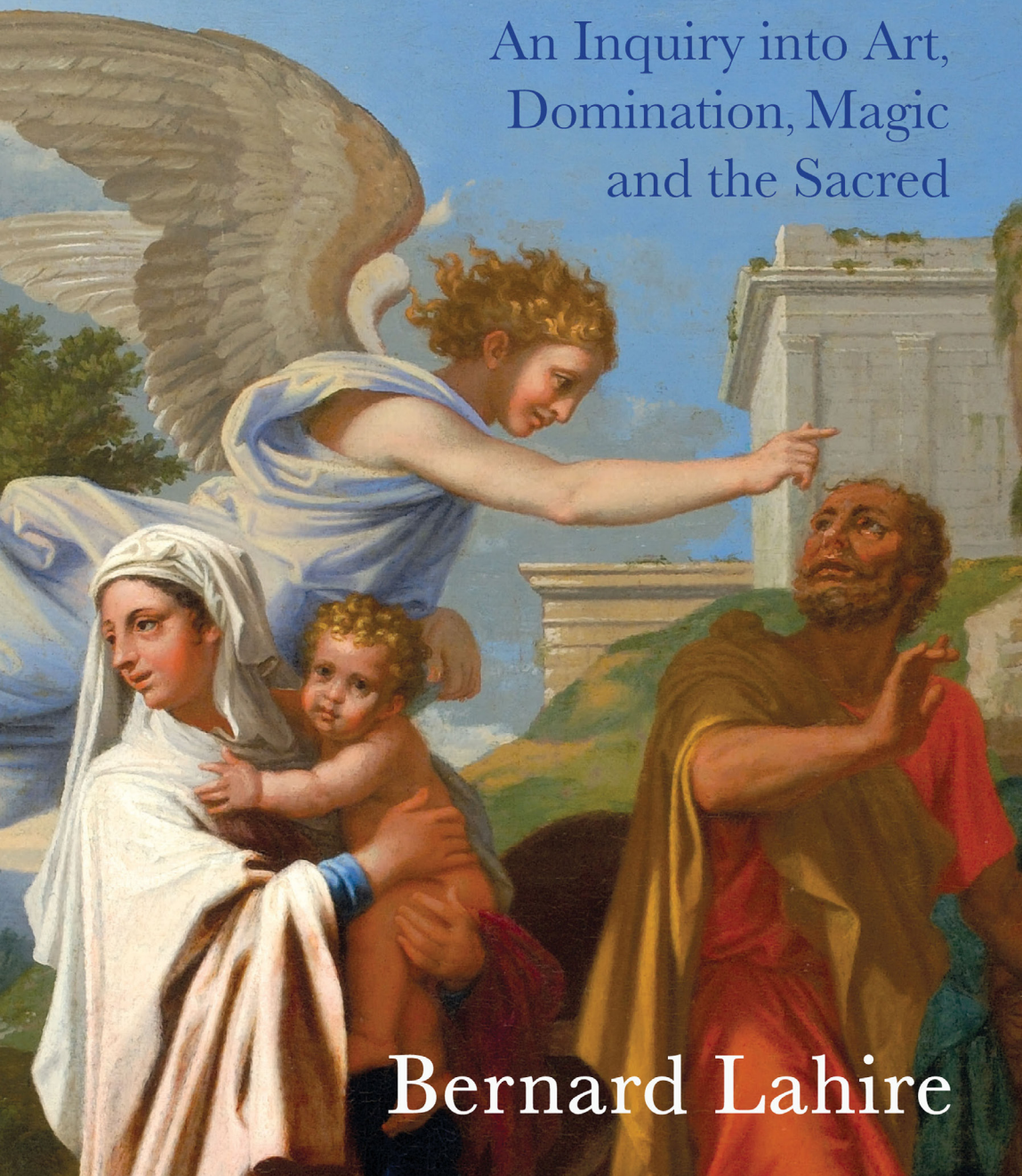# This is Not Just a Painting

## An Inquiry into Art, Domination, Magic and the Sacred

### Bernard Lahire

# This is Not Just a Painting

*To my son Nathan, whose creative spirit and sense of humour delight me.*

# Bernard Lahire

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## An Inquiry into Art, Domination, Magic and the Sacred

*Translated by*
Helen Morrison

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# *Acknowledgements*

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During my long period of research, I benefited from the scientific collaboration of Géraldine Bois, who interviewed most of the 'major actors' in connection with the recent history of *The Flight into Egypt* and who put together all the various documentation needed for a historical reconstruction of Nicolas Poussin's fame.

I have been fortunate to benefit from contact with various colleagues, including Samuel Coavoux (Centre Max Weber) and Marianne Woollven (Université de Clermont-Ferrand), Emmanuel Renaut and Claude Gautier (ENS de Lyon), Frédéric Vandenberghe (IESP of the State University of Rio de Janeiro), Mathieu Hilgers (ULB, Belgium) and Felice Dassetto (Université catholique de Louvain/Académie Royale de Belgique).

This research would not have been possible without the help of several groups of students, all participants in the 'Atelier Poussin', at the École Normal Supérieur de Lyon, during the academic years 2008/2009, 2009/2010, and 2010/2011. I am all too aware that I would never have had the courage to embark on a project so fraught with risks because of its sheer historical scope, the constant requirement to step outside the specialized domains and the multiple scientific implications had that risk not been shared within the context of this 'teaching'.

There are two main approaches to teaching at university level. One is based on a distinction between a teacher who knows and students who

learn, and the other places teacher and learners in the same uncertain situation, where the only advantage held by the former is to have had more experience sailing these uncharted seas than the young crew members embarked on the same voyage. There is something reassuring about the 'cold' knowledge which is transferred in the first kind of teaching. There it is: objectivized in the research texts, commentated on in the more scholarly texts or works, presented by the teacher, and the student who wishes to appropriate it can devote all the time required for the task by reading and then re-producing in an oral or written form the fruits of his or her study. 'Hot knowledge' can be destabilizing, emerging as it does somewhat unpredictably throughout the academic year, but it offers far greater opportunities for scientific minds to develop. It was this second type of teaching that the students who participated in the 'Atelier Poussin' were confronted with: a mix of genuine case studies and theoretical or methodological commentary, a mobilization of authors or texts depending on the variable needs of the research, the sense of helplessness or of ignorance which marks the different stages of a research project and which sets the course of tasks yet to be achieved, etc.

Unfortunately, however, those national authorities capable of funding research, who often tend to favour the large-scale projects (multi-team, multi-disciplinary, international, etc.) often based on compromises, and loose arrangements or consensus, could not be approached for such a project. The more risky and unusual the project and the more it differs from the standard type of project, the less likely it is to be the result of inter-team collaboration. A few isolated but closely-knit researchers can, in my view, achieve far more than loose groupings of teams or laboratories, which are often forced to get together in order to finance research and to keep their staff busy. And, given how difficult it is to get funding for science outside this carefully organized bottleneck, it seems to me that scientific life is harder now than it was in the past. Reversing the order of priorities, researchers tend to favour research projects they know are likely to be funded rather than seek funding for scientifically powerful projects,

As for what motivated me, it is quite simple; I would hope that in the eyes of some people it might be sufficient in itself. It was curiosity – the only kind of curiosity, in any case, that is worth acting upon with a degree of obstinacy: not the curiosity that seeks to assimilate what it is proper for one to know, but that which enables one to get free of oneself. After all, what would be the value of the passion for knowledge if it resulted only in a certain amount of knowledgeableness and not, in one way or another and to the extent possible, in the knower's straying afield of himself? There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all.

M. Foucault, *The use of pleasure*: *The history of sexuality, Vol. 2*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990, p. 8

If you want to push science forward as quickly as possible you will succeed in destroying it as quickly as possible; just as a hen perishes if it is compelled to lay eggs too quickly. Science has certainly been pushed forward at an astonishing speed over the last decades: but just look at the men of learning, the exhausted hens. They are in truth not 'harmonious' natures; they can only cackle more than ever because they lay eggs more often: though the eggs to be sure, have got smaller and smaller (…).

F. Nietzsche, *Untimely meditations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 99

*Nicolas Poussin*, by Albert Clouet, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC
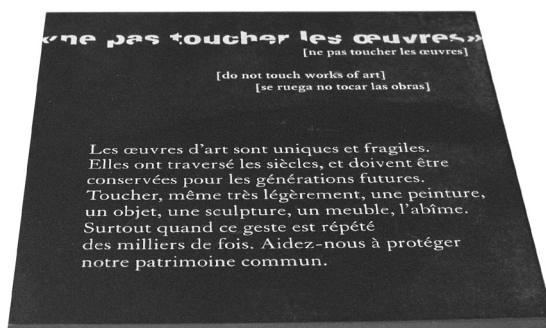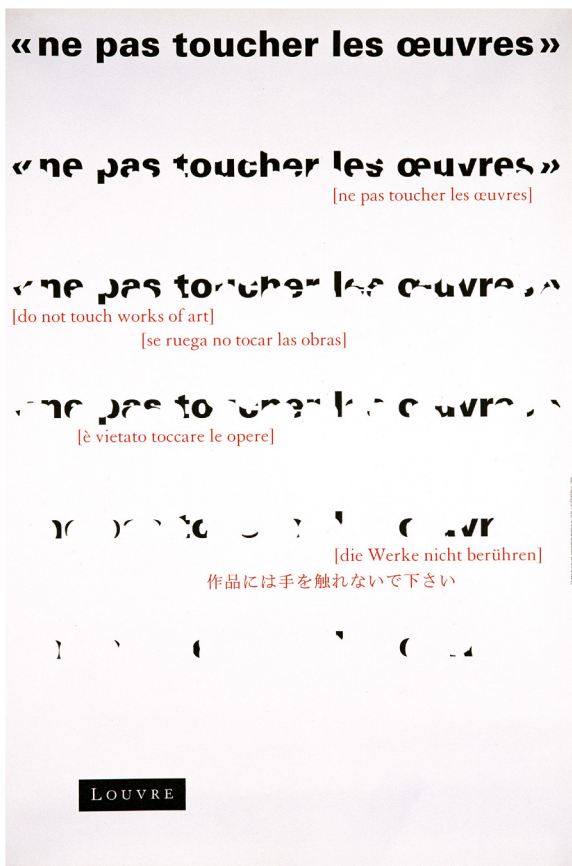
1a and 1b. *Ne pas toucher les œuvres* (Do not touch the works), poster by Jean-Luc Chamroux, Louvre Museum, 1996, 100 × 150 cm and caption 15 × 15 cm, jean-luc-chamroux.net.

2. *The Flight into Egypt*, 'Piasecka-Johnson' version (photo: D. Rykner).

3. *The Flight into Egypt*, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon.

4. Comparison of the 'Piasecka-Johnson' (left) and the 'Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon' (right) versions of *The Flight into Egypt* (2008) (photo: D. Rykner).
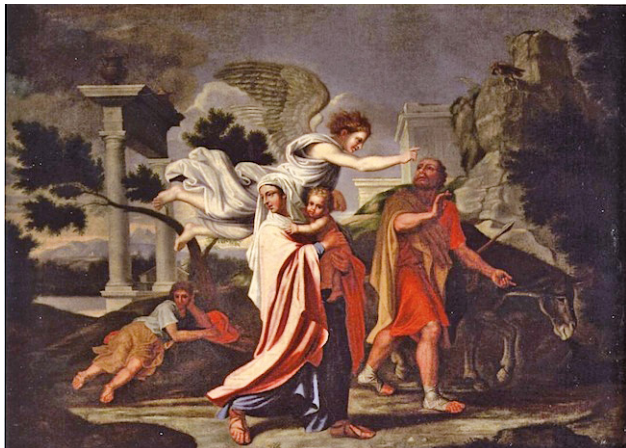


5. *The Flight into Egypt*, Museum of Verrières-le-Buisson.

