

The processes of reclassification between domination and emancipation

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Abstract: This article addresses the dynamic and multidimensional character of practical reclassification processes. By emphasizing its temporal and historical side, every classification turns out to be a reclassification, either of itself or of other classifications; there is no way to classify in an ahistorical void. In that context, two key orientations of these processes are pointed out: an oppressive one, linked to the production, reproduction, defense and expansion of different forms of domination; and an emancipatory one, related to the extension of the life possibilities of those who are dominated, exploited and subalternized. Thus, three dimensions of each of these orientations are deployed: regarding oppressive reclassifications, sharp cleavages, violence and standardization; regarding emancipatory ones, interconnection, radicality and reflexivity. Although they can be studied separately, it is necessary to establish a comprehensive outlook that understands how they configure and reconfigure each other in a given epochal framework. Likewise, it is considered fundamental to highlight that sociology and other social sciences and humanities can also intervene with their own reclassifications in the two orientations of these processes, particularly, in the reflexive dimension of emancipatory reclassifications, both through studies on global contemporaneity and through theoretical-analytical perspectives focused on the dynamics of reclassification itself.

Introduction

Sociological and social theory has always given relevance to the problem of social classifications, namely to the ways in which the social and natural world is divided, valued and qualified, either by the social actors themselves (individuals, groups, institutions, states), or by sociology and other social sciences and humanities. However, in recent years this problem has emerged in the center of the theoretical debate for various reasons: regarding current society, due to the growing social struggles and demands in which classifications are discussed – class, race, gender, regions, etc. –; regarding empirical research, in studies that not only focus on these disputes, but also address nodal issues such as the symbolic domination that produces and legitimizes social inequality; and regarding theoretical reflection, by the search for a multidimensional theory of the social that might account for relations of domination, its transformations and for the possibilities of social emancipation. In this context, I am interested in proposing a theory of social reclassifications, focused on the processes through which they are elaborated and questioned, and through which new social reclassifications are generated. This outlook points to two decisive issues.

On the one hand, it seeks to understand the dynamic and practical character of any social classification, since in reality they are social re-classifications: each classification is the result of a reclassification of itself or of other classifications, generated by the most diverse social instances. This is a historical question about the ways in which these reclassification processes (of

“appropriation”, “combination” and “transformation”) have taken place, which accounts for their heterogeneous, and even contradictory, qualities, especially linked with the mutations in relations of domination in a certain social space.

On the other hand, it implies a reflexive perspective of sociology and other social sciences and humanities. These produce specific reclassifications in their theoretical and empirical research, since they reclassify the (re)classifications of their objects of study through the conceptual tools and methodologies they use. Sociological reclassifications are not outside social reclassifications in general, but rather are a singular modulation of them, with a particular relationship established between both instances (of “criticism”, of “collaboration”, of alleged “neutral distance”). Thus, a reflexive exercise is developed on the reclassification processes of sociological and social theory.

In this way, a theory of social reclassifications does not separate the theoretical elaborations from its claims for practical intervention. More precisely, depending on the way of reclassifying that each perspective displays, it is possible to elucidate how it conceives (implicitly or explicitly) of its potentialities – or not – to influence what has been investigated. Therefore, a theory about social reclassifications also implies an elaboration of possibilities for modifying relations of domination and social hierarchies, although these modifications can imply their reinforcement or an emancipatory challenge. Here the efforts of the most diverse social instances intersect with the interventions of sociology and other social sciences and humanities.

In this article, I approach the interplay between domination and emancipation that has intersected the question of social reclassifications since the very beginning of sociology, but which has now become increasingly evident in the context of conflicts that, due to their global quality, exceed the national framework. To do this, I firstly dedicate myself to analyzing the dimensions of the oppressive reclassification processes connected to social domination and their production, feedback and reinforcement. Secondly, I focus on the emancipatory potential of social reclassification processes, through the different dimensions that are guided by the questioning and reversal of relations of domination and their restrictive definitions of “good life” in common. Finally, I point out the importance of this reflective character for sociology and other social sciences and humanities, given the urgency with which contemporary global reclassifying conflicts arise.

