# II. THEORY OF THE BOURGEOIS MENTALITY

*Posted on 29/05/2026 by Redacción*



After this initial approach to the themes and concepts, we will now tackle the first of the two major sections of this study: the theory of the bourgeois mentality. For methodological, but also historical reasons, two aspects must be distinguished: on the one hand, the specific contents of bourgeois mentality and, on the other, the intellectual framework in which these contents are included.

This distinction, justified analytically, is particularly important in those processes of change in which, for a long period, there is no coherence between thoughts, which begin to change under the impetus of new situations, and the methods of thinking those thoughts, which take much longer to change. The bourgeois mentality is constituted from a set of attitudes rooted in experience, which was gradually producing these new contents while, in parallel but simultaneously, shaping the new frameworks of thought.

Let us consider an example: alchemy. Traditionally, there were ways and means of searching for gold, in which certain practical procedures, derived from ancient experiences, were accompanied by certain incantations. This constitutes a magical organization of thought, one that fits well with the general view of reality characteristic of the Christian-feudal conception. Gradually, however, practical procedures began to vary and develop on the basis of experience, and incantations began to occupy a marginal position. Thus the experimental method began to take shape and a form of scientific knowledge began to emerge: the framework of thought was being modified. On the basis of the new framework, all traditional knowledge—which had been embedded in the magical organization of thought—was revised and incorporated into a new type of thinking, naturalistic and experimental in character.

Just as in this area, in other fields the bourgeoisie accumulated varied experiences: it learned new things and enriched itself with original knowledge, and it also modified its methods of thinking; as it modified them, it filled them with new ideas and with others, older ones, which it subjected to renewed scrutiny.

In the second part, we will undertake an analytical examination of these contents. In this part, we will examine the process of constitution of this new way of thinking, which we have called the theory of bourgeois mentality. We will show how it emerged as an elaboration of the initial spontaneous experiences of the bourgeoisie, in opposition to and challenging the traditional mentality. We will characterize the major stages of this process, from the incipient manifestations of the new mentality during the bourgeois revolution of the eleventh century to its apogee and crisis after World War I. We will highlight the projective and ideological character of the bourgeois mentality, whose culminating manifestation is the eighteenth -century theory of progress. Finally, we will clarify the

relationship between the original experiences of the bourgeoisie and their rational projection, since, ultimately, what is at stake is explaining the entire arc that, beginning from those initial experiences, culminates in the constitution of a new method of thought.

# 1. Structural changes and ideological responses

The analysis of the emergence of the bourgeois mentality within the framework of the Christian-feudal order requires certain clarifications regarding the relationship between changes in structure and changes in mentality.

Every socio-economic structure corresponds to an ideological structure that serves as its support and foundation, while at the same time providing a law governing its dynamics. This second and important aspect is often overlooked by economistic interpretations: if ideology were nothing more than support, we would have a world at rest, a static world; what matters about the ideological structure is that it somehow indicates how the structure endures, reproduces, and transforms itself.

This point deserves to be underscored. The structure is also a historical structure: it endures for a long time, to the point of appearing static, but it does not stand still — it is the historical phenomenon with the slowest rate of change. Just as political phenomena change rapidly, the system of relations between men and things, and between men themselves, has a strong tendency toward permanence. To characterize this peculiarity, we use the term institutionalization. When a relation becomes institutionalized, a whole apparatus is erected — in which the ideological dimension is fundamental — so that the relation changes slowly, and may even give the appearance of not changing. When the structure becomes institutionalized, it moves at a very slow, almost imperceptible pace, creating the illusion that it does not change. The Christian-feudal order is an excellent example of this.

But structures are historical and they change. To a certain extent, they evolve through their own internal dynamics, and in part because change is driven by the social groups that live within those structures, on the basis of the opinion those groups form of them. At times, two or more structures—one traditional and one modern—coexist and mutually influence each other, both at the level of real relationships and at the level of ideas and opinions. The purpose of this study is to establish—within the framework of Western European society—the processes of change undergone by the various structures, proceeding from one of their driving forces: the images of change constructed by their protagonists.

We will therefore begin by analyzing the emergence of an urban and bourgeois structure, within the framework of a seigneurial and rural tradition, following the play of ideological responses to structural changes.

The bourgeois mentality appears in a world in which the bourgeois groups are merely small islands within the old seigneurial society, which controls the land and everything produced on it. They are small, insignificant, marginal groups, without prestige or power, which they only manage to attain to a certain extent when they begin to amass great fortunes, and even then to a much lesser degree than the traditional classes. Certainly, in some cities illustrious patriciates did manage to form, as in Venice or Florence, but in other countries, such as France, Spain, Portugal, and Hungary. Even in the eighteenth century, they were never able to compete in prestige with the old aristocracy.

On the other hand, these bourgeoisies — whether those that carried out the communal revolutions in the twelfth century or the one that carried out the revolution in Holland in the seventeenth century — traded principally in the products of the land, which remained in the hands of the old lords. The latter continued to be the producers of agrarian goods, while the mercantile classes served as their distributors. It is true that these classes distributed and produced manufactured goods, as well as pepper, silk from China, and pearls from Ormuz; yet a large portion of colonial products also came from seigneurial societies comparable to those of Europe. Thus, bourgeois society grew in the interstices of a seigneurial society which, for its part, was changing gradually, coming to produce for the market and even to pay wages, although in other cases it sought to maintain or restore certain forms of serfdom.

How is the bourgeois mentality constituted within the framework of such a solid society with a firm charismatic foundation? The system of attitudes and thinking adopted by the nascent bourgeoisie, which shapes its mentality, arises in defiance of a vigorous pre-existing mentality. This phenomenon, sociocultural in nature, is of enormous importance. These are small social groups born through an act of rebellion, which barely suffices to ensure their existence, but not to confront in a defiant manner the social and mental structure of the old classes. Hence, the initial attitude of the bourgeoisie is inhibited by a kind of tacit agreement. The battles that are waged are limited in scope: a certain guarantee or right is wrested from the lord, freedoms necessary for the exercise of the profession are achieved, but the power or position of the lords is not questioned. The social structure of the nascent bourgeoisie and its mentality are thus born with a kind of inferiority complex, which in a certain sense forces it to conceal its thinking — a characteristic that marks the development of the bourgeois mentality through the eighteenth century. The bourgeois mentality is born out of this conflict, out of this bold and revolutionary, yet covert, affirmation that challenges a highly rational and solid system of thought.

The Christian-feudal mentality, against which the bourgeois mentality is constituted, is itself the product of a vast historical process, in which at least three layers can be recognized: the baronial mentality, the courtly mentality, and the knightly mentality.

