Are received sociological theories capable of grasping the realities of contemporary stratification? We think in terms of a structured hierarchy of inequality. A prominent imagery is Bourdieu’s (1984) field of economic power and a hierarchy of cultural tastes internalized in individuals, with these two hierarchies mutually reproducing one another; the image helps explain the frustrations of reformers attacking inequality by attempting to change educational attainment. Empirical researchers report on inequalities in income and wealth, education and occupation, as changing slices of a pie, and as distributional shares for races, ethnicities, genders and ages. We see an abstract scaffolding of hierarchy manifested in a shell of objective-looking quantitative data. Does this image of fixed, objective hierarchy come to grips with the realities of lived experience?

The distribution of income and wealth has become increasingly unequal since 1970 (Morris and Western 1999). Yet observe a typical scene in an expensive restaurant, where the wealthy go to spend their money: Waiters greet customers informally, introducing themselves by name and assuming the manners of an equal inviting a guest into their home; they interrupt the customers to announce menu specials and advise what they should order; as Goffmanian ritual, it is the waiters who command attention for their performance while the customers are constrained to act as polite audience. Other examples: Celebrities of the entertainment world appear on ceremonial occasions in deliberately casual attire, unshaven, or in torn clothes; far from a demeanor giving ritual honor to the occasion, they adopt a style that a previous generation would have associated with laborers or beggars; this style, widely adopted among youth and others when occasions allow (e.g., “casual Fridays” at work), constitutes a historically unprecedented form of anti-status or reverse snobbery. High-ranking government officials, corporation executives, and entertainment celebrities are targets of public scandals involving their sexual lives, employment of housekeepers, use of intoxicants, and efforts at privacy; social eminence, far from providing immunity for petty derelictions, opens up the high-ranking to attacks by lower-ranking functionaries. A muscular black youth, wearing baggy pants and hat turned backwards and carrying a boom box loudly playing angry-voiced rap music, dominates the sidewalk space of a public shopping area while middle-class whites palpably shrink back in deference. In public meetings, when women and ethnic minorities take the role of spokespersons and denounce social discrimination against their group, white men of the higher social classes sit in embarrassed silence or join in a chorus of support; in public opinion-expressing and policy-making settings, it is the voice of the underdog that carries moral authority.

How are we to conceptualize these kinds of events? The examples given are micro-evidence; my contention is that they characterize the flow of everyday life in sharp contrast to the ideal type of a macrohierarchy. The hierarchic image dominates our theories, as well as our folk concepts for talking about stratification; indeed, the rhetorical tactic of taking the morally superior stance of the underdog depends upon asserting the existence of a macrohierarchy while tacitly assuming underdog dominance in the immediate speech situation. Conflicts over the issue of so-called “political correctness,” which might be called authoritative imposition of special consideration for the underdog, hinge upon this unrecognized disjunction between micro and macro. In social science, we generally accord
the status of objective reality to statistics (e.g., the distribution of income, occupations, education); yet ethnographic observations are richer and more immediate empirical data. Our trouble is that ethnographies are piecemeal; we have yet to survey situations widely through some kind of systematic sampling, so that what the general distribution is of the experiences of everyday life across an entire society could be argued with confidence.

My argument is that microsituational data has conceptual priority. This is not to say that macrodata means nothing; but amassing statistics and survey data does not convey an accurate picture of social reality unless they are interpreted in the context of their microsituational grounding. Microsituational encounters are the ground zero of all social action and all sociological evidence. Nothing has reality unless it is manifested in a situation somewhere. Macrosocial structures can be real, provided that they are patterned aggregates that hold across microsituations, or networks of repeated connections from one microsituation to another (thereby comprising, for instance, a formal organization). But misleading macro “realities” can be built up by misconstruing what happens in microsituations. Survey data is always collected in microsituations by asking individuals such questions as how much money they make, what they think is the prestige of given occupations, how many years of schooling they have, whether they believe in God, or how much discrimination they think exists in society. The aggregate of these answers looks like an objective picture of a hierarchic (or for some items a consensual) structure. But aggregated data on the distribution of wealth does not mean anything unless we know what “wealth” actually is in situational experience; dollars in inflated stock prices do not mean the same thing as cash in the grocery store. As Zelizer (1994) shows with ethnographies of the actual use of money, there are a variety of currencies in practice confined to certain social and material advantages in restricted circuits of exchange. (Owning jewelry worth a certain “book value” does not mean that most people, if they are not in the network of jewelry merchants, can realize that value and convert it into other kinds of monetary power.) I will refer to such circuits as “Zelizer circuits.” We need to undertake a series of studies looking at the conversion of abstract macrodistributions, which we have constructed by taking survey aggregations as if they were real things with fixed transsituational values, into the actual distribution of advantages in situational practice. For instance:

Occupational prestige surveys show most people believe physicists, medical doctors, and professors are very good jobs, above business executives, entertainers, and politicians, and that these in turn rank above plumbers and truck drivers. Does such consensus show anything more than a pattern of how people tend to talk when they are asked extremely abstract, uncontextualized questions? Although surveys show “professor” ranks high as a bare category, any specification (“economist,” “sociologist,” “chemist”) brings down the prestige rating (Treiman 1977); further specification (“assistant professor,” “junior college professor”) brings it down yet further. “Scientist” and especially “physicist” rank very high in recent surveys, but does this mean that most people would like to sit next to a physicist at a dinner party? “Plumber” may rank low in the survey, but in practice their income outranks many educationally credentialled white-collar employees, and this may translate into material resources to dominate most life situations; plumbers may sit in the box seats at the stadium while white-collar workers are in the remote grandstand. What is the real-life standing of construction workers when they display a style of outdoor muscular activity that receives respect in a time when the prestigious style of automobile is the big, trucklike “sports utility vehicle”? Occupational prestige can only be realistically understood if we can survey situations of occupational encounters and judge the actual situational stratification which takes place.

The common interpretation of years of education as the key to the hierarchy of stratification, either as principal indicator or as major component of a composite index, gives a
skewed picture of microsituational stratification. Mere correlation between years of schooling and income is an aggregate of outcomes that hides rather than reveals how educational stratification operates. Years of schooling are not a homogeneous currency; years in different kinds of schools are not equivalent, in terms of what kinds of subsequent educational and occupational channels one can enter. For example, years in an elite prep school or highly ranked private college have no particular value for one's occupational level unless they are translated into admission into a particular kind of schooling at the next higher level; it is valuable to attend a liberal arts college well known by graduate school admissions officers if one is going on to specialized graduate education in fields connected with one's undergraduate specialty, but it gives no special advantage, and may even be counterproductive, if one immediately enters the labor force. Educational credentials should be regarded as a particular kind of Zelizer currencies, valuable in specific circuits of exchange but not outside of those circuits.

It is at the point where years of schooling are translated into recognized credentials that they leap in social value. Moreover, those credentials themselves vary in their consequences, depending both upon the aggregate amount of competition among credential-holders at a particular historical time (credential inflation), and also upon the extent to which credentials are earmarked for particular kinds of specialized jobs or professional licensing barriers (Collins 1979). Years of education are only a vague proxy for what kinds of credentials people hold, and that in turn gives only a vague picture of what microsituational uses they have in people's lives. We need a microdistributional research program to look at educational stratification; this would include both the situational advantages and disadvantages of official recognition at each level of school experience, from elementary on through secondary and advanced and thereafter into the occupational and social encounters of adult lives. It does not automatically hold that a student who performs well by the official criteria of the school system will enjoy microsituational advantages; in poverty-level urban black secondary schools, the student who gets good grades typically receives much negative interaction from peers, who accuse her of "acting white" or thinking that she is better than they; she does not rank high in the immediate community stratification but low. Many such high-achieving students give way under microsituational peer pressure and do not go further in the school system (Anderson 1999: 56, 93-97).

The microsituational critique holds a fortiori for inferences from survey attitude data to depictions of a larger social structure. The fact that approximately 95% of Americans say they believe in God (Greeley 1989: 14) says little about how religious American society is: comparisons of survey responses with actual attendance show that people strongly exaggerate how often they go to church (Hardaway et al. 1993, 1998); and in-depth probings of religious beliefs in informal conversation shows quite disparate, and from a theological viewpoint largely heretical, beliefs lumped under survey responses that seem to show conformity (Halle 1984: 253-269). Similarly, we ought to be suspicious of survey reports on how much discrimination by race or gender, sexual harassment, experience of child abuse, etc. exists, until these are backed up by attempts at situational surveys which do not rely on reconstructions, one-sided recollections, or opinions. Answers to such questions are ideological and often partisan, subject to social movement mobilization and waves of attention in the public media or by particular professional interest groups. To say this is not to take a position that most social problems are exaggerated by surveys; under some conditions, they may be minimized and underestimated. The point is that we will not know with any high degree of plausibility until we shift our conceptual gestalt, away from accepting macroaggregate data as inherently objective, and toward the translation of all social phenomena as a distribution of microsituations. We need to be open to the possibility that the actual experience of stratification in social encounters is highly fluctuating, subject to
situational contestation; and that to understand stratification, at least in present historical circumstances, we need a theory of the mechanisms of microsituational dominance. These mechanisms might be connected to our older hierarchic image of economic, political, and cultural power; but they might not; or the connection may be becoming increasingly tenuous. To determine why this is happening would call for a historical theory of change in microsituational circumstances.

