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HOW TO CRITICIZE OUR SOCIETIES TODAY?

PART I: PRAGMATIC SOCIOLOGY AND PRAGMATIC CRITICAL THEORY AS A SOCIAL CRITIQUE

ABSTRACT

The article is dedicated to the pragmatic social critique as one of the most influential patterns of contemporary social critique. It is focused on the evolution of Luc Boltanski's pragmatic sociology of the critique, which initially refused to play an overtly critical role and restricted itself to reconstructing the modalities of critique social actors recourse to in their everyday practices. In his most recent publication, however, Boltanski seems to return to Pierre Bourdieu's definition of sociology as a critical sociology. According to Boltanski, the critical vocation of sociology is supposed to answer the increasing critical deficit that social actors experience in the context of contemporary societies with their complex forms of domination.

The aim of our study is to make this two-sided transformation comprehensible by putting into question the underlying methodological and political arguments. The pragmatic sociology seems methodologically more convincing but politically weaker than Bourdieu's critical sociology. Moreover, it seems more legitimate but less efficient in its critical effects. How could this dilemma of social critique opposing requirements of legitimacy and requirements of efficiency be solved?

Keywords: social critique, pragmatic sociology, social classes, domination, capitalism.

INTRODUCTION

Social critique today is threatened by a double danger: to be too timid or to be too arrogant. The last book of Eric Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World? Marx and Marxism 1840–2011* (Hobsbawm, 2011) casts light on this disequilibrium of critique. The collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989 has been hastily understood as the definitive triumph of liberal democracy

and capitalism. Twenty years later, the world financial and economic crisis has been hastily considered the sign of the forthcoming failure of liberal democracy and breakdown of capitalism, and this has provoked the revengeful rehabilitation of ideas that had been until recently suppressed: those of social revolution and of communism. The social critic who is ashamed by the first failure risks being unnecessarily self-restrictive, resigned to the current form of society; the social critic inspired by the second failure risks being extremely speculative and arbitrary, neglecting the concrete experience of social actors. Regardless of his well-known and honestly acknowledged ideological creed, Hobsbawm claims that we should accept both failures: state socialism, as it was realized in Eastern Europe, has failed once and for all and cannot be restored, and the same is true of the ideology of the free market. Neither of these two failures should make us forget the other.

The aim of this text is to analyse one of the most prominent contemporary patterns of social critique—the *pragmatic social critique*—with regard to these critical dilemmas, and also with regard to the way it treats the globally triumphant neoliberalism, the increasing “economization” of social relations, the growth of social inequalities, and ever-deepening feelings of injustice, disrespect and humiliation.

The pattern of the *pragmatic social critique* includes the traditions of critical sociology and critical theory. The representatives of this pattern bind social critique to empirical social research and thus to the experience and moral sense of social actors, thereby avoiding the dangers of theoretical arbitrariness. In a theoretical perspective, this pattern is closely related to the intellectual tradition of pragmatism, more precisely, to the pragmatic turn in philosophy and social sciences during the 1970s and 1980s. In the framework of critical theory, this turn refers to Jürgen Habermas’ *Universal Pragmatics* (1976), but later it was reformulated and developed differently by Axel Honneth in his book *The Struggle for Recognition* (1992). In the framework of critical sociology, on which my research is focused, the pragmatic turn occurred with Boltanski’s book *On Justification* (1991), where he criticizes Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology and formulates his own *pragmatic sociology of critique*. The methodological impact of the pragmatic turn implied a crucial transformation of the relationship between social science and social critique: social science refused to assume the role of subject of the critique, transforming it into a mere object of research. From now on, the task is either to reconstruct the critical potential implied by the universal conditions of intersubjective communication (Habermas) or to differentiate the regimes of justification and critique social actors refer to in their everyday intercourse (Boltanski). Following both scientific and moral imperatives, the social sciences renounced its monopoly over the legitimate social critique, devolving it to the social actors.

