Appendix: The Family Spirit

Shorter on the invention of family feeling, and is perhaps last disappearing.

But if it is accepted that the family is only a word, a mere verbal construct, one then has to analyze the representations that people form of what they refer to as the family, of this “word family” or “paper family.” Some ethnomethodologists who see discourse about the family as a kind of political ideology designating a valorized configuration of social relationships have identified a number of presuppositions common to this discourse in both its ordinary and scientific forms.

First set of properties: through a kind of anthropomorphism in which the properties of an individual are attributed to a group, the family is seen as a reality transcending its members, a transpersonal person endowed with a common life and spirit and a particular vision of the world.

Second set of properties: definitions of the family are seen as having in common the fact that they assume the family exists as a separate social universe, engaged in an effort to perpetuate its frontiers and oriented toward idealization of the interior as sacred, sanctum (as opposed to the exterior). This sacred, secret universe, with its doors closed to protect its intimacy, separated from the external world by the symbolic barrier of the threshold, perpetuates itself and perpetuates its own separateness, its privacy, as an obstacle to knowledge, a private secret, “backstage.” One might add to this theme of privacy a third theme, that of the residence, the house as a stable, enduring locus and the household as a permanent unit, durably associated with a house that is endlessly transmissible.

Thus, in family discourse, the language that the family uses about the family, the domestic unit is conceived as an active agent, endowed with a will, capable of thought, feeling and action, and founded on a set of cognitive presuppositions and normative prescriptions about the proper way to conduct domestic relationships. It is a world in which the ordinary laws of the economy are suspended, a place of trusting and giving—opposed to the market and its exchanges of equivalent values—or, to use Aristotle's term, philia, a word that is often translated as “friendship” but which in fact designates the refusal to calculate; a place where interest, in the narrow sense of the pursuit of equivalence in exchanges,
is suspended. Ordinary discourse ordinarily, and no doubt universally, draws from the family ideal models of human relations (with, for example, conceptions like brotherhood), and family relations in their official definition tend to function as principles for the construction and evaluation of every social relationship.

A Well-Founded Fiction

At the same time, if it is true that the family is only a word, it is also true that it is an active "watchword," or rather, a category, a collective principle of construction of collective reality. It can be said without contradiction both that social realities are social fictions with no other basis than social construction, and that they really exist, inasmuch as they are collectively recognized. Every time we use a classificatory concept like "family," we are making both a description and a prescription, which is not perceived as such because it is (more or less) universally accepted and goes without saying. We tacitly admit that the reality to which we give the name "family," and which we place in the category of "real" families, is a family in reality.

So, while we may accept, with the ethnomethodologists, that the family is a principle of construction of social reality, it also has to be pointed out, in opposition to ethnomethodology, that this principle of construction is itself socially constructed and that it is common to all agents socialized in a particular way. In other words, it is a common principle of vision and division, a _nomos_, that we all have in our heads because it has been inculcated in us through a process of socialization performed in a world that was itself organized according to the division into families. This principle of construction is one of the constituent elements of our habitus, a mental structure which, having been inculcated into all minds socialized in a particular way, is both individual and collective. It is a tacit law (_nomos_) of perception and practice that is at the basis of the consensus on the sense of the social world (and of the word "family" in particular), the basis of common sense.

Thus the pretensions of common sense and the folk categories of spontaneous sociology which, methodologically speaking, have to be called into question, may, as here, be well founded, because they help to make the reality that they describe. In the social world, words make things, because they make the consensus on the existence and the meaning of things, the common sense, the _doxa_ accepted by all as self-evident.

The family is a principle of construction that is both immanent in individuals (as an internalized collective) and transcendent to them, since they encounter it in the form of objectivity in all other individuals; it is a transcendental in Kant's sense, but one which, being immanent in all habitus, imposes itself as transcendent. This is the basis of the specific ontology of social categories: being rooted both in the objectivity of social structures and in the subjectivity of objectively orchestrated mental structures, they present themselves to experience with the opacity and resistance of things, although they are the product of acts of construction which, as a certain ethnomethodological critique suggests, apparently legitimate them to the nonexistence of pure figments of thought.

Thus the family as an objective social category (a structuring structure) is the basis of the family as a subjective social category (a structured structure), a mental category which is the matrix of countless representations and actions (such as marriages) which help to reproduce the objective social category. The circle is that of reproduction of the social order. The near-perfect match that is then set up between the subjective and objective categories provides the foundation for an experience of the world as self-evident, taken for granted. And nothing seems more natural than the family; this arbitrary social construct seems to belong on the side of nature, the natural and the universal.