Sociologists, like most highly educated persons on the left side of the political spectrum, are so deeply imbued with the hierarchical image that we react with cynical amusement to instances of the officially illegitimate privilege in everyday life. We consider it sophisticated to pass around stories of the corruption of police officers, such as their withholding traffic tickets from the elite or in return for bribes, and regard the political world as made up of those who have “clout” or “backdoor influence.” Yet to what extent is this folk belief, untested by situational evidence which may go to the contrary? A former government official related this experience to the author: Stopped for speeding by a state police officer, he said: “Do you know who I am? I’m your boss.” (The official was head of the state agency under which the state highway patrol was located.) The officer replied: “My boss is the people of the state of [X],” and proceeded to write the ticket. The official was politically very liberal, yet he narrated this incident with indignation, outraged that the underground system of entitlement did not work for him. One could interpret this as an instance of micro-situational stratification. The patrol officer, with bureaucratic impunity, could exercise situational power over his own superior, much in the way a “whistleblower” has official immunity to report violations of organizational superiors. Further interviewing with patrol officers suggests another dimension of the situation. In this state, members of the law enforcement community, when stopped for a traffic violation, express their membership by the code words: “I should have known better” and then offering to show identification. Patrol officers do make exceptions to official rules, but they do so in a ritual of solidarity and equality; they react negatively to attempts at imposing hierarchic authority.

MACRO AND MICROSITUATIONAL CLASS, STATUS, AND POWER

As yet we lack situational surveys. The best we can do is to sketch what the contemporary situation of societies like the USA appears to be as of the late 20th century. I will suggest a microtranslation of the Weberian dimensions of class, status, and power.

ECONOMIC CLASS

Economic class is certainly not disappearing. On the macro level, the distribution of wealth and income has been becoming increasingly unequal, both within societies and on a world scale (Sanderson 1999: 346–356). What does this translate into in terms of the distribution of life experiences? Let us divide the question into material wealth as consumption experiences, and wealth as control over occupational experiences. Extremely large amounts of wealth are virtually impossible to translate into consumption experiences. The fact that owners of large blocks of stock in Microsoft or a few other commercial empires have net worth valued in the tens of billions of dollars (fluctuating according to stock market prices) does not mean that these individuals eat food, inhabit dwellings, wear clothes, or enjoy services greatly different from several million other individuals who may be ranked within the top 10% or so of the wealth distribution; and if one counts temporary experiences of luxury consumption, the overlap may be with an even wider group. Most wealth arising from financial ownership is confined within Zelizer circuits that stay close to their point of
A MICRO-MACRO THEORY OF INEQUALITY

origin; by this I mean that individuals who have hundreds of millions of dollars or more can do little with that money except buy and sell financial instruments; they can trade control of one segment of the financial world for control of another segment.

Wealth of this scale needs to be located not in consumption but in occupational experience. In terms of microsituational experience, possession of large amounts of financial instruments means a life-route of frequently interacting with other financiers. The main attraction of having extremely large amounts of money may be the emotional energies and symbolic membership markers of being on the phone at all hours of night and day, engaging in exciting transactions. In terms of sheer consumption power, the extremely wealthy have attained the maximum of what they can get as material benefits; yet most of them continue to work, sometimes obsessively lengthy hours, until advanced ages (some of the tycoons struggling for control over world media empires are men in their 70s and 80s). It appears the value of money at this level is all in the microexperience, the activity of wielding money in highly prestigious circuits of exchange. Money here translates into situational power and into nothing else.

The main diversion of these circuits is that wealth from financial circuits can be shifted to charitable organizations, and thus out of the control of the original owners. From the point of view of the donor, this is trading wealth for honor, the moral prestige of being a charitable donor, often getting a concrete token of reward in the form of one’s personal reputation being broadcast by having a charitable organization named after oneself: the Rockefeller Foundation, Carnegie Corporation, Milken Foundation, and now the Gates Foundation, Packard Foundation, etc. Yet the two circuits of capital are not far apart. Foundation executives typically take their endowments and put them back into financial markets, drawing only small parts for operating expenses, their own salaries, and some stream of grants to non-profit organizations. Counting up the personnel in the non-profit sector, one arrives at a group of upper-middle- or upper-class persons not many network links removed from personal contact with the financial magnates who donated the money in the first place (Ostrower 1995).

As one descends the hierarchy of wealth and income, the proportion of money that translates into actual material consumption increases. For the lowest income levels, money may be entirely a matter of consumption goods. Yet even here, as Zelizer (1994) documents, money which can be spent on prestigious or at least exciting social encounters tends to have preference over mere mundane money: immigrants to the early 20th-century U.S. who spent money on lavish funerals because these were key social ceremonies of display within the ethnic community; men whose priority is to have drinking money to participate with the all-male group at the saloon; prostitutes’ money which is spent on the locally prestigious “action” style of drug parties, while their welfare checks go toward household expenses.

Let us conceive the entire structure of economic class as a variety of circuits of money used to enact particular kinds of social relations. I am not speaking here of social relations as status groups, communities of leisure sociability analytically distinct from classes, but rather of the interactional enactment of the economic class structure, the world of occupations, commerce, credit, and investment. The “upper class” are those who engage in circulating money as ownership and, in the process, linking tightly with one another in webs of negotiation; such persons may or may not be part of the Social Register or otherwise take part in the social gatherings and rituals of the upper class conceived as a status group, which in turn may consist of people who only passively receive moneys from spouses or inheritance, and who do not take part in the actual circuits of financial exchange. Thus, contrary to the Bourdieu model which sees cultural activity as reinforcing economic dominance, and vice versa, I suggest that the upper-class status group tends to siphon off
capital from the circuits in which it is generated, and gradually loses touch with the anchoring which creates and perpetuates wealth. Money is process, not thing; the upper class is a circuit of financial activity, and to withdraw from that activity is to gradually be left behind. Upper-class status group snobbery about “old money” versus “nouveau riche” reverses the actual situation of economic power.¹

We have yet to map out the actual structure of the circuits of monetary exchange for a given historical period (such as our own). Roughly, we might recognize:

(a) A financial elite of active participants in financial transactions on the scale where particular individuals can wield sufficient blocks of capital that they personally count as reputations in financial coalitions. Their experience of financial circuits is personal, in contrast to the impersonal participation of the next category.

(b) An investing class (largely drawn, in more conventional terms, from upper middle and lower upper classes) who have enough money from highly paid occupations or direct ownership of business enterprises to act as players in the game of financial investments (the stock market, real estate, etc.) but who are anonymous participants, without access to personal circuits among the deal-makers. Their microsituational economic reality includes reading market reports, talking with their brokers, circulating financial gossip, and bragging as part of their conversational capital among social acquaintances. This group is depicted by advocates of the neo-liberal ideology as comprising everyone in modern societies, an ideology of classlessness through universal ownership of small bits of market capital. The ideology ignores differences in the social circuits of capital which I am presently describing, but it does reflect an aspect of reality the strict macrohierarchical view of class has difficulty conceptualizing.

(c) An entrepreneurial class which uses their money directly to hire employees and purchase and sell goods, thus typically participating in local or specialized circuits of exchange. Their key microsituational experiences are those of bargaining repeatedly with particular persons in their organization or industry; that is to say, they operate in a world of personal reputations, both their own and those of others.² Unlike members of other classes or economic circuits, their routine experience includes the monitoring of competitors in order to seek out market niches as described in the network theory of Harrison White (1981, 1992). Entrepreneurial circuits tend to be invisible to most people, and are visible only within very local or specialized communities; hence, the larger social prestige of individuals in such positions, as measured in occupational prestige surveys, may be modest. The actual amounts of money flowing through these circuits, and hence, the income commanded by these individuals, can vary all the way from tens of dollars to millions; thus, this sector may span the entire class structure as conventionally laid out in a hierarchy of dollars.

(d) Celebrities, which is to say, highly paid employees of organizations specializing in public entertainment (film, music, sports, etc.), and which in the nature of their business aim at focusing public attention on a few individuals who are treated as stars. Athletes, in fact, are manual workers, at the bottom of a chain of command insofar as they take orders from coaches. Some small proportion of them (necessarily a small proportion, since the mass attention business is intrinsically competitive) have acquired the bargaining power for extremely high salaries, corresponding to the size of these markets for entertainment products. Celebrities as wealth-holders face the same problem as the financial upper class

¹When sociologists incorporate these concepts into their model of class hierarchy, they are being taken in by the ideology of the leisure upper-class status group, perhaps because this group is more talkative and easier to interview than the upper class which is actively making money.

²There are also anonymous aspects of labor and goods markets, which are the topics of classical and neoclassical economic theory. Nevertheless, as emphasized in recent economic sociology, the social structuring of markets by networks may well make particular connections the most important aspect of entrepreneurs’ lives. The relationship between anonymous and particularistic aspects of exchange is just beginning to be formulated.
in converting their wealth into consumption. Many of them are cheated by their agents or brokers who offer to connect them to the unfamiliar world of financial investments; those who do best seem to be those who convert their wealth back into financial control of organizations in the same entertainment industry that they came from (e.g., hockey stars who buy a hockey team). This suggests the following rule: Those who keep their wealth within the same Zelizer circuit in which it originated are best able to hold its monetary value and to maximize their microsituational payoffs of experiential prestige as well.