Domination and oppressive reclassification processes

The classification of the natural and social world into different portions and segments is directly linked to domination. The world is divided, for example, into certain types of individuals (“clean” and “dirty”), groups (“white” and “black”; “men” and “women”), institutions (“public” and “private”; “economic”, “political” and “cultural”), regions (“North” and “South”; “central” and “peripheral”). Each of these partitions is defined, qualified, adjectivized and given positive and negative attributes (which carry a normative burden). With this, certain hierarchies are established – or not – among them, the character of which depends on the specific manner of classification (Rehbein and Söyler, 2018).

Now, as I mentioned, these classifications are actually the complex result of reclassification processes. There are no ahistorical classifications performed in a vacuum, but rather every classification is a practical elaboration, based – even when opposing them – on other classifications that, in turn, are also reclassifications. One could lose sight of this temporal side of the classifications, given that the classifications appear in principle to be spatial, by supposedly dividing the world into “boxes”, between which distances in axes and spatial dimensions can be measured (this is clearly observed in any study of “clusters”). Such a temporal and historical aspect is one that the concept of “reclassification” emphasizes.

Thus, for example, to understand capitalist social classes, it is necessary to analyze how they

have taken up and reconfigured certain precapitalist classifications and hierarchies (Rehbein and Souza, 2014). This implies giving an account of the reclassification processes that go through not only great epochal transformations, but also the most varied social contexts, from everyday life to political conflicts in which social movements participate. Such reclassification processes can be linked to relations of domination, exploitation and subalternization. What are the dimensions of this link between reclassifying and domination? Here I focus on three fundamental dimensions: cleavages, violence and standardization.

As I have pointed out elsewhere (Bialakowsky, 2019), not every reclassification implies a cleavage, since the latter implies the sharp separation between two or more poles – cfr. the definition of alienation by Jaeggi (2014). Relations of domination require reclassifying the dominant and the dominated as strong split instances, obstructing their relational character, that is, pretending to prevent, through the most diverse forms, mutual modification. This has its most obvious correlation in spatial separations such as walls, but it is also observed in other mechanisms of social distancing: the greater the social distance and domination (that is, the more restrictive and accessible only for the dominant that the definition of a “good life” is), the greater the reclassification that separates dominant and dominated individuals, institutions and groups. It is a split that allows for the domination both of others and of oneself.

This does not mean that both instances do not actually modify each other; on the contrary, reclassification mechanisms are required (new reclassifications, new attributes) that account for these modifications and absorb them without altering the distance – cfr. the “new spirit of capitalism”, by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005). Moreover, what is intended is to extend and expand that difference as much as possible. The exercise of domination unfolds, then, into a process of cleaving that may in some way be recognized by both dominant and dominated, but that entails an unequal distribution of the possibilities of life, which establishes social hierarchies sustained in the exploitation of one over the other (for example, in the feasibility of accessing certain jobs, of participating in mass media, etc.). Therefore, these reclassification processes are not linear, but are in constant tension and, thus, are configured in a heterogeneous and complex way. Sociology, social sciences and humanities are no stranger to these processes, since some of their productions have been and continue to be part of this splitting reclassificatory work. This is observed, for example, in the manner of defining in a particular way (from a certain dominant cultural context) what a “human being” is or is not, or the characteristics of a “full modern” society and its institutions versus “non-modern” ones (Grondona, 2016).

The second dimension to look into turns out to be violence. “Oppressive” reclassification processes, which split, amplify and sustain that split, require the use of violence, from death as its extreme manifestation, to its subtle forms in language, gestures and gazes. Violence involves wounds and scars on the body, emotions, discourses, territories and objects. At its end it leads to the extermination of the other, to its disappearance, to its “reclassification” as non-living. The multiple forms of violence put into play that graduation of death, as a final threat, but also as the production of wounds or scars that remind us of it – for example, regarding shame and stigmata (Goffman, 2009) or disrespect and distributive injustices (Fraser and Honneth, 2003).

