

Phenomenology as a tool for sociology of critique

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Introduction

After Bourdieu, French sociology tended to see value-based arguments as “illusio” that hid cultural or economic determining factors of which actors were unaware (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 21). In the study of the solidarity economy (a field I will introduce later) this Bourdieusian conception has led to actors’ own justifications being quickly dismissed, as it is shown how they are in reality moved by market forces. But what would happen if, rather than suspecting solidarity economy actors’ moral justifications to be the veil concealing the invasion of the market’s logic, we just took them seriously? To answer this question, I **will try first** to demonstrate the usefulness of the **sociology of critique** (also called pragmatic sociology), an original research program in contemporary French thought created by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot in the 90. Sociology of critique allows us to treat values as sources of motivation, especially within fields which are keen to promote a moralized and politicized economy. By studying the moral judgements of people thanks to the notion of “moral grammar”, the sociology of critique has helped restore to people the critical capacity that had been confiscated by the sociologist (Latour, 1993, p. 50-51). **In a second time**, I will show through the example of solidarity economy how rich is this sociology which turn from a (bourdieusian) critical sociology to a sociology of critique (as actors critique).

But in a third time I will point out a problem in sociology of critique. Indeed, while the sociology of critique’s notion of grammar allows us to understand the action of actors when it is coherent with the values they use to justify it, it does not allow us to explain a paradox: how can we understand the fact that sometimes the moral values mobilized by actors to justify their action seem to misrepresent the main characteristics of their action? Within the Bourdieusian framework of unconscious actors unaware of the factors that really determine their action, we can understand how their erroneous justifications might not fit with their action. But once we have left the Bourdieusian paradigm, this paradox cannot be solved from within the sociology of critique itself. Resolving this problem **requires phenomenology** as we will show in **a fourth time**, convoking Husserl and Scheler.

Indeed, the notion of grammar can be understood as the cognitive syntax of what Husserl and Scheler call “intentional states of mind” that mediate how an actor’s consciousness relates to the external world. This redefinition will lead us to conceptualize **in a fifth time**, the notion of “extrapolation”. It can be understood as the moment where an action is so focused on the realization of one single moral value that this action can be seen by actors themselves as contradictory with some other values of the solidarity economy’s general grammar of justification. In this way, I aim to reinforce the sociology of critique paradigm and I continue to take actors’ moral values seriously without reducing them to some kind of unconscious social toolkit that veils the real causes of action.

1. The sociology of critique

The sociology of critique is well known outside France today. This is why I will only summarize here its conceptions of common sense and grammar, which will serve my general analysis. Boltanski and Thévenot condemn the way in which, for a long time, the social

sciences in general, and Bourdieu especially (Boltanski's former director of studies), have considered common sense to be a source of errors, equating, in a swift positivist motion, the critical sociology science with truth. Contra Bourdieu, these two authors argue that, in everyday life, ordinary people never stop wondering about how to rationalize what they are currently experiencing (2006, p. 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 in a way that approaches that of sciences." (2006, p. 356). This is why the language emerging from the common sense of ordinary people must be taken seriously by the sociologist. (Boltanski, 2012, p. 100).

The most sophisticated language, arising from actors' common sense, appears when they develop *justifications*. It is through justifications – which often contain actors' own nuanced (albeit non-scholarly) *critiques* – that they perform the social world. But the justifications produced by actors are often hurried and brief. For the sociology of critique, the sociologist's role is to take the time to "clean up" actors' justifications and present the problem in question as clearly as possible. **In doing so, they clarify the values (also referred to as "common goods")** upon which people rest when they act, critique and justify their actions. The reconstruction of these models is necessary since, amid the immediate urgency of matters, people rarely reach back to access the values that they use to back up their arguments (Boltanski, 2012, p. 31).

The sociology of **critique emphasizes the critical competences** actors have to recognize and reflect upon the multiple values that co-exist and that they use to co-construct social reality. Justifications are hence not approached with skepticism, accompanied by a search for unconscious influences that operate hidden behind discursive articulations. Justifications serve as the starting point for studying the political and moral frameworks that motivate people's behavior thanks to values (seen as motivations for and constraints on action).