(e) A variety of middle-class/working-class circuits shaped by occupational markets and the networks of information and contacts which sustain them (Tilly and Tilly 1994). Here money is not translated into ownership in any other form than mere consumer property. There are suggestions in the empirical sociology of economic networks that for large, one-shot expenditures (houses, cars, etc.) such persons spend their money in networks of personal contact, whereas they spend small amounts on repetitive consumer expenditures in impersonal retail organizations (DiMaggio and Louch 1998). Some of these networks withdraw money from the other circuits of exchange in the form of profit and thus constitute a hierarchy (or more likely, several kinds of hierarchical relations). We have yet to measure and to conceptualize the mechanisms by which “profit” moves across circuits. In general, it appears that those located “lower down” in the circuits have difficulty seeing what goes on in the circuits above them, let alone finding social and financial entrée into those networks. For instance, the lower down one goes in the social class hierarchy, the more the conception of those above simplifies to ideas about celebrities (d), who are actually the most peripheral of all wealthy people to the circuits of wealth.

(f) Disreputable or illegal circuits, ranging from gray markets outside the official tax and licensing system, to markets of criminalized commodities and services (drugs, sex, arms, age-restricted alcohol and tobacco, etc.), to stolen property and outright robbery. All these are circuits, entry to which (and competition over) makes or breaks the individual in his/her illicit/criminal career. The sheer amount of money flowing through some of these circuits and accruing to particular individuals may be substantial, overlapping with middle or even occasionally high levels of the abstract income hierarchy. But although cross-over among these networks (money-laundering) is considered highly desirable by some participants, the weight of social organization from both sides is against much interchange of currencies and melding of circuits of exchange. Illicit circuits avoid the rake-off by which the government is normally involved in all the reputable circuits of exchange, and through which governments are usually committed to regulating and providing infrastructure in the interests of the members of those circuits. The very fact that some of these circuits are illicit means they must be kept hidden from the regulators of the official circuits; the result is that the rituals and symbols of everyday encounters within these circuits are very different in tone. Tacit recognition of these differences is a mechanism by which persons conceive of moral exclusions among classes, documented by Lamont (1992, 2000). Monetary circuits comprise different cultures, bearing in mind that “culture” is not a reified thing but merely shorthand for referring to the style of microsituational encounters.

(g) An ultimate lower class on the margins of society might be conceptualized as those outside any circuits of monetary exchange. Yet even the homeless, beggars, scavengers, are involved in the tail end of various circuits, receiving donations, handouts in kind, discarded or stolen goods. Analytically, this group would include all those who receive a trickle downwards from the more actively mutual circuits of exchange, including those receiving welfare and other entitlements (pensions, etc.). What makes this group experience such dishonor is not merely their low level of material consumption, but the
fact that they are severely circumscribed in how much further exchange they can do with what they receive: Currencies they receive are often earmarked for certain kinds of expenditures only (e.g., food stamps); gifts in kind are also largely already specified as to their use value (Zelizer 1994). Some exchange may go on even here, largely on the barter level. Denizens of this level of monetary stratification have their microsituational encounters shaped in a fashion which is experientially different from that of any other class: Barter relations are highly specific, lacking the sense of symbolic honor and freedom which comes from possessing financial tokens which are more generally negotiable.

Microtranslating economic class shows, not a hierarchical totem pole of classes neatly stacked up one above another, but overlapping transactional circuits of vastly different scope and content. Because these circuits differ so much in the particularity or anonymity of connections, in the kind of monitoring which is done, and in orientation toward economic manipulation or consumption, individuals’ experiences of economic relations put them in different subjective worlds, even if these are invisible from a distance.

STATUS GROUPS
Status is one of the loosest terms in the sociological vocabulary. Leaving aside the vacuous usage of “status” as stratified rank in general, and confining it to a specific sphere of cultural honor, we may distinguish several meanings. The most abstract is status as measured by occupational prestige surveys. This decontextualized questioning about categories may show little more than the distribution of ideologies about events outside people’s own experience. This leaves two main versions: the Weiberian concept of a status group, as a real organization of social networks; and deference, as microsituational behavior.

Weber (1922/1968: 926–39) defines status group as a community sharing a cultural lifestyle, a recognized social identity, and publicly (even legally) recognized honor or social ranking. The clearest examples of this ideal type are medieval estates (e.g., aristocracy, bourgeoisie, peasantry) although the term is widely applicable to ethnic and religious communities and other lifestyle groups. Weber coined the term to contrast with economic class, in that status groups are no mere statistical categories but groups with real social organization. Status groups may also be organized around economic classes, provided that classes have a cultural distinctiveness and organize themselves as groups. For example, the economic upper class may be organized into “high society” and listed in the Social Register. It is a historical question whether class-based status groups continue to have as strong boundaries as in previous periods, or whether economic class has reverted to a mainly statistical category. If status groups structure life experience much more intimately than class in the abstract, such a historical shift would mean that class identity, conflict, and capacity for mobilized action would be considerably weakened.

To what extent is there closure of status communities—how sharply are they bounded in everyday life? And how much ranking is there among status groups—when are they neatly aligned in a publicly recognized hierarchy? When are they mere horizontal divisions, like mutually alien tribes? (For hypotheses, see Turner 1984.) Historical change can occur in either aspect: Cultural lifestyles among status groups may be homogenizing; and/or groups may assemble less often, and their identities may become less influential as to where members spend their time. The Social Register still exists, but members may spend little time in these circles as compared to other settings (e.g., with entertainment celebrities), and their gatherings receive much less public attention than at the turn of the 20th century (Amory 1960; for historical comparisons: Annett and Collins 1975; Elias, 1983). On a lower level of status, many ethnic and religious groups do not structure their
members’ lives much, receding into mere statistical categories without relevance for life experience (Waters 1990).³

Status groups have varying degrees of microsituational reality: Some are loosely overlapping networks, only segments of which ever see one another face to face (e.g., all Italian-Americans). Some may be closely bounded because they base their membership and their lines of exclusion on who takes part in social encounters. Here a typology of situations is useful:

1. work situations
2. official ceremonies (enactments of a formal organization)
3. sociable situations, which vary along a continuum: from relatively focused and formalized to relatively unfocused and informal; at the extreme end of this continuum comes
4. open public situations

Status group relations occur largely within the third category, sociable situations, although to some extent in the second category as well. At the highly focused end of the continuum, there is ritual in the formal sense: Scheduling is carried out in advance; the event may be widely publicized; what is done follows traditional scripts and is possibly rehearsed; here we find weddings, traditional dances, testimonial dinners. In the old-fashioned etiquette of the higher classes (described in Goffman 1959, 1963; Annett and Collins 1975), there was considerably scripting of the details of behavior: the ritual procession of gentlemen escorting ladies in to dinner, seating guests, toasts and other drinking rituals, polite forms of conversation, card games and other collective amusements after dinner. Descending toward less sharply focused or more “casual” situations are largely improvised interaction rituals: lunches and other shared eating with acquaintances (often as a friendly offstage framing for business talk), parties, attending commercial entertainment events.

At the upper end, this continuum overlaps with formal ceremonies such as political speeches, government ceremonies, parades, school graduations, church services. All ceremonies enact social memberships, although some connect much looser communities than others. Political speeches may attempt to assemble and affirm the belonging of all the citizens of a nation, the members of a political party, or supporters of a particular candidate, but the identities they enact may take up rather small portions of people’s lives, peripheral to more regularly enacted status group activities. Weberian status groups are located toward the middle of the continuum; here rituals imply more intimate and more frequently enacted commitments. Still further down are the ephemeral civility of the minor Goffmanian interaction rituals, casual conversations, shared greetings, little jokes, bits of gossip, small talk about the weather or how long a wait it is for a bus. At the bottom end, relationships dissolve into unfocused interaction: the public crowd or just physical copresence on a street or some other widely accessible place (Goffman 1963, 1971, 1981). Yet even here, Goffman notes, there is at least tacit monitoring; expanding on the point, we shall see how behavior in public places varies considerably as to restraint, politeness, or contentiousness. Here too can be variations in situational stratification, even if they are highly ephemeral.

This continuum provides a backdrop for a situational survey of both status group inclusion/exclusion and deference behavior. There are two sub-dimensions: (a) how much

³The main exception appears to be evangelical Christians, for whom there is evidence of a large percentage of personal friends within their congregation, sociability is often confined to the group, and rival settings for social encounters may be avoided, such as by home-schooling their children. The “New Christian Right” is one part of society that is trying to reconstitute a moral hierarchy of status groups. For this reason they are anathema to many other Americans.
time group rituals take up of people’s lives, whether they are regularly enacted or occasional and hence represent everyday or episodic communities; (b) at the moment that a ritual community is activated, how much enthusiasm and solidarity it generates; regularly enacted status groups are not necessarily stronger in generating enthusiastic commitments than temporary ones. Accordingly, I will suggest two generalizations.

Where there is a repeated round of formal, highly focused ritual occasions (weddings, dinners, festivals) involving the same people, status group boundaries are strong. Who is included and excluded from membership is clear to everyone, inside and outside the status group. All the more so to the degree that ritual gatherings are publicly visible: e.g., when the “Four Hundred” met to dine and dance in the ballroom of the most luxurious hotel in New York City and crowds of the non-elite classes lined the sidewalks to watch them enter and exit, the status group boundary and its ranking system was widely public. Here status has a thing-like quality, following the neo-Durkheimian principle: The more ceremonial and public the ritual enactment, the more reified the social membership category. Conversely, the less scripted, advance-scheduled and widely announced the sociable gathering, the more invisible are social boundaries. A sociometric order may still exist, in the sense that some persons habitually associate with others, but their gatherings convey only a very local recognition of ties, personal connections rather than categorical identities or statuses. Such privatized and fragmented networks may continue to sustain cultural differences, in that distinct cultural capitals circulate within particular social networks; but they are invisible to outsiders, not widely recognizable as lifestyle groups.