During the last decade, due to the “economization” of social relations, the “displacements of capitalism” and the expansion of the managerial model of

governance, which were more and more considered as the source of new forms of domination, new forms of social injustice, and new forms of social pathologies, even the pragmatically oriented social sciences decided to invest social critique with a new and stronger role. This trend is particularly visible in two recent books of Luc Boltanski: *Rendre la réalité inacceptable* (2008) and *De la critique. Précis de sociologie de l'émancipation* (2009). The sociological diagnosis Boltanski comes to is that the process of transformation of capitalism ongoing since the 1980s and the increasingly fragmented social milieu have made domination and social injustice difficult to identify, thus depriving social critique of its basic reference points. In this situation, pragmatic sociology should recover the functions of a critical sociology—the functions it has deliberately abandoned—because it can no longer restrict itself to the mere reconstruction of the critical competences of social actors. Given that these competences are so disproportioned with regard to the new complex and sophisticated forms of domination, the gap should be filled exactly by the critical efforts of sociology itself. And herein lies the problem. A pragmatic sociology of the critique can no longer rely on the largely insufficient critical competences of social actors; instead, it should formulate its own stronger critical project. However, this critical project should still stay embedded in the experience and the moral sense of the actors. This is the challenge both pragmatic sociology and critical theory have to deal with: How can they be relevant to the experience of social actors and to the normative requirements inscribed in the social world, and, at the same time, introduce a productive asymmetry between the critical potential of the actors and the critical potential of social theory? Where does the “critical excess” of social theory come from? The theoretical contribution of the pragmatic sociology of critique and of critical theory can be evaluated precisely with respect to their capacity to clarify and justify the possibility of this productive asymmetry and of this “critical excess.”

FROM BOURDIEU AND HABERMAS TO BOLTANSKI AND HONNETH

Regardless of the considerable methodological differences between their theories, Habermas and Pierre Bourdieu seem to share a similar endeavour: Both *critical social theory* and *critical sociology* are tempted to integrate social critique into the body of social theory. In the case of Bourdieu, as pointed out by Boltanski, social critique (the critique of domination) is integrated in the very description of the social world that claims scientific objectivity. This paradoxical and arguable reconciliation of science's self-understanding in terms of axiological neutrality and the axiologically involved critique is made possible at the level of rhetoric: The critique is expressed through rhetorical devices, which are woven into presumably impartial scientific analysis. In the case of Haber-

mas, social critique is integrated into the very procedures of communicative rationality. The intersubjective rules of any successful communication, as formulated by Habermas in the *Universal pragmatics*, presuppose that we mutually criticize each other, thus ruling out those unacceptable claims (implying domination, exploitation etc.) that could not be defended from a universalistic point of view.

We could argue that in both cases, that of the critical social theory as well as that of the critical sociology, the social critique has been brought out of the social world, it has been, so to speak, socially disincarnated in order to be theoretically reincarnated, either in the scientific description of the world or in the universal and formal conditions of communication. Both theories have elaborated a powerful conceptual apparatus accompanied by a strong objectivist or universalistic claim, but haven't they done this at the expense of estrangement from the critical potentialities of social actors themselves? The further development of critical sociology after Bourdieu and of critical social theory after Habermas could be defined by a similar shifting of attention from the theoretical elaborations of social critiques towards the exploration of socially generated forms of social critique.

The disciples of Bourdieu and Habermas—Luc Boltanski and Axel Honneth—gradually moved away from the paradigms of their teachers, and in the beginning of the 1990s they elaborated their own critical projects. Boltanski formulated his *pragmatic sociology of the critique*,¹ and Honneth his theory of the *struggles for recognition*.² What are the principle arguments that underlie the rejection of their teachers' theories and what are the consequences of this rejection for their own theories?

Boltanski summarizes his critique of Pierre Bourdieu's critical sociology in three main points:³

1) *The unity of scientific objectivity and social critique*: Boltanski reproaches Bourdieu for the basic ambiguity of his sociological discourse, which combines a claim for scientific objectivity, on the one side, with a value determined social critique, on the other. According to Boltanski this position seems difficult to justify, because it entails that "sociology is [...] both the instrument for describing domination and the instrument for emancipation from domination,"⁴ thus strangely reconciling Max Weber and Karl Marx's standpoints;

2) *The privilege of sociological knowledge*: "Sociology then tends to be invested with the overweening power of being the main discourse of truth on the

¹ (Boltanski, Thévenot, 1991).

² (Honneth, 1992).

