

Beyond Critical Sociology
Bourdieu's Positivism and the Sociology of Critique

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the value of French *sociology of critique* as a post-Bourdieuian critical sociology. We first show why this sociological paradigm correctly highlights positivistic elements within the Bourdieuan paradigm. Bourdieu's epistemological barrier between scientists and ordinary actors implies that critical sociologists' judgments are scientifically true and must be distinguished from the latter's own understandings of his/her action. This is epistemologically and normatively unsound due to the scientist's own position within the social milieu. We then propose that critical scholars adopt the sociology of critique approach. This takes actors' understandings of motivations and actions seriously, minimizing the distance between sociologists' and actors' understandings of the social world, better representing people's social reality. This richer, more reflexive portrait of social life places social scientists in an advantageous position to understand and critically engage with the individuals and communities whom we study.

INTRODUCTION

In the wake of positivism's decline as the hegemonic epistemology in social sciences such as sociology, scholars have sought alternatives to fill its void. One particular orientation stands to profit from this shift: critical sociology. Though there are a plethora of different approaches within critical sociology, including but not limited to feminist and postcolonial theory, the critical school can largely be divided into two broad categories: constructivism (Reed 2008, 2010) and critical realism (Steinmetz, 2004; Steinmetz and Chae, 2002). Though divided among ontological assumptions, epistemological models, and the normative implications of their research, these scholars stand united in their belief that social science is better off in the postpositivist era.

One scholar stands out as a popular paragon of critical scholarship: Pierre Bourdieu. His work has been lauded as a powerful example of how to conduct social scientific research in light of the postmodern critiques of the scientific endeavor (Jain, 2013). He staunchly adhered to the belief that sociology should critically engage with the social world, not merely examine it from afar, fitting well with critical theory's general goal of working to create a freer, more just society.

We argue that Bourdieu's approach partially fails to make a clean break with positivism, despite his attempts to distance himself from that paradigm; this is particularly troublesome for critical scholars. His contributions to theories of social reproduction and domination remain important, but he retains notable problematic assumptions, threatening critical sociology's central aim of fomenting change in society. In short, his approach does not liberate people from systems of control, but instead places them under control of social scientists.

Beyond Bourdieusian critical sociology, we argue that scholars should engage with the pragmatic school of thought. In particular, we focus on French pragmatism (e.g. Benatouïl, 1999; Silber, 2003; Jagd, 2011; Blok, 2013; Blokker, 2013), also known as the sociology of critique (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999; Frère, 2004; Guggenheim and Potthast, 2011). The French sociology of critique facilitates scholars' engagement in critical social research, more cleanly divorced from the positivist-legacy tied to the Bourdieusian framework. Keeping Bourdieu's emphasis on meta-level orders, the sociology of critique provides scholars a form of micro-sociology with macro-sociological foundations (Silber, 2003). In the sociology of critique, values mobilized in justifications are neither strategic devices nor elements of cultural tool kits embodied by unconscious actors. Instead, reflexive actors make valuable categories to understand the world. This system levels the positionality between researchers and social actors, recognizing the limits of the former in imposing their own beliefs on the latter's understandings of the social world. This produces a more moral means of criticizing social actors and structures, as researchers work *with* actors to change the world, respecting actors' agency and autonomy as humans, as opposed to demeaning them for their false consciousness (Marcuse, 1964). In this sense, we are calling for critical sociology to further distance itself from the elitism of professional sociology, turning towards more public sociologies (Burawoy, 2004). By treating people not as objects, but autonomous subjects, sociologists of critique are better able to engage in the liberating mission of critical sociology.

Positivism: Definition and Bourdieu's Relationship with it

Before we discuss Bourdieu's positivist legacy and its implications, we must first define what we mean by positivism. Positivism is often poorly defined, a label used as a

cudgel to attack scholars' work as either unsound or passé (Hibbard, 2010). Indeed, Bourdieu was quite critical of the positivist model of social science, but never defined it himself, leaving the reader to construct whatever understanding fit their own critiques (Sullivan, 2002). Generally speaking, the label "positivism" encompasses logical, methodological, and epistemological traditions within both philosophy and the sciences (Heidtman, Wysocka, and Szmatka, 2000). We focus on two conceptualizations: George Steinmetz's definition and French positivism, notably in the Comtean vein.

