecting frogs now' (Mrs O. junior).

the Ys as if it went without saying that the investigator would know them. The individual disappears, swallowed up in a dense network of family and social relationships. Here the pronoun 'I' is little used; a royal 'we' indicates simultaneously membership of a group and the distance that lies between the speaker and the investigator.

This being 'outside' enables the investigator to recognise as distinctive the signs that separate him from the people being studied. But it may also lead him to exaggerate certain characteristics and as a result gain a somewhat naïve view of what he is observing. It is a familiar pitfall in ethnographic research, and every researcher will be used to sorting this one out for himself.

Here, however, everything is different. Anyone can ask the ethnographer to justify himself. On the basis of the knowledge that in varying degrees everybody may have of the subject, they will quibble about what he had seen and heard. The break with common parlance is perhaps more difficult in relation to this object than in other areas.

The first question (and it is an urgent one) is: which bourgeoisie are you talking about? The diversity and complexity of this social group suggest a medley of possible behaviours. The individuals picked out here can only represent tiny segments of the spectrum of bourgeois variety. So who will those individuals be? The answer, in common parlance, is men and women of all ages belonging to what is ordinarily termed the 'middle and upper

bourgeoisie' of Paris. One further detail: they are Catholic. Some will seize on this (albeit very loose) demarcation in order to validate and at the same time restrict what will be set out in the course of this study. Others will be happy to ignore such arbitrary classifications. The aim of the study is to give an all-round cultural meaning to the term 'bourgeoisie', above and beyond the inevitable categorisations into *grande*, *petite*, middle, provincial, Jewish, Protestant, old, new, lower, upper and the rest. In fact, all these preconceptions have to do with the elusiveness of the object, as mentioned earlier.

To give an account of some of the factors peculiar to this bourgeois culture, it seemed appropriate to look at the forms of education that appoint an individual to the bourgeois state. One is born a bourgeois, yes, but one also learns to become one. Being born a bourgeois means entering an already existent culture with decipherable values or models. Becoming a bourgeois means enjoying the socially inherited ability to control those schemata and in so doing reproduce them. It is a further instance of the fundamental ambiguity of the notion of culture, which is a state but at the same time is also a process of socially influenced individual acquisition. The distinguishing feature of the bourgeois would thus be to stress or at least not to leave to chance the need for the heir actively to take possession of the values of the group. In fact, the educational concern turns that need into a categorical imperative: a person must already be a bourgeois in order to become one. An attention to detail, a certain self-possession or controlled introspection, and what almost amounts to a ritualisation of everyday practices constituting the passage from the private sphere to the public sphere would seem to characterise this culture that is conceived and experienced as something that goes without saying, the indispensable minimum required to rise above the state of nature.

From learning to acquisition, we shall also be looking at the role and symbolic importance that this social group attaches to the genealogical principle. By arranging the generations in order and giving each individual his place, genealogy makes a title of social function, thereby transforming it into privilege.

At the present stage of this investigation, many aspects will be merely touched on or suggested. The fact is, the conceptual foundations themselves need to be constructed. Although the bourgeoisie has been studied fairly extensively by both French and English-speaking historians, their concern has always been to pin it down at a particular moment of its history in relation to the development of the society they are studying. It is difficult, in this context, to identify the distinguishing features of a bourgeois culture over the long term. We shall discover, in fact, how historians are themselves put in the position of seeing the bourgeois slip away beneath the reality they are analysing.

As for the conceptual referents used in the economic and political sciences,

they are no help at all. Notions of privileged or ruling classes, *élites* or *sub-élites*, merely fragment this group *ad infinitum*, increasing the opacity of the object. The bourgeois vanishes behind all these labels, all these layers of dissection, as it defies all chronological limits that are drawn too tightly.

To establish a specific, overall vision of the bourgeoisie, it was necessary to free it from the shadows cast by two reductive representations. One of these sees the bourgeoisie as a willing victim of the aristocracy; the other invariably describes it as a shameless exploiter of its fellows. This fixing of representations in the collective imagination stems from the very fact that the bourgeoisie has always claimed to base its social order on the principle of universality. As Friedrich Engels wrote:

We have seen how the French philosophers of the eighteenth century, the men who paved the way for the Revolution, appealed to reason as the sole judge of everything that existed. It was necessary to set up a rational state, a rational society; anything that contradicted eternal reason must be ruthlessly exterminated. We have also seen that this eternal relationship was in reality nothing more than the idealised understanding of the citizen of the middle class, whose development in fact made him a bourgeois. (Engels 1973)

However, not everything was reasonable. And for a long time bourgeois culture found itself reduced to the economic and social function that a triumphant section of the bourgeoisie occupied for part of its history. It is at this level that we should reintroduce (with a view to transcending) the notion of milieu and observe how a cultural model is constructed out of borrowings and rejections, spreading in a thousand ways right through the social fabric. This very special position of the bourgeoisie as object complicates the question of its legitimacy in the discipline of anthropology itself. Certainly, it is no part of the tradition of anthropology to study a dominant group. On the contrary, the ethnology of modern societies shows a fascination with the local, often focusing for preference on the strata that, socially and culturally, are the farthest removed from the observer.

Consequently, the biggest problem in the present study lay in the play of looks between investigator and informants, with its concomitant risk of always thinking in the categories of knowledge produced by the group being observed. The object, the problematics, the whole approach made this investigation a product mid-way between sociology and ethnology. Neither discipline is going to be satisfied, and both must accept a degree of epistemological blurring.

