**Transcending the transcendental: Towards a constructive critical sociology**

**Bruno Frère**

University of Liège

**Daniel Jaster**

Eureka College

Abstract

This article calls for a rethinking of critical sociology. The popular Bourdieusian paradigm effectively highlighted how domination persists, but its negative foundation removes the voices of actors by privileging sociological knowledge as capable of identifying transcendental categories of thought. Latourian critical theory arose in opposition to this privileging, but underplayed the roles of domination and power dynamics, and thus critique. We propose a perspective that evades the transcendental perspective which relies on pure negation but allows critique; a more positive critical sociology. This alternative perspective is founded on processualist, phenomenological, pragmatic, and utopian perspectives, which levels the distinction between social scientists and social actors. Focusing on process, not privileged knowledge of transcendental truths, emphasizes actors’ own critical capacities: critical scholars do not dominate, but help actors build better worlds based on their own perspectives and pasts. Thus, critical sociology does not negate actors, reducing them to unconscious reifiers, but recognizes that people utilize their pasts to challenge power structures and create better futures based on their imaginations.

This article calls for critical sociology to be reinvented for the 21st century. Doing so is, of course, a matter of identifying the forms of domination under contemporary conditions; but it is also a matter of identifying the means of emancipation without remaining content to pin our hopes on them for an uncertain future. Indeed, focusing on the French Bourdieusian tradition and the Latourian reaction, we try to demonstrate the precise extent to which critical sociology has denied actors the opportunity to build an emancipated existence. A better world is seen as highly improbable; only truly possible for future generations, following the rupture that occurs when the dominated finally take up the critique suggested by critical scholars, especially sociologists. Critical sociological discourse must thus expose the illusions of common sense that interfere with scholarly production.

In the first section of this paper, we show that the popular Bourdieusian approach exposes how common sense reflects the established order. Here, critical sociology is the practice of diving under this common sense to highlight its social determinations. Then we engage with a reaction to this perspective, the constructivism of Latour, who argues that Bourdieu has the audacity to claim a God’s point of view (Latour, 2005: 32-33). We argue that Bourdieusian critique comes not from above like a transcendent God, but from the deep; a transcendental God. The Bourdieusian critic is one who claims to place oneself beneath actors’ consciousness, to see social-transcendental condition of perception and representation. Bourdieu is a Kantian idealist. The problem with this approach is that actors who wish to be emancipated must first to reach this transcendental point of view, self-reflecting in an effort to purify oneself interminably (Boltanski,1990 [2012]: 23). In this sense, emancipation remains nigh-unreachable as actors will never finish to deconstructing the social determinations of their thought: they can never build a new world through freer actions.

Despite the parallels with Latour, we do not abandon the goal of critical sociology as he does (Latour, 2005 : 139). We do not deny the existence of symbolic domination, social alienation, or social order. The Bourdieusian critical tradition allows us to not take the world for granted and to explain why we don’t feel comfortable in it. The suggestion of a constructive critique aims to resolve the problem of exploring domination within pragmatic sociology, notably French pragmatism (Boltanski and Basaure, 2011, p. 274).

We reject the idealist position that grants the sociologist a monopoly of legitimate critique, always dismissing actor’s actions as unaware of their real social conditions and indelibly stained by what we inherit from our past and cultures. According to this position, only sociologists can identify people’s reified practices, since the sociological perspective takes into account the polluting structures that distort common sense. Second, we reject Bourdieu’s tendency to only engage in negative critique, the *néantisation* (self-annihilation) of what social actors are by only focusing on what can be understood as bad social influences (Sartre, 1993 [1943]).

In a third section, wdevelopn alternative sociology, one which is constructive as well as deconstructive. To critique also means to look for practices that can be described as non-reified or alienated practices in the world. This requires highlight the oft-neglected positive potential of some Bourdieusian concepts. But this also requires searching for accounts outside of the critical tradition, which has a history of negative analysis. In the two last sections of this paper we synthesize processual accounts of phenomenology, pragmatism, and Blochian utopianism. These approaches suggest a form of critique which recognizes everyday people’s ability to criticize their world and practices, utilizing their own critiques to build on other elements of their pasts and cultures to create something better***.*** This helps critical sociology to take more seriously actions against domination instead of doubting, and understanding them as new forms rather than to confine them to reification of the social order by constant negation. The critical scholar doesn’t just critique some ways of being: she encourages actors to continue to build and live other ways of being, of constructing society positively, in the contingency and the fragility of a present new aggregation turned toward the emancipation in acts rather than in the comfort of an exclusive negation of social categories inscribed in actors’ minds, always supposed to structure the present experience in a sad way.

***1. Doubting unconscious actors***

The idea that the dominated reproduce the conditions of their own domination is at the heart of the critical sociological tradition of which Bourdieu is a figurehead. One of the key thoughts in critical tradition is that “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 [1979]: 389). Contrary to Renault’s (2012) claims, Bourdieu draws inspiration from the Frankfurt School, especially Adorno:

What the relation to ‘mass’ […] 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* […]*,* present themselves to the worker as *opus alienum* […]*,* alienated labour. […] 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 [1979]: 386-387; on Adorno and Bourdieu see Susen, 2011; Gartman, 2012

Mass culture imposes its ideology on such a scale because the dominated do not possess the cultural capital which allows them to distinguish themselves and produce it to their advantage like the dominant. To combat actors’ to reproduce dominant systems through non-reflexive action, Bourdieu argues that sociology’s epistemology should focus on revealing these reflexive presuppositions and denounce acceptance of the established order contained in ordinary language. The task of the sociologist as that of the intellectual who takes care not to “consecrate the obvious facts of common sense” (Bourdieu, Chamboredon and Passeron 1991 [1973]: 54).

