

**A PARTICULAR SENSE OF RADICAL DEMOCRACY**  
**On the citizen's ordinary conception of politics**

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The “Arab Spring” uprisings have unexpectedly led to a global movement of opposition to governments and economic powers, the pace and vigor of which have been striking. To the “Get out” that was chanted in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East, have echoed the “You are not representing us” in Spain and Greece, “The people demand social justice” in Tel Aviv ; “We are the 99%” in New York and elsewhere in Europe or Asia. And more recently the “We exist” or “Don't let Putin enter the Kremlin” in Moscow and the “Enough is enough” in Dakar - to name but the most celebrated among them

This sudden and unpredictable outbreak of claims for democracy that has taken place in 2011 has given birth to a new form of political action, which I call “gatherings”. What is a gathering ? People taking to the streets and non-violently occupying major places in cities to require a complete change of the political order. The worldwide dimension of this movement compares somehow with that of two of its historical predecessors : the student revolts of May 68 in the western world and the occupation of Tiananmen Square in Beijing and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 in the Communist world. Some say that 2011 is the year in which the democratic wave has hit the Arab world (the riots in Tehran in June 2009 being a forerunner). The first feature of these gatherings is the unexpected and circumstantial nature of these eruptions of anger which express a chaotic collection of grievances. They differ in kind from what has happened during the decolonization movements of the 1950s - the purpose of which was the construction of sovereign nation-states - or even from the Iranian revolution of 1979 - which was organized in a secret manner by clandestine political parties.

Gatherings are a political form of action which, like civil disobedience and riots, display an original feature : they arise outside traditional ways of expressing political grievances - i.e. militancy in opposition parties, trade unions, Non Governmental Organisations or associations and demonstrations. These unconventional forms of political action directly and sporadically emanate from civil society's mindful members or from crowds of outraged individuals. A second feature of these forms of political action is that they are often called or promoted through modern means of communication, such as Facebook, Tweeter, personal websites, satellite television, etc. A third feature is that they are paradoxically based on the rejection of power, as is clearly demonstrated by the fact that they claim no leader, no agenda, no censorship, no hierarchy among people's statements. Gatherings are places where “direct democracy” (general assemblies, open meetings, votes, alternative information, poetic inventiveness, etc.) and free information through autonomous news networks are put into practice. A fourth feature is the absence of a unified theoretical

slogan : no specific reference to liberation, to class struggle, to the overthrow of imperialism or capitalism, or even to religion. The only demand is for democracy.

In authoritarian regimes, this demand is generally voiced in terms of an appeal to the recovery of dignity, which is violated when the slightest expression of discontent is harshly crushed or when people's lives are wrecked by a system of corruption fostered by the concentration of power in the hands of a privileged *nomenklatura*. In Western world's democratic regimes, the lack of democracy is said to stem from the indifference of governments and representatives to the demands and needs of the people, from a political system in which the citizens' role is restricted to episodically casting a voting paper into a ballot box or from the submission of politics to the orders of the financial world and its tiny circle of beneficiaries.

Disenchantment is now at the order of the day since in many countries elections have been won by parties which are deemed to be enemies of individual freedom (like in Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco) ; or championing more drastic cuts in public spending (in the case of Portugal, Spain and Greece) ; or putting back into power discredited leaders (as in Russia, Congo or Senegal). Elsewhere, occupier's settlements have been dismantled. But, whatever their fate will be, these alternative forms of political action have expressed the same wish - though in different contexts : living a political life that plainly respects the rights and autonomy of citizens and a regime in which everyone should find his voice. In other words, these movements have highlighted a phenomenon : the expression of a certain sense of radical democracy, which rests on what I call an "ordinary conception of politics". This is the phenomenon I am studying at the moment. And the analysis I will present today will rely on my current work which consists in a comparison between the features of gatherings and civil disobedience.

### **How to stake a claim for democracy ?**

As John Dewey has written, "democracy is not simply and solely a form of government" (*The Ethics of Democracy*, 246). According to him, democracy is at the same time a conception of politics, an institutionalized regime, a method based on experimentation and an open and pluralistic way of life. As he wrote in *The Public and its problems* : "From the standpoint of the individual, [democracy] consists in having a responsible share according to capacity in forming and directing the activities of the groups in which one belongs and in participating according to need in the values which the groups sustain. From the standpoint of the groups, it demands liberation of the potentialities of members of a group in harmony with the interests and goods which are common."