My hypothesis is that status group boundaries blur to the extent they are grounded in weakly focused sociable rituals. Full-blown Weberian status groups, recognizable by visible signs (at one time, even mandated by sumptuary regulations; for a Japanese example, see Ikegami, 1999), can exist only when the round of everyday life is highly formalized. Under these conditions people carry categorical identities (“gentleman,” “aristocrat,” “burgher,” “peasant,” “common laborer”—even if these are no longer legal categories). Toward the other end of the continuum, identities are increasingly personal. A particular person is known by name, among a smaller or wider social audience, and may have a particular reputation. Widely known reputations are rare, confined to particular athletic stars, actors, or other famous or notorious individuals: the judge hearing the O. J. Simpson trial, not judges in general. Most individuals are known only inside local networks and invisible outside of them, no matter their fame inside. In many ways this is a hierarchy of fame or attention rather than a hierarchy of honor.

The second generalization casts light on what kind of situational status may exist even in the absence of recognized status group rituals and boundaries. Regardless of where one is along the continuum of how formal or informal the ritual is, rituals also vary in intensity. Some rituals are more successful than others in creating collective experience: Some are flat, perfunctory, mere going through the forms; others build up shared emotions (sentimentality, tears, awe, laughter, anger against outsiders or scapegoats) and regenerate feelings of solidarity. Intensity variations are possible at any point on the continuum: A formal ceremony (a wedding, a speech, a ball) can fail or succeed, just as a party can be a bore, a friendly amusement, or a memorable carouse. Here we have a second continuum: Situations rank in terms of the attention they generate; situations have higher and lower prestige, depending on how they are enacted. At high levels of the formality or focus continuum, the intensity of the ritual does not matter as much; society is structured by formal inclusions and exclusions at such ritual occasions, and the resulting categorical identities are pervasive and inescapable, so that rituals may be rather boring and still convey strong membership. As we descend toward relatively informal and unfocused rituals, more effort needs to be put into making them emotionally intense, if they are to be experienced as...
having much effect upon feelings of social position. This may explain why contemporary Americans often are “hot dogs,” making noisy attention displays when they are at sports or entertainment events, large parties, and other public occasions.

Thus the second generalization or hypothesis: *To convey an effect, the more informal or improvised rituals are, the more the need to be ostentatious, to make blatant appeals to emotion and to visible or highly audible action.* Those starved for institutionalized ritual status (e.g., black lower class, teenagers, and young people generally) tend to seek out means of intense situational dramatization.

The dimension of ritual intensity stratifies people in terms of their personal access. The individual who is at the center of attention in a social gathering—the life of the party, the class clown, the ceremonial leader (in Bales’ [1950, 1999] small group studies, the expressive leader)—has the highest personal status in that situation and in networks where his/her reputation circulates through conversation. The intensity of the situation might also be generated by a sense of threatening violence and display of the ritual of challenge. Anderson (1999: 78, 99) notes that “staging areas” in the inner city are densely populated places where youths go to show off and receive a sense of status just from being there; in such settings, fights are referred to as “showtime.” This kind of courting risk in order to show off one’s character in handling the situation is what Goffman (1967) referred to as “where the action is.” Further examples include gambling scenes where a good deal of money is risked; as Goffman (1969) suggests, a similar structure may account for the appeal of highly respectable, even elite forms of economic action, such as manipulating financial markets. An abstract status hierarchy such as occupational prestige ranking is far indeed from the distribution of experiences that makes up micro-situational status. A geeky, intellectual physicist or somber surgeon may rank high in the abstract, but would likely cut a poor figure at a youth party. Again we see the need for a new kind of survey of the distribution of intensity, focus, and membership in situations.

Intense social rituals may exist here and there across the landscape, but they may be relatively invisible to most people. This clearly differs from a society historically in which the community knew who was fighting the duel, who was the belle of the ball or the Debutante of the Season: i.e., a situation in which personal reputations were anchored within an institutionalized status group structure. Today personal reputations are broadcast only to the extent that, and within networks where, rituals are visible within contemporary society. Such enclosed networks or “status goldfish bowls” exist today mainly among children. Small children in day care centers are organized into cliques: little groups of bullies and their scapegoats, popular play leaders and their followers, fearful or self-sufficient isolates (Montagner et al. 1988). High schools probably have the most visible and highly structured cliques—preppies, jocks, religious evangelicals, druggies, rebels, grinds (Coleman 1961, Stinchcombe 1964, Milner 1999; contemporary high schools have developed more complex clique structures, mainly by addition of religious and intellectual/artistic counterculture cliques). If there is a trend, it is in the direction of more overt conflict among different status orders, as manifested in school violence by outcast or status subordinates against dominant cliques.

Schools are one of the few arenas in which quasi-status-groups can be formed, with institutionalized lifestyle differences, social honor or dishonor, and categorical identities going beyond personal reputation. These are quasi-status-groups insofar as membership in them is not permanent, but they are real in their social effects during the years that they shape youths’ lives. The local structure of youth groups is formed against the backdrop of a larger categorical exclusion. Youth are one of the few groups in modern society who are singled out for subjection to special legal disabilities and restrictions, similar to legally defined medieval estates. They are excluded from ritual forms of leisure consumption,
such as drinking or smoking; they are the only group which is divided off by an officially enforced taboo on sex with nongroup members. The world is segregated into places where youths cannot go; significantly, these are places where sociability rituals take place (places of carousing such as bars or parties) or places of entertainment where the most intense forms of sociable excitement—sexual activity—is depicted; the effect is to dramatize a hierarchy of ritual intensity reserved for adults. The official adult world, as enunciated by politicians on formal public occasions, rationalizes these exclusions as protecting youth from evils, an attitude which broadens the moral divide between the subjective worlds of adults in their official mode and of youths’ experience. The real-life situational effect is that young people, whether they are below a limit (at one time 18 years old, now generally raised to 21) or are somewhat older, routinely experience demands to prove their age, both from petty officials and from ticket-takers, ushers, and shop clerks who are transformed into officials who can demand subservience and exercise exclusion. Youth are thus the only contemporary group which is officially subjected to petty humiliations because of their categorical status, in this respect resembling black people who are unofficially subjected to similar tests; both groups are assumed dishonorable until proven otherwise. This is a reason why youth culture is sympathetic to black culture, and emulates especially its most rebellious elements.

The pervasive everyday enactment of group barriers supports a youth counterculture. Youth style and demeanor are shaped directly in opposition to adult styles: wearing hats backwards because the normal style is forwards; wearing baggy pants and torn clothes because these are counterstylish (documented by Anderson 1999: 112). The counterculture starts at the border with adult culture and proceeds in the opposite direction; a status hierarchy develops inside the youth community building further and further away from adult respectability. Over the years there has been escalation in the amount, size, and location of body piercing, of tattoos and body branding. Many of these practices resemble those used in a hierarchy of religious status among Indian fakirs, holy outcasts demonstrating their religious charisma by the extremes to which they are willing to distance themselves from ordinary life. There are a variety of cultural styles and clique structures within the youth quasi-status-group; the more extreme forms of counter-adult-culture occupy one kind of niche, while others (athletes, preps, grinds, evangelicals) make compromises with, or even positive commitments to, the respectable adult world they expect to join. Nevertheless, the anti-adult counterculture in one degree or another appears to be the most pervasive; we may expect that every escalation of adult moral crusades which ritually demean youth will be matched by a corresponding degree of polarization in the youth counterculture.

I have argued that youth counterculture is anchored in the publicly enacted, legally enforced exclusions practiced against teenagers which give the group a stigmatized group identity. Yet the youth counterculture is widespread among young adults as well. This occurs because of several structural continuities: Young people as a whole are poor in autonomous economic resources; when they hold jobs, these are typically at the most menial service level; the inflation of educational credentials has expanded the length of time they stay in school, and thus they occupy a status which is outside adult occupational ranks. In addition, the mass media industries take the youth culture as their target audience since they are the most active consumers of entertainment; hence youth culture with its showy alienation is also among the most recognizable set of emblems in the otherwise privatized public consciousness. And there is one economic elite, entertainment celebrities, who tend to display the counterculture symbols of their fans; although celebrities are outside the main circuits of economic power, nevertheless they are the most visible successful people in the class structure. Counterculture styles are thus reinforced not just as
signs of alienation on the part of the status group oppressed, but as positive status emblems both within the youth community itself and in the world of free-floating public reputation. If contemporary society mostly lacks visible status group boundaries, the one quasi-status-group boundary which officially exists, youth vs. adult, provides publicly recognizable markers of status hierarchy throughout everyday life which reverse the solid but invisible structures of class and power.