The baronial mentality dominated during the era of the Germanic conquest and the feudal wars. It is not of Christian tradition but of Germanic tradition. It is the mentality of the *Song of Roland* or the Norse sagas, that of the strong, vigorous hero, alien to Christian virtues, like Siegfried. At the heart of the feudal conception there is not a Christian knight but a Germanic hero, devoid of all restraint — such as piety or love — and with no purpose other than the exercise of vitality and the acquisition of wealth by force. Siegfried fights only to overcome his enemy; what he seeks is glory, victory, and the exaltation of his supernatural condition.

From the twelfth century onwards, and in the context of the stabilization of the aristocracies, already established as the landowning and military nobility of the established kingdoms and seigneuries, these aristocracies began, for the first time, to accept the ideological pressure of the Church. Originally reluctant to accept the Church, the old aristocracy of Germanic origin came to accept the theoretical authority of Christianity but not its ideas. From the twelfth century onwards, Christian thought began to teach knights a series of things. It taught them love of one's neighbor, thereby weakening the theory of the hero. It introduced respect for women into a masculine world: the Marian cult, from the twelfth century onwards, was a pedagogical cult that introduced the values of femininity. It also introduced the ideas of piety and mercy, typical Christian virtues. All of this, which constitutes Christian morality, challenged the system of ideas that gave strength to seigneurial society.

Concurrent with this campaign by the Church, the exchange economy began to develop, driven by the bourgeois but capable of benefiting the aristocrats themselves if they chose to engage with it. Some formed associations with merchants, others devoted themselves to plundering them, and still others found ways to share in their profits, modestly but steadily. The lords grew wealthy, as the bourgeois did, and began to modify their way of life. In the castle, windows were enlarged, glass was fitted, tapestries were hung on the walls, and the court was organized, complete with women, dances and banquets, troubadours and jesters.

There, the courtly mentality took shape, similar in many ways to the bourgeois mentality. But it was not the only one. The Church discovered a possible compromise with the traditional classes, giving its desire for struggle a goal: the enemies of the faith. Thus, at the same time that the courtly mentality was taking shape, the knightly mentality was also taking form. With it, the nobility received the support of Christian social theory and became a legitimate aristocracy, which no longer based its

power on conquest but on God's design.

We will now examine the fundamental contents of this mentality, beginning with what is generally the key aspect: the image of reality. The Christian-feudal mentality presupposes being permeated by unreality—that is, that the profound causality of reality belongs not to the natural order but to the supernatural: miracles and wonders that filter through the cracks of reality and establish causal connections.

This idea develops a certain Christian tradition, strongly influenced by Neoplatonism, which connects with Christianity through Origen, Clement of Alexandria, and the scholars who translated the Bible into Greek. They incorporated the Platonic idea of the existence of a pure, formal, logical, and perfect world of ideas — knowable only through the intellect and not through the senses — which is identified with the other world, the world of God. This conception clashed head-on with the Roman mentality, which was wholly sense-based and anti-metaphysical, sensual and without an afterlife. Over the course of three or four centuries, through a formidable work of catechesis, the Church managed to impose a certain image of reality, permanently intertwined with unreality. A mentality founded on transcendence thus took shape: on the idea that this world is insignificant; on the conviction that sensible reality is a mere illusion and that, consequently, the body is worthless, the earthly is vanity, and the only thing of value is the eternal salvation of the soul. A reality, in short, in which everything that happens reveals decisions occurring outside of reality. It was a true revolution, for it involved imposing a reality against primary evidence. And it was imposed.

Within the framework of this mentality, the bourgeoisie is born, gradually reestablishing the distinction between reality and unreality—where reality is understood as sensible reality. And from this distinction, as we shall see, an empirical attitude becomes possible and, over the longer term, the development of scientific thought.

The second content of the Christian-feudal mentality is the idea that man's destiny is transcendent. The world is a vale of tears, man's true reality is to be found in the afterlife, everything that happens in this life is unimportant, and the only legitimate end for man is to save his immortal soul.

The third content has to do with the conviction, in some sense Aristotelian, that every authentic society is dual, composed of those who have and those who have not. Certainly, tripartite formulations abound—those who pray, those who defend, and those who labor—but at bottom these are subsumed into a simpler one: there are those who work to support those who do not work. The emergence of the bourgeoisie complicates this image, because the bourgeoisie cannot be inserted into this scheme, which is articulated around the possession of land, but rather creates,

alongside the former, a new structure, also dual, in which people are progressively divided according to whether or not they own property.

The last feature has to do with the socio-economic structure, which is conceived as static; historical life itself is not conceived as changing historical life but as a kind of endless persistence in a valley of tears, without a historical project. Christianity offers the entire seigneurial structure, which arose from acts of force, an absolute foundation. The identity between reality and unreality, the system of supernatural causality, the transcendent idea of man, the dual society—everything is in the revelation, in the Holy Books. If it has a supernatural foundation, it is immovable, and anyone who attempts to modify it is sacrilegious.

With the bourgeois revolution, a new structure begins to take shape alongside the traditional one, and the bourgeois groups of the nascent bourgeoisie, in projecting and creating it, discover that although the traditional structure resists, it also concedes and strikes deals. There are lords who enter into business association with the bourgeois; others who devise taxes on markets, on tolls, on profits, and on the use of bridges and roads, and who in return offer guarantees, thereby strengthening the new structure.

If the socio-economic structure does not offer too much resistance, the mental one proves to be far more rigid. The bourgeois, who take care to affirm and demonstrate their religiosity, begin to take for granted, or unconsciously to admit, that the God in whom they claim to believe does not intervene in everyday contingencies. Thus, very slowly and in an undeclared manner, the contingentism proper to the Christian-feudal mentality begins to be undermined.

This contingentism, that is, the idea that God intervenes in everything and that everything that happens bears the mark of divine will, has a fatalistic element common to the Hebrew-Christian and Muslim traditions. If God intervenes in everything, why concern oneself with acting? In order to operate upon the world, the bourgeoisie assumed, explicitly or tacitly, that the divinity does not operate in a contingent manner. The divinity creates, is demiurgic, but what is created has its own law from the very outset. From this derives the theory of free will and the possibility of human creation, not contingently subject to God.

A socio-economic structure created by man is unstable, and the sign of its instability is social mobility: there is no pre-established place in society for each man; this is the fruit of each individual's effort and fortune. If the tendency toward mobility in the structure is combined with the absence of a contingentist conception, it follows that the entire structure created by the bourgeoisie has no foundation other than the historico-factual.

# 2. Stages in the development of the bourgeois mentality

From the eleventh century onward, and at the pace of the formation of a new socio-economic structure that was being superimposed upon the traditional one, a type of mentality takes shape whose development extends, albeit with significant variations, to the present day. We shall now identify its main stages.

