Nation States, Statistical Groups, Individuals, and Other Groups

PAUL DUMOUCHEL

Graduate School of Core Ethics and Frontier Sciences
Ritsumeikan University
56-1 Toji-in Kitamachi
Kita-ku
Kyoto
Japan 603-8577

Email: dumouchp@ce.ritsumei.ac.jp
Web: http://www.ritsumei.ac.jp/acd/gr/gsce/s/pd01/index-e.htm

Abstract: This paper enquires into the complex ontology of groups. Methodological individualists suggests that groups can be reduced to the aggregation of individual actions. However, all groups are not, so to speak, born equal in relation to individual action. In particular I distinguish between two types of groups: what I call "natural groups" and "statistical groups". I analyze the different relationship which both types of group entertain with modern nation-states, as well as with different types of theories of justice. Central to my argument is the idea that different types of groups reflect the various ways in which we understand and divide the population and that the ontology of groups has fundamental epistemological and political dimensions.

According to Max Weber's original understanding of methodological individualism, "for the subjective interpretation of action in sociological work [these] collectives [states, associations, business corporations, foundations, etc.] must be treated as *solely* the resultants and modes of organization of the particular acts of individual persons, since these alone can be treated as agents in a course of subjectively understandable action" (Weber 1978). Or in the more modern language used by Joseph Heath (2005), methodological individualism privileges action theoretic level explanations This methodological choice which puts individual action at the center of the explanation does not rule out the importance of collectives, nor does it imply that these phenomena will always reflect the intentions of intentional agents, but it does suggest that in a sense groups do not exist; that they can be considered as, or reduced to the complex aggregation of individual actions. This paper enquires into the complexity

of group ontology and how it affect social phenomena and policies.

It addresses the issues of various ways in which we divide the world and of group formation, in relation to questions of social justice and social policies, and more basically, with regard to how we understand social phenomena. The precise focus of the paper is the way in which we organize and divide human populations into different sub-groups: identity groups, vulnerable groups, ethnic groups, age groups, genders, minority groups and so on. These different groups form sub-sets of a total population. They are the main targets of social policies and constitute some of the central objects of our reflections in social justice theories. Thus, minority cultural groups or the 'least advantaged' constitute, so to speak, the 'moral persons' who lay claims to social justice, for example, residents (citizens or non-citizens) of foreign origin, single parents households, person aged more than 65,

African-Americans, foreign workers, cultural or linguistic minorities, etc. These are the type of 'objects' we talk about when we discuss issues in social justice. These groups also constitute the 'realities' that we feel we need to take into account when we devise social policies. The question I wish to address is not so much that of the nature and identity of these groups, for example, who are they and where do they come from? Rather, it is that of the way in which such groupings are constructed, or 'discovered'. How does this way of dividing the (social) world come about? What interests me is not the history and sociology of social groups, but their ontology, and the epistemology of the ways in which the average person as well as theories of justice and social policies classify and categorize human populations.[1] What types of objects are these divisions and associations? How do we come to know about them? These questions are both epistemological and political. To ask about them is to inquire into the epistemological dimension of politics.

In particular I am interested in the difference between two types of partitioning of a population, one that may be defined as 'natural' partitions and the other as statistical partitions. Both types of categorizations may lead to group formation, and especially to the creation of *autonomous groups*. However the type of autonomous groups, their characteristics and in particular their 'resilience', vary depending on whether or not the group emerged from a 'natural' partition of the population. Interestingly groups that occupy a special place in liberal theories of justice are usually constructed through statistical partitioning, while multicultural theories of justice are generally concerned with 'natural' partitions of the population. In conclusion I suggest that there is a kind of normal spontaneous agreement, a form of conceptual consistency between modern States, that hold the monopoly of legitimate violence, and statistical groups, and that such States have a much harder time dealing with groups that arise from natural partitions of the population, something which was not the case for example in traditional and even in modern (i.e. 19th century) empires.

