The impasse of French critical sociology :

Attempts at a materialist renewal

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Abstract

Many significant intellectual developments (Frankfurt School, Bourdieu) continue to be based on the assumption that workers, social actors, etc. unconsciously reproduce the social structures of capitalism whilst being alienated by them. They cannot contribute to their emancipation. To account for new forms of social resistance to domination we need an alternative approach. We consider Boltanski's pragmatic sociology, most notably his conception of institutions, and Latour's own pragmatic stance because they offer some potential solutions to the question of resistance. However while productive we found these two contributions to critical social theory also problematic. Boltanski continues to imagine emancipation primarily as a return to some ideal state. As to Latour he abandons the question of domination. In this paper we will outline our own position as a materialist critique of the established order. This will lead us to ponder on the political role of sociologists.

Introduction

This article is concerned with the lack of effectiveness of contemporary critical theories in explaining the conditions for social change. These theories, we would argue, continue to rely on a narrow construction of social actors. Indeed from the Frankfurt School to Bourdieu, many significant intellectual developments have taken place which continue to be based on one key assumption: that individuals (workers, social actors, etc.) unconsciously reproduce the social structures of capitalism whilst being alienated by them. They accept the conditions enforced on them and no longer seek to rebel against a system which impoverishes not only their work and culture, but also their soul and their creativity. What is more: they ensure the reproduction of the system by seeking to engage in mass consumption at any cost, or by glorifying the dominant values.

In this paper we would like to show that today, no new critical perspective has emerged out of this negative representation of the world. Indeed, critical works present 'man' living here and now as nothing more than a deeply bastardized being, corrupted, denatured and soiled. What we have is in effect a social actor who, in Rousseau's philosophical tradition, has been perverted by a civilizing process informed by modernity or capitalism. This view of social actors rests on a form of disgust towards the world.

This approach is problematic: it assumes that capitalism or modernity have robbed social actors of their original purity and of the consciousness of their alienated condition. In other words thinkers belonging to the Frankfurt School and those associated with Bourdieu's critical sociology believe in the existence of a transcendental and ideal subjectivity for social actors which predates modern society. In this understanding resistance to alienation would consist of recovering this ideal subjectivity. Authors of the Frankfurt School have fallen into this trap, which has its roots in Rousseau and his conception of a state of nature, with concepts such as false needs, false conscience, reification, instrumental reason (…), to capture what is at stake. Correspondingly Bourdieu argues that social actors are not equipped to identify and critique their alienation, and he positions sociology as the

discipline which will save social actors from the alienation of their habitus, their illusions or their common sense. We would argue that there are problems with these approaches: i. They assume a pristine state of nature and unspoilt humans, all of which predate the social; ii. The alienated is unable to resist his/her condition by him/herself; iii. Resistance would entail a return to unmediated subjectivity and sociality.

In other words, ironically, social actors cannot contribute to their own emancipation and to the process of social change. This denial of the role that social actors could play in their emancipation is unsatisfactory. It cannot account for new forms of social resistance to domination such as those embodied by the animal rights organisation, *Extinction rebellion,* new feminist movements such as *Femen*, Temporary Autonomous Zone, movements of unemployed people or illegals (etc.),. These new forms of resistance demand an alternative approach, one which is firmly embedded in sociological questions about the potential for emancipation in social action.

Focusing on debates in French sociology, we explore the potential for such an approach in a stepwise way. Firstly, we will examine in detail Bourdieu's position to show, as evoked, that his intellectual stance, shared with the Frankfurt School, is steeped in idealism. Secondly we will identify the key elements of Boltanski's pragmatic sociology, most notably his conception of institutions, to show how it provides promising tools to examine people's actions without burdening them with false consciousness or illusions. Thirdly, inspired by the materialist turn suggested in Latour's pragmatism, we will endeavour to show why part of Boltanski's critical pragmatic sociology nevertheless contains a latent idealism. Latour's materialist position is a departure from Bourdieu's view of sociology as illusion-free and from Boltanski's metacritical methodology. But we will also see why the Latourian rejection of the very ideas of critique and domination is itself problematic. Thus, in a fourth step, we outline our own critical and materialist stance, articulated in examples of emancipation already nascent here and now in some social movements. As sociologists ourselves we do offer a critique of the established order and retain the concept of domination as central. In contrast we take seriously the discourses and denunciations of social actors as having inherent critical potential. However we

argue that we need to take social contingency into account when making sense of these forms of agency. First we note the ambivalence of the law regarding both the established order and the resistant practices of social actors and second we ponder on the political role of sociologists.

1. Bourdieu's critique of social action as social reproduction

1.1 *Common sense, ordinary language and false consciousness*

At the heart of the French critical school whose figurehead is Bourdieu is the idea that the dominated reproduce, and participate in, the conditions of their own domination. To this extent, Bourdieu's sociological programme is suffused with the concerns raised by the Frankfurt School that social actors are unable to move beyond false consciousness and processes of reification.

Indeed in *Distinction*, Bourdieu states: "There is no doubt in the area of education and culture that the members of the dominated class have the least chance of discovering their objective interest and producing and imposing the problematic most consistent with their interests. Awareness of the economic and social determinants of cultural dispossession in fact varies in almost inverse ratio to cultural dispossession (…). Every hierarchical relationship draws part of the legitimacy that the dominated themselves grant it from a confused perception that is based on the opposition between 'education' and ignorance." (Bourdieu 1984: 387, 390)

Bourdieu openly acknowledges the inspiration that he draws from the Frankfurt School and especially from Adorno:

"What the relation to 'mass' (and a fortiori 'elite') cultural products reproduces, reactivates and reinforces is not (only) the monotony of the production line or office but the social relation which underlies working-class experience of the world, whereby his labour and the product of his labour, *opus proprium (owned piece of*

work [author's Note]), present themselves to the worker as *opus alienum (alienated piece of work [author's Note]),* alienated labour. Dispossession is never more totally misrecognized, and therefore tacitly recognized, than when, with progress of automation, economic dispossession is combined with cultural dispossession, which provides the best apparent justification for economic dispossession. Lacking the internalized cultural capital which is the pre-condition for correct appropriation (according to the legitimate definition) of the cultural capital objectified in technical objects, ordinary workers are dominated by the machines and instruments which they serve rather than use, and by those who possess the legitimate i.e., theoretical, means of dominating them." (Bourdieu 1984: 386-387)

Written some thirty years later, these lines indeed clearly echo Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: "The consumers are the workers and salaried employees, the farmers and petty bourgeois. Capitalist production hems them in so tightly, in body and soul, that they unresistingly succumb to whatever is proffered to them. However, just as the ruled have always taken the morality dispensed to them by the rulers more seriously than the rulers themselves, the defrauded masses today cling to the myth of success still more ardently than the successful. They, too, have their aspirations. They insist unwaveringly on the ideology by which they are enslaved." (Adorno and Horkheimer 2013, p.106). In other words, if mass culture (Hollywood, reality TV, advertising, etc.) imposes its ideology on such a scale and unconsciously, it is because the dominated do not possess the cultural capital which would allow them not only to distinguish themselves in relation to this ideology, but also to produce it to their advantage, as the dominant do. This is what Bourdieu refers to as symbolic violence:

Symbolic violence "is the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity (…). Social agents are knowing agents who, even when they are subjected to determinisms, contribute to producing the efficacy of that which determines them (…). And it is almost always in the 'fit' between determinants and the categories of perception that constitute them as such that the effect of domination arises (…). I call *misrecognition* the fact of recognizing a violence which is wielded precisely inasmuch as one does not perceive it as such. It is through the fact of accepting this set of

fundamental, prereflexive assumptions[i] that social agents engage by the mere fact of taking the world for granted, of accepting the world as it is, and of finding it natural because their mind is constructed according to cognitive structures that are issued out of the very structures of the world (…). This is why the analysis of the doxic acceptance of the world, due to the immediate agreement of objective structures and cognitive structures, is the true foundation of a realistic theory of domination and politics. Of all forms of 'hidden persuasion', the most implacable is the one exerted, quite simply, by the order of things." (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 168, translation changed)

On an epistemological level, Bourdieu defines sociology as a discipline which, above all else, must reveal the set of all those pre-reflexive presuppositions and denounce the doxic acceptance of the established order. The sociologist's task is to challenge the common sense interpretations which are found in ordinary language. Just like a mathematician, he has "to point out that formalization can consecrate the self-evidence of common sense rather than condemn it" (Bourdieu 1991: 54).