Via a focus on justifications the sociology of critique thus brings values back into the centre-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 them to mere ideological masks (or) to an interplay of forces over which actors have no control.*" (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007, p. xi). **Values are not composing an ideology here. They are composing a grammar" (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, p. 140).**

The notion of grammar is a key term here. It should not be understood as an external structure that becomes internalized as unconscious social norms. Grammatical rules are neither "externally guaranteed" as would say Weber (1980 [1922]) nor stabilized through naturalization as would say Bourdieu (1979). It is for Boltanski and Thévenot a sense-making device that renders a situation intelligible and meaningful. A grammar consists of a set of values which work like **conscious** rules of the game for actoes but that vary according to the moral communities one belongs to.

In short, a grammar organizes how we speak – and therefore make sense of the world. It lies at the heart of how we make judgments about the world and/or what we are doing (Frère and Jaster, 2018). The sociology of critique posits that actors *are* conscious of these grammars – because they organize their common sense – even if they do not use the word "grammar" and if in their daily life they rarely have the time and opportunity to systematically clarify their normative assumptions, unlike the sociologist, (Boltanski 2012, p. 36-58).

Let me now give an illustration with solidarity economy. Indeed, in a large research program I lead since 2002, I aim to identify the grammar of this "solidarity economy" in France.

2. The grammar of the solidarity economy

The solidarity economy is clearly defined in France. It brings together new worker cooperatives (such as enterprises taken over by their workers in self-management); new consumer cooperatives such as Community Supported Agriculture, *Local Exchange Trading Systems* (LETS); solidarity micro-credit and what are called the *community services*¹ (which include providers of everyday support such as help for older people; communitarian restaurants ; environmental initiatives such as local recycling, etc.) (see Laville, 2009, Frère, 2019). These initiatives were for a long time established by *consulting services* such as the Local Economic Development Agency (ADEL) or the *Pôles d'économie solidaire*² (POLE), which will be our focus here.

ADEL is an organization that helped establish community services to promote local economic development. ADEL primarily offers advice to its users, who are often jobless and willing to become social entrepreneurs “creating” community-service cooperatives. In that way, ADEL helped to create the multi-ethnic restaurant “Le Flamboyant” in Paris, which embodies the organization’s particular interest in local community business projects. Le Flamboyant was set up in 1989, with the help of ADEL, in a poor city neighborhood one hour north of Paris. It has given employment to five young female entrepreneurs.

In the interview I will quote hereafter, we will see the moral grammar that characterizes justifications shared by people within the solidarity economy at work. Of course, ADEL members do not use the word “grammar”, but they are conscious of a specific set of values – and tend to respect these values in their practices and justifications – when they talk about their “solidarity economy” practices. My study shows that when actors of solidarity economy give reasons for why they are involved in the solidarity economy they always and quite naturally respect the same grammar, mentioning the same values without necessarily having been in touch with each other.

Madeleine is an ADEL member. She says (I quote) :- “The women are from really poor neighborhoods. Public transportation doesn’t work, the staircases are squatted by dealers, the plumbers don’t come, everything’s [in danger of] catching fire. They lived in conditions like that. By having a meeting and asking themselves why things weren’t changing, they finally said to themselves “Could we not change it ourselves by creating economic activities?” Voila, le Flamboyant and the idea of a solidarity economy cooperative were born [...] . This comes from the lived experiences of people themselves. The business is rooted in what the people are, because they are close to each other, because there is a social tie [...]. There needs to be material elements for a solidarity economy initiative to germinate and it always does so based on what is shared [...] People have to be together, rethink the world starting from their staircase in order to be able to create... These girls, they survived distress. They went through hard times. What keeps them going with their restaurant...I think...that’s because they have an organization of multiplicity: they share the tasks, they share the responsibility, and so on. They find themselves in a world that they themselves have organized. And that’s because they keep going. But then, if you put a real boss there that exploited them, it wouldn’t work. These girls, they destroy capitalism from the inside, making their initiative impossible to privatize.[...] Ultimately, the question is: how do you create a strong movement, how do you link these initiatives so that they speak together, in a “similar” voice? We have to link the initiatives [...] To do that