DEFERENCE

On the most fine-grained microsituational level, we come to deferential behavior—the fleeting gestures by which one individual defers to another. In tightly organized societies historically, everyday life was filled with blatant gestures of deference—bowing low, deferential forms of address (“My Lord,” “My Lady,” “If you please, Mistress”), deferential tones of voice (described in Chesterfield 1774/1992; for Japanese examples, see Ikegami 1995). All these are examples of asymmetrical rituals. Goffman (1967) describes most rituals in the mid-20th century as mutual: showing polite recognition of others by handshakes, greetings and small talk, hat-raising, door-holding. Individuals reciprocated, thereby showing their status equality; Goffman also indicated that being included in a little circle of reciprocity was itself a display of a status order since higher-status persons were those who practiced the most elaborate manners, and therefore such a circle excluded those who could not properly perform mutual deference ceremonies.

It would be useful to have a survey of how much and what kind of deference is shown across situations in contemporary society. Deferential behavior can be mapped onto our typology of situations. Ignore for a moment the deference displayed at work (better to consider this below as a form of organizational power) and the kind of deference built into formally scripted ceremonies. Most interesting would be a survey of deference in relatively unstructured social situations and in unfocused publics.

Contemporary people, I suggest, receive relatively little categorical deference. Most deference is by personal reputation; and that depends on being in the presence of the network where one is personally known. A famous sociologist will get some deference (mainly in terms of speaking rights in conversation) at sociology meetings, and at parties with other sociologists, but not outside this sphere; most such professionals get what deference they experience inside gatherings of a subspecialty. Our survey would want to discover how many specialized networks exist which pay attention to one another enough to give honor or dishonor within their ranks. Such deference distributions are found not only in occupational communities but in various kinds of voluntary associations and interest networks, connoisseurs, arenas of display and competition. There are a huge number of voluntary associations in the U.S., and each likely contains an internal status hierarchy. Even though most of these are externally oblivious to one another, a considerable proportion, perhaps half the population of adults, may experience some small parts of their lives in little realms where they are given mild temporary deference.

Outside such specialized organizations and networks, transsituational deference is largely confined to celebrities. Such figures are manufactured by the mass media, notably the entertainment business, whose income comes largely from promoting and selling “star” identities; news media also create famous identities (politicians, criminals, and subjects of human interest stories) and sell information about them. The mass media are the only place where there is a recurrent focus of attention shared by anything close to a majority of the

4The latter historically would show a shift from bowing and honorific address to persons who held certain categorical statuses, toward more subtle deference in the form of who gets speaking rights and control over turn-taking. Microsituational data on the latter: Gibson 1999; on the long-term trend, Annett and Collins 1975.
society; this not only helps build up an intensity of significance around those characters, but makes it easier for news and entertainment organizations to fill their regularly scheduled quota of offerings to the public. (In the news world this is called “milking a story,” especially in “dead” times when no “breaking news” is happening.) The reputational hierarchy is exceedingly steep; outside the elite is a vast majority of anonymous persons, that is to say, anonymous outside of their own occupational or acquaintance circles.

Although celebrities get most of what deference there is in contemporary society, they receive much less deference than upper class dominants in previous history. People rarely bow or give way before them; instead they try to get close to them to touch them, to get some token from them (photo, clothes, autograph); they treat them less like aristocracy than like a totemic animal in a tribal religion. The analogy is fitting since totemism is the religion of internally egalitarian groups, and the modern public is egalitarian. Touching a celebrity and carrying away a bit of him or her fits Durkheim’s description of how people behave in the presence of sacred objects, drawn in magnetically to share in a portion of collective *mana*. The celebrity is one of the few focal points in the modern attention space, through which collective emotional energy can be revved up to a high level. In a Durkheimian interpretation, worship of a celebrity is the group worshipping itself—worshipping its capacity to get excited and drawn out of its mundane life into something transcendent. Note, too, that publicity and attention to celebrities can just as well be negative as positive; scandals about celebrities are extremely popular (need I mention the O. J. Simpson trial?). These too are forms of highly focused attention; scandalized emotions are especially effective in building up shared intensity. Celebrity deference is of a peculiar kind, less hierarchical than participatory.

In a Durkheimian sense, the celebrities elevated by mass media attention are the only human beings who can serve as sacred objects, emblems of the collective consciousness of any considerable part of society. It is no wonder, then, that ordinary individuals attempt to appropriate for themselves a portion of this *mana* or emblematic force, through the sympathetic magic of wearing clothing marked with likenesses or identifying marks of these celebrities. Tribal people painted the totems of their clan upon their bodies (Lévi-Strauss 1958/1963); contemporary people, especially those without eminence in occupations which give them at least a specialized sphere of categorical identity, wear sweaters bearing the number and name of athletic heroes, and t-shirts printed with the pictures of entertainment stars. In a social structure which sustains no visible status groups, much less clan identities, only the media stars serve as emblems expressing participation in the collective energy of a focused group.

The nearest approach to deference in the classical sense, displaying overt gestures of dominance and subordination, respect and disrespect, is found in the black inner city. Elijah Anderson (1999) describes a situation in which the majority of black people are trying to pursue lives according to normal standards of the larger society: jobs, educational attainment, family and church life. But due to poverty, discrimination, and above all, lack of police protection in the inner city, a “code of the street” prevails in which each individual (and especially each young male) tries to display his physical toughness, to convey that it is dangerous to bother him. There is a good deal of demanding deference from others; fights often break out because of small signals such as looking at a man for a long fraction of a second, interpreted as hostile “staring,” and locking eyes can lead to a killing (Anderson 1999).

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News stories reported that the U.S. Congress, as well as the President, stopped their official proceedings to hear the outcome of the O. J. Simpson trial.

There is precedence in cases of persons treated as religious sacred objects; for example, a medieval saint whose trances drew spectators who would poke her with knives and burning objects to marvel at her imperviousness to pain (Kleinberg 1992).
son 1999: 41, 127). Uncivil behavior—blaring loud music, leaving one’s car parked in the middle of the street—is generally ignored or accepted by most residents to avoid confrontations. Although two codes or ritual orders operate—the ostentatious toughness of the “code of the street,” and the normal code of Goffmanian behavior in the surrounding society—the former dominates situationally in the black ghetto.

In the mainstream white community, the status order is invisible or visible only within specialized networks; occupation and wealth do not receive deference nor form visible status groups broadcasting categorical identities. Public interaction is an equality without much solidarity, an establishing of personal distance mitigated by a tinge of mutual politeness and shared casualness. Goffman (1963) calls it the order of civil disattention. As Goffman noted, this is not merely a matter of sheer indifference, since one needs to monitor others at a distance in order to avoid contact with them when they are close, ranging from little maneuverings of sidewalk traffic to avoid physical collision, to averting eyes and controlling microgestures in order not to intrude into the privacy of their personal space. In contrast, the status order of the black street code is ostentatious and often hostile. It broadcasts a blatant situational hierarchy of the tough and the dominated; here egalitarian encounters are typically a hostile egalitarianism, tested in violent conflict that can be reopened at any time. Dominant individuals demand control of the street space; others monitor them warily. Here the tacit monitoring of civil disattention is ratcheted upwards into a much more focused and tense public situation. It is the dominated who display civil disattention, while the dominators demand it.7

The street code not only negates normal criteria of middle class achievement and respectability, it is a full-fledged counterculture. Middle-class demeanor standards are taken as signs of timidity; in addition, display of any marks of conventional achievement (school, a disciplined work-style, a licit job) are taken as status claims and thus implied insults to those who lack them. For this reason, Anderson argues, many “decent” or “square” black residents adopt the outward signs of the oppositional culture—wearing gang-style clothes and emblems, adopting the conversational style of the street dominants, playing the oppositional music, the scornful or angry sounds of rap. The code of the street becomes the publicly dominant culture, in part because straight youth adopt it as a protective front against the danger of violence, in part because the oppositional culture has situational prestige. The street code is a set of rituals that generate the most emotional intensity and dominate the focus of attention; the bland politeness and mild accommodativeness of normal Goffmanian social manners pales before it and is unable to compete with it in the attention space.8

What are the devices, the situational weapons by which the oppositional culture dominates interactions? In the black street situation, these are sheer coercive power and its threat: a display of muscles, as well as a demeanor indicating willingness to use weapons and to fight at the slightest question of honor. Sexiness and good looks are prestigious, especially for women; these are keys to the sexual action scene, a focus of excitement, and

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7This is a move along the continuum from relatively unfocused to highly focused public interaction. At the upward extreme were the Chinese mandarins carried down the street surrounded by armed guards while the ordinary populace were required to avert their eyes from them by prostrating themselves to the ground.

8This helps explain why the oppositional culture of the black lower class, rooted in violence, has been adopted as prestigious among groups whose life situation involves very little violent threat, middle-class white youth, and among the stars of the entertainment media, the “reverse snobbery” noted at the beginning of this article. In detail, however, white counterculture style is not black street style. Black hoodlums favor expensive athletic clothes, flashy cars, sexy women; white counterculturers display torn clothes, body piercing, unshavenness, grubbiness. Black street toughs are not being casual, whereas white counterculture takes normal casualness to an extreme. The “code of the street” arises where dominance through violent threat is situationally projected, whereas middle-class youth and entertainment celebrities are presenting a purely symbolic rebellion, not a claim to physically dominate others.
a contest to score sexual conquests and to display one’s connections with the dominants of the street. Vocal prowess, especially in insults and repartee, is another situational weapon; it goes along with the use of prepackaged sounds of anger and scorn in rap music, and of loud noise generally through technological amplification to dominate the auditory attention space.

