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Symbols of Class Status¹

ERVING GOFFMAN

I

THE TERMS *status*, *position*, and *role* have been used interchangeably to refer to the set of rights and obligations which governs the behaviour of persons acting in a given social capacity.

In general, the rights and obligations of a status are fixed through time by means of external sanctions enforced by law, public opinion, and threat of socio-economic loss, and by internalized sanctions of the kind that are built into a conception of self and give rise to guilt, remorse, and shame.

A status may be *ranked* on a scale of *prestige*, according to the amount of social value that is placed upon it relative to other statuses in the same sector of social life. An individual may be *rated* on a scale of *esteem*, depending on how closely his performance approaches the ideal established for that particular status.²

Co-operative activity based on a differentiation and integration of statuses is a universal characteristic of social life. This kind of harmony requires that the occupant of each status act toward others in a manner which conveys the impression that his conception of himself and of them is the same as their conception of themselves and him. A working consensus of this sort therefore requires adequate communication about conceptions of status.

The rights and obligations of a status are frequently ill-adapted to the requirements of ordinary communication. Specialized means of displaying one's position frequently develop. Such sign-vehicles have been called *status symbols*.³ They are the cues which select for a person the status that is to be imputed to him and the way in which others are to treat him.

Status symbols visibly divide the social world into categories of persons, thereby helping to maintain solidarity within a category and hostility between different categories.⁴ Status symbols must be distinguished from *collective*

¹ A modified version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the University of Chicago Society for Social Research in 1949. The writer is grateful to W. Lloyd Warner for direction and to Robert Armstrong, Tom Burns, and Angelica Choate for criticism.

² The distinction between prestige and esteem is taken from Kingsley Davis, "A Conceptual Analysis of Stratification", *Am. Soc. Rev.*, VII, June 1942, pp. 309-21.

³ The most general approach to the study of status symbols known to the writer is to be found in H. Spencer, *The Principles of Sociology*, vol. II, part IV, "Ceremonial Institutions".

⁴ See G. Simmel, "Fashion", *International Quarterly*, vol. X, pp. 130-55.

symbols which serve to deny the difference between categories in order that members of all categories may be drawn together in affirmation of a single moral community.¹

Status symbols designate the position which an occupant has, not the way in which he fulfils it. They must therefore be distinguished from *esteem symbols* which designate the degree to which a person performs the duties of his position in accordance with ideal standards, regardless of the particular rank of his position. For example, the Victoria Cross is awarded in the British Army for heroic performance of a task, regardless of what particular task it is and regardless of the rank of the person who performs it. This is an esteem symbol. It rates above a similar one called the George Cross. On the other hand, there is an insignia which designates Lieutenant-Colonel. It is a status symbol. It tells us about the rank of the person who wears it but tells us nothing about the standard he has achieved in performing the duties of his rank. It *rank*s him above a man who wears the insignia of a Captain, although, in fact, the Captain may be *rated* higher than the Lieutenant-Colonel in terms of the esteem that is accorded to good soldiers.

Persons in the same social position tend to possess a similar pattern of behaviour. Any item of a person's behaviour is, therefore, a sign of his social position. A sign of position can be a status symbol only if it is used with some regularity as a means of "placing" socially the person who makes it. Any sign which provides reliable evidence of its maker's position—whether or not laymen or sociologists use it for evidence about position—may be called a *test of status*. This paper is concerned with the pressures that play upon behaviour as a result of the fact that a symbol of status is not always a very good test of status.

By definition, then, a status symbol carries *categorical* significance, that is, it serves to identify the social status of the person who makes it. But it may also carry *expressive* significance, that is, it may express the point of view, the style of life, and the cultural values of the person who makes it, or may satisfy needs created by the imbalance of activity in his particular social position. For example, in Europe the practice of fighting a duel of honour was for three centuries a symbol of gentlemanly status. The categorical significance of the practice was so well known that the right of taking or giving the kind of offence which led to a duel was rarely extended to the lower classes. The duel also carried an important expressive significance, however; it vividly portrayed the conception that a true man was an object of danger, a being with limited patience who did not allow a love of life to check his devotion to his principles and to his self-respect. On the whole, we must assume that any item of behaviour is significant to some degree in both a categorical and an expressive capacity.

