



| For a Medieval Sociology

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Call for papers
First Workshop of the SOCIOMA Project

“Thinking society in categories in the Middle Ages”

Oxford, 11-12 December 2025

A BRIEF PRESENTATION OF THE PROJECT

The aim of the Collaborative Research Project ‘SOCIOMA – For a Medieval Sociology’, funded by the French National Agency for Scientific Research (2024-2028), is to write a history of sociological knowledge in Latin Europe from the 12th to the 15th centuries. This research differs from other works of social history by focusing on the study of classificatory thought, in order to show that such thought is not merely descriptive, but that it is a performative intellectual tool, a repertoire of social forms available to actors, a ‘technology of power’.

This research project has three main topics:

- 1/ a lexicographical study of Latin and vernacular vocabulary for social categories in the Latin West;
- 2/ the study and editing of scholarly theological, legal, philosophical and medical corpora that convey a discourse on the architectonics of medieval society;
- 3/ the analysis of the use of social taxonomies in pragmatic literature, in order to reveal the resulting social dynamics.

Within a very long history of categorical social thought, which largely overlaps with that of the forms and modalities of State domination, and which extends from the first lists of socio-professional categories written in cuneiform (ED Lú A, c. 3200 BC) to the most advanced statistical tools – such as The National Statistics Socio-economic classification (NS-SEC of 2010) – the medieval period certainly deserves to be studied as an important stage in the development of tools for social identification and categorisation, and the promotion of a form of sociological rationality.

ARGUMENT

In 2013, in an editorial published in *Annales HSS* calling for a “rethinking of social status in history”, its authors delivered a twofold observation: on the one hand, that “the existence of ‘social statuses’ predates that of the social sciences” as evidenced by “the vocabulary by which social groups refer to themselves across time and space”; on the other hand, that the question of social statuses seems to have slipped into the background of researchers’ concerns since the 1980s, probably due to the abandonment of the major historical paradigms that claimed to offer global interpretations of human societies [Anheim, Grenier, Lilti, 2013].

This twofold observation highlights the blind spot that the medieval period very often represents in the history of sociological ideas: classical syntheses too often refer to the Middle Ages as the structural inability of its actors to develop their own social thought. However, the European Middle Ages were a constant observation ground for the sociological science under construction, from Émile Durkheim’s analysis of the forms of religious life to Max Weber’s reflections on the structures of domination. Weber saw the concepts of ‘communalisation’ (*Vergemeinschaftung*) and ‘sociation’ (*Vergesellschaftung*) as two complementary types of social relationship, part of a joint historical process of institutionalising social groups in the medieval city [Weber, 1958; Oexle, 1992]. More recently, Pierre Bourdieu regretted that contemporary sociology did not take seriously the medieval theologians who, ‘speaking of their problems as theologians, proposed a particularly refined, particularly modern theory of the social, transposing to their institution the modes of thought they were accustomed to using for their theological objects’ [Bourdieu, 2015]. Sociologists are obviously not the only ones responsible for this unfinished interdisciplinary dialogue with historians [Fontbonne, 2023]. For their part, medievalists have undoubtedly been unable to offer practical synthesis tools or systematic analyses that would have enabled non-specialists in the Middle Ages to overcome certain prejudices and allow the results of historical research to be integrated into the history of sociological ideas. It has to be said that the major sociographic studies of the Middle Ages, which were undertaken in the 1960s [Roche, Labrousse, 1973] and continued until the 1980s [Duby, 1981; Le Goff, 1990], with the aim of reconstructing the dynamics of categorisation, have since been largely abandoned by historians. As a result, medievalists are still largely at a loss when it comes to ‘describing social stratification’ using the conceptual tools specific to the Middle Ages [Aurell, 2005].

Outside the field of specialists, the Middle Ages often remain associated solely with the social imaginary of the three orders, even though the limits of this paradigm beyond the 12th century have long been emphasised [Denton, 1999; Jussen, 2001]. Georges Duby himself emphasised the extent to which the masters of the Parisian schools – Stephen Langton at the helm – had very early emancipated themselves from the restrictive framework of functional tripartition, applying themselves from the 12th century onwards to ‘sifting the social’ [Duby, 1978]. Driven by pastoral zeal, theologians of the 12th to 13th centuries sometimes distinguished in *ad status* sermons several dozen categories of faithful based on various criteria of age, sex, clerical status, profession, etc [Bériou, 1998; Muessig, 2002]. This categorical thinking spread to a number of pastoral tools, such as the *Summae confessorum* [Le Goff, 1964], and spread to moral literature inspired by it: Moralized Game of Chess [Mehl, 1999], Dances of Death [Batany, 1984], as well as Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* [Mann, 1973]. Alongside the pastoral sphere, the organisation of the social world into categories can be seen from the 12th to 13th centuries in the economic and fiscal order – particularly in the context of the trades – but also in the political and legal order, where the first sumptuary laws

of the late Middle Ages appear to be a striking attempt to objectify the social order in terms of dress and to bring social representation into line with the 'states' [Bulst, 1997].