This is not a relativist position: the principal difficulty for sociology, as a science, is to confront the obstinacy of the common sense shared by the dominant and dominated alike. But sociology’s scientifically objective understanding of the social world is destined to be challenged by naïve actors who do not wish to challenge their preconceived notions (Bourdieu 2004 [2002]: 88). The prereflexive presuppositions that agents use to construct their discourse about the world is precisely what the sociologist must distrust (Bourdieu, 1982).

The sociologist must therefore arm themselves against “the semi-scholarly grammar of practices bequeathed by common sense” so their own thought is not polluted. Actors’ rationalizations of their practices are not truly scientific, but products of the dominant ideology (Bourdieu 2000, p.306 & p.308, own translation). These “spontaneous theories” carried by ordinary language are, in reality, subordinated to practical functions; assigned by habitus. The individual who analyses their actions in terms of choice does nothing other than mobilize the preconception of “freedom” to justify themselves. Scientists who use this illusory freedom to develop a critical sociology allow themselves to be contaminated instead of giving this act a sociological explanation. Thus, one must steer clear of ordinary explanation and examine the extent to which this act is the product of dominant schemes and modes of representation inscribed in a habitus (Susen, 2007: 253). It is through this habitus that the dominant modes of being serve as a model for dominated modes of being, unbeknownst to the dominated. For example, the petit bourgeois’ actions express – however clumsily – the unconscious desire to copy the practices of the dominant to mask their working class origins (e.g. Accardo 2009).

Bourdieu’s distinction between conscious and unconscious is revealing. We could stop at the suggestion that, because “habitus is not something mental”, it is situated “beyond the conscious/unconscious distinction,” escaping any approach that subjects it to this dichotomy (Bouveresse 1995, p.583). But Bourdieu explicitly assigns habitus’ mechanisms to the sphere of the non-conscious: it functions “without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them” (Bourdieu 1990 [1980], p.53). The justification someone is likely to give of their practice thus becomes supplementary to their real motives, rooted in a habitus which only the sociologist can bring to light via refusing it as expression of domination and alienation. It is no accident that a petit bourgeois is more at ease at a football match than a contemporary art exhibition. Everyone plays the game without realizing it.

The only effective reality is that of the habitus, which weaves the truth of action beneath our illusions. Social science must incorporate common sense experiences into its definitions of social phenomena, but only when it has protected itself against everyday preconceptions produced by the habitus (Bourdieu 1990 [1980]: 135; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, pp.19-46). Common sense must always be the object of sociological suspicion and rejection, sparking a “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 reified, false consciousness, alienated by the unconscious work of habitus.

Bourdieu is uncompromising when it comes to the foundation of his epistemology: “the social sciences have to win all that they say against the received ideas that are carried along in ordinary language […]. To try to disrupt verbal automatisms does not mean artificially creating a distinguished difference that sets the layman at a distance; it means breaking with the social philosophy that is inscribed in spontaneous discourse” (Bourdieu 1993 [1984]: 20). He never recants his faith in a rupture with common sense. He reiterates that “rigorous knowledge almost always presupposes a more or less striking rupture (…) with the evidence of accepted belief – usually identified with common sense” (Bourdieu 1999 [1993], p.627). Sociology must question “all the preconstructions, all the presuppositions” to which it risks exposing itself, and which are the product of “social agents [who] do not innately possess a science of what they do” and what they are (Bourdieu 1999 [1993], p.627). Laypeople’s largely do not notice the tacit rules that govern their practices with complete impunity; produced by a habitus unaware of itself.

**2. Transcendentalism**

Bourdieu’s brand of sociology makes special demands for reflexivity if critical scholars intend on seeing the truth of the social world. Objective science requires the sociologist to understand one’s own socio-cognitive and historical position. To “carry out the scientific project in the social sciences” and “bring to light what is ‘the hidden’ *par excellence*, what escapes the gaze of science because it is hidden in the very gaze of the scientist, the transcendental unconscious, one has to historicize the subject of historicization, to objectify the subject of the objectification, that is, the *historical transcendental*, the objectification of which is the precondition for the access of science to self-awareness […].” (Bourdieu 2004 [2001]: 86; see also p. 78). The sociologist must primarily objectify herself as the person who objectifies social facts and social positions of which actors are not aware.

