

International conference

**“Challenging Categories” – 12-13 October 2023**

CLIMAS UR 4196 - Université Bordeaux Montaigne, France

According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, a category is a class to which entities or concepts belong. Creating categories, according to Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things (Les Mots et les choses)* amounts to creating “common grounds,” *common loci*, which allow us “to tame the profusion of existing things” and pursue with our “age-old distinction between the Same and the Other.” By contrast, in his famous list of animals, “Borges does away with the *site*, the mute ground on which it is possible for entities to be juxtaposed,” and produces an “unthinkable space.” Categories, therefore, are necessary for humans to think, and the need to categorise is one of the most fundamental, defining characteristics of the human brain.

Medicine, for instance, not only needs but relies on categories since “diagnosis constitutes the naming of an ailment or condition based on classifications that are embedded in extant medical knowledge. Diagnosis is a critical feature of medicine, simultaneously identifying what is wrong, providing a roadmap for treatment options, and assessing possible outcomes or prognoses” (Conrad). In other words, diagnosis transforms random symptoms into an organized illness. In Joshua Ferris’s 2010 novel, *The Unnamed*, the main character’s symptom is never scientifically defined – it challenges medical classifications and clinical expertise. Hence, the character is never given permission to be ill, and thereby he is doomed to the chaos created by his condition.

However, the distinction between which categories are out there and which are within us, which are learnt and which discovered, is a categorisation which is itself rarely innocent. The development of ever more intricate taxonomies and classifications, and the paradigms and hierarchies which have so often flowed from them, have attempted to legitimise teleologies, “natural progressions” and power relations which we now seldom see as anything other than contrived, constructed, as so many instances of Foucauldian “discursive formations” or “power-knowledge”.

The imposition of categories, the drawing of lines, at the very least occludes a fundamental continuity, stifles nuance and creates a “type” which opens the way to a “profile”, to prediction, prejudice, stereotype and discrimination. At its most extreme, categorisation parodies its own capacity to assign or consign, reducing classification to a binary distinction, a polarisation and the formula “if you are not with me, you are against me”! The compassionless violence of such in/and either/or distinctions can, however, lead to their own polar opposite: the rediscovery, regeneration and nurturing of care, empathy and the well-being of the necessarily nuanced self.

We would like to explore some of the ways in which categories both take up the challenge of organising different aspects of the art, politics and history of the English-speaking world, and are then themselves challenged as a form of limitation, even repression, and undermined, revised,

transformed, overthrown. The field is an extremely rich one and the examples suggested here are only intended to indicate a few possibilities, and not to limit approaches in any way.

Colleagues whose research is in the area of civilisation may wish to consider how some of the most basic categories which define their specialisms are open to challenge: the pitfalls of periodisation and even the division of history itself into clearly delineated centuries; the problematics of geographical/geopolitical categories – country, federation, union, bloc, league, pact; the meaning, in a globalised economy, of “micro” and “macro” categories, and the pertinence or not of the continued existence of the categories of “market”, “mixed” and “command”; those interested in political science may, among many other things, interrogate the concept of the separation of powers or the usefulness of a division between soft, hard and smart power; or the ideological distinctions between political parties, and attempts to challenge these – “neither left, nor right”; those interested in cultural and sexual politics will be interested in all forms of categorisation where both historical and contemporary sexualities and gender identities are concerned, and where they can become hyphenated. The dynamics of change in our call for papers can refer to both collective and individual processes, be they processes that are actively sought out and even fought for in the deconstruction of rigid and normative categories, or processes that are experienced as passive transformations and played out as forces beyond the control of individuals.

Literature has delighted for ages in the challenge of categories. In his *Essais*, for instance, Michel de Montaigne claims that he created “grotesque and monstrous bodies, pieced together of diverse members, without definite shape, having no order, sequence, or proportion other than accidental” (“Of Friendship”), and he calls his own “Essais” *grotesques*, precisely because they challenge conventional categories. As the grotesque prefers the margin over the center and the unconventional over the classical and rational, it questions the traditional categories of representation, both pictorial (take Horace’s mermaid in his *Ars Poetica*, for instance) and literary. Challenging traditional representation is also what textual images can do when they bring together incongruous elements: think of Fitzgerald’s famous “her voice is full of money” and “yellow cocktail music” in *The Great Gatsby*. Challenging generic categories – in autofiction, for instance – can allow for an exploration of the dialogic capabilities of genres. Similarly, intertextuality as it questions the identity and integrity of a text can generate “a dialogue among several writings” (Kristeva). As for the challenge of conventional binaries in fiction – religion or science, health or disability, the body or the mind, even man or woman, to name only a few – it can result in an exploration of the power of language to promote “inclusion over exclusion, synthesis over rupture and compromise over raw polarities” (Burn). In the end, challenging literary categories can result in the creation of “a textual syndrome,” that is, etymologically, “a place where several roads meet” (LeClair). It can also produce an “open work,” in the sense of Umberto Eco, that readers are invited to interpret and “conclude,” even a “literary laboratory” (Tougaw), that is, a site for experiments and investigation.

Linguistics and phonetics are fields in which categories are extensively used to classify and study markers, and papers may discuss typical or unusual linguistic phenomena. Some forms challenge commonly-accepted categories, and more closely resemble a continuum than discrete groups. For

example, a morpheme such as -ING may be bound to nouns and verbs alike thus making the distinction between them sometimes blurry; conversion may change the part of speech a word belongs to; and a subordinate clause may feature both nominal and adjectival properties. The very semantics of markers may in some contexts be open to interpretation: the meaning conveyed by root modality or by aspectual forms for example is not always easily interpreted. Pragmatic and sociolinguistic phenomena can also challenge established linguistic categories: gender-neutral uses of pronouns and the creation of neo-pronouns defy linguistic norms. In phonetics, categories are created to discuss prototypical realizations: lexical stress may be used to indicate the syntactic category of a word, for instance. However, some elements, such as vowels, are harder to categorise as there are no distinct boundaries between them. Though their values can be calculated, deciding whether they belong to one set or another may sometimes be arbitrary. Variation in the pronunciation of words, and whether they should appear in pronouncing dictionaries, may also be of interest.

Organising committee: Pascale Antolin, Mathilde Bertrand, Pierre Habasque, Trevor Harris

The organisers invite proposals for papers (in English or in French) treating any aspect of “challenging categories”. Proposals – including a 250-word summary and a short biographical note (150 words) – should be sent, **by 9 January 2023**, to:

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