THE 'NATURAL' PARTITIONING OF A POPULATION

First take any human population. How is it given? Through what process did it come to existence? How are its limits established? How were its borders determined? At this point we will not inquire into these questions. (Though we may have to come back to these issues since it is possible (likely?) that the process through which the original population was

given, is not entirely different from some of the processes that allow us to identify or to create different sub-groups within that population).[2] To start let us just take the population as given. Given a population, I call a 'natural' partition of that population any division of the population that is evident for members of that population. For example, among any normal population of human beings the divisions into male and female, adult and children, young and old constitute natural partitions of the population. The same applies to the distinction between members of the (more or less extended) family unit and those who do not belong to the family unit. This division also constitutes a 'natural' partition of the population. These partitions of the population are not 'natural' in the sense that they are naturally determined, even though that is often claimed to be the case. In fact, they are not so determined, or at least not entirely, but are essentially social and cultural constructions. I call them 'natural' because they are evident to members of the larger population, as well as to members of the sub-population to which they correspond. They are readily recognized by all as constituting an important aspect of the world in which they live and are perceived by everyone either as given to them from birth, like the parent child relation, or at least as given to them from the outside, not only independently of their will, but in such a way that members of a natural partition of the population cannot exit the 'natural category' to which they belong.[3] 'Natural' partitions of the population are natural in the sense that they are based on evident perceptions shared by all, both those who are inside and those who are situated outside of the partition.

Thus 'natural' partitions of a population rest on the every day epistemology of average agents. It may be objected that the characteristics of persons which are evident to some individuals are not necessarily evident to everyone else. This is certainly the case. The term 'evident' as I use it here should therefore be understood as being 'relevance relative'. That is to say, which divisions of the population its members will recognize as 'natural' depends on the circumstances holding at that time within that population. Among certain populations the separation between slaves and free persons or between individuals of different ethnic or racial origins will be construed as 'natural partitions' of the population. At other times, and in other populations, such categorizations will not be viewed as natural in anyway whatsoever and in some cases they will not even be seen as a division. The same applies to divisions of the population according to religious, social or even political affiliation. What is evident and how it is evident may be quite different and often highly uncertain

from a purely epistemic point of view. For example, during the period when the various areas of Baghdad were being violently segregated between Shiites and Sunnis, Sunni insurgents often claimed that it was easy to recognize a Shiite by the way he or she walked.

It follows, as was suggested earlier, that there is very little that is 'natural' about 'natural partitions' of a population. These divisions and segregation are not 'natural' because they are grounded in nature, in biology or in some way inscribed in the structure of the universe. To the opposite they are culturally relative and interest relative, what makes them 'natural' is that they are spontaneous divisions that are evident to everyone, that is to say, to every member of the population in question. The fact that this evidence is 'relevance relative' implies that the 'naturalness' of the partitions of a larger population is a question of degree and of context. In any context, some partitions are more 'natural' than others. For example, it seems more 'natural' to divide the population of a bilingual university into speakers of one or the other languages, rather than on the basis of the height of students or the length of their hair, in spite of the fact these characteristics are just as 'evident'.

'Natural' partitions of a population are everyday epistemological tools. They reflect circumstances that are common to many members of the population and usually rest on relatively salient characteristics of individuals. In consequence, multiple 'natural partitions' of any population can coexist at any time. For example, in Japan I am a mature, non-Japanese, male, but I am also an English speaker and which characteristic is relevant will depend on the context. 'Natural' partitions of a population, divide that population, they 'organize' it. However partitioning is not the same thing as group formation, it merely is an epistemic operation. Rather, 'natural' partitions lay the ground for 'spontaneous' group formation in the sense that they reveal lines of separation that are evident for everyone. Groups that tend to reproduce those divisions, like linguistic or ethnic groups, also appear 'natural'. However, 'natural partitions' of the population neither immediately, nor necessarily lead to group formation.

'Natural' partitions of the population constitute a principle of organization that can be used whenever 'others', that is new unknown individuals are encountered. What I mean is that when individuals belonging to no known 'natural' partition of the population are encountered, the simple fact that they do not fit into any recognized category constitutes a 'natural' partition of the population. They are categorized as strangers, foreigners, aliens, barbarians, etc. This allows,

in principle, for an exhaustive categorization of all members of the population.