Status symbols are used because they are better suited to the requirements of communication than are the rights and duties which they signify.

¹ See E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. S. W. Swain (New York, 1926), especially pp. 230–4.

This very fact, however, makes it necessary for status symbols to be distinct and separate from that which they signify. It is always possible, therefore, that symbols may come to be employed in a "fraudulent" way, i.e. to signify a status which the claimant does not in fact possess. We may say, then, that continuing use of status symbols in social situations requires mechanisms for restricting the opportunities that arise for misrepresentation. We may approach the study of status symbols by classifying the restrictive mechanisms embodied in them.

With this approach in mind, we may distinguish between two important kinds of status symbols: *occupation symbols* and *class symbols*. This paper is chiefly concerned with class symbols.

There appear to be two main types of occupation symbols. One type takes the form of credentials which testify with presumed authority to a person's training and work history. During the initiation of a work relationship reliance must frequently be placed upon symbols of this kind. They are protected from forgery by legal sanctions and, more importantly, by the understanding that corroborative information will almost certainly become available. The other type of occupation symbol comes into play after the work relation has been established and serves to mark off levels of prestige and power within a formal organization.¹

On the whole, occupation symbols are firmly tied to an approved referent by specific and acknowledged sanctions, much in the manner in which symbols of social caste are rigidly bound. In the case of social class, however, symbols play a role that is less clearly controlled by authority and in some ways more significant.

No matter how we define social class we must refer to discrete or discontinuous levels of prestige and privilege, where admission to any one of these levels is, typically, determined by a complex of social qualifications, no one or two of which are necessarily essential. Symbols of class status do not typically refer to a specific source of status but rather to something based upon a configuration of sources. So it is that when we meet an individual who manipulates symbols in what appears to be a fraudulent way—displaying the signs yet possessing only a doubtful claim to what they signify—we often cannot justify our attitude by reference to his specific shortcomings. Furthermore, in any estimate we make of a person's class status, the multiple determinants of class position make it necessary for us to balance and weigh the person's favourable social qualifications against his less favourable ones. As we may expect, in situations where complex social judgments are required, the exact social position of a person is obscured and, in a sense, replaced by a margin of dissensus and doubt. Self-representations which fall within this margin may not meet with our approval, but we cannot prove they are misrepresentations.

¹ Examples would be private offices, segregated eating-rooms, etc. For a treatment of status symbols in formal organizations, see C. Barnard, "Functions and Pathology of Status Systems in Formal Organizations", chap. 4, pp. 46-83, in *Industry and Society*, ed. W. F. Whyte (New York, 1946).

No matter how we define social class we must refer to rights which are exercised and conceded but are not specifically laid down in law or contract and are not invariably recognized in practice. Legal sanctions cannot be applied against those who represent themselves as possessing a class status which an informed majority would not accord them. Offenders of this kind commit a presumption, not a crime. Furthermore, class gains typically refer to attitudes of superiority which are not officially or too openly discussed, and to preferential treatment as regards jobs, services, and economic exchanges which is not openly or officially approved. We may agree that an individual has misrepresented himself but, in our own class interests, we cannot make too clear to ourselves, to him, or to others just how he has done so. Also, we tend to justify our class gains in terms of "Cultural" values which everyone in a given society presumably respects—in our society, for example, education, skill, and talent. As a result, those who offer public proof that they possess the pet values of their society cannot be openly refused the status which their symbols permit them to demand.

On the whole, then, class symbols serve not so much to represent or misrepresent one's position, but rather to influence in a desired direction other persons' judgment of it. We shall continue to use the terms "misrepresentation" and "fraudulence", but as regards matters of social class these terms must be understood in the weakened sense in which the above discussion leaves them.

II

Every class symbol embodies one or more devices for restricting misrepresentative use of it. The following restrictive devices are among the most typical.