However, one question arises that would place the novelty of such an investigation project in perspective. It has been centuries since anyone shouted: 'Death to the bourgeois!' and many years (something like a hundred) since sociologists, historians and political scientists talked in prophetic tones of the death of the bourgeoisie. Yet it so happens that for the last few years (triggered by the bicentenary of the French Revolution,

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possibly?) the bourgeois, echoing the aristocrats, have been noisily laying claim to their own moral and cultural order. Surely this crystallisation around their manner of being and the kind of exhibition to which it has given rise (namely a spate of autobiographical success stories) really are symptomatic of their imminent disappearance? A swan song, as it were. In which case, studying the bourgeoisie of today is perhaps almost in the nature of an ethnographic emergency . . .

Behind these alarmist prophecies, regarding which younger-generation bourgeois evince a high degree of sensitivity, there is the ultimate question of the real attenuation of privileges. Demographic upheavals are putting pressure on and radically modifying the conditions of transmission of property. Today's heirs wait longer and in greater numbers than before. Meanwhile, freed from the shameful shadow of capital, they are able at their leisure to develop and recognise their cultural values and (why not?) snare the ethnologist in their nets!

1

THE INVESTIGATION

It is 4.30 in the afternoon in the rue Cler in Paris's seventh district, and that woman is certainly one (navy loden coat, court shoes, little shoulder bag slung across her back). So is she (no doubt about it: soft black-leather coat with a lambswool lining, open to reveal a woollen roll neck). Both women, willy-nilly, evoke the word 'bourgeois'. Their air of neutrality, limited range of dress, certain shared emblematic details (court shoes, scarf, bag, ring) are so many tangible elements that the practised eye will recognise but that in the absence of more conspicuous clues will pass unnoticed. They may not evoke the word 'bourgeois' for everyone. And even if they did, not everyone would perhaps agree on what they had seen.

However, before juggling with these cultural schemata, it was necessary to pass through stages full of doubts and uncertainties and dominated by the question of the Other. Underlying many of the obstacles to observing everyday practices is this undeniable social fact: private life, in our society, is that which is legally entitled to escape outside scrutiny. According to the *Littré* dictionary, it is not even permissible to 'discover and publicise what takes place in a person's house' (Duby 1985). In other words, the very definition of the adjective 'private' precludes what to the ethnologist is a familiar practice. The situation is paradoxical, to say the least, and not without a certain ambiguity. In time you contrive to get round this sort of difficulty, even if a vague feeling of committing an offence still persists in your heart of hearts. On the other hand, forming a clear analysis of what goes on between the investigator and his subjects in the fieldwork situation is no easy task. It means, in fact, considering the investigative situation as being in itself a social fact or, to borrow a definition from the ethnomethodologists, a practical accomplishment making use of lay expertise and procedures. It would clearly be naïve to suppose that informants are capable, during interviews, of disregarding their own 'methodology'. Coulon uses the term 'lay methodology' to mean 'what is natural for the ordinary actor, the way in which he combines and permutates his natural assumptions in interactions in which he becomes involved with his peers' (Coulon 1986).

During this study I was led to observe, for example, that bourgeois culture is based on a conception of otherness in which precisely this question of the

The investigation

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3 A bourgeois silhouette?
A certain neutrality, subtle emblematic details, each one perceptible to the trained eye.

other person is, as we shall see, resolved before it has even been posed. In the circumstances, it is difficult not to wonder about the effects of this 'natural assumption' on the very course of interviews that arbitrarily place the person approached in the position of being an Other. It is a situation that, for the bourgeois of either sex, is socially unusual. So all my informants reacted in such a way as to reach a practical resolution of this social and cultural inversion occasioned by the investigation. Depending on the interpretative faculties of those involved, various procedures were used.

The first has to do with the question of identity: the informant wishes to know to whom he is talking. His concern is no more to become acquainted with the investigator than it is to show interest in (in this case) her professional qualifications. The informant simply wants to know whether the person in front of him belongs to his world or not. The trouble is, in his world that question does not arise: one usually knows whom one is dealing with. The informant proceeds to resolve this problem by asking questions about the links between the investigator and the intermediary: 'You must know Julie's grandmother, then?', 'You've surely visited their family seat?' and so on. The informant is looking for clues that will indicate the degree of familiarity or intimacy that the investigator has with 'his people'.

Another strategy is for the informant to employ humour to show (as may be done at any time) that he is aware of falling in with a curious game. In this way he contrives to put a distance between himself and what he says, or between him and the investigator.

A third method, finally, is for the informant to embody, for the duration of the interview, one of the possible representations of the bourgeoisie (historical, moral, virtuous, austere, urbane, cultivated, industrial, etc.). This is how those informants behaved who, without knowing why, felt embarrassed at having to talk about themselves. Because in their world it goes without saying that one does not push oneself forward. So in the very mechanics of the encounter these men and women brought their own reflexive, interpretative capacity into play. They sought to limit the disorder occasioned by an abnormal situation, that of being an Other to the extraordinary extent of being capable of forming an object of observation.

The sample

Unlike a previous experiment of mine where I had used the door-to-door method (Le Wita 1984), here I was obliged to fall back on intermediaries in the form of friends or professional colleagues. There would have been no point at all in ringing the doorbell at random on, say, the third floor of 27 boulevard Delessert in the sixteenth district – and for one obvious and disturbing reason, namely that there is no guarantee a bourgeois family would be living there. So it was necessary to ask for informants. Some of these