THE STATISTICAL PARTITIONING OF A POPULATION

What is a statistical partition of a population? John Rawls in his *A Theory of Justice* (1971) claims that inequalities are only justified if they are to the advantage of all, and in particular to the advantage of the *least advantaged*. He immediately reminds us that principles of justice do not apply "to particular individuals who may be identified by their proper names" but to "representative persons holding the various social positions, or offices, or whatever established by the basic structure" of society (Rawls 1971, p. 64). Thus principles of (social) justice do not apply to Niu, to Noah or to Paul as such. They only apply to them inasmuch as they occupy certain social 'positions' or 'offices'; that is to say, inasmuch as they have particular social characteristics, for example inasmuch as they are professors, students, foreigners, immigrants, and so on. Principles of justice apply to persons, irrespective of who they are, of which particular individual they are and of what social or religious group they belong to because otherwise these principles of justice would fail to be universal. This means that principles of justice should apply independently of a person's position relative to most 'natural partitions', because 'natural partitions' of the population are what provides the social identity of different individuals. They are fundamental to determine that a person is this or that particular person, rather than simply 'an individual'. They specify a list of particular qualities which together determine, or mostly determine, the person's identity.

Who is, or who are then the *least advantaged* if they cannot be named? Imagine, for example, that you are asked to determine who are the least advantaged in Canada today. One, particularly simple (and likely inadequate) way of doing this in a market economy is to look at people's income. The least advantaged then will be those whose income is below a certain threshold. One belongs to the 'least advantaged' then if one has an income that is less than X. Alternatively, you may consider that income alone is an insufficient indicator of the relative advantages and disadvantages that determine individuals as more or less advantaged. Therefore you decide to take into account other variables. For example, life expectancy at birth, number of years of education, gender, different types of financial or cultural assets, etc. In any case, whether you chose a more complex or a simpler method, in the end you will come up with a collection of individuals, a

sub-set of the total population that is constructed on the basis of given criteria of choice. The 'least advantaged' then will be elements of that sub-set of the total Canadian population that is defined by the rule which allows us to construct that set: in the simplest case individuals whose revenue is inferior to X. This is a statistical partition of a population.

In what sense is such a division of the population statistical? Statistics, as the name suggests, are related to States. This is not simply an etymological curiosity. As many historians have documented the development of finer mathematical techniques characteristic of modern statistics went hand in hand with the national and international standardization of weights and measures, as well as with the establishment of national bureaus of statistics and the nationwide collection of data on numerous aspects of social life: birth and mortality rates, numbers of marriages, suicides, crimes, the volume of trade, employment distribution and so on (See for example Desrosières in note 1; also Datson 1988; Hacking 1990; Stigler 1986). All these things were made possible by the modern State, for counting social realities is not a purely mathematical exercise; it also requires power, resources and a properly disciplined population, all of which are only to be found in well policed states. Furthermore, you can only add, subtract, or compare what is to some extent alike. Gathering statistics rested on a process of homogenization of the population that is inseparable from the rise of modern States (Rae 2002).

Rawls, as well as most other advocates of theories of social justice, simply take for granted (why would they do otherwise) the existence of modern States and of the technical apparatus that allows us to determine, for example, who are the *least advantaged*. Such a partitioning of the population is statistical first of all because this way of dividing a population is only possible thanks to social tools that are part and parcel of the modern State's apparatus and thanks to mathematical techniques whose development is inseparable from the rise of the modern State.

There is a second reason, an epistemological reason, that justifies qualifying such partitioning of the population as 'statistical'. One of the goals of statistics is to render visible what, so to speak, either cannot be seen or usually cannot be seen by the naked eye. For example, the average age of those who are unemployed, the ethnic origin of employees in different trades and occupations, the correlation between average income, years of education, and life expectancy, the percentage of women in higher education, all these things that are not clearly seen by the 'naked social eye', statistics reveal. Unlike 'natural partitions' statistical partitions are

usually 'invisible' to individual social agents. Even though everyone may agree that in an unequal society it is a logical truth that some must be least advantaged, who these individuals are is not necessarily evident. Furthermore, the relevance of statistical partitions of the population is not evident to all in the way that 'natural' partitions are evident. In the case of 'natural' partitions that evidence I argued earlier is 'relevance relative', and the greater the relevance of a partition the more it is viewed as 'natural'. In the case of statistical partitions just as the partition itself is not evident, not readily visible, its relevance is not shared by all. For example, mortality tables may be of great interest to life insurance companies, but they leave most of us rather indifferent. No one (or only few?) would think of organizing social life on the basis of categories of individuals divided by life expectancy, such a way of organizing our social world, unlike a social organization according to national, linguistic, or gender differences or according to age groups, would in no way appear 'natural'. The relevance of a statistical partition to some individual social agents taken severally may be great, but this importance is not clear to others and often it is not even clear to those who are concerned by it.