Thus, democracy should not be reduced to a political regime defined by a series of individual rights (vote, opinion, association, strike, religion) and by a specific system of institutions (pluralism of parties, legislative control over the executive, impartial administration, independent justice, free information). It is also a way of conceiving of the

organization of social life which is based on a principle : the State has to ensure the autonomy and equality of its citizens and safeguard them against arbitrariness, domination and humiliation (as Philip Pettit would say). And it is in line with this principle that citizens are able to stake their claims to achieve the new rights and freedoms they come to petition for.

Gatherings and civil disobedience have demonstrated in practice the fact that the gap between citizens and governments has widened to an extreme. In 2011, authoritarian regimes have been challenged to denounce repression, corruption, poverty, fear and intimidation ; and democratic regimes have been spurned since all the institutional channels (election, rulers, parties or trade unions) of the representative system seem to have rusted overtime. These diverse political uprisings have proven that citizens are never deprived of their ordinary capacity to assess the actions of those who govern and to resist them.

The succession of events offers an opportunity to analyse the grounds on which citizens are able to press a claim for democracy. Here is my proposition. The concept of democracy contains in itself a series of elements - or categories of description - one can legitimately invoke to do so. What are these categories ? 1) Democracy is a regime in which power should proceed and derive from the people (one may then assert that it is not the case any longer). 2) Democracy is based on a system of delegation to representatives (one may then claim that representation does not work satisfactorily). 3) Democracy requires equality between citizens (one may contend that equality is in jeopardy). 4) Democracy is based on majority rule (one can then pretend that this rule has ceased to be valid). 5) Democracy should offer public services to allow for an equalization of conditions - health, education, standard of living, etc. - (one can then observe that equalization is no longer enforced). 6) Democracy must guarantee individual rights and freedoms (and nobody knows where one should set a limit on rights and liberties). 7) Democracy requires impartiality of the State, which is a condition of human dignity (one may then profess that impartiality is violated). 8) Democracy requires the separation of executive, legislative, judicial and media powers (one can then proclaim that this separation is no longer effective).

These eight points afford a series of categories that any ordinary citizen can possibly invoke to press a political claim for democracy or to engage in an action aiming at improving a democratic regime when one of these constitutive elements is absent, ignored or not fully respected. So I claim that a process of *democracy production* is constantly at work in a State society which can be empirically apprehended these days since the historical period provides a kind of natural laboratory in which we can observe the ways conceptualization of democracy do manifest themselves in actual practices. This is the case with civil disobedience.

### Civil disobedience as a form of political action

The legitimacy of civil disobedience is highly questionable in democracy. And the rationale for such a suspicion is simple : openly claiming a right not to abide by a legal law or regulation which is allegedly illegitimate is a decision that poses a threat to a principle of democracy, namely majority rule. The strength of this rule is particularly important the stronger a democratic system is entrenched. To sum up, in a living democracy, civil disobedience can be objected to for reasons of justice (evading the law is an unacceptable option), for reasons of legitimacy (the interests of individuals cannot prevail over the interests of the community), for reasons of stability (the State must not yield to those who openly challenge it) or for reasons of efficiency (refusing to fulfill an obligation is an approach that does not address the roots of domination and inequality).

However, civil disobedience is still resorted to in contemporary democracies. Why is it so, may one ask, since expressing a disagreement can easily be done by joining political struggle or using one of the numerous legal channels that justice affords in democracy ? My first answer to this question is empirical : if citizens make use of civil disobedience, it is just because the political circumstances prompt them to do so. This answer is compelling since it forces to admit that ordinary people know when and why it is possible and acceptable to resort to civil disobedience to support a legitimate cause. In other words, they master a political know-how and make a proper use of it.

Which raises a puzzling problem : is it possible to say that civil disobedience and gatherings - but this is also true of riots like those that have occurred in Paris and more recently in London - are political when the people who engage in them reject all relations with the current way political grievances are voiced ? This is the question I want to consider now through the example of civil disobedience.

On what grounds can one assert that it is a form of political action ? Let us consider the facts. First, one must clear up a fairly common semantic confusion. Indeed, the verb to disobey can embrace the entire scope of all actions which consists in refusing to comply with a law, a regulation, an order or a standard. As a consequence, one may name disobedience any type of dissent, resistance and rebellion. But one has to recall that civil disobedience is a term which has an historical background and displays unique political features.