³ This critique has been first developed in: Boltanski, L. 1990. "Sociologie critique et sociologie de la critique." *Politix*, vol. 3, no 10, 124–134. Then it has been proceeded in a recent book: Boltanski, L. 2009. *De la critique. Précis de sociologie de l'émancipation*. Paris: Gallimard.

⁴ (Boltanski, 2011, 19).

social world ...”⁵ and this presupposes the introduction of a too-drastic asymmetry between the “professional” knowledge of social scientists and the “ordinary” knowledge of social actors;

3) *The predetermination of the situations of action*: Bourdieu’s critical sociology implies the underestimation of social actors’ critical capacities, and a greater importance is also attributed to their dispositions at the expense of role played by the concrete configurations of the situations of action. Bourdieu subordinates actions either to objective social structures or to interiorized (mainly through the process of education) dominant social norms, whilst the peculiarities of the situations are neglected. According to Boltanski, it is not by chance that Bourdieu uses the term *agent* instead of *actor*, since the former term emphasizes both the objective and the subjective predetermination of social action.

As a response to Bourdieu’s critical sociology, Boltanski gives the following concise definition of his pragmatic sociology of the critique: “The strategy implemented consisted in *returning to things themselves*, as phenomenology puts it.”⁶ The meaning of this return is to launch again the social critique which, in order to be convincing and efficient, should be “solidly rooted in social reality.” For sociology’s self-definition this implies that sociology should give up its directly critical functions and replace them with the task of reconstructing the critical competences of social actors who, even while making use of them, are not completely aware of them. The purpose of the pragmatic sociology of the critique more particularly is to clarify the normative framework to which social actors refer when they criticize other actors’ positions or when they justify themselves against other actors’ critiques.

Seen through the lenses of Boltanski’s pragmatic sociology, the social world looks significantly different than the social world presented by Bourdieu’s critical sociology. Neither the actors nor their interactions are the same:

“The *actors* whom these [Boltanski’s] works have made visible were very different from the *agents* who feature in the critical sociology of domination. They were always active, not passive. They were frankly critical, even critical rather in the manner of critical sociologists [...] Envisaged thus, the social world doesn’t appear to be the site of domination endured passively and unconsciously, but instead as a space shot through by a multiplicity of disputes, critiques, disagreements and attempts to re-establish locally agreements that are always fragile.”⁷

⁵ Ibid., 21.

⁶ Ibid., 24.

⁷ Ibid., 26–27.

The critiques of Honneth towards Habermas, although formulated in the language of a different paradigm, follow a similar direction. According to Honneth, critical social theory should be defined through the linkage between social critique and the prescientific moral experience of social actors. It is precisely from that linkage that the legitimacy of theory derives. If it is to be considered legitimate, it should thematize, problematize, give voice to a current suffering, exploitation etc. Actually, it is merely a theoretical reconstruction of a moral content given on a pre-theoretical level:

“By ‘critical theory of society’ we mean that type of social thought that shares a particular form of normative critique with the Frankfurt School’s original program—indeed, perhaps, with the whole tradition of Left Hegelianism—which can also inform us about the pretheoretical resource [...] in which its own viewpoint is anchored extratheoretically as an empirical interest or moral experience.”⁸

“Without some form of proof that its critical perspective is reinforced by a need or a movement within social reality, Critical Theory cannot be pursued in any way today, for it would no longer be capable of distinguishing itself from other models of social critique in its claim to a superior sociological explanatory substance or in its philosophical procedures of justification. It is solely by its attempt (which still has not been abandoned) to give the standards of critique an objective foothold in pre-theoretical praxis that it may be said to stand alone.”⁹

According to Honneth, however, the history of the Frankfurt school is also the history of the gradual loss of this linkage between critical theory and its extra-theoretical backings in social reality. Critical theory has already lost this linkage in the works of Adorno, and it was later blurred again in the works of Habermas. The historical-philosophical negativism of Adorno is considered by Honneth to mark the definitive failure of the attempt to give theory a social-historical legitimacy. Actually, as the reflections in the *Dialectics of Enlightenment* point out, the only place where a kind of transcendence in the world is still possible is the practice of modern art. As to Habermas’s theory of communication, according to Honneth the process of emancipation, anchored in the procedures of communicative rationality, remains distant from the moral experience of social actors, since they don’t feel the violation of their moral expectations as a limitation of their linguistic competence, but rather as a violation of their claims for identity acquired through their socialization. The normative perspective of Habermas’s communicative theory, despite its claims to reconstruct pro-

⁸ (Honneth, 2007, 63–64.)

⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

cesses going on in the life-world, could hardly find any consistent backing in social reality.

The main objection of Honneth against Habermas, presented as schematically as possible, consists in the argument that Habermas's theory lacks a stable sociological justification, that it is not related relevantly to the moral experience of social actors, and, more precisely, that it is not sensitive to the way they live this experience. Honneth's proposal is to develop the communicative paradigm further in the direction of its sociological prerequisites, which implies "that we not equate the normative potential of social interaction with the linguistic conditions of reaching understanding free of domination,"¹⁰ but focus instead more on the violation of the claims for identity to which social actors themselves bear witness in a variety of forms. It is precisely in this perspective that Honneth suggests that critical theory should not be normatively bound up with the theoretically reconstructed universal conditions of communication, but rather with the social conflicts in which social actors give direct expression to their frustrated moral expectations:

"... I got to the idea that every conflict is partially motivated by moral convictions, because some legitimate claims, claims for identity, have been unjustly rejected. My view today is that all types of social conflicts, even those who envisage redistribution of goods and seem to be purely interested, should be understood as normative conflicts, as struggles for recognition."¹¹

Thus, the whole conception of critical social theory is deeply transformed: Its purpose is no longer to formulate, on a purely theoretical level, the universal model of valid communication (free of domination and constraint); it is to articulate the value horizon and the normative expectations of social actors manifested in social conflicts, protest movements etc. The energy and the content of social critique derive from the social world, and more precisely from the pre-theoretical experience of social actors; the task of critical social theory consists in the reflexive clarification of this experience.¹²

The reorientation of social critique in the works of Boltanski and Honneth—its anchoring in the normative expectations and in the critical capacities of social actors—is similarly motivated by the concern to make social critique sociologically more relevant and thus more convincing for social actors themselves.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹¹ (Honneth, 2011, 30.)

¹² For Honneth the requirement of legitimacy of social critique—the need for it to be closely related to the prescientific experience of social actors—is the argument he uses, on the one hand, against Adorno and Habermas, and, on the other hand, against the projects of a radical social critique. In a conversation with a philosopher Krassimir Stoyanov, Honneth claims that the radicalization of critique "hides the danger of not being capable at all of establishing the legitimacy of its own critical instance. Therefore, if its linkage with the prescientific norms is too weakened, then the critical standpoint becomes arbitrary." See (Honneth, 2001, 56).

The social world where social critique develops is already different from that presupposed by Bourdieu and Habermas: It could not be seen any more through the perspective of total domination or from that of universal consensus. Both total domination and universal consensus represent strong, integrative theoretical idealizations which were made possible and intellectually credible in the institutional framework of the Welfare State.¹³ But the changed historical context in the last three decades requires a different approach: the appeal to “going back to social reality,” to the experience of social actors could not but be paid for by the fragmentation of social critique, which becomes particularized and, so to say, distributed among a variety of social actors and their normative claims. But this first step should be followed by a second one, which the real task of social critique consists in: overcoming fragmentation of society by discovering the conceptual grounds for new collective social divisions, without however neglecting the irreducible pluralism of social experiences.

PRAGMATIC SOCIOLOGY OF CRITIQUE AND/OR CRITICAL SOCIOLOGY

Boltanski's and Chiapello's *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005) ends with the general conclusion that social critique today is disoriented, incapable of renewing its vocabulary, of identifying the new forms of domination. In his recent publications, *On Critique. A Sociology of Emancipation*, but also *Make Reality Unacceptable (Rendre la réalité inacceptable*¹⁴), Boltanski tries to explain the reasons for this *malaise* of critique and to redefine the very relationship between sociology and social critique. Reevaluating the programme of his *pragmatic sociology of critique*, he suggests that it is time for sociology to abandon its previous modesty and to become again critical.¹⁵ Pragmatic sociology of critique and critical sociology are no more considered to be the terms of an alternative, since, according to Boltanski, the only way for social critique to be at the same time sociologically relevant and socially efficient is to put together the contributions of both approaches.¹⁶

In the last publications dedicated to the critical role of sociology Boltanski raises two main questions. The first one is: Why have the critical competence of social actors, the critical potential of their everyday communication, the forces

¹³ On how the institutions of Welfare State favored the development of critical sociology, see (Boltanski, 2011, 45–46).