# Introduction: unravelling a canvas

Introducing a book by beginning with a description of the conditions in which the work was conceived is certainly the simplest and the most honest way of addressing the reader, as well as the clearest. Research, and the books which emerge as a result, do not appear out of nowhere and are always the result of a subtle mixture of coincidences and opportunities and of scientific and personal imperatives.

This particular investigation owes its origins to Sylvie Ramond, director of the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon. It was she who, in 2008, suggested I should take a close look at the recent story of a version of *The Flight into Egypt* by Nicolas Poussin, a painting recently acquired by the museum. Initially somewhat sceptical, as is often the case for researchers anxious to protect their independence, I finally agreed to take a look at the press file put together by the museum. It was at that point that I became caught up in the intrigue of this curious tale, which read rather like a detective story with plot twists, cliff-hangers and a cast of colourful characters, and began to identify a number of ways of approaching a problem which was gradually taking shape before my eyes. In spite of what may seem like an initial departure from the core focus in an effort to understand its broader meaning and to explore what this story could reveal about the structure of our societies, their historical foundations, and about the relations of dominance and the acts of social magic constantly at work within them, I hope that all those who have so generously opened up their archives to me and assisted me on numerous occasions with the process of my research will find food for thought in these pages.

The social, political and scientific context in which I have carried out this research, and gone on to write this book, is a significant element in the *regressive* approach I have chosen to adopt here, a process which consists of stepping back into the past in order to understand the present. Indeed, it seemed to me imperative to produce a work which sets out to shine a spotlight on a certain number of *self-evident facts* and *foundations or bases of beliefs* which, though virtually invisible, have a deeply significant

influence on the way our lives are structured. Equally urgent was the need to reiterate the importance of relations of domination in this objectivized history which nevertheless quietly reveals so much about our current behaviour. This research therefore sets out to ensure that history in all its forms – whether structural and long term or individual and biographical – like the facts of domination, is not forgotten, either in a political or scientific context.

As someone who has campaigned for many years to ensure that sociology on an individual scale finds a legitimate place within social science research,[1] I have also always defended the need to vary the scale of contextualization depending on the nature of the questions to be asked or of the problems to be resolved.[2] There will therefore be no shift in my position in the course of this project, which often disregards individual singularities in order to focus instead on the great cultural foundations on which individuals play out their roles. Social issues, unfolded, that is to say examined from an outside perspective, in different societies and in different eras, are not incompatible with 'folded' or more internalized social issues embodied within socialized individuals.

## Flights into Egypt: trajectories, rivalries and controversies

In 2008, the arrival in the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon of a painting entitled 'The Flight into Egypt' (1657–1658), and attributed to Nicolas Poussin, was announced in the national press as an event which was, on a number of different levels, exceptional. Exceptional because of the reputation of the prestigious presumed creator of a painting presented as a masterpiece. Exceptional too because of the rollercoaster journey of an object which had been missing for a long time and had not always been recognized as an autograph work.[3] Exceptional finally, because of the economic magnitude – €17 million – of public and private investment brought together in order to bring a Poussin into the collections of the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon.

### *Breaking away from legends*

It was indeed the exceptional nature of this work and its history, emphasized by many commentators, which first attracted my attention. Not that I sought to get involved in telling the intricate and fascinating story of this 'famous work' and, in particular, of the 'incredible scientific and legal epic'[4] which preceded the acquisition, but because that very *exceptionality*, as emphasized by all the commentators, struck me as an interesting focus in itself. From my very first exposure to the story of this painting, as with other similar stories, what astonished me most was the way it had somehow taken on the status of a kind of legend. The history of a painting which had been missing for more than three centuries, and which was

then re-discovered but remained un-acknowledged, passing from hand to hand, from a bourgeois family who had no notion of its value and then to gallery owners who made assumptions regarding its value, a tale involving Franco-British controversies between the four greatest Poussin experts in the world, including two 'Knights of the realm' (one the curator of the art collection belonging to the Queen of England and a Russian spy known as the 'fourth man' of the famous 'Cambridge Five', and the other, a descendant of the family who had founded the Guinness Mahon investment bank), a professor at the Collège de France, and a Director of the Louvre who was to become a member of the Académie Française. Add to all this, the astonishing contrast between what was considered merely a decorative old item put up for sale in 1986 at the price of a simple contemporary copy (around €12,000) and the masterpiece by Nicolas Poussin sold for €17 million in 2007, the legal imbroglios around the ownership of the painting, etc. All of this has proved fascinating for many a commentator.

If some aspects of the painting's history indeed resemble a detective story, it also has elements of a fairy-tale. In the manner of the frog transformed into a Prince Charming, we are told the tale of an ordinary canvas transformed into a masterpiece, a simple copy transmuted into a national treasure. This is the magic of transubstantiation, the social alchemy which transforms lead into gold, the ordinary into the extraordinary, the profane into the sacred. Social magic is everywhere here: in the phenomena of successive enchantment and disenchantment around certain objects, the white and the black magic of performative acts which bestow status or remove it, cause things to exist by simply naming them, or the admiring and reverential attitudes towards a sanctified object. Magic is omnipresent even though scarcely noticed.

This social magic might seem to be more of a matter for an anthropology of belief and of the effects of belief. But when beliefs generate so much social energy in so many different actors who discuss, authenticate, appropriate, buy and sell, admire, etc., when it is with these same beliefs that public or private money is committed or that laws are made, then belief and magic are no longer specialist questions. Instead, they are central facts which potentially concern the whole area of the social sciences, from the history of religion to monetary economics, from political anthropology to the history and sociology of art. What I set out to demonstrate here is that, with a different set of beliefs, and as a result, with a completely different accumulated history, the world, and our lives, would be totally different.

What fascinates us about 'legends' is therefore an important aspect of what will be explored here by focusing on this object made sacred by history and on the behaviours associated with it. It is not therefore the 'incredible story' or the 'fantastical story' of this painting that will be narrated in these pages since that would simply mean subscribing to the collective wonderment. The history of popular art abounds with such stories described as 'thrillers', as 'incredible', 'breath-taking' or 'fabulous'. Such tales tell us more about the myths associated with great art

and with creative genius than help us gain any genuine understanding of the meaning of our practices in relation to art. Thus, the spell-binding biographies of famous paintings do not at first appear to distance themselves with regard to pictorial art in general.[5] Unconsciously part of a whole multi-layered history, those who write them forget what the current situation owes to the institutions, power struggles and shows of strength accumulated throughout the past.

This absence of distance continues to manifest itself in relation to the unique works whose various adventures are recounted. For example, Courbet's *The Origin of the World* is supposed to represent 'both the universal arms of feminine heraldry and a hymn to liberty'.[6] Such paintings belong to a process which sees them singled out to become a focus of intense interest and particular fascination, and end up being universalized and mythicized. As Thierry Savatier writes: 'But *The Origin of the World* is no ordinary picture. It has a unique place in western art because it represents, without compromise and without historical or mythological alibi, not only the sexual organs of a woman, but THE sexuality of WOMANKIND and, even more than that, of all women, mistresses and mothers included'.[7] Finally, anecdotal history very often takes the form of a detective story, made up of little episodes which, bit by bit, spell out the trajectory of the picture ('a complex story, with multiple plot twists, shadowy areas, lies, alibis, things left unsaid, all of which need to be approached like a police investigation'[8]).

In the same way, Donald Sassoon, in his *Leonardo and the Mona Lisa Story. The History of a Painting told in Pictures*, delivers an almost ideal-typical fable, a story of enchantment and of 'admiration' which tells the extraordinary adventure of 'the world's most famous painting',[9] painted by Leonardo de Vinci around 1503–1507. The history of this painting is teleological ('From its first viewing, this work of art caused a stir among all who saw it') and the entire book consists of a historical account vaunting the growing glory of the painting: the high visitor numbers, the numerous photos of the painting, the multiple copies of the work (sixty alone registered in the two centuries following the artist's death), the pastiches, the visitors filming it, the books, cartoons or films in which it features, etc.[10] The focus is this portrait of the Mona Lisa who 'has had 500 years of fame', of the 'sighs of recognition' she provokes and of the 'jostling of the crowd shifting from foot to foot' and errors of history or inexplicable lapses in taste are blamed for all the moments when the canvas was not apparently considered as the undeniable masterpiece whose one-dimensional history is set out here.[11]

### Categorized and classified paintings and retrospective illusions

None of all that will be found in this book, but, on the contrary, a determination to rationalize the legend, to lay bare the beliefs and to topple the myths. Reconstructing the socio-historical trajectory of a painting

representing the biblical episode of the flight into Egypt, and of a number of other rival paintings, means looking at the history of the different ways in which such objects have been described and, as a result, at the history of the various categories into which they have been placed: ordinary object/ objet d'art, copy/original, ordinary painting/old master, minor painting/ masterpiece, single painting/painting featuring in a collection, etc. It is also to tell the story of the various *tests*, particularly legal and scientific, to which they have been subjected in order to be authenticated.

The history of a long-lost canvas, initially known only thanks to the existence of engravings and a few sparse mentions in written accounts, is, moreover, not such an easy one to tell without the risk of falling into the trap of retrospective illusion or teleological vision. The difficulty lies in the fact that several versions of the work reappeared in the public domain during the 1980s, but without any immediate or definitive clarification of their status. A first version, discovered in 1982 by the British art historian Anthony Blunt and published as an autograph painting,[12] was followed a few years later, in 1986, by the reappearance, in an art auction in Versailles, of a second canvas, which I shall be focusing on in particular here. The attribution of the first painting to Poussin, initially uncontested, led the auctioneer and the expert to classify this second version as a simple studio copy (in the knowledge that Poussin is generally regarded as a painter who never painted the same canvas twice). However, in the years following the sale of this second painting, a controversy began to take shape, triggered by the publication, in 1994, of the second canvas as an autograph work, by Jacques Thuillier, an eminent French art historian and professor at the Collège de France, a view supported in the same year by the newly appointed director of the Louvre, on the occasion of a major Poussin retrospective at the Grand Palais in Paris. Another leading authority on seventeenth-century art history, Sir Denis Mahon, also from Great Britain, then stepped into the debate with a defence of the first version, in spite of the fact that throughout his entire career he had always systematically opposed Blunt. A third version of the painting, which subsequently emerged in the late 1980s, was put forward as potentially genuine by a less influential British art historian, Christopher Wright, but subsequently unanimously rejected by the more eminent specialists. The battle between these four major international experts (Anthony Blunt and Denis Mahon on one side and Jacques Thuillier and Pierre Rosenberg on the other) was to involve specialist historical knowledge of the work and life of Poussin and scientific analysis of the paintings.

In the early years of the twenty-first century, the second canvas gained ground in terms of legitimacy and moved closer to the Holy Grail, or in other words, the status of an autograph painting. The first version lost its strongest supporter with the death of Blunt in 1983, followed, in 2011, by that of Mahon. The second canvas, after a long legal imbroglio between the former owners and the gallery owners who had acquired it in 1986, was classified as a 'national treasure' by the French government and its

trajectory finally came to a halt in the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon.[13] Such a story, very briefly summarized here,[14] demonstrates how a cultural object only exists in so far as it becomes the subject of discussions, classification systems, tests, procedures and institutions which close in on it and commandeer it. It becomes an object of controversy, it is subjected to all kinds of tests (legal, scientific, technical, etc.), it is accepted or rejected, classified, indexed, exhibited to the public, put up for public sale, included in a collection, and so on.

