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Paradoxical Critique

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In a work offering insights into his treatment of various theoretical currents, Toni Negri noted that he encountered the slogan “From Critical Sociology to a Critique of Critique” as early as 1987 in a work by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot.[1] Although he found the idea quite interesting, he wondered at the same time whether it was not merely a play on words. The formulation was given a different phrasing in the early 1990s, which made it clear that what it involved was a battle of paradigms: “From Critical Sociology to the Sociology of Critique”. This formula was used in France primarily by Luc Boltanski, Laurent Thévenot and Nathalie Heinich, all of them former collabouraters of Pierre Bourdieu. Bruno Latour, otherwise the more original thinker, joined in this association in this question, which certainly gave it more weight. [2]

Whereas Nathalie Heinich focused with this approach on the transition from a normative to a descriptive theory, in other words taking an outmoded positivist approach oriented to the postulate of a freedom from value judgement[3], this applies neither to Latour nor to Boltanski. In an essay published after his study on the new spirit of capitalism, Boltanski explained that he was thinking only of a temporary turn away from the position of a critical sociologist.

[4] Latour made it clear from the beginning that he was oriented to other figures of argumentation than "critical sociology". In his view critique on the part of "critical sociology" led to a battle against false enemies.[5] Because the expression "critical sociology" is unusual in the Anglo-Saxon and German-speaking fields of sociology dominated by empiricism, especially since the concomitant critical spirit hardly still exists there, perhaps it is not superfluous to point out that in France "critical sociology" means primarily Pierre Bourdieu and his school. The sociology of critique thus involves mainly an attack on Bourdieu's "field capital habitus" paradigm, on the one hand from the positivist side, on the other from positions that in the labeling processes of the academic field are called pragmatic sociology, actor-network-theory and economics of convention. From the perspective of field theory these attacks are easily comprehensible, as Bourdieu continuously rose to a more dominant position. Only the works of Michel Foucault are quoted more frequently than Bourdieu's.[6]

In terms of the reconstruction of the critique of critical sociology, I will concentrate primarily on the inventor of the idea of a "sociology of critique", in other words Luc Boltanski, but without dispensing entirely with references to other positions. Boltanski makes a sharp distinction between his approach and other variations of "critical theory", those in the Marxist tradition like the Frankfurt School as well as those in the tradition of Nietzsche. Nevertheless, sociology and especially Bourdieu's theory will be my primary point of reference in this essay. Negri already pointed out that Boltanski's approach does not reach very far from a philosophical perspective.

Boltanski does not relate the term "critical sociology" to Bourdieu's late phase, to the period that included political interventions such as *La misère du monde*, appearances on television directed against

the cultural industry or the speeches and essays directed against neoliberalism and American imperialism, against media and zeitgeist intellectuals, which made Bourdieu the "last Sartrean intellectual" of France.[7] Boltanski, who obviously disapproved of these interventions, distinguishes instead between the "important and discussable" work by Bourdieu and the phase he calls the "agit-prop" orientation[8] of the 1990s, during which, however, such important works as *Méditations pascaliennes* or *Les régles de l'art* were written.

Boltanski focuses instead on the much earlier formulated theoretical core of critical sociology. According to Boltanski, a first exemplary sentence from this core of theory states: "Sociology unveils self-delusion, the collectively maintained [...] conjunction of illusion, which is the foundation of the most sacred values and thus of social existence in all societies." The associated "project of desacralization" forms, in Boltanski's view, the nucleus of a critical sociology, for which "everything is belief and only belief". This is supplemented with an axiom from the 1960s: "Every possibility of a symbolic exercise of power, i.e. every form of power, which succeeds in enforcing meanings, enforcing them as legitimate through obscuring the force relations, on which its power is founded, strengthens these power relations."[9]

Counter to these assumptions, Boltanski objects that critical competences and the critiques expressed by the actors themselves or articulated at the level of behavior are also to be taken seriously. This is not possible, however, since scholarly knowledge is strictly separated from doxa, common sense and pre-concepts. All the actors according to Boltanski, have possibilities of critique at their disposal, which they employ in the everyday life of society almost without interruption. Critical sociology is indifferent to the values the actors claim for themselves and therefore not capable of

precisely observing and analyzing the critical arguments that so-called 'common' people exchange in the course of their quarrels.

