

# Rethinking Critical Sociology, Transcending the Transcendental

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## Abstract

This article calls for a rethinking of critical sociology. Representing classical critical sociology, the Bourdieusian paradigm illustrated domination, but its negative foundation removed actors' power, privileging sociological knowledge as capable of identifying (social) transcendental categories of thought. Latour's constructivism challenged this privilege, giving actors the political power of aggregating collectives around their common concerns at the cost of emphasizing domination and critique. We propose a critical approach that evades a transcendental perspective reliant on pure negation, producing a more positive critical sociology founded on processualist phenomenological and pragmatic perspectives, principally Merleau-Ponty and Dewey. Actors and researchers can collectively ruminate on their perspectives and concerns to challenge power structures and transform their worlds. At the center of this is the *social-mien*, a creative reimagination of habitus. A brief discussion of the protests and scholarship surrounding the Notre-Dame-des-Landes activists' practice of democracy highlights the utility of the approach and serves as a model for future application.

## Keywords

common sense, constructivism, critical sociology, phenomenology, pragmatism, social-mien

Critical sociology needs a 21st-century update: beyond identifying the forms of domination, one must also identify the means of emancipation. In the classical theoretical tradition, critical sociological discourse exposes the illusions of common sense that interfere with scholarly production. Self-emancipation becomes only truly possible for future

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generations, when the dominated finally take up critical scholars' critiques. But do actors' actions always reify ideologies, or can we also consider them as parts of constructive collective efforts to move beyond their perceived injustices? A critical sociological perspective rooted in suspicion and doubt cannot effectively address those who actively resist dominant modes of being.

The first section of this paper focuses on how classical critical approaches expose common sense's reflection of the established order, represented by the popular Bourdieusian paradigm. Here, critical sociology condemns common sense by highlighting its social determinations. The Bourdieusian critic claims to see social-transcendental conditions of perception and representation underneath actors' consciousness. The problem with this approach is that actors who wish to be emancipated must interminably self-reflect, purifying themselves to approach this point of view. Actors will thus never finish deconstructing the social determinations of their thought: they can never build an emancipated world through freer actions.

Bourdieu's transcendental position, granting the sociologist a monopoly of legitimate critique, dismissing actors as unaware of their real social conditions and indelibly stained by inherited schemes and habits, is problematic. What must be reformed is not critique itself, however, but the overemphasis of negative critique, only focusing on what are understood as bad social influences. This critique form becomes equated with pure consciousness lying under actors' false understandings, unreachable except through sociologists' reflections.

Within pragmatic sociology (Guggenheim and Potthast, 2011), Latourian constructivism or aggregationism prompts a positive shift in the second section. The clash between Latourian and Bourdieusian perspectives is well known. Bourdieu accused Latour of 'philosophical hubris' (Bourdieu, 2004 [2001]: 30) and Latour mocked Bourdieu's 'eternal asceticism' (*ascèse continuée*) (Latour, 1989:12). Latour's materialist constructivism (Devellenes and Dillet, 2018) evades the transcendental problem associated with Bourdieusian critique. Emphasizing the way people make collectives without permanent suspicion of unconscious transcendental forces can help critical scholars synthesize what we call a negative critique with a constructive one. But by refusing Bourdieusian concepts to eliminate the fiction of unconscious unreachable forces, Latour ends up suggesting a pacified social world, woven of compositions between social actants unfettered by domination. Our suggestion of a constructive critique helps resolve the specific gap within Latour's blindness to domination (Basaure, 2011: 274). This problem occurs precisely because Latour seems to reject the aspirations of critical sociology (Latour, 2005: 139) and engaging with power (cf. Harman, 2014).

We synthesize this thesis and antithesis to show how critique can be constructive as well as deconstructive, evading the conflict produced by orthodox adherence to the other perspectives. Critiquing also means recognizing practices that can be described as non-reified or non-alienated practices. This requires highlighting the oft-neglected positive potential of some Bourdieusian thoughts and searching for accounts outside of the hegemonic, typically negative, critical tradition. We derive our critical constructivism from a processual perspective, showing how people collectively use their critiques to build new common senses from elements of their pasts, alternatives to situations in which they feel dominated. This helps critical sociology move beyond doubting forms of

resistance, condemned as reifications of the social order, and towards understanding them as emancipating. The critical scholar does not just negate: she encourages actors to continue inheriting differently from the past, to sculpt new ways of living, to construct society positively in the contingency and fragility of new assemblages aimed toward emancipation in action.

To build such a critical processual constructivism, we take up important resources on which Bourdieu and Latour rely. Bourdieu's early abandonment of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology may have led him to overemphasize the idea of an unreflected relationship between our body and the social world, leading to a habitus concept rooted in a transcendental and negative posture, needing to be located and denied to allow emancipation. This neglects Merleau-Ponty's positive and creative contributions. Contrary to Bourdieu and the classical critique, we follow Merleau-Ponty's vein to the end: what we inherit from the social is not exclusively perceived as a layer of determinations that we must discard. The *social-mien* is also a cultural material susceptible to be sculpted and shaped in an innovative way. Latour was inspired by American pragmatism, a perspective rooted in progressivist critique, but nevertheless ends up building a sociological investigative approach incapable of addressing the problem of domination. We must reconnect his perspective with the critical roots of the dimensions which help Latour's constructivism highlight change. Scholars and actors can seek to recompose the meaning of a situation in common, against more powerful institutions' imposed meanings.