As he admits, this is a sociologizing of Kantian transcendental idealism. In Bourdieusian sociology, as in Kantian idealism, we can “entitle *transcendental* all knowledge which is occupied not so much with objects as with the [social] mode of our knowledge of objects in so far as this mode of knowledge is to be possible *a priori*. A system of such concepts might be entitled transcendental philosophy [sociology]” (Kant 2003, p.59 (B25); our additions in brackets). By “transcendental”, Kant means *that through which knowledge is possible*. The transcendental categories of understanding condition all thought, detectable via philosophy (see Kant 2003, pp. 113-114 (A80)), become, for Bourdieu, *social* transcendental categories of the possibility of thought, detectable via sociology. More precisely, he seeks to shed light on the socio-transcendental conditions of the possibility of knowledge which condition the judgements people make about their everyday lives. These judgements are truncated from the scientific perspective, since they convey a highly situated point of view.

After reflexive self-analysis, the sociologist can identify the truth about social relations. Locating her own perspective makes her capable of comprehending the perspectives of other actors. Which thus:

enables one to take – this point of view on all points of view being, according to Leibniz, the point of view of god, the only one capable of producing the ‘geometrical of all perspectives’, the geometric locus of all points of view, in both senses of the term, that is to say, of all positions and all position-takings, which science can only indefinitely approach and which remains, in terms of another geometrical metaphor, borrowed from Kant this time, a *focus imaginarius* , a (provisionally) inaccessible limit. (Bourdieu 2004 [2001]: 95).

This absolute point of view is not accessible itself, but the Bourdieusian sociologist gets closest to it (Bourdieu: 2004: 92). For Bourdieu, common sense can only be “thought of negatively, or more precisely as a censorship and a concealment of an objective truth” (Laval 2018: 184-185). Like Marcuse, he borrows the concept of denial from Freud to name that reaction of rejection by the dominated and the dominants whose actions and visions of the social world the analyst comes along and explains.

Our analysis here is an epistemological one. What we question is the position Bourdieu grants to the sociologist, which he himself likens to that of an omniscient God, the only one capable of objectifying the transcendental unconscious that conditions the perspective of the point of view of the one he calls the agent,” a point of view which is unaware of being a point of view and is experienced in the illusion of absoluteness” (Bourdieu 2004 [2001]: 116). Theory becomes logically unfalsifiable and the field of science (sociology) becomes a “historical site where trans-historical truths are produced” (Bourdieu 2004 [2001]: 69). It will never be questioned by actors caught in the bondage of the dominant ideology, unknowingly playing the game of a social order. Nor will it ever be contested by other theoretical approaches. Those who demand other analyses are inevitably lesser scientists having not carried out their own socio-analysis. By not joining the search for an underlying truth beneath the thought and actions of deluded actors, researchers only prove that they remain alongside actors in the pre-reflexive obscurity of false consciousness. Cooperation with the actors is complicit in validating what it ought to denounce.

Bourdieu thus confiscates the transcendental position from the philosopher, granting it to the sociologist. With common language now relegated to the rank of misleading presuppositions, only sociological analysis can free us. Like the psychoanalyst, the sociologist must set about “translating the unconscious into the conscious” (Freud 1961, p.433; see also: Steinmetz, 2006; Darmond, 2016). He must help the actor to elevate himself to the level of the truth of his practices. Only the sociologist can aspire to perform this unveiling, as the actor will engender a distortion of his experience whenever he wants to pass “from the world where he lives” to “the world where he thinks”(Bourdieu 2000 [1997]: 52; see also Bourdieu 2000 [1997]: 121). We could say that sociological explanation is akin to a higher court overruling the lower court of everyday actors (Wittgenstein 2007, p.44).

Bourdieu invites us to bracket common language –produced unreflectively by habitus – lest we run “the risk of mistaking objects pre-constructed in and by ordinary language for data” (Bourdieu, Chamboredon and Passeron 1991 [1973]: 21). We must constantly be vigilant regarding “even the most purified schemes… whenever they have a structural affinity with ordinary-language schemes” (1991 [1973]: 24). Truly scientific sociological language is that which resists contamination by common sense. Sociological thought is a transcendental analytic (Kant 2003, p.102 [B89] sq), a body of thought that determines the conditions of possibility of all thought.

The sociologist is thus not above individual consciousness, but below it, able to highlight to negate their sociological conditions of emergence. This is a theoryof the depths: sociological knowledge is situated beneath ordinary language. She is the one who is most capable of objectifying actors’ transcendental unconscious by getting closer to the perspective of all perspectives; the perspective of God. By leading us towards a continued asceticism when faced with the language of common sense and its presuppositions, Bourdieu wants to show that “rationality can only be defined as a battle, ever renewing, against the prescientific mindset, against false evidence” (Latour, 1989, p. 12, our translation). If unconscious social schemas govern our activity via the intermediary of a kind of incarnated and unreflective reason – which can only be expressed in an alienated and reified language – then how can we think about social change and creativity? Despite its emphasis on perpetual critique, Bourdieusian sociology seems to lack the ability to recognize how culture not only limits, but can also transform (Delanty, 2011: 80; Sewell 1992).

***3. Towards the other Janus face of critique[[1]](#footnote-3)***

The transcendentalism embedded within the dominant Bourdieusian perspective in critical sociology has a significant effect on understandings of emancipation. We contend that its ability to emancipate is limited because it cannot encourage actors to recognize and *actualize* their innate agency. It is not positive: it does not help social actors illustrate that they belong in society, capable of and encouraged to communicate with all in the commons, to change the society (Rancière 2007[1992]: 48). There is an embedded sense of self-superiority. There is the assumption that we know better than actors how the world works; reflexivity is not humility. Such a belief implicitly establishes yet another system of inequality, despite the good intentions of establishing equalities (Rancière 2007[1992]: 52). Some have access to the transcendental; some need help. Potential societal changes rely on a tiny public who, following sociologists, will realize, and then negate, all their unconscious predisposition which reproduce the social order.