The Work of Institution

If the family appears as the most natural of social categories and is therefore destined to provide the model for all _social bodies_, this is because it functions, in habitus, as a classificatory scheme and a principle of the construction of the social world and of that particular social body, the family, a principle which is acquired within a family existing as a realized social fiction. The family is the product of an _institutionalization_, both ritual and technical, aimed at durably instituting in each member of the instituted unit feelings that will tend to ensure the _integration_ that is the condition of the existence and persistence of the unit. Rites of institution
Appendix: The Family Spirit

by each member), and its struggles to hold on to and transform these power relations.

The Site of Social Reproduction

But the naturalization of social arbitrariness causes it to be forgotten that, in order for this reality called "family" to be possible, certain social conditions that are in no way universal have to be fulfilled. They are, in any case, by no means uniformly distributed. In short, the family in its legitimate definition is a privilege insituted into a universal norm: a de facto privilege that implies a symbolic privilege -- the privilege of being comme il faut, conforming to the norm, and therefore enjoying a symbolic profit of normality. Those who have the privilege of having a "normal" family are able to demand the same of everyone without having to raise the question of the conditions (a certain income, living space, etc.) of universal access to what they demand universally.

This privilege is, in reality, one of the major conditions of the accumulation and transmission of economic, cultural and sibolic privileges. The family plays a decisive role in the maintenance of the social order, through social as well as biological reproduction, that is, reproduction of the structure of the social space and social relations. It is one of the key sites of the accumulation of capital in its different forms, and its transmission between the generations. It safeguards its unity for and through this transmission. It is the main "subject" of reproduction strategies. That is seen clearly in the transmission of the family name, the basic element in the hereditary symbolic capital. The father is only the apparent subject of the naming of his son because he names him in accordance with a principle of which he is not the master, and in transmitting his own name (the name of the father) he transmits an autoritas of which he is not the auctor, according to a rule of which he is not the creator. The same is true, mutatis mutandis, of the material heritage. A considerable number of economic acts have as their "subject" not the individual homo economicus but collectives, one of the most important of these being the family; this is as true of the choice of a school as of the purchase of a house. For example, in property purchases the decision often involves a large part of the lineage (such as the parents of one or the other
of the spouses, who lend money and in turn have the right to give advice and influence the economic decision. It is true that, in this case, the family acts as a kind of "collective subject," as commonly defined, and not as a simple aggregate of individuals. But this is not the only case in which it is the site of a kind of transcendent will manifesting itself in collective decisions and in which its members feel required to act as parts of a united body.

At the same time, not all families, and, within a given family, not all members, have the same capacity and propensity to conform to the dominant definition. As is seen especially clearly in societies based on the "house," where the perpetuation of the house as a set of material assets orients the whole existence of the household, the tendency of the family to persevere in its being, to perpetuate its existence by ensuring its integration, is inseparable from the tendency to perpetuate the integrity of its heritage, which is always threatened by dilapidation and dispersion. The forces of fusion, especially the ethical dispositions that incline its members to identify the particular interests of individuals with the collective interests of the family, have to contain the forces of fusion, that is, the interests of the various members of the group, who may be more or less inclined to accept the common vision and more or less capable of imposing their "selfish" point of view. The practices of which the family is the "subject" (for instance, "choices" as regards fertility, child-rearing and education, marriage, consumption) cannot be accounted for without considering the structure of the power relations among the members of the family group (and therefore the history of which it is the outcome), a structure that is always at stake in the struggles within the domestic field. But the functioning of the domestic unit as a field meets its limit in the effects of male domination, which orient the family toward the logic of the monolithic body (since integration can be an effect of domination).

One of the properties of dominant social fractions is that they have particularly excessive families ("great families are big families") that are strongly integrated because they are united not only by the affinity between habitus but also by the solidarity of interests, that is, by both capital and for capital, economic capital naturally, but also symbolic capital (the name) and perhaps above all social capital (which can be shown to be the condition and the effect of successful management of the capital collectively possessed by the members of the domestic unit). For example, among executives, the family plays a considerable role not only in the transmission but also in the management of the economic heritage, especially through business alliances which are often family alliances. Bourgeois dynasties function like select clubs; they are the sites of the accumulation and management of a capital equal to the sum of the capital held by each of their members, the relationships between the various holders making it possible to mobilize it, partially at least, in favor of each of them.

The State and the Statisticians

Thus, having started out with a form of radical doubt, we are led to retain a number of the properties that figure in the ordinary definitions; but only after subjecting them to a twofold challenge that only apparently leads back to the starting point. Undoubtedly one has to cease to regard the family as an immediate datum of social reality and see it rather as an instrument of construction of that reality, but one also has to move beyond the ethnomethodological challenge and ask who constructed the instruments of construction that are thereby brought to light, and to examine family categories as institutions existing both in the objectivity of the world, in the form of the elementary social bodies that we call families, and in people's minds, in the form of principles of classification that are implemented both by ordinary agents and by the licensed operators of official classifications, such as state statisticians (working for INED, INSEE, etc.).