(1) *Moral Restrictions.* Just as a system of economic contract is made effective by people's willingness to acknowledge the legitimacy of the rights which underlie the system, so the use of certain symbols is made effective by inner moral constraints which inhibit people from misrepresenting themselves. This compunction is typically phrased in different but functionally equivalent ways. For example, in Western society, some of the persons who can for the first time afford to emulate the conspicuous consumption of the upper classes refrain from doing so on the grounds of religious scruple, cultural disdain, ethnic and racial loyalty, economic and civic propriety, or even undisguised "sense of one's place".¹ Of course these self-applied constraints, however phrased, are reinforced by the pressure of the opinion both of one's original group and of the class whose symbols one may misemploy. But the efficacy of these external sanctions is due in part to the readiness with which they are reinforced by internalized moral constraints.

¹ Moral restrictions apply to many types of status symbols other than class. For example, in Western society, women feel that it is seemly to refrain from using symbols of sexual attractiveness before reaching a given age and to abstain progressively from using them after attaining a given age.

(2) *Intrinsic Restrictions.* One solution to the problem of misrepresentation is based on the kind of symbol which perceptibly involves an appreciable use of the very rights or characteristics which it symbolizes. We symbolize our wealth by displaying it, our power by using it, and our skill by exercising it. In the case of wealth, for example, racing stables, large homes, and jewellery obviously imply that the owner has at least as much money as the symbols can bring on the open market.

The use of certain objects as intrinsic symbols of wealth presents a special problem, for we must consider why it is that a very high market value can be placed upon them. Economists sometimes say that we have here a case of "effective scarcity", that is, a small supply in conjunction with a large demand. Scarcity alone, however, does not qualify an object for use as a status symbol, since there is an unlimited number of different kinds of scarce objects. The paintings of an unskilled amateur may be extremely rare, yet at the same time almost worthless. Why, then, do we place great value on examples of one kind of scarce object and not upon examples of another kind of similar and equally scarce object?

Sometimes an attempt is made to account for great differences in the market value of objects that are of similar kind and are equally scarce by pointing to the "expressive" difference between them. (The same rationalization is sometimes employed to explain the difference in market value between "originals" and "reproductions".) In many cases an identifiable difference of this kind not only exists but can also be used to rank the objects on a scale in accordance with some recognized æsthetic or sensuous standard of judgment. This difference in experiential value between relatively similar objects does not, however, seem to be important enough in itself to justify the widely different market value placed upon them. We must account for the high price placed upon certain scarce objects by referring to the social gains that their owners obtain by showing these possessions to other persons. The expressive superiority of an object merely accounts for the fact that it, rather than some other equally scarce object, was selected for use as a status symbol.

(3) *Natural Restrictions.* The limited supply of some kinds of objects can be increased with relative ease but is not increased because persons do not have a motive for doing so or because there is a strong social sanction against doing so. On the other hand, the limited supply of certain kinds of objects cannot be increased by any means remotely available at the time, even though there may be a motive for doing so. These objects have been called "natural scarcities".

The natural scarcity of certain objects provides one kind of guarantee that the number of persons who acquire these objects will not be so large as to render the objects useless as symbols for the expression of invidious distinction. Natural scarcity, therefore, is one factor which may operate in certain symbols of status. Again we may note that not all scarce kinds of objects are valued highly. We must also note that not all highly valued

scarce objects are status symbols, as may be seen, for example, in the case of certain radioactive minerals. Bases of scarcity in the case of certain status symbols nevertheless present a distinct analytical problem. If we think of it in this way we can appreciate the fact that while scarcity plays its most obvious role as an element in intrinsic symbols of wealth, there are symbols of status which are protected by the factor of natural scarcity and which cannot be directly bought and sold.

On the whole, the bases of natural scarcity may be sought in certain features of the physical production or physical structure of the symbol. More than one basis, of course, may be found combined in the same symbol.

The most obvious basis of scarcity, perhaps, can be found in objects which are made from material that is very infrequently found in the natural world and which cannot be manufactured synthetically from materials that are less scarce. This is the basis of scarcity, for example, in the case of very large flawless diamonds.

A basis of scarcity is found in what might be called "historical closure". A high value may be placed on products which derive in a verifiable way from agencies that are no longer productive, on the assumption that it is no longer physically possible to increase the supply. In New England, for example, family connection with the shipping trade is a safe thing to use as a symbol of status because this trade, in its relevant sense, no longer exists. Similarly, furniture made "solidly" from certain hardwoods, regardless of style or workmanship, is used as a symbol of status. The trees which supply the material take so long a time to grow that, in terms of the current market, existing forests can be considered as a closed and decreasing supply.