The emergence of civil disobedience dates from the decision of Henry David Thoreau, American writer living in the 1850s, to no longer pay taxes to proclaim the withdrawal his membership to the American State which, at his times, still tolerated slavery and was waging an unjust war against Mexico. In 1879, a French lawyer and feminist activist, Hubertine Auclert, took the same decision publicly expressing her refusal to fund a State that did not recognize women's right to vote. Then Gandhi, an Indian lawyer living in South Africa at the time of the British empire, resorted to civil disobedience in order to

claim the Indian minority's rights in the 1910s, before using the same weapon in India in the 1940s, to demand (and eventually get) the country's independence. Gandhi's example was followed by many national liberation movements (the Wafd in Egypt in 1919 for example), by the movement for Afro-Americans civil rights in the 1960's United States (led by Martin Luther King) or against the Vietnam War as well as against the French war in Algeria. Civil disobedience has also been used to get the recognition of abortion rights (1971), the end of the penalization of homosexuality or the integration of illegal aliens (1997). Thus history has bequeathed to mankind's political patrimony a form of action that has proven its success in changing the destiny of societies.

Enough with history. Let's turn to political features now. To count as civil disobedience, a refusal to fulfill a legal or regulatory obligation must meet a series of requirements : it has to be publicly expressed, in one's own name, in a collective way, specifying how this obligation violates a civil or political right and basing this claim on the invocation of a higher principle (equality, justice, solidarity and dignity). And this is still not enough : one must also and above all make sure that that refusal will be sued in court (civil or administrative) so that the penalty imposed on the offenders would reopen a public debate on the legitimacy of the contested obligation. Why should one turn to such a demanding and dangerous form of action to voice a grievance ?

Two arguments help answering this question. First, let us consider the present-day contents of the acts of civil disobedience. In contemporary France, these acts serve two main political causes : the first one is to enhance the rights of alien residents (assisting illegals, opposing arrests and expulsions, refusing to denounce, etc.) ; the second one is to extend the political and social rights of citizens. Observations attest that the latter are motivated by different political aims: resisting the nuclear power, exposing polluting companies, destroying Genetically Modified Organisms, challenging the ban on euthanasia or the obligation for journalists to reveal their sources ; reprovving unacceptable infringements of democratic principles (this is an action led by teachers, academics, judges, doctors, psychiatrists, policemen, job-center agents, social workers, etc. who refuse to follow instructions that reduce equal access of citizens to basic needs (health, education, justice, etc..)) or limit their social and political rights or seriously downgrade the quality and universality of public service. All these motives are political in nature but seldom taken into account in the established political life.

The second argument touches on the nature of the acts of civil disobedience. They are non-violent and submit the legitimacy of their claim to public judgment the verdict of which - positive or negative - is generally respected peacefully. Moreover, these claims are always motivated by a demand for increased individual rights and liberties. There is nothing here that would threaten or destroy democracy. It is quite the opposite. Since these acts aim at giving these principles their full actuality, one can contend that civil disobedience is essential to democracy and serve to revitalize it.

This argument is however difficult to accept since history is replete with examples of protests that have used disobedience as a means to destabilize democracy, as was the case in Chile to bring down the Allende government and establish the dictatorship. It should however be remembered that these seditious movements are easily distinguishable from civil disobedience in the strict sense : first, their aim is not the increase of social and political rights but the overthrow of a power that has conceded too much of these to the citizens ; second, in these cases, the rejection of legality is not expressed by a small number of individuals but is a collective action with powerful allies, and the call for disobedience is closely linked to violence. Although these differences are well known, one finds that they are still unconvincing for those who prefer to think that civil disobedience is the instrument of a project that undermines democracy.

I then surmise these arguments verify the idea that civil disobedience can be construed as a form of political action. I will devote the rest of my talk to expand on this idea and try to justify a contention : citizens have a political know-how and are able to use it in an appropriate way. This claim rests on a very special conception of citizenship which asserts that the mere fact of being a citizen of a State directly implies the mastery of what I call an “ordinary conception of politics”. I will try now to explain what I mean by this notion.

### **An ordinary conception of democracy**

To begin with, let me address an old question : what is politics ; or what are the categories in which we are used to think what we call politics ? There are four main ways to answer this question. The first can be called *essentialist* : in this case, politics is reduced to the legitimate struggle to get control of the administration of the State and to the way public policies are decided and implemented.

A second way to consider politics may be called *absolutist*. It is summarized by the motto “everything is political”, which suggests that any human affair always expresses the state of the power or domination relationships specific to a given society.