## Transcendentalism, Unconsciousness, and the Negation of Common Sense

Bourdieu belongs to a long critical tradition built on the idea that the dominated reproduce the conditions of their own domination. In this tradition, '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). The parallels with the Frankfurt School are palpable:

Dispossession is never more totally unrecognized, and therefore tacitly recognized, than when, with progress of automation, economic dispossession is combined with cultural dispossession, which provides the best apparent justification for economic dispossession. Lacking the internalized cultural capital which is the pre-condition for correct appropriation (according to the legitimate definition) of the cultural capital objectified in technical objects, ordinary workers are dominated by the machines and instruments which they serve rather than use, and by those who possess the legitimate, i.e., theoretical, means of dominating them. (Bourdieu, 1984 [1979]: 387–8)

Like the Frankfurt School, Bourdieu sees mass culture as a dominating force, alienating agents from the truth of their condition (Gartman, 2012). Naïve actors who do not wish to challenge their preconceived notions will inevitably challenge sociology's scientifically objective understanding of the social world with pre-reflexive suppositions (Bourdieu, 2004 [2001]: 88). Bourdieu argues that sociology's epistemology should focus on revealing these presuppositions and denouncing acceptance of the established

order contained in ordinary thought, taking care not to ‘consecrate the obvious facts of common sense’ (Bourdieu et al., 1991 [1973]: 54).

The first task in this approach is to avoid ordinary explanations, examining the extent to which actions are products of dominant schemes and modes of representation inscribed in a habitus. Sociologists must arm themselves against ‘the semi-scholarly grammar of practices bequeathed by common sense’ (Bourdieu, 2000 [1972]: 308). Common sense is retained, but as ‘the immediate, lived experience of agents in order to explicate the categories of perception and appreciation (*dispositions*) that structure their action from inside’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 11). Individuals who analyze their actions in terms of choice merely mobilize the preconception of freedom to justify themselves. This kind of justification is supplementary to one’s real motives, located beneath a habitus, which can only be identified by the sociologist. That is why ‘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). Proper sociological work can only be performed when it is protected from ‘summary and schematic representations’, from ‘ordinary language syntax’ which emerges from the habitus (Bourdieu et al., 1991 [1973]: 14, 21). Sociologists must then push aside these ‘mundane representations’, forming the epistemological break necessary for an objective Durkheimian scientific position (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 11).

Bourdieu’s Durkheimian inspiration largely remained throughout his oeuvre. Social science requires a rupture with ‘the ordinary experience of the familiar world [. . .] that phenomenology describes without providing itself with the means of accounting for it’ (Bourdieu, 2000 [1997]: 147). Critical sociology must avoid self-evidential findings which give the illusion of being based in reality (Bourdieu, 2000 [1997]: 181). This echoes his earlier writings where he notes that sociologists very quickly protect themselves 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).

Bourdieu never compromised on this epistemological core. Even in *The Weight of the World*, despite giving the impression of social actors having a voice, he returned to his usual conviction that ‘rigorous knowledge almost always presupposes a more or less striking rupture with the evidence of accepted belief – usually identified with common sense’ (Bourdieu, 1999 [1993]: 620). Indeed, ‘Only active denunciation of the tacit presuppositions of common sense can counter the effects of the representations of social reality’, for ‘social agents do not innately possess a science of what they do’ (Bourdieu, 1999 [1993]: 620). Laypersons generally do not understand the tacit schemes that govern their practices, their habitus.

Bourdieu’s sociology demands reflexivity if critical scholars intend to emancipate themselves to see the truth of the social world. 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 see ‘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). The sociologist must

primarily objectify herself as the person who objectifies social facts and social positions that actors are unaware of.

Bourdieu sociologizes Kant's transcendental analytic (Kant, 2003: 102 [B29] sq). In Bourdieusian sociology, one 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: 59 [B25]). By 'transcendental', Kant means *that through which knowledge is possible*. The transcendental categories of understanding condition all thought, detectable via philosophy (Kant, 2003: 113–14 [A80]), and become, for Bourdieu, *social* transcendental categories of the possibility of thought, detectable via sociology. In other words, 'transcendental qualifies the principle of necessary subjection of what is given in experience to our *a priori* [social] representations' (Deleuze, 1999 [1963]: 12). By considering habitus as a social and 'historical transcendental, which can be said to be a priori', Bourdieu seeks to shed light on the conditions of the possibility of knowledge which condition people's judgments about everyday life (Bourdieu, 2004 [2001]: 78).