Although he is quoted less often by Bourdieu than other Frankfurt theorists we find also in his work an echo of Marcuse. Inspired principally by Marx and Freud, this other Frankfurt School member develops a perspective in which alienation and repression merge. For example, he makes the distinction between true and false needs: "Most of the prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate, belong to this category of false needs. Such needs have a societal content and function which are determined by external powers over which the individual has no control; the development and satisfaction of these needs is heteronomous (…). In the last analysis, the question of what are true and false needs must be answered by individuals themselves, but only in the last analysis; that is, if and when they are free to give their own answer. As long as they are indoctrinated and manipulated (down to their very instincts), their answer to this question cannot be taken as their own" (pp.7-8). All liberation requires that we become aware of servitude, but this is hampered by the response to false needs that the individual has made their own. It entails substituting for the false consciousness of

consumption a true, liberated consciousness of this fact. "Free choice among a wide variety of goods and services does not signify freedom if these goods and services sustain social controls over a life of toil and fear – that is, if they sustain alienation. And the spontaneous reproduction of superimposed needs by the individual does not establish autonomy; it only testifies to the efficacy of the controls" (p.10).

Therefore, the individual who rationalizes her/his act of consumption (for instance, the purchase of a gleaming SUV) in terms of freedom, choice, or selection, only mobilizes the pre-reflexive presupposition or the stereotype of 'freedom' in order to justify her/his act of purchase through his ordinary language. Like Bourdieu, sociologists would do nothing but become contaminated by a petrified philosophy of the social, rather than assigning a sociological explanation to that very same act. The first thing s/he should have done is to bid farewell to this ordinary explanation inherent in common sense, and to examine how this act is nothing but the product of dominant forms and modes of representation inscribed in a 'petit bourgeois' habitus. Ordinary language remains 'subordinated to practical functions', the ones that their habitus assigns to them. This is how, in the manner of the first-generation Frankfurt theorists, Bourdieu indicates in *La distinction* that dominant modes of consumption serve as a model for the modes of consumption of the dominated, through their habitus, even though the latter are unaware of it. The petit bourgeois is the parvenu whose acts convey the unconscious desire to symbolize tactlessly a social success and to ape the real practices of the dominants (who would probably object to expressing their domination through possession, considered vulgar and ostentatious, of an SUV).

1.2. A sociological account of freedom masked by habitus

Even though they form an oppositional tandem which Bourdieu aspires to get rid of, the use of the conscious/unconscious distinction – which he constantly evokes – is revealing. The distinction is an inherent aspect of his notion of habitus as:

"a system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring

structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them." (Bourdieu 1990: 53)

The justification that one is likely to make for one's practice, therefore, comes as additional element in relation to one's real motives that are located beneath a habitus which can only be brought to light by the sociologist. The only objective reality is beneath the illusory reality over which our habitus, as structuring structures, weaves a desk blotter. "Social science has to reintroduce into the full definition of the object the primary representations of the object (*namely that of common sense which sees the SUV object as the embodiment of a freedom [Authors' Note]*), which it first had to destroy in order to achieve the 'objective' definition" (Bourdieu 1990: 135).

But it only does so when it is protected from "summary and schematic representations" from "ordinary language syntax" which emerge from the habitus (developed in Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 19-46). Common sense (and its language) must, therefore, be subjected perpetually to sociological suspicion and to arouse a will of "critical rupture with its tangible self-evidences, indisputable at first sight, which strongly tend to give to an illusory representation all the appearances of being grounded in reality" (Bourdieu 2000: 181). Ordinary consciousness is the reifying consciousness, Marcuse's false consciousness, alienated by the unconscious game of the habitus.

Bourdieu never compromised on the core of his epistemology. In his best-seller *The weight of the world*, he gave the impression that he was giving social actors a voice, taking it seriously. However in the conclusion to the book he returned to his usual conviction that "rigorous knowledge almost always presupposes a more or less striking rupture with the evidence of accepted belief – usually identified with common sense" which contaminates the sociologist in the first instance. If the sociologist does not free him/herself from these pre-conceptions in the next step then the danger is that the terrain will be "free for preconstructions or for the automatic affects of social mechanisms (…). Only active denunciation of the tacit presuppositions of common sense can counter the effects of the representations of social reality" (Bourdieu 1999: 620). Bourdieu continues: "I am thinking

particularly here of representations in the press and, above all, on television, which are everywhere imposed on the most disadvantaged as the ready-made terms for what they believe to be their experience. Social agents do not innately possess a science of what they do" (Bourdieu 1999: 620). What laypersons mostly do not understand are, of course, the tacit rules that govern their practices unwittingly in their habitus.

Bourdieu's fiercest opponents understood well that by inviting us, in the manner of Marcuse, to what is in effect a form of asceticism towards common-sense language, he was willing to demonstrate that "rationality can only be defined as a fight which must be restarted over and over again, against pre-scientific mentality and misleading evidence" (Latour 1989: 12).

Scientific sociological language is that which exists *before* being possibly contaminated by a common sense from which it must be protected. It is *beneath* ill-thought out prejudices and representations which manifest our habitus. The sociologist must dig out the true meaning of social facts which are different from those assigned by ordinary social actors. Bourdieu's sociology is thought from the depths: correct language is that of the sociologist before being contaminated by this stratum of dirt made of prejudices. Under the rationality (alienated and reified by the habitus) expressed consciously through common sense, Bourdieu says there exists another value-free rationality which has the power to reveal the unconscious practical rationality of the actor. The Bourdieusian sociologist would be closest to that value-free rationality, a pure subjectivity which is itself free from all myths, common sense, doxic presuppositions, and received ideas. However this value-free rationality is itself at risk of being contaminated.

Indeed, the habitus, the individualized social, as he liked to remind us, is the condition of any practice or logic, no matter their mutual interaction. In a society in which the dominant ideology belongs to liberalism and consumerism, habitus will lead social actors to reproduce consumerist behaviours. They will justify their practices by mobilizing, for instance, stereotypes of freedom entirely imbued with dominant connotations (I am free to consume, purchase, express my pride of

owning such and such a brand or SUV). Bourdieu's aim is to establish a critical thought which identifies the process which creates the illusions manifest in common language under the pressure of dominant ideology and its structures of thought, in order to prevent them from contaminating the language of sociological research. As with Marcuse, Adorno, or Horkheimer, only the intellectual has true consciousness, the transcendental consciousness of depths. But this has to be protected.

1.3. The liberated social actor and idealism in the critical sociology

Bourdieu's positions rest on the postulate that human consciousness is reified, decadent and distorted by petit bourgeois habitus, consumerism or dominant class values in late capitalism. Beyond this there is an authentic consciousness and its lost or censored freedom, in sum an ideal transcendental state to which human beings should be returned.

But how appropriate is this classical critical thought in accounting for the multiplicities of reactions from citizens to the unprecedented austerity, constructed as prudent governance, into which some population groups have been thrown in the depths of the economic crisis? Arguably it is no longer satisfactory to account for these attempts at emancipation using a framework which privileges constructions of the subject as alienated, tarred with flaws which despoil him/her, pollute him/her, render him/her incapable of real communicative skills and of attaining a state of perfection which exists only in the fantasies of intellectuals.

Thus we need a different approach. In what follows we present suggestions for an alternative paradigm with the potential to untether sociology in general and critical thought more specifically from these pervasive philosophical understandings of the modern subject. This paradigm finds expression in French pragmatic sociology and its recent advances, such as those found in the work of Luc Boltanski, to whom we now turn.

2. Luc Boltanski's Critical and Pragmatic Sociology

2.1. How bodiless bodies define reality

In this section we will show how Boltanski gets to grips with the tradition of critical thought in order to give it a new orientation. To him, what is at stake, as has been the case since Marx, is to develop a theory which de-constructs domination. Domination is attributable to higher classes, namely those who escape precariousness or the risk of precariousness. The concept of 'domination', as Boltanski explains in *On Critique*, refers to 'the field of *determination of what is* (from the French '*ce qui est*'), that is to say, the field in which is established the distance between what may be called symbolic forms and the state of affairs (Wittgenstein, 1922). "We can also say, in a different language inspired by law, that the critique of domination concerns the establishment of qualifications that is [...] the operations which indivisibly fix the properties of beings and determine their *worth*. This work of qualification generally relies on *formats* or *types,* invariably combined with *descriptions* and/or *definitions*, which are themselves stored in various forms such as regulations, codes, customs, rituals, narratives, emblematic examples etc" (Boltanski 2011: 9).