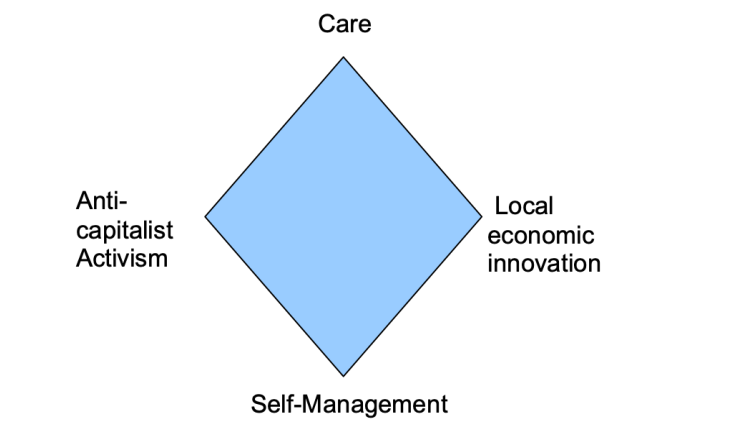
¹ . Services de proximité

² . Solidarity economy centres

we go to the **anti-globalization forums**. I think that the solidarity economy is primarily about (practical anti-capitalist) citizens who politically fight in their everyday-life”.

I quote this especially because it illustrates the four values we usually find within justifications of solidarity economy actors :

Figure 1. The grammar of the solidarity economy and its four values.



I realized through my 75 interviews that actors systematically mobilized these four values, the pure forms of which I identified as **local economic innovation, care, self-management and political activism**. I found these four values in all our interviews so I treat them as grammatical elements. The combination of these four values never occur by chance. Solidarity economy actors “see” the world, as phenomenology would describe it, through the lens of this moral grammar characterized by these four values. They live within these values when they are acting, and they may even shift between them if they have to argue about what they do. We can see here how sociology of critique is useful to extract a grammar and to show that actors don’t wait for sociologists to critique capitalism and to be critique against exclusion. Here the justifications are both critique and clearly referred to what ADEL does in practice. Having observed how ADEL works, we cannot pretend that she is unconsciously led by the utopia of the neo-liberal illusio of self-entrepreneurship (as Bourdieu might have it: 1998, pp. 108-119) or by the veiled desire to make profit.

3. But what happens when we find contradictions between action and justification?

This kind of contradiction was indeed what I discovered when I went to Chalon to work about the “Pole d’Economie solidaire” (Hereafter POLE), an organization which were doing exactly the same activity than ADEL, sharing the solidarity economy’s grammar, and identified itself as a member of the movement.

Manon, on of the team members, explained us : ***“The people who come to POLE are really in a mess. [...] There are many people who are self-employed, also people who are tired of having a boss. Who had a boss on their backs for years. A boss that fired them like dirt. These are people who don’t want to go back to these authoritarian logics, but who want to flourish. [...]: There are many people who come out of a factory at 20, who are self-employed and who have a passion. And they want to work for their passion, and why not***

*earn money with their passion? [...]. We really motivate them to set up their projects that they feel deeply about, that allow them to flourish. That doesn't simply mean re-socialization. **We are more getting into individual self-realization**, in the sense of creating a network between project initiators, between creators, between businesses that exist in the Chalon region."*

Offering free services to unemployed people, POLE appears in no way inferior to ADEL. At various instances during the participant observation, members of POLE emphasized their desire to also become politically active, for example in the anti-globalization movement. They also insisted on collective, democratic decision-making in the organization's management, and the importance of working with people who are really in a mess (that show how the care value is important). But in the course of the interview, Manon becomes reflective and expresses some self-critical thoughts.