Everyday judgements in an actor's subjective experience are transcendently structured by a priori social categories which compose their habitus. They work as 'systems of schemes of perception, appreciation and action [which] enable them to perform acts of practical knowledge' (Bourdieu, 2000 [1997]: 138), unidentifiable to actors. Bourdieu explicitly assigns habitus mechanisms to the unconscious: 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]: 53). Bourdieu's distinction between conscious and unconscious is revealing. Ordinary consciousness is reified, false consciousness, alienated by the unconscious work of habitus. Reflexive self-analysis allows the sociologist to identify the truth about all social categories of representations. Locating her own perspective makes her capable of comprehending the perspectives of other actors and their social categories of thought and knowledge. This:

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)

Though inaccessible, the Bourdieusian sociologist gets closest to this absolute point of view (Bourdieu, 2004 [2001]: 92), mapping fields to identify the variety of habitus via a scientific socio-transcendental of apprehending the world.

Sociologists are uniquely positioned to objectify the transcendental non-conscious that conditions the actor's 'point of view which is unaware of being a point of view (and is experienced in the illusion of absoluteness)' (Bourdieu, 2004 [2001]: 116). Because it aims to give the synthesis of all actors' points of view (and their respective socio-transcendental categories of thought), science (sociology) becomes a 'historical site where trans-historical truths are produced' (Bourdieu, 2004 [2001]: 69). By joining the search

for an underlying truth, the socio-transcendental categories of knowledge beneath the thought and actions of deluded actors, the critical scholar escapes the pre-reflexive obscurity of false consciousness and becomes conscious of all the ways an actor can (socially) perceive his realities.

The difficulty with Bourdieu is not his objectivism: it is his transcendentalism. The sociologist is not above individual consciousness, but below it, able to identify the sociological conditions of emergence. Liberation requires their negation. Habitus covers the free anthropological substrate of people, and only the Bourdieusian can excavate deeply enough to recover it. If unconscious social schemes are the social transcendental categories governing our activity, expressed in an alienated and reified language – then how can we think about social change and creativity? Bourdieusian sociology's perpetual critique seems to not recognize how culture can both limit and transform.

## **From Stable Transcendentalism to Volatile and Elastic Aggregations**

Bourdieuian transcendentalist critical sociology is crucial to understand why our social categories of thought lead us to reproduce the social order, contributing to its restructuration. But such an argument makes emancipation difficult to truly realize. In some way, potential societal changes rely on elites who, following sociologists, will realize, and then negate, non-conscious predispositions to reproduce the social order. Emancipation can only occur in a negative way. Social schemes which condition us to understand and act in the world in a conventional way, inherited by our categories of thought, must be controlled and destroyed, but these categories shape our understandings, meaning negation must continue interminably: any new thoughts carry the seeds of the previous order, so no emancipated ideas can fruit.

Bourdieu's type of critical sociology can play an important political role, but there is no reason to assume that critique cannot be accessible to everyone and depends on privileged access to non-conscious transcendental categories. Otherwise, only a select few can emancipate themselves. Additionally, analyses of people's actions should not over-emphasize reproduction of the social order. To remain focused on false consciousness and the reproduction of the social order through people's predispositions underestimates the effect of sociological discourses on society, effectively denying the double hermeneutic – ironic for a perspective which demands reflexivity (Boltanski, 2011 [2009]: 21; 2012 [1990]: 18, 84). One can be critical but also emphasize the creation of something different. Disadvantaged people do not necessarily need sociologists to be conscious of the social order they live in and the symbolic violence they endure.

Equating scientific practices with identifying objective and inaccessible truths can obfuscate how common sense resembles the structure of scientific thinking. Though not formally trained, everyday people act like scientists (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006 [1991]: 54). For this reason, pragmatic sociology does not negate common sense, but translates actors' understandings (Frère and Jaster, 2019). Instead of defining agents by stable transcendental attributes which must be cleansed, translation communicates actors' beliefs and utilizes sociological knowledge to help actors to find their own

coherence in the public space. It 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). Clarifying consolidates.

Bruno Latour links this to constructivism (Latour, 1993: 44; 2009: 365). To do social science from a constructivist point of view is to start from collectives in the material process of being formed, not starting from pre-formed collective structures (Latour, 2013: 353, 401). Relatedly, society is always in the making: constantly materially built by actors’ associations. There is no pre-existing social force, no context, no separation of the social from other realities. The Bourdieusian perspective operates as if actors do not know what they are doing. Constructivism posits that they do but may not satisfactorily explain it to researchers (Latour, 2005: 4–5). Latour rejects transcendental a priori categories which unconsciously give forms to perception and reflection. There is no ‘hidden’, a ‘deep dark below’ that is only accessible through a transcendental approach (Latour, 2004: 229). The major puzzle is Bourdieu’s solution: society is not an explanation of binding social processes, a ‘glue that could fix everything’, but rather a binding process produced by people’s actions to be explained (Latour, 2005: 5).