The black street situation looks like the extreme case of episodic situational resources prevailing over resources drawn from macrostructural connections. Such connections are not entirely cut off since street encounters are influenced by transsituational factors such as a person’s reputation for ready violence or a past record of backing down; such (positive or negative) transsituational resources operate mainly in encounters where community members know one another personally or through gossip networks. The street encounter is also influenced by ties to kin or other allies, and by some local categorical status group markers such as gang emblems. These street encounters are near one end of the continuum, but they are not historically unique. The same “virtues” come to the fore—fighting prowess, physical strength, a ritualistic style of looking for challenges and risking one’s life over honor and precedence, and a verbal culture of boasting and insults—in a number of other situations: among the best documented are the Homeric Greeks and Viking Scandinavia at the period of the Norse sagas. All these are situations in which the state is very weak or non-existent; power is in the hands of ad hoc bands of warriors without even much continuity by kinship.9

Even here, it would be simplistic to conclude that sheer violence is the basis of deference. It is always more effective to threaten than to fight, and coalitions are important even for the strongest. Accordingly, interaction in routinely threatening situations takes the form of rituals of intimidation and displays of honor. There is some suggestion in Anderson’s data that even the toughest “criminal element” does not merely prey on the weakest in the community; to build a reputation as tough, it is necessary to challenge someone else who is tough. Fights among Homeric heroes adhere to the same structure even though the literary picture is no doubt idealized. Thus even violence passes through the filter of ritualization if it is to be an effective device for situational domination.

In mainstream American society, public encounters are mildly accommodative while ghetto street styles are largely confrontational, on the part of the situational dominants, and confrontation-avoiding, on the part of those who are situationally subordinated. Anderson (1999: 20) notes that black youths sometimes use the street code to situationally intimidate whites, venturing onto middle-class turf to do so. Mainstream white interactional style is based on background conditions in the macrostructure, the existence of a strong state, and deep state penetration into everyday life by police, educational, and other regulatory agencies. White middle-class persons are used to long-distance organizational networks that operate in an impersonal style of bureaucratic regulation and control much of the conditions under which people encounter one another. Violence is to a considerable degree monopolized by state agents; it is not much of a factor in most daily encounters. When whites encounter the black street style, they are made to feel extremely uncomfortable—almost as in a Garfinkelian breaching experiment (Garfinkel 1967).

Yet it is not easy for whites to treat the black street code as simply criminal, since it operates with highly stylized rituals which tend to mask overt threats. In addition, the official media of white society, and especially the cultural media of education and enter-

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9Historically, this happened in situations where bands of men made long-distance voyages or raids, often capturing women. In all of these cases, there was much emphasis on establishing fictive kinship. We see this in Anderson’s (1999) data on fictive parents, brothers, and cousins among alliances of protection and support; and it was common where tribal order was broken into fluid bands of marauders. Cf. Finley 1977; Borkenau 1981; Njal’s Saga [ca. 1280] 1960; Searle 1988.
tainment, since the public successes of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, has made a point of emphasizing racial equality and opposition to categorical discrimination. This egalitarianism of official pronouncements and in the ceremonial statements of the courts, is reinforced by the normal style of middle-class public encounters, egalitarian casualness, including its general tendency to countenance any demeanor and behavior as long as they keep their ritual distance. As Goffman (1967: 81–95) commented, our ritualism lets each individual walk through everyday life with a shell of privacy and forbearance, without strong ties of ritual membership, but also with a security from being intruded upon. People in this ritual style are unable to deal with a confrontational street style, with its blatant inequality of the situationally strong over the situationally weak. Middle-class whites following the Goffmanian code defer to confrontational blacks more than “straight” ghetto residents do, since the latter adopt the street code for situational protection. Encounters with whites thus tend to reinforce in the performers of black street codes their feelings of contempt for white social order (Anderson 1999); at the same time, the discomfort of whites, even unexpressed, helps reinforce an interactional dividing line that maintains the racial barrier.

Categorical identities have largely disappeared, replaced by purely local personal reputations in networks where one is known and by anonymity outside. But if categorical identities are upheld by ritual barriers in interaction, black/white ritual standoffs between the street code and the Goffmanian public code are one of the few remaining bases for categorical identities.

POWER

Power is another conventionally reified concept. The Weberian definition, imposing one’s will against opposition, is not yet sufficiently microtranslated. We may distinguish between the power to make other people give way in the immediate situation and the power to make results happen. There is an old dispute about whether the latter necessarily involves the former; Parsons (1969) argued that power is not primarily zero-sum (I win, you yield) but a matter of social efficacy in which the entire collectivity accomplishes something it did not have before. Let us call the first D-power (deference-power or order-giving power) and the latter E-power (efficacy-power). The latter sometimes exists in microsituations but only if the result wanted can be carried out right before the order-giver’s eyes. Here D-power and E-power would coincide empirically, but in many situations D-power is formal or ritualistic: One person gives orders, in extreme cases with an imperious tone and demeanor, while the other acquiesces verbally and in bodily posture. But it remains a question whether the orders are actually carried out, and even if they are, whether the result will be what the order-giver wanted. D-power is always socially significant, even if it is completely severed from E-power; it is consequential for meaningful social experience, shaping the “culture” of personal relations. A society in which there is much inequality in D-power will be one in which there are sharp differences in social identities, and a good deal of smouldering resentment and suppressed conflict (for evidence, see Collins 1975: chaps. 2 and 6). Concentration of E-power may well have no such effects, but this is a hypothesis, awaiting empirical evidence.

E-power is typically transsituational or long-distance; if it is real it must involve events which happen because orders and intentions are transmitted through a social network. E-power is generally macro, involving actions of large numbers of people and situations.

\[^{10}\text{Michael Mann (1986) referred to this as “off with their heads” power, and suggested that in traditional despotisms the actual reach of such power might be very limited; he termed this the difference between “intensive” and “extensive” power.}\]
Setting a large organization in motion is a mild form of E-power; if the organization achieves an intended result, there is even more E-power; further along the continuum, the highest kind of E-power is to change an entire social structure so that the patterns in which networks link people are permanently changed for the future.

There have rarely been efforts to measure the distribution of power along either dimension. Blau (1977) suggested measuring power by organizational span of control: An individual is powerful to the extent that s/he gives orders to a number of subordinates who in turn have a number of subordinates, and so on until the total chain of command is quantified. But such a measure remains confused by too glib a summary of what command means; if we could measure by microsituational sampling the chain of command in organizations, we would find variations in how much D-power is being exercised in different situations of interaction among superiors and subordinates. Probably what Blau has in mind is E-power, assuming that the orders actually get carried out and that the chain of command is a way in which the will of a person “higher up” is carried out by persons “lower down.”

But this is just what needs investigation. There are many ways in which slippage can occur. The organizational literature has shown workers controlling their own work pace, resisting controls by their immediate (and thus by more remote) superiors (Burawoy 1979; Willis 1977); they give token D-power by deferring to their supervisors when they are present, but return to their own way of doing things when the supervisors are not present (i.e., they use the appearance of D-power compliance as a front to cover up their E-power insubordination). The divergence between D-power and E-power is particularly sharp in the case of what Marcia Marx (1993) calls the “shadow hierarchy” of women administrative assistants who defer to (usually male) line authority but wield most of the invisible power to make things happen in a bureaucratic organization, or impede them from happening. There is a considerable literature analyzing how much actual control can be exercised in terms of how visible the work operations are, how standardized and countable the work output, and how much uncertainty there is in what is expected to happen (summaries: Collins 1988: chap. 13; Etzioni 1975). Managers may resort to indirect controls (shaping the physical environment, manipulating communications and information) to constrain the alternatives available to persons down the chain of command. Such shifts to indirect controls are declines in D-power, which managers hopefully trade for E-power. But even here E-power remains ambiguous or multidimensional; some organizations may be able to constrain how employees do their jobs but are unable to make the organization itself profitable or outcompete its rivals. Generals have a lot of D-power (click heels; salute; yes, sir!), and a military chain of command can be calculated fairly easily in terms of how much accumulated heel-clicking there is between one officer’s realm of D-power and another’s. But other contingencies intervene which slow up how quickly and to what extent the army will actually do what the general orders, and yet further contingencies determine whether it will actually win the battle.

The organizational literature is full of suggestions of how the shapes of organizational control have changed in various historical periods and in relation to various physical and economic environments and technologies (Chandler 1962, 1977). There has been enormous growth in size and centralization of organizations, from the military revolution and state penetration from the 1500s onward, with similar transformation of capitalist enterprises in the 1800s and early 1900s (Mann 1993). These imply an increasing concentration of D-power and to some extent E-power in the microencounters of top officials. For the 20th century, organizational analysts have generally told stories of the dispersion of control: at the top, by the dilution of managers’ control by stock ownership and thus by financial coalitions; in the middle, by increasing complexity and uncertainty of tasks and
hence tacit E-power or at least subversion-power (a sort of negative E-power) among staff; in the lower ranks, through challenges by the countervailing organization of labor unions (a rising and falling pattern of challenge) and by informal work groups, and more recently, through a reversal in which organizations use electronic monitoring to control the details of workers’ actions (Fligstein 1990; Leidner 1993). There have been waves of mergers and takeovers; but also counter-waves of divisionalization, multi-profit center structurings, franchising and out-sourcing; and recent trends toward loose networks of firms trading expertise and personnel in forms which are “neither market nor hierarchy” (Powell 1989). If D-power and E-power were constant in all forms of organization, we could add up the shifting numbers of direct and indirect levels of control through chains of command, and trace the rising-and-falling patterns of power concentration. But D-power and E-power are surely not constant. That does not mean that some such measurement could not be attempted, but it would have to be multidimensional, and it would show a very mixed historical pattern.