We do not wish to jettison all of Bourdieu’s perspective. He joins the ranks of Foucault and Derrida because his deconstruction powerfully illustrates the existence of social, economic, and symbolic domination (Benatouïl, 1999a, p. 284). We agree that critical sociology engages with social problems and can play a political role (Benatouïl, 1999a, p. 312, 1999b, p. 389). But to suggest a way for emancipation means to recognize that sociological categories of thought on how domination works can be reached by anyone depending of circumstances. Otherwise, only a select few could emancipate themselves; a new hierarchy. Critique is accessible to everyone and does not depend of the privileged access to unconscious transcendental categories. Additionally, we must find a way to analyse people’s actions which does not overemphasize reproduction of the social order: one must be critical but also emphasize the creation of something better.

Let us address our first point. To remain focused on the false consciousness and on the reproduction of the social order through people’ predispositions leads to “under-estimat[ing] the effects of the circulation of sociological discourses in society and their re-appropriation/re-interpretation by actors – which is rather problematic in the case of a sociology that claims reflexivity” (Boltanski 2011 [2009] : 21, see also Boltanski, 2012 [1990], 18 and 84). This double hermeneutic (Giddens 1986) has been illustrated repeatedly: under-class people are conscious of the symbolic violence they endure, even without sociologists’ input (Viguier 2019), as evidenced by social critiques levied in free software associations (Depoorter 2019), the solidarity economy (Frère, 2019), and the Notre-Dames-Des-Landes ZAD (Bull 2019).

To our second point, equating positivistic scientific practices with objective and inaccessible truths, as some defenders of Bourdieu do (e.g. Jain, 2013, p. 105, Atkinson, 2019: 10), can ignore how common sense itself follows the structure of scientific way of thinking. Though not formally trained, everyday people act like scientists, testing the world around them (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006[1991]: 54). There exist some situations where “actors exhibit their action and unfold it verbally. On such occasions, they seek to generalize and to constitute facts by means of language, and as they do so they use language in a way that approaches that of sciences” (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006[1991]: 356).

The pragmatic turn in sociology is built on this assumption, making it more respectful of people and ordinary life (Frère and Jaster, 2019). Contra much critical sociology, pragmatic sociology does not negate common sense, but translates actors’ understandings (Callon, 1986). Instead of defining agents by means of stable transcendental attributes which must be cleansed, endowing them with tendencies “capable of generating objective unconscious intentions […], the sociology of translation shows how actor develop discourses about these action, how they shape their action into a plot [...] We are attentive to the way in which the actors themselves construct reports that are coherent and that aim for objectivity and generality” (Boltanski, 2012 [1990]: 29-30). The idea of translation is not only to reproduce what actors say in other words. It is also utilize sociological knowledge to help actors to find their own coherence in the public space. Clarifying is also consolidating. In consists “in going back to the argumentative chain to utterances of higher generality in the sense that they are acceptable to unspecified actors and their validity no longer depends on the contingent dimensions of the situation” (Boltanski, 2012 [1990] :32).

Latour helps give critique a constructivist element to this tradition. Militantly against Bourdieusian critique (Latour 2004: 229), Latour argues that critiques do not deconstruct, but construct. The goal is not to upend those we study, but to help clarify ideas with the full recognition that social reality is a fragile and contingent construction, and must be treated with respect and caution (Latour 2004: 246). More recently, Latour (2017) suggests what could be called constructive critique. Constructive criticism is when the sociologist utilizes his or her repertoire of knowledge and specific tools alongside, not above, people. In their commitment to the world in which they live, sociologists contribute to the formatting of social constructions and aggregates at the same time as they study them (see also Boltanski 2012 [1990]: 32). In such a perspective, society always needs to be explained; it does not explain. To do social science from a constructivist point of view is to start from collectives that are in the process of being formed, integrating controversy instead of starting from pre-formed collective structures (Latour, 2013: 353 and 401).

Per Latour, Bourdieusian thought washes away the specificity of the social world. There is no context, no separation of the social from other realities, no social forces to explain social phenomena unexplainable by structure, etc. The Bourdieusian perspective operates as if actors know what they are doing, even if they don’t satisfactorily explain it to researchers (Latour 2005: 4-5). We must understand that society is always in the making: constantly built by the associations that the actors are involved in. There is no preexisting social force.

Compelling. But Latour throws the baby out with the bath water. Rejecting the idea of any preexisting social force also rejects all the Bourdieusian concepts such as habitus, social dispositions, or schemas. Certainly, Latour saw that these were not a priori categories which unconsciously give rigid forms to perception and reflection. There is no "hidden", a "deep dark below” that is only accessible through a transcendental approach (Latour 2004: 229). Totally rejecting these concepts gives the impression that humans live and think in a kind of permanent *tabula rasa;* that people never refer to schemes of thought from their pasts. In the Latour’s works, the actors associate and build the “social” ex-nihilo.