The ecclesial order was undoubtedly one of the main sources of this medieval sociological thought: backed by a theology of the heavenly and earthly order provided as early as the 6th century by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, the clerics never stopped thinking about the social order and its hierarchies, in a quest for harmony and bringing the earthly order into line with divine designs. In a way, medieval ecclesiology is thus nothing other than a form of sociology, concerned with ordering and hierarchising the social body that is the *ecclesia* [Bougard, Iogna-Prat & Le Jan, 2008; Iogna-Prat, 2016]. As a product of the transformations in medieval society in the 12th century, scholarly doctrines – such as law, theology and natural philosophy – which were then rediscovered or reinvented to be taught in the very first universities, helped to categorise, divide and classify reality, both descriptively and prescriptively. Theologians, lawyers, physicians and philosophers, in touch with the society to which they belonged, applied themselves to forging the semantic and semiological tools needed to describe the social world, producing divisions and distinctions specific to their field that were also contributions to an architectural conception of the social order. Beyond scholarly production, and in the context of a broadening of the uses of the written word, pragmatic literature also played a part in the construction of active social conceptions. Urban legislation on trades and labour nomenclatures [Lachaud, 2006; Bourlet, 2015], accounting and management writings, chronicles, historical writings and family books, judicial writings – this vast body of literature reveals an abundant use of social taxonomies by authors, which affects forms of awareness of social belonging and shapes social identities [Judde, 2023].

With this in mind, the first workshop of the SOCIOMA project aims to **examine the driving forces behind categorical thinking as applied to medieval society**: what intellectual mechanisms or processes were used by social actors to define, circumscribe and name social categories?

Recent work in sociology can also provide useful methodological support for medievalists. In an article published in 2015, Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot looked at the 'practical manufacture' of social classifications and observed – from the perspective of the sociology of interactions – the way in which individuals mobilised various skills or aptitudes to classify individuals into groups and then to name these groups [Boltanski and Thévenot, 2015]. At the end of this survey, there appeared to be a strong opposition between two distinct ways of understanding the social world. While scholarly nomenclatures tend to assume the existence of a 'homogeneous, segmented and oriented social space [...] in which all social positions could be distributed with equal ease', the 'semantic categories of ordinary languages', on the other hand, are based on the apprehension of a diversified social space, polarised on the basis of 'salient points'. These 'salient points' are positions or professions that are easily identifiable because they have been or are being 'socially represented': their existence is commonly accepted as a result of the social discourse that has promoted them. From then on, the categorisation process operates not by distribution but by 'assimilation of salient points', based on variable criteria (age, gender, place of residence, education and qualifications, pay, cultural practices, etc.) and positions more or less distant from these in the social space, drawing ill-defined boundaries between each category. In the social game of categorisation, no agent is neutral. The result is a vast descriptive vocabulary, in which aesthetic and moral considerations also intersect, helping to create a sometimes-conflicting social imaginary.

As this first meeting will focus on the cultural structures and intellectual processes at work in categorical thinking, participants will be invited to consider the following questions: what scholarly and/or practical taxonomies were used in Latin Europe? Who are the agents of these classifications, for what purpose do they produce them and on the basis of what criteria? What intellectual tools are used to produce these classifications, and what vocabulary is used to describe them? What influence do these nomenclatures have on groups other than those who produced them, and how do they contribute to the 'social work of representation' and to the formulation of a social imaginary? How do these categories interact or, on the contrary, conflict?

Looking at the whole of Latin Christendom or just one part of it, papers may focus on a specific corpus of documents, a predefined social group, a term or concept to be examined, a specific period, place or event that may reveal an evolution or an inflection, or an author or a work that is remarkable for its sociological acuity.

The 30-minute papers may be presented in English or French. Proposals must be submitted by 15 June 2025 to antoine.destemberg@univ-artois.fr. Travel, accommodation and catering expenses will be covered by the organisation of the workshop.

Organising Committee

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