Violence becomes visible in the moments of greater oppressive reclassification production, such as when it is intended to reinforce a challenged domination or, even, to expand it and make it even more restrictive, that is, to sharpen the splits (de Marinis, 2002; Góngora Mera, Santos and Costa, 2019). Thus, reclassification marks are imposed with forcefulness, and the more subtle and everyday ways do not dissolve but become more visible, explicit symbols with which oppressive reclassification is projected onto bodies, movements, spaces or narratives in the history of an individual, a group or certain institutions. Oppressive reclassifications are not defined exclusively by the fact that they have some degree of violence, since violence is detectable in an immense amount of social relationships that exceed these reclassifications. Rather, reclassifications

constantly display violence, in cycles that are not uniform, but that are tied to the challenge of their splits: those challenges and resistances, which I will return to in the next section, can bring increasing violence as a response from the dominant, and even lead to the cruelest horrors, such as the material or symbolic extermination of the dominated.

Finally, it is worth noting the relationship between oppressive reclassifications and standardization. Although it is not something exclusive to capitalist modernity, in this epoch the processes of social and natural reclassification acquire a decisive centrality through standardizations (Bokker and Star, 2009), and certain inscription devices such as metrologies and their tests (Latour, 2005). The relations of modern domination cannot be understood outside of “making available, accessible and attainable” the individuals, their relationships and the natural world (Rosa, 2017), in order to manipulate and control them through their homogenization, abstraction, and even “mathematization”, by collecting information about them (Giddens, 1990).

What Marx (1977) and Weber (2013) had analyzed about capitalism and the modern bureaucratic state, and as the Frankfurt School (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2007; Habermas, 1984, 1987) articulated in their study of instrumental and strategic reason, is today daily evidenced with the increasing informatization of the social – for example, in the contemporary global deployment of economic financialization (Pelfini and Ludwigs, 2012) or in the collection of data on the use of the Internet (Halavais, 2015). Even so, such evidence does not necessarily imply a constant dispute over it. Here, social sciences – and, in particular, sociology – intervene directly with their research techniques, deployed across academia, state institutions and marketing. From the study of social structure and national censuses to the testing of new product campaigns, tools are sophisticated and concepts and analyses of the standardization of society are produced, for which the relevance of sociology and social sciences is unavoidable – in this regard, cfr. Bourdieu’s call (1990) “to objectify objectification”.

Despite this overwhelming deployment of modern standardization, it does not mean we are witnessing its total triumph, at least not if it is understood in a simple way, i.e. as the homogenization of the world through metrological standards. Modern oppressive reclassification processes combine the “qualitative” (normative, aesthetic, subjective) aspect of the splits with their standardizing aspect. Thus, they imply heterogeneous and possibly contradictory results (Quijano, 2000), against which the standards are refined, accepting their limitations, or “translating” and “hybridizing” them (Callon, 1984). As in the case of violence, standardization by itself does not imply oppressive reclassification: for this to be the case, the processes of sharp splitting, linked to continuous violence, must be brought into play, in its indissoluble link with domination, exploitation and subalternization.

Emancipatory reclassifications

Reclassification processes cannot be reduced to an oppressive figure, even as they produce, justify, sustain and amplify relations of domination from the dimensions that have been analyzed in the previous section. Reclassification processes can also be oriented towards emancipation. What do I mean by this orientation? It implies expanding or broadening the life possibilities of those who find themselves severed by oppressive cleavages. These emancipatory reclassification processes challenge, criticize, question, displace, reconfigure or radically modify practical reclassifications, as well as their divisions and their attributes, and with that, the very shape of the existing social world. This occurs in the different social strata, in their points of continuity, for example, between the manners of daily life and the distribution of property and employability relationships. Just as I have highlighted three dimensions of oppressive reclassifications, I will do the same with regard to emancipation on interconnection, radicality and reflexivity.