It is the task of institutions, Boltanski continues, to define reality, to *say what is*. Indeed, no real individual can affirm that they have the necessary authority to define *the state of what is* (from the French '*ce qu'il en est de ce qui est'*) for the simple and good reason that he or she has a body. He or she is, therefore, necessarily located in space and time, and is thus likely to be accused of expressing only his or her point of view, an interpretation of reality. Consequently, the task of saying what is must be delegated to *bodiless beings*: institutions. It is those institutions that will precisely enact regulations, codes, and rituals which will then enable us to talk about reality. And it is thanks to these regulations, codes, and rituals enacted and protected by beings who *do* have a body (the judge, the policeman, civil servants, European Commissioners, etc.), that *bodiless beings*, such as the State or capitalism, for example, become constitutive of reality. *The Foetal Condition* uses the example of abortion because it is involved in the fundamental problem of defining what a human

being is. The State is entrusted with the very delicate task of turning a being from a state of thing into a person. This is achieved by having recourse to biomedicine filled with embodied beings such as doctors who will begin to identify gametes, pre-embryos, embryos, foetuses, viable foetuses (etc.), which will give this being an ontological status likely to turn into a legal status (Boltanski 2013).

"[In the case of capitalism, institutional operations are just as necessary to define the properties of things], what transforms them into *products or goods* and enables the establishment of markets. For supply and demand to be able to coincide, and a market then to be established and operate (more or less), information about goods must be concentrated in prices. But for this process itself to be possible, the goods must previously have been subject to a labour of definition or rather the relations between goods and the words that designate them, or the names given to them, must have been stabilized by a *determinate description.* This task of *fixing* reference is what is performed by brands, and, more generally, institutions of normalization (e.g. ISO norms) or quality control, which prevent objects losing their identity in the course of the multiple uses made of them. All these institutions guarantee, as is said in the case of wine, '*appellations contrôlées*'." (Boltanski 2011: 77)

2.2. Stabilizing reality to avoid anxiety.

As one can guess, in our democratic social-liberal societies, the law plays a key role in the process of stabilization of reality, without which we would live in a permanent state of anxiety about perpetual change, unable to share discussions about the world and things that surround us.

"[The law contributes to making reality] both intelligible and predictable, by preforming chains of causality likely to be activated to interpret the events that occur. Since the law has to establish links between events and entities, it must equip itself with an encyclopaedia of entities that it acknowledges as valid. It is in its power [...] to say *what is* and to associate decisions about *what is* with value judgements. This is the reason why the law can only be produced by institutions – dependent mostly, in contemporary societies, on the State. Conversely, any device likely to produce the law can be considered an institution. In that sense, we may say that the law is at the same time a semantic instance, in the sense that it fixes characterizations, and the ontological operator par excellence [...]. Legal institutions always comprise representatives, people in charge or spokespersons who are physical persons, ordinary embodied individuals who can represent these entities,

speak on their behalf." (Boltanski 2012a: 322; *Author 1's translation*)

However, contrary to what the Frankfurt School's theory of reification has implied for a long time, capitalism and the State are naturally not the only *bodiless beings* that enact the symbolic forms of reality. Depending on cultures and societies, there are other *bodiless beings* such as religious institutions, political parties, ethnic groups, the dead, etc. but also Universities. Therefore, for instance, a doctoral seminar is more or less defined symbolically by the kind of institution the university is, which relies on embodied beings to (re)state *what is*. It forces its members to respect a set of tacit norms and regulations in compliance with a situation. But a complaint may arise, in case the *state of affairs* of the seminar does not match adequately the idea that one may have about its form. The professor might be caught day dreaming, the doctoral student making a presentation might mumble, the students might sleep, chat, or play with their smartphones. The complainant in the audience might, on behalf of the institution, get up and ask: 'Is this what you call a seminar'? Such a statement "is pointing out the fact that the state of affairs, in the here and now, does not warrant being designated by the symbolic form (the seminar)" (Boltanski 2011: 72) – even though the being with a body, the professor, had said at the beginning of the year that his seminar would be scholarly and scientific.

It is thus the task of the institutions, literally, to institute reality so that everyone agrees on what we are talking about or on the situation in which we live. Institutions have a semantic role, which is necessary for someone to be able to represent and refer to a common world. In that common world, we live in a routine most of the time.

"It is only when hiccups prevent routines from being followed that the institutional dimension of the institution takes priority. This is also to say that 'institutions' themselves must continually be subject to a process of re-institutionalization, if they do not want to lose their shape and, as it were, unravel. In the course of these reparative processes, actors or some of them – usually those to restore the (fictional) presence of the bodiless being by recalling the requirement to act in the correct forms, in such a way as to check its dilution". (Boltanski 2011: 80)

This is, for instance, the case when the Head of Department or the Laboratory Manager, once

he/she has got wind of the (above-mentioned) professor's mistake during his/her own seminar, calls him/her to order. It is another reason why processes of ritualization are crucial to institutions. They enable us to be constantly reminded that reality is what it is and that we should not worry about the perfect juxtaposition between symbolic forms and the state of affairs. In this way, for example, a student's parent will actually *feel* for his/her child, during graduation, in front of a group of gowned professors. However, if one or some of the latter came to the ceremony wearing a pair of jeans and sports shoes, a little tipsy from an alcoholic lunch, doubt and worry might emerge: are these people really professors? Are we actually at a graduation ceremony? If we really are, shouldn't my son's or daughter's achievement be taken seriously?

2.3. To confirm what is *in what* happens

In order for us to avoid permanent uncertainty, institutions constantly need confirmation devices that can select from the continuous flow of what happens, what *is*, and to keep it as *being* in spite of the passage of time. In other words, these devices, established by embodied representatives of institutions, must do the job of consolidating what is while confirming what *is* (in a certain context) in every possible worlds, or, so to speak, *sub specie aeternitatis*. In order to confirm reality or at least that it really is what institutions say it is, these devices may undergo 'tests of truth'.

These tests "strive to deploy in stylized fashion, with a view to consistency and saturation, a certain pre-established state of the relationship between symbolic forms and state of affairs, in such a way as to constantly reconfirm it (…). Repetition plays an essential role here. (Its) only role is to make visible the fact that there is a norm, by deploying it in a sense for its own sake". (Boltanski 2011: 103-104)

In this way, if we go back to the above-mentioned example of the graduation ceremony, we may consider it as a device to confirm, by repeating every year the same kind of tests, mobilizing the same objects (official documents, gowns, hats, university emblem, etc.), that we are in a real ceremony on the one hand, and, on the other hand, that many people in the room *actually* embody,

from that moment on, what they have been trained to become (a doctor, an architect, etc.). This is achieved by the simple performative decree of the university institution which has the actual power to award them their status.

It becomes clear that the law plays a key role for society at a higher institutional level than the implicit seminar code for the University. If we turn to commercial law, for example, an entrepreneur can be convicted by the law Court for 'unfair competition in the market' because s/he employed workers illegally.

Thus all the controls that companies are subjected to by work inspectors seeking to unearth unofficial work may also be considered as a set of devices of confirmation. Here it is not only about the law ensuring that welfare costs and other taxes are actually paid by the employer for all of his/her workers, but it is also about reiterating that the world we live in conforms to capitalism thanks to commercial law, of which one of the fundamental norms shaping business reality is free and fair competition. Competition is a norm which, incidentally, has disseminated down into common representations of the world and what we consider to be real that we would all contemplate calling into question the validity of the result of a race won by obvious cheating with the aid of doping or collusion. Within a competitive world, devices of confirmation must constantly act as reminders of the founding, individualistic, and liberal norms so that no other reality is possible.

"By covering with the same semantic fabric all the states of affairs whose representation is dramatized, this deployment creates an effect of coherence and closure – of necessity – which satisfies expectations of *truth* and even saturates them. This coherence makes manifest an underlying intentionality whose strength is imposed even on those who are ignorant of its content or do not grasp its 'meaning'. Such operations no doubt play an important role in what might be called the maintenance of reality. When they succeed, their effect is not only to make reality accepted. It is to make it loved." (Boltanski 2011: 105)

What must be pointed out here is the radical contingency of the social world that Luc Boltanski

intends to highlight. To this day, critical theory, whether Bourdieu's, or of the first Frankfurt School (Marcuse, Adorno, Horkheimer has always returned to a transcendental plane of guaranteed stability (a philosophical or sociological freedom.), which enables it to consider the construction of a common world, but then is immediately reified. Besides, it is why one must acknowledge Honneth's relevant intuition that this transcendentalism, a position which has opened the way to social philosophy, is a new declination of Rousseau's pacified state of nature (2006: 81-82). If there is an original position in *On Critique*, it is that of a radical uncertainty about reality, about what it *is*, and what is valuable about it. It is the task of institutions to give points of reference which make the reading of a social situation possible so that individuals can coordinate their actions while gaining the impression that this situation stands on its own strength.