It would be wrong, therefore, to recount the history of this second version of the painting, which made its appearance in 1986, as though it had always existed as an 'autograph masterpiece by Nicolas Poussin'. That would be tantamount to forgetting that, at different periods and times, what is referred to by the title of 'The Flight into Egypt', but which was never given a title by its creator, has at diverse moments been a commission from a dealer by the name of Jacques Serisier of which Bernini had a rather poor opinion, a simple mention in various written accounts of a painting that had perhaps once existed, the lost model for engravings attesting its past existence, an item in various catalogues (in the absence of an actual canvas, but on the basis of engravings and written accounts), a painting published in 1982 by the art historian Antony Blunt, a painting which had been 'copied' and a resulting copy which turned up in an art auction in 1986, a source of scientific controversy between art historians of differing status intent on defending the authenticity of the two pictures, a painting previously considered as a mere copy but whose authenticity was gradually recognized by a growing number of experts, the object of a court case involving the former owners, the gallery owners who had subsequently acquired it, the auctioneer and his expert, a chef d'œuvre by a master of classicism worthy of being classified as a 'national treasure', the focus of local, regional, national and even international repercussions, an 'exemplary' sponsorship operation, a piece which completes a collection of seventeenth-century art at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon, a means of attracting the attention of museum goers.

Giving the painting properties only recently attributed to it by using the term 'a masterpiece by Nicolas Poussin' in reference to its earlier existence would be falling into what Patrick Boucheron describes as 'the retrospective illusion', a reference to the state in which a witness to a speech made by a certain 'Francis' writes, long after the event, that he had seen 'Saint Francis', whereas the person he had actually seen, at the time he had seen him, was not yet a saint and 'his name did not evoke the powerful echo which would resonate from it thirty years later, when life stories, legends and accounts of "Saint Francis of Assisi" had proliferated and merged together'.[15]

For me, therefore, it was a matter of reconstructing the series of actors (individuals or institutions) and the sequence of their actions which led to the same 'material object' going from the status of a copy of insignificant value, either in aesthetic or economic terms, to that of a highly

prized painting with what was considered a record-breaking purchase price within the context of a sponsorship operation involving multiple partners, both public and private. Amongst these numerous actors, will be found, in no particular order, the original owners of the picture, lawyers, an auctioneer and his expert, a professor at the Collège de France, an ex-director of the Louvre Museum and member of the Académie Française, various major foreign experts (notably British or American), a series of art historians with less established reputations but who were nevertheless specialists in seventeenth-century art, curators from the Louvre museum, experts appointed by the courts, Le Laboratoire de recherché des Musées de France, the laboratory of the National Gallery, London, the French government, who took the decision to classify the painting as a 'national treasure', the authors of the 2002 law relating to sponsorship, major international museums who acquired seventeenth-century artworks in general and especially those of Poussin, thereby contributing to increase the reputation of seventeenth-century paintings and those of Poussin in particular,[16] the private companies and public partnerships (municipality, region, State) who played a part in the acquisition, the management team at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon, etc. Together, these actors form the long chain of actions, opinions, decisions, judgements, classifications or categorizations whether State, legal, aesthetic, cultural or scientific, economic evaluations, etc., leading up to the present situation.

The story of such an object, which one imagines will boost visitor numbers and the national and international reputation of the Musée des Beaux-Arts and of the city of Lyon itself, is clear proof that a painting is always more than just a 'simple painting': it is a public event, a matter with ramifications for the worlds of politics, museums, finance and publicity, a barometer of public tastes and interest, something which prompts numerous visitors, each with their own cultural outlook, to travel to the museum, and generates a multitude of discussions about art, the price of art, etc. But even more fundamentally, once authenticated, a painting is more than simply a stretched canvas on which brush strokes of paint have been applied. It becomes a magical object thanks to the *aura* which, from now on, seems to mysteriously emanate from it. This book will therefore focus on all the issues associated with this object and on the different effects it produces or provokes within the social world depending on the status attributed to it.

### The real: between material continuity and social discontinuity

The situation of an object which, throughout its trajectory, has taken on very different meanings and values and which has been variously appropriated by different individuals, groups or institutions could generate discussions of a radical nominalism on the fact, for example, that it would be impossible to say whether it was indeed the *same* picture from one era (that

in which the painting tranquilly decorated the walls of a bourgeois house or the one in which it was stored without any particular care in an old farm building) to another (when it was recognized as an autograph painting by the majority of experts).

I am not sufficiently nominalist to think that it is not *ontologically* the *same object* which has passed 'through the hands' of different owners, art historians, gallery owners, patrons, curators, scholars, lawyers, auctioneers, experts, etc. Its meaning and its value (both economic and aesthetic), and sometimes its actual status, have certainly varied considerably depending on the circumstances and on the way it has been appropriated by the individuals, groups and institutions with which it was variously associated throughout the course of a long trajectory which began in 1657 and ended (for us) in 2013. But it seems to me more reasonable to maintain the idea of a continuity in terms of the material existence of the painting (even when it had completely disappeared from circulation and when the historian, deprived of access to any archive, could not say anything either about its owners or about the context of its movements, *it still continued to materially exist somewhere*), while at the same time being careful to reconstruct the different stages and the different uses to which it had been subject. No contradiction exists between the two principles of the material continuity of the painting and the social and symbolic discontinuity of the ways in which it was appropriated.

Such a notion seems however to be challenged by Bruno Latour in an article on the subject of the death of Ramses II around 1213 BC.[17] In the late 1990s, the Val-de-Grâce hospital (Paris) was able to prove that Ramses had probably died of tuberculosis, but Latour seriously questions the legitimacy of saying that the pharaoh 'died from a bacillus discovered by Robert Koch in 1882'.[18] Latour clearly highlights here the confusion between the scientific knowledge of the cause of illness and the reality of the facts. Ramses II did indeed die of a disease the origins of which would not be discovered until 1882, in other words, some 3,000 years later. There is no paradox, no anachronism, no scientism in such a statement. What can be added, however, is that the lives of patients and even of bacilli are no longer the same since the discovery of the bacillus. As a result of that discovery, vaccines and drugs have been created to eradicate this illness. What changes, therefore, are the social practices associated with the illness and the response of people to what is happening to them. At the time of Ramses II, as in our own time, the bacilli from which the illness originated, but which nobody was in a position to name or to study, existed and were active independently of any notion of the nature of the disease or knowledge. From one period of time to another, what has changed is the status of the disease, the treatment of the patient, the gestures and the attitudes adopted in order to avoid transmission of the disease. Once the bacillus was discovered, new measures, new preventative or healing strategies could be put in place. The same could be said of any object where the many different ways in which it is appropriated at any one time change

the meaning, status, function and practice associated with it. The difference here is that the bacillus could only be identified once specific instruments (such as the microscope) allowed it to become visible. But processes which are invisible to the naked eye and as yet undiscovered are just as real as those which are visible and scientifically recognized.

Comparing 'Koch's bacillus' to a 'burst of machine-gun fire' in order to condemn the anachronism of those who claim that Ramses died from tuberculosis and to claim that, 'before Koch, the bacillus did not really exist' is to confuse the scientific concept and the physical reality. For, if the machine-gun was indeed invented several thousand years after the death of Ramses II, viruses did not wait for scholars to appear on the scene in order to become active. They were active even without being observed, recognized and named. It is, moreover, rather paradoxical that a researcher who proclaims loudly and clearly that non-humans are actors too, should make the reality of the existence of the virus depend on it being observed and named by humans. In effect, this means giving humans a much greater power than they actually have. And if we took the hypothesis of linking the real existence of something to its recognition by humans to absurd lengths, we might indeed conclude that, in order to eradicate viruses, we would simply need to eradicate the scientists who discover them.

If, to avoid 'committing the cardinal sin of the historian, which is that of the anachronism' it is prudent to say that the pharaoh died from what would, several thousand years later, be known as 'tuberculosis', and that this death from tuberculosis would not even be diagnosed until one hundred years after the discovery of Koch's bacillus, nothing can challenge the fact that, within the limits of what the state of science allows us to assert, the pharaoh died of what we would today call tuberculosis.

### The objects of research: status, values and modes of behaviour

Objects, as some social scientists would tell us, are 'non-humans' and their point is a perfectly reasonable one. But these 'non-humans', they add, are actors in every sense of the term, 'in their own right', within the social world. The principle of 'generalized symmetry', which enjoins researchers to treat 'non-humans' as 'humans',[19] should, if it had any relevance, allow us to read or hear what non-humans can tell us about the social world. But, to date, such accounts have so far failed to materialize within our societies. 'To forget' that objects cannot speak or write[20] and that, when they do manage to do so, it is only as the result of programming by humans, is rather surprising on the part of sociologists or anthropologists who claim to be fighting against all the abstractions of 'classic sociology' and to adhere as closely as possible to the real. Forgetfulness on such a scale can legitimately raise questions about the intentions of those who forget.

Not only do objects not speak, but they are not in any way socially

constituted to act, feel, sense, believe, all of which would be the product of their experiences. In this sense, objects have no particular *attitude* towards other objects or humans. These differences mean that objects, whilst they are omnipresent in social life and part of the constraints which humans must continually come to terms with, and therefore an issue for researchers in social science, are anything but actors. It is even one of their specificities that they are what the humans who invent them, use them, exchange them, interpret them, divert from their original function, etc., make them. Outside of films or science fiction, objects do not invent humans and have no intentions or attitudes towards them. Nor do they use them, exchange them or discuss them with a view to establishing what they can do with them. Such remarks may seem absurd and will indeed appear so to those who have never read the work of the authors referred to, but, when there is no consensus within a scientific community over such apparently obvious facts, it is not completely without value to revisit them.[21]

Objects do not exist in a socially independent way from the individuals, groups or institutions which appropriate them. They vary in terms of their meaning, their status, their value and in the modes of behaviour that they give rise to, precisely as a result of their status, value and meaning. For example, perfectly ordinary water, which could just as easily be used for washing dishes or as drinking water, can, in the Christian tradition, by means of a sacrament, become 'holy water', which can then itself be used in the sacramental act of baptism. While the act of blessing does not chemically alter the nature of the water, it does, however, change its status and significance, and leads believers to behave towards it with all due consideration.[22] The efficacy of the sacrament 'modifies the status or at least the position of the person it is intended for'.[23] In a similar way, the placing of an ordinary object, or even what might normally be considered as simply a piece of refuse, in a museum by someone who has the status of an artist and can legitimately exhibit their work, makes that object into a work of art. The mere fact of exhibiting it in a museum is a way of saying: 'This is a work of art.' Whether the work in question is a painting, a urinal, excrement or the absence of any object whatsoever does not alter this fact. It can therefore be said that, depending on the way we appropriate them, objects change their status, and these changes in status modify their value and the way they are used in real terms. When a canvas goes from being a simple copy to being a genuine masterpiece, the same object, although it has not changed its substance, nevertheless *really* transforms social behaviour in respect to it, beginning with the sum of money the actors involved are prepared to pay to acquire it or their need to insure it heavily against theft and to keep it in a secure place, and ending with the individual aesthetic emotions that this new status inevitably provokes in the visitors to the museum.