The original stage lasted until the fourteenth century. During this stage, typical ways of thinking had not yet emerged consciously. It was a stage of spontaneous action and experience; bourgeois groups did not stop to think about the implications of their new attitudes and simply acted. For a long time, there were no signs of a way of thinking corresponding to these groups: on the contrary, when required to express an opinion, they did so as before. Certainly, the initial change of activity—the flight from the glebe—and the move to the city did not necessarily imply the idea of transgression and, with it, an act of consciousness. But some forms of life, which developed within the framework of urban life, raised problems of conscience, since they transgressed a certain type of opinion, judgment, or established norm. Those who combined daily work with leisure—in the square or in the tavern, drinking and conversing—began to live and feel as human beings in a way different from that of the peasant. They spontaneously discovered the lawfulness of sensual effusion. They discovered themselves as beings of nature, who found in the city the possibilities for an unbounded effusion of new sensibility, including erotic effusion. This is what appears in Boccaccio, in the Archpriest of Hita, and in so many others: an exuberant and uncontrolled effusion, corresponding to a change in forms of life that had occurred spontaneously and whose implications had not yet been reflected upon. There had been no reflective act, no act of consciousness, that led to an awareness of the ultimate consequences of the change that had taken place in reality.

Something similar occurs with social changes. For those who have left the glebe to begin a new life, the city offers spaces of communal life, of close communication among peers, and also a series of shared problems that compel solidarity: attacks or sieges upon the city, wheat shortages, and the like. Greater communication intensifies the dynamic interplay through which ideas are adjusted and common ideas and currents of opinion take shape. Through this daily contact, a community gradually comes into being a unity of thought forged by shared experience. Communication tends to generate norms through collective consensus, establishing what is acceptable and what is not within this community that lives within the confines of a wall and converses every day. It is in this way that socio-political opinions are formed, gradually shaping a contractual society in which its members both determine the norms by which they choose to live and consciously acknowledge that it is they who do so.

As opinions about the situation emerged, certain implications began to surface that called the traditional order into question. This occurred first with the communal revolutions of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and subsequently with the craft movements of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, which convulsed the cities. Amid this upheaval, reflection began on the forms of economic life and on the experiences afforded by new forms of collective life whose center was the city. It became apparent that the city was a kind of crucible in which a small revolution was taking place. The ingredients and the outcomes were in plain view, and most notably the dissensions. From the fourteenth century onward, reflection began on the far-reaching consequences of change and on its implications.

It thus becomes apparent that the new forms of life no longer correspond to a conception dominated by the supernatural. These forms of life are governed by things pertaining to the human condition and not merely to the soul. This realization came as a profound disruption: the bourgeois mentality became aware of itself, and people began to take sides for or against this conception. This discovery, and the various consequences it entailed, characterize the period spanning the fourteenth through the eighteenth centuries—that is, the interval between the crisis of the first originary stage and the full flowering of the mature bourgeois mentality.

Confronted with an awareness of change that had come about spontaneously, there were those who accepted the new forms of life and embraced them — such as Boccaccio or the Archpriest — who at most resorted to a small stratagem, affirming: deep down I am good and God will forgive me. The second attitude consisted of denying these changes, which undermined inherited principles. This is the attitude of Savonarola, who gives full expression to the terror felt before the negation of the absolute and sacred foundations of order, and who was able to create in Florence a mystical atmosphere that led to the burning of jewelry, clothing, and profane paintings. It is also the attitude reflected in the dances of death and, in general, the theme of the *memento mori*. All of this was sung, painted, recited; it was the theme par excellence of the minstrels and was, for decades, the starting point for the sermons of countless friars who, unlike the Boccaccians — who were many — devoted themselves to warning their audiences of the ultimate consequences of the new forms of life.

The third attitude, dominant among the Italian and Flemish patriciates, and in general among the upper classes of Europe, was masking. It is discovered that these new forms of life, pleasant and attractive, if left to their own impulse, lead to a naturalism that can degenerate into bestiality. It is considered dangerous to eliminate all types of constraint and traditional norms for the popular classes. The upper classes, on the other hand, accept profaneness on the grounds that educated men possess the capacity to impose restraint upon themselves. They discover that the only legitimate form of aristocratic secularity is what the Romans characterized with the formula *otium cum dignitate*.

Thus, the theme of the dignity of man becomes a privileged subject among Renaissance philosophers. As Seneca and Cicero affirmed, man is a natural being to whom God gave a soul endowed with restraints capable of curbing his passions and natural instincts. Unlike the vulgar man, the wise and educated man is master of his own conduct; he can live the profane euphoria of worldly existence, provided he knows how to set limits for himself.

The forms of sixteenth-century culture—the so-called Renaissance—are aristocratic. It is accepted that a painter depict nudes with the same sensuality with which Boccaccio can speak of a peasant woman with seductive curves. This is how Raphael, Dürer, and Rubens paint them. There is, however, a physical masking, which consists of diluting the nude somewhat, and there is another, far more subtle and cynical form, which consists of a formal avowal of the supernatural that barely conceals the natural: the naked woman is a Virgin nursing her child, even though her figure possesses a sensuality that has little to do with the figure of the Madonna. There are even more subtle forms, such as the masking implicit in Galileo's phrase, *eppur si muove*. This mechanism of thought is the means of concealing the ultimate implications of the forms of living and of thinking, maintaining them while enclosing them within certain constraints, generally defined by the word dignity; it is characteristic of the upper classes and of the educated classes who—as they suppose themselves to be—are capable of self-control.

There are thus three positions: one spontaneous, which recognizes the implications and accepts them; another repressive; and a third, hypocritical and predominant, adopted by the upper classes. Repression is maintained by the Catholic Church and later by Protestant groups, as well as by certain traditional societies in which bourgeois transformation is weak, such as Spain. At a time when Titian and Rubens were unleashing an outpouring of erotic effusion, painting in Spain followed the manner of El Greco, idealizing a type of humanity that perpetuated the Christian-feudal mentality. When Rembrandt painted only bourgeois subjects, Velázquez painted kings and lords, or dwarves, hunchbacks, and madmen — that is, the underside of a dual society. But not a single bourgeois, which indicates a marked deliberateness, since Velázquez painted values, and in Spain the bourgeois were not values. We get to Goya and there are still no bourgeois.

Boccaccian naturalism is transformed into folklore, leaving fewer and fewer traces, although it does not succumb. It does not condenseinto theoretical thought, nor is there any reflection on the ultimate consequences of that way of thinking; instead, as always happens when thought is not critical, it merges with other ways of thinking that are sometimes contradictory and that, in the case of popular traditionalism, blend with the traditional system of superstitions, detached from more elaborate religious beliefs.