The sociology of critique in Boltanski's sense opposes theoretical approaches in sociology and in social philosophy that tend to reduce norm demands to the level of conflicts of interest between groups, classes or individuals, to grant them no autonomy, but instead to regard them merely as a veiled form of power relations. Boltanski's "pragmatic sociology" rejects the model of "agents", who find themselves in a permanent state of lying, dissimulation or schizophrenia. In this context in his joint work with Eve Chiapello[10] he refers, in the sense of a further illustration of this kind of theoretical position, to Bourdieu's first principle of the "Principles of a Theory of Symbolic Violence".

Boltanski defends "common people" against assumptions of this kind, whom he does not call "agents" like Bourdieu, but rather "actants". Contrary to the views of critical sociology, the critique that comes from the actors themselves is also to be taken seriously. Latour expresses a similar thought with the appeal to dispense with classical sociology and its asymmetry between researchers and those taking action, an approach, which according to him beliefs in knowing more than the actors themselves.[11] Accordingly, the critical view seeks to anchor itself below the consciousness of the actors and to uncover forces and laws within the structures that elude the actors. It can only approach moral values and ideals by regarding them as ideologies or as doxa, as products of symbolic power, as more or less hypocritical disciplinary measures of the power relations. In contrast to this, a sociology of critique in Boltanski's sense, which also regards itself as a "moral sociology", presumes a relationship to ideals.

In order to arrive at a sociology of critique from a critical sociology, according to Boltanski it is not a matter of assuming an increasingly narrow internal standpoint, which reflects, for instance, one's own position as researcher in a field or involvement in the object of investigation. What is decisive is rather an increasingly broad "external standpoint". This recalls utilitarian philosophers who postulated an unbiased external observer, but also John Rawls, when Boltanski is arguing that exercising critique means detaching oneself from the action and assuming an external standpoint, from which the action can be observed from a different perspective.

Boltanski undertook a first step in the direction of a sociology of critique in the 1980s in the course of an investigation of accusations in the form of letters to the editor in *Le Monde*. The investigation focused on the conditions, under which *Le Monde* picked up accusations and published them in an edited form.[12] It is not sufficient, for example, that an incident is presented as being unjust or that outrage is expressed. Accusers must appear, for instance, not to represent particular interests. They must pay attention to maneuvers to magnify the problem, but without appearing ridiculous. The findings that it is not difficult for the actors to orientate themselves to similar figures of interpretation such as those used by critical sociology when uncovering hidden particular interests contradicts, in Boltanski's view, the assertion of a radical discontinuity between the perceptions of common people and the reality of the social world. From this he also draws the conclusion that the postulate of asymmetry between researchers and researched and hence the claim of exclusivity of positive and simultaneously critical research must be abandoned. Whereas for critical sociology self-delusion is a condition of the possibility of social order, pragmatic sociology understands processes of critique

as an internal moment of social order. It endeavors to develop the possibility conditions of critique. Instead of illusions, it analyzes accusations. From Boltanski's perspective, we do not find ourselves in an "society of illusion", in which social order is based on the self-delusion of almost all the members, but rather in a "critical society" with a multitude of critical subjects. The actions of persons are understood neither as a realization of possibilities within certain structures, nor as an expression of the execution of a pre-determined program, as is the case in the foundation of a disposition term such as the habitus from the perspective of pragmatic sociology. In addition, an approach to the question of social order ensues without it being reduced to a play of forces that the actors cannot influence. It is clear that the sociology of critique involves nothing other than a variation of a voluntaristic program that affords the actors with a large measure of both competences and liberties.