If we examine in even more detail the successive statuses of objects, we discover that, for example, a canvas produces different social effects depending on whether it is regarded as a copy or as an autograph work,

whether it is viewed in a church, a palace, on the television, in the pos-
session of a wealthy individual or in a museum, whether it is seen in the
context of an exhibition bringing together works by the same artist or in
that of an exhibition grouping works from the same period by very differ-
ent artists, whether or not the state has classified it as a national treasure,
whether the artist in question is judged, in the context of art history and by
all the official commentators on art, as a major or a minor artist, a great
master, a genius or a second rate painter, etc. The attitudes of actors from
the world of art and those of the public will therefore vary depending on
what they think they are looking at. Each time an object becomes part of
a new context or acquires a new status, it produces new effects and takes
on new meaning. And, in the case of sacred objects (relics or works of art),
'they project onto their owner an aura of wonder',[24] just as they do onto
all those who seek to enter into contact with them.

The involvement and association of objects in social experiences are also
what distinguishes a 'new object' from 'an object which has a history', in
other words, one which is associated with people, with certain moments
of existence and with which, as a result, an emotional relationship is pos-
sible. But, unlike the personal or familial object, whose history quickly
disappears with the person or group of people who were associated with it,
certain objects such as relics or art works are associated with institutions,
places, texts, eyewitness accounts, written accounts and repeated collective
rituals all of which prolong the status of the objects in question. The differ-
ence is therefore a difference in the degree of objectivization-crystallization
of the status of the object, of the number of people sharing the history of a
particular object and of the degree of legitimacy of the people with whom
it is associated. As the anthropologist Jean Bazin writes:

> The day Uncle Victor gave me a silver plated cup from Christofle
> in honour of my christening and Aunt Agatha presented me with a
> birthday present of a ceramic vase in the neo-Moustiers style, by so
> doing they transformed an ordinary object, which could be replaced
> by any number of other objects, into a unique item which would from
> then on, in a given world, be referred to by a proper noun as Uncle
> Victor's cup, Aunt Agatha's vase. […] After my death, in the absence
> of any suitable narrator, there is a high chance that Uncle Victor's
> cup will disappear as such, only to resurface in some junk shop as the
> object of a potentially new gift, and therefore undergo a change of
> identity. Although, with the help of celebrity, the identities of succes-
> sive donors and recipients can merge (the vase of Jackie Kennedy's
> Aunt Agatha) and eventually live on permanently (the cup of
> Napoleon's uncle Victor, which I picture in the museum in Ajaccio).[25]

Finally, like individuals,[26] objects can be studied from two points of
view and on different scales of observation which are not incompatible, but
which do not lead to the same knowledge of the social world. On the one

hand, there may be particular objects whose biography (trajectory) can be traced, objects which are in circulation, change hands, are the subject of commentaries, appropriations, etc. (such as the Poussin picture), and on the other hand, there are the representatives of a specific class of objects (that of works of art as opposed to artisan or industrial products), whose evolution, transformations, disappearance, etc., can be studied by history and macrostructural sociology.

   The biography of objects and the macrostructural study of categories of objects complement each other[27]: if the former allows observation of actors at work, notably in their task of categorizing the objects in question, the latter is a reminder of what biographies sometimes forget, namely that the processes of categorization or the strategies of actors vis-à-vis objects imply the existence of established categories, of opposing classifications and of socially structured frameworks within which certain practices can be deployed and where strategies can be tried out. What I have tried to do in this book is to combine these two points of view while at the same time taking care to consider objects and individuals in their unique contexts, and to reconstruct the wider framework within which their lives, their circumstances and their behaviour make sense.[28]

## Pulling on a loose thread

By focusing on the history of a painting, I found to my astonishment that a simple case study can lead to an investigation of major scientific and sociological issues. By simply pulling on a loose thread, the whole skein seemed to unravel before my eyes, even though I had not set out with any very precise idea of the size and exact nature of the skein of yarn I was dealing with. From theoretical interrogation to methodological reflexivity, from structural contextualization to historical regression, I gradually distanced myself from the specific *case* in order to gain a deeper understanding of it.

   I make no claim to do the work of an art historian here. The existence of a completely separate discipline, that of art history, is, moreover, part of a process of autonomization through which art becomes a sacred domain, distinct from those of the profane, and this is exactly what I have sought to understand here. Once art has been separated and studied in itself and for itself, it becomes more difficult to link it to realities outside of the artistic domain and, in particular, to power structures. Starting out with the history of an object, which ended up being recognized, at least by some of the specialists, as a painting by Poussin, has not led me to focus my study entirely on the position of Poussin within the artistic world of his time or on his 'career' in both France and Italy. Nor has it led me to analyse his relationships with the royal power or with his patrons in order to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of his work or to embark on an interpretation of his paintings both from a thematic and a formal point of view. Instead, I have explored the place, role, meaning and value of art

in history. I have also looked at how the social world, at different times throughout history, seized upon a certain canvas and how, once it had been recognized as the work of a great master, the painting in question in turn affected that social world. Some of these questions are no different from those examined by art historians, but their work has been as much the object of my analysis as a means of understanding the real. I hope they will not see this as an attack on academic practice, but simply as an opportunity for them (debateable, of course) to reflect in a different way on art and on their profession as art historians.

The historical sociology that I am engaging in here enables major theoretical questions from the field of social sciences to be examined. It allows us firstly to work on the link between *events* and long-term structures, and, in a more general manner, on the intersection of temporalities which come together in the present of the action. The interest in such an approach lies in the possibility it offers to link together, as Fernand Braudel[29] suggests, *long term* and *short term*, and to see how the movements of social and cultural history as well as the most agitated scenes of the history of events take place against the background of the virtually immobile history of major social and cultural structures. Research of this nature involves taking a broad perspective on particular events (meetings, one-off interactions between actors, localized decisions, detailed speeches) and providing elements of a structural framework for both longer time sequences – spanning many centuries – as well as shorter time sequences lasting only a few decades.

The arrival in the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon of a painting by Nicolas Poussin therefore gave me the opportunity to reposition a slice of recent history within the longer-term history of art and, further still, within the long-term history of the relationship between the sacred and the profane and of how this is linked to relations of domination. It seemed to me that the whole of history, sociology and anthropology of domination, of the sacred, of legitimacy and of social magic suddenly shed light on all the behaviours I had witnessed in regard to this painting, and in particular all the strategies of self-aggrandisement and self-promotion and, ultimately, of the sanctification of the self, through association with a work of art. Each actor or group of actors plays out their role in an attempt to appropriate marks of prestige and to increase their status in their own field. For art, its structural place in our societies, its separation from the profane, and the admiration it receives (and demands) is not unconnected to the relations of domination which underpin our societies and which are an essential part of them. Behind art, there is, for those who are prepared to look closely enough, something quite different from art. And, through the history of one painting, we can expose some of the fundamental structures of our social formations. What may seem a rather tedious detour seems to me to represent the most logical and necessary step possible. With reference to Magritte's well-known phrase 'This is not a pipe' which he placed alongside his famous drawing of a pipe in order to draw attention

to the difference between the thing represented and the representation of the thing, I have often found myself saying, throughout the course of my research: 'This is *not just* a painting.'

Even in my first sociological study, which focused on learning difficulties amongst working-class children in primary school,[30] I tried to link the study of interactions within the classroom, or of the school work produced by the children, to long-term, and even very long-term, history. It seemed (and still seems) to me impossible to understand unhappy interactions and dialogues of the deaf in the classroom during the course of a French lesson, without knowing the history of writing, the history of grammar, the history of the relationship between written culture and power, the history of the shift from restricted literacy to a more generalized literacy, the history of how education is structured and of the relationships between learning and teaching, etc. Such a process took me a long way from the contemporary educational universe, on a journey from the stateless societies without a writing system studied by anthropologists, to European societies with high levels of literacy, via Egypt and Mesopotamia 3,000 years BC, ancient Greece or European societies from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries. But the reward for this kind of distancing is the opportunity it brings to understand the closest and most contemporary issues hidden behind all the politico-pedagogical approaches of the moment. For each classroom gesture, each subject studied, each pedagogical or intellectual technique observed in the classroom today, carries within it a history that teachers and pupils are unaware of but which is nevertheless linked to the serious difficulties they encounter on a daily basis, some with the 'transmission' of school learning and others with absorbing it.

The members of the panel examining my thesis were either very discreet or remained silent in response to what was a somewhat atypical approach by a young candidate. And I was left feeling somewhat frustrated with these three hundred supplementary pages or preliminary remarks which did not really correspond with what was expected from a young sociology research student. I drew the practical, and almost unconscious, conclusion that sociology began with the production of 'first-hand' evidence and culminated with the interpretation of this, and that any reading of the work of historians, anthropologists, specialists in some particular area of past or present civilization, etc., although undoubtedly useful in terms of general levels of culture or scientific imagination, should not feature to any great extent in sociological study and were definitely not to be referred to or recycled in the construction of social theories. I continued to adhere to this view until the time came when, either my frustration reached a critical level, or my first instincts to follow imperatively the route of a long detour through history and through anthropological comparison 'before' embarking on the contemporary educational ground of my thesis, were revived. That frustration resurfaced in the face of a profession which was becoming more and more specialized and formatted, professionalized in a sense, where the researcher is transformed into a social investigator who

is precise, thorough and even at times reflective, but who gradually abandons the big questions or the major problems seen as too metaphysical or too broad – questions such as; What is power? Or domination? Why have so few societies escaped a hierarchical structure? What is the sacred? Religion? Or magical thinking? What is art, literature, science?, etc.

Why go so far back? Why look so far from the empirical base of the events to be studied for the means to understand them better? The answer is, from my point of view, a simple one. This approach is the only way to grasp the fullest possible meaning, to understand all the issues at stake and all the implications. Throughout this book, I have tried to highlight the impact of the objectivized past – of the various strata of the objectivized past which overlap and merge – in present practice. Death seizes the living (as Bourdieu puts it); in other words, the past, in the form of all the institutions and beliefs about the sacred, art, museums, authenticity, the aesthetic and economic value of works of art, the law, science and many more things besides, weighs upon the present of the painting as it exists today.

The regressive approach that I adopt when it comes to the recent history of this Poussin painting consists in trying to identify *the foundations of historical belief on which contemporary events are balanced*. This process is not in any way specific to this particular story, nor even to the history of art or of culture. Any contemporary reality could be approached in exactly the same way. If I embarked on this research with enthusiasm and curiosity, it is because I saw it as offering a direct answer to all those sociologies based on presentism and contextualism which focus on the individual in the context of the present,[31] concentrating essentially on the properties inherent in their situations and neglecting both the dispositional properties of individuals and the historic contexts, often far wider and invisible to the immediate view, that limit individual behaviour patterns. I am not doubting the interest of all forms of pragmatism (interactionism, ethnomethodology, pragmatic sociology of critique) when they lead to genuinely detailed studies of social encounters, human interactions or links between humans and objects, modalities of practice or of action. But the current risk of these conceptions is to *lock us into the immediately visible present of situations*, whereas we need to resituate our practice onto the different historical terrains from which they are the temporary outcome.