Although it derives from the first stage, of spontaneous effusion, there is almost no bourgeois mentality there. It adopts the airs of a bourgeois mentality when it reflects on its contents, its assumptions and foundations, and even elaborates rationalized forms in literature, philosophy, and the plastic arts, and when it opts for one of three possibilities: to accept all its implications, to reject them, or to accept them and mask them. This option ends up being predominant because it is that of the upper classes, who rationalize and write. This rationalization even extends to religious ideas. Descartes' ideas, for example, prepare the highest exponent of this: the deist doctrine of the eighteenth century. The theory of masking — that of dignity as a necessary limit on profane expansion — finds a final check, beyond dignity, in the idea of a God who creates the universe but does not intervene in its governance.

The next stage corresponds to the ideological revolution of the eighteenth century, that of Voltaire, Montesquieu, and the *Encyclopédie*, but also that of less theoretical yet equally representative and influential writers such as Goethe. This explosion, which gave its distinctive character to the world in the second half of the eighteenth century, is related to certain social processes of the preceding stage. Between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries, an intertwining of aristocracies and bourgeoisies took place — bourgeoisies that had moved from being urban to being national. National kingdoms created large political and economic structures, and the bourgeoisies, which had previously operated within the confines of cities, began to transform themselves into instruments of the modern state, supplying ministers such as Colbert, who coexisted with representatives of the military and courtly aristocracy. Gradually, the gap between the two sectors closed: some became somewhat bourgeois and others somewhat aristocratic. At the same time, on the level of ideas, it was discovered that what until not long before had been blasphemy no longer alarmed anyone: in the middle of the century, Voltaire wrote his *Treatise on Tolerance*; thirty years earlier, he would surely have been burned as a heretic. But the ideas disseminated in *The Social Contract*, *The Spirit of the Laws*, and, above all, the *Philosophical Dictionary*, constitute a body of thought that dares to declare, explicitly, what had long been more or less secret — after having been explicit in the early stages of the formation of the bourgeois mentality.

Scientific knowledge, which developed remarkably during this period, made itself felt in the sphere of social and religious ideas. The entire development of physics and astronomy, from Galileo to Newton, shook traditional beliefs: physics was the challenge of the learned man against superstition. Significantly, Nature began to be written with a capital letter; it was hypostasized and transformed into an entity with its own existence. God had created it, but now Nature had its own laws, becoming God's intermediary in the world. Hence the expression work of Nature came into common use — a phrase that would have been deemed sacrilegious in the seventeenth century. This Nature governs the profane world, which functions as a mechanical system, wholly detached from any moral or transcendent idea. All bourgeois thought is, in its central thrust, mechanistic.

In this regard, and in many others, a system of ideas took shape that was so coherent, and that expressed an entire worldview so clearly, that it became the prevailing conception, or at least the expression of progressive thought in the nineteenth and even the twentieth century. It was a body of thought set against traditional beliefs, superstitions, and everything considered a lingering vestige of the Christian-feudal mentality and of all non-critical forms of knowledge. This was the mentality of all the progressive elites of the nineteenth century. Despite having been formulated in the eighteenth century, it remained current by virtue of its coherence and because it took root within the educated bourgeoisies, becoming a model for the upper strata of the middle classes who were striving to align themselves with them.

Curiously, the popular classes did not adhere to this progressive thought; they remained faithful to the traditional mentality and old beliefs, and resisted the modernizing minorities, as happened in Spain, where the struggle against Napoleon mobilized the traditional popular classes against the *afrancesados* (Frenchified), so called because they were heirs to a way of thinking received from the French in its most explicit formulation. This type of traditionalist reaction occurred mainly among the rural classes, as in La Vendée, but also among the urban classes, which until the Industrial Revolution retained the characteristics proper to a baroque society. Between them and the upper classes — bourgeois and noble — a gulf opened up, and while the latter identified with progressivism, the popular classes remained resistant, as if they were accustomed to that peculiar split in which their way of living went one way and their way of thinking another. They retained their old beliefs but lived as if they did not in fact believe in any of it.

This development of the bourgeois mentality, in which we have distinguished three stages, undergoes an inflection, a turning point, as a result of the Industrial Revolution. The first sign of this turning point is an apparently unconnected phenomenon: Romanticism, which erupts across Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Romanticism is one of the most far-reaching cultural phenomena, whose consequences have not yet been exhausted. It is a typical seminal phenomenon, generating in the realm of ideas and attitudes a series of effects that would only find their proper channels much later. One of its characteristic expressions is Walter Scott who, along with many others, brought the Middle Ages into fashion, revitalizing the traditional heritage of European states and societies. Chateaubriand affirmed that man is a child of history — that is to say, in some measure irrational. The appeal to the past was precisely an affirmation of irrationality against rationality. It was an affirmation of the accumulated traditional heritage of states and societies as customary systems, in opposition to the ideology of the French Revolution, rooted in the eighteenth-century tradition, which upheld the rational and positive origin of the norm. As Fichte and Savigny argued in their opposition to the implementation of the Napoleonic Code, law is not a system of rational norms but is rather

grounded in custom as its valid foundation.

Romanticism is, at its core, a spiritualist and traditionalist reaction against a society beginning to be shaken — partly by evident political conflicts and partly by the imperceptible and almost secret impacts of the Industrial Revolution, impacts more profound than the very emergence of the new manufacturing cities. The Industrial Revolution began to transform the structure of society, turning the artisanate into the industrial proletariat and the mercantile bourgeoisies into industrialists. Romanticism perceived this substantial renewal in the social order. Saint-Simon perceived it when he distinguished what he called industrial society and idle society. The mercantile and intermediary sectors, dominant until the Industrial Revolution, came to constitute, once it was unleashed, the substratum of traditional society — in contrast to the active class, made up of workers and entrepreneurs who, as Saint-Simon came to discern, revealed, despite their obvious differences, a new way of engaging with the world and, consequently, a new mentality, one that laid bare the parasitic character of the traditional bourgeois classes.

Literary and philosophical Romanticism is also a way of reacting against this new type of society, in which a number of non-traditional features are discernible. The old elites were all adherents of this new Romantic ideology, inasmuch as it represented a return to tradition, to old beliefs. Around 1809, Chateaubriand wrote in *The Martyrs* that the only salvation of the world lay in a return to the type of bonds found in the earliest Christian communities. To formulate such an ideal at the very moment when the Industrial Revolution was unfolding constituted a nostalgic exaltation of something considered definitively lost and which, for one last time, one sought to restore to value.

The Industrial Revolution and its response to Romanticism introduce an unusual variant in the evolution of the bourgeois mentality, which had developed coherently between the eleventh and eighteenth centuries, even when the full scope of its contents was at times left unexplicit. A kind of hesitation then arises, as various responses to such modifications in social situations emerge — responses not always consistent with what the bourgeois mentality had hitherto represented.