George Steinmetz's conceptualization of positivism is one of the more popular understandings within the sociological literature, often used as a basis for discussing the implications of positivism in social science (e.g. Clough, 2009; Riley, 2007; Walker, 2010). He argues that the social scientific positivist paradigm is marked by three dimensions: 1) empiricist ontology, such that only observable phenomena matter in inquiry; 2) positivist epistemology, such that scientists seek to understand invariant laws regarding causation; and 3) scientific naturalism, such that the natural and social worlds can be studied utilizing the same methods (Steinmetz, 2004; Steinmetz and Chae, 20002). It is important to add elements present in Comtean positivism lacking in Steinmetz's conceptualization, as Comte, and Durkheim's refinements to Comtean positivism, influenced Bourdieu's early works (Robbins, 2002, 2003). Christopher Bryant (1975) outlines six dimensions to Comtean positivism two of which are key here: 1) morals/politics should be guided by science; 2) social order is the norm, disorder is not.

We contend that Bourdieu maintains these assumptions of this broader positivist framework, creating important epistemological limitations within the theoretical framework of his *oeuvre*. He believes that there is one objective world which can be studied empirically

like the natural world, about which science identifies the truth (scientific naturalism).

Relatedly, he argues that timeless, invariant causal laws govern the social world (positivist epistemology). Important for his critical approach, he believes that morality and politics should be guided by science; scientific experts should reshape the social world in more intelligible ways (morals/politics should be guided by science). This is particularly important in conjunction with Bourdieu's first two assumptions: actors are unable to recognize these timeless causal laws, and scientists must protect themselves from actors' understandings if they are to clearly observe, understand, and change social norms.

Many commentators maintain that Bourdieu's critical theory still heavily leans toward positivist assumptions (Boltanski, 1990, Alexander, 2003; Boudon, 2003; Susen, 2011). This incomplete break with positivism left Bourdieu's social scientific approach riddled with internal contradictions. We focus on the larger epistemological and normative problems that the Bourdieusian framework specifically produces for critical theorists. Echoing interpretivists such as Isaac Reed (2008, 2010), we highlight the epistemological problem of Bourdieu's claim of scientific objectivity compared to social actors in regard to understanding the social world. Such a position has important normative implications, namely that scientists' objectivity makes them superior to social actors in regard to making critical claims about how others interpret the social world, and how to address social problems produced by the social system.

Our paper is structured as follows: First, we provide a general description of Bourdieu's approach to critical sociology, highlighting the positivistic elements in this theoretical framework. We then discuss the epistemological problems with this approach from a critical perspective, as well as an important normative implication: the reduction of actors'

autonomy in creating change. We then offer the grammatical French sociology of critique as an alternative approach to Bourdieusian critical sociology. Actors' actions and justifications follow general norms, but are not bound by them: actors consciously and purposefully follow them or are able to reflect upon values that normatively justify their performances in the social world. We then discuss how this approach avoids the positivistic elements of the Bourdieusian framework, and represents a new way forward for critical scholars.

BOURDIEUSIAN CRITICAL SOCIOLOGY

Habitus, dispositions, unconscious, common sense

Bourdieu conceived the social world as constituted of fields. In these fields social actors experience what he labeled as *illusio*: “the illusion of the game” (Bourdieu, 1994: 151, *author's translation*). The illusion only affects those in the game; impartial observers can see the true motivations and principles of action that guide social actors: “the illusion is an illusion or ‘diversion’ only for someone who perceives the game from outside, from the scholastic standpoint of an impartial spectator” (Bourdieu, 2000[1997]: 151). Notably (and ironically) in Bourdieu's genetic structuralism, moral values conceal interested strategies that actors use as *unconscious* adaptations to these rules, relying on the very type of dichotomous thinking he aspired to rid social science of. The conscious/unconscious distinction is an inherent aspect of his notion of *habitus*:

“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[1980]: 53)

One's justification for action, therefore, is secondary to, perhaps derived from, one's *real* motives, unconsciously drawn from one's habitus. Only sociologists are uniquely positioned to discover these objective, hidden, *true* motivations. "Social science has to reintroduce into the full definition of the object the primary representations of the object which it first had to destroy in order to achieve the 'objective' definition" (Bourdieu, 1990[1980]: 135). Objective reality lies beneath the illusory reality over which our habitus, as structuring structures, weaves a desk blotter.