Yet people recognize and engage with the past, and it can be a positive resource for changing society. Social forces can be a positive influence on how people engage with their social dispositions; they are no not necessarily negative or necessary to negate. Habitus, dispositions, and social schemas can help people transform society. Increased reflexivity does not mean just being able to identify what structures one’s thoughts, experiences, and actions: it also means being better able to think critically about how things must change in order to make the world more reflective of our better imaginary.

This leads to our second critique of Latour: his promotion of a “flat concept of society” dismisses dynamics of domination within societal organization (Guggenheim and Potthast, 2011, p. 163). Because society is always what thousand and thousand aggregations of actors construct all over the world, “change is permanent”. We have swung from one extreme to another: with Bourdieu, nothing never changes; with Latour, everything changes everywhere, all the time. Social stabilized spaces, with power hierarchies, do not exist. Latour’s desire to describe any kind of aggregation/association/assemblage on the same level, always digging deeper into description of aggregations themselves, implies no stable power dynamics (Keller, 2017: 62; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 48).

While we agree that critical theory must move beyond Bourdieusian transcendentalism, the Latourian model overcorrects. In an attempt to reconcile critique with pragmatism (Boltanski, 2011 [2011]; Susen, 2014, 2015; Nachi, 2014), we suggest conserving Bourdieusian deconstruction of domination, but with a constructive emphasis, recognizing Latourian descriptive assemblage (Savage, 2009). To accomplish this, we draw from a handful of schools of thought. First is what can be called the processual perspective, with a heavy emphasis on Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Second is the related pragmatist perspective, particularly American pragmatism. Lastly is the utopian perspective of Ernst Bloch, which has many parallels with these schools of thought.

These perspectives highlight how the lived experience is dynamic and fluid. Our understandings and actions are influenced by our perception of our past and our culture, our goals, and visions of better ways for the world to be. In this sense, there is a hint of utopianism in our understandings of the social world. But utopianism doesn’t always follow a strict teleology. As we better understand the world, our understandings of what happened, and what can happen in the future, changes. There is no clear, set better to perceive: critique changes as our social world changes.

***4. A processual construction of the present rooted in critique***

We begin with the individual’s phenomenal encounter with the lived world. When we experience our world, we constantly balance a yet-unrealized future and a fluid past in our present. However, in our desire to understand our world, we freeze this experience in moments of time; categories of our habitus. Though these categories are necessarily alien from our experience, we find them useful in helping us to act here and now, changing or confirming our way of life. There are many circumstances in social life when we analyse and try to understand our social experiences. This can help us solidify our understandings of the past, an oft believed necessary condition for establishing causal, and thus predictive, relationships (Bergson 2011[1913]: 101, 196; Boltanski 2011; Merleau-Ponty 2012[1945]: 277-278, 380-381, 438-442).

Being social creatures, we are taught to act and think in certain ways. So far, this parallels Bourdieu’s transcendentalism. How we think and act is necessarily influenced by our socialization; our dispositions (habitus); our pasts. Indeed, actors’ contemporary perceptions and understandings are interwoven with our memories (Bergson 1959[1896]: 53-54). Bourdieu was probably right to say that we cannot erase or bracket our biographies and socializations from our understandings. These frameworks influence how we understand the world. Nevertheless, we can consciously take inspiration and repurpose them for change instead of negate them via ordinary communications.

The temporal relationship is not as static as it appears. Bourdieu recognizes this, underspecifies how transformations occur. The past is actualized in the present as memory only through reference to our contemporary moment (Bergson 1959[1896]: 53-54, 128, 236; Merleau-Ponty 2012[1945]: 277-278, 438-442). Bergson calls this an upwelling of the past towards the present, but Merleau-Ponty, influenced by Bergson (Heidsieck, 1971: 35), helps sociologize this spiritualized and subjectivized concept (Halbwachs (1935 [1925]: 123, 370). We don’t normally think in social categories and analysis, but during moments of crisis, when understandings become unsettled, our “preconscious relations to class […] that had until then been merely lived [are transformed] into conscious decisions; tacit commitment becomes explicit. But it appears to itself as if it preexisted the decision” (Merleau-Ponty 2012[1945]: 381).

Merleau-Ponty prefigures Bourdieu’s critical sociology, as he conceives of our entanglement with the world in general and our ineluctable situatedness in our bodies as cultural (see also Boltanski 2003). This view is based on the assumption that “the unity of culture extends above the limits of an individual life the same kind of envelope that captures in advance all the moments in that life, at the instant of its institution or its birth” (Merleau-Ponty, 1960a: 111). Like Bourdieu, he refuses to see “in the mind the guarantee of unity which is already there when we perceive” the world and the meaning that one’s culture (one’s social universe) has deposited as sediment (*ibid.*). But contra Bourdieu he does not pretend that reflection on the socio-cultural frame of perception depends of a kind sociological transcendental cleaning.

Merleau-Ponty’s conception is much more optimistic. Through the action of culture, one inhabits lives that are not one’s own. The significations that the objects in the world take on were forged by those who “preceded my present” (Merleau-Ponty, 1960a: 111). This present becomes what Merleau-Ponty calls the *social-mien* (social-mine); that is to say, the raw material of my being-in-the-world that I will then be able to sculpt (Frère, 2005: 248).