The third way could be named *institutional*. In this case, the word politics is used to refer to the activity deployed by all the persons who are busy working in government agencies, State administrations, organs of opinion formation, academics, the media and members of civil society affiliated to associations and activist groups. In other terms, this professional milieu of politics in which the legitimate forms of government are debated and designed.

These three conceptions of politics assign a similar primacy to the State, and admit that its key element is the takeover of the crucial sites which are said to be the seat of power (government, parliament, justice, the army, the police and other official duties). Politics is thus reduced to an activity which consists in either working directly within the machinery of government (on the basis of a mandate or an office), or partaking in the process of decision making (as an authority, an expert or an civil society member or association) or

working as an opposition to those who momentarily are in charge of the executive. This is typically what is taught in Political Science Universities or High Schools.

Another conception of politics exists which articulates three proposals : 1) the order of politics is scattered throughout society ; 2) its institutionalization takes place in a multitude of forms which are not confined to those in vigour in the administration and its agencies ; and 3) political collective action manifests itself in ways that often go beyond the usual bounds of representative democracy. In a word, this conception is *pluralistic* ; and it is in the light of this pluralistic perspective that I have derived the notion of ordinary conception of politics. I will now offer two justifications of this notion. The first one is theoretical and draws on Rawls's definition of political liberalism and on Dewey's conception of democracy ; the other one is empirical and comes from a host of sociological and anthropological analyses of politics. Let us begin with John Rawls.

### Principles of justice

As a brief reminder, I will recall that in his theory of justice as fairness, the question Rawls seeks to answer is not "what is justice ?" but rather "how could the basic structure of a society be just ?". Since his interest is focused on the "basic structure of a society" (that is, the institutions organizing the collective life of a political group), Rawls' conception of politics displays many sociological overtones. In effect, contrary to contract theorists, Rawls acknowledges the fact that human societies exist and are organized before any kind of contract has been agreed upon by its members. The concept of justice he proposes directly refers to the elementary level at which the equitable distribution of the fruits of social cooperation is decided. This is summed up this way : "The unity of society and citizens' allegiance to their common institutions are not based on the fact that they all adhere to the same conception of the good, but on the fact that they publicly accept a political conception of justice to govern the basic structure of society. The concept of justice is independent of the concept of right and anterior to it, in the sense that its principles limit the conceptions of the good allowed. A just basic structure and its institutions provide a framework within which the authorized conceptions of the good can be sustained."

Rawls reckons that his theory is political and not metaphysical, since it admits the priority of the right over the good and dismisses any abstract theory of society built on an *a priori* definition of the good. For Rawls, individuals living in a fair society is directly aware of the principles of justice which are currently invoked in ordinary life and enable them - far more than the legal norms written down in a Constitution - to reach, to quote his words, the "reasonable disagreements" that allow for the "overlapping consensus" which is the normal mode of existence of a pluralistic regime. These principles of justice are those that "free and rational individuals, wishing to further their own interests and placed in an initial position of equality would accept as they believe that they would define the fundamental terms of their association. These principles provide a framework of rules for all subsequent

agreements. They specify the forms of social cooperation in which they can engage in and the forms of government that can be established.”

What is then, according to Rawls, the use of the social contract ? To publicly display the fact that the “moral principles” members of a society should adhere to are commonly shared. These principles do not aim at regulating the private behaviours of individuals but to organize a peaceful and beneficial cooperation between them. That is why a sound democracy should oblige itself to accept and promote the irreducible plurality of the conceptions of the good. For Rawls, political liberalism is the regime which organizes such an obligation, by stimulating the ordinary practices that citizens are implementing in order to discover, in the action in common which bring them together, the relevance and appropriateness of the principles of justice that should govern their collective action in a mutually acceptable fashion. This dynamic conception of politics can be complemented by the one advocated by John Dewey.

### **Citizenship as a community of inquirers**

In *The Public and its Problems*, Dewey contends that “the fact of association does not in itself constitute a society. This requires ... the perceived consequences of a joint activity and the distinctive role of each element that produces it. This perception creates a common interest, that is to say a concern on the part of each for joint action and the contribution of each member who engage in it.” (p.289)

The question is how does this transition from association to society takes place : does it happen naturally or is it the product of a political work that members of a social grouping must deliberately engage in ? Dewey oscillates between these two options. He writes in the opening pages of the book : “the problem of discovering the State [...] is a practical problem for humans living in association with each other. This is a complex problem. It depends on the power to perceive and recognize the consequences of the behaviour of individuals united in groups and to trace these consequences to their source and origin.” (p.113) And he draws this conclusion : “What is required to direct and conduct a successful social inquiry is a method that develops itself on the basis of reciprocal relations between observable facts and their results. This is the essence of the method that we propose to follow.” (p.118) This method is what Dewey names democracy.