Another basis of natural scarcity is found in objects whose production requires an appreciable fraction of the total available means of production. This provides assurance on purely physical grounds that a large number of duplications will not appear. In non-industrial societies, for example, large buildings embody a significant portion of the total labour and building material available in a given region at a given time. This condition also applies in the case of some artists and craftsmen whose total life-output takes the form of a small number of distinctive objects which are characteristic of their producer.

We may consider, finally, the fact that the person who acquires the symbol may himself possess characteristics which connect him with the production of the symbol in a relatively exclusive way. This, for example, is the relation of its creator to a work of art that has become a symbol of status.

Similarly, children may share, in part, the status of their parents not only because the connection is demonstrable but also because the number of children a woman can bear is strictly limited. The family name may then be used as a symbol of status on the assumption that it can be acquired legally only by birth or by the marriage of a woman to a son of the house.

A similar basis of scarcity is found in the characteristics of social interaction. Generally speaking, personal association with individuals of high status is used as a symbol of status. The fact that there is a physical limit

to the number of persons with whom any specific individual can be intimately related is one reason why this is possible. The limitation is based on the fact that personal relations imply mutual integration over a wide band of activities, and on the grounds of time and probability an individual cannot be related in this way to a large number of persons.

Finally, a play produced by a given cast must "play to" an audience of limited size. This is related to the limitations of human vision and hearing. The cast may repeat their performance for a different audience, but the performance cannot be reproduced in the sense that is possible with a cinematic performance. It is only in the cinema that the same performance may be "given" at different places simultaneously. Play-going can thus be used as a symbol of status whereas a visit to the cinema, on the whole, cannot.

(4) *Socialization Restrictions.* An important symbol of membership in a given class is displayed during informal interaction. It consists of the kind of acts which impress others with the suitability and likeableness of one's general manner. In the minds of those present, such a person is thought to be "one of our kind". Impressions of this sort seem to be built upon a response to many particles of behaviour. These behaviours involve matters of etiquette, dress, deportment, gesture, intonation, dialect, vocabulary, small bodily movements and automatically expressed evaluations concerning both the substance and the details of life. In a manner of speaking, these behaviours constitute a social style.

Status symbols based on social style embody restrictive mechanisms which often operate in conjunction with each other. We tend to be impressed by the over-all character of a person's manner so that, in fact, we can rarely specify and itemize the particular acts which have impressed us. We find, therefore, that we are not able to analyse a desired style of behaviour into parts which are small and definite enough to make systematic learning possible.

We also find that symbolic value is given to the perceptible difference between an act performed unthinkingly under the invisible guide of familiarity and habit, and the same act, or an imitation of it, performed with conscious attention to detail and self-conscious attention to effect.

Furthermore the manner prescribed for the members of a class tends to be an expression in miniature of their style of life, of their self-conception, and of the psychological needs generated by their daily activity. In other words, social style carries deep expressive significance. The style and manners of a class are, therefore, psychologically ill-suited to those whose life experiences took place in another class.

Finally, we must note that members of a class frequently exercise exclusiveness in just those situations where the categorical significance of a particular act is taught. This accounts in part for the common social fact that one class may use as a symbol an act which another class does not know is being used in this way.¹ One-sided symbolism of this kind can occur even

¹ Perhaps the structural model for this kind of symbol is found in the "password" and fraternal sign.

in cases where the persons who do the act are the ones who do not know of its significance.

(5) *Cultivation Restrictions.* In many societies, avocational pursuits involving the cultivation of arts, "tastes", sports, and handicrafts have been used as symbols of class status. Prestige is accorded the experts, and expertness is based upon, and requires, concentrated attention over a long period of time. A command of foreign languages, for example, has provided an effective source of this sort of symbol.