*Manon: "I think, for example, to really be creating the solidarity economy, to be supporting solely fair-trade cooperatives or community services would be great[...]. But there are enormous political pressures that mean that in the end you can't concentrate on the solidarity economy, that **you're forced to support the creation of "traditional" businesses, any type of business. We are funded by the European social fund for that [...]** We've also long since debated here about it with my **brother** who works at an anarchist bookshop. He said: "But that's crazy, you're creating future bosses, but that has nothing to do with the logic of the solidarity economy! **That's micro-capitalism!** [...]. That is to say that the logic of funding is something that determines our activity. We are in fact extremely dependent of European Social Fund. An example: we want to set up a solidarity economy enterprise. We won't get funding if it is called "support for a solidarity economy project". But we will if we say that we aim at the creation of a "usual" start-up business... You see what I mean?"*

Manon critically reflects on the incongruity between the reality of her professional life, where she recognizes a mismatch between what truly *living* solidarity economy values would mean to her and the actual practices of POLE. It shows that the language of "local innovation" alone is not sufficient to realize the moral grammar of the solidarity economy in practice. Manon also criticizes the de-valorization of "self-management", when she agrees with her brother by quoting him saying "you are creating future bosses". This implies that POLE won't react if the leader of the project decides to recruit employees rather than collaborators paid at the same level and engaged in the collective management of the business. Nor will POLE react if the same project leader decides not to concern himself with care and precariousness (he could become a new exploiter as Manon's brother suggests). When Manon points out that they would not get financial support if a community service project were promoted under the label of the "solidarity economy" she regrets that POLE cannot draw on political arguments as this would risk them getting a reputation as *activists* in the eyes of funding bodies.

Contrary to what a pure Bourdieusian reading would suggest, Manon is able to step outside her actions to reflect on her practice and self-criticize. By analysing Manon's grammar of justification, the sociology of critique shows us how aware she is of the need to make the solidarity economy a social project of emancipation. But this value of political activism is in contradiction with her practice when she helps people create ordinary businesses. And she knows it.

Manon's justifications are not "illusio", but they are not always the perfect mirror of what she is doing in reality. How to explain the paradox? The sociology of critique in its

present form does not provide any real solution to this question, **as it implicitly assumes coherence between actions and justifications**. That's why it needs phenomenology.

4. A phenomenological reading of the grammar : A question of states of mind

Indeed, the notion of “intentional states of mind”, as developed by Edmund Husserl (1987[1931]) and Max Scheler (1982 [1919]), is particularly useful for understanding a grammar as a cognitive representation of the world, but one of which actors are *fully conscious*.

Phenomenology – the science of the essence of consciousness, as Husserl defined it – allows us to understand how people experience the world. It is through consciousness that the subject's mind is linked to the world's objects. This fundamental and general property of consciousness – which consists in being always conscious *of* something ([1949], 1994, pp. 77-78) – is called “intentionality”. Intentionality thus means that human consciousness is always directed towards an object of the world, and this occurs under the influence of a perceptive modality (memory, love, judgment, wish, hate, joy, etc.). Intentionality is neither a structural property of the external world nor a subjective property of the individual mind. Instead, it characterizes the relation between the subject's mind and the world of objects.

I quote Husserl : “During the flowing process of (subjective) experiencing, the object of consciousness does not come into experience from outside, but its sense is already given within the process of experiencing. (The same object) can be conscious in highly diverse, simultaneous or successive, separate modes of consciousness, for example in separate perceptions, recollections, expectations, valuations, and so forth (Husserl 1987 [1931], p. 44, own translation)

When Husserl speaks of diverse modes of consciousness, he means that a human's relation to the world is mediated not by a single but by a plurality of “intentional consciousnesses”. Each of them makes the world represent itself to the conscious mind in a particular way. The actors' relationship towards the world can be mediated by, for example, desire, rationality, love or profit.

While Husserl was concerned with the subjective “intentional relation of consciousness to object, cogito to cogitatum” (1987 [1931] p. 31), **Max Scheler's** focuses on the sociological dimension of intentionality (Scheler, 1980 [1927]; 1982 [1919], Vandenberg, 2008, 18)³. Using the vocabulary of “Einstellung”, which the American scholar Frings translates **as mind-set or states of mind**, Scheler shifts from Husserl's notion of subjective consciousness of an individual mind to a collective disposition towards the world.

