

Analyse et commentaire de textes ou documents en anglais

George Orwell once said of England that it was the « most class-ridden society under the sun », and to most British people class distinctions are part of their everyday life, if only through the many different accents spoken in Britain. On the other hand Americans have ever since the birth of their country entertained the idea that they are a classless society. Recent sociological studies have shown that class is far from being the only variable to take into account when studying social hierarchies. This corpus of text focuses around this theme of interseccionality, that is to say the way class, gender and race intersect with each other in the formation and the perception of social hierarchies. The first document is a private letter from President Thomas Jefferson to a certain Benjamin Hawkins, involved in dealing with indians for the Federal government. Although the letter is private, Jefferson explicitly says that these views are also the official views of the administration on the issue. This letter was written in 1803, the year of the Louisiana purchase, which marks the beginning of the westward expansion and raised the issue of the indian tribes: how should the authorities and settlers interact with them given their cultural differences and the fact that new settlers were interested in the land inhabited by these tribes? Jefferson offers a peaceful and benevolent (and probably naive) solution, based on education and commerce and steeped in his vision of an ideal society made out of a small land-owning farmers. The second document is an 1845 sociological study of The Condition of the Working Class in England written by Karl Marx's collaborator, Frederick Engels, that is to say at a time of flourishing industrialisation in Britain. What first seems to be a very misogynist text reinforcing male domination over women by criticizing working women turns out in the end to be a text denouncing said domination as being "inhuman". Through the use of dialogue and an impression of reality he provokes an emotional response in the reader which he cleverly uses to make his point, one that was rather uncommon at the time. The third document is an article published in 1983 in a British socialist publication. It focuses on the snobbery of the middle classes in England during the inter-war period, that is to say their fascination with the aristocratic lifestyle and their yearning to approach them and imitate them. The author, Raphael Samuel, claims that this reverence offered to an idealized representation of aristocracy explains all of the conduct of the middle class during the period. The fourth document is a column written by Daniel Levering Lewis in 2005, a history professor and an expert on W.E.B. DuBois, published in the New York Times, and which deals with the author's disillusionment with assimilation as a young black man living in the segregated South. He relates a story which made him realize that race remains a very powerful factor of social representations: despite belonging to the middle class, his family was shunned by whites as well as blacks because of its involvement in the civil rights movement. Finally the last document is extracted from an article by American sociologist Peter Kaufman published in the Sociological forum in 2005. Through interviews, analysis and references to other sociological studies he debunks the idea that middle class reproduction is a passive process, showing that middle class students and their parents exhibit strategies of reproduction. He also underlines the importance of race and gender in self-perception and expectations for social positions. While class is usually seen as the defining element of social hierarchy, this corpus of document shines a light on the weigh of such variables as gender and race. How do these three categories intersect in the making and the perception of social hierarchies? I will see in the first part of the analysis how these authors deal with the dynamics of social hierarchies: imitation, reproduction and assimilation. Then I will ponder on the consciousness and reflexivity exhibited by

these authors and the people and characters present in these texts: to what extent do they perceive class, gender and race as being socially discriminating variables? Finally I will show how these texts and individuals, each in their own way, strive to conciliate the question of identity (class identity, gender identity and race identity) with the dynamics of social hierarchies.

All of these texts seem to call for the end of social hierarchies and oppressions that seem unfair and arbitrary, either by demanding it like Thomas Jefferson, or by shining a light on the mechanisms that create these hierarchies. Thomas Jefferson dreamed of a society made out of small land-owning, self-sufficient farmers. He notices the place of indians in America as being subjected to a form of oppression, even though he does not call it that but says that "many casualties [...] may endanger them while a separate people" (doc.1, l.27). He thus calls for their integration through the development of agriculture and the reduction of their land, which conveniently ties in with the direction in which he wants his country to go. To him race and history, the fact for instance that indians were living in America before European settlers, are no obstacle to their assimilation which is the "natural progress of things" (doc.1, l.23). This idea that anybody, despite differences in culture, race and history, could "blend together" (doc.1, l.23) clashes with the point of view given by Daniel Levering Lewis' column. Not only did the author live in a segregated state, proving that assimilation cannot be provoked only by an order or a wish, but he realized that even his family's social success (they managed to be a part of the middle class) was not enough to make people forget about their race, they remained black people before anything else. Lewis' family as is described in the first half of the text looks like the perfect application of the ideas of the late 19th century black activist Booker T. Washington who argued in the 1890s for the integration of black people through their financial success in menial jobs, in a segregated society. Of course Lewis' parents do not exactly have menial jobs but they accept their inferiority to white people, although they are educated they are only "at the top of the bottom" (l.18) of social hierarchy. Document 3 gives us another example of an attempt to erase or at least blur the boundaries between two socially distinct groups through imitation: middle class and aristocracy. Virginia Woolf, whom Raphael Samuel mentions in his text, also reflected on the fascination of the middle class with the aristocracy in an essay entitled "Am I a snob?" in which she admits her adoration for the upper class lifestyle. In a way Engels' text also showcases a case in which traditional boundaries are blurred, but in the dialog we see that it is only because they are forced to by the economic conditions, and that the representations of feminine and masculine roles have not changed ("I know this is not my work" doc.2 l.14). However Engels himself calls for the end of this "inhuman" (l.38) rule of men over women, calling it a "false position" (l.36).