Until then, the bourgeois conception of society had been individualist, framed since the eighteenth century within rationalism. Society is conceived as a juxtaposition of individuals; following Montesquieu, when he elaborates the principle of majorities, the behaviour of a society may be known through the action of the majority. The Romantic conception, enunciated by Saint-Simon and elaborated by Carlyle, conceives of society as a whole possessed of a soul. This soul resides not in any particular individual but in the community as a whole, although—as Carlyle notes—it is the Hero who is capable of speaking on behalf of that collective soul. This idea dominated the entire nineteenth century: the national community was something that social changes—such as the

Industrial Revolution—could not undo, and any return to the past signified a recovery of that community. One need only think, for example, of Charles X having himself crowned in 1824 according to the ceremonial of the eighteenth century.

From its very origins, the bourgeois conception was linked to the individualist conception — to the idea of the individual possessing a mind that, as Goethe said, was a microcosm. Beginning with Romanticism, two variants of the bourgeois conception emerged, representing two different responses to a social situation that had changed. These are two intellectual models proposed to the bourgeois mentality, which had traditionally known only one. The first is the orthodox model, of Enlightenment tradition, liberal and progressive. The second stems from the rationalization of the traditional conception of society and power, taken to its ultimate consequences by the aristocracies, yet finding its support in the traditionalist popular classes. This line produced great theorists, such as De Maistre and Maurràs, and can be recognized in contemporary phenomena such as fascism.

This variant of the bourgeois mentality constitutes one of those generative phenomena whose force and endurance far exceed their intrinsic content and the circumstances in which they arose. These ideas emerged in certain circles that reacted violently against the impact of the Industrial Revolution, in those countries where that impact was felt. In these places, the conflict became apparent between the bourgeois mentality that remained faithful to the mainstream and the new variant—which is, in reality, an old one. The Romantic mentality offers the bourgeoisie an option consisting in a return to the Middle Ages. This is one of the possible versions of conservatism: an uncompromising conservatism that denies social mobility and appeals to the caste principle of traditional aristocracies. If it later became anachronistic, in the first half of the nineteenth century, when many European societies still retained their traditional structure, it did not yet appear to be so.

After 1848, a second and significant inflection of the bourgeois mentality occurs, in response to the emergence of the industrial proletariat and its clear differentiation from the mass of artisans and other components of the popular sectors that lacked the cohesion which only industrial life can provide. Among other things, the industrial proletariat possessed a formidable capacity for struggle and for autonomous action, as was evident in France in 1848, and this awakened in the bourgeois classes a sense of panic, of apocalypse. Here the inflection takes place, referring specifically now to social problems, though presupposing a vast philosophy. The bourgeois mentality, individualist and profane, recognizes that the industrial process accelerates social change as much as technological change, and that this process cannot be stopped unless an absolute brake is applied to it. It is then that this sector of the bourgeois mentality draws closer to the traditional sector and turns religious. In 1870, at the time of Pasteur and of the explosive industrial development of Germany and the United States, when Progress was invoked as an article of faith, the infallibility of the pope and the dogma of the Immaculate Conception were simultaneously proclaimed, and society was compelled

to choose between scientific thought and dogma. If they achieved a resounding triumph, it was because of the support lent by all those who discovered that opposition to social change somehow required a foundation of a metaphysical order.

Since then, one sector of the bourgeois mentality has abandoned one of its fundamental assumptions —profaneness– and drawn closer to the traditional line that had been constituted with Romanticism. Another sector affirms that the traditional bourgeois conception is compatible with industrial society, that social change is, ultimately, one of the forms of progress, and that bourgeois mentality can channel that change. **This line of thinking extends from Krupp,** who around 1870 built the first workers' colonies in Essen, to Henry Ford, and subsequently the entire neocapitalist conception, which expresses the maturation of an industrial mentality that, as we shall see, will develop fully in the post-World War I period.

## 3. The bourgeois mentality as ideology

We will now attempt to establish the specific characteristics of the bourgeois mentality that make it an ideology, since, unlike the Christian-feudal mentality, the bourgeois mentality implies an ideology in the strict sense.

This requires defining a term that has been used in many different senses. In my approach, an ideology is a system of ideas to which absolute truth value is assigned and, furthermore, a progressive or projective meaning; an interpretation from which such a concatenation is derived that the future seems to unfold from the present.

In that sense, Marx's interpretation is an ideology. He preferred to restrict that term to those interpretations distorted in such a way as to justify the position and interests of a particular group, and he maintained that, in contrast, his examination of reality and the corresponding prognosis were scientific. I will not enter here into the discussion concerning the possibility of absolute scientific knowledge, wholly severed from the various forms of false consciousness, and I will adhere to a morphological definition of ideology, understood as an interpretation of the past that entails a prognosis, legitimate in relation to the diagnosis. An ideology expresses, describes, a historical process, and derives from that description its logical, necessary, inescapable, coherent continuation.

Naturally, this interpretation is made from a certain point of view, from which its justificatory character derives. In their opposition to absolutism, historians of the French aristocracy developed in

the seventeenth century the theory of the founding character of the Germanic aristocracy — who had conquered Gaul in the fifth century — from which the aristocracy of the seventeenth century was held to descend in a direct line. Against this, an interpretation of history grounded in the idea of the divine right of kings was elaborated around the monarchy. In the eighteenth century, the aristocratic version was revived and inverted: it was now claimed that the true owners of France and its lands were not the aristocrats descended from the Germans but the so-called Third Estate, which descended from the defeated Gauls. All these conflicting interpretations reveal, more than any concern with explaining the past, an attempt to justify particular political positions.

The stability of the Christian-feudal conception derived from its sacred foundation, validated by the Church on the basis of revealed truth. The bourgeoisie created a social order built upon the factum, upon historical life itself, and never found any organizing principle other than force as the *ultima ratio*. Since bourgeois society as a whole rested on a market economy that favored social mobility, efforts were made to prevent those who ascended from gaining direct access to political decision-making. At regular intervals, mechanisms operated to arrest social mobility; at times these were oligarchic solutions, as in Venice; at others, they were purely coercive, as in the Italian *signorie*. Such mechanisms, and others like them, were characteristic of bourgeois society until the nineteenth century.

This difference in the basic operating mechanisms of society corresponds to differences in mentalities. What is characteristic of the Christian-feudal mentality is the assumption that society constitutes a fixed and pre-established order. What this society is in the present is the same as what it has been before, and the difference between the two does not constitute an enigma, nor does it configure a problematic. The perception of social mobility is virtually nil; moreover, even when factually distinct situations arise, they do not alter a tableau of social relations that is grounded not in actual situations but in pre-established ones. For this reason, and despite St. Augustine, it may be argued that traditional Christian thought has no conception of history.