Throughout his work, one can see a nod in the direction of sociology (see Bourdieu 1987: 15). He describes, for example, a social fact not as a ‘massive reality’ but as ‘embedded in the deepest part of the individual’ (1960c: 123-142). Every life has ‘a social atmosphere’ which precedes and conditions the reflexive gaze we can turn on it. One is immersed in the world before becoming aware of the world. But the self is the most capable of reflecting on this significance since one is the only one to experience the cultural and social world in the way one does. Merleau-Ponty put this as follows: ‘When I awake in me the consciousness of this social-mine (*social-mien*), it is my whole past that I am able to conceive of […], all the convergent and discordant action of the historical community that is effectively given to me in my living present’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1960b: 12). We can call this one’s common sense. One can then seek people who share the same *social-mien*, the same common sense, as oneself. It is important to keep in mind Merleau-Ponty’s insistence on the empowering nature of the *social-mien*:

Merleau-Ponty’s unexpected death meant that the *social-mien* ‘found no name in any philosophy’ (Lefort 1978: page?). It did, however, emerge in sociology. In moving from a philosophy to a sociology, the *social-mien* can be understood as habitus. The habitus, understood in light of Merleau-Ponty’s work, allows us to envisage an active and plural actor for whom habitus is not frozen in time as, at the same time, likely to behave in accordance with social learnings (Lahire, 2010 [1998]). But the Bourdieusian translation removes the positive and pro-active dimension. As a schema and disposition, it became a kind of transcendental category of perception to be negated, lacking creative agentic potential.

Of course, Bourdieu periodically notes that habitus creates the capacity to act upon the social world. Such a view portrays the relationship between habitus and the social world as a relationship of mutual and continuous transformation. Yet, in most of his writings, Bourdieu largely neglects the existence – and, consequently, the significance – of the creative and transformative dimension. Such a deterministic conception portrays actors as heteronomous entities condemned by their common sense to reproduce the social conditions of their domination. This somewhat fatalistic perspective is particularly seductive when studying the situation of working classes in advanced societies. These classes learn to like watching television rather than reading books, and to disengage from, rather than engage with, politics; in short, they learn to accept their alienation.

Importantly, social determinations and cultural complexity are not mutually exclusive. Socially complex individuals are aware of their multifaceted identities. Merleau-Ponty uses the example of a painter to show how being-in-the-world is a source of creativity. He writes that ‘the painter lends his body to the world in order to put himself in painting’ and that he thereby makes himself the ‘echo’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 16-22). But he does it with a specific transformative touch coming from the artistic-social and cultural surrounding which built his *social-mien*. This has important implications for a more constructive version of critique: we are all capable of assembling our *social-mien* to change the social order from which we emerge. The constructively critical sociologist here would aggregate and illuminate common senses which contributors inherit from the past and share to change the future.

These perspectives highlight the hubris in claiming that sociological critique consists in bracketing one’s experiences to gain access to the transcendental, truer understandings of social reality. Even the language we use to express our sociological analysis comes from our past and has cultural connotations. Based on these insights, how can we realistically claim to bracket our pasts and categories when claiming to recognize the transcendental subject lying beneath? As sociologists, we seem to be no different from other actors in our inability to separate ourselves from the social, which makes sense since the self and the social are consubstantial (Mead 1962[1934]).

This emphasis on the fluidity of our understandings of the past and present, and how these capacities both structure and provide creative agency, illustrates the need to recognize that social actors have, and act on, innate critical capacities. We now turn to pragmatisms to build a new critical foundation. We focus on two emphases which help us build a more constructive critical approach: moments of uncertainty, when past understandings no longer work, and the way that desires for the future influence our understandings of the past and present.

**5. A utopian construction of the future rooted in critique**

Within the broader pragmatic paradigm, people are not unconscious actors incapable of understanding their social world and their social constitution without help. Quite the opposite: human agency, creativity, and inquisitiveness as central themes. Like Bourdieu, pragmatists recognize a generally conservative trend in how people think and act. However, this attempt to retain past dispositions and understandings is not unconscious nor stable. While we tend to follow habit when acting, “Habit does not preclude the use of thought, but it determines the channels within which it operates. [...] We dream beyond the limits of use and wont, but only rarely does revelry become a source of acts which break bounds [...]” (Dewey 1981: 630). This would seem to fit with a Bourdieusian perspective: actors rarely think consciously about what they are doing, perpetuating inequalities. However, this is not what Dewey indicates there. It is not that people do not, or cannot, imagine otherwise or critique: it is that such desires rarely produce revolutionary actions.

This is because there is a more gradual, piecemeal theory of change within the pragmatic understanding of thought and action. Like Merleau-Ponty’s artist, humans are conscious and creative. This is particularly evident during indeterminate periods, when our habitus does not help us understand or solve the problems we encounter (Dewey 1957[1920]: 141). Actors are then freer to re-evaluate how they understand and act within the world; to reimagine it differently. During these moments, actors become more reflexive, and must critically examine their past understandings based on new information and experiences, to synchronize their understandings across their temporalities (Dewey 1981: 221; Joas 1997: 82). Like processualists, pragmatists note that actors can change their understandings of the past to fit with their new experiences. New ideas can be applied to old experiences: there is no guaranteed stability in our understandings of the social (Jaster 2019; James 1978: 35). Here again we can refer to the *social-mien* redefinition of habitus: we can look for rarely mobilised predispositions from our social heritage to create something new.