Why do these attempts to assimilate people and to blur boundaries between social groups fail to a certain extent? Jefferson's proposal is a very eloquent example of such a failure, this letter in no way corresponds to what happened to Indian tribes during westward expansion. Not only were many brutally killed, but they were also expropriated from their land (and not through commerce) and had to flee to the west. Finally even today many Indians have not "blended together" with the rest of America, and they are not the only ones. Rather than "one people" (doc.1 l.23) the US seem to be a patchwork of peoples. One of the reasons why this is has not happened is given by Daniel Levering Lewis, who says that race still has a "powerful, subsisting reality" (doc.4, l.30). The lifestory

of Daniel Levering Lewis is quite reminiscent of a novel by Phillip Roth, The Human Stain in which a young man coming from a background similar to that of Lewis and who also became a professor, decides to live as a white man despite being black (his very pale skin allowing him to pass for a white man easily) because being black poses too many obstacles in life. This comparison shows a complete contrast in reactions to the same issue. Document 3 offers several reasons why blurring the lines between classes is so difficult. First of all, most people have a trichotomous vision of society, as the author shows in the first paragraph of the extract. This means that people see and understand the world through those three classes, making it very difficult to blur the boundaries between classes. The process of imitation described by Raphael Samuel is reminiscent of Pierre Bourdieu's work on distinction. In La Distinction he characterizes the cultural behaviour of middle classes as "bonne volonté culturelle" (cultural effort). Middle classes try to emulate upper classes but are doomed to fail most of the time because they do not have the right habitus (but also for monetary reasons, for instance they do not have the money to send their children to private schools), that is to say the upbringing, the values, the ways of being and speaking of the upper class. The habitus of the upper class makes their superiority seem natural, easy, it is the "charisma" mentioned by Samuel (l.31). In a similar way, gender roles are made to seem natural by habits and upbringing, which is why Engels deems that to his reader work is probably part of "true manliness" (doc.2 l.30).

The documents also show another reason why social hierarchies are so rigid. Document 5 in particular shows that assimilation and imitation of a class by another are not the only dynamics in social hierarchies, but that individuals also have a tendency to socially reproduce. That is to say that individuals most of the time follow in the steps of their parents in their social destiny. Peter Kaufman shows that, unlike middle class in Britain between the wars, middle classes do not merely mirror the lifestyle of the upper class but that they have their own ways and that they actively reproduce them from generation to generation. Belonging to a class, or a gender, gives an individual a set of values and aims, it is hard for individuals to think outside of that box. It is the case for the two students interviewed by Kaufman. The first one "AJ" says that he "didn't know anything else" from what his parents wanted him to do (doc.5, l.28). Kaufman also mentions "strategies of resistance and rejection" (doc.5, l.11) that are part of working-class reproduction and which have been studied by French sociologist Raymond Boudon. Boudon showed that the strategies of students and their parents relied in great part to their experience and their knowledge. For instance if a student had the ability to go to college but did not know anyone in his family or his friends who had gone he was very likely not to go. In document 4, Daniel Levering Lewis seems to go from a position similar to what Booker T. Washington advocated, to a position encouraged by W.E.B DuBois (claiming equal rights), and it is no coincidence if Lewis is an expert on this sociologist and black activist, the co-founder of the N.A.A.C.P. DuBois' analysis of what he calls the "negro problem" shows that social reproduction also existed among black people after the end of slavery. He said that this problem was both caused by an oppression coming from white people but also by black people's inability to imagine themselves doing things that black people did not do then.