2.4. The world as a contingent and immanent background to reality

Institutions format reality, which is thus detached from a background into which it cannot be re-absorbed. This background is called the world (*le monde*) by Boltanski (2011: 57). Drawing inspiration from Wittgenstein again, he defines that world as being *everything that happens*. Through its tests and characterizations, reality wants to establish some permanence in this ever-changing world by choosing in that world what is valuable for it. For instance, the object 'Powerpoint projector' could be mobilized in a seminar, but the comic book that can be found in a student's school bag could not. The object "contract of employment" could be mobilized in the case of the unfair competition trial but the radio on the work site of the firm cannot.

"Contrary to reality, which is often the object of pictures (particularly statistical ones) claiming an overarching authority, it is immanence itself – what everyone finds herself caught in, immersed in the *flux of life,* but without necessarily causing the experiences rooted in it to attain the register of speech, still less that of deliberated action". (Boltanski 2011: 58)

The world is filled with beings who, depending on their relevance within a given situation, can be either ignored, or rejected or re-characterized and integrated to reality in order to confirm it.

In short, reality consists of elements extracted away from the world and which will be put through its tests of truth by means of categorizations, characterizations, and totalization.

Thanks to these devices of confirmation, social reality manages to make us think that it is robust and to make actors internalize their inability to change the format of tests. To rephrase this with the vocabulary of *La justification* (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006: 41 and 153), reality is robust or 'hangs together'*ii* when instruments of totalization, representation, and categorization (financial, managerial or political statistical) of "what is and what is given as relevant for the collective seem capable of completely covering the field of actual and even potential events" (Boltanski 2011: 34). Thus we can conclude that reality is robust or stands either when no event suddenly appears in the public space to disrupt the pre-established harmony between reality and the staging of reality, or when such an event is inappropriate, or if it is invisible.

But a reality entirely submissive to a semantic system stabilized by the institutions would make action impossible. This is the reason why reality always contains the potential for criticism. Institutional language is never in a position to prevent the possibility that actors engage in misconduct and in divergent interpretations of *what happens*. Indeed, instruments, categorizations, and devices that aim at constructing, organizing, and confirming reality are fragile because critique can always draw events from the *world* that contradict its logic and furnish ingredients for unmasking its 'arbitrary' or 'hypocritical' character (Boltanski 2011).

The texture of reality can, therefore, be questioned because a reflexive moment emerges, and raises the question of how to characterize what happens (example: 'that is what you call a seminar?' or 'this crumpled, hand-written, grease-stained paper is what you call a contract of employment?').

2.5. *Existential criticism: a first pragmatic step away from idealism*

There is, however, another type of test that takes us to the very heart of the renewal of critical theory currently carried out in francophone pragmatic sociology. We refer here to the *existential*

criticisms or *existential tests* that Boltanski sometimes characterizes as 'radical'.

"Existential criticism or existential test, "when it ends up being formulated and made public, [it] unmasks the incompleteness of reality and even its consistency, by drawing examples from the flux of life that make its bases unstable and challenges it in such a way as to confront it with the inexhaustible, and hence impossible to totalize, reserve represented by the world". (Boltanski 2011: 113)

Here criticism is pragmatist because it draws its strength from a socially constructed world rather than in a state of nature intellectually purified beneath what constitutes our daily life. The life world is the concrete world of *experiences lived here and now* without any background. "Existential tests present themselves as tests of something, even if, in their case, what is tested has not been subject to official qualification or even explicit characterization, capable of being incorporated into the normative formats that sustain reality" (Boltanski 2011: 113). Something in the world demands to be accomplished but is hampered by the institutions that prevent it from happening. This triggers a form of thwarted satisfaction. There is already something other in the flow of life than what is shaped under the features of the reality that is given to us, and even if that something cannot be said in the languages of institutions, we may nonetheless be driven by the desire to see it come into being.

An existential critique would draw attention to alternative worldly wishes and thus would concretely and materially test out the sturdiness of the apparatus which structures reality, in much the same way that the Indignados tried to do when they occupied Wall Street, this key symbol of capitalism and its institutions. We can get a clear measure of the penalty for attacking the status quo of what economy *is* from the rapidity with which the police expelled the Indignados from Wall Street. As long as a demonstration disturbs only the average citizen, without undermining the devices of domination, that is the devices of the embodiment of reality, the very urge to dominate will be unchallenged and the desire for change by the demonstrators will remain unfulfilled.

What emerges here is a new paradigm, a new departure from the assumption that beneath human consciences reified by capitalism, the State, modernity or consumerism, there exists an unspoilt human nature. There is no expectation that the sociologist's role is to return social actors to

some state which would precede alienation. On the contrary, the sociologist's role is to help social actors recover their agency, here and now, in line with their own wishes. The sociologist looks for what in people's existence/lives is amenable to reconstruction/reinvention to resist the rigidity of the structures and institutions which dominate them. This new paradigm, which divests critique from any idealism without compromising its own existence, is pragmatic sociology. Nevertheless, pragmatic sociology also has some serious limitations, principally because, in common with the transcendental approaches, it confines the sociologist to a position of exteriority as we will now see.

3. Toward materialism with Bruno Latour

3.1. *The persistence of an idealist stance in pragmatism*

Boltanski, inspired by Bourdieu's critical sociology, argues that we should retain "the possibility, obtained by the stance of exteriority, 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 gain strength by combining into collectives" (Boltanski 2011: 48). We are in partial agreement with this ambition. Indeed he is right to focus in fresh ways on domination, inspired by Bourdieu's own concerns. But we would argue that to do so need not rest on the concept of 'exteriority'.

Bourdieu's aim was to look into the depths of social action, bringing into view the free, transcendental subject hiding beneath social actors blinded by common sense and illusions, in the same way that the Frankfurt School scholars envisaged the true consciousness as buried inside people's practical conscience. For his part, Boltanski locates his critique at a metapragmatic or metacritical level to enable a more detached, synthetic and objective take on the events making up the reality to which people, whose lay reflexivity is bounded by the pragmatic limits of their actions, are confronted. In the process, he gives primacy to a lucid stance which sits above people's consciousness (transcendent) rather than beneath (transcendental). Either way, this stance appears to

take the form of an ideal, external and inaccessible to these social actors. The positions described thus far can be summarised in the pictorial representation (Figure 1) shown below:

Figure 1: Critical theory as external idealism

Whatever stance adopted, transcendent or transcendental, the sociologist's true relationship with the world of social actors is to be on the outside. The same sociologist had already taken his/her distance through his/her habitus thanks to the work of reflexivity which freed him from common sense (Bourdieu) and the mire of reality (Boltanski).

We have used No Entry symbols to show that social actors are stuck in their material lives. On the one hand they do not have access to true consciousness or reflexivity. On the other hand, they are denied any possibility that they might have the ability to take a step back from the context in which they live their material lives, the 'local' and their situated condition.

The latter position is held up by Boltanski when he focuses on what he terms 'complex exteriority', that is a language to verbalise lived situations. To be sure, elsewhere he states that critical sociology can dig out instances of events within the world that are at odds with the official version of reality. But he turns away from looking in the *world* for concrete examples of actions which could also challenge this reality, confining himself to exposing the processes and social arrangements which make this reality so potent and organized. His focus is on how a metacritique can help unravel reality, stripping it of the messiness in which people are embedded and which fosters their alienation. Hence Boltanski's pragmatism also turns its gaze more firmly towards an ideal of a purified social actor. In this perspective the sociologist, assumed to have already freed him/herself from it, is the one best placed to unpack the institutional framework which constitutes this reality.

3.2. The materialist pragmatism of Bruno Latour and ANT

In direct opposition, we would like to propose a materialist stance. This would consist of working with dominated social actors and explore what in their practices, though emanating from the material world are not fully articulated, can be linked with those of others to develop collective critical voices which challenge the official version of reality. This materialist position starts from the immanence of the world in line with Latour's project. Latour, whose work is also inscribed in French pragmatic sociology alongside Boltanski's, (Guggenheim, Potthast, 2011) rejects the presence of any ideal posture, whether transcendent or transcendental, which would be external to people's lived experiences. The sociologist's role then is to work within the lives of actors in the world to describe the way they construct society together.

Latour proposes working with ordinary people to map their practices in the network of situations constituting everyday life. That's why Latour defines this stance as an extension of the Actor Network Theory (ANT) that he developed with Michel Callon[iii].