Importantly, this ability to see objective structures only persists when protected from "summary and schematic representations," "ordinary language syntax," by the "objectivist rupture" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 11). Common sense must be perpetually subjected to sociological suspicion, to 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[1997]: 181). Sociologists must position themselves *above* social actors' understandings, producing the objective, ordinary consciousness separate from the unconscious habitus.

Bourdieu drew strongly from both structuralism and phenomenology, and even intended to elaborate a synthesis between these positions (e.g. Bourdieu, 1990: 36-37; Robbins, 2002). Phenomenology as a method can help deeply penetrate actors' practical sense (habitus) in situations; but this method must also be forsaken as soon as the sociologist wants to separate his explanation of the objective social world from the potential contradictory or incoherent accounts given by actors. According to Bourdieu, the sociologist can phenomenologically bracket his/her own lived experience, deconstructing what social actors

typically take for granted. Sociologists go beyond this description of what characterizes lived experience, showing “the coincidence of the objective structures and the internalized structures which provides [actors] the illusion of immediate understanding, characteristic of practical experience of the familiar universe, and which at the same time excludes from that experience any inquiry as to its own conditions of possibility” (Bourdieu, [1980]1990: 26).

The scientific and the profane

Bourdieu’s postpositivist approach produces three problems critical sociologists. First, is the empiricist ontological assumption, i.e. that we as *outside observers see the world better than actors themselves*; subjective interpretations of actors are not valid without outside verification. Second is the reliance on the epistemological assumption of timeless, invariant causal laws, represented by utilizing objective, unconscious structures to explain even clearly subjectively constructed social phenomena, most notably actors’ moral deliberations. This leads to the third critique: these assumptions are not only epistemologically unsound, but also normatively so. Actors are limited in their ability to consciously change themselves. If they weren’t, the work of sociologist would be unnecessary. According to Bourdieu, the central goal of critical scholars is to enlighten actors with sociological (Bourdieuian) knowledge, helping them change the social system.

Until his later texts, Bourdieu retained the Durkheimian positivist notion that common sense must be the object of sociological suspicion. Sociologists should desire to critically and scientifically break “the ordinary experience of the familiar world [...] that phenomenology describes without providing itself with the means of accounting for it” (Bourdieu, 2000[1997]: 147). For Bourdieu (2004[2001]), the sociologist occupies a neutral and

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distanced position, allowing him to unveil normative positions, though perhaps having to first clarify one's own normative standpoint. He boldly claims that “the sociologist very quickly protects him/herself against “rationalizations that agents inevitably produce once they’re invited to adopt a point of view which is no longer that of action nor that of scientific interpretation” (Bourdieu 2000[1972]:306, our translation¹). The sociologist reserves a superior status vis-à-vis his/her object of study.

This superiority is derived from an epistemological distinction between actors’ own subjective reasoning (common sense) and more objective scientific study (Bourdieu, Chamboredon, and Passeron, 1991[1973]:13-33). Laypersons mostly do not understand are the tacit rules that govern their practices in their habitus: “rigorous knowledge almost always presupposes a more or less striking rupture with the evidence of accepted belief – usually identified with common sense” which contaminates sociologists’ knowledge (Bourdieu, 1999[1993]: 620). If the sociologist does not free him/herself from these pre-conceptions, the danger is that the social map produced will be “free for preconstructions or for the automatic effects 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[1993]: 620). Bourdieu continues: “Social agents do not innately possess a science of what they do” (Bourdieu, 1999[1993]: 620). Indeed, the task of the sociologist is to produce an awareness of the truth [prise de conscience]:

¹ The translation of *Outline a Theory of Practice*, was significantly changed by Bourdieu. He revised, deleted, and changed several sections. In the English translation of the referenced section, the sociologist is advised to be careful with the knowledge of actors which is “produced by an operation of the second power which presupposes the structures it analyses and more or less rigorously accounts for. Being the product of the same generative schemes as the practices they claim to account for, even the most false and superficial of these ‘secondary explanations’ only reinforce the structures by providing them with a particular form of rationalization” (1977[1972]: 20).