¹⁴ (Boltanski, 2008a.)

¹⁵ In the *On Critique. A Sociology of Emancipation* Boltanski proposes a detailed description of the critical deficits of his pragmatic sociology of critique. See (Boltanski, 2011, 29–33).

¹⁶ According to Boltanski : To be credible today, sociologies directed towards a metacritique of domination should [...] equip themselves with an analytical framework that makes it possible to integrate the contributions of what we have called the *overarching programme* [of the critical sociology], on the one hand, and the *pragmatic programme*, on the over (Boltanski, 2011, 48).

of civil society proved, so to speak, to be insufficient to produce an adequate understanding and critique of contemporary societies? Why has this idea, which Boltanski himself long believed in, suddenly proved inadequate? Whence this deficiency, inability, incompetence? The second question is: Can social critique be a task of sociology today, and if yes, in what form?

Boltanski gives a more detailed and convincing answer to the first question, that of the absence of social critique. According to him, the main reason for the exhaustion of the critical energy of civil society is the great social change that took place in the Western world in the second half of the 1970s, which consisted in a change of the model of justice, of the fundamental structural categories in which society thinks of itself, of the organisation of work. As regards the model of justice, there was a transition from the model of *collective redistribution* (*redistribution collective*) to the model of *individual reward* (*rétribution individuelle*). From a sociological point of view, the *meritocratic model* based on the individualisation of merits and rewards entails the fragmentation and elimination of collectives. According to Boltanski, this model is conservative, because it substitutes the redistribution among classes or groups, which requires social reforms, implementation of social policies, and so on, with redistribution among individuals depending on their contributions, which is done within the framework of the status quo. The meritocratic model was established as dominant because of the coordinated effect of two factors, and this was concomitant with the elimination of social classes. Boltanski calls the first factor “displacements of capitalism” (*déplacements du capitalisme*). This factor concerns a change in the organisation of work that took place in the 1980s and 90s, resulting simultaneously in the growth of inequalities and their ever more difficult identification as collective inequalities

“precisely because of the individualisation of the conditions of work, of the transformation of categorisations (categorisations using classifying criteria), of the change of designations (for example, ‘operator’ instead of ‘worker’), of the growth in the number of workers with a different status working in one and the same place, and so on.”¹⁷

It follows, then, that the imposition of the meritocratic model and the elimination of social classes necessary for it is above all a strategy of capitalism and, in particular, a corporate policy, which, by reorganising the form and nomenclature of work, disunites and alienates workers from each other, eliminating the conditions for the creation of a community of workers. The death of social classes, then, is not the result of natural evolution—it is a caused death, we may even say a staged death. This conclusion is important because, as we shall see, it is at the basis of the possibility for the revival of social critique.

¹⁷ Ibid., 131.

The staging and proclamation of the death of class society is not the work of capitalism alone. Capitalism closely interacts with the State. Boltanski follows Marx in this respect: Capitalism and the State are in complicity; the State has a class character. As regards the conditions for the existence of classes, however, he remains a disciple of Bourdieu: Classes exist or cease to exist depending on whether the State recognises their existence or not. After the end of the Second World War, in the 1950–1970 period, the State (more specifically, the French State) recognised the existence of social classes and of class struggle by peaceful means within the State itself as a way to control social conflicts and their possibly revolutionary denouement. In the 1980s this danger decreased significantly—due to the weakening of the trade union movement, the “shrinking” of communist parties, the implosion of the countries from the Eastern bloc—and then “a new formula of the State in which the very term ‘social class’ is absent was established.”¹⁸ The removal of this term from the official vocabulary of the State led to the abandonment or relegation of other important terms, such as “social handicap” (*handicap social*), “social inequalities,” or “social justice”, as well as of regulative ideas like “equalising living conditions” or “equalising chances of success,” which until then had determined the agenda of society.