Latour does not dismiss critique, but, contra Bourdieu, argues that it helps construct rather than deconstruct. ‘The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather’ (Latour, 2004: 246). Critics should not necessarily aim 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. Recognizing the contingency of the social instead of searching for a stable transcendental consciousness cleansed of social categories, Latour lays the foundation for what can be called constructive critique. The critic’s translation and clarification contributes to the elaboration of the public and collective life, ‘an ontological politics redefined by the progressive composition of a common world’ (Alliez, 2015: 150). Sociologists contribute to the formatting of social constructions and aggregates as they study them, working alongside actors. More precisely, critique requires that scholars abandon presuppositions that we know best how to change the world towards our interventions’ conclusions, opening possibilities for actors to intervene with us (Guggenheim, 2020: 71).

This aggregating sociology gives critique a new way to see society building itself, but also poses a problem. Rejecting the idea of any pre-existing social force also rejects useful Bourdieusian concepts. It gives the impression that humans live and think in a kind of permanent *tabula rasa*; they never refer to schemes of thought from their pasts. Actors associate and build the social *ex-nihilo*. Latour’s ‘flat concept of society’ (Guggenheim and Potthast, 2011: 163) leads us to believe that no aggregations are stronger than others and that they are connected in a peaceful, elastic, and horizontal network. It underemphasizes domination within societal organization, notably in a time when technological systems allow new forms of exploitation and inequalities (Hornborg, 2014: 120).

Latourian constructivism focuses on local situations, describing aggregations of actors, seemingly emerging from nowhere, facing specific problems which concern them. He refuses to generalize towards general critique of any potential social order pre-structured by larger aggregations. He thus fails to truly redefine critical sociology.

Everybody is elastic and can horizontally connect and collaborate with everybody. This approach implies that actors desire cooperation with local arrangements for one reason or another, to desire stability in a changing world (Boltanski, 2011 [2009]: 54). Aggregations have no boundaries and are themselves destined to aggregate. The sociologist would be satisfied to make them link up.

Latourianism describes how actors aggregate together to clean the sea, including industrial firms. But saying actors unite to claim water is polluted is not critique: claiming that industrialism empowers manufacturers to pollute the water is (Guggenheim, 2020: 65). To say this, we must go beyond the local potential cooperation between neighborhood associations and industry: to see that larger aggregations have more influence than smaller ones, more power. In a Latourian perspective, market sharks and minnows alike have the same aggregative power, equating Google's and a new tech start-up's ability to shape the social world. With Latour, one does not emancipate oneself from the established order because one drowns in it through a myriad of connections.

Because society is aggregations of actors' constructions, change is permanent and each aggregation has the same power to change. We have swung from one extreme to another: with Bourdieu, things rarely change; with Latour, everything changes all the time. Stabilized spaces, with power hierarchies, do not exist. Latour's desire to describe any kind of material aggregation/association/assemblage on the same level, always digging deeper into description of aggregations themselves, implies no stable power dynamics (Keller, 2017: 62). Such a position contradicts actors' experiences and concerns just as much as Bourdieu's hermeneutics of suspicion.

Critical theory can move beyond Bourdieusian transcendentalism and the Latourian overcorrection. To reconcile critique with pragmatism, it seems possible to conserve Bourdieusian deconstruction of domination, but with a Latourian constructive emphasis. To accomplish this, we propose a processual critical constructivist sociology. First we will emphasize a tradition which inspired Bourdieu: the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Second, we will deepen the American pragmatist perspective which Latour recognizes as influential on his own constructivist stance.

When assembled, these perspectives highlight how the lived experience is dynamic and fluid. Social forces can be a positive and conscious influence on how people engage with their social dispositions; they are not necessarily negative or to be negated. Habitus, dispositions, and social schemes can help people challenge and transform dominant aggregations. 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 to inherit differently from our pasts to reconstruct our presents. Our understandings and actions are influenced by our perceptions of our past, our goals, and visions of other worlds to be. In this sense, there is the recognition of inherited social schemes in our re-building of the social world, but not transcendentalism. Re-building doesn't always follow a strict teleology structured by our embodied pasts via a priori categories to be negated. The impacts of our pasts shimmer and transform, sometimes unpredictably. We can use them to build constructive reimaginative critiques for the future.

### A Processual Construction Rooted in Merleau-Ponty's Positive 'social-mien'

In the transcendental approach of contemporary critical theory, critical scholars claim to inoculate themselves against the overdetermined, everyday understandings that they maintain form people's (false) consciousness. Transcendental approaches assume that stable unconscious schemes influence our perspectives. The task of critical scholars is to identify said structures, which must be negated to achieve a truer way of experiencing the world. Transcendental critical thought thus can *only* negate: those who claim to see the Truth fall into dogma, and thus see any alternatives to dogma as error to be cleansed (Deleuze, 1994 [1968]: 148).