By producing externally, in objectivity, in the form of explicit principles, that which guides practices from inside, theoretical analysis makes possible a conscious awareness, a transmutation of their scheme into representation which give symbolic mastery of the practical principles that practical sense enacts either without representing them or while giving itself only partial or inadequate representations of them (Bourdieu 1990[1980]: 102; see also Frère, [2004](#), 2011).

What actors say is interesting and must be taken in consideration, but it cannot approach scientific articulation in any fashion.

Second, Bourdieu's assumption is that actor's practical knowledge about the world operates as a sort of false consciousness, determined by timeless, causal laws based on their relative position in a field or a social class and, consequently, their economic, social and cultural capitals (Bourdieu, 1984[1979]; Jenkins, 1992; Frère, 2015). As Jeffrey Alexander (1995:161) highlights: "Both practices and habitus give way to conceptions of *unconscious strategizing* oriented to structures of domination that almost always take on a class form" (emphasis added). Bourdieu's notion of habitus shows how actors internalize and embody social structures. Consequently, actors' actions and strategies tend to reproduce the dominant social order, regardless of actors' intent: "Class condition permeates all others, making habitus into a class unconscious, a corporeal, cultural mode of being manifest in language, thought, taste, understandings, a socially stratified common sense and a powerful mechanism of social reproduction" (Friedland, 2009: 890). People either accept the rules of the field, contenting themselves with their cultural mode of being (Bourdieu, 1984[1979]: 374-378), or they 'play the game' in order to improve their social position by learning the cultural code and

imitating the accent, taste, style and behavior of the dominant culture, unconsciously rehearsing the values of the dominant class (ibid: 386-396). Bourdieu sees sociologists' roles as revealing how the habitus of an individual adapts to fields or classes through biologically embodied dispositions (Bourdieu, 2000[1997]: 156-157). In both cases, actions are predisposed by the habitus derived from the broader structure of the field. Fields and habitus act as timeless laws; actors respond to these laws regardless of intent, naturalizing a socially constructed phenomenon. We can thus predict, within reason, how people will act based on our knowledge of the objective layout of the fields in which actors are embedded.

This dynamic applies even to normative moral justifications, which obscure the *real* causes for action. Michèle Lamont (1992: 184) criticizes Bourdieu, noting that he "allows no autonomy to moral discourse." For example, a student who passes her exams might justify her success in reference to her 'intellectual interests' or 'intelligence'. Within Bourdieusian critical theory, these justifications conceal that it is actually her family background, accumulated in her habitus, which provides her with the required capitals needed for success (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970). The student does not reflect on how dominant values are embodied in her behavior.

Bourdieu's emphasis on the unconscious reproduction of domination leads some to criticize him for neglecting the transformative potential of people's inner orientations. Even explicitly constructed dimensions of human action are subject to these universal laws; people are stripped of the ability to re-create themselves even if they develop a revolutionary consciousness or question cultural reproduction. Actors are never fully considered as *agents* possessing the power to change the dynamics of a field. If they fight within a field, it isn't

against its deep logic, but to become recognized as someone who better embodies dominant characteristics: “The politics of cultural contest is a struggle for the space of domination, and only secondarily [against] the logic of domination” (Friedland, 2009: 893).

These emphases on observational study relying on sociological epistemological objectivity and timeless laws lead to the third, normative, critique, focusing on the role of values in sociological analysis. If the critical sociologist is intent on challenging the broader social system, Bourdieu’s approach leaves no room for dialogue and transformation with social actors. After Bourdieu on the one hand and postmodern relativism on the other, a “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Ricoeur, 1970) has taken hold of sociological analysis, inhibiting our ability to connect to and respectfully engage with those who we study. Actors are treated like other natural forces: lacking agency, one can disregard their voice in lieu of manipulating natural laws (field dynamics; habitus) to produce desired outcomes.