STATISTICAL PARTITIONS AND GROUPS

The way in which we partition the world, in 'natural' or in statistical partitions, has consequences for the types of groups that can be 'built' on the basis of these partitions. These consequences may to some extent be described as sociological, but they can probably best be viewed as ontological. They concern the nature of the different types of groups that one or the other form of partitioning may sustain. They also pertain to the way in which different groups *exist*, they pertain to the *mode of existence* of different types of groups.

Statistical partitions are subsets of the population and as such they can immediately be viewed as groups or as collections of individuals. However, unlike subsets that result from 'natural' partitioning of a population, there is a sense in which such statistical groups only exist as a result of collecting the statistical data to which they correspond. Their existence nonetheless is not purely mathematical as they are the result of the jointly statistical and political operation that determines the sub-set of individuals which constitutes the collection. Individuals, members or elements, of the sub-set have an independent existence, but the group itself, for example, the *least advantaged* defined by a given criterion or procedure only exists as a result of the operation that deter-

mines who they actually are, for example, those whose income is inferior to X.

Take a different example: single parent households. In many countries persons who live in single parent households are the target of special social policies. Where these policies exist, members of single parent households form a group, a sub-set of the total national population, a collection of individuals that is singled out for particular treatment on the part of social agencies. This collection only exists as the target of such policies through the operation that defines the necessary characteristics for individuals to qualify as members of a 'single parent household'. It may be that members of that group also share other common characteristics, for example, they all belong to a certain age bracket or happen to mostly live in cities. These individuals however do not *need* to satisfy any of these other characteristics in order to be part of that collection; they may be young or old, rich or poor, male or female, of different religious or ethnic origin, etc. All of these other characteristics are irrelevant as far determining whether or not they belong to the 'single parent household' collection. Therefore, even when statistical groups also constitute 'sociological' groups, or classes, defined by characteristics that are by widely shared by their members, like education level or the income of the parents, most often these other social characters will also corresponds to statistical partitions. They will be characteristics that generally are invisible to the 'naked social eye'.

The way that statistical groups are constructed (invented or created) entails that individuals who belong to them do not need to know each other, or to be related to each other, in any other way than that of, for example, living in single parent household or having an income that is inferior to X. These groups are statistical because the only thing that holds them together as a group is the rule that defines this particular collection of persons as that group, irrespective of who these individuals may happen to be or of any and all social relations that may exist between them. The rule that defines statistical groups as groups is external to the group. Not only in the sense that it is given to the group, that is also true of the criteria that defines 'natural partitions', but in the sense that it cannot be perceived by the members of this particular subset, or utilized by them to form an autonomous group. In order for that to be possible the statistical group first has to be (generally directly) instituted by being statistically defined by a power that is external to the collection.

An extreme, and particularly tragic, but in many ways revealing example of this political and methodological procedure is the group of all-Cambodians-who-wear-glasses.

In Cambodia during the Pol Pot's regime, those who wore glasses were singled out for particularly harsh treatment. Wearing glasses was seen by the Khmers Rouge as a sign of bourgeois and intellectual tendencies, therefore those who wore glasses clearly needed to have their ways reformed. Question: does the group of glass wearing Cambodians exist? In a sense it does, as a mathematical subset of the Cambodian population, just as the group of all Cambodians who are more than 2 meters tall and just as that of the *least advantaged* exists. However until one of those groups is targeted by a specific policy there is a sense in which it only exists virtually. If you prefer, it only exists mathematically but not socially. Once it becomes defined by a social procedure the group gains a different type of existence. At that point it becomes possible to number its elements, to imprison them, to reduce their food ration, or to make them eligible for welfare and financial help. Considered as a social group, rather than as a simple mathematical class, the group of all Cambodians wearing glasses or the *least advantaged* does not exist otherwise than as the result of the operation that constitutes its members as objects of a particular State policy. As a group it does not have any existence independent from the State policy that determines it from outside the group itself. The individual members of these groups exist independently, but statistical groups themselves do not have any social existence exterior or prior to the operation that constitutes them as a group.