To evade this restriction of sociology to pessimism, we propose a critical constructivism within a process-oriented approach. The goal is to shift away from a Kantian negative analysis, moving towards a phenomenological, pragmatic perspective which recognizes common sense given to the world by aggregations of people, including sociologists and critical scholars. This approach is based on the recognition that there is no stable foundation upon which critical scholars can claim truth and superiority over everyday actors. However, such a shift does not go as far as the Latourian approach, which denies power relations. Our approach recognizes asymmetries between entities which compose the world. Critical scholars can coach and critique by virtue of critical, mutual engagement with actors' own critical assessments of the relationship between their thoughts and actions.

There are many circumstances when we analyze and try to understand our social experiences. When we experience our world, we constantly balance a yet-unrealized future and a fluid past in our present. 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 act, changing or confirming our way of life (Merleau-Ponty, 2012 [1945]: 277–8, 380–1, 438–42). How we think and act is necessarily influenced by our socialization, our dispositions, our pasts. But this is not exclusively a past to present trajectory. The past can be actualized in the present as memory through reference to our present creative moment (Merleau-Ponty, 2012 [1945]: 277–8, 438–42).

Merleau-Ponty sociologizes this phenomenal experience. He acknowledges that we use social categories during key moments in our lives; the preconscious element makes it appear as if the category was what caused certain actions and thoughts (Merleau-Ponty, 2012 [1945]: 381). Merleau-Ponty thus prefigures Bourdieu's critical sociology, conceiving of our entanglement with the world in general and our ineluctable situatedness in our bodies as cultural (Bourdieu, 1990 [1980]). This view assumes 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).

This conception is nevertheless optimistic. Through culture, one inhabits lives that are not one's own – multiple beings, multiple possibilities. The objects in the world's significations were forged by those who came before (Merleau-Ponty, 1960a: 111). These significations or understandings become what Merleau-Ponty calls the *social-mien*

(social-mine), what we have understood until here as dispositions or schemes: the raw social material of our being-in-the-world which we can transform (Frère, 2011: 261).

This process is not deterministic because we can recognize our various influences. Structured categories do not impose upon us: we feel pressures but see alternatives and identify intersections of schemes that offer different ways of being. Social facts are not a ‘massive reality’ but are ‘embedded in the deepest part of the individual’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1960b: 123–42). Although one is immersed in the world before becoming aware of it, one can recognize and reflect upon the significance that one is the only one experiencing the cultural and social world in the way one does: ‘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). The *social-mien* empowers: it develops agency through the subject’s constant exposure to the social world, with conflicting schemas provoking a thousand wonders (Merleau-Ponty, 1960a: 108).

In moving from philosophy to sociology, the *social-mien* can be understood as a kind of collective habitus without need of negation. With Merleau-Ponty’s work, we can envisage an active actor likely to behave in accordance with social learnings but not overdetermined. Our pasts are not singular, nor are they static. We incorporate our individual biographies and significant experiences with the collective experience of those linked to us via society, recognizing common significations/understandings and adjusting our understandings of our pasts. This has important implications for a more constructive version of critique: we are all capable of collectively assembling our *social-mien* to change the social order from which we emerge. Actors do not need to be emancipated, as they do not necessarily reproduce their socializations (pasts): they can transform them to the best of their ability. The constructively critical sociologist here would aggregate, translate, and inform actors’ common senses from diverse but similar *social-miens*, potentially helping shift understandings of pasts, presents, and futures.

The fluidity of our understandings of the past and present, and how these capacities both construct and provide creative agency, can help inform sociologists’ aggregation of people’s significations/preoccupations in a collective. Sociologists can work as Cézanne worked in art. The painter is aware of lending his arm, fingers, and brush to Mount Sainte-Victoire so it can be painted (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 16). As sociologists, we lend our body, our hand, and our pen to the social world so that it reproduces itself through us. Critical constructivism consists then not in denouncing illusions but in putting itself in the service of a collective which puts itself in shape, in sense, and in scene from what its members retained of their own pasts, of a shared *social-mien* susceptible to be sculpted.

Merleau-Ponty suggests a process of bringing the world to visibility, a world that is irreducible to any simple subject-object dialectic or to the genius of the subject, quoting Cezanne – ‘The landscape thinks itself in me and I am its consciousness’ – or describing painting as a ‘reflexivity of the sensible’ such that ‘it becomes impossible to distinguish between what sees and what is seen, what paints and what is painted. (Coole, 2007: 227)

This process ‘requires expressive intervention, a certain freedom of stylistic improvisation that is facilitated by the artist’s particular perspective and corporeal familiarity with the world’ (Coole, 2007: 227).

Whether it is a pure subject (Kant) or a subject cleansed of its social determinations (Bourdieu’s sociologist), a transcendental subject ‘cannot learn from or recreate the world [. . .], because it never engages with or interrogates the objects on which it mechanically and monotonously imposes (social) categorial forms’ (Coole, 2007: 34). Coole’s links between Merleau-Ponty’s Marxist roots and his philosophy of Cézanne’s art are also what allow us to transform him into a critical sociologist. Marx and Cézanne share ‘a determination to express the lifeworld afresh, rather than relying upon established conventions that obscure the upsurge of existence’ (Coole, 2007: 95) – conscious rejection of inherited conventions to create a new form of experiencing reality.