In this way, actors are much like scientists. These moments of uncertainty are somewhat common: how the world works do not match past experiences, prompting actors to regularly prod, explore, and reexamine the social world (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006[1991]: 37; Dewey 1981: 175-193; James 1978: 34-35). They make incremental changes to their understandings, with major revolutions in thought and critique rarely happening; once past understandings can no longer be accommodated to fit new data. Sociologists of knowledge may recognize this process: it is like Kuhn’s (2012[1962]) description of scientific revolutions. Radical change can occur without having to identify transcendental categories of thought cleansed of the social.

Notably, how we examine the world is not separate from our desires; how we want the world to be. Our goals influence what we consider to be data, how we analyze it, and how we then assess which actions to take (Dewey 1981: 139-141, 406-407). Present reflexivity allows us to engage with our dispositions and how our future hopes influenced our actions and understanding in the present (Joas 1997: 129-131; Mead 1956: 313-314). More contemporary psychological theories like just-world theory and motivated reasoning evidence this (Hafer and Bègue 2005; Hart et al 2009).

Again, the parallels with Merleau-Ponty arise. We can see elements of this interpretation in his analysis of political activism, where he notes that “revolt is not, then, the product of objective conditions, but conversely it is the decision made by the worker to desire the revolution that turns him into a proletarian. [...] One might conclude from this that history has no sense by itself, it has the sense we give it through our will” (Merleau-Ponty 2012[1945]: 468). Toussaint Louverture utilized his knowledge of the French revolution and his own experience to galvanise a revolt against slavery (e.g. Merleau-Ponty 1960; 2000). Our desires for different futures help produce these moments of uncertainty, where we re-evaluate our social conditions; critique. And, contrary to a highly structuring habitus, many people often want to live in different ways, inventing futures inspired by positive past experiences.

Social scientists are much like other social actors in terms of their method of understanding the social world. Our understandings are still rooted in our understandings of the past and desires for the future. We will believe to be true things that work within their understandings of the world. Lacking the privilege to perceive social-transcendental categories with which one can trouble actors’ judgements, how can we effectively critique? What is a critical sociologist to do when she finds actors who critically engage with the social world, though not in as systematic a fashion as she is trained? To answer this question and complete our alternative to Bourdieusian critical sociology, we turn to Ernst Bloch. While the processual theories of Merleau-Ponty and pragmatists have helped us make negative Bourdieusian concepts into something positive, Bloch’s processualism helps us combine elements of domination with Latourian constructivism

Though somewhat transcendental on account of his Marxist perspective, Bloch’s epistemology is less rooted in seeing the underlying social categories than focused on the **process** through which people regularly try to improve the world around them thanks to. His is a form of critique that is constructive rather than negative; rooted in hope, not fear (Bloch 1986[1959]a: 75). This hope is based on a recognition, like pragmatists, that utopian consciousness is not defined by its knowledge free from social determinations, but rather by the process through which actors regularly improve upon their critiques of the world they experience.

Actors, at least those with utopian consciousness, are already aware of the injustices around them. In their actions, they challenge society to be better (Bloch 1986[1959]a: 315). This should not discourage the critical actor, however. Much like how pragmatists note that actors learn from their tinkering to further improve their knowledge, Bloch argues that a continual process of learning from past attempts, critiquing, and improving constitutes utopian consciousness (Bloch 1986[1959]a: 188). Bergson often referred to this "pressure that the past exerts on consciousness" and defined freedom as the ability to retain the past and to formalise his/her future to increasingly influence the course of events (Vieillard-Baron, 2000: 59). More specifically, the social actor is one "who has control over his future only because he is able to give himself a certain perspective on his past" (Hyppolite, 1993: 479). Thus, contra Latour, when one forms a collective, one does not do so from nowhere. One does it from an experience that one shares with others of their social-mind-set, a dough whose contours they collectively knead and whose contours they intend to modify. This is how society has improved through time, and will continue through the future (Bloch 1986[1959]b). The utopian consciousness can spring from common sense and is improved by the aggregation of people who want to improve the world and realise that they share common pasts, habits, or ideas from past experiences.

Thus, from a Blochian perspective, social actors regularly learn that their better worlds do not always work perfectly, and they constantly tinker with them. As we tinker, we learn, and consequently our understandings and dispositions of perception change. We try to make a better world and learn how it falls short, but also learn new ways that it can be improved; flaws that we hadn’t seen before. We can see this in the French May 1968 movement, which helped eliminate many of the hierarchical, patrimonial, and ossified elements within the French economy, but paradoxically unleashed the perils and precarity of contemporary dynamic capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). This constructive process is reflexive; critical; processual; pragmatic; uncertain; fragile. Most importantly, the critical scholar doesn’t just critique and highlight injustices: she joins actors who critique a specific subject, encourages them to continue to build better ways of being, of constructing society; to continually develop their own critical capacities and moral visions.

