



## Universal social determination

Some battles are won too well. So well that the winners might become convinced of having reached the end of history. For the social sciences, the mother of all battles was fought and won during the twentieth century. It was the battle of representing inequality between humans as a social process, not a natural accumulation of individual differences. That was a scientific endeavour with deeply political consequences. It was about convincing people that they are in many and important ways the outcome of their relations with others and the positions imposed by these relations. They were not simply themselves or what destiny or god made of them. They were sculpted by their own coexistence and their lives took one or another direction because of that.

If we think of modernity as an era where individual ambition started counting more than collective coercion, a critical view on social inequality was indispensable, and accordingly inevitable. In that sense, acknowledging social determination was itself a product of modernity. Education brought that acknowledgement to society at large and the emergence of applied socialism obliged everyone to take a stance on the balance between equality and competition. Class became part of standard political thinking and social determination got to the centre of debates both in the social sciences and in politics. Thus, we came to the broad admission that the poorer and less powerful parts of society do not simply stay so because they are less capable; starting positions affect ending ones. This was not an emotionally neutral process, it contained all kinds of components. Manners, mentalities, knowledge, posture, language, etc. in fact the entire mental infrastructure of our social life. Miles of library shelves are dedicated to the subject and keep getting longer; for a short guide to the bitterness of this new understanding of society one can turn to John Lennon's 'Working Class Hero'.<sup>1</sup> That new consciousness reorganised the perception of oneself and others and denaturalised relations with one's neighbours as much as it did with peoples on other continents. A series of lower social positions became increasingly questionable and new fault lines emerged in seeking emancipation following class: race, gender, sexuality, disability, age and all instances of 'otherness'.

This is all great, powerful and just. But I would like to argue that winning this battle so perfectly has led the social sciences to a degree of critical inertia. Put simply, my argument is this: social determination is not merely a process that affects the lower social positions. It affects society as a whole and *all its parts*. If that is a plausible line of thinking it means that our focus on social determination as a process of keeping the lower strata in their places would need to be applied to the middle and higher strata too. This is not very different from saying that the distribution of power is subject to an evolutionary dynamics under which all participants

<sup>1</sup>Written in 1970, in perfect timing with the wind of conscious social determination blowing over Europe.


tend towards ends that supersede them. They are determined in what they wish for and in their inherent means for achieving it. What varies is the hazard of the social conditions in which they will find themselves. Depending on this hazard, the same individuals can come on the top or the bottom of the social pile. If one wishes to put it crudely, murderers may end up heroes when they defend their own from the aggression of other murderers, just as generous altruists will be venerated in a natural catastrophe but ignored when all goes well. It so happens that today daily tacticians and moderate innovators are more compatible with a market-based society.

Viewed under this light, social determination can be construed as two parallel tendencies with opposite directions: the desire to influence others, i.e. power, and the suffering from not having any power and being, largely or completely, under the power of others. On the long road to understanding sociality, we have at least completed an important first stage; we know that it is based on consciousness. If evolution did not endow beings with the capacity to suffer, social influence would be meaningless, for those who do not understand social order are not powerless or powerful, they are just free from power. Following that logic, justice and equality are responses to the consciousness of suffering and magnificent proofs that new elements are continuously invented in social evolution.<sup>2</sup> We are all puppets of our social coexistence, both the powerless and the powerful, and the social sciences are there to help the species face up to this truth.

It is therefore necessary to stop linking social determination only to the lower classes as if there were something inherently or naturally superior to the existence and the mode of living of the higher classes. It is time to show that we are all primates directed by a collective process which may bring us to sleep alone under bridges or make decisions that affect millions of us. Unfortunately, the process is not interested in individual suffering but we as individuals are. And this is the point of social determination, that we are all interchangeable social automata. We need to protect each other from the 'weight of the world'<sup>3</sup> and limit the process to what we consider acceptable for the human condition.

This is why it is a pleasure to publish this special issue on charting the social space, a clear attempt to look at the structure of society in terms of multiple antagonisms that are constitutive of social relations. It is not important what the criteria of clustering are in every era (art, money, violence, knowledge, technology or even vacuous celebrity). What is important is that hierarchical clustering will inevitably chart the social space and attribute positions in it, because social relations are structured in that manner.

In his introduction to the issue, Dieter Vandebroek takes us through the interest of considering the entire sociological insight into social division at the level of a topography that clarifies the macroscopic view of class. I would like to thank him for taking the initiative to bring together a series of articles under this bold perspective.

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<sup>2</sup>We are lucky to have works such as Mann's *Sources of Social Power* that give us an overarching perspective on that process (Cambridge University Press, four volumes, 1986–2013).

<sup>3</sup>Bourdieu P. et al., Polity Press, Cambridge, 1999.