Starting from what we generically call the bourgeois revolution, the phenomena of social mobility and change begin to impose themselves as a perceptible experience and to unsettle the traditional conception. Within Christian thought, the first symptoms of a dynamic interpretation make their appearance. In the twelfth century, a singular mystic, Joachim of Fiore, argues that the Apocalypse foresees the arrival of what he calls the age of the Holy Spirit, which succeeds that of the Father, described in the Old Testament, and that of the Son, described in the New Testament. To this third era, which completes the Trinitarian framework, correspond the characteristics that Augustine had assigned to the Celestial City. Joachim draws on the Apocalypse, a text that had been newly valorized during the terrors of the millennium. While its ideological importance is not considerable, it nonetheless introduces a wholly new idea into Christian thought: that one age still remains — not

after death, as St. Augustine proposed, but on earth, in history. It was on this schema that the Franciscans drew when they affirmed that Christian values must be made to triumph on earth and not in the hereafter.

These signs that a dynamic conception of history was beginning to emerge correlate with the perception that, with the bourgeois revolution, society was entering an era of change. Without needing to take the argument to extremes, the correlation between the two phenomena is evident. The sense that society is in motion did not exist in the feudal world, and not only did the bourgeoisie begin to impart dynamism to society, but society itself began to become aware that this was occurring. The perception of social mobility is what began to create the lived experience that history moves.

From here, we must ask ourselves how experience comes to be transmuted into theory. The idea of Joachim of Fiore, continued by the Franciscans, marks one path, but there are others. In literature, the theme of fortune — classical in its roots and long forgotten — becomes widespread. In the fifteenth century, Juan de Mena writes the *Labyrinth of Fortune*, but before that it appears in countless literary and artistic works, in poems such as the *Carmina Burana*, almost as a sign of human life. In the long run, the idea of Fortune, as conceived by the Romans and graphically expressed in the theme of the wheel, ends up becoming a theory of history: history moves, and it does so in a peculiar way. Its sign is no longer, as Joachim and the Franciscans believed, the possibility of the earthly triumph of Christian virtue, but rather fortune — that is, the condition of man's instability.

The theme of chance or fortune revolves around the experience of all those who have had a certain destiny that, from a given moment on, is cut short by an absolutely unforeseeable situation. This, which from a Christian perspective would be considered God's punishment, begins to appear as an entirely profane contingency. There are undoubtedly many ancient examples of this, but when the example is applied to the contemporary world, it plays upon the theme of the subject who has led a life full of success, who has attained wealth and who, suddenly, loses everything. This is the symbolic form — grounded in an element of the classical tradition — through which the perception of the phenomenon of social mobility begins to be expressed. In the context of the Christian-feudal mentality, ideas such as 'the force of fate' or 'the force of blood' express the static character of a society in which each person was placed in their position and nothing, save God's decision, could cause the subject to leave it. Suddenly, the experience emerges that society is in motion, driven by the market economy, and consequently the signs of this perception of change begin to appear, projected onto a dynamic conception of history. A variation on this is the theme of the dance of death, enormously widespread in the literary and visual works of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Death equalizes social conditions, which therefore contain a certain dose of chance:

before it, no position is definitively established.

Thus, the experience of social mobility corresponds to a mobile interpretation of society and history, expressed in various symbols. The bourgeois mentality is characterized precisely by this transition from experience to theory: all rationalized theory proceeds from certain very concrete experiences. In this case, the accumulation of experiences of social change suggests, after a certain time, no longer a purely symbolic explanation of historical life — through the idea of Fortune or others — but rather a theory of this dynamic conception of history.

The first to formulate this theory were the men of the Renaissance, who represent the first stage in the rationalization of bourgeois experience. This was still a chaotic and unsystematic mode of thought. Dazzled by the brilliance of ancient thought, they appealed to a classical symbol more complex and abstract than that of Fortune: the symbol of the cycle. This idea appears in Giordano Bruno, in pantheism as a whole, and extends through to Vico in the eighteenth century. History moves, but in a way that implies a certain stasis, since each human society develops through certain stages that ultimately return to the point of origin in a kind of synthesis that encompasses other experiences and positions itself at a new point of departure.

This is the theory of eternal return, with Platonic roots and a somewhat religious underpinning. It is a kind of attempt to find unity in diversity; a limit to the image of humanity as set upon a course of endless transformation and a march that seems like a challenge to God. That march consists of the development of certain possibilities, and when they are fulfilled, the cycle ends and begins again. This scheme took shape in the Renaissance, was carried to its ultimate consequences by Vico, and was then taken up again — with the idea of eternal return — by Nietzsche, with a naturalistic cast that Spengler would subsequently develop.

This cyclical conception reconciles the dynamic conception of history with the idea of restraint, characteristic of the stage of concealment. The idea that the world is hurtling toward something is frightening, as is the final principle of the profane, and this gives rise to a tendency to conceal and restrain these conceptions, in the same way that the image of the virgin with a veil concealed the delight in the nude. The same holds for the idea of dynamism: history moves, but not toward emptiness and nothingness; at a certain point, everything is gathered back, as in a closed circle, and at the point of departure the entire system of traditional beliefs is readjusted and history is given a cyclical continuity.

This is the concealment thesis. There comes a moment, however, when the experience of social mobility suppresses the ultimate terror and an explanation of history is formulated in which mobility

is continuous to infinity, without anyone asking what the final term might be. It is the theory of progress, implicit to some degree in the thought of Joachim of Fiore, which matures in Voltaire and is explicitly formulated by Condorcet in his *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*.

This is the theoretical sublimation of an experience of change that the bourgeoisie has been undergoing for five centuries and that philosophers have elaborated in a rational and systematic way. It is asserted that humanity moves incessantly from its primitive forms to more evolved ones. The goal is not defined; history is the journey, not the destination**,** and in this it differs from the Augustinian conception: the kingdom of God is suppressed, without being denied, since rationalism is agnostic, not atheistic. Thus, man is condemned to live without knowing where he is going. We said earlier that what is characteristic of the bourgeois conception is its inability to find an absolute that would serve as a stable foundation for order; in the case of its theory of history, the goal is always a more distant point, never the final one. At that time, Cuvier pointed to the possibility of the existence of pre-man, so that both the certain beginning, located in a creative act, and the sure and fixed goal that constituted the end of humanity's course disappeared simultaneously. In their place, there is a mysterious origin, which leads to the mystery of creation, as the naturalists will begin to say, and ahead, nothingness.