Overall it appears D-power has become milder in character where it does occur; and its occurrences have become fragmented into specialized enclaves where yes-sir! micro-obedience is established. E-power is another story; and there are some very big hierarchies or ones located where chains of financial resources and other forms of influence ripple far and wide throughout social networks, such that what a few individuals do may have some effects upon the life experiences of millions. The ongoing shakeouts and mergers at the turn of the 21st century in the world communications industries, creating mega-businesses in publishing, television, satellites, telecommunications, cable transmission, and films, suggest one example of increasingly concentrated E-power. Yet it is not clear the E-power of such big organizations/networks is increasing above the level, for instance, of the big capitalist oligopolies at the turn of the 20th century. Big organizations are often big illusions, as far as control of their own destinies, or even their own behavior, is concerned. The so-called totalitarian dictatorships before mid-century had structures on paper that looked completely centralized; yet communist organizations had enormous difficulties in translating top policy into local behavior (Kornai 1992). The resort to terroristic methods did not increase E-power over the system, but can be seen largely as an attempt to extend D-power at greater distance from the center.

It would be premature to draw an empirical conclusion from these theoretical considerations. We will not know what is happening to the concentration of power, even as mega-mergers take place in the most important industries of today, until we attempt situational sampling of D-power in such organizations and to model various kinds of E-power (the extent to which orders are actually transmitted, put into action, and have results). Whether the heirs of Rupert Murdoch and the like will be future dictators of an Orwellian universe; or E-power will remain at the level of unintended consequences and Perrow’s (1984) “normal accidents”; or whether organizational members will be increasingly free of constraints or subject to covert manipulation: these are matters still to be worked out by investigating the actual dimensions of microsituational power.

There is an additional, ironic twist to the pattern of E-power concentration. Francis Bacon, reflecting on his experience as a life-long civil servant and organizational politician in the consolidating Elizabethan state, a career that culminated in a stint as chief minister, declared that power itself is a trap for those who wield it:

Men in great place are thrice servants: servants of the sovereign or state, servants of fame, and servants of business. So as they have no freedom, neither in their persons, nor in their actions, nor in their times. It is a strange desire to seek power and to lose liberty, or to seek power over others and to lose power over a man’s self. ([1625] 1965: 70)
Bacon did not distinguish between the two kinds of power; like most people, he probably thought getting efficacy power and deference power were the same thing. But his ironic lesson applies especially to those seeking to wield E-power: They are enmeshed in the communications center of the organization they attempt to dominate, and they cannot step away from the network without losing control. As D-power has declined, the seeking of E-power has probably increased not just at the top but through the spread-out middle ranks and horizontal alliance-structures of contemporary organizational networks. We have the term “workaholic” for people caught up in such positions. E-power is largely an illusion, but it is an addiction as well.

HISTORICAL CHANGE IN SITUATIONAL STRATIFICATION

The prevailing hierarchical image of stratification as a fixed structure in which micro is tacitly assumed to mirror macro is a historical heritage. Bourdieu’s machine-like cycle of cultural capital permeating individual habitus and reproducing the field of economic power bypasses situational interaction; not surprisingly, it is the image of a survey researcher collecting data on individuals and arraying it in an abstract hierarchical space (this is especially clear in Bourdieu 1984: 128-129, 262, in figures laid out along the dimensions of coefficients of correspondence, similar to factors in factor analysis). The image is an old-fashioned one. Like most of our images of stratification, it dates back to the time of Marx when microsituational reality was much more tightly linked to the distribution of power and property. In Webersian terms, it was a historical period in which classes were organized as status groups and belonging to a class was a categorical identity, indeed the most prominent social identity. My argument is not simply that historically macrostructures once dominated, and that now the microsituational order has come loose from the macro order. The macrostructure, in any historical period, is always composed of micro-situations. What I am saying is that the microsituations today are stratified by quite different conditions than existed in the early 20th century or earlier.

The key historical difference is that societies were formerly organized around patrimonial households. This Weberian term refers to a structure in which the main political and economic unit is the family dwelling, augmented by servants, guards, retainers, apprentices, and guests. Economic production takes place in the household or on property controlled by it. Political and military relations are alliances among households, with dominance going to the biggest coalitions amassing the most troops. The upper class consisted of the heads of the biggest households. Under this structure, it was difficult to separate economic class, political power, and status group membership. The largest households generally held the most property, mustered the most force, and controlled the most political dependencies, and a similar proportionality would hold for smaller households. Often these distinctions were formulated in legal categories such as aristocracy and commoner, and sometimes in subcategories such as levels of nobility. The names of these status group categories were common parlance; Marx was among the first to claim that economic class was the underlying dimension, but class stood out in his mind precisely because the organization of everyday life centered around property-owning, power-wielding, honor-receiving household dominants.

Status group borders were constantly reaffirmed and publicized in everyday life. One was always being reminded of which household one belonged to and what kind of ranking that household had, within and without. Status group membership was inescapable, since there was virtually no place for persons who did not belong to a known household or who were not under its economic control and political protection; such persons were dishon-
ored outcasts, virtually non-persons. Within the household, interactions were inequalitar-
ian; one repeatedly gave or took orders, received or gave deference, depending upon how
one ranked as a servant, retainer, or relative of the household heads. Individuals could
move through the hierarchy, but only by moving from one household to another, or by
rising higher within the internal structure of one’s household to come into closer relations
of trust and dependency with the household head. Even relatively high-ranking persons
usually had some situations in which they had to demonstrate their loyalty and subordina-
tion to some higher-ranking person. High-ranking persons were surrounded by atten-
dants, and one’s rank was generally represented by the size of one’s entourage. This
meant that high-ranking persons (and those who attended on them) were constantly in a
ceremonial situation (this is vividly documented in regard to Louis XIV: Lewis 1957; Elias
1983); groups were always assembled and focused on persons of rank, giving a high
density of ritual interaction. The result is a high degree of social reality—indeed,
reification—of the social categories focused upon, and thus a high degree of conscious-
ness of social rank and one’s closeness to persons of higher rank. In sum, everyday inter-
action was highly ritualized, and the rituals were largely asymmetrical, giving deference to
some persons over others.

The character of everyday social interaction has changed above all due to the shrinking
and replacement of the patrimonial household. This has happened gradually over the last
several centuries, driven by several macrolevel developments. The growth of the central-
ized state removed military power from households, and the expansion of government
bureaucracy for extracting revenue and regulating society created a new type of organiza-
tional space, bureaus in which individuals interacted for specialized purposes and limited
times. Categorical identities were replaced by the inscription of individual citizens in
government records for purposes of taxation, social insurance, education, military con-
scription, and voting rights. Bureaucracy spread into the economic realm as work became
organized in places separated from the household.

The modern organization of life into private places, work places, and public places in
between them is a historically recent development. This new social ecology of kinds of
interactions has drastically changed the ritual density of everyday encounters and the cat-
egorical identity schemes that go with it. The realm of consumption is now separated from
the places where production takes place and where politically- and economically-based
power relations are enacted. Consumption now takes place in private or at least outside of
situations where it is marked by socially visible rank. The center of gravity of daily life
switches to the realm of consumption. This is reinforced by the growth of consumer indus-
tries, including entertainment and the hardware which delivers it, into the largest and most
visible part of the economy. A side-result has been to increase the salaries as well as the
pervasiveness of entertainment stars; by contrast, in a patrimonial society, entertainers
were merely servants, dependent upon patronage of the big households. Entertainment
stars are the contemporary sacred objects because they are the only widely visible points of
attention in this private sphere, where relationships are casual (which is to say, deritual-
ized) and free of work and power relations. One might say entertainment stars who express

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11For example, Francis Bacon, son and nephew of high-ranking officials in the Tudor monarchy, himself the
holder of high offices and member of the aristocracy, addressed himself with great ceremonial deference to his
own patrons. The pattern of deference in patrimonial households is continually illustrated in Shakespeare’s plays,
Chinese novels of the Ch’ing dynasty and earlier, and indeed in virtually all of the descriptive literature of the
world prior to the 20th century.

12The theme comes through strongly in Shakespeare’s King Lear, the plot of which concerns how many armed
personal retainers a lord could have around him. Stone (1967) documents that this was a struggle going on at the
time, as the state attempted to limit the scope of private armaments to a few household guards, thereby monop-
olizing control for an increasingly centralized state as part of the opening phases of the “military revolution.”
a casual, anti-formal style are appropriate symbols to represent the character of the modern consumption experience.13

Individuals now have a choice as to which situations they invest their emotional commitment in. They can withdraw attention from their work situations to concentrate on their private lives of consumption. This is characteristic especially of workers in subordinate positions; Halle (1984) indicates that workers identify themselves as working class only while they are on the job, whereas at home they are more likely to identify themselves as part of a pervasive middle class. Persons in high-ranking professional and managerial jobs have an incentive to identify more strongly with their work positions, but when they leave work they too enter the anonymous world of consumption.