Oppressive reclassification processes connect different forms of domination, so in terms of a broad broad “intersectionality” or “entanglement” (of class, ethnicity, gender, region, political position, etc. cfr. Boatcă and Roth, 2016; Jelin, Motta and Costa, 2017) it is necessary to analyze how they articulate with each other and what specific weight each of these reclassifying angles acquires in each social configuration: how and when a religious minority, an ethnicity, a gender, a class fraction or a health status are crossed, more or less intensely, by the processes described in the previous section. The highlighting of these interconnections and weights is the one that is put into play in emancipatory reclassification processes, although this does not imply that they are reflected upon directly. This is where the role of sociology and social sciences comes into play, regarding whether they mean to “collaborate” with what individuals, groups or institutions already produce – for example, in a more pragmatic and symmetrical way – or to “criticize” certain connections and weights that those individuals, groups or institutions do not emphasize, or which they even “hide” (Lemieux, 2018; Nardacchione, 2011).

In such processes tensions can be observed, for example, between “universalistic” and “particularistic” reclassifications. “Universalistic” ones are more abstract and comprehensive (sometimes incorporating all of humanity or living beings in general), and one thing that they can be questioned about is the point from which this “universality” is formulated, given the well-known strategy of “making the particular appear as universal” – such is the case of the discussions between the perspectives of the “South” and the “North” (Beigel, 2006; Fraga, 2013; Rehbein, 2015). On the other hand, “particularistic” reclassifications focus on certain splits while subordinating or neglecting others, and it can be questioned as to whether they contribute to the reproduction, though modified, of the splits in question, by simply reversing their attributes. This indicates what Elias analysed regarding “counter-stigmatization” which, like stigmatization itself, implies defining the whole group only in terms of some of their members – in this case, in terms of those of its members that display more “dishonorable” practices (Elias and Scotson, 1994).

In turn, emancipatory reclassifications more or less imply radicality towards existing relations of domination (Cristiano, 2017; Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018). With this, as already mentioned, different levels of potential physical-symbolic violence are at stake as the defensive reaction of the dominant, which, depending on the case, can be displayed or not in different ways. This problem is no stranger to the aforementioned interconnections. Sustained and amplified in modernity with its standardization of global reach, such interconnections generate limits to its questioning in general. Either some divisions are reclassified but not others (whereby interconnections can be reclassified oppressively if only a small part of the split is accepted for reclassification in an emancipatory manner); or generality cannot account for the depth of certain splits, for example in the more “universalistic” elaborations (Álvarez Ruíz, 2017).

The wounds and scars of violence are articulated with deep interconnections so that emancipatory reclassifications face a bifurcation between a moderation of their potentialities or a kind of simplifying radicalism. The moderate “way out” involves a reclassification negotiation game in which certain reclassifications may not be put into question in a profound way, or are directly set aside, usually “for later”, in a future of unspecified temporality. On the other hand, the “way out” through simplifying radicality implies a reclassification centered around one or two cleavages, with a strong process of simplification of the interconnections and the reclassification weights. This can even lead to authoritarian and violent forms of reclassification, in which the emancipation that is “gained” is simultaneously “lost” in many others ways. So, is it impossible to highlight emancipatory reclassification processes that do not fall into this bifurcation? I think that the third dimension, reflexivity, can allow us to make some points in this regard, in which the reclassification proposals of sociology and other social sciences and humanities can intervene (Söyler, 2014).

As a third dimension and contribution of this article, I propose the possibility of analyzing and

developing “reflexive emancipatory reclassification processes”. Reflexivity in relation to reclassifications can be understood in several ways. On the one hand, there is a practical definition of reflexivity as the reclassification capacity of all actors, groups, institutions, etc. to deal with the situations in which they find themselves and of which they are a part (Archer, 2012), which range from “sensitivity” – even as a disposition for “resonance” (Rosa, 2019) –, or “cunning” (González, 2017), to the more standardized and metrologized forms of these capacities – for example, specialized knowledge (Browne, 2017). On the other hand, this reflexivity can be understood as a deepening of the oppressive splits and their poles that, by densifying collective practices and debates about it, allows the refining and expansion of that emancipatory process.