A problem arises at that point : how could one imagine that a society as a whole engages collectively in an inquiry on every issue at hand ? Dewey recognizes that this is one of the weaknesses of democracy : “The people’s government at least has created a public spirit, even if it has not really succeeded in forming this spirit [...] It is true that any good idea comes from minorities, perhaps even a minority formed of a single person. What is important is that this idea may spread and turn to be the possession of the multitude [...] In other words, the essential need is to improve the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion. This is the problem of the public. We have argued that this



improvement depends mainly on the release and development of the investigative process and the dissemination of their findings.” (p.310-311) Dewey adds an important comment : “As long as secrecy, prejudice, bias, false reports and propaganda will not be replaced by inquiry and publicization, we have no way of knowing how the actual intelligence of the masses could be fit for assessing public policies.” (p.312) Here is the heart of the matter.

For Dewey, primacy should be given to democracy as method, not to the ways this method is implemented. His theory does not rest on what individuals can and should do in practice to be able to carry out a particular inquiry. Hence the importance he assigns to the notion of a *community of inquirers*. In contemporary democratic societies, collective decisions that citizens should come to adopt or ratify at the end of their collective inquiry have to deal with complex problems that require the mobilization of professional knowledge to identify and propose the most satisfactory solutions from a scientific point of view. This work of identification and proposals is, for Dewey, the preserve of experts. But he thinks that democracy is not overstepped as long the data collected by these experts is openly given to ordinary citizens and as long as they are able to discuss the information circulated by specialists and inquire into the objectivity and uses of the results they provide. I will now turn to the arguments offered by some social sciences about the domain of politics.

### **The reflexive order of politics**

Inquiries in sociology and social anthropology have established a series of facts about politics. First, the creation and perpetuation of a society are invariably accompanied by the institutionalisation of a governing body to which responsibility for collective matters is delegated. This body fulfills two groups of functions : securing cooperation between individuals by enforcing a single compelling codification of citizen’s rights and duties ; and guaranteeing peace and security to ensure the permanence of the unity of a human community.

A particular type of activity emerges from this process of specialization of political functions : governing. Insofar as this activity is based on a conditional delegation of power, it requires (ideally) that the actions the government lead can be viewed as aiming at enhancing common welfare. The power that is granted to a government is commensurate with the legitimacy it manages to acquire. In the case of a democratic regime, the tasks which are devolved to a government and its Departments cover large parts of citizen’s daily lifes (education, health, justice, family, employment, housing, etc..).

In a democracy, such a delegation of power occurs in a dynamic process in which a question of personal interest eventually obtains the status of a question of general interest, prompting then government intervention. And nothing is ever final in this process : matters that are subjected to public action one day (may it be sovereignty, security, economy or well-being) may stop to be devolved to government responsibility the other. Hence, one can argue that any society naturally gives rise to a “political work” - a collective

activity through which people define, or attempt to do so, the content and extent of the scope of State intervention. "Political work" is a protean collective endeavour which makes up the background of government activity and defines the criterion by which citizens constantly assess its legitimacy.

This is what I call a reflexive conception of politics - in the sense that politics is apprehended as the product of a relentless work which is ceaselessly accomplished in the course of everyday relationships. This conception suggests that the power enjoyed by the leaders is never absolute : the activity of government is always accomplished under citizen's scrutiny who exercise their control through all kinds of means allowing them to express their grievances about the way the administration of public affairs should be conducted. I have to specify that, in my eyes, the political means citizens make use of to voice their standpoints are extensive : they range from voting to indifference, including militancy in political parties, affiliation to unions, abstention in elections, violent protests, antisocial behaviours, unrest, opinion polls, rumours, slander, sarcasm and irony.

The reflexive and pluralistic conception of politics I have been advocating in this talk rests on an important premise : the organization of societies always pre-exist to the theories which claim to give them one. Endorsing this premise helps discarding all tentative descriptions of ideal forms of government and all abstract definitions of the principles on which a political order should be set up to be democratic. And one might add that if this is the case, it is because ordinary citizens unceasingly formulate practical judgments on the ways a government exercises power, on the political affairs they are concerned with and on the competence or reliability of those who are in charge.