Social life for Merleau-Ponty is neither something reproduced by itself nor categories imposed on events ‘but a living process that incessantly engenders new forms’ (Coole, 2007: 182). The theorist joins a collective to rebuild the significations/understandings they care about together through discourse and praxis. Their *social-mien* gives them the material for sculpting a common sense. Since we are actors in an open society, praxis emphasizes construction instead of an ideal form impressing itself on the world (Coole, 2007: 182). Sociologists can contribute and reinforce this creative intervention, since returning to the lifeworld is also a means of creatively bringing it to expression. Thus, when we speak of society, we are speaking of a world constructed and methodically interpreted within our analyses as well as actors’ interpretations. It is this active/passive agency – of construction and learning, intervention and listening – that actors, with the committed sociologist, practice together, and the sociologist translates it to the public sphere (Coole, 2007: 182). This Latour-like constructivism retains a critical angle: the emphasis on praxis is rooted in critiquing the dominant order in action as well as thought. Action helps actors and theorists shift the social world away from the dominant order (Coole, 2007: 86).

But rather than simply analyzing such moments of sculpting, the critical constructivist aims to *create* them with people he associates with. Our critical constructivism consists in a kind of collective ‘experimental *modification* of practices’ (Guggenheim, 2020: 70). As an inventive method, critical constructivism, informed by Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, aims to change the world thanks to others’ significations/understandings/dispositions inherited from their worlds. We collectively sculpt a *social-mien*, giving a common sense to a situation. Importantly, these methods allow Latour’s flat constructivism to become critical. Practitioners can ‘intervene in practices by giving actors in the field the resources at hand to clarify and change their situation’ (Guggenheim, 2020: 71). Critical sociologists can help aggregating actors see patterns in their critiques which can more fully challenge previously more weakly challenged ideas inherited from those that are dominant.

### *Pragmatic Praxis and Constructivist Critique*

American pragmatism’s emphasis on praxis adds a proactive social engagement dimension to processual critique. Processual sociological approaches recognize a generally

conservative trend in how people think and act. Contra Bourdieu, this attempt to retain past dispositions and understandings is neither unconscious nor stable. Habit influences actions, yet ‘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 reverie become a source of acts which break bounds’ (Dewey, 1981: 630). Paralleling Bourdieu, actors rarely think consciously about what they are doing, consequently perpetuating inequalities. However, it is not that people do not, or cannot, imagine otherwise or critique: such desires just rarely produce transformative actions.

Transformative actions are more likely to occur during indeterminate periods, when our standard inherited ways of solving problems no longer work as we expect (Dewey, 1957 [1920]: 141). During these moments, actors are freer to re-evaluate their understandings and actions within the world; to reimagine it differently, with a common sense distinct from dominant understandings. Praxis combines action and thought: we often need action to resolve meaning problems which collectively concern us (Dewey, 1957 [1920]: 140–2; 1981: 237–9). Like Merleau-Ponty’s Cézanne, actors become more reflexive and critically examine their past understandings/dispositions based on new information and experiences, re-synchronizing their *social-miens* across their temporalities in action (Dewey, 1981: 221; James, 1978: 35; Joas, 1997: 82). These actions can help shift or consolidate our identities, and we then reconstruct our pasts to make the temporal logic seem linear for everyone despite the change in perspective (Merleau-Ponty, 2012 [1945]: 381). Recalling the *social-mien* redefinition of habitus, we can look for rarely mobilized predispositions from our social heritage to construct a new common sense, a new way of life emerging from people’s shared past representations.

This temporal malleability implies that our knowledge of how the world works may not be solely based on predictions from past information: it can also be based on our desires, be they the past, moving away from the past, or desiring something different. Such a statement is processual in addition to being constructive. Our goals and desires influence what we gather as collective significations, how we analyze them, and how we then assess which actions to take (Dewey, 1981: 139–41, 406–7). Reflexivity allows us to engage with our dispositions and how our hopes influence our actions and understanding in the present (Joas, 1997: 129–31; Mead, 1956: 313–14). Pragmatic reflexivity again parallels Merleau-Ponty: our desired futures can impact our understandings of our pasts, which we use to justify our actions: ‘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). Our wills emerge at the crossroads of a present situation and our *social-miens* (our socialized and biographical experiences), leading to a dynamic collective (and uncertain) conception of the present, far from a reproductive conception stabilized by transcendental structures. Thus, during these indeterminate periods, we can hope for and recognize difference, for difference resides in our self-conceptions. Pragmatic praxis allows us to experiment with new ideas and self-conceptions; to examine who we are through embodiment of new understandings (Jaster and Young, 2019). Pragmatism’s emphasis on what works, when our understandings sufficiently match our experiences, plays a dual role: it shows us when our current states of being need amending and allows us to test different

possibilities that better match our expectations. When action and thought cannot be meaningfully separated, our desires and critiques are a cyclical process of reflection about inherited schemas, adjustment, and transformative action.