In a network, a given situation is defined as "the list, specific in every instance, of the beings that will be said to have been associated, mobilized, enrolled, translated, in order to participate in the situation. There will be as many lists as there are situations. The essence of a situation, as it were, for a 'network', the list of the other beings through which it is necessary to pass so that this situation can endure, can be prolonged, maintained, or extended. To *trace a network* is thus always to reconstitute by a test[iv] (…) the antecedants and the consequences, the precursors and the heirs, the ins and outs, as it were, of a being. Or to put it more philosophically, the *others* through which one has to pass in order to become or remain the *same*". (Latour 2013a: 41)

What is radically new in Latour's approach is that he focuses on the situations in which people find themselves as immanent. In other words he starts from the everyday situations with which people associate themselves and reconstitutes the networks of relations between them which give their situations their stability.

This has implications for methodology. Latour advises the trainee sociologist to confine his analysis to describing the situations in which social actors together engage in what could be termed social labour*: « what they do to expand, to relate, to compare, to organize is what you have to describe as well. It is not another layer that you would have to add to the 'mere description'. Don't try to shift*

from description to explanation: simply go on with description" (2005: 150)[v]. Latour (2017a [2015] : 191, 244; 2017b: 111) disputes the fact that there exist dominant institutions such as the State, the World Bank, etc… which would have emerged as the sedimentation of pre-existing powerful institutional entities in stable situations. In effect these institutions would be both abstract, without any tangible material reality. They would influence social actors without their knowledge. Latour argues that they should be excluded from sociological analysis. The focus of sociological labour should be to describe systematically and make visible the situations in which social actors come together and are engaged in the business of making society within a massive network whose boundaries are hazy and undefined.

3.3. The pitfalls of rejecting critique

The problem with Latour's vision of the social world is that although networks do exist, he also sees them as interconnected in infinite combinations. Dominant institutions do not exist but small material entities combining to create institutions do exist. The question of domination and power differentials among the actors in and across the networks is not considered (Latour, 2005 : 165-173).Latour confidently rejects "the dream of a critical sociology" which, he claims, 'has run out of steam' (Latour, 2005 : 139; 2004: 225). But he throws the baby out with the bath water and endows social actors with a tacit will to cooperate to ensure that reality *as it is* is maintained, as if people were inherently prone to protecting social structures (Boltanski 2011).

Remaining the same, being faithful to oneself, constantly knitting the myriad connections between people and things to ensure the stability and longevity of a situation are *tests of confirmation* of one's reality as it is experienced. And contra Latour, we agree with Boltanski that that big and abstract institutions do exit (States, religions, capitalist banking networks….), even if they need material bodies to be incarnated. For Latour only these material bodies exist and they are all interconnected in a giant network which has to be locally described.

The established order is not apprehended as a potential order of domination because it simply

doesn't exist. We are all, without distinction, links in a chain, on a flat plane, without hierarchies. For instance, we are consumers, we are the employees of a supermarket chain which sources its products from suppliers which, on the other side of the world, engage in social or environmental exploitation on a massive scale. In Latour's work any critical element would consist at best of getting mired in endless descriptions of reality and of simply drawing up lists of the embodied as well as the bodiless beings and things which support the institutional framework in which this reality is caught up. Returning to our example this would mean systematically reconstituting the connections between shoppers of a supermarket and open cast mines in Bangladesh which provide employment at $1 a day, but also shopping trolleys, the supermarket car park, and the river which flows behind the supermarket…

Although in many other ways radical and innovative, embedded as they are in the material lives of people, Latour's insights nevertheless appear to demand of researchers that they confine themselves to providing accounts of what binds people and things together, legitimating, rather than critiquing, by identifying and flagging up the institutions which frame the reality in which people are embedded. For instance, what could be highlighted is the potential for the legal justification by supermarket chains to deal in commodities indirectly by sub-contracting to the open cast mine owners mentioned earlier. Latour's methodology does not lead to emancipation but drowns the reader in the details of this reality which is described in all its complexity without querying whether the conceptual tools used by large institutions to define it is fair or not – an example is the reliance on the concept of 'free trade' by the IMF, the WTO or the World Bank with the consequence that delocalization and social dumping go unchallenged. Using Boltanski' terms, in ANT and Latour's materialism it is impossible to critique the way institutions define and frame reality as it emanates from the world because the former incorporates the latter. Descriptions of situations lived by concrete actors (with bodies) suggested by Latour are just tests which confirm reality.

Yet, we would argue that Boltanski's critique of Latour's pragmatism has emergent problems. Indeed, Boltanki's own response to tests of reality is to advocate the search for forms of articulation

which operate at the level of metacritique (or metapragmatism). To an extent this entails a return to the classical stance of critical thought which views reality from an ideal position. This is shown in the updated Figure 2 below in which we use the No Entry symbols to show that Latour and Boltanski, are both stuck in a framework which does not look for the seeds of emancipation *within* people's own lives. Boltanski finds them in his metapragmatic stance. And what is particularly distinctive about Latour's position is that, whilst he correctly identifies the material lives of persons as the source of sociological analysis, he refuses to move beyond mere description toward critique as we outlined above. Therefore in what follows we begin to articulate our own position.

Figure 2: Latour's pragmatism as unexternal …. and uncritical

3.4. *How to be materialist AND critical ? Diving into emancipatory movements*

In response to this stance, we propose to bring critique closer to situations by looking for emancipatory events and desires which challenge the dominant reality in all its constituents. We propose that we should focus on the actual lived experiences of people in *the world*; in particular looking for emancipatory events and desires which people express in the flow of everyday life and are noteworthy because they might oppose the logic of reality (which can be embodied in legal texts or other forms of social normative rules). This critical pragmatic approach does not distinguish between the emancipated actor (freed from his/her common sense and illusions) and the alienated, reified actor who would be its outward manifestation. The task would be to find and articulate what in people's lived situations carries some emancipatory potential in their critique of dominant institutions. This does then rest on the acceptance by the sociologist that the end point of this process of articulation cannot be assured, as it is contingent on the world in which people and the sociologist find themselves. This is what makes such an approach to critical pragmatism firmly materialist.

Producing with the actors the theory of their practice in situation must be done without actually

endorsing actions which consist in legitimating reality *as it is* so that it can continue. It is rather about working with them to make their existential experiences visible and legible and to identify from the world precisely the tools they use or the desire they show to escape an alienating reality. This amounts to saying that, in this perspective, sociology must support people's emancipation not simply by pointing out the devices of alienation and symbolic violence which they are subjected to, but also and above all by describing the possibility of that emancipation from what *already* exists in their life world. What sociology must constantly target is *the world* as it contains both suffering and desire. That desire does not rest upon a perfect, pacified, idealized human nature but upon the material content of life experiences already unfolding, in the world as it is, which holds the promise of *something* which could be emancipation. It is already there, in concrete, material forms of life and material form of association (or aggregation as Latour would put it). Forms which, although not necessarily articulated, have nevertheless always existed as a 'line of least resistance' in this world (Frère and Jacquemain, 2019).

We may think about the first couple of homosexuals who had the temerity to reveal their sexuality in public and often suffered the legal consequences of their visibility. But contemporary examples would be all these initiatives of alternative and solidarity economy which refuse to comply systematically with the local injunctions of economic institutions. The local exchange trading system (associations whose members trade goods and services with a fictive currency, therefore enabling the most deprived to participate) was condemned in 1997 in Foix, in south-west France, for unfair competition (Laacher, 1998). Structures whose purpose is to support the development of associations and/or cooperatives have seen their subsidy being questioned each year because, rather than working towards the reintegration of the precariat into the conventional labour market (from which they are ejected again a few months later), they enable them to create their own jobs in a collective framework. The point is to enable the workers to recover the meaning of what they produce, to become autonomous (in the strictly Marxist sense of the term), in a context in which they are likely to be the owners of their own means of production. These attempts are more difficult to implement than simple

re-characterization, and they do not figure in the statistics or the language of the European Social Fund work programme whose bureaucrats, the fleshy embodiments of European institutions, can threaten to cut subsidies for not meeting the targets of unemployed integration within the official labour market ((Frère, 2020). As bodiless beings, European institutions do not possess the language or the legal framework which would enable them to make sense of these initiatives and accept them as legitimate.

We may also think about all these consumer cooperatives such as community-supported agriculture[vi] which circumvent the controls of the institution called Health and Safety Agency (and its inspectors made of flesh and blood) by directly getting their supply from local farmers to resist the stranglehold of large consumption emporia such as Walmart. Other examples are the '*casseurs de pubs*' who reclaim privatized public spaces, Greenpeace activists who paralyse nuclear waste convoys, the undocumented migrants and the homeless who squat in empty accommodation without authorization or share out the unsold products thrown out by supermarkets (which the latter criminalise by interpreting them as thieves).