Luc Boltanski was particularly concerned with the contradictions of Bourdieu’s critical sociology. It both wanted to be emancipatory but saw the world as “constituted by ‘structures’, inhabited by the ‘laws of social fields’ and propelled by ‘forces’ that escape the consciousness of social actors” (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007 [1999]: x). This critical sociology could “deal with moral values and ideals only as ‘ideologies’ □ or cultural determinations – that is to say [...] as a more or less hypocritical cover for relations of force” (ibid.). Bourdieu “fails to acknowledge fully that people may also exhibit the ability to distance themselves in the absence of scientific interference” and become self-reflective actors (Baert, 1998: 33). If values are unconsciously driven by pre-determined social positions, the sociologist becomes the only person who is able to reveal these ideological and

cultural determinations. Like Comtean positivism, Bourdieu's theory posits, implicitly, that only the scientist can discover the reality of social forms. Stripped of autonomy, social actors should be grateful for the paternalistic analysis of sociologists.

The aim here is not to dismiss that objective structures exist and can influence actors' consciousness. But while actors may not articulate clear principles of moral judgment or give contradictory accounts about their action, this does not necessarily mean that they are guided by a structurally determined false consciousness like cultural dopes, according to Garfinkel's (1967: 66-68) famous expression, nor that they qualitatively misunderstand their social world vis-à-vis sociologists. We need to abandon the "unconscious moral habitus" that only promotes a person's subjectivity in search of the true motivations of action (Vaisey, 2009: 1680). Rather, we argue that taking actors seriously allows the development of a rich and promising sociology of critique. This approach avoids the epistemological problem of separating sociologists' "scientific truth" from actors' understandings, highlighting agentic navigation and creation the social world. Due to these two factors, critical theorists are thus better able to communicate with social actors and convince them of alternative values and ways of acting.

THE SOCIOLOGY OF CRITIQUE: AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH²

To understand how the sociology of critique breaks from Bourdieusian critical theory, we first must understand the specific detachment of Boltanski from Bourdieu, his former mentor and collaborator. The sociology of critique emerged in the mid-1980s, after Boltanski

² The French sociology of critique is also known as *economies of worth* and *French pragmatism* (see Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999; Lamont and Thévenot, 2000; Biggart and Beamish, 2003; Jagd, 2011; Blok, 2013).

left Bourdieu's *Centre de Sociologie Européenne*. Starting a new collaboration with Thévenot, they created the *Groupe de Sociologie Politique et Morale*. This group aimed to challenge the structuralist dimensions of the dominant Bourdieusian paradigm. From 1985 to 2000, these two sociologists had many fruitful exchanges with Bruno Latour (e.g. Latour, 2009). While Latour (2005) engaged in a pure sociology of description, Boltanski and Thévenot remained concerned with social critique and its relation to sociology, emphasizing their grammatical approach to critical sociology (Boltanski, 2008; Boltanski, 2011 [2009], Thévenot, 2014, Frère, 2015).

The notion of grammar

The sociology of critique is embedded in an intellectual tradition that privileges studying situated behavior in indeterminate social situations, e.g. Garfinkel's (1967) ethnomethodology, and seeks to identify the grammar of common sense in order to understand how people understand their everyday world. The sociology of critique assumes that actors can criticize, and criticism is drawn from normative values (or common goods) that underpin basic moral frames. Values, defined as "higher common principles," give substance to justifications in situations and critiques that actors address to each other (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006[1991]: 140). The notion of grammar insists on explanatory elements that resemble, but do not strictly act like, social structures; people consciously and reflexively use values to justify actions. A grammar is a way of speaking which is influenced by cultural values which can be opposed, lying at the heart of how people make judgments about the world and/or what they are doing. The sociology of critique's emphasis on interactions and broader cultural understandings illuminates the micro-dynamics of social interaction without losing focus on the larger social infrastructure, an attribute some researchers have recently

called for (Lounsbury, 2008).