This view can be summarized this way : the order of politics cannot be conceived of as if it were totally detached from the daily life of the members of a society. Which is another way to say that the members of a political entity master an ordinary conception of politics which enables them to guide their political activity according to a specific idea what the common good ought to prevail, and to voice their claims regarding the individual rights and liberties that a State should actually guarantee. And it is according to this ordinary conception of politics that some citizens decide to disobey or to take the streets in defence of democracy, whether in authoritative or democratic regimes.

## Addendum

One might ask what is “ethnomethodological” about this analysis of politics ? The question is quite legitimate since my work does not rest on data collected through direct observation of (physical and verbal) interactions as they unfold in an everyday setting. Here is the answer I would like submit : this work is ethnomethodological as far as its general design consists in singling out an object of inquiry that can be observed in the “real world” (civil disobedience in democracy) and to define the “phenomenon” which organizes the form of practical activity in which this object emerges and develops (politics in the framework of a democratic State).

I have to specify that civil disobedience or gatherings are deliberately analysed as a *form of political action* not as a practical accomplishment (which would have then required to rely on direct observation of what is going on in existing occurrences of these forms of action). The reason is that this analysis serves a specific and critical aim : offering an ethnomethodological analysis of the State. What is at stake here is, in my opinion, trying to demonstrate that ethnomethodology is able to deal with “big” objects like institutions not only conversations or interactions in workplaces. In this perspective, the problem is, as I see it, to adapt the ethnomethodological tools to the size of the chosen object (which leads a sociologist to give them an attuned scope). I claim that this adaptation is a matter of degree not of nature.

I must add that I apply ethnomethodological principles to the procedures of object definition, data collection and analysis. These principles are the following:

1. Focusing on the *rational properties of practical activities* (one has to define the most significant features of the type of practical activity which is the object of one’s analysis, i. e. the activity of government) ;
2. Admitting that members master a *common sense knowledge of the social structures* and acknowledging that this common sense knowledge is at the same time about the social world at large and about the social organization of each practical activity in which action in common emerges and unfolds (i.e. the ordinary conception of politics) ;
3. Describing the forms of reasoning - and the descriptive categories which are attached to it - individuals have to grasp to adjust their moves to the rational properties of the practical actions they are engaged in (a political form of reasoning which can be divided into a “professional theory of the State” - what a power elite expect to do when governing - on the one side ; and a “ lay theory of the State” - what citizens expect a government should do - on the other side) ;
4. Analysing the current ways in which lay and professional members of the practical activity of doing politics make use of the descriptive categories of the political form of reasoning to identify, typify, and order their specific environment of action in common.

A fifth principle specifies the way I deal with collected data : each piece of information picked up during the research and used in analysis must always be seen as indexical (irremediably linked to its practical and temporal context of emergence) and as reflexive (in the ethnomethodological sense of the term, i.e. the meaning of the resources people rely on to guide themselves constantly change in the process of the sequential accomplishment of an action in common).

These are some of the methodological principles I have made use of in this work on civil disobedience in democracy. The last principle is much more traditional in current sociology : it consists in drawing a comparison between different situations. This is the perspective in which gatherings and riots have been analysed. This comparison is fed by data which document the multiple procedures members use to categorize politics and act politically on these categorization practices.

To compare categorization practices is analytically expedient : it offers a solid ground for generalization of qualitative data. As we know, traditional sociology admits an *a priori* principle of generalization which has to be theoretically defined. In general, this principle is subsumed by one of three abstract notions : society, domination or rationality. On such a basis, empirical work only consists in collecting data which are used to exemplify the truthfulness of the theoretical principle. What sociology invariably demonstrates then is how and why society or domination do reproduce themselves in a specific domain of the social world ; or how does rationality allow people to solve the problems they meet. Thus, it is not surprising to notice that at the end of the inquiry, the sociologist just discovers what he already had in mind right from the start. From an ethnomethodological perspective, the approach should be exactly opposite : one chooses to observe practices as they accomplish themselves in the framework of an action in common and, from the data one is able to collect, one tries to find out, in the most rigorous way, a principle of generalization which is appropriate to the collected data. Such is, in my opinion, the heart of the opposition between these two ways of doing sociology : adopting a top-down or a bottom-up model of generalization. Comparing categorization practices is a good way to work according to the latter.