This construction from *social-miens*, ‘common sense’, is more dynamic than the Bourdieusian perspective: it is a collective sense constructed by shared knowledges. Inspired by Deweyian pragmatism, Stengers (2021: 16) highlights how we *ruminate* together on what we inherit from the past, making us ‘capable of objecting against the order of things’. In complex societies, collective concerns can be drowned out by the cacophony of publics. The shared public cannot find itself to present a unified voice to the state, which, in the Deweyian conception, exists to address collective concerns (Dewey, 1927: 27, 118–23). Normally, clear communication among the publics can make it so that ‘genuinely shared interest in the consequences of interdependent activities may inform desire and effort and thereby direct action’ (Dewey, 1927: 155). Social scientists can help the community to address clearly identified, shared public problems. They should not prescribe the right solution but rather help individuals identify their shared collective concerns, forming a public which can make demands on the state and society (Dewey, 1927: 207–9).

Critical scholars can help a group weld new imaginations and common senses as Dewey prescribes. The study of activists at the Zone d’Autonomie à Défendre de Notre-Dame-Des-Landes (ZAD), a territory occupied for years to prevent the extension of the nearby airport, illustrates this. A shared public problem led Zadists, ignored by the state, to occupy the territory and to experiment with new processes of democracy. Their ability to create new forms of debate and collegial decision-making institutions was based on their democratic schema, a kind of predisposition which has progressively become a component of the *social-mien* of citizens in democratic societies. Democratic voting is composed of internalized, inherited rules, regulations, and institutions, but also value statements and norms about how to discuss and express oneself: a sort of democratic common sense developed as a *social-mien* (Quéré and Terzi, 2014: 113). In such systems, we are used to engaging with people with other understandings: some may cause dismay, but others may prompt wonder and innovation (Stengers, 2021: 22–5).

The Zadists suggested a new version of democracy contrary to standard aggregations which embody exclusivity in elite representational formulations. Standard forms favored the elites they struggled against. Encountering a form of democracy which excluded rather than included, this indeterminate period prompted action: Zadists embodied a re-created democracy paralleling Cézanne’s experimentalism, aided by sociologists lending their pens and hands to help weld imagination and common sense (e.g. Bulle, 2020; Pruvost, 2017). The sociologists remind us that recomposing a (micro)society is delicate work. Activists tested ways to avoid the trappings of the old system in action. Seeking consensus and accessibility instead of majority rule, they mobilized different kinds of collective intelligences applied to public discussion, similar to the psychoanalyst Levine’s suggested strategies to promote a common sense in political discussion (Jeanmart et al., 2018): a recorder means that those wary of expressing themselves publicly could do so quietly, collectively processing the recording; a *chairperson* identifies those who regularly raised their hands but were ignored by the moderator; a *rephraser* rephrases awkward expressions; a *confidant* collects the impressions of each person at

the break to ensure that no point of view is prejudiced; a *signaler* highlights the silence of unaddressed objections which resulted in alienation from the process.

Sociologists also helped translate the concerns of the Zadists to the public. They played the role of diplomat by writing and publishing about them (Stengers, 2021: 115). Diplomats fairly represent positions before all concerned parties; here, the full assembly. The Zadists happily shared their concerns with investigators attentive to their wills. In listening, the sociologists showed genuine interest in the project and could help to link it to common concerns. These sociologists could not misrepresent the Zadists' words, to claim that they are immersed in the illusion of common sense or false consciousness, precisely because they themselves contributed to constructing this common sense, formulated through dynamic, reflexive pragmatic praxis.

*Together*, the Zadists and the investigators aggregated a re-constructed democratic practice, critiquing an aggregation that is stronger than them: parliamentary democracy, where many elected officials lobbied on behalf of private airlines for expanding the airport. The ZAD has become a (re)generative device (*dispositif*) (Stengers, 2021: 196). The idea of generative *dispositif* 'is at the heart of the question of the practices of direct democracy of which activists learn to make themselves capable. It is about ways of making sense in common that make possible common actions against the ravages that continue in the name of economic growth' (Stengers, 2021: 49). It is about 'inheriting democracy in a non-conforming way' to 'oppose the order of things' (Stengers, 2021: 149, 16). A generative *dispositif* produces new social practices against the dominant aggregations that structure this order, fulfilling Bourdieu's critical goal.

Dewey (1981) argues that public debate is key for overcoming power in democracies (pp. 635, 649, 657), but talk alone is insufficient: reflexive interaction, discourse, and action are key in democracy (pp. 664, 685, 695). The ZAD illustrates how putting alternative discourses in action, and scholars translating this process to the broader public, is a meaningful way in which local publics can have a broader impact. None in the ZAD, including the critical sociologists, have suggested that it would be possible to strictly extend this model of lively and direct democracy. But this does not mean that the ZAD had no political effect on the broader French state. The critical process the activists and translating scholars engaged in may have contributed to making the project popular enough to force the government to abandon the extension; more broadly, they may have shaped public discourse, inspiring others to question their representation in government systems (Bulle, 2020; Mauvaise Troupe, 2016).