**Conclusion**

In a transcendental perspective, the social scientist is tasked with negating actors’ beliefs to illustrate just how confined their perspectives are, subsuming everyday actors underneath their authority. Our proposed alternative perspective levels the distinction between these parties. Scientists and everyday actors are all engaged in a steady process of understanding the social world. Both can utilize dispositions and knowledge from their past to change things. The difference between the two is a question of refinement, not qualitatively different perspectives. Here, critical sociology does not show actors the true forms instead of the shadows on the wall of the cave. Constructive critique emphasizes actors’ innate capacity to critique and construct. We help actors refine their ability to tease apart their various lifeworlds and dominant systems (Habermas 1989) and examine the degree to which 1) these systems are consistent with one another, and 2) these systems are acceptable to actors and how they think the world ‘works’, how they want the world to work and how they are making it working differently.

The Bourdieusian approach quashes actors’ potential because it is exclusively negative: always doubting, assuming the worst in people. Critical sociologists must disrupt somewhat stable fields to help foment change. We emphasize construction over negation. One must not to always doubt, but rather foster and encourage those who already resist and to describe the forms of life they are democratically building together (Latour), consciously trying to avoid old forms of domination (Bourdieu). Actors’ understandings and actions are taken as the starting point of a dialogue between the scientist and the actor to better understand actors’ intents and worldviews. Sociologist assumes that she’s co-constructing the world with people, trying to translate this co-construction to reinforce it as an aggregation which can change social order.

We do not wish to condemn Bourdieusian thought to the dustbin of dead theories. We merely want to abandon the transcendental dimension of critique under certain conditions: no a priori categories which must be refused, but historically and contingent habitus and conditions of thought which can be criticised *or* galvanized. Actors have utopian visions. They can reframe the contours of the world like Cezanne painting the mountain Sainte Victoire (Merleau-Ponty1964). When understood as the *social-mien*, habitus becomes an innovative resource.

Thus, the process, not the telos or goal, is what makes critical sociology: we should emphasize that in our perspective by avoiding proclamations of knowledge of truer, more just ways of being. Claims to see the transcendental through careful analysis should be taken with caution. To proclaim that science knows better because it is scientific is faulty (not to mention tautological); science has a more refined epistemological process but is not categorically different from other empirically based theorizing (Haack 2009: 187-188). We cannot rely on pure sociology for a purer judgment, rid of empirical determinations; why should we rely on sociologists for emancipation and critique?

In short, critical scholars can improve the world through helping actors refine their already existing critical capacities. Such aesBy focusing on the social construction process, not the vision, we evade presumptions of moral superiority.

Some may protest, noting how our levelling of the distinction between the scientist and the social actor implies that we cannot distinguish different critical claims. We supposedly equate the critiques of the reformist, the socialist, and the Nazi as equally just or true, derived different but symmetrical perspectives from different pasts. However, the broader pragmatic perspective can critique, even with a levelling of actors and social researchers (e.g. Haack 2009; Misak 2000). Reality can challenge our interpretations, making them weaker (Barthes et al., 2013, p. 199). It is empirically obvious that hierarchies exist. While we cannot know better than actors which understandings or dispositions are truest about the social world, we can indeed distinguish better and worse claims depending of actors’ positions in the social order. People who are dominated under social systems are often quite aware of their domination and they try to resist. As sociologists, we can help give form to their claims and proposals for better ways of being. To study a group can mean recognizing our shared concerns (Hache, 2013; Latour, 2005). But we do this while recognizing that we are constructing together a critical stance in a broader social (unfair) structure. This common critique will be much more powerful if we do not constantly dismiss claims derived from past experiences, but instead collectively from them to focus on how we want to build for the future.

The hermeneutics of suspicion should not be the default perspective for all critical engagements with the social world. We should respect that social actors have critical capacities and nurture this empowerment, helping them further refine and actualize their critiques. Like Latour, processualists, and pragmatists, we symmetrize positions from an epistemological point of view. But we do not symmetrise the position of each actor in society; a flat world without power dynamics. Sociology is itself a democratic game, a process through which oligarchization over public life is challenged (Rancière, 2014[2005]). Rather than dismissing actors and showing them why their critiques are rooted in illusions structured by socio-transcendental categories, scholars can help dominated groups publicize their critiques and their own representation of symbolic domination. Recognizing and asserting people’s capacities to critique and explain the social world as sociological actors themselves, cognizant of concepts like capitalism, power, and domination, empowers them (Blokker 2014). They can better use their *social-mien* to create something new from their marginalized dispositions. Levelling the judgments of actors and social scientists forces scholars to reflexively engage with our attempts to foment change. Turning a more constructive/critique eye upon ourselves, and what we think together is moral, helps us embody an ethics of fragility and contingency, a recognition that we are collectively limited by our habitus but also, in the same time, empowered by it (Corcuff, 2002, 2012; Frère, 2004). This perspective helps us realize the cracks that people create in the dominant system (Holloway 2010), or the real utopias they are trying to create (Wright 2010). A transcendental point of view makes it easy to minimize these elements as alienation due to over immersion in common sense, reducing people to objective reproducers of the established order. One can lead without dominating, challenging power systems through irony and through empowering actors to collectively take charge themselves; without us.

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