Grammars should not be understood as external structures that become internalized as social norms. Grammatical rules are neither “externally guaranteed” (Weber, 1980[1922]) nor stabilized through naturalization (Bourdieu, 1979; Douglas, 1966). To emphasize the non-technical nature of a grammar and contrast it to the positivist approach, we echo Lemieux’s (2009) comparison between grammars and a Wittgensteinian language game. In a language game, the grammar renders a situation intelligible and meaningful within common sense. It does so by organizing elements according to a particular system of rules which require mobilization of certain values based on one’s moral communities. Masterful competence of grammars in a language game, rather than compliance with rules akin to a mathematical algorithm, guide action, discussion, ways of seeing the world. Grammatical rules are resources for people’s playful uses of language, while at the same time setting boundaries of intelligible ways of speaking and acting. A grammar is therefore both enabling and constraining. Comparable to people’s understanding of the generic rules of the language they are speaking, the sociology of critique posits that actors are *conscious* of these grammars. Actors organize their own common sense even if they rarely have the time and occasion to systematically clarify their normative assumptions (Boltanski, 2012: 36-58).

Actors’ performances in the social world are mediated through justifications and critiques about the right way to evaluate a situation. The sociology of critique stresses that moral values are “often directed towards a[n] [...] analysis of the actions, justifications and critiques developed by people in concrete situations - bringing out the operations implemented by actors to ‘perform’ or ‘construct’ the ‘social’, reduce the uncertainty of situations, make and consolidate agreements, criticize existing arrangements, and so on.”

(Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: xi). They are at the heart of a representation of the world:

When one is attentive to the unfolding of disputes, one sees that they are limited neither to a direct expression of interests nor to an anarchic and endless confrontation between heterogeneous worldviews clashing in a dialogue of the deaf. On the contrary, the way disputes develop, when violence is avoided, brings to light powerful constraints in the search for well-founded arguments based on solid proofs, a search that thus manifests efforts toward convergence at the very heart of a disagreement. (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006: 13)

Boltanski and Thévenot suggest that what counts as value in different contexts is embedded in complex philosophical and political value systems. Each of these value is based on a grammatical construction that spells out the rules for what counts as legitimate standards of value. In *On Justification*, Boltanski and Thévenot show how actors arguing in a situation have their own grammar which helps them to utilize or to combine values in the aim of convincing others that reality must be read through their understandings. They showed that actors generally mobilized six general values (creativity, care, reputation, general interest, richness or efficiency) but note that others are possible. These six values “give direction to the ordinary sense of what is just” in that situation (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006: 74). Boltanski and Thévenot say that several moral values can be taken into consideration to understand what actors mobilize to give meaning to situations.

In the sociology of critique, reality is not presented as fields or established orders as Bourdieu presents, pre-existing social constructions reinforced and reproduced by actors.

Instead, there is a radical uncertainty about reality, about what it *is*, and what is valuable about it:

Each of us confronts this question on a daily basis. Faced with decisions involving incommensurable frameworks – work versus family life, career opportunity versus loyalty to friends or attachment to a locality, vacations versus investments for retirement, and so on – we ask ourselves what really counts. What is valuable and by what measures? (Stark, 2009: 6)

It is not surprising that the sociology of critique, with its strong emphasis on the critical capacities of actors, has been interpreted as an insufficient cultural “tool kit” approach (Swidler, 1986) where culture is “viewed as a loose repertoire of justifications” and which neglects the unconscious component of moral judgment (Vaisey, 2009: 1676; Thornton and Ocasio, 2008). However, such critiques neglect the key contribution of this approach. Concentrating sociological research on unconscious adaptation to social worlds strips actors of their critical capacities, overemphasizing the need for sociologist’s understanding and ability to create change.