In fact once a State has sufficiently homogenized its population, statistical groups can emerge without the direct intervention of the State, granted that the State allows individuals access to tools that permit these groups to become 'visible' and their members thus to gain knowledge of each other. Once such a group becomes visible, either as a result of having been directly defined and instituted by the State's power, or by some other instance, it can give rise to an autonomous group. Such a group arises when individuals who form the statistical group recognize each others as member of the group, realize that they share common interests and create institutions, for example, newspapers, clubs, associations that allow them to defend these interests and to act in common.

AUTONOMOUS GROUPS

Unlike statistical groups, some groups actively distinguish themselves from the larger social environment. A political party, a religion, an association, a terrorist network are examples of such groups. These groups are autonomous in

that they accomplish by themselves the operation that distinguishes them from the rest of the population. This is not a claim concerning the origin of the group. For example, a professional group may exist as the result of a charter that was granted by the State to certain individuals, the army, or a paramilitary force come to existence through an explicit act of the government. As mentioned above, any statistical group can, in principle, give rise to an autonomous group. Such groups actively distinguish themselves from the larger population. They have rules, which they administer by themselves, which determine, among other things who is and who is not a member of the group. Interrelations between members of the groups are different from the relations members entertain with non-members. If all members of an autonomous group do not necessarily know each other, they usually can recognize each other as members of the group, and therefore actively distinguish themselves from non-members. Finally, autonomous groups are poles of cohesive and collective action. Members of autonomous groups can refer to themselves as "we" and they can engage in coordinated shared activities. That is why autonomous groups like the army or some other administrative service that have been created by a different and superior authority (the State), can, and often do, escape the control of that authority.

Statistical groups inasmuch as they only exist through the operation that defines them, never manifest this kind of independence. Individuals may be disqualified as members of a statistical group, because they fail to qualify, or because of some action they did, but statistical groups themselves do not act. They do not actively distinguish themselves from their environment, but are defined from the outside through an operation that alone sustains their existence. However, statistical groups can 'give rise' to autonomous groups through institutions that organize some elements of a statistical groups into members of an association, a party or a movement. I say 'give rise to' rather than 'transform itself into' an autonomous group, because the autonomous group will never exactly correspond to the statistical group. The reason why this is so, is because an autonomous group that arises from a statistical group will always be a voluntary association, while the statistical group out of which it emerges, by definition is not a voluntary association.

We can distinguish two types of autonomous groups, voluntary association and involuntary association. Statistical partitions of the population only give rise to voluntary association autonomous groups, while natural partitions of the population usually support involuntary association autonomous groups. In this case the way in which a person comes

to join the autonomous group may, but need not be independent of his or her will, but the most important characteristic of involuntary association autonomous groups is that individuals cannot willfully exit the group. Many times leaving the group is simply not an option. For example, in many traditional societies division by gender[4], a natural partitioning of the population, also leads to the formation of autonomous groups. Men and women form groups that accomplish different task and act collectively for certain purposes. Men hunt, fish, collect fruit, and engage in warfare. Women tend gardens, prepare and cook food and raise children. These are autonomous groups inasmuch as they actively distinguish themselves from their social environment, and can act coherently as a group. They are not however voluntary association, not only because one does not chose to be born man or woman, but mainly because one cannot escape from the obligations and privileges associated with one's gender.

To the contrary my Austrian economist friend who for a long time belonged to the *Austrian Association for Slowing down Time*, a voluntary association for those who wish to be less in a hurry, had no difficulty leaving the association and adopting a different set of behavior. All voluntary associations constitute, at least minimally autonomous groups, and, in principle, it is possible to devise a voluntary association that attempts to match any division of a global population, whether it is a natural or a statistical partition of that population. However, voluntary association autonomous groups suffer from a particular weakness compare to involuntary association autonomous groups: the fact precisely that they are voluntary associations! That is to say, their continued existence rests on the explicit agreement of those who form the group. That is why the only means for a voluntary association to be sustainable in the long run is to transform itself into an involuntary autonomous association, something which happens when the exit cost becomes prohibitively expensive.