In all these cases we are in the presence of emancipatory movements which challenge reality without the help of an intellectual able to dive under unconscious dominant values and common sense supposedly polluting the consciousness of these movements' actors.

4. Why laws, people's critiques and politics are central in critical and materialist sociology

4.1. The law and social movements

In short, we may think about all these groups as contesting the boundaries of legality as traced by dominant institutions and often infringing them. In other cases these groups use the law itself to force the State to recognize that it must accept change to the social order, or what Boltanski calls "reality". The law is a double edged tool. It does not exclusively operate to sustain dominant

institutions and shut down legitimate critiques of power. It also works to give expression to the need to recognise and defend the principle of justice inherent in the very existence of a legal framework. Liora Israël (2009) has shown how certain groups have challenged dominant cultural norms, using the legal apparatus.

There are many past and contemporary notable examples where protestors deliberately provoke their arrest to use their day in court to articulate their demands. Historical examples include the suffragettes, conscientious objectors in the two world wars, the Vietnam War or South Africans refusing conscription, Ghandi and his followers in South Africa and India, the Defiance Campaign against segregation in public spaces and the Pass Laws in South Africa, the Civil Rights movement in the US. More contemporary examples include Femen, animal rights campaigners, AIDS campaigners, etc. (Israël, 2009: 30). These movements use the law as a blade to reshape the contours of reality, ie to challenge the established reality (*Ibid*., p. 31). These forms of resistance, whilst arduous, have had some success in forcing the State to incorporate new rights and protections into the legal framework. The role of the sociologists therefore is to support and translate these demands for change.

A materialist critique or a materialist sociology would apprehend these infringements as attempts at emancipation. These groups have not waited for critical theory to challenge the *reality* imposed by the established order. However some of them (Greenpeace or the Casseurs de Pub) run the risk of accusations by Bourdieusian critical scholars of being '*petits bourgeois*' full of illusions. In contrast, our critical materialist approach would apprehend these attempts as ideals here and now, even if they suffer from every conceivable impurity, or emerge from a world which is as it is, beautiful and awful at the same time. Of course we must also bear in mind that these acts come from an imperfect world in which attempts to resist official truths coexist with other unpalatable actions such as violence. For example, someone who, during the day, was the coordinator of a community restaurant in Salvador (Bahia, Brazil) turned out to be a heroin dealer at night in order to survive or

to buy the latest smartphone. These attempts to resist the reality proclaimed by institutions even risk becoming a crutch of capitalism. The point is that the world that this materialist pragmatism captures has always been flawed, dirty and impure. It is not the clean world which precedes reification in critical tradition. It is composed of people as they are in the world (Frère and Laville, 2021) .

4.2. Enabling people's critique of reality

This critical approach is distinctive because it brings actors' dissatisfactions into its purview. Its objective is to understand people's critical relation to social reality and to channel it towards emancipation. This must take place in the knowledge that this emancipation already finds elements of material fulfilment acted out in the world by the actors and their desires. The role of critical theory is to enter into the preoccupations and critiques of ordinary actors, reformulate them to expose how unacceptable reality (and its institutions) has become for these actors and make their actions and justification understandable, explicable, rather than insignificant or even the subject of public condemnation. Thus a cooperative can no longer be dismissed as merely 'a bunch of poor people who help each other' or condemned as 'self-organized mutual assistance groups that unfairly compete with local SMEs'. Indeed sociology could help people extricate themselves from the reality of the powerful by suggesting that what they do and know that they are doing is about dissociating reality from necessity and to call into question the former's legitimacy. To mention an example, the sociologist is not the only actor to point the finger at how consumer society has reified our cultural practices to such an extent that we eventually find pleasurable, even beautiful, the kilometres of advertising which flood our metro, bus stops, televisions (etc.). The actors ('Casseurs de pubs' and others) who daub the very same advertisements today, who desire and achieve another possible world, have not waited for Marcuse, Adorno, Horkheimer or Bourdieu to resist this. But, for these actors, being attacked by the police or by power is a constant possibility.

When that theoretical and sociological thought presents itself as the 'main access to the truth', what follows is that people's *own raw 'resources emanating from the world'* to engage in a critique

of reality risk being ignored. A critical theory informed by a materialist perspective in contrast eschews the pessimism of a social order steeped in unmitigated misery impervious to change. It does so by combining Latour's take on social action as immanent and Boltanski's apprehension of the social actor as critical, as he has shown since *Love and Justice as competences* (Boltanski 2012b). For the last twenty years, French pragmatism, except in Latour's work, has indeed been the harnessing and synthesis of people's own critical stance as they perform the *world* in their daily lives in innovative ways (Boltanski 2011). However there is something missing: the need to take into account the necessary political issue of critical sociology rather than to turn back to idealism. Thus we now turn to an exposition of the political dimension of materialism.

4.3. Beyond pragmatisms: the political dimension of materialism

Inherent in a materialist stance is the presence of a political dimension as its aim is to work with social actors to make visible a theory of their practices, by exploiting the practices which have the potential to challenge reality *as it is*. By the same token, it is important to be sensitive to the tendency of institutions to censor all experiences evoked above which might be promising of a new reality.

This is really important as the reflexive and critical actor might at any time also perform the world in 'ugly' ways, drawing on what Spinoza would have called sad passions rather than happy passions (or desires, like Boltanski). We may, for example, recall the murder of a young antifascist militant by skinheads in the middle of Paris in 2013. It is here that the political reflexivity of the sociologist him/herself is needed.

The pragmatic sociologist's expertise is gained in a scientific engagement with the world. But how will s/he distinguish between emancipatory and discriminatory or abusive practices? This claim to expertise is in itself politically charged as it will allow certain practices – those that embody happy passions – to be generalizable as emancipatory social action[vii]. This will depend on the research questions that the sociologist will ask to test out the ability of practices to challenge the dominant

truth about what is reality. For instance, what are the conditions which enable the person who runs the restaurant cooperative to which we alluded above also to be a dangerous drug dealer at night? The articulation of this question and the response to it are both politically charged.

What is required therefore is the application of sociological reflexivity, without nonetheless denying social actors' potential for reflexivity and conscience (or lack thereof) as merely the voice of the dominant ideology whose role would be to appease people's anxieties about the world's effervescence by legitimating *what is*. It is therefore imperative to act out this reflexivity as a democratic impulse (Laville 2010) by accepting that the world is contingent and that social action is messy. Thus the sociologist's role should be to identify, record and formalise the skills of lay social actors wherever they have the potential to bear fruit. Of course, sometimes actors turn a blind eye to the reality to which they contribute, so the sociologist's other role is not necessarily to give them the opportunity to open their eyes to their subordination. indeed often they are aware of it (Boltanski, 2012b) and sometimes they also engage in practices in the world which alter that very reality.

For instance, the person who runs the restaurant cooperative who is also a dangerous drug dealer at night, embodies a contradiction between acting out a critique of individualism and capitalism on one hand and engaging in illegal practices (drug deals) on the other hand. Confronted to this impure state of the *world* the sociologist can choose to focus on what it means to practice cooperative economy and collective property in a *reality* in which the economy is driven by private property and competition.

Only then can people's capacity for meaningful action be developed, thus eliminating the asymmetry that exists between the actors' beliefs and 'illusions' on the one hand and the expert 'knowledge' of the critical sociologist who would be privy to an 'underlying reality' (2012b: 34-35). This is political action par excellence: the sociologist's responsibility is to accept that by his/her mentoring, s/he will galvanise or reject certain actions influenced by sad passions. In the case of the former, the sociologist's duty is thus to understand the processes and circumstances which lead to

these sad passions.

The concept of action itself also has to be rescued from the danger that it might lose its meaning by being dismissed as the manifestation of alienation. Yet action as a choice between different options in an unpredictable world must be countenanced. Thus the target of sociological theorising is by definition uncertain: is the guy in his restaurant cooperative creating a new form of solidarity, as yet inarticulated as such by formal institutions? Is he a dangerous Mafioso? Or is he both? In critical materialism, this kind of uncertainty does not disappear. The risk is that it will be reabsorbed by tests of truth[viii] which will make it legible and understandable ('Ah X eventually let go of his utopia of self managing cooperative, he has recovered *a proper sense of reality* and accepted a stable job at Walmart). However it need not necessarily be this way.