After having shown how class, race and gender intersect in the dynamics of social hierarchies, in particular how they limit assimilation, the question of consciousness of these obstacles should be asked. Are people conscious of being determined by their class, race and gender? And in particular, what is these authors standpoint?

Individuals which belong to races, genders or classes most stigmatized or dominated seem to be more conscious of the way these variables have an impact on their lives. It is the case for Daniel Levering Lewis who "learned to assume the permanent possibility that [...] race could trump class in [his] life experience" (l.28). In document 5 the individuals studied by Kaufman all seem perfectly conscious of their belonging to the middle class. It is particularly true for the parents who try to set their children in similar path as themselves. For instance AJ's parents "expected him to become a doctor" (l.19) but approved of him going to law school (l.38) because, although lawyers and doctors are very different professions, they have a very similar social "ranking". AJ is also conscious of the stereotypes of Asian-American as "overachievers" (l.66) and the pressure this puts on him.

In a way the middle class described by Raphael Samuel was also very conscious of their social position: "their own low social esteem, their sense of being outdistanced by upstarts, their fear of the growing power of the working class" (doc.3, l.55-56) but are also in a way in denial of the impossibility for them to belong to this class, a class that they have completely idealized. The most oblivious to all determination linked to class, gender and race seem to be Thomas Jefferson and the men of Engels' dialogue. All of these people turn out to be white male, and thus in at least two out of the three categories we are analyzing, part of the dominant group. Of course the men in Engels' text are probably mostly made up by the author but it shows that, even though in this case the "rule of husband over the wife" seems to be abolished, in fact it still exists in their representations. One of the characters, Jack even says that "the world is upside down" (doc.2, l.26), as if this domination was a natural one, part of "the world". Thomas Jefferson is the one most oblivious to the importance of race in social hierarchies. His thinking relies on ideals developed by the philosophers of the Enlightenment ("progress" l.24, "happiness" l.22), and leave no room for differences and particularities. He thinks that, as a rich white man, he can decide where the happiness of people lies, and what direction progress should take. Or rather, he does not see how his position allows him to decide this. In a nutshell he lacks reflexivity.

All these texts strive for or give examples of a questioning of social hierarchies, but by dealing with issues such as race, gender and class they also ask whether or not the culture and identities linked to these categories can be compatible with assimilation.

Jefferson's proposal to deal with Indians through education and commerce to integrate them fully ("incorporate" them, l. 23) - again, while being very benevolent and well-meaning and probably preferable to Andrew Jackson's approach of the issue - does not take into account the existence of cultures and the fact that the "incorporation" might simply destroy them. Jefferson denies the existence of a different culture and a different history that might not integrate easily with that of the European settlers, and as Daniel Levering Lewis writes, it is only an "ultimately unhelpful evasion" (doc.4, l.32). To him it is important to acknowledge the existence of race and "racial identity" (l.30) and not pretend not to see race because it remains a very important factor in the perception of class. There are cultures and identities linked to race, and maybe to gender and class too. Furthermore there are also different "life experiences" (doc.4, l. 28) linked to those variables, which means that a

white person cannot know what it is like to be black, or a man cannot know what it is like to be a woman, and so on. But does this mean that people should pride themselves on belonging to these categories, or to these communities? Pride is always a way to reverse a stigma, which is why black pride, working-class pride and gay pride exist. The rejection from mainstream culture also means that these communities had to develop a culture of their own (for instance the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, the rastafari movement or the camp aesthetic) and a sense of belonging, as opposed to rejection. It is for instance what the inter-war middle classes studied by Raphael Samuel lacked of which explains their "profound sense of social inferiority" (doc.3, l.1).

This corpus of texts highlights all the most important factors that play a role in the making and the perception of social hierarchies. Class is the most obvious one and probably the main one: belonging to a class plays a huge part in one's social destiny and one's perception of society. But social hierarchies cannot be fully analyzed without taking into account the role played by race, which creates a subdivision in this hierarchy, blacks being considered as lower than whites for instance, whether officially (in the segregated south) or not. While Barack Obama's election in 2008 seems to prove that race is becoming a less divisive factor, recurring attacks on his race and his origins suggest otherwise. As for gender, it both locates a person in a hierarchy between men and women and provides a set of different roles and expectations which participate in the determination of one's social destiny. Does calling out these inequalities and discriminations mean that one should completely ignore race and gender identities? Claiming one's belonging to a community, or an identity based on those factors seems legitimate as they tie in with the history of communities and individuals, however forcing one to identify with one's race, gender or even class (through the essentialisation of these notions for instance) seems to be where discrimination and inequalities start.