It is a truism to say that anything which proves that a long span of past time has been spent in non-remunerative pursuits is likely to be used as a class symbol. Time-cost is not, however, the only mechanism of restriction which stands in the way of cultivation. Cultivation also requires discipline and perseverance, that is, it requires of a person that he exclude from the line of his attention all the distractions, deflections, and competing interests which come to plague an intention carried over an extended period of time. This restriction on the improper acquisition of symbols is especially effective where the period from preparation to exhibition is a long one.

An interesting example of cultivation is found in the quality of "restraint" upon which classes in many different societies have placed high value. Here social use is made of the discipline required to set aside and hold in check the insistent stimuli of daily life so that attention may be free to tarry upon distinctions and discriminations which would otherwise be overlooked. In a sense, restraint is a form of negative cultivation, for it involves a studied withdrawal of attention from many areas of experience. An example is seen in Japanese tea ceremonies during the Zen period of Buddhism. In Western society the negative and positive aspects of cultivation are typically combined in what is called sophistication concerning food, drink, clothes, and furnishings.

(6) *Organic Restrictions.* Restrictions related to manner and cultivation provide evidence by means of relevant symbols as to how and where an individual has spent a great deal of his past time. Evidence concerning previous activity is crucial because class status is based not only on social qualifications but also on the length of time a person has possessed them. Owing to the nature of biological growth and development, acquired patterns of behaviour typically provide a much less reliable view of a person's past than is provided by acquired changes in his physical structure.¹ In Britain, for example, condition of hands and height in men, and secondary sexual characteristics in women, are symbols of status based ultimately on the long-range physical effects of diet, work, and environment.

III

Persons in the same social position behave in many ways that are common to all the occupants of the position as well as particular to them. From the

¹ The use of inherited characteristics as symbols of status is typically found, of course, in a society of castes not classes.

wide range of this activity certain items are selected and used for the special purpose of signifying status. These items are selected instead of other possible ones partly because they carry a strong expressive component and embody mechanisms for limiting misrepresentative use of them. The kind of class-consciousness which develops in a society can be understood in terms of the division between items of characteristic conduct that are employed as status symbols and those items which could be employed in this way but are not.

Six general devices for restricting misuse of class symbols have been outlined. It must be said, however, that there is no single mode of restriction which can withstand too many contingencies, nor is there any restriction which is not regularly and systematically circumvented in some fashion. An example of this is the Public School System in Britain, which may be seen as a machine for systematically re-creating middle-class people in the image of the aristocracy—a task in which twenty-six Charm Schools in Chicago are similarly engaged, but with a somewhat different clientele and a somewhat different ideal image.

The presence of routine methods of circumvention may partly explain why stable classes tend to designate their position by means of symbols which rely on many different types of restrictive devices. It would appear that the efficacy of one type of restriction acts as a check upon the failure of another. In this way the group avoids the danger, as it were, of putting all their symbols in one basket. Conversely, social situations for which analysis of status symbols is important can be classified according to the type of mechanism upon which members of a class may be over-dependent or which they may neglect.

From the point of view taken in this paper, problems in the study of class symbols have two aspects, one for the class from which the symbol originates and the other for the class which appropriates it. As a conclusion to this paper, reference will be made to three of these two-sided problem areas.

(1) *Class Movement.* Social classes as well as individual members are constantly rising and falling in terms of relative wealth, power, and prestige. This movement lays a heavy burden upon class symbols, increasing the tendency for signs that symbolize position to take on the role of conferring it.¹ This tendency, in connection with the restrictions that are placed upon the acquisition of status symbols, retards the rise to social eminence of those who have lately acquired importance in power and wealth and retards the fall of those who have lately lost it. In this way the continuity of a tradition can be assured even though there is a change in the kind of persons who maintain the tradition.

As already suggested, we find that sources of high status which were once unchallenged become exhausted or find themselves in competition with new and different sources of status. It is therefore common for a whole class

¹ The extreme case is found in so-called ritual transmission of charisma. See Max Weber, *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. T. Parsons (London, 1947), p. 366.

of persons to find themselves with symbols and expectations which their economic and political position can no longer support. A symbol of status cannot retain for ever its acquired role of conferring status. A time is reached when social decline accelerates with a spiral effect: members of a declining class are forced to rely more and more upon symbols which do not involve a current outlay, while at the same time their association with these symbols lowers the value of these signs in the eyes of others.