In summary: the relationship between the Zadists and critical scholars highlights a different way to critique in social research, one that attests to a kind of permanent revolution building towards something better in our own aggregations. The ZAD exemplifies key themes tied to our proposed critical approach: a group of people who are composed of multiple *social-miens* sharing an idea of what democracy is; an exercise of critical reflection on both their *social-miens* and the current situation; a re-sculpting of what is possible in action to test ideas; and an organization of their concerns translated to a broader public for debate by critical scholars. The critical scholar highlights the ways that people engage in this process, identifying what the actors collectively care about and broadening the message. For instance, they may use their broader knowledge of similar movements to help construct a common sense. Contrary to Latour's flat world, scholars

and actors gather in a common aggregation, identifying dominant aggregations they want to distinguish themselves from, here power holders wanting to extend the airport. The critical scholar has lost their privileged status as the sole guarantor of liberation via transcendental analyses, yet domination is still addressed: their new epistemological and ontological foundations no longer purely negate via perpetual doubt and deconstruction, but instead facilitate collective creativity.

## Conclusion

In a transcendental critical perspective, the social scientist must negate common sense categories of thought to illustrate limited points of view. This approach quashes actors' potential because it is exclusively negative: always doubting, assuming the worst. Critical sociologists must disrupt somewhat stable fields to help foment change. But within this perspective, critical scholars may fall prey to a sort of commodity fetishism if we think of fetishism as a form of phenomenological semblance (Skotnicki, 2020). Their ideas and theories are themselves socially constructed and produced by an intersection of ideas, thoughts, and findings, not standalone, ontologically true things. Saying structures are socially constructed is not the same as treating them as such: claims of identifying transcendental categories makes ontological statements at odds with notions of changing thought.

Our proposed constructive critique emphasizes actors' capacity to critique and construct sense in common. Emphasizing construction over negation implies turning way from doubting and towards encouraging those building different forms of life in the attempt to escape old forms of domination. Everyday actors engage in a steady process of understanding the social world. They can utilize dispositions and knowledge from their common past to change things.

Emphasizing construction is not categorically rejecting Bourdieusian thought. We merely want to abandon a specific dimension of critique: the claims to reach the transcendental through careful analysis. In constructive critique there are no a priori hidden-behind-social dispositions which must be categorically negated, but historically and contingent *social-miens* and conditions of thought which can be publicly debated, criticized *or* galvanized. Actors have visions inspired by their former experiences. They can reframe the contours of the world like Cézanne painting the Sainte-Victoire, using his artistic skills in new ways, transforming his and others' perspectives. *Habitus* as the *social-mien* is an innovative resource.

The *social-mien* gives rise to a collective work of recomposing common sense. We all inherit meanings and understandings that, as in the case of democracy, can be collectively *ruminated*, opening new generative *dispositifs*. Contrary to Foucauldian devices of power, we can consider here our aggregative sociology as a sociology of 'generative' and processual devices. These devices 'require that those they gather be explicitly concerned by the question or the proposition that brings them together. They require that each of those gathered know that what will emerge from their gathering will not belong to any of them, but will be the result of the "being together" that the device has brought into existence' (Stengers, 2021: 173). Yes, we come to think like others, to 'think the thoughts of the others', like Bourdieusian common sense. But with Bourdieu, common sense is the

vector of false explanations to negate. Here the common sense is thought, between ourselves, scholars, and the others, ‘on a mode which makes us (together) the masters of the sense to attribute to our experience and to theirs’ (Stengers, 2021: 182). In short, it is positive thought.

This does not mean that critical scholars cannot critique. The levelling of actors and social researchers does not imply such a conclusion (Haack, 2009; Misak, 2000). Critical scholars should help actors refine both their already existing critical capacities and their capacity to ruminate on inherited dispositions to build something new in common. The hermeneutics of suspicion should not be the default perspective for all critical engagements with the social world. People who are dominated are often quite aware of their domination and they try to resist by concretely aggregating themselves. 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 own representations of symbolic domination and collective innovations. Recognizing and asserting people’s capacities to critique and explain the social world as sociological actors, cognizant of concepts like capitalism, power, and domination, empowers them. They can better use their *social-miens*, derived from past schemes and understandings, to create something new from their marginalized dispositions.

What makes critical sociology work is the process, not the telos or goal. A transcendental point of view, like a God from the depths, makes it easy to minimize the *social-mien* as alienation due to over immersion in common sense, reducing people to objective reproducers of the established order. Embracing a constructive approach helps us embody an ethics of fragility and contingency, a recognition that we are limited by our habitus but also empowered by it. One can work together without negating all influences from past habits, challenging power systems through empowering actors to collectively take charge themselves to build the future.

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