Finally, the plurality of domains and sub-domains of the various activities (pictorial, museum related, academic, legal, political, scientific and technical, economic, journalistic, etc.) involved in the study of the historical trajectory of a painting is an opportunity to highlight those objects pertinent to the research but which often end up confined to very restricted zones of specialization, and to mobilize areas of knowledge which are only rarely brought together: historians stop at the point where sociologists are supposed to begin their investigations, sociologists specializing in art rarely stray into the territory of religious history, just as political anthropologists leave other colleagues to deal with the issue of magic, or as sociologists of law do not concern themselves with science or art, and so on.

Little by little, proximities or analogies are lost to sight, cross-disciplinary phenomena go unnoticed, interdependent relationships between areas of practice which, by definition, fall outside the scope of analysis based on a chosen domain or sub-domain, and questions or problems remain unaddressed on both sides of the different disciplinary or sub-disciplinary frontiers. As a result of a growing process of specialization,[32] researchers have ended up becoming accustomed to limiting their interpretative ambitions and focusing on increasingly restricted fragments of the social world. This book is also a means of combatting this problematic impoverishment of specialized research.

## Coda

I will end this introduction with a brief commentary on the form this book takes, beginning with its 'funnel-like' structure which takes the reader from the general to the particular, from the structural to the individual. The first part (Book 1: History, domination and social magic) begins with a reflection on objectivized history, in the form of a series of general proposals on the unquestioned facts and the foundations of belief that we inherit. This section sets out to emphasize that it is imperative for social science to take account of history in order to make sense of today's practices (*Self-evident facts and foundations of belief*). I continue with an analysis of the social magic which is indissociable from the exercise of power in all its forms (*Domination and social magic*). I then go on to explore more closely the historically attested links between relations of domination and the opposition between the sacred and the profane (*Linked oppositions: dominators/dominated and sacred/profane*).

In the course of the second part (Book 2: Art, domination, sanctification), I set out to show how art, which gradually emerged during the course of the Italian Renaissance, became part of this long history of domination and of what constitutes the sacred (*The expansion of the domain of the sacred*) and how artistic forms of the sacred took over certain objects through the use of acts of social magic (*Authentication and attribution*).

And it is only at this point that the study of the trajectory of a painting by Poussin (*The Flight into Egypt*) can finally reveal all the issues involved and lay bare all its mysteries (Book 3: On Poussin and some *Flights into Egypt*). Starting with the creation of the reputation of the 'sublime Poussin' (*Sublime Poussin: master of French classicism*), the focus then narrows to examine the trajectory of certain paintings (*The fabulous destiny of paintings attributed to Nicolas Poussin*) and looks at the role of legal, scientific and economic measures and practices (*Poussin, science, law and the art market*) before zooming in on some of the major actors from its recent history (*How each person plays their game*). This third and final section, which represents the initial and central focus of my work, is by no means simply an illustration of what has already been stated in the

first two parts. Within the true logic of research, it is the patient study of the story of a particular painting which *necessitated* the reflections and historic regressions of these first two parts and of the beginning of the third part. This study is the starting point for numerous theoretical and historical explorations which are simply the necessary conditions for an understanding of the case.

Moreover, I have used a model based on Spinoza's practice (propositions and scholia[33]) in order to progressively introduce the principal elements of my argument:

1. A theory of self-evident facts and foundations of belief (Book 1, *Self-evident facts and foundations of belief*);
2. A general theory of the magic of power (Book 1, *Outline of a general theory of the magic of power*);
3. A history of the interlinked transformations of power and the sacred (Book 1, *Linked oppositions: dominators/dominated and sacred/profane*);
4. A theory of links and associations (Book 3, *Links, associations and changes in status*).

The sole objective for this particular structure is to show as clearly and systematically as possible the way this analysis has developed, and within the reality of research, has taken shape very gradually, sometimes moving forwards and sometimes backwards. The principal interest of this attempt at theoretical clarification is to save time for all those who are interested in the same issues and to enable them to go further still or, of course, to facilitate discussion and analysis of the arguments put forward.

Finally, if in certain scholia associated with specific propositions I permit myself on occasion to refer to examples from situations taken from literary sources (notably Voltaire, Diderot, Montesquieu, Balzac, Proust and Kafka), it is neither as a substitute for a lack of empirical evidence nor because I consider them to be more eloquent or more apt to make my case more powerfully than situations taken from observation of the social world. My use of them essentially reflects the shape I have chosen to use for my argument: literary examples often take the form of ideal types of real situations which allow analysis to be focused on specific points. By sometimes choosing to refer to scenes or observations from literature in the course of theoretical discussion, I am able to focus my reflection more precisely. But I would only cite such extracts if I were sure that they represented real situations from social life which could be observed by anyone and which reflect the many examples studied in Book 3.

# Book 1

# History, domination and social magic

Not much attention has been paid to the retreat of sociologists into the present. This retreat, their flight from the past, became the dominant trend in the development of sociology after the Second World War and, like this development itself, was essentially un-planned. That it was a retreat can become clearly visible if one considers that many of the earliest sociologists sought to illuminate problems of human societies; including those of our time, with the help of a wide knowledge of their own societies' past and of earlier phases of other societies. The approach of Marx and Weber to sociological problems can serve as an example.

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Norbert Elias, 'The Retreat of Sociologists into the Present',
*Theory, Culture and Society*, 4 (2), June 1987, p. 223

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# 1

# *Self-evident facts and foundations of beliefs*

The past is not fugitive, it stays put. […] After hundreds and thousands of years, the scholar who has been studying the place-names and the customs of the inhabitants of some remote region may still extract from them some legend long anterior to Christianity, already unintelligible, if not actually forgotten, at the time of Herodotus, which in the name given to a rock, in a religious rite, still dwells in the midst of the present, like a denser emanation, immemorial and stable.

Marcel Proust, *In search of lost time.*
II. *The Guermantes Way*, London, Vintage, 2000, p. 482

**1. Our current behaviour is determined by a past, often very long, which manifests itself in the form of self-evident facts (institutions, buildings, machines, tools, texts, categories of perception, of representation, of judgement), in other words in an established order of things more often misunderstood and opaque than acknowledged and transparent.**

*Scholium 1.* When Nietzsche rails against the way history imposes itself on the present, he is thinking about history used as an example or held up as a model, of figures from the past who are evoked as ideals to be imitated ('a half-understood monument to some great era of the past is erected as an idol and zealously danced around'[1]), about the history that is taught to young people and which prevents them from living their lives. In contrast to this use of history through which 'life crumbles and degenerates', Nietzsche proposes another use in which it 'stands in the service of life'.[2] Yet the difficulty inherent in this way of approaching the issue of the relationship between the present and the past lies in the fact that the weight of the past is essentially seen as the weight of memories imposed on people in the present. As a result, we completely fail to see that this 'weight of the past' lies in *facts* (in institutions, objects, machines, texts, customs, mental structures) and that, for this very reason, this past is for the most part not consciously present in the minds of those in the present even though they are very much products of it. The men and women of the present can

forget or be ignorant of history, they may well not fantasize idealistically about the past, yet, as Nietzsche says, they nevertheless continue to be 'overwhelmed' by the 'great and ever greater pressure of what is past'.[3] But by 'past' or 'history' we need to understand all that has crystallized and accumulated over time and which we inherit, more often unconsciously than consciously.

It is this same past that Marx refers to in a famous passage of *Le 18 Brumaire de Louis Bonaparte*[4]: 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.' He criticized Ludwig Feuerbach for his failure to see that 'the sensuous world around him is not a thing given direct from all eternity, remaining ever the same, but the product of industry and of the state of society; and, indeed, in the sense that it is a historical product, the result of the activity of a whole succession of generations, each standing on the shoulders of the preceding one, developing its industry and its intercourse, modifying its social system according to the changed needs.'[5] Nothing that appears to our immediate sensual experience to be natural or present since the beginning of time is completely detached from history. The same applies to the elements of a landscape we contemplate which themselves depend on the industrial, agricultural and commercial past of the country. 'The cherry-tree, like almost all fruit-trees, was, as is well known, only a few centuries ago transplanted by commerce into our zone, and therefore only by this action of a definite society in a definite age has it become "sensuous certainty" for Feuerbach'.[6]

If Marx generally draws his examples uniquely from the economic order (thinking about the state of productive forces, economic exchanges, etc.), the analysis he sets out is just as much about language, law, the State, cultural customs, art, science or politics.[7] Just as the cherry trees, which seem such an obvious element of nature to the eyes of a European at the end of the second millennium, with their impression of always having been there, necessitate a historical detour via the commercial exchanges between East Asia and the West, so the smallest cultural gesture dates back to a distant or recent history. Thus, eating with a knife and fork, as the majority of Westerners today learn to do at an early age, is an action which has its place in the long history of the self-control of manners in Western experience.[8] In the same way, the simple act of reading a book or a newspaper in silence is the result of a number of key moments in the history of writing. These include the invention of the codex around the second to third century AD, the development of silent reading in monastic circles from the sixth century onwards, the widespread use of the practice of putting spaces between words from the seventh century onwards, the introduction of printing in the mid fifteenth century and its subsequent mechanization in the nineteenth century.[9] Or, finally, in the context of polite rituals, raising one's hat to greet someone means 'unwittingly reactivating a con-

ventional sign inherited from the Middle Ages when, as Panofsky reminds us, armed men used to take off their helmets to make clear their peaceful intentions'.[10]

Not only is the present determined by an accumulated and multi-layered past, but the product of past activities appears to us as realities over which we have no more control than when we find ourselves contemplating the spectacle of a mountain range or a wild sea. The realities of the past, completely arbitrary as they are, impose themselves as self-evident facts which we must simply accept and which we can in no circumstances ignore. Referring to the social division of labour, Marx and Engels wrote:

> This fixation of social activity, this consolidation of what we ourselves produce into an objective power above us, growing out of our control, thwarting our expectations, bringing to naught our calculations, is one of the chief factors in historical development up till now. The social power, i.e. the multiplied productive force, which arises through the cooperation of different individuals as it is determined by the division of labour, appears to these individuals, since their co-operation is not voluntary but has come about naturally, not as their own united power, but as an alien force existing outside them of the origin and goal of which they are ignorant, which they cannot thus control, which on the contrary passes through a peculiar series of phases and stages independent of the will and the action of man, nay even being the prime governor of these.[11]

Society, the State, the economy, take the form of external forces which are both mysterious and overwhelming (Marx and Engels use the term 'alienation') and which are beyond the control or the will of individuals.

That does not mean that the accumulated past rigidly fixes history, allowing only the eternal repetition or renewal of what already exists. The products of history are, on the contrary, continuously re-appropriated by the actors of the moment according to whatever new consideration they are focused on. But the present is never totally autonomous and the new, when it comes along, is never independent of all the past which forms the conditions of possibility.

> At each stage there is found a material result: a sum of productive forces, an historically created relation of individuals to nature and to one another, which is handed down to each generation from its predecessor; a mass of productive forces, capital funds and conditions, which, on the one hand, is indeed modified by the new generation, but also on the other prescribes for it its condition of life and gives it a definite development, a special character. It shows that circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances. This sum of productive forces, of capital funds and social forms of intercourse, which every individual and generation finds in existence as something

given; is the real basis of what the philosophers have conceived as 'substance' and 'essence of men'.[12]

Each moment in the history of societies is therefore a combination of inherited situations and of new orientations, but the inheritance is often much more onerous than we think. It may indeed be true that the French language is constantly evolving, yet we need to go back several centuries to find texts that we can no longer understand on the basis of our existing linguistic competencies, proof of its relative stability. In the same way, while we can stress the fact that international currencies are arbitrary and socially constructed, that they have a historic birth and death (like the French franc for example) and that they depend on faith and confidence, we must also remember that there are virtually no societies today which function without a currency and that currency has a history going back over thousands of years. We could even say that there are natural realities (such as the viruses which cause certain illnesses), which can now be more easily modified (we can be vaccinated against the flu or treated if we catch it) than the currency system or the capitalist mode of production.