Critique in the form of accusations is taken as a collision of heterogeneous principles of social or political order. The sociology of critique investigates the corresponding descriptions of situations in terms of the constructions of the common good they are based on. This approach flows into the model of orders or logics of justification, developed with the economist and statistician Laurent Thévenot, which are called "cités". Following its theoretical foundation in their joint *De la justification: Economies de la grandeur* [13]this approach for deriving an external standpoint was most famously applied in the study *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, co-published with economist Eve Chiapello. This study stands for a return to a critical sociology, or rather for a connection between a sociology of critique and critical sociology. In the subsequent works on this study in more detail, such as in a text by Boltanski on the left after May 1968 in 2002, even the departure from the social

class, announced in the early 1990s in *De la justification*, which occurred with the rejection of other typical categories and social positions of both critical and conventional sociology, was rescinded. There it was still stated that the "readers of the present book may be surprised that they will not find categories they are familiar with on the following pages. Here there are no groups, social classes, workers, supervisors, adolescents, women, voters, etc., to which both social sciences and numerous series of numbers have accustomed us, which circulate today through society." In the text entitled *The Left After May 1968 and the Longing for Total Revolution*[14] there is nothing to be found other than that which is called a theory of the "new class" in sociology, such as is familiar from a somewhat different direction, for instance, from Daniel Bell or Alvin Gouldner: the issue here is a "new class", even a "new bourgeoisie". In its composition it is very similar to the social category that the economist Richard Florida calls the "creative class", but with the difference that Boltanski, taking recourse to Marxist terminology, describes it as a class of exploiters and exploited and as partially leftist and partially right-wing, based on their integration in the capitalist system, but also based on their relationship to the logics of justification described in *De la justification*.

The thesis of the two partly antagonistic critiques, social criticism and artist critique, which temporarily united in the 1960s, is too well known to need repeating here. It seems too much of a simplification to make a binary distinction between a critique, on the one hand, that refers to oppression, standardization and commodification and postulates liberation, autonomy and authenticity, and on the other a critique that addresses inequality, poverty, exploitation, individualism and egoism and results in a call for solidarity. Even if this dichotomy is not interpreted as a general

systematizing of politically relevant critique, but as a historically specific typology especially suitable for the analysis of French conditions, the limitation to two variations of "anti-systemic" critique appears to be somewhat truncated. What is overlooked is not only the "green critique" of capitalism, but also the various variations of identity politics critique on the basis, for instance, of gender, religion or ethnicity.

Based on a comparative analysis of the contents of a corpus of management literature from the 1960s and 1990s, Boltanski and Chiapello develop how especially artist critique contributed to a change in the justification regime of capitalism and to a mutation of capitalism assessed as successful. There is indeed an emphasis on the social problems linked with this accumulation regime, the increase in inequality, the spread of anomie, a loss of trust and new forms of exploitation in the framework of project-oriented work in networks. However, they diagnose neither a state of crisis nor an agony of the system. The crisis applies more to the predominant critique of this system: social criticism, including its academic variation in the form of critical sociology, because it is not capable of recognizing and dealing with the new structures that led to a formation of a third spirit of capitalism and the new forms of exploitation in networks; and artist critique, because despite its intentions it contributed to the major transformation of the system, which imbues this critique with a paradoxical or perverse character, with which I make a verbal allusion to the theory of non-intended action. Apart from it being a successful new edition of Max Weber's dramatic tale of the Puritans, whose spirit and habitus – the Protestant ethic – fostered the formation of the spirit of modern capitalism despite their own intentions, I see in this investigation of the paradoxical results of critique an indication of

desiderata for research in the framework of a sociology of critique with considerable political relevance.

The formation of a new and increasingly influential logic of justification is attributed to the influence of artist critique, which took the path through a trade union in France, according to Boltanski and Chiapello, the CFDT. They characterize this newly forming regime of justification as a project oriented or connectionist cité, but without being able to base this on a canonical author or imbue it with a comparable philosophical dignity like the other cités. This cité emphasizes mobility, flexibility and a diversity of social contacts. Since the capitalist spirit is to be understood as the configuration of a plurality of cités, they note that the cité of inspiration gains in significance, which is confirmed in the European context in recent years, for instance, by the discourse around "creativity and innovation" spreading out from Great Britain. A decrease in significance, on the other hand, is noted by Boltanski and Chiapello for the position of the industrial cité. The "world", to which the new connectionist order of justification refers, is distinguished at the level of capital accumulation by product variation and differentiation, as well as by the major position attained by a globalized financial system, the Internet, biotechnology and network companies. The specific attraction or the attractiveness of the system for its managers is found, according to this theory, not least of all in the elimination of steep hierarchies and authoritarian management.