It is indeed clear that in modern societies the main agent of the construction of the official categories through which both populations and minds are structured is the state, which, through a whole labor of codification accompanied by economic and social effects (family allowances, for example), aims to favor a certain kind of family organisation, to strengthen those who are in a position to conform to this form of organization, and to encourage, through all material and symbolic means, "logical conformism" and "moral conformism" as an agreement on a system of forms of apprehension and construction of the world, of which this form of organization, this category, is without doubt the cornerstone.
Thus the family is indeed a fiction, a social artifact, an illusion in the most ordinary sense of the word, but a "well-founded illu-

sion," because, being produced and reproduced with the guarantee of the state, it receives from the state at every moment the means to exist and persist.

Appendix Notes

1 I will cite just one work exemplary in its audacious application of ethnomethodological doubt: J. F. Gubrium and J. A. Holstein, What is Family? (Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield, 1990).

2 In the absence of empirical studies, I will cite here, for the case of France, the work of the cartoonist Claire Bretcher, an excellent ethno-
grapher of a very particular social milieu. In one of her books, Agrip-
pine, her heroine spells out a whole new taxonomy corresponding to entirely unprecedented kin relationships - "pseudo-half" (brother), "half," "double-half," "half-double" - devised to designate all the forms of kinship made possible by remarriages or "pseudo-marriages.

3 In short, to understand some of the family combinations really existing today in the social world, one would have to 'follow Bretcher and con-
struct an entirely new kinship terminology overriding all the structural

oppositions that componentional analyses of kinship normally bring out.

4 To convey the full force of this shared self-evidence one would need to relate here the testimony of the women we recently interviewed in the course of a survey on social suffering: being out of line with the tacit norm which demands, with increasing insistence as they grow older, that they should be married and have children, they speak of the pressures exerted on them to fall into line, to "settle down" and start a family (such as the harassments and problems associated with the status of single woman, at receptions or dinner parties, or the difficulty of being taken completely seriously when one is seen as an incomplete and inadequate pro-

5 Ethnomethodological critique leaves unanswered the question of the genesis of the social categories of construction of social reality, the acquisition of the durable dispositions that constitute the habitus. Similarly it fails to address the question of the social conditions of possibility both of this process of acquisition and of the family as a realized social category.

Appendix: The Family Spirit


6 French national institutes for demographic and socioeconomic statistics, respectively. Trans.

7 These indicators are often provided by sociologists, as has been shown by an American study of the criteria social workers use to make a rapid assessment of the cohesion of the family. This assessment then provides the basis for a forecast of the chances of success of a given course of action and, consequently, one of the mediations through which social destiny is accomplished.

8 For example, the major commissions that have decided the form that state housing aid should take have made a major contribution toward shaping the family and the representation of family life that demographic and sociological surveys record as a kind of natural datum.

4

Is a Disinterested Act Possible?

Why is the word interest to a certain point interesting? Why is it important to ask about the interest agents may have in doing what they do? In fact, the notion of interest first imposed itself on me as an instrument of rupture with an enchanted and mystifying vision of human behavior. The furor or horror that my work sometimes provokes is perhaps in part explained by the fact that its somewhat disenchanted gaze, while not sniggering or cynical, is often applied to universes, such as the intellectual world, which are sites of excellence of disinterestedness (at least according to the representation of those who participate in them). To recall that intellectual games also have stakes and that these stakes arouse interests—as so many things that everyone in a sense knows—was to attempt to extend the scientific vision's universal mode of explanation and comprehension to all forms of human behavior, including those presented or lived as disinterested, and to remove the intellectual world from the status of an exception or an extraterritoriality that intellectuals are inclined to accord themselves.

As a second justification, I could invoke what seems to me to be a postulate of the sociological theory of knowledge. One cannot do sociology without accepting what classical philosophers called the "principle of sufficient reason" and without assuming, among other things, that social agents don't do just anything, that they are not foolish, that they do not act without reason. This does not mean that one must assume that they are rational, that they are right to act as they do, or even, to put it more simply, that
PRACTICAL REASON

On the Theory of Action

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CONTENTS

PREFACE vii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS X

1 Social Space and Symbolic Space 1
   Appendix: The "Soviet" Variant and Political Capital 14

2 The New Capital 19
   Appendix: Social Space and Field of Power 31

3 Rethinking the State: Genesis and Structure of the Bureaucratic Field 35
   Appendix: The Family Spirit 64

4 Is a Disinterested Act Possible? 75

5 The Economy of Symbolic Goods 92
   Appendix: Remarks on the Economy of the Church 124

6 The Scholastic Point of View 127
A Paradoxical Foundation of Ethics 141

INDEX 146