*Scholium 2*. Michel Foucault speaks of the 'historical *a priori*' and of the 'conditions of possibility' of utterances, speeches or knowledge. He is conscious that 'juxtaposed, these two words produce a rather startling effect'.[13] But, in the context of the Kantian notion of *a priori*, the many layered history of past centuries does indeed represent a condition of experience, a reality anterior to any individual experience. By adding the qualifying 'historical', Foucault simply suggests that the conditions of possibility of any discourse, knowledge and experience can only be found in the crystallized, multi-layered and organized product of past human experiences. Nothing 'transcendental' here, unless this too can be described as historical. Foucault's ambition is to historicize the Kantian transcendental, the *a priori* of practices and experiences studied. Historicized, the *a priori* is no longer necessary or universal. It appears to be so because the products of history have been naturalized and transformed into self-evident facts, into what is obvious, into tacit beliefs. As Fernand Braudel insists, 'mental frameworks too can form prisons of the longue durée'.[14]

Often in disagreement with Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu nevertheless shares the same convictions as the philosopher concerning the structuring presence of the past in the present which defies the positivist logic of proof: 'The system of cognitive schema which are an essential element of the construction of reality and which are common to the whole of a given society, at any one time, make up the cultural unconscious or, better still, the "historical transcendental", which is the basis of the common sense (or the doxa), in other words, everything which is taken for granted, which is self-evident, which goes without saying. This "historical transcendental" is undoubtedly, out of all the aspects of historical reality, the one historians are most likely to remain ignorant of, not least because there is no trace of it in historical documents which, by definition, do not register it (much like

Hegel's description of "the original historian" who, because he lives in the very era that he is describing, records everything except the essential, that which is taken for granted).'[15]

**2. The self-evident fact takes the form of something which is *taken for granted* and often 'accepted' by the actors as an inescapable and quasi-natural state of affairs. The principal characteristic of these *self-evident facts* is that the existence and legitimacy of such facts is beyond question. *They exist* and *that is how it is*: you must simply accept their existence, adjust, and organize your life accordingly.**

*Scholium 1*. The many self-evident facts which form the basis of any given social grouping are generally adopted by the members of this social grouping who rather than taking their desires for reality, gradually begin instead to take the reality of things for their desires and to love, embody, bring to life or adopt what is being imposed on them as a compelling necessity.

The stoics, and notably Epictetus, differentiated between what lies within our control and what lies outside our control and advised their followers to want only the former and to accept the latter without argument, or to endure it without protest. Such wise advice, however, fails to take into account that many of these self-evident facts which seem to us 'natural' or 'inevitable' are not so and are instead the product of human history. They are therefore subject to the control of man but very little subject to the will of the individual. Any newcomers generally come to adapt to the situation as they find it and 'go along with' what seems to be so overwhelmingly inevitable. They are born into a society which has its specific language, a State, an economic system, laws, arts, sciences, etc., with which they become more or less familiar, and which they are more or less obliged to accept as their own: 'My life consists in my being content to accept many things.'[16]

*Scholium 2.* The self-evident fact imposes its legitimacy first and foremost by the crushing weight of its existence rather than by means of a process of ideological justification. The example of the motor-car, first invented at the end of the nineteenth century and soon ubiquitous in the vast majority of industrialized societies, is particularly significant from this point of view. Individuals are born today into societies which have invented, industrialized and commercialized the car on a massive scale. They have constructed road and motorway networks, developed oil refineries, allowed the development of competing networks of filling stations and of networks of professional garages, erected road signs and traffic lights, introduced a highway code, set up a national driving licence system guaranteed by the state, organized the growth of driving schools and the professional network of driving instructors, set up police forces to monitor and control drivers' behaviour, built car parks both paying (with all the technology required to collect the money) and free, organized a complete urban way of life based around the use of the car, etc. This collective

life organized around the car brings with it a plethora of consequences, values, beliefs and myths. It is based on an individual or family-based approach rather than on any notion of public transport and on a myth of freedom and individual ownership and relies on relatively sophisticated objectivized measures for controlling drivers and a willingness to apply self-control on the part of drivers ready to accept the rules and regulations as well as the imposition of certain types of behaviour with regard to alcohol, drugs, etc. And yet it is not clear that we can really speak of any real process of recognition of the legitimacy of the car and of all the various measures, organizations or legislation associated with it. We adapt to its presence: as an adolescent we dream of owning a car of our own and of proudly offering our boyfriend or girlfriend a lift, we take the driving test with the impression we have taken a step forwards towards independence, we buy a car, take out insurance, stop at the petrol station to fill up with fuel and at the garage for an MOT or in the event of a breakdown, we learn how to fill in forms when we are involved in an accident, we organize our journeys and our timetable depending on how long we think it will take us to get there by car (rather than on foot, by bike or by bus), we become accustomed to judging people's social status by the type of car they drive, etc., but there is still no real acknowledgement of the legitimacy of this state of affairs. No 'belief in the car' or in the road network, no real recognition of the legitimacy of the car as a means of transport but only a *prereflexive acceptance of its existence* and a *practical organization of daily life in consequence.*

The only exception to this banality of the self-evident fact lies in the existence of an explicit political criticism such as that associated with militant groups who are against the car in general (as opposed to the bicycle or to walking) or against the petrol car in particular (as opposed to the electric car), against the individually owned car (as opposed to public transport), against any form of urban pollution and in favour of the development of less polluting modes of transport, against the motorway system which criss-crosses and 'disfigures' the landscape, etc. But not everyone has a militant tendency and not all *self-evident facts* or all *crystallized situations* have their critics. And even when critics exist, they are not necessarily equipped with the appropriate measures to replace the *criticized self-evident* facts by other *more acceptable self-evident facts*. We can criticize cars and motorway systems all we like, but as long as there are no practical solutions to replace or radically reorganize such lifestyles, nothing can really change. The same is true of the struggle against capitalism, industries with high pollution rates, the commercialization of society, etc. Getting rid of the car would involve us questioning every single link in the *chain of necessities* which links all the groups and institutions with direct or indirect interests in protecting the ongoing existence of the car.

The relationship between individual actors and different sections of the objectified and accumulated past exists, therefore, outside of any process of recognition of the legitimacy of the social world, of institutions and

powers. *Self-evident facts are simply imposed* and are not in reality criticized or even questioned, nor is their *obviousness* challenged except by very limited social groups (militants for some cause or other, or researchers in the social sciences).

*Scholium 3.* A final element, which is rarely taken into account in the study of 'social changes', of 'reforms' or 'revolutions', is the biologically inevitable fact that social actors have a limited life span, which inevitably makes any revolutionary transformation of the existing nature of things extremely difficult. Our societies are based on extraordinarily complex, multi-layered histories and the time needed to assimilate or appropriate products of civilization is becoming longer and longer. In the biographical timescale imposed on all actors, the period of assimilation, which allows us to understand the world as it is and to learn how to behave in an appropriate manner (how to eat, drink, dress, speak, write, calculate, make things, move around, interact, etc.), is spread over a relatively long sequence of time during which it is often difficult to combine learning with criticizing the existing situation. If individual actors can gradually learn to deconstruct what exists, to challenge underlying assumptions, notably thanks to an accumulation of critical ideas of the world in which the social sciences play an active part, *they still have very little time left* to make sure these criticisms actually end up as part of any real process of transforming the world. The biographical window allowing any modifications of the existing situation to be made is a limited one and each new generation must start all over again, setting out from the point where preceding generations stopped.

**3. Acknowledging the self-evident facts and the foundations of belief allows us to call into question the theories which give a central role to *uncertainty* (or doubt) and *criticism* (or subversion). Uncertainty, doubt, criticism or subversion, when they exist, are neither permanent nor systematic.**

*Scholium 1.* 'Sociology of critique' as opposed to 'critical sociology', considers that 'dispute and critique occupy a central position in the course of social life'.[17] It somewhat unfairly generalizes critical moments by implying that all actors are equally capable of subversive and critical capacities: 'The pragmatic sociology of critique […] fully acknowledges actors' critical capacities and the creativity with which they engage in interpretation and action *en situation*'.[18] That being so, it takes no account of all those things in the social world which are not debated, which are presupposed and which exist in the manner of *self-evident facts*. Actors may therefore sometimes criticize one or another aspects of the world but they continue to subscribe to its main orientations (what else could they do?), for objectivized history, the crystallized product of past struggles, and therefore what dominant figures in the past have passed down to humanity today, imposes itself with the same degree of self-evidence as the mountain imposes itself on the gaze of the person who sees it through his window every morning on waking.

*Scholium 2.* Rather than placing uncertainty (and even anxiety) and doubt at the heart of every action, it would be more realistic (and reasonable) to ask ourselves what it is possible to doubt or in which conditions a situation becomes uncertain. In all cases, it seems obvious *that we cannot question everything, all the time*.[19]

Imagine that two sides are in dispute over the ownership of an object. They seek recourse to the law and a trial takes place during which they confront each other. Each side sets out their case and justifies their position with a view to convincing the judge. Then, after a more or less lengthy series of exchanges, the judge is called upon to 'pronounce' and to decide what is to become of the object in question. In such a case, the law is called upon to solve the disagreement and to end the uncertainty of a situation arising from a conflict between the two parties concerned. Similar situations can be found in the context of scientific controversies where scientists struggle to determine the veracity of a proposition or the existence of a phenomenon and conclude by deciding in favour of one of the parties, thereby ending, temporarily and until further notice, the uncertain situation revealed by the argument between the scientists. Such cases involve relatively uncertain situations and objects which are sometimes indeterminate (What is the status of this object? How should it be defined?), actors who consciously argue and justify themselves according to their interests and their skills, and procedures or tests (whether legal or scientific) which are designed to end the uncertainty of the situation. Now this is exactly the kind of situation described by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot in their theoretical model of 'justification', in which they want to make us believe that each situation in the social world resembles a trial or an ongoing dispute, like a scientific controversy in full spate. Boltanski himself claims that 'the sociology of critique undertook to describe the social world *as the scene of a trial*, in the course of which actors in a situation of *uncertainty* proceed to *investigations*, record their *interpretations* of what happens in *reports*, establish *qualifications* and submit to *tests*'.[20]

An awareness of the special nature of this kind of situation of uncertainty is heightened when you work, as I have done, on controversies over the authenticity of paintings or on questions around the legitimate ownership of a painting and become familiar with the tests (scientific and legal in particular) to which works are submitted in order to determine their authenticity and their legitimate ownership.[21] In this type of situation, and only in this type of situation, 'the ordering of social life must face (…) an uncertainty about the *whatness of what is.*'[22] So institutions decide this 'whatness of what is', and name, describe, classify, categorize objects, individuals, situations and, in order to do so, set up procedures or tests – academic exams, scientific expertise, legal proceedings, etc.