In other words, to summarise: According to Boltanski, the “displacements of capitalism” and the change in the “formula of the State” are processes that were coordinated, synchronised, and deliberate with regard to their effects; these processes led to the fragmentation of the social sphere and the disappearance of large structural units such as “classes.” Here we are less interested in the plausibility of this thesis than in the final diagnosis—the disintegration of social classes and fragmentation of the social sphere. But what is the connection between this diagnosis, if we accept it to be true, and social critique? To Boltanski, it is more than obvious: In a fragmented social sphere where everyone is tied to a specific status, social critique becomes impossible. Not just because the unity and “striking power” of the collective is lost, but above all because “social visibility” is lost: Certain determining social conditions can be discerned, understood, and turned into causes only if they are defined as collective conditions. According to Boltanski, this is what constitutes the advantage of sociological analysis in terms of social classes and the class division of society:

“Statistics based on class equivalence [...] allow one to reveal the inequalities in the distribution of public or private goods and to show that successes or failures are neither distributed randomly nor depend on individual qualities (as the ideology of meritocracy claims), but according to collective chances for access.”¹⁹

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 122–123.

The elimination of social classes and the rejection of the analysis of society in class categories deprived social critique of moral grounds, turning the problem of social inequalities and social injustice into a private problem. Why criticise, if everyone is personally responsible for his own life, for his successes and failures? In addition to this first reason, Boltanski also suggests a second one, namely "the withdrawal of power from discourse." Who is to criticise, if the sources and channels of domination cannot be clearly identified in contemporary societies? Unlike the "simple domination" characteristic of totalitarian regimes and dictatorships, contemporary "complex domination," as Boltanski calls it, is not achieved through repression or legitimated ideologically. It is based on "dispositives" (institutions, legal systems, regulations), which are simultaneously diverse, dispersed, and encoded in professional jargons, and are therefore difficult to reconstruct and unite in a single general picture. In the new mode of domination:

"partial and technical measures, which are difficult to interpret for non-specialists and dispersed but nevertheless coordinated, are implemented discreetly without resorting to extensive ideological discourses in the public sphere, the only starting point at the local level being the reference to rationalisation, to efficiency, to the saving of resources and to quality in the sense of quality of 'products'."²⁰

It is precisely this neutral expert discourse, uttered monotonously and melancholically as if in the voice of historical necessity itself, which conceals the social inequalities and tensions, obfuscates the possible ideological identifications and legitimations, and tones down the political differences, ultimately rendering politics itself meaningless.

SOCIAL CRITIQUE: OLD WORDS, NEW PERSPECTIVES

The second question raised by Boltanski concerns the possibility of social critique today, and more specifically of social critique as a task of sociology. In its turn, this question points to another one: Is it possible to reactivate the old critical reflexes, to use once again the erstwhile conceptual tools of critique? This is precisely what Boltanski does: He reintroduces terms such as *domination*, *dominant class*, and *dominant ideology*, which reproduce the situation of a polarised, dramatic social sphere and are as if designed to "magically" invoke social critique. Unlike in Marx, however, where these terms are clearly defined, in Boltanski they tend to remain empty signifiers. In Marx, the dominant class and the exploited class are designated as bourgeoisie and proletariat, and defined through ownership and their place in the division of labour and the production process. In Boltanski the contours of the dominant and the exploited are

²⁰ Ibid., 164.