It is easy to discount extreme actions, such as those of neo-nazis. More mundanely people can find themselves in the position of adopting the dominant values which have enslaved them, by internalizing them as ideologies or as part of their habitus, sometimes going so far as to ardently desire what alienates them. In this respect, it may seem odd for a so-called critical sociologist to see the relentlessness with which some unemployed people strive to find a job, any job, which might enable them to reintegrate a sacrosanct labour market that has repeatedly signified that it does not want them by returning them to their temporary work agencies. But these very same people might, at other moments in their lives or in other situations, stand up to the terrifying power of that reality by giving new interpretations to them.

4.4. A non naïve and optimistic representation of a social actor

Having said that, the more optimistic representation of a social actor offered by materialism is that of one who is not naïve. Boltanski himself was very clear about this:

"It is the difficulty in breaking free of what (…) we can call the seriality and viscosity of the real – that is, if you like, its excess reality – which discourages critique and not (as is often said) the absence

of a 'project' or an 'alternative' to the present situation. As clearly indicated, for example, by the social history of the labour movement, past revolts have never put off their dramatic expression until an 'alternative' is presented to them, drawn up in details, on the model of the literary and philosophical genre called 'utopia'. On the contrary, it can be said that it is always on the basis of revolt that something like an 'alternative' has been able to emerge, not vice versa". (Boltanski 2011: 41)

Sociology can support all these attempts at displaying critical energy by helping people construct a stronger common association – stronger because more collective – which will provide more effective resistance to the reality in front of which they would all be individually more fragile. This must be undertaken in a social world which is understood as making itself, not as inherently already complete and alienated.

This type of sociology, materialist and democratic, would have as its object of investigation emergent associations and social forms from the world. The idea is to start from the creative potential of social actors as they either adapt to the reality as it is or seek to modify it in their practices by putting this reality to the (existential) test. Unlike the metacritical approach proposed by Boltanski, we do not see social actors as unable to attain a metacritical register of understanding of the structures in which they are locked up. We do indeed recognise the power of these structures to constrain but we want to go much further when we argue that constructing social actors and the role of sociologists within a metacritical register does in fact close up any political engagement, denying 'ordinary' social actors any space for conflict and debates *in the world*.

Thus we are not denying that reality yields alienation but, ironically, as Boltanski (2011: 46) himself put it: "By dint of seeing domination everywhere, the way is paved for those who do not want to see it anywhere". Rather, our ambition as sociologists would go further than to expose and understand processes of domination. We would also expose how democratic social actors can carve pathways to liberation, if only temporary ones, in *specific situations* as Latour would say, by necessity

local and messy, and how if they act in a coordinated way they can really challenge the belief that the reality is necessarily as it is.

Conclusion: The Upcoming Task of a Critical, Pragmatic, and Materialist Sociology

At this time, the ideology of management, with its armada of specialists, technicians, and other experts or embodied beings, reinforces the status quo, the reality of its very necessity, a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy which could be expressed as follows: '*we do not have a choice, austerity cannot be avoided, welfare benefits must be reduced, public and social expenditure must be cut, we must rationalize, restart growth, work longer, for lower wages, etc…*'. In some of his recent texts Boltanski (2008; 2011; 2015) mentions how the need for recognition can, albeit with difficulty, lead to shared concerns and limited resistance, which can take the form of individual or small-scale DIY. In order to minimise the constraints that weigh on them, actors develop a specific interpretative skillset aimed at identifying spaces of freedom by taking advantage of flaws in systems of control. By doing so, they often act at the limits of legality. These ordinary people, who undergo the effects of domination (unemployed people from alternative and solidary economy, illegal immigrants, homeless people, and others) cannot be deprived of the correctness of their sense of justice, their freedom, the correctness of their interpretations as to what occurs in reality, or their lucidity. But all these people are put in the impossible position of being unable to act by institutions and their bodily beings (police forces, job centre workers, etc.).

Mixing sociological work and that of these collectives of precarious people, however small they might be, is a pre-condition for being able to see reality as it is in all its intimacies, therefore, for taking the first step to get out of this blinkered reality and then for identifying other possible realities that the *world* has to offer. The theoretical work of sociology may consist in identifying the way situations in the world connect to each other, even though they are isolated in different situations where each undergoes the constraints of its reality (the landlord's rights to evict squats, applying standards of competition to cooperatives of consumption or to LETS, etc.). The cognitive tools that

pragmatic perspectives provide must enable these actions that have apparently different manifestations in the world but are in fact underpinned by the same material roots grounded in the world. This echoes partly what Lefort and Castoriadis' group *Socialisme ou barbarie* once sought to do with the disparate actions of workers' collectives in the 1950s (Castoriadis, 1990). In order to do so, however, pragmatic sociology must transform itself into a materialism which gives sociology a political vocation, rather than confining it to the pursuit of some intellectualist - transcendental or transcendent - idealism.

Borrowing from Latour's insights, we can say that the world that we must regain, through the social actions it gives rise to, is not a second façade behind a first one, a face behind a veil, a human nature hidden behind a spoilt human, a mysterious one behind its outward manifestations, a truth behind a lie, an anthropological ideal, a state of nature behind a false consciousness or a habitus. "These stacks of successive layers, all these veils piled on top of one another like so many petticoats keep your eyes turned in the same direction: they confirm us in our desire to accede to the distant (*past or future: Authors' Note*), to the ever more concealed. But it's not a matter of turning our eyes towards the distant; nor is it a matter of seeing through untruthful appearances to seize the hidden truth, but of bringing our gaze back to the near, yes, to our neighbours, to the present, which is always waiting to be recaptured" (Latour 2013b: 101-102). The contemporary world with its inequalities of class, its individualism, its consumerism, can be detestable but at the same time, paradoxically, this is the only one we have. By definition, it is this *world*, accessible here and now by everybody within this official reality, that we must question, exposing its own language. "To wait until we find ourselves transported miraculously to other times and places in order to speak truly is, by design, to lie" (Latour 2013b: 154).

'For how many years has it been, how many centuries, since those professionals, the clerics, found themselves in a contemporary period that they didn't hate with all their guts? Idols, materialism, the market, modernism, the masses, sex, democracy – everything has horrified them. How would they have found the right words? They wanted to convince a world that they hated with all their soul. They really believed that you couldn't possibly speak 'absolute revolution[ix]' except by first deporting people to other places and other times,

supposedly more spiritual." (Latour 2013b: 173, translation changed)

We would go further than Latour however, and argue that the sociological project belongs *in the world* in the way people aggregate or associate and and in their objectives for imagining a better world, and thus it is from the world that we must critique dominant institutions, in particular economic institutions, and how they construct the truth of their reality as the only possible reality, confounding reality and material existence. Mere descriptions of networks are not enough. We can, as sociologists, associate ourselves with social actors to denounce the aggregations of powerful actors as they constitute themselves into dominant and abstract institutions, without necessarily getting bogged down into the minute details of these aggregations.

This also forces us to rethink and perhaps reimagine the social role of the Sociologist in the world: not as standing somehow outside of the messiness of social life but as fully implicated in the world, deriving his/her expertise not from their own social purity but from the systematic analysis of situations within the world and its workings, driven by a desire to work in collaboration with social actors to negotiate meaningful ways to improve the social conditions in which lives, including those of sociologists, are led and choices made. The sociologist is therefore neither naïve nor superior, but perhaps privileged to have had the time and space to acquire the tools to deploy the sociological imagination (Mills 1967). In this sense can we say that doing sociology is a political act: it is about encouraging a more explicit engagement with the world which would bring substantial improvements in people's lives here and now, in situation, not in some unspecified utopia, and being willing to take head on the institutions which foster power and social inequalities.

This also brings the question of how we, in Sociology, *know* about people's lives. This is at the very least a methodological question. Indeed by giving primacy to lived experiences in the world as the potential source for the search for resistance and emancipation, a materialist sociology might find itself closely associated with methods of investigation which address reality as an institutional construction. When we take seriously the actions of social actors we also need to take into account

the emotional and sensate dimensions of experience, that is Spinoza's sad and happy passions or Boltanski's desires, and how actors themselves rationalize them. This appears to position materialist sociology in the same space of understanding as phenomenology. This is, a relationship which would require greater justification than we are able to propose in the present paper, especially given Sociology's other role which is to reveal the connections between different experiences and situations. Thus we invite a debate on methodological renewal in sociological research qua praxis.