The realm of individual privacy has increased, in part because of the separation of a private realm of consumption, and in part because the increase in level of wealth has allowed the household itself to be divided into separate spaces. Even aristocrats’ palaces generally lacked special rooms for sleeping, for washing or toilets; even very personal physical activities happened in the presence of servants and followers. Among the wealthy, private bedroom and dressing chambers began to appear in the 1700s and spread in the 1800s; household architecture now added corridors so that it was possible to enter a room without passing through other rooms and disturbing their inhabitants (Girouard 1978). In the mid-20th century this kind of dwelling space, including bathrooms, became considered normal for everyone. These changes in the material settings of daily life made possible Goffmanian backstages as well as frontstages for the vast majority of people. This is one reason why individual reputations have become more important than categorical identities.

Habermas’s (1984) phrase, “the colonization of the life world,” conveys an inaccurate picture of the main trend of modern history. Habermas’s phrase is congruent with the trend of state penetration, the expanding scope of obligations of individuals in direct relation to the bureaucratic agencies of the state, which went along with breaking through the barriers surrounding the patrimonial household. But Habermas’s argument does not take account of the actual patterning of social situations. The patrimonial household conducted economic and political relations in a concrete and often oppressive manner throughout daily experience. State penetration has displaced and broken up the patrimonial structures, but the actual experience of dealing with government agencies usually takes place in little fragments, not as continuous pressure; and contact is enacted in impersonal bureaucratic relationships, with little of the ritualism that reifies social categories or the deference that generates pride and shame. Contemporary social structure generates a life experience in which most individuals have at least intermittent, and sometimes quite extensive, situational distance from macrostructured relationships.

Luhmann ([1984] 1995) has described the structural change as a shift from society organized by stratification to one organized by functional specializations. This is congruent with the shift brought about by the decline of the patrimonial household and the breaking apart of everyday interaction from the pervasive experience of property and political/military power. But stratification has not disappeared in every respect; the macrodistribution of economic inequality is becoming stronger than ever. And on the micro level, situational power still exists, not only inside governmental and economic organizations but even in the public sphere. The most common, everyday experiences of this kind are encounters with petty bureaucratic functionaries such as security guards, flight attendants, ticket-takers, and police patrols. These are rather limited situational power-wielders,

13Entertainment stars are outside the circuits of economic class and organizational power, and even outside the networks of categorical status group. They have large amounts of money but do not participate in the activities which constitute upper class financial circuits. They have neither E-power nor, in the strict sense, much D-power.
who have more capacity to impede and delay people than to positively control much of their behavior; petty functionaries hold a kind of very local, negative E-power but little D-power as they are given little respect or deference. Such situations contrast with the earlier historical experience; in patrimonial households, even armed guards were extremely rank-conscious, and would rarely if ever take it upon themselves to impede a social superior. In the transitional period as well, when patrimonial households were being displaced but class-based status identities were still widely recognized categories, even police acted as if they were in the lower status group, and gave polite deference to persons identified as "gentry." The police and other specialized bureaucratic functionaries have thus risen in situational power as they no longer have any pressure to defer to any categorical identities.

AN IMAGERY

In place of a hierarchical image, we need a horizontal-spatial imagery of today’s situational experiences. Contemporary life is something like being in an ancient or medieval picaresque story. These were adventure stories, sagas of what happens once an individual is off on his own, venturing outside the patrimonial households where he has a place in the social order. When Odysseus or the Argonauts leave home, or the knights in Malory or Spenser set out from their castles, they are in a realm where their economic and political positions do little or nothing for them. In their most extreme adventures, they venture outside the status order, where they have no categorical identities among those they encounter; at best, a personal reputation of their prowess in battle or cunning may have circulated to some of those they visit.

The daily experience of modern people has much of the same quality. We have our home bases, to some extent, networks within which we are personally known, including some occupational or skill-practicing communities where people will give some deference to those who are high-ranking. But these are highly specific, localized regions, and what we get there does not carry over into the majority of our social contacts. The macroties of our networks are no longer relevant; we are voyaging in a vast realm of situations in which there is very little which will produce solidarity with other people that one encounters, or deference or power, except what one can carry with oneself in the most palpable way. People who are particularly strong and athletic, or threatening, or good-looking and sexy, or quick-spoken, witty, or just plain loud, can attract attention and perhaps dominate a momentary situation. People who are particularly lacking in these qualities can be situationally dominated. It is structurally the same as whether Odysseus will outwit the Cyclops or Jason will succeed in capturing the golden fleece because the daughter of the king falls in love with him. This is not to say that background resources of social class might not help one's situational maneuvering. But resources must be translated into whatever makes an immediate situational impression. Carrying a great deal of money can get you service (but not necessarily much politeness) at an expensive restaurant, but it can also get you robbed; being an important person in some profession, or a powerful person in some organization, will get you nothing if you are voyaging in some other part of the social landscape. James Joyce fleshed out the analogy in depicting a modern-day Ulysses travelling in and out of urban networks of 1904 Dublin, weaving among little pockets of reputation, solidarity, and hostility. Joyce's description pertains too much to the transitional period, depicting a small city where reputational networks were still fairly widespread. If we shrink those networks to little family and occupational enclaves, and expand the overarching mass media of entertainment with their pseudo-familiar reputations of manufactured star images, we arrive at our contemporary world.
Perhaps a better image would be a highway, especially a high-speed interstate freeway. Here there is formal equality; all cars are equal, they are subject to the same laws, and situationally they tend to adhere to a very loose code of civility (not crowding other cars or cutting them off). As in Goffman’s (1971) model of human foot traffic, drivers monitor each other mainly to keep their distance; eye contact, even when it is possible (at stop lights and when cars are in parallel lanes), is generally avoided, and gestures of any kind are very rare. Civil inattention is the prevailing custom.

The situational equality of a highway is generally an equality of motivated indifference, not of solidarity or hostility. The one clear exception is police cars, to which everyone defers, which demand deference in the form of signals with flashing lights or sirens, and break the rules which they enforce on others (speeding, crossing the median, etc.). By a simple behavioral criterion—who gets out of the way for which vehicles—police cars are the kings of the road. But there is also some purely situational dominance. This may be mildly correlated with sheer physical property: An expensive, fast car lords it over ordinary cars by passing them; overt deference is displayed as a car captures the dominant trajectory of motion or momentum on the highway, so that other cars get out of the way when they see it coming. Thus transsituational resources, mainly money, may translate into the material possessions that enable one to dominate the situational encounters of the highway. Small, old, or badly maintained cars, likely belonging to poor people, hug the side of the road and defer to virtually all bigger and faster cars. Here we see that economic power translates into situational dominance to some extent, whereas political power translates not at all on the highway (unless one is a government official with a police escort, or oneself the police). But dominance is not strictly a matter of economic class; truck drivers sometimes exercise situational dominance, especially on relatively unpolicing rural roads, using their sheer size to muscle their way into controlling lanes. There is also an emergent, completely situational order of dominance, the car who gets to pass other cars and gets others to defer (although sometimes contests occur over who drives in front of whom, struggles over who gets to be the hero of the road). Within a range of cars which have roughly the same speeding power, some are driven by persons who build up the aggressiveness to scare most others off. It may be that some persons (or even categories of persons, such as teenagers) may occupy this “road elite” more than others, and may even have the transsituational repetitiveness that can be characterized as a “personality trait.” But there is no clear categorical identity of which drivers are especially dominant or dominated; and it may well be the case that road dominance is episodic and transitory, arising from particular build-ups and losses of emotional energy from driving within a particular configuration of drivers at a particular time.

Categorical identities, grounded in repetitively enacted social communities with publicly visible rituals, have largely disappeared. What is left are individual reputations, most of which carry little social charisma, little of the mana of social emotion which attract desires for contact or the propensity to give deference; and reputations are generally circumscribed to very limited networks compared to the totality of the public sphere. One reason race is a social category so resistant to dissolving into the egalitarian civil inattention of public places is that race is one of the few markers of status group identity which is still visible. Most of the situations have disappeared in which class-based status groups can be enacted, and the situations that are left have withdrawn into privacy, where they no longer give public emblems of membership. Ironically, as black Americans differentiate
across the class structure, the fact that class distinctions are not publicly recognized contributes to lumping all black people into a single, ritually excluded category. Social mobility gives rewards in material consumption and life conditions, but it no longer gives public deference or status. Black Americans would probably be better off today if there were more class consciousness; class categories could help dissolve the racial category and make this categorical exclusion and discrimination more difficult in the ritual dynamics of everyday life.

The trend of contemporary life, based on the momentum of macroinstitutional patterns, is in the other direction. We are increasingly a world in which power operates only within specific organizations and casts no halo; in which economic class is meaningful largely if one stays within the circuits of exchange which generated the money, with some small microsituational advantages that come from investing money into material consumption which helps dominate face-to-face situations; in which categorical reputations have largely dissolved, and personal reputations circulate only in limited networks, except for the artificial reputations of entertainment stars. Race may be the big exception because the situational rituals of lower-class black street encounters are so sharply different from the middle-class public rituals of the dominant society. In a world in which most status-group structures, most enactments of ritual barriers around communities, are invisible, the black street culture is the most visible ritual barrier. The publicity given to it, both negative and positive, in the news and entertainment media, makes it the last vestige of the status-group organization of premodern society, the structural equivalent of a world of patrimonial relationships in the midst of a world of impersonal bureaucracies and privatized networks.

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