Natural partitions of the population usually give rise to involuntary autonomous associations simply because of the evidence of the criteria on which they rest, its social visibility prevents agents from escaping the partition. Because the criteria that defines a natural partition of the population is socially evident, it is extremely difficult to hide the relevant characteristic or, so to speak, to 'cheat', to pretend that one is not 'one of them'. For example, most people cannot successfully pretend that they belong to a language group that is different from the one in which they were born, and even those who can succeed, usually can only do so for some time and with some people only, not with everyone; sooner or lat-

er they will make mistakes that reveal their different origin. The main consequence of this difference between involuntary association autonomous groups and voluntary association autonomous groups, is that voluntary associations are much more fragile and, for the State, much easier to dissolve than involuntary associations autonomous groups.

GROUPS AND (SOCIAL) JUSTICE

As suggested earlier by Rawls's quotation from *A Theory of Justice*, liberal theories of justice tend to construe the targets of social interventions as statistical groups. It is to such groups that principles of justice apply, that is to say, to individuals in virtue of the various social positions or offices that they occupy and not to persons that can be identified on the basis of their proper name, or of natural partitions of the population. This is not entirely surprising given liberal theories of justice are individualistic theories according to which only individual human beings, or aspects of their life, can be intrinsically good or valuable. Such theories are consistent with the fact that statistical groups, in a sense are not really groups, but collections of individuals, sub-sets of the total population.

Members of statistical groups do not have a shared history. They do not have common rules, or any way of saying 'we' when they refer to themselves, apart from the procedure that determines them as elements of that collection, as in "we are those who receive welfare checks" or "we are those who were not born on the national territory". This inability to act as a group can only be remedied if the statistical group can give rise to a voluntary association autonomous group that takes upon itself to speak for the members of the statistical group. However as mentioned earlier, the statistical group and the voluntary association will never coincide perfectly and this will always raise issues of legitimacy: who can speak for the members of the statistical groups? There is a sense then in which statistical groups can be defined as 'transparent groups'. That is to say, they tend to disappear as groups in the eye of the procedure that collects them into a group, only remain visible the individuals that are the elements of the collection. This transparency of statistical groups can be illustrated with the help of the Rawlsian concept of a 'representative person' which we encountered earlier. A representative person is anyone who satisfies the particular criteria that define the sub-set of individuals which interests us, for example the least advantaged, determined by an income lower than X. The group has 'disappeared' from Rawls's text and all that remains is the abstract concept of a representa-

tive person. However it would be wrong to consider that statistical groups are not groups at all, that they are not groups in any sense whatsoever, and that they entirely disappear in the procedure that determines their individual members for special treatment. For it is as members of such groups, as unemployed, or as head of a single parent household, that persons are entitled to financial aid, to fiscal advantages, or to health care benefits, and not as particular individuals who can be identified by their proper name. These groups are real, because they can become the target, the object of particular actions or policies which are directed to them as groups, rather than towards the specific individuals who make them up.[5]

To the opposite, the objects of (and the agents active in) multicultural policies and multicultural theories of justice most often are involuntary association autonomous groups, or at least members of natural partitions of the population. Ethnic groups, cultural, linguistic and religious minorities usually correspond to division of the general population that are evident (and to a large extent that seem relevant) to all. The fact that they are rooted in natural partitions of the population constitutes both an advantage and a disadvantage for such groups. An advantage because as poles of initiatives involuntary autonomous groups can put forward claims and do not need to wait for the state to define them as deserving or requiring special treatment. A disadvantage because given that they are involuntary associations autonomous groups, they inevitably challenge the authority of the State, in a way statistical groups and voluntary association autonomous groups necessarily do not, for the very simple reason that these latter groups depend on the State for their very existence.

There is, in fact, a spontaneous convergence and agreement between modern nation-states, characterized by the monopoly of legitimate violence, and statistical groups. It is not only liberal theories of justice and liberal democratic states that find it easier to deal with statistical groups, but also all modern nation-states that rest on the monopoly of legitimate violence, because statistical groups, not only do not imply any allegiance other than to the State, but further can only exists, can only become socially visible through the agency of the state, or at least with its permission.