vague, and it is as if the only thing that distinguishes the two categories is the cyclicity of successes and failures. The deep social asymmetries are measured by the indicator that "it is invariably the *same ones* who succeed in all (or almost all) trials, while for others, who are invariably the *same too*, the trials always (or almost always) have a negative outcome."²¹ In Marx the main mechanism for exploiting workers is elucidated through the *added value theory*. Boltanski does not deal with the mechanisms for exploitation of the oppressed classes by the dominant class. Marx has his own theory of ideology, expounded in *The German Ideology*. Boltanski argues that there is no dominant ideology, because in contemporary societies domination is exercised without ideology: political goals are achieved "discreetly and efficiently without recourse to discourse and to justification, by direct intervention on the dispositives themselves."²² In addition, unlike in Marx, where social critique is objectively based on a philosophy of history, in Boltanski there is no philosophy of history, agent of social change or horizon of change. All those deficits are compensated for by a single surplus. Boltanski hyperbolises to the point of absurdity the influence and freedom of "the new class of success" (the managers in the different social spheres). In Marx's theory, capitalists are the dominant class by virtue of the objective structure of social reality, not just by virtue of their own will to dominate, and therefore to the extent that they are inscribed in reality, to the extent that they are subordinate to the latter, they too are subject to social constraints: the cyclic crises of capitalism, capitalist competition, the phenomenon of "alienation" characteristic of bourgeois society, and so on. In Boltanski, "the rulers" (the dominant class, the class of the privileged) are represented as *constructors of social reality*: They are "the producers of the rules which they impose on others,"²³ but they themselves are free to play with those rules, being in a sphere that is as if free from all social constraints and regulations.

Applied to the situation of contemporary societies, the classical scheme of class societies, with their divisions and conflicts, proves incapable of expressing their specificity. The dominant class cannot be identified clearly in social and ideological terms, nor can its domination be clearly deciphered. Societies have changed, but so has the way we think of them. In this situation, critical sociology seems to have no other option but to join the general trend of critiquing democracy in the name of democracy, which is one of the two possible idioms of social critique today.

Although it is well-founded, Boltanski's critique of contemporary society is not original. Today this critique is shared by many researchers in the humanities and social sciences. What is even more important is that Boltanski has not arrived at it by means of the research tools of critical sociology: He has not

²¹ *Ibid.*, 155.

²² *Ibid.*, 163.

²³ *Ibid.*, 169.

invented it, he has simply joined it, adding his voice to that of others. According to this critique, in the last twenty or thirty years democracy has gradually turned into a “market democracy” or “manager democracy.” The moment that is key to understanding this decline is the change of legitimacy: *Political legitimacy* has been supplanted by *expert legitimacy*. Whereas once—not so long ago, in the 1960s and 70s—the ruling elites still legitimated themselves through the principle of representation, claiming to represent citizens, nowadays they legitimate themselves through their expert knowledge. The essence of this “democratic decline” can be represented schematically by the changed relationship between politics and economics. According to Boltanski, in the last thirty years there has been a new articulation of the State and capitalism, whose principle is

“subjection of politics—defined as investigation of lateral possibilities [different variants of the future society which are subject to collective choice]—to neoclassical economics viewed as an implacable science of the determining conditions [*déterminations*] by virtue of which reality is what it is and cannot be other. In this logic, ‘the responsible’ [*les responsables*] have no choice but to follow ‘the new trends’ determined by ‘experts,’ therefore the role of politics cannot be other than marginal. The exercise of politics in this case is reduced primarily to strategic management of information (not to say propaganda) or to some kind of palliative medicine.”²⁴

In other words, politics must present the decisions prepared by experts in a way that makes them maximally acceptable to the citizens. In addition, politics must develop adaptive measures that will mitigate the social consequences of the implementation of these decisions.

In a recent article called *Institutions et critique sociale. Une approche pragmatique de la critique*,²⁵ Boltanski proposes a more modest but also more concrete critical task of sociology. If contemporary (state) institutions, applying the principle of meritocracy, fragmentise the social sphere—dividing and isolating individuals—then critique must do the opposite: It must counteract fragmentation, linking individuals with each other, helping to create new social ties between them. The critical function is a function involving the *social linking* of individuals:

“Its [of critique] development rests on work whose object is linking—social linking [*le lien social*]—and which consists in destroying some relations in order to establish others. This does not mean substituting autonomy for heteronomy in the sense of the Enlightenment. On the contrary, the work aimed at linking consists in expanding, often in a categorial mode, properties hith-

²⁴ Ibid., 142–143.