Boltanski claims that: 'the main contribution of the pragmatic standpoint to sociology has been to underline the *uncertainty* that threatens social arrangements and hence the fragility of reality'.[23] To adopt the view that action, *in general*, would take place 'against a background of uncer-

tainty, or at least with reference to a plurality of possible options',[24] would mean, however, excluding the essential properties of social life. Placing uncertainty at the heart of social life (of the 'flow of life'), is tantamount to seeing the world as simply a series of 'situations' which give rise to problems and call for tests. Yet in reality, actors do not start each day by calling into question the economic situation, the language imposed on them at birth, the civil and criminal laws, the education system, etc. It is from an unchallenged block of certainties or self-evident facts that occasionally situations emerge leading to discussions, disagreements, criticisms, accusations or justifications. For Boltanski, actors are constantly having to 're-establish locally agreements which are always fragile',[25] whereas in fact certainty and shared assumptions fall outside any such agreements: the division of labour, the distribution of wealth, pay scales, educational hierarchies along with the statistical correlation between qualifications and employment are more often than not seen as part of those self-evident facts which are beyond discussion.[26]

Actors share beliefs which form the foundation on the base of which lie both doubts and certainties.[27] Moreover, even if arguments and controversies open up zones of uncertainty, it must not be forgotten that they exist against a background of shared and undisputed beliefs. Debating the scientific validity of a fact implies having faith in science and being in agreement on a certain number of the procedures involved in the authentication of scientific facts. In the same way, in order for art historians to disagree over a painting with a view to establishing whether it is an original work, a replica, a copy or a forgery, they must of necessity believe in the importance of art, in the importance of being able to establish the authenticity of paintings, or in the 'greatness' of the painter to whom they mean to attribute the work. The 'uncertain' action involved in all this is typically that of the auctioneer who judges the authenticity of the items in question. And yet, by doing so, he (or she) is merely paying tribute to several centuries of attributionism, to the invention of art as a sacred domain, as distinct from profane activities, and to the art market. The practical act of perception and judgement involved is based on a series of underlying assumptions which are the product of a centuries old and multi-layered history.

The body of beliefs forms the foundation of ordinary certainties. While aware that actors cannot constantly question or debate the overall framework into which they fit because they sense that this reality is stronger than they are,[28] Boltanski still overturns the ordinary order of things. He writes, for example, that it is a question of 'abandoning the idea of an implicit agreement, which would somehow be immanent in the functioning of social life, to put *dispute* and, with it, the divergence of points of view, interpretations and usages at the heart of social bonds, so as to return from this position to the issue of agreement, to examine its problematic, fragile and possibly exceptional character'.[29]

But, in the end, it is impossible to doubt everything all the time. For

example, in the context of economic transactions, the buyer can, of course, doubt the value of what is being bought (am I really buying a car that has only done 100,000 km or has the clock been tampered with? Am I buying a genuine old master or simply a copy or even a forgery which has been deliberately painted to deceive me?), just as the seller can doubt the solvency of the buyer or the authenticity of the banknotes used in the transaction,[30] but everybody cannot be in a permanent state of doubt about everything. Each act of buying and selling confirms the existence of a market and of a monetary system and suggests a certain degree of implicit confidence and belief in the stability or the reliability of the system. As Ludwig Wittgenstein said: 'If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty.'[31]

It is, moreover, by no means certain that disagreements systematically provoke uncertainty, and even less anxiety, given that each side may be convinced they are in the right and are in no way shaken in their conviction by the position of their opponents. Indeed, actors are rarely on an equal footing in arguments or disputes, and some categories of actors occupy positions or have a social standing that make their point of view carry more weight and sometimes even allow them to have the last word on a particular situation. There are many examples where this superiority comes into play: judges over defendants, teachers over pupils, priests over their congregation, the police over offenders, officers over soldiers, renowned art historians over young art history graduates, or, in short, the dominant over the dominated.

**4. Our everyday practices rest on *self-evident facts*, and in particular on *foundations or bases of belief* sometimes dating back over many centuries and which, as a result, escape our consciousness, which is far more preoccupied with secondary matters. Yet they nevertheless drive our immediate behaviour. The significance of our current gestures, words and actions can only be fully grasped if they are set against the context of the relatively long history of these largely unquestioned beliefs.**

*Scholium 1.* The whole of society rests on unquestioned assumptions, or in other words, on beliefs which are not explicitly perceived as such. I am not referring here to the kinds of belief that lead us to say that we 'believe' or do not 'believe' … in Father Christmas or in the existence of a life after death. Instead, these are cultural assumptions which are more rarely evoked in ordinary conversations, such as the necessarily hierarchical character of all societies, the need for currencies or the importance of art and science. As Pierre Legendre writes: 'one fact is denied: that all cultures, including those in the west, live by indemonstrable truths, by beliefs with an almost untouchable status, whose coherence and normative consequences depend on their authentication according to the correct social rules'.[32] It is a matter, therefore, of beliefs which the holders themselves often do not know they possess (it is rather that the beliefs possess them

than that they really possess the beliefs), and that only an external view can help identify and clarify. As the unquestioned background context to action, they are objectively presupposed by those who act.[33]

*Scholium 2*. The history of teaching and learning is full of examples of conflicts between the supporters of different pedagogical theories who, unknowingly, share the same common foundation of practices and beliefs. For example, if debate on the concept of 'the thriving child' has emerged within the pedagogy of the twentieth century, with the idea that the child should progress with their learning at his or her 'own pace', any changes to teaching methods must come up against the nature of the skills to be taught (writing, spelling, grammar, etc.) and the specific relationship with language which is inseparable from it. Thus the 'new forms of assessment' or 'new methods' never question the concept of 'assessment', the 'lesson' or the 'curriculum'. A sociology which focused too closely on the various pedagogical debates would almost certainly fail to grasp the essence of the underlying reality. In order to be able to debate and argue, at times passionately, on the merits of one type of classroom exercise or another, there needs to be some tacit agreement on the obvious necessity of such exercises. As Jean Hébrard writes, 'exercises carried out in the classroom is certainly a much favoured example of practice which largely remains outside the realm of pedagogical debates […] so much does it form part of the accepted landscape of school life'.[34] For obvious reasons of proximity, educationalists are unable to see the ground beneath their feet. Socio-historic analysis of educational developments, as an unvarying expression of the learning relationship, therefore enables us to step back in order to understand more clearly the current state of education.[35] 'When schools have had to meet specific goals for decades, *a fortiori* for centuries, these are handed down to teachers through a complex didactic and pedagogical tradition which is sophisticated and detailed. And it is not unusual to see cases where the accumulation of educational practices in a particular discipline ends up preventing many teachers from seeing the ultimate objectives they are working towards.'[36]

*Scholium 3*. The *terrain* on which the men and women of today carry out their activities is the crystallized and multi-layered product of history. It is a terrain made up of assumptions, of things taken for granted, of relationships with the world and with others which remain unquestioned, in other words, the objectivized beliefs in institutions, measures, objects, spaces, etc., which are then assimilated as inclinations to perceive, think, feel and act in a certain way. Thus, the notions of the sacred, of art, of the work of art, of contemplation or of admiration, of the sublime, of the institution of the museum, of authenticity, value, etc., all of which we inherit from what is sometimes a very distant past, instantly impose a whole series of underlying assumptions.

In the domain of art, each category of actors has a specific role when it comes to works of art. Art historians and experts bring their knowledge of the painters and their works and can pass judgement on their authenticity;

laboratories specializing in analytical tests on works of art have a role to play in identifying the properties of art works and in the process of authentication and conservation; museum directors seek to build up the best possible collection, acquire the finest pieces and put on the most attractive exhibitions; those in the legal profession resolve disputes where the conditions of a sale are challenged and apply the laws governing the conditions in which works of art can be moved; gallery owners are on the lookout for bargains in the art market; auctioneers put works on sale in the economic interest of their owners and in their own interests; actors within the art market want to see the value of their artworks recognized and therefore rely on the activity around the attribution and disattribution of works by art historians, etc. The actions of one group affect the actions of others (no art market without art history, no art history without the cultural policies of the state or without the existence of museums, etc.), without anyone being necessarily conscious of the foundation of collective beliefs on which their own action is situated.

Everyone considers, for example, that art is important, that certain eras are more artistically rich than others, that certain painters are worth more than others. Everyone subscribes to the cult of authenticity and regards a copy, even if it is contemporary and very well executed, as inferior to an autograph work. Everyone finds it normal that the price of paintings is indexed on their aesthetic or historical value, etc. Controversies place historians or experts on opposing sides without this fundamentally altering the fact that they still share the same unquestioned convictions. The beliefs associated with each of the situations briefly mentioned here are not the kind that make a person say that they 'believe in God', that they 'believe homeopathy works' or that they 'believe sport is good for you'. They rarely have the opportunity to come out with a phrase such as 'I believe only a genuine work is of any interest and worth looking at'; 'I believe that a simple copy has no aesthetic interest whatsoever'; 'I believe in the greatness of Nicolas Poussin'; 'I believe that certain objects deserve to be distinguished from the mass of ordinary objects and exhibited in museums'. Yet their behaviours clearly demonstrate that they believe all of this. They presuppose it through their attitudes and their behaviour.

We can observe the way people behave in relation to works of art as the magical behaviour of individuals who regard such works as sacred, set them apart from ordinary objects, condone emotional responses to works of art which have been authenticated and sanctified, but ridicule the same kind of responses in the face of a mere copy. And we can see the actors from the art world as faithful believers who organize their rituals (of authentication, sanctification, contemplation, etc.) and their magical acts (legal, scientific, economic, etc.).

**5. The foundations of the beliefs-assumptions which underlie present activities can be characterized by the fact that they do *indeed determine* practices and attitudes and that they are not just pure representations without any**

**practical consequences. Beliefs of this kind imply a disposition to act in a certain way in certain situations.**

*Scholium.* These beliefs, which are more often than not unrecognized as such with the result that, for the holders, rather than simply possessing the beliefs, the beliefs possess them, are beliefs of the type defined by Charles Sanders Pierce: 'Belief does not make us act at once, but puts us into such a condition that we shall behave in some certain way, when the occasion arises.'[37] From this point of view, believing that the sea is infested with sharks results in us not wanting to go swimming there, just as believing in the importance of art and considering it as something precious and sacred leads the believer to treat it very carefully (like the 'do not touch' signs found in museums). This type of belief is therefore closely linked to an action.[38] 'The believing, in effect, is about "what makes something happen". It is measured against the links, either loose or tight, which it maintains with what it causes to happen and/or expects to see happen.'[39]

**6. Only an approach of a *regressive* nature, consisting in reconstructing the *conditions of possibility* of any given fact, permits a true understanding of the fact in question.**

*Scholium 1.* We know the importance Durkheim placed on history in his sociological work. For him, historical research was a sort of psychoanalysis of the present time, allowing an understanding of what makes our contemporary world possible: 'If we leave the present, it is in order to return to it. If we flee it, it is in order to understand it better.'[40] He turned to history, for example, going right back to the twelfth century, in order to understand the state of the education system of his own time.[41] For sociologists, this regressive approach is therefore clearly anchored in the study of the present time. Unlike the historian who can use what he knows of the present to study a past situation, the sociologist studies the present situation and goes back through history in order to grasp the conditions of possibility.[42]

*Scholium 2.* Given that this regressive approach does not simply go back to the premises of the fact being analysed, we need to consider the *conditions of possibility* of a situation and not just its *origin* or its *development*. It does not restrict itself to only studying the different forms that a phenomenon takes throughout history, from the moment it first appears to its present state, but questions what it is that has made a given object possible and which may not necessarily be of the same order or nature as the object itself (even if it relates to religious history and is of little interest to art historians, the history of relics in the West is undoubtedly, as we shall see, one of the historical conditions of possibility behind the emergence of art as a separate and sanctified domain).[43]

*Scholium 3.* A similar approach was applied by Bourdieu in the context of interactions between vendors of private houses and their buyers. He explains how, starting with a study of commercial transactions, he then

worked back to the conditions of possibility of these transactions through
a series of regressions which led him to the State: 'The centre of research
interest shifted to the institutional conditions of production, both of the
supply of homes and of their demand. It became very quickly apparent
that, in order to understand what happens in the transaction between
a single seller and a single buyer – a meeting that ultimately is appar-
ently random – you have to go back step by step, and at the end of this
regression you find the state.'[44] It is this kind of historical regression,
this stepping back in history, that I deploy in the context of a painting
by Nicolas Poussin. In order to understand why, after being involved in
controversies around the different versions of the painting, it then ended
up being bought for such a high price, I needed to go back to the putative
artist (Nicolas Poussin) and to the conditions of his success over the cen-
turies, to the history of attributionism, to the emergence of an art market,
to the development of artistic values, to the status of pictorial art from
the Middle Ages onwards, etc. From regression to regression, it emerges
that art is incomprehensible unless it is seen in the context of relations
of domination: the opposition between the sacred and the profane, the
masterpiece and the ordinary painting, the painting which commands a
high price and the accessible copy, etc. All of these lead back to relations
of domination the nature of which it is the researcher's task to attempt to
determine.