In a new form of meritocracy, everything that could limit one's own availability must be given up. Life-long plans are just as much to be avoided as strong ties to places or persons. "Greatness", in the sense of the "économies de grandeur", is attributed in the newly forming "cité par projets" to the mobile actors, who not only use networks in an egocentric and exploitative way, but also make their

networks and contacts available to others at the same time. I see great merit in Boltanski and Chiapello's study in the attempt to ground a theory of largely invisible exploitation in networks, supported by a consideration of the relationships between those who are mobile and those who are immobile. This is especially the case since network theory, particularly in the USA, dominates sociology in a positivist form, so that although impressive mathematical formalizations are attained there, so far no development of a critical theory of networks has emerged.

Almost without exception, in summaries of the study, in interviews with Boltanski and Chiapello and in the meanwhile extensive literature on the new spirit of capitalism, there is an orientation to the thesis of the two critiques and their interplay. In the study, however, partly marginalized in the footnotes, there is a more interesting development of the thesis of paradoxical critique, in which ultimately three variations of artist critique are distinguished …

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[1] Antonio Negri, 2003 (1994), Relire Boltanski et Thévenot : sociologie et philosophie politique. Multitudes, http://multitudes.samizdat.net/Relire-Boltanski-et-Thevenot.html?var_recherche=boltanski

[2] Bruno Latour, 1993 (1991), We have never been modern. Chap. The end of denunciation, Cambridge, Mass.,

[3] Cf. Natalie Heinich, Sociologie de l'art. Paris 2004.

[4] Luc Boltanski, 2002, The Left After May 1968 and the Longing for Total Revolution. Thesis Eleven, Nr. 69, May 2002, pp. 1-20.

[5] Cf. Bruno Latour, (2004), "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern". *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 30, Nr. 2., pp. 225-248.

[6] Cf. the results on the frequency of quotations from philosophers and social scientists of the 20th century in academic and intellectual fields in: Ulf Wuggenig, 2008, "Die Übersetzung von Bildern". In: Beatrice von Bismarck, Therese Kaufmann, Ulf Wuggenig (Ed.), *Nach Bourdieu: Kunst, Visualität, Politik*. Vienna, p. 191.

[7] Cf. Nilo Kauppi, N. (2000), "The Sociologist as Moraliste : Pierre Bourdieu's Practice of Theory and the French Intellectual Tradition". *Substance*, Vol. 93(3), pp. 7-21.

[8] Luc Boltanski, 2001, Les réactions de nombreux compagnons de route. Le Monde, 25.1.; P. Wright / A. Rousseau, La sociologie politique & morale de Luc Boltanski. Eléments biographiques. «Et puis j'ai rencontré Bourdieu» http://boltanski.chez-alice.fr/biographie.htm

[9] Pierre Bourdieu / Jean-Claude Passeron, 1970, La reproduction. Paris, p. 18.

[10] Vgl. Luc Boltanski / Eve Chiapello, 1999, Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme. Paris, p. 675.

[11] Bruno Latour, 2005, Reassembling the Social. An introduction to Actor-Network Theory. Oxford, p. 9ff.

[12] Cf. Luc Boltanski with Yann Darrée and Marie-Ange Schitz, (1984), “La Denonciation”. *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*. Vol. 51, Nr 51, pp. 3-40.

[13] Luc Boltanski / Laurent Thévenot, 2006 (1991), On Justification. Economies of Worth. Princeton and Oxford.

[14] Luc Boltanski, 2002, The Left After May 1968 and the Longing for Total Revolution. Thesis Eleven, Nr. 69, May 2002, pp. 1-20.