However, this nothingness is reached in stages, which must be specified. Originally, the idea of progress has no other content than movement. In the eighteenth century, it is assigned a specific meaning: the culminating point of human history is located at that precise moment, that of the Age of Enlightenment. The metaphor is characteristic: humanity is bound to progress, from its dark origins to its darkest ends, but there comes a moment when, like a Messiah, light arrives and the 'dark age,' the 'night of the ages,' draws to a close. Progress thus becomes a qualitative march, in which each stage is superior to the previous one, notwithstanding occasional setbacks, and without raising any questions about the most remote past or the most remote future. This is the most extraordinary display of relativization: that which is final only on the scale of human life is transformed into the final stage of history itself. The terrible metaphysical problem posed by the bourgeois conception of life is resolved by taking this criterion as given — a criterion that is never explained theoretically, since as a philosophical theory it is exceedingly frail, even as it derives its force from being a lived theory of the bourgeoisie.

The last question is to establish in what respect one stage is superior to another, and what the criterion is for judging superiority or inferiority. Here we encounter the reductiveness that governs all operations of transforming a particular experience into a theory of the bourgeois mentality: progress manifests itself in the field of technical civilization, of the mastery of nature.

The case of prehistory, a discipline that developed contemporaneously with the elaboration of the theory of progress, is symptomatic. Its founder, Boucher de Perthes, proved the existence of fossil man—contrary to Cuvier's assertion—and established the classic classification of its stages: Paleolithic, Neolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age. The progress of humanity consisted first in using knapped stone, then ground stone, then bronze, then iron, which is more difficult to work with. Then came Plato's philosophy... and finally the Industrial Revolution. In this strange process of inventing a linear development of human history—resting content with the enigma of beginning and end, and affirming empirically that progress is composed of successively superior stages—it is concluded that the index of superiority is the index of mastery of nature. The history of moral development, for example, appears only as a correlate. It is further added that what accompanies this development is a progressive rejection of superstition, which is explained as error or false belief. Voltaire argues that as nature is mastered, it is better understood, and thus all superstitions fall away successively. Among them, everything that constitutes Christian dogma falls away, until it is reduced to the single idea, never denied, of a single God. This spirit, in which one always believes, is demiurgic and creative: it performs the first act, imprints its own law upon creation, and then no longer intervenes. Among the things that, once created, function according to their own law and are subject to its discretion, is man.

This theory of history as progress, a theoretical sublimation of the bourgeoisie's understanding of historical life based on its experiences, is an ideology. It is an interpretation of history as a process of change, projected into the future according to the law whereby each stage is superior to the preceding one. This ideology, perfectly formulated in the eighteenth century, undergoes, like all other aspects of bourgeois mentality, a modest impact from the turbulent experiences of the Industrial Revolution and Romanticism, imprinting upon it the dialectical variant—from Hegel to Marx—and in turn restoring the theory of the cycle. These are the typical returns to traditional conceptions that normally occur, or attempts to blend other lines of development with the linear conception, but they do not alter the substance of the bourgeois interpretation.

## 4. The original experience and its projections

We have already pointed out that a mentality is, in the final analysis, a coherent system of opinions, covering all possible fields and spontaneously or systematically yielding responses to the most varied questions. There is a certain mechanism in the formation of opinions, which differs in the case of the bourgeois mentality and the Christian-feudal mentality. While the bourgeois mentality is constituted as a system of attitudes arising from experience, without a complete and clear frame of reference, the Christian-feudal mentality is elaborated from the existence of a perfectly clear canonical framework. There is a dogma, which has been developed over a long period of time in

very rarefied scholarly circles and has become a rigorously established body of doctrine. This thought is subsequently disseminated through an appropriate pedagogy: the catechism. Indeed, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Christian thought possessed such coherence that an almost geometric system of questions, answers, conclusions, and derivations could be established, as exemplified by the structure of the Summa Theologica: a system of truths to be learned and a set of instruments for their disputation.

The bourgeois mentality is constituted in exactly the opposite way. When the new bourgeois groups began to form, their system of ideas referred to what each of their members had learned from the priest and what they had received from their mother or grandmother. All of this had been learned in the diffuse way in which integrated knowledge is transmitted in a society, and ultimately referred to the framework of the Christian-feudal mentality.

However, this group, which has changed its way of life in a substantial manner, begins to act upon reality and simultaneously to modify its opinions. For a long time, this remains a merely practical opinion, and no one dares to express their dissidences from the canonical opinion except in a slightly burlesque form, as informal household talk. This situation gives the bourgeois mentality a kind of persistent inferiority complex, stemming from the confrontation between these elementary opinions, arising from everyday experience, and the solemn and canonical character of traditionally accepted opinions. This manifests itself in the Middle Ages in various types of popular literature, in which it is possible to detect the emergence of these practical opinions.

First in order are the fabliaux, short didactic tales with explicit or implicit morals and with themes sometimes drawn from other parts of Europe and others entirely unprecedented. One of the best known is the *Roman de Renart*, which has a long oral tradition behind it—more than ten different versions are known—and in which the first signs of that bourgeois mentality beginning to manifest itself can be discerned, sometimes simply through a variation on traditionally accepted norms. There are also new versions of old stories. Some are of Roman origin; many are of Persian or Hindu origin, such as the *Panchatantra*, which the Arabs brought to the West and which appear, interwoven with other newer tales, in the *Calila e Dimna*, in *Il Novellino*—a collection published in Sicily in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries—and later in two famous fourteenth-century compilations, that of the Archpriest of Hita and that of Boccaccio. In all cases the old tales are modified, to a greater or lesser extent, so that the situation makes sense to the reader or listener: thus, the imam becomes a priest and the qadi becomes a judge or a sheriff. In this subtle modification emerge the first signs of new attitudes and opinions toward things, which in no way develop in systematic fashion. These new attitudes also appear in twelfth-century French comic theater, performed by jongleurs in the atriums of churches, such as *The Play of Saint Nicholas* or *The Play of Adam*, in which themes appear that would later be extensively reworked by Spanish picaresque literature, and more broadly in an entire

rich body of popular literature, undoubtedly far more extensive than what has come down to us in written form.

These practical attitudes arise in conflict with established attitudes and norms. The richest source of these aforementioned materials concerns the modification of moral norms; it is not explained in terms of ethics or principled reasoning, but rather it is recounted — and, more importantly, approved — which indicates that, to a certain extent, it commands consensus. During this period, between the eleventh and twelfth centuries, another type of literature, the epic, expresses the whole of traditional Christian-feudal morality, in which the attitudes of the aristocracy are ultimately integrated with the ethical and ideological foundations of Christianity. But simultaneously, this popular literature, recounted in the city inn, gives us a version of life, forms of sociability, and morality that is entirely different. The most eloquent example is the approval accorded to cunning: the bear, always described as a lord, is unfailingly deceived by the fox, presented as a peasant or a poor man. The bear, like the lion or the wolf — solemn animals that invariably represent lords — goes to the farm and says: I have come to receive what is owed to me; that is, you must give me all the honey, for I am the lord; whereupon the peasant says, Yes, my lord Bear, and contrives a trap consisting, for example, of stirring up the bees, which set upon the bear, who is forced to flee. Two significant things then occur: the bear is made to look ridiculous — a subtle way of undermining the hierarchy — and the peasant makes off with the honey. Thus, the theme of cunning signifies a wholesale revision of the code of values, and reveals the coexistence of two moralities: a canonical one, which exalts the seigneurial classes and commands the paraphernalia of the established ideological system, and a new practical morality.