I quote: “depending on the nature of a specific attitude of consciousness, things around us appear in a specific light” (Frings 1997, p. 169). Intentional states of mind “appear as supra-individual, they are collective spirits and collective livings of the present” (Scheler 1982 [1919], p. 623, own translation). These are not fixed cognitive categories, but contingent on changing historical realities. Scheler's thesis was that the dominant mind-set of 19th and 20th century society was a capitalist way of relating to the world, which superseded a religious way of seeing the world:

A mind-set (or a state of mind) “is an attitude of consciousness that determines ‘how’ things appear in the human milieu. Depending on the nature of a specific attitude of consciousness,

³ . Max Scheler was the first author who sought to explicitly integrate phenomenology and sociology, even though Schütz is repeatedly, but mistakenly, credited for having done so.

things around us appear in a specific light. (...). **Let us first look at mind-sets of the past.** A theophantic mind-set dominated the age of mythology according to which earthly things and events bespoke the divine. The celestial bodies, the seasons, animals, mountains and oceans appeared according to a mind-set that attributed their existence to the divine. By contrast in our time it is difficult for a capitalist to imagine, for example, the fury of Zeus manifested in a thunderbolt (...). In the capitalist mind-set, things and entities of the world are experienced under aspects of profitability, capitalization and usefulness that pervade our technological civilization” (Frings, 1997, p. 169, 173, 171).

Scheler understands “this mysterious specter of so-called capital” as the way of seeing the world that lets all objects come to be understood in terms of the social values related to appropriation : “I claim that the ‘commodity’ is everything [...] that is recognized, seen, interpreted through this mode of valuing as if through a particular lens.” (Scheler 1982 [1919], p. 619, own translation).

Scheler tries to show that capitalism is not only a model of economic exchange but a modern way of apprehending all the world’s objects, which appear as either sources of profit and capitalization or not. For the capitalist state of mind, everything is potentially a source of capitalization. Not only commodities but also Eros, art, education, sport, and religious objects (for instance the indulgences). “Things themselves look at man as a function of their ability to be capitalized. They ask him the same thing: see what profit you extract from me” (Frings, 1988, p. 356). Modern man became an *homo capitalisticus* whose principal characteristic is to inflect each kind of intentional perspective of his consciousness with the modality of profit and utility (M. Scheler, [1919], 1982, p.632). His state of mind presents the world to him as a market on which things either can be appropriated or cannot, even if they could be seen with some other intentional modalities such as love, real emotion, care, etc.

Now, integrating these phenomenological insights with the sociology of critique, we can say that the states of mind in action and justification are “mind-sets”. By understanding the complexity of those intentional states of mind that operate in the grammar of solidarity economy actors, the sociologist can apprehend the specific lenses through which the world appears to them. **Contra the capitalist, solidarity economy actors do not have one single state of mind (the one of the economic innovation for profit).** The grammar shared by actors in the solidarity economy is not monolithic. It is composed of a synthesis (Husserl) of four *social* states of mind (Scheler) : economic innovation, political activism, care and self-management. This grammar is a heuristic device, which can be understood as a syntax of action and justification. Each state of mind is a particular lens for looking at the world that is based on a particular value.