This convergence can be illustrated it seems by some recent changes that took place in Chinese society. Yunxiang Yan (2009) in *The Individualization of Chinese Society* shows how in the last few years the rise of consumerism in China has led to the protection of some individual rights, in particular of the rights of consumers[6] Recent consumerism, Yan

argues, constitutes an expression of the development of individualism. While before 1990, buying big consumer items often required the economic power of a social network involving extended kinship, today's consumer market is driven by the preferences and desires of individuals who have to a large extent broken free of this dependence on groups and natural partitions of the population. One consequence of this individualization, is that being the victim of a fraud, or of having bought a faulty or fake product from now on is essentially being a member of a statistical group. Those who have bought a fake or defective product do not share anything in common apart from the fact that they have bought a fake or defective product, and they do not represent anyone else than themselves. In order to join the China Consumer Association or any other Chinese consumer protection group all you need to do is to want to, these are voluntary association, but it is probable that many of those who want to become members also belong to the statistical partition defined by these dubious commercial practices. Interestingly enough, argues Yan, not only did the Chinese government not oppose the development of consumer protection groups, but actually encouraged their creation. When later on it came under sufficient pressure from them, the Chinese government promulgated laws protecting consumers and institutionalized the services offered by consumer protection groups which had spontaneously emerged from the burgeoning Chinese civil society.

The attitude of the Chinese government toward these consumer protection groups who were openly critical of the government and who publicly argued in favor of new regulation is very interesting. While the Chinese government is generally highly sensitive of many forms of criticisms, to which it often reacts strongly, in this case it actually encouraged it! Why? Of course there may be some evident economic reasons at work here, but these economic reasons do not explain why in this case criticizing current policies was considered legitimate and even encouraged. From an economic point of view repressing the criticism and modifying the regulation would have been just as efficient and more in line with what we has often been the Chinese government's response to criticism since 1989. Furthermore the Chinese Communist Party has been ready to suffer important economic drawback when it felt that the political stakes were high enough, as it did after the Tiananmen Square crisis. Why then were the protests of consumer groups encouraged and respected while those of ethnic minorities, like Tibetans or Uyghurs, and those of religious groups generally repressed and silenced? Part of the answer, I suspect is that

unhappy consumers form a statistical group, while ethnic and religious groups correspond to natural partitions of the populations which modern states always see as threatening.

Modern states have an affinity with statistical groups because, as we have seen, such groups do not exist as groups otherwise than as a result of the operation of the state. Statistical groups also satisfy the ideal that there should not be any 'intermediary groups' between the state and individuals. In the absence of the operation that institutes a statistical group there are only individuals. The state in consequence can create or 'erase' a statistical group simply by changing its policy and will only have to face the opposition or reaction of a collection of individuals, not that of a group.

NOTES

1   As Desrosières (1998) shows clearly in this context, the political and epistemological aspect of social categorizations are inseparable: political decisions made methodological innovations relevant and theoretical discoveries inspired new politics.

2   For an analysis of the relation between States and groups that is more complete and general see Dumouchel 2015.

3   This inability to exit is to be understood as a social impossibility rather than an intrinsic incapacity. For example, it is logically possible to change one's class affiliation or one's religion, or even today one's gender, but there are many social situations where no matter what you do you will remain a kulak or a Christian all your life. In such cases being a kulak or a Christian constitutes a natural partition of the population.

4   Division of a population by gender is often referred to in ethnology as 'sexual division of labour'.

5   This criteria is to some extent similar to that put forward by Ian Hacking some years ago concerning the existence of non-observable entities in physics. See Hacking 1983).

6   See especially chapter 9 "The Politics of Consumerism", pp. 207-241.

REFERENCES

Datson, L. J. (1988). *Classical Probabilities in the Enlightenment*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Desrosières, A. (1998). *The politics of large numbers: A history of statistical reasoning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Dumouchel, P. (2015). *The Barren Sacrifice an essay on Political Violence*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.

Hacking, I. (1983). *Representing and Intervening*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hacking, I. (1990). *The Taming of Chance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Heath, J. (2005). Methodological Individualism. In: *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* at http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/methodological-individualism/

Rae, H. (2002). *State Identities and the Homogenization of People*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rawls, J. (1971). *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Stigler, S. M. (1986). *The History of Statistics. The Measure of Uncertainty before 1900*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and Society*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Yan, Y. (2009). *The Individualization of Chinese Society*. Oxford: Berg.