The other aspect of this problem turns upon the fact that new sources of high status typically permit the acquisition of costly symbols before symbols based on cultivation and socialization can be acquired. This tends to induce in the rising group expectations which for a time are not warranted and tends to undermine the regard in which costly symbols are held by members of other classes.¹

(2) *Curator Groups*. Wherever the symbolizing equipment of a class becomes elaborate a curator personnel may develop whose task it is to build and service this machinery of status. Personnel of this kind in our society include members of such occupational categories as domestic servants, fashion experts and models, interior decorators, architects, teachers in the field of higher learning, actors, and artists of all kinds. Those who fill these jobs are typically recruited from classes which have much less prestige than the class to which such services are sold. Thus there are people whose daily work requires them to become proficient in manipulating symbols which signify a position higher than the one they themselves possess. Here, then, we have an institutionalized source of misrepresentation, false expectation, and dissensus.

An interesting complication arises when the specialist provides symbol service for a large number of persons and when the symbol to which he owes his employment at the same time carries a strongly marked expressive component. This is the case, for example, with the fashion model and interior decorator. Under these circumstances the curator comes to play much the same sacred role as those entrusted with the collective symbols of a society. It then becomes possible for the improper expectations of the curator to be realized and for the status and security of the patron class itself to be correspondingly diminished.

(3) *Circulation of Symbols*. The systematic circumvention of modes of restriction leads to downward and upward circulation of symbols.² In these cases, apparently, the objective structure of the sign-vehicle always becomes

¹ This has been referred to as the problem of the *nouveau riche*, of which the community of Hollywood provides an example. See Leo Rosten, *Hollywood* (New York, 1941), especially pp. 163-80. See also Talcott Parsons, "The Motivation of Economic Activity", *Essays in Sociological Theory* (Glencoe, 1948), p. 215. An extreme case in the U.S.A. is the decrease in social value of the type of expensive car favoured by the rich criminal classes.

² It is not rare for practices which originate in one class to be adopted by the members of a higher one. Cases in point would be the argot of criminal, ethnic, and theatrical groups and such fugitive social crazes as the Lambeth Walk. In most cases these adopted practices serve only an expressive function and are not used as status symbols. Sometimes practices of low repute are adopted as status symbols in order to comment on those who cannot afford to be associated with them.

altered. A classification of these alterations or modes of vulgarization would be interesting to pursue but is beyond the scope of this paper.

From the point of view of this paper, circulation of symbols has two major consequences. First, those with whom a symbol originates must turn from that which is familiar to them and seek out, again and again, something which is not yet contaminated. This is especially true of groups which are smaller and more specialized than social classes—groups whose members feel inclined to separate themselves from their original social class, not by moving up or down but by moving out. This may be seen, for example, in the attempt of jazz musicians to create a monthly quota of new fashion to replace items of their action and speech which laymen have appropriated.¹

The second consequence is perhaps the more significant of the two. Status symbols provide the cue that is used in order to discover the status of others and, from this, the way in which others are to be treated. The thoughts and attention of persons engaged in social activity therefore tend to be occupied with these signs of position. It is also a fact that status symbols frequently express the whole mode of life of those from whom the symbolic act originates. In this way the individual finds that the structure of his experience in one sphere of life is repeated throughout his experiences in other spheres of life. Affirmation of this kind induces solidarity in the group and richness and depth in the psychic life of its members.

As a result of the circulation of symbols, however, a sign which is expressive for the class in which it originates comes to be employed by a different class—a class for which the symbol can signify status but ill express it. In this way conscious life may become thin and meagre, focused as it is upon symbols which are not particularly congenial to it.

We may close with a plea for empirical studies which trace out the social career of particular status symbols—studies similar to the one that Dr. Mueller has given us concerning the transfer of a given kind of musical taste from one social grouping to another.² Studies of this kind are useful in a period when widespread cultural communication has increased the circulation of symbols, the power of curator groups, and the ranges of behaviour that are accepted as vehicles for symbols of status.

¹ From conversations with Howard Becker.

² J. H. Mueller, "Methods of Measurement of Aesthetic Folkways", *Am. J. Soc.*, vol. LI, pp. 276–82.