Taking people seriously: A fresh perspective on common sense

What interests us here is the basic assumption of sociology of critique: we have to take the judgments of actors, and especially their moral judgements, seriously. Sociologists of critique condemn how the social sciences have long considered common sense as erroneous, equating, in a swift positivist motion, science with truth. To consider only sociological, scientific discourse as legitimate, external to actors’ moral judgements, is:

to increase the asymmetry between deceived actors and a sociologist capable – and it would appear from some formulations, the only capable – of revealing the truth of their social condition. This leads to overestimating the power of sociology as science, the sole foundation on which the sociologist could base his claim to know much more about people than they themselves know. Sociology then tends to be invested with the overweening power of being the main discourse of truth of the social world. (Boltanski, 2011[2009]: 20-21)

Echoing American pragmatists like John Dewey (1859-1952) and George Herbert Mead (1863-1931), sociologists of critique argue that social actors regularly navigate the social world in a scientific ways: “in everyday life, (...) ordinary people never stop suspecting, wondering, and submitting the world to tests” (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006[1991]: 37). There exist some situations “in which 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, Thévenot, 2006[1991]: 356). Justifications from the common sense of ordinary persons must be taken seriously by the sociologist. The elitist attitude must be muted. As Luc Boltanski (2012 [1990]: 28-30) explains:

we have to give up the idea that we can have the last word by producing – and imposing on actors – more powerful reports than the ones they themselves are able to produce [...]. Instead of defining agents by means of stable attributes (i.e. habitus, dispositions, etc.), endowing them with interests and tendencies that are inscribed in the body and capable of generating objective unconscious intentions, and then

assigning itself the task of explaining the actions of these agents when they encounter external obstacles, (our) sociology shows how actors develop discourses about these actions, how they shape their action into a plot [...].

Thus, the difference between social scientist's and everyday social actor's method of inquiry is a matter of *degree*, not *quality*. We as researchers are *more refined* in our attempts to understand the social world; not *categorically superior*.

Sociologists "clean" justifications of actors and present disputes as clearly as possible. They identify and theorize the principles that underpin the justification of actors. The sociologist must climb the argumentative chain until he/she finds generalizable statements that are acceptable to the actors. We clarify the values people mobilize when they act and justify their actions. The implementation of these models is necessary since people, in the immediate urgency of matters, rarely reflect on the moral values that they use to justify their arguments (Boltanski, 2012[1990]: 31). In this way, social scientists act like Richard Rorty's (1989) ironist: cognizant of the contingency of language, but nonetheless asserting its power to help us understand the world. This implies that scholars can, and should, work *with* social actors to understand and critique our social world. Social scientists are companions who happen to have a skillset to help actors better refine their *own* understandings and thoughts. Actors' autonomy is respected.

By placing actors' justifications and thoughts on an equivalent position to the critical sociologist, the sociology of critique emphasizes the actors' competence to recognize and reflect upon the multiple values that co-exist and co-construct social reality. Criticism arises from the interpretation of situations according to normative principles, becoming rationalized

and intellectualized through justifications. Justifications are hence *not* approached with skepticism, as self-replicating mechanisms of a habitus hidden behind discursive articulations. They serve as the *starting point to study the political and moral grammars that motivate people's behavior*.

Via a focus on ordinary criticism and justifications, the framework hence brings back the question of values, as motivations and constraints of action, onto the center stage of sociological inquiry: "In the realm of moral values, it was a question of taking the normative principles and ideals that people claim to adhere to seriously, without reducing it a priori to an interplay of forces over which actors have no control." (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007[1999]: xi). Critical sociology had lost this dimension in their structuralist, objectivist approach under the Bourdieusian paradigm.

As sociologists, we can never be sure which values actors will provide to understand a situation. Critiques and disputes can happen at any time between actors because they do not share the same values that give sense to reality. Unlike the positivistic world constructed by Bourdieu, bound by observable, timeless, causal laws, the sociology of critique highlights the radical contingency of the social world; disorder and conflict, not stable reproduction, are the norm. Critical theory, including Bourdieu's, has always returned to a transcendental plane of guaranteed stability behind a taken for granted, established order. In this sense, Bourdieu unintentionally reifies the dominant order, arguing that only social scientists can understand the *true* nature of the social world, hindering the actors' ability to autonomously create change. The sociology of critique's rejection of the epistemological break between actors and social scientists thus better positions scholars to more genuinely work towards creating a freer, more just social world.