This is the first substantial modification that has been documented. The first sign of the change of mentality that has taken place is the validation of certain ethical norms that correspond exactly to the new conditions of life. Cunning is a word loaded with negative moral meaning, used to describe the new forms of commercial activity: we are told, for instance, how someone contrives to sell a sick donkey and pass it off as a sound one. This is, therefore, a moral code, implicit in this literature, that stands as the antithesis of the knightly code — one in which the upper classes and their values are held up to ridicule; the methods employed by the popular classes to defend themselves against the oppression of the upper classes are exalted, and these same ruses are applied to certain operations characteristic of the new bourgeois class, such as commercial activities.

So far, these are elementary yet far-reaching and revolutionary matters, such as the rules of life. When it comes to more subtle ideas that directly touch on the foundations of the ideological system, this popular literature—and even other, less popular literature—employs a device, a ruse: the theme of the fool. All medieval literature is imbued with the theme of the fool and madness. The fool is a character who appears whenever heterodox ideas need to be articulated. He appears as

marginal and irresponsible; he says everything that people say and believe, but the author bears no responsibility for it, because it is a fool who says it.

The first theme he addresses is that of love. Traditionally, there exists a holy love — the love of God — in which the individual attains a state of complete self-abandonment. Suddenly, the Archpriest exalts mad love: profane, sensual love that transgresses all established norms. When high literature speaks of love for the lady, for the spirit, the fool declares that what is truly at stake is carnal love, and proceeds to elaborate on every manner of detail. This literary device serves to challenge other types of established values as well. For example, when greatness, generosity, and magnanimity — all values of a noble character — are extolled, a voice interjects: Let them fill my purse; nothing else matters. A further device of analogous purpose is the introduction of classical authors. For instance, a knight's love for a beautiful lady is described in the terms of epic poetry or courtly lyric, and then, abruptly, Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* is introduced, bringing with it an entire profane conception of life and love.

In this way, this new morality, through these literary tricks, can express itself without directly denying the entire system of conventional assertions, while at the same time laying out a whole new system of ideas which, unlike the fabliaux, does not usually refer to matters enjoying social consensus but to more fundamental ones. By the time we reach the fourteenth century — the age of the Archpriest or of Boccaccio — the whole new system of ideas is developed and justified, even if it has not been treated in a theoretical and systematic manner. None of the new moral ideas, nor those pertaining to the profane conception of man and life, are expressly declared. Yet all of this seeps through by means of these literary devices, so that by the fourteenth century the corpus of notions and ideas that characterizes this first unsystematic, elementary, primary, even grotesque stage of the bourgeois mentality stands fully visible and manifest.

The formation of these practical attitudes and their relationship to established norms can also be seen in the field of economic activity. In the thirteenth century, St. Thomas Aquinas developed the theory of the just price; his assertion that things have a specific price, and not one fixed by supply and demand, reflects that a market economy has begun to function—and this occurs without any prior experience, so that the first attempts at correction take the form of a recourse to traditional norms and precepts. This indicates that new forms of activity—trade, credit—are perceived, recognized, and sanctioned by precepts grounded in the traditional conception. Against this, almost secretly, drawing on the experiences of commercial life and the market, certain rules are elaborated that point toward the constitution of what might be called a commercial ethic.

Thus, it is in experience that moral norms, principles of life, and principles of legitimacy of

everything that is material or profane in man are elaborated. This is the characteristic of the bourgeois mentality: not only does it not depart from a system of ideas, but those ideas — of diverse origin, or born as a reaction to the circumstances of life or to new ways of living — are not integrated with one another from the outset; they do not form a corpus. Everything that constitutes the bourgeois conception of life always has its origin in experience, which is then progressively elaborated in increasingly abstract terms.

A first form of elaboration is manifested in the didactic literature of the eighteenth century. These are books of advice on civility that reveal how the upper strata of the bourgeoisie have developed certain manners, partly imitated from the aristocracy, which have become canonical and can be taught to those new groups that, by virtue of the mobility characteristic of these societies, are joining the upper strata. The pedagogical nature of these works testifies precisely to the presence of people who hold a status to which they are not accustomed — that is, they reveal social mobility. In the ornamental system of external behaviour, typical of the seigneurial classes and imitated by the bourgeoisie, civility includes courtesy but is not exhausted by it. Civility consists of a series of rules for the exercise of the forms of life proper to the bourgeoisie, among which the most important are money relations. Good faith is essential to the running of business, and out of it there began to develop what in the fifteenth century came to be called bourgeois honour, which consists of paying one's debts and keeping one's pledged word. It is a moral code, but not in the abstract; rather, it refers specifically to a type of activity that had no tradition and, consequently, no traditional rules.

From these initial experiences begins a long process of rational elaboration that culminates two or three centuries later in what will become systematic thought on each of these problems. In the ethical thought of the seventeenth or eighteenth century—in Spinoza or Kant, for example—one can recognize the traces of the experiential norms characteristic of the fabliaux. In Kant's epistemology there appears, elaborated, transformed, purified, and rationalized, the experience of the new bourgeois who in the eleveenth or twelfth century learned to engage with the tree, glass, or clay—who grew accustomed to observing, experimenting, discovering regularities, and formulating laws. At the heart of this body of systematically developed ideas, proper to modern bourgeois thought, lie these experiences and these first conclusions, which begin to be elaborated and refined, gradually shaping criteria and then, to a considerable degree, rationalization and speculation.

Consider the case of ethics. In the eighteenth century, Kant states: you must act in such a way that your conduct can be erected into a general rule. This is the expression of a non-dogmatic, rational ethics whose foundation is not a divine command but a principle elaborated by reason. But what it establishes is that what validates the ethical principle is consensus, the accepted norm — a norm that arises from experience, from practice, and that once refined acquires value insofar as it gains consent. The ethics that presents itself as rational is, at bottom, a social ethics.

In their origins, these experiences have little that is rational; there is much that is emotional and intuitive in them. But progressively, those remote origins are sublimated in a certain way — they are transformed into rational constructs. In the eighteenth century, and also with the idealism of the nineteenth century, it is asserted that reason has drawn from nothing a number of principles that have in fact emerged from experience. To rationalize is precisely to erase the experiential origin, always contingent, and to affirm its eternal and universal value.