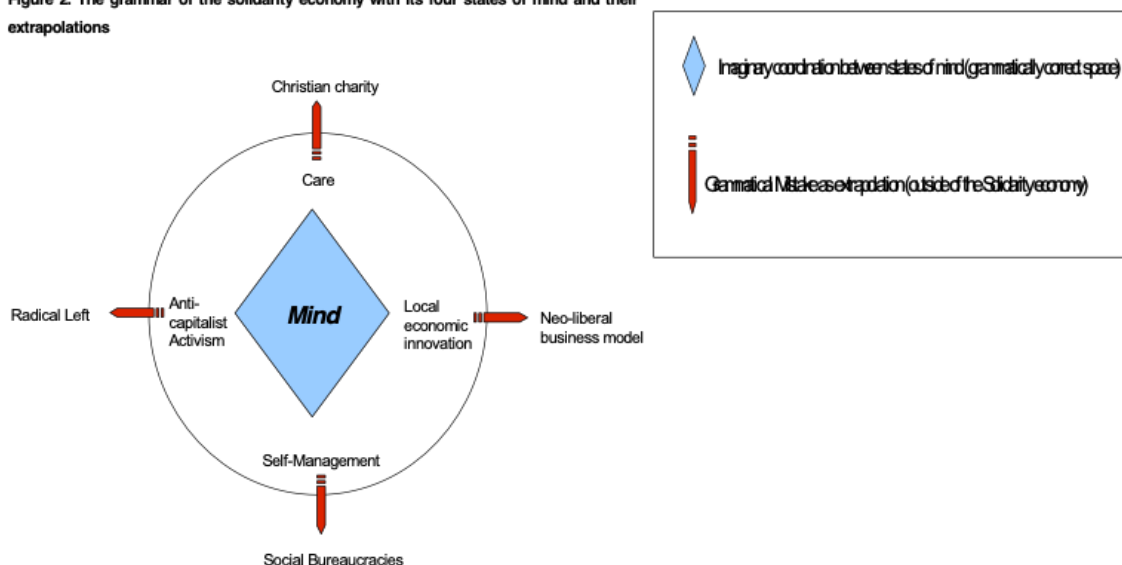
In a “state of peace” (to borrow Boltanski’s expression, 1990), like in the case of ADEL’s justification, the situation does not pose any problems of incoherence. There is no need for critical reflection **since people travel between the four states of mind.** When there is a balanced realization of all values, solidarity economy actors “see” the world (and act in it) through the lens of the four values. Madeleine, the woman I quoted before, illustrates what it means when one’s intentional relations with the objects in the world are mediated by several states of mind simultaneously. Her justifications navigate within the discursive space of the grammar to describe their practices. She valorizes all four states of mind and draws on concrete examples to illustrate how these are actively *lived* in her cooperative and activist life. Both their practices and their motivations correspond to the grammar. ADEL becomes what Max Scheler terms an “**example to follow**” (1987 [1921]), a moral champion that is praised by actors in the field.

5. Extrapolation as Grammatical Mistake

But situations in which we can see “examples” in action are very rare since it is very difficult for actors to realize in practice all the solidarity economy’s values (even for ADEL, which a longer participatory enquiry would probably sometimes catch out). Most of the time, individual actors’ justifications mobilize arguments around values, **but one state of mind is emphasized over the others**. Such a dominant state of mind can be regarded as a specific lens through which each association sees their activity, producing a particular way of “living” in the solidarity economy, like in the Scheler’s definition of the capitalist. In the ideal state, a grammar is actively mobilized through justifications that express a corresponding action. But in a critical situation, the grammar can give rise to self-criticism when deviations are recognized.

The values that constitute the grammar function like cardinal points, which, when not respected in different settings, provoke the feeling of a mistake having been made. A grammatical mistake (Lemieux, 2009) elicits a critical reaction, as it becomes necessary to articulate reasons for grammatical deviance. This happens when actors encounter some incoherence. When the moral equilibrium is violated, actors reflect on the mistake. This moment of discursive reflexivity allows us to study the critical and justificatory operations that people perform in everyday life using their common sense. They accuse themselves of a grammatical mistake and they leave the state of peace. This kind of mistake occurs when a single state of mind becomes the overriding lens through which actors relate to the world. Actors who are leaning too far towards a dominant state of mind and failing to shift back to the neglected states of minds stretch the boundaries of the grammar. In this case, we will say that **they are extrapolating** the value of that specific state of mind.

Figure 2. The grammar of the solidarity economy with its four states of mind and their extrapolations



When actors close their eyes (Boltanski, 2013, pp. 22-23) to certain values in their justifications and extrapolate only one of them, as the schelerian capitalist, we can say that they are making a *grammatical mistake*. Each critical moment has the same structure: a solidarity economy association accuses itself of *extrapolating* a value, doing which casts it into one of the non-“solidarity” worlds directly related to it.

