

## Art and class struggle: The Diagrammatic Imaginary

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Il est peu contesté que la lutte des classes soit le «maître mot» de la théorie marxiste.  
Bensussan and Labica, *Dictionnaire critique du marxisme*

Five women work with their hands. They look at one another; at their work; at their tools: the spindle, distaff, and of course the wheel. The bare feet of the middle three form a triangle that catches and holds a ball of yarn, freshly spun. Behind them, second plane, five more women. Two steps up; light streams into the alcove here, from a source hidden behind a wall. These five women dress differently—more sumptuous cloth; their feet, unseen. If they're at work it's unclear on what: one, helmeted, raises her hand as if to strike another. Two watch: a play? The last turns away and looks across her left shoulder toward the first plane and perhaps beyond, to catch my eyes. Third plane, behind this scene: a tapestry, a white bull carrying off the figure of a naked woman.

The palette: the range of browns; an ochre-d red; a mid-range blue, highlighted in clear whites; white.

The brush-stroke: loose, daubed. Barely an edge or a line; an enhanced and accelerating gradient.

What quality shared by members of each group allows me to imagine that they form *a class*? Thus the *semantics* of Velázquez's "Las Hilanderas (La fábula de Aracne)", from roughly 1657. What qualities of the canvas allow me to imagine these classes to be *at war*? Thus the painting's *syntax*.

I'm standing in front of "Las Hilanderas", as I have so many times before. The motley of interpretations is before me too: iconographic, formal, historicist. I find war and classes there as well: Arachne against Athena; humans and gods; Jupiter and Europa; the purchasing class and the weaving class, in the twinned spaces of the tapestry factory of Santa Isabel, in Madrid; the war between the line drawn by the gazes that draw me in or draw me to them (the woman in the middle plane looking out; the bull's one eye, reaching out from the tapestry) and the spiral that winds from the uncarded wool hanging, massive, unformed, on the wall; through the whirl of its production in the first plane; up the steps and into the matter of the tapestries that form the canvas's third plane, hung on the virtual plane that's both a fourth, receding plane and the material support for the whole fraught architecture: the canvas. (Icons: the spinning wheel; the ladder; circle/line).

Today I have different questions. My eyes come back, as they do most times, to the blank wheel in motion almost at the plane of the canvas.

Imagine that we wanted to translate the famous proposition that “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas”. Our translation of the sentence from Marx’s *German ideology* sounds very much like a restatement of the original, and goes like this: “The aesthetic of the ruling class is in every epoch the ruling aesthetic”, or “The art most valued is in every epoch the art of the ruling class”, by which we mean “the art valued by the ruling class”.

The translation runs into four classes of problems. Let’s outline the braid they form today.

The first is topological: To what extent and in what way is the *aesthetic* a subset of the class of ideas? Can we in fact substitute one in place of the other, and deposit thought about “art” or “the aesthetic” into the place occupied by “the idea”? Marx himself does not use *idea*, *Idee*, but *Gedank*, *Gedänke*, thought or thoughts. A proper version would then be: “In every epoch, the dominant thoughts or thinkings or thought products are the thought-products of the dominant class”. The distinction is an important one. The *idea* is an object of thought, one of many; it is produced as such, with the name “idea”, by philosophers who borrow their dominance over other producers of thought from the qualities with which they endow the idea—a hieratic eminence; permanence; abstraction; capaciousness. The idea of the philosopher shines with light borrowed from the “idea” that the philosophers spin into the normal form of thought. Differently: philosophers famously charged with just *interpreting* the world install a regime of ideas preponderant over thought. They create an ideal class of idea-producers whose “ideas”, foremost the idea of “class” or a “*class*”, are simultaneously more capacious, more capable of describing the world, and accessible only through the sovereign disposition, in the domain of *thinking*, of that class of “thoughts”, and in the world of disciplinary and institutional relations, of the faculty of philosophers who produce and protect them.

Our first class of problems then flows from the unsettled status of our terms and their relation: “ideas”, “thoughts”, “class”, “art”, and “aesthetics”. What relations they bear to one another and what relationships of inclusion, extension, and order of generality might be implied when we make a statement concerning “the dominant aesthetic” or “the art of the dominant class”—these are, for the moment, unaddressed.

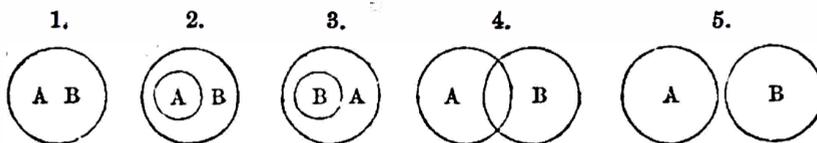
Our second class of problems is conceptual. What value do we assign the possessive, the figure of ownership, of private possession: “*of* the ruling class”. What does it mean for a “class” to possess “ideas”, or an “aesthetic”? (If a class is defined by the “ideas” it “possesses”, can it be said to be distinct from those “possessions”?) Do we imagine possession on the model—according to the diagram—of what I myself can *own*, under specific circumstances, according to a socio-economic frame that associates my possessing this or that, say, with my individual standing? (Icon: McPherson.) The first recorded owner of “Las Hilanderas”: Pedro de Arce.