²⁵ (Boltanski, 2008b.)

erto regarded as accidental or secondary so as to make them a mainstay for *classes*, be it in the sense of ‘social classes’ or of genders and/or sexual orientations or of the attitude toward nationality or ethnicity, and so on.”²⁶

The role of social critique is not simply to reveal, to unmask, to deconstruct domination, but also to help construct groups or classes that are carriers of social change.²⁷ This is exactly what should be the contribution of the overarching programme of critical sociology: its totalizing approach to social reality should first of all help surmount social fragmentation.²⁸ If in social reality individuals are institutionally (meritocratically) disunited, then social critique, working in the zone of the marginal, insignificant, rejected, unarticulated characteristics, strives to create new “chains of equivalence” that can become the basis for the appearance of new collective agents penetrating reality and changing reality.²⁹ What is specific to Boltanski, however, is a clearly discernible self-limitation in his notion of the future “classes.” Whereas Boltanski refuses to predict exactly what they will be, he outlines their general profile. In this description we could recognize the special contribution of his pragmatic sociology of critique, which emphasizes particularly the irreducible pluralism of social experiences.³⁰ So, these classes will not be classes of the State, nor will they be associated exclusively with a single political party; they will be based on one leading characteristic—for example, socio-occupational identity—but they will not completely identify themselves with the latter, keeping the significance of their other identifications as well (gender, sexual, religious, ethnic, and so on); above all, they will not identify themselves primarily through the struggle for political power.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁷ Boltanski admits that this task could hardly be fulfilled by pragmatic sociology as defined in *De la justification* (Boltanski, Thévenot (1991)). This is because pragmatic sociology is confined to the critique expounded by the actors themselves, which is too dependent on the models of justice established in the particular historical context. It often follows the requirements of those models and is incapable of turning into a critique of the models themselves: “We can ask ourselves whether the model of the meaning of justice established on the basis of the polls conducted in the 80s has made way for a *meritocratic* model of justice because of its contextual dependence upon the historical moment characterised by the failure of the efforts made in the previous decades to impose the validity of a collective notion of justice viewed as *social justice*” (Boltanski, (2009, 59).

²⁸ According to Boltanski, from the overarching programme critically oriented sociology should take the possibility “of challenging reality [...], of providing the dominated with tools for resisting fragmentation—and this by offering them a picture of the social order and also principles of equivalence on which they could seize to make comparisons between them and increase their strength by combining into collectives” (Boltanski, 2011, 48).

²⁹ In Boltanski’s view social discontent is constructed in a similar way as by Ernesto Laclau (2005).

³⁰ From the pragmatic programme critically oriented sociology “should pay attention to the activities and critical competences of actors and acknowledgement of the pluralistic expectations which, in contemporary democratic-capitalist societies, seem to occupy a central position in the critical sense of actors, including the most dominated among them” (Boltanski 2011, 48).

By introducing this limitation, Boltanski clearly manifests his own position: He eliminates from the code of the future classes the possibility for a revolutionary deviation that might call into question liberal democracy itself.

Boltanski is one of the authors who think that we must urgently invent a way to remain within the framework of democracy, but to this end we urgently need carriers of social change—of new social projects, new proposals for a social world within the framework of democracy. If this endeavour fails, if the existential vacuum filled with entertainment and consumption and the crisis of the social imagination continues, then another idiom of social critique will take the upper hand—a radical critique where the first condition for unlocking the social imagination is disassembling the restrictive emblem “democracy.” After Boltanski come Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou.

CONCLUSION

The pattern of the pragmatic social critique that has been presented in this text could be clearly defined in view of the dilemma of whether social critique should meet the requirements of legitimacy or that of efficiency: Boltanski's pragmatic sociology emphasizes legitimacy at the expense of efficiency. Sociology could deal with social critique only if it renounces the intention to be itself a critique and limits its effort to explore the different forms of social critique developed by social actors. This modesty of sociology has been put into question in the recent books of Boltanski, since he has realized how disproportionate the critical potential of social actors is with regard to the current forms of domination. So, sociology should become again “critical sociology,” even if its increased efficiency would cast doubt on its legitimacy. But even then, sociology is still conceived of by Boltanski as an empirical scientific discipline, which is firmly rooted in the moral experience of social actors. If it oversteps its previous scientific asceticism and assumes critical functions, it will be in so far as it aims to help social actors better understand their situation and the reasons for their current suffering, restore the social bonds between them and thus give them the possibility to organize themselves in order to change those segments of the social world that are relevant to their personal biography. But all further steps—sociological clarification, restoration of social bonds, social demands, social change—are considered as remaining meaningfully anchored in the initial moral experience of social actors as it is lived by them.

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