Instead of creating community services, for instance, solidarity economy innovations resemble ordinary businesses in a competitive world. The focus on “local economic

innovation which creates profit”, forgetting the three other values, led to an extrapolated state of mind that is usually alien to the solidarity economy. We are focused on a neo-liberal state of mind that shapes the organization’s intentional relation to the world. Like the shelerian capitalist again.

In the example of POLE, a lot of community services created are not fair-trade shops or cooperative restaurants. They are just small, local, ordinary businesses that have to compete on the market. By focusing on entrepreneurial creativity actors like **Manon they abandon the other states of mind**. The “creative” projects that meet with success tend to recruit salaried workers in a **vertical hierarchy**, no longer care about belonging to an **anti-capitalist political** struggle, and do not pay special attention to **care**: the project can ignore the poor neighborhood where its instigator was born or recruit only employees from the middle classes – it doesn’t matter. Manon confesses that, like Scheler’s capitalist, she lived for a time in an exclusive “profit” state of mind because doing so was crucial for the project holder to get out precarity.

Conclusion: moral sociology and domination

In conclusion, I can summarize the sociological contributions I try to suggest. First, the focus on the French sociology *of* critique has shown the importance of a paradigm that encourages us to transition from the usual critical sociology toward a sociology *of* critical actors’ capacities, particularly in a very reflexive field such as the solidarity economy. Social actors are not always caught up in the illusion of a game (i.e. the economic game).

But the sociology of critique often presupposes that justification and action are always homogeneous, and that the former always gives the true ends of the latter. It can’t help to understand moments where justification and action diverge. But how to understand this kind of contradiction without falling once again into the trap of the **unconscious** argument? And how can we deal with these moments where actors recognize incoherence between justification and action, accusing themselves of what we have called extrapolation?

I have tried to solve this problem. I have argued that phenomenology provides a useful way to link the level of action in the world and the level of reflexivity, expressed through justifications. Conceptualizing grammar phenomenologically articulates the lenses through which an actor intentionally relates to the world of objects in a way that guides both action and (reflexive) justifications. Husserl’s emphasis on synthesis draws attention to the fact that multiple intentional states of mind are forged into a composite consciousness. Scheler’s integration of phenomenological ideas into sociological analysis allows us to understand these states of mind, resting on values and linked to each, as giving rise to a *shared* moral grammar and a collective identity. This enables us to interpret solidarity economy actors’ representations and justifications as expressions of collective ways of experiencing the world, rather than just rhetorical exercises or internalized social structures. If the values of some states of mind can consciously be reflected in actors’ justifications, they can also be bracketed in order to understand reality in a more specific way that no longer respects the grammar of the collective imaginary. It is the case when Manon focus on local innovation that generates profit. I introduced the notions of grammatical mistakes and extrapolation to describe the moment when this occurs.

To understand a grammar at work, the sociologist has to start from both the action and actors’ own representation of this action. They should not attempt to impose an epistemological break with these actors’ common sense in order to propose a stronger scientific language able to show how far astray this common sense is led by illusion. But this implies that sociologists should always start from the life of actors themselves in order to understand their ordinary critiques and to translate their power. Finding critique as it is

forged in the everyday life of people who may be suffering from capitalism (and who are trying to build an economy with principles beyond that of “innovation for profit” alone) is a difficult job. A job much more difficult than that of merely trying to criticize capitalism from a transcendent point of view. It is easy to extract from reality those elements that will allow us to prove the extent to which people are alienated and reduced to mere consumers or businesspeople. But then we no longer see the micro-spaces of emancipation that people are trying to build, because we are focusing on an extrapolation in order to demonstrate that these micro-spaces are always co-opted by capitalism. If we try to formalize their grammar, however, we can see how things are far more complex than that. But it is always more difficult to criticize on the basis of fact than on the basis of theory.