Our third class of problems is philological. I mind my tenses now. Take the word “class”, *Klasse*, in constant use throughout *The German Ideology*. What was it, what did it mean, and for whom? What was its function at the time that Marx was writing *The German ideology*? *Klasse* covers “group;” “race;” “type;” a collection of similarly-aged school-children; and in a naïve sense, “set”. It’s to be distinguished from *Stand*, an “estate” or an “order;” it’s not a “caste”. To use *Klasse* to mean a group with similar economic interests, in a similar emplacement in the circuit of extraction-production-distribution and consumption, and *aware* of that similar emplacement, involves doing work with the term, upon it, and upon terms contingent

upon it. What's the nature of *that* work? What do we say about the class of people or of institutions, or of people working in institutions, who perform this work?

Our fourth class of problems is posed by the historicity of the first three. How has the semantic drift of "idea", "possession", "thought", "aesthetic", "class" into today's settings formed how I understand the work it did then? ("Today's settings" – for whom? Where? Whose "day", and what, after all, is a "day" for you and me, today? Icon: work-day.)

A diagrammatic imaginary shapes the field on which our four problems braid. When I say, with Marx's translator, "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas", or in my version today "The aesthetic of the ruling class is in every epoch the ruling aesthetic", or "The art most valued is in every epoch the art of the ruling class", I seem to draw lines, to make distinctions, sharp enough, between spaces. I'm thinking of the line that runs from Euler to Boole and Venn. A collection of elements forming a class, a set, is figured in the following way. (Icon "elements": the members of a class, proletariat, bourgeoisie; accountable, substantially self-identical, "possessing" shared definitive properties; distinct from nonmembers of the class or members of other classes who don't "possess" those properties, with whom they can enter into conflict.)



Here's Venn's expanded table:

(i) Diagrammatic	(ii) Common Logie	(iii) Quantified	(iv) Sym-bolic
	All <i>A</i> is <i>B</i> } All <i>B</i> is <i>A</i> }	All <i>A</i> is all <i>B</i>	$A\bar{B} = 0$ } $\bar{A}B = 0$ }
	All <i>A</i> is <i>B</i> } Some <i>B</i> is not <i>A</i> }	All <i>A</i> is some <i>B</i>	$A\bar{B} = 0$ } $\bar{A}B = v$ }
	All <i>B</i> is <i>A</i> } Some <i>A</i> is not <i>B</i> }	Some <i>A</i> is all <i>B</i>	$\bar{A}B = 0$ } $A\bar{B} = v$ }
	Some <i>A</i> is <i>B</i> } Some <i>A</i> is not <i>B</i> } Some <i>B</i> is not <i>A</i> }	Some <i>A</i> is some <i>B</i>	$AB = v$ } $A\bar{B} = v$ } $\bar{A}B = v$ }
	No <i>A</i> is <i>B</i>	No <i>A</i> is any <i>B</i>	$AB = 0$

The naïve diagrammatic imaginary of the line-set is the vernacular space in which classes take shape for us; stand before each other; cross or fail to meet; enter into struggle.

The most substantial transformation of the concept of *class*, and in the concept of *concept*, is a transformation of the diagram. It's due to Bourdieu and Wittgenstein:

it follows Velázquez's counter-diagram. (Icon: Cantor vs. Boole; incompleteness; Wittgenstein, ostension in *PI* but also *Remarks on Colour*: "What then is the essential nature of cloudiness [Trüben, Trübe–French "trouble"; cloudiness, tarnish, murkiness; struggle, war]? For red or yellow transparent things are not cloudy; white is *trübe*. Is *trüb* that which conceals [*verschleiert*: what veils] forms, and conceals forms because it obliterates light and shadow?" Bourdieu: "In the reality of the social world, there are no more clear-cut boundaries, no more absolute breaks, than there are in the physical world. The boundaries between theoretical classes which scientific investigation allows us to construct on the basis of a plurality of criteria are similar, to use a metaphor of Rapoport's, to the boundaries of a cloud or a forest. These boundaries can thus be conceived of as lines or as imaginary planes, such that the density (of the trees or of the water vapour) is higher on the one side and lower on the other, or above a certain value on the one side and below it on the other. (In fact, a more appropriate image would be that of a flame whose edges are in constant movement, oscillating around a line or surface.); a flame--the destruction of the line and the signature of the point-field. Here is the wheel Velázquez's spinner spins in "Las Hilanderas", capturing for a flickering moment the figure of labor-time that distinguishes the painting's first plane from the arrested times of the second and third planes. (The fourth plane?) At its side, a possible reference: Stradano's "Penelope at the Loom", the central tondo on the ceiling of the Sala di Penelope, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence.



The spinning wheel. Materialization of labor time upon the dialectic between the point of, as, the spinning edge and the destruction of the spokes of the wheel. Production of the 0, not as the diagrammatic figure of enclosure but as the troubled and troubling motion of a point-in-time, an index of labor-time. The empty container of the spinning wheel balanced upon a set of spokes, elements supporting the trace of the point-in-motion, labor-time erasing the linear supports of its imaginary production.

No "class" can "dominate" without a diagram. The 0 of the spinning wheel: the trouble of the counter-diagram, its struggle, its war –the temporalization, as labor-time, of the production of "class"'s edge. (Icon: thought-product as color field; "field" unpossessed; "possession" of the quality "belongs to the field", predicatable-unnepredicable of substance-elements "in" the field.)