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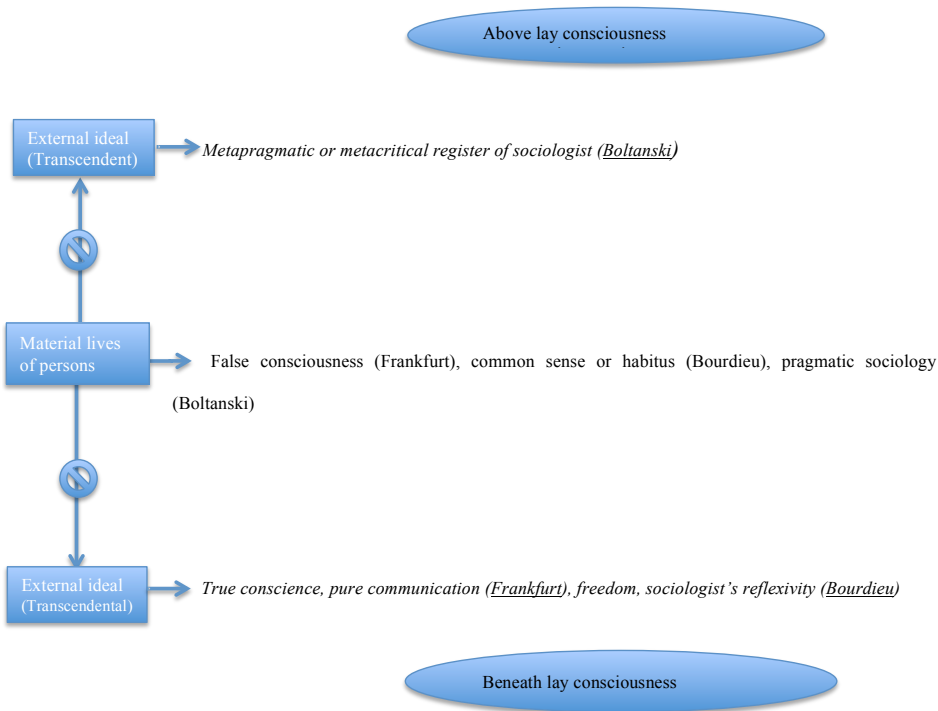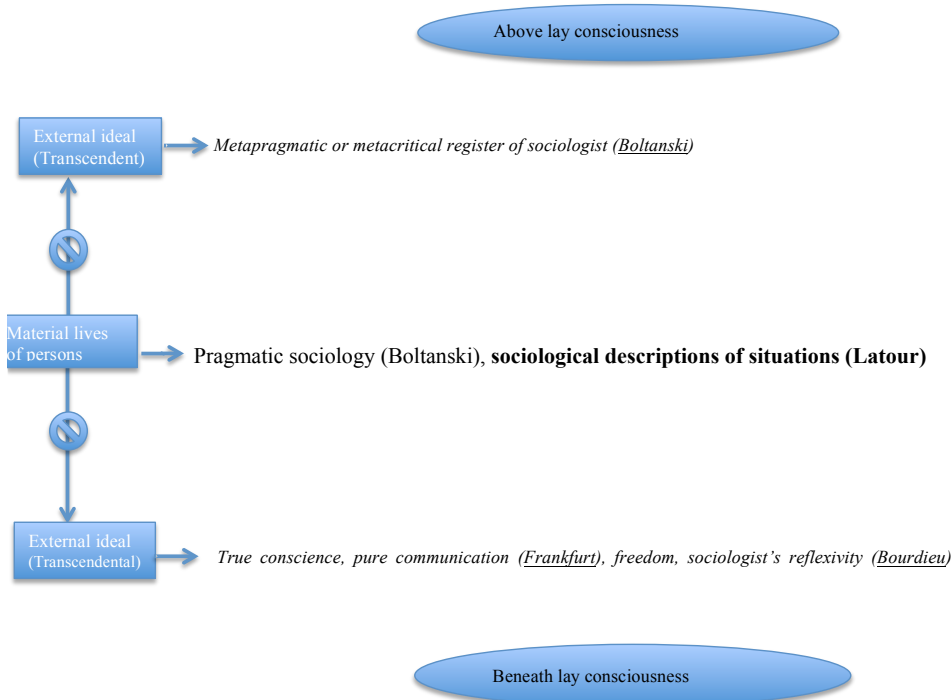
Figure 1: Critical theory as external idealism

Above lay consciousness

External ideal (Transcendent) → *Metapragmatic or metacritical register of sociologist (Boltanski)*

Material lives of persons → False consciousness (Frankfurt), common sense or habitus (Bourdieu), pragmatic sociology (Boltanski)

External ideal (Transcendental) → *True conscience, pure communication (Frankfurt), freedom, sociologist's reflexivity (Bourdieu)*

Beneath lay consciousness

Figure 2: Latour's pragmatism as unexternal …. and uncritical

Above lay consciousness

External ideal (Transcendent) → *Metapragmatic or metacritical register of sociologist (Boltanski)*

Material lives of persons → Pragmatic sociology (Boltanski), **sociological descriptions of situations (Latour)**

External ideal (Transcendental) → *True conscience, pure communication (Frankfurt), freedom, sociologist's reflexivity (Bourdieu)*

Beneath lay consciousness

Notes

[i] . The start of the next sentence found in Wacquant's translation, which begins with "*What he put under the term of 'recognition', then, is the set of fundamental ...*" has been omitted here because it is not present in the French original : *"J'appelle méconnaissance le fait de reconnaître une violence qui s'exerce précisément dans la mesure où on la méconnaît comme violence; c'est le fait d'accepter cet ensemble de présupposés fondamentaux ..."* (; "*it is through the fact of accepting this set of fundamental, prereflexive assumptions ...*") [Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:143].

[ii] . Gregory Elliott translates the French "se tient" as "holds together" in *On Justification*. But he translates the same French expression as "hangs together" in *On Critique*. We will just use "hangs together".

[iii] . It is generally recognised that ANT was born in a well-known article on the constitution of scientific understanding by scallop fishermen by Michel Callon. 1986. "Eléments pour une sociologie de la traduction: La domestication des coquilles Saint-Jacques et des marins-pêcheurs dans la baie de Saint-Brieuc". *L'Année sociologique*. Vol.36 : 169-208

[iv] . In her translation of Latour's works, Catherine Porter translates the French word "épreuve" as trial . In her translation of Boltanski's works, Gregory Eliott translates "épreuve" as "test". We have decided to keep this translation.

[v] . "I'd say that if your description needs an explanation, it's not a good description. That's all. Only bad descriptions need an explanation. It's quite simple really. What is meant by a 'social explanation' most of the time ? Adding another actor to provide those already described with the energy necessary to act. But if you have to add one, then the network was not complete. And if the actors already assembled do not have enough energy to act, then they are not 'actors' but mere intermediaries, dopes, puppets" (*Ibid*: 147).

[vi] . For instance the AMAP in France (Association pour le Maintien de l'Agriculture Paysanne)

[vii] . Our translation of the original 'montée en generalité'.

[viii]. Here, the notion of test, a central concept in pragmatic sociology, should be explained. It has notably been defined by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot in *On Justification* and developed by the former in *New Spirit of Capitalism* (with Eve Chiapello). The test refers to situations of social life where beings, pitting themselves against each other, demonstrate their competence. The test is a judgement on people's status. As we will see later, critique, by unveiling the action of hidden forces, constitutes a test to the extent that it questions an existing order, that is to say, the status of people in a given situation (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005:30-32). The maintenance of this order rests on the assertion of a *common good*. In the situations that we have considered above the common good would be the order of the *Market*. The test would ask the following: in what circumstances do we have the right to enrich ourselves *legitimately* in a capitalist market? In the order of *prestige*, who is accredited to confer diplomas in a graduation ceremony? The seminar would be part of the *industrial* order in which the following question could be posed: which conditions must a seminar legitimately meet in order to be efficient, functional and reliable and which conditions must the present people meet in order to be considered competent and responsible (on that topic, see Boltanski and Thévenot 2006: 83-124)? The implementation of a test is supported by **objects** which can be used by people when they pit themselves against each other. In our examples, it may be the professors' gowns, the red carpet, the PowerPoint projector, the contract of employment or the safety helmets, etc. For the situation to be judged as being for the common good and as natural (that is for *it to hang together*), each being (person or thing) must accept it (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006: 41). In this way, for example, the 'safety helmet' could not be mobilized by a professor during the graduation ceremony although it could be mobilized by the entrepreneur who wants to show that he does not want to enrich himself at the expense of the health and safety of his workforce.

[ix] Curiously, the original French "revolution absolue" ("absolute revolution": Latour Bruno. 2002. *Jubiler, ou les tourments de la pensée religieuse*. Paris: La découverte) is translated as 'religion' in the English translation. We keep here the original sense of the quotation.