**7. A *regressive method* of this type, which reconstructs the *conditions of
possibility* of what appears as self-evident in the present context, enables
*collective options*, which were taken up in the past and then forgotten, to be
identified. Without being linear or leading in any particular 'direction', the
history of societies is also that of the *closing down of possibilities* and of the
reduction in the range of possibilities as well as that of points of no-return.**

   *Scholium 1.* One of the reasons for reconstituting the past is to dem-
onstrate that any given causal series could at any time be subject to any
number of shifts or changes of direction, and that these would have had
different consequences as far as forms of collective life and individual
destinies are concerned. As it is presented to us, social reality often con-
ceals the 'choices' which underlie it and prevents us seeing the multiple
alternative realities, whether real or potential. However, 'what we cannot
imagine, we cannot desire',[45] as Joseph Gusfield pertinently observed. By
studying the past, by pointing out that alternatives presented themselves
and were 'decided' in one way rather than another, we reveal the choices
that have often been forgotten as such.[46]

   Even if evolutionism is mistaken in seeing the course of history as a
linear sequence of moments, ranging from the simple to the complex,
which can be practically predicted, it is always possible to think of history
as a succession of *orientations* or of *collective options* (which are not neces-
sarily guided by conscious choice). The product of the conflicts between
the supporters of opposing orientations or options, these open the door

to some possibilities but close off others, or render them highly improbable.[47] 'By going back to the beginning of history, if not obviously to its absolute beginning', writes Gérard Lenclud, 'epistemic configurations can be reconstituted which were once so many centres of organization. In these centres, such as those in Greece for example, choices were made and paths taken, closing off other choices and other paths and excluding other conceivable developments.'[48] Even without a 'sense of history' inscribed from time immemorial in an illusory genetic code of human societies, historical developments show that certain transformations make any return to previous situations difficult and carry within them potential developments which are never infinite. Thus there are no examples of societies in which some form of State has been introduced, reverting to a collective mode of organization without the State, nor of highly differentiated societies returning to a situation where functions and domains of activity were less differentiated.[49] It seems to me that the same is true when it comes to writing (there are no examples of societies where writing has been introduced subsequently reverting to a purely oral tradition), to money (the invention and then the gradual generalization of money as a 'general equivalent' make any return to a barter-based economy extremely improbable), to science and technology (the history of societies tends to be one of a gradual complexification of accumulated knowledge and techniques rather than one in which scientific and technological development is abandoned), and to many other things besides.

The examples given by Bourdieu in 1980 on the subject of nuclear energy and of access to home ownership, once again highly relevant today, are a good illustration of what we could call the *ratchet effect*, in other words the difficulty of turning back once a direction has been determined:

> As the conclusion of a long series of social choices which show themselves in the form of a body of technical necessities, the technological heritage tends to become a real *social destiny* which excludes not only certain as yet unrealized possibilities, but also any real possibility of excluding many of those possibles already realized. We need only take the example of nuclear power stations which, once constructed tend to impose themselves not just in terms of their technical function but also by virtue of all the complicities that exist between them and all those who have vested interests in them or even in their products. We can also take the example of the choice which emerged in the 1960s to facilitate access to home ownership, for the greater profit of banks and in particular of the creators of 'personalized credit', instead of pursuing a policy of social housing, one effect of which, amongst others, was to attach a segment of the members of the dominant class and of the middle class to the political system which seemed to best guarantee their capital. In this way, every day that a given power remains in place, increases that element of the irreversible with which those later seeking to reverse it must contend.[50]

*Scholium 2.* A systematic reflection on the opening and closing of possibilities which constitutes each new moment of the life of societies is essentially what could fuel the approach of what is referred to as '"*what if?" history*?' The question as to what might have happened if things had taken a different course in the past necessitates an awareness of the significance that each moment, each new collective orientation, imposes on the destiny of societies. Unfortunately, those asking such questions have often supported an event-based conception of history which notably promotes a classic political history of 'great men' and focuses exclusively on the most frequently taught, and sometimes most mythicized, events.[51] What if Jesus had not been crucified? What if the Arabs had been victorious at Poitiers? What if Napoleon had won the Battle of Waterloo or had been defeated at Austerlitz? And what if the First World War had not happened or had taken a completely different course? And yet, the 'options' which determine the destiny of societies are more collective than individual and have more to do with a structural order than one based on events. Imagining that the destiny of societies could have been different by focusing only on the surface of events bears witness to a considerable scientific regression.

**8. The *plurality of different universes* of art, science, law, the State, culture, the market, etc., explains the fact that the relatively independent products of history (self-evident facts), link together, interact and intersect in present practice. Present practice is therefore the product of the combination of these partially independent self-evident facts.**

*Scholium 1.* The history of a painting, like the history of its changing status, its value and its various successive owners and therefore like the history of its relationships with a whole range of individuals, groups or very diverse institutions (gallery owners, auctioneers, art historians, experts, lawyers, museum directors, museum curators, researchers in analytical laboratories, political actors whether municipal, regional or state, economic actors, journalists, etc.) implies a plurality of spheres of activity: political, economic, legal, aesthetic, museum-based, academic/scientific, media-based, etc. By taking such an apparently simple object of study, the researcher is obliged to abandon the usual frameworks of observation of the social world which generally focus attention on a specific domain or sphere. Framing the matter in this way allows the researcher to analyse, for example, controversies between art historians or rivalries between museums. Analysis in terms of specific fields, tends notably to push the researcher in one particular direction, with the result that, if sufficient care is not taken, instead of answering the questions being posed about the object in question, researchers end up asking only the questions to which theory is able to offer answers. This is exactly the type of question that led Norbert Elias to say 'the tail wags the dog'.

Callon and Latour's actor-network theory is typically the kind of theory which breaks away from the notion of domains, spheres or fields and it

is no coincidence that it is in studying technological objects that these authors were led to make this kind of link between heterogeneous realities. Indeed, focusing on the object inevitably ends up grouping in the same field of observation actors, groups or institutions generally considered separately by the theories which study these specific sub-universes (theories of systems, fields, worlds, spheres of activity, etc.). In this way, a painting is linked to actors who have emerged from the sub-universes of museums, art, science, law, economics, politics, journalism, etc., and even to those from within the sub-universes. These different actors, who individually belong to different fields or worlds, are not only linked with actors from the same fields or the same worlds, but are also linked amongst themselves through the intermediary of the painting.

Nevertheless, encountering a real problem does not necessarily mean that the solution found is always the right one. From this point of view, the sociotechnological world of Callon and Latour represents a bad solution to a good problem or a bad answer to a good question. Not only do Callon and Latour consider as wide-ranging a group of actors as possible by using the principle of non-distinction between humans and non-humans, and by making the latter actors in their own right,[52] but they also refuse to impose any hierarchical structure on the actors, and notably to take into account the relations of domination between them (in the case of humans). Yet it is these relations which explain why they do not all carry the same weight or have the same chances of having the last word in situations of controversy or conflict. Painting a portrait of a world without history, they reduce any relationship between humans, or between humans and non-humans, to a vague and very weak 'association' which does not really enhance our understanding of social situations.

It seems to me, in fact, that by trying too hard to link everything with everything, and by refusing to differentiate between the 'actors' who have been linked together, we end up no longer explaining anything at all. It seems highly risky to place on the same level and to bring together realities that are as different as macrostructures, technological mechanisms, administrative or scientific procedures, human beings, animals, plants, gods and concepts. The process of maximum heterogenization of connected elements certainly produces some surprises but unfortunately affords few insights.

*Scholium 2.* In his *Essai sur les fondements de nos connaissances (An essay on the foundation of our knowledge)* (1851), Antoine Augustin Cournot starts with the hypothesis that in the world of natural phenomena, various independent causal chains would exist, and that it is precisely from the intersection of these that what we call chance would be born. Thus, he argues that there is independence between the causal chains and that there is no solidarity between the chains. Such claims seem to me to be debateable if one ventured to transpose them exactly in order to understand the social world. We can certainly say that the social 'microcosms' making up society are like separate universes *relatively* independent from

each other, each with their own logic, which cannot be reduced to other parallel logics. But two points need to be considered:

1. Microcosms often link together or intermingle. For example, the law always operates within specific sectors of social activity (intellectual property law, commercial law, labour law, family law, etc.); the political world has the particularity of being able to intervene in all fields of practice; the economic world is omnipresent, whether in art, the motor industry or any other sector, etc.
2. Certain actors have the role of establishing links between relatively independent microcosms. Their role is to connect microcosms. In the art world, for example, the management team in a museum is typically at the crossroads of microcosms: the business and political world (municipality, region, State, etc.) for sponsorship activities; the world of experts and art historians, to authenticate works and put together catalogues for exhibitions; the scientific world with laboratories that bring together skills and techniques from chemistry or physics; the legal world in the case of possible recourse to lawyers; the media world to communicate information about events organized, etc.

These comments should act as a warning to us not to consider microcosms as universes which are closed in on themselves.[53] They have their own internal logic but tend to develop their specific action by drawing on other microcosms and are also in a position to intervene, make their presence felt or be used in any area of practice whatsoever. From this point of view, the terms 'world', 'universe' or 'sphere' can give a false impression of something closed in on itself and imply that each microcosm has its own separate life.

Certain objects of research oblige the researcher not to limit their study to a particular 'field' or 'world', but to embrace the interconnections, links, the shared and coordinated mobilization of actors operating within different microcosms.

**9. The relatively independent *self-evident facts* which interlink, merge or join together in present practice can be associated with variable temporalities, ranging from the shortest to the longest period of time.**

*Scholium 1.* The regressive approach involves the reconstruction of histories of extremely varied duration, from the history of events to the almost immobile history which extends over several centuries: biographies of objects, of individuals or of institutions, the development of the categories to which these objects, individuals or institutions belong. The meaning of present human behaviour can be found at the very heart of this overlapping of temporalities. Progressively more dynamic layers superimpose themselves onto slower layers, the most recent being that on which the actors hurry about their business, with all their various intentions and their illusions, their words, gestures and actions.[54] The present is thus the