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CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to pose a difficult question to critical scholars in the postpositivist era in sociology: Does Bourdieusian critical theory offer a way forward, given its positivist foundations? We highlighted positivist elements in this framework: scientific naturalism, timeless and invariant causal laws, and that morality and politics should follow a scientific imperative due to scientists' ability to see the *truth*. Bourdieu believed that social actors and sociologists understood the world in qualitatively different ways. The sociologist's training made it so that she could observe the objective social structures unconsciously shaping actors' understandings and actions, structures which are causal and persist across a variety of fields. Actors are not able to critically engage with their social system without the aid of sociologists, unless they have already engaged in sociological reflection. Their reliance on the sociologist as savior seems to violate the very respect for persons that critical theorists espouse, elevating the sociologist to the position of all-knowing savior, gracing actors with their morality and presence.

We offer an alternative to Bourdieusian critical sociology: the sociology of critique. This approach maintains the principles of a moral, critical sociology while avoiding the problems of the epistemological cut. The sociology of critique eliminates the divide between the social scientist and social actors. Their differences in inquiry and understanding are a matter of degree, not quality. It assumes that social actors are conscious and autonomous, constructing and navigating their social world. They can accurately reflect on their actions, thoughts, and justifications. This does not mean that actors are always conscious of everything. For this reason, Bourdieusian studies of the social world will remain fruitful in the

future. But critical sociologists should take actors' justifications seriously, organizing them into a grammar to help themselves and actors understand the social world.

The sociology of critique focuses on the way controversies are debated in ordinary situations. Scholars identify the grammatical syntax operating as the organizing principle of actors who identify with one of many categorical identities. It offers a powerful framework to think about moral and political constructions of the common good as organizing schemas that guide social action, thought, and justification. This dynamic applies to actors' judgments of others and themselves. To understand a grammar at work, the scholar must start from the actors' *own* understandings of action and its significance. He does not impose an epistemological break with their common sense, avoiding a scientific paradigm that reduces their understandings to products of causal laws like *habitus* and *illusio*. Instead, actors' understandings are taken as the starting point of a dialogue between the scientist and the actor to better understand actors' intents and worldviews. Seeing values and norms as powerful sources for grammatical devices and outcroppings of historical contingencies account for actors' experiences as moral experiences, starting with studying the relation of actors towards their world. From their point of view, grammatical exigencies appear as questions of values – it is here that uncertainty, open-endedness, and moral choice become important.

Our argument here is not without precedent. Alvin Gouldner (1979) argued that intellectuals were becoming a cultural bourgeoisie, monopolizing human capital in the form of knowledge. James C. Scott (1999) illustrates the consequences of this system: when experts believe their understandings to be categorically superior to non-academics and have the power to socially engineer society, catastrophic results can result. Bourdieu unintentionally reifies the very system he hopes to attack, relying on his belief in the sociologist's ability to see,

through an objective perspective, how people are embedded within a complex system of causal laws that are only observable due to the sociologist's training. He places social actors in a subservient position to intellectuals; his critical sociology does not liberate, but changes who is in control.

The sociology of critique helps us move beyond this type of critical sociology. By levelling the judgments of actors and social scientists, scholars are forced to reflexively engage in their attempts to foment change. This is not necessarily a new approach: as Jess Gilbert (2015) noted, this was attempted during the New Deal era of U.S. history. Scientists, social and natural, took community input seriously in their attempts to restructure society, to great success, though stunted by other elites. This approach has the added benefit of helping scholars see the various ways people are already resisting domination. It 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 positivist transcendent point of view makes it easy to minimize these elements for the sake of illustrating how alienated people are, reduced to objective reproducers of the establish order. One cannot see the emancipatory spaces that people build, however meager they may seem, because of one's focus on extrapolation, testifying that fields and social belonging always co-opts them. We cannot maintain the epistemological break between the scientist and the social actor if we hope to create a truly liberating form of social inquiry.

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