Now, I consider that a third way of reflexivity can be pointed out which encompasses the previous two: a reclassifying reflexivity interested in the forms of situations, in the ways in which different contexts are dealt with and constructed (by individuals, groups, institutions and, also, “living beings”, “things”, etc.). A reflexivity densified in the debates around cleavages, focused not just upon a single or a few cleavages, but on the deep interconnections that span all of them. This implies, therefore, reflexivity in the reclassification processes themselves, that is, in their historical forms, their consequences, their potentialities and limitations. While such a variant is not the monopoly of sociology or of social sciences and humanities, they can definitely make significant contributions to it, since mutual reclassifications (“appropriations”, “criticisms”, “collaborations”, “ruptures”, “hybridizations”) between their own perspectives and their “objects of study and analysis” have always been an important part of their reflections. With some collaboration between sociology and other social sciences and humanities, this form of reflexivity could offer radical emancipatory reclassification processes, open to democratic negotiation and to the very reflexivity on those processes, without assuming a position in which their decisive challenges are suspended until further notice.

Conclusion

In this article I proposed to address the dynamic and multidimensional character of practical reclassification processes, emphasizing their temporal and historical aspects, in which every classification is actually a reclassification of itself or of other classifications, since there is no way to classify in an ahistorical void. I have pointed out two key orientations of these reclassification processes: an oppressive orientation, linked to the production, reproduction, defense and expansion of different forms of domination; and an emancipatory one, related to the extension and broadening of the life possibilities of those who are dominated, exploited and subalternized. To do this, I have outlined three key dimensions of each of these orientations, in which sociology and other social sciences and humanities are also involved.

In addressing the oppressive orientation, I first indicated the sharp cleavages that delimit two or more poles and thereby obstruct or reabsorb the relational character between the dominant and the dominated. I then pointed out the oppressive violence that produces wounds and scars on bodies, emotions, discourses, institutions or territories, both from their reclassification as “not alive” (i.e. the material or symbolic death of the dominated) to their more subtle forms in everyday life. Finally, I highlighted the standardization of modern capitalist reclassifications, in particular in our global context, which combines their “qualitative” aspects with a certain abstraction and homogenization, making individuals, groups and the natural world vulnerable to manipulation and control.

With regards to the emancipatory orientation, I first noted the necessary interconnection between various reclassification processes, that is, a broad “intersectionality” that takes into account the specific modes and weights that are adopted by the interconnections between different

relations of domination within each social configuration. This leads to a tension between emancipatory reclassifications of a “universalistic” and “particularistic” feature. Secondly, I pointed out the question of the radicality of reclassificatory transformations, which requires paying attention to the limitations of two of their graduations: the “moderate” one, which leaves the questioning and mutation of the deepest oppressive splits for a later, unspecified time; and “simplifying radicality”, which takes into account a few splits and subordinates or neglects the others, simplifying the interconnections and specific weights of these oppressive reclassifications. Finally, I proposed the importance of reflexivity for the emancipatory reclassification processes, on their situations, capacities, interconnections and the scope and limitations.

Each of these orientations (oppressive and emancipatory) combines the three dimensions indicated in different ways. Therefore, although they can be analyzed separately, to account for reclassification processes it is necessary to establish an outlook that encompasses all of them, in order to understand how they are configured and reconfigured among themselves in a certain epochal framework. More precisely, these configurations and reconfigurations are fundamental in the social dilemmas of the epochal framework that is being addressed.

In the same vein, I consider the reflexive dimension of emancipatory reclassifications to be key. It shows the possibilities of densifying its exercise together with the reclassifications of sociology and other social sciences and humanities, not only through studies on contemporary society, but also through the development of theoretical-analytical perspectives that focus on the same reclassification dynamics. The claims of practical intervention in these fields of specialized knowledge can thereby collaborate with the emancipatory and democratic efforts to expand and broaden the life possibilities of the most diverse actors and social instances.

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Notes

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