

## CHAPTER 10

# Beyond Pragmatic Sociology: A Theoretical Compromise between ‘Critical Sociology’ and the ‘Pragmatic Sociology of Critique’

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### **Introduction**

The 1980s witnessed a remarkable change in the social sciences, a significant renewal of sociological theory. In France it was an occasion to discover and appreciate, albeit with significant delay, the contribution of Anglo-Saxon sociological currents which had earlier been dismissed or underestimated, such as symbolic interactionism, ethno-methodology, and phenomenological sociology. Through the 1960s and 1970s, French sociology was limited mainly to four major currents, which Alain Touraine proposed to call ‘the four corners of sociology’, represented by Raymond Boudon, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Crozier, and Alain Touraine himself. The debates in the social sciences during this period significantly turned around two paradigms: Marxism and structuralism. No one would deny the importance of these debates or diminish the role they played, but it is equally indisputable that, because of a polarization that constrained fertile exchange, they prevented the development of other sociological perspectives. In this intellectual configuration, the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu clearly occupied the foreground, bringing about a major renewal of social theory. In fact, pragmatic sociology, which shall be examined in this chapter, is part of its aftermath, even if its founders sought to elaborate a new model of analysis that would break with some key epistemological premises underlying Bourdieu’s genetic structuralism.

Ensuing decades saw the emergence and development of new configurations in the social sciences, a *refocusing* of theoretical problems particularly around an analysis according to regimes of action, assessment, justification, and convention. The *plurality of action* through diverse *modes of engagement in the*

*world* – this is what Laurent Thévenot proposes in his latest book (Thévenot, 2006). More generally, the emergence of the *pragmatic style* in France can be located in the late 1970s and early 1980s. One may suggest that it shares some theoretical presuppositions with the anthropology of science (Latour, 1988), and with the economy of conventions (Batifoulier, 2001). Amongst other things, it borrows from the first the concept of ‘test’ (*épreuve*) and uses the conventionalist perspective for the *grammatical construction of regimes of action and justice* (Nachi, 2006a). This style succeeded in quickly conquering the scientific field and the space of research and debate in the social sciences – especially in sociology, anthropology, economics, and history. It shares several central features with pragmatic sociology and the anthropology of sciences. Still, one should not construe it as a single current, nor regard it as a unified paradigmatic programme. In fact, behind a shared epistemology and the recourse to proximate methodological tools and vocabularies, one finds significantly differing objects of investigation and theoretical preoccupations.

The programme established by Boltanski and Thévenot aimed to distinguish itself from Bourdieu’s ‘critical sociology’, which the two scholars accused of proposing a totalizing account of society – an account that, in terms of its popularity, had reached a saturation threshold. Hence they tried to elaborate a model of analysis capable of taking seriously the justifications provided by ordinary people in their performative actions – that is, in their shared effort to adjust to various situations of daily life. The point of departure had been the analysis of operations of categorization and classification necessary for the construction of nomenclatures (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006 [1991]) and, thus, of ordinary operations of judgement and public denunciation (Boltanski, Darré, and Schiltz, 1984). The two researchers sought to comprehend the *modes of equivalence* – as well as the *operations of judgement, qualification, adjustment, and justification* – by way of which agreements and compromises are made and unmade in the course of action coordination processes. On this view, what is at stake is the possibility of observing and understanding the multiple ways in which individuals create orders of worth with which they can denounce an injustice or explain the normative character of a given situation or action.

In order to put this programme to work, pragmatic sociology equipped itself with a theoretical model and a conceptual apparatus that were entirely novel and were elaborated in great detail in *On Justification* (2006 [1991]). Untrained readers and those unfamiliar with the style may find this book somewhat inaccessible, and so I took it upon myself to ease comprehension of the theoretical model in an introductory volume entitled *Introduction à la sociologie pragmatique : Vers un nouveau style sociologique* [Introduction to pragmatic sociology: Towards a new sociological style] (Nachi, 2006a).

The model of *Economies of Worth* (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006 [1991]; henceforth, *EW*) seeks to resolve the problem of coordinated actions in relation to a plurality of orders of worth. Agreement alone can no longer be presupposed since there are inevitable tensions between different forms of reaching agreement, and because even a legitimate agreement can be questioned at any moment in the name of another legitimate principle, thus necessitating compromise (Nachi, 2011). Boltanski and Thévenot clearly assert their commitment to ‘treat instances of agreement reaching and critique as intimately linked occurrences within a single continuum of action’ (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006 [1991]: 25). The hypothesis of a plurality of worlds becomes, as a result, the necessary condition to surmount the conflict between different worlds and different orders of worth.

A number of critical points were made following the publication of the initial model of *EW*. In responding to the most important amongst them, Boltanski proceeded with profound *revisions* of the theoretical foundations of pragmatic sociology. First, he introduced some *inflections* in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005 [1999]; henceforth *NSC*), but it is mostly in *The Foetal Condition* (2013 [2004]) that he proposed a more radical change, now adopting an approach that combines pragmatic sociology, structuralism, and phenomenology. More recently still, his penultimate book, entitled *On Critique* (2011 [2009]), made the additional step of grappling anew with the question of domination and of emancipation, thus coming closer to Bourdieu’s ‘critical sociology’. It seems, therefore, appropriate to reflect on the nature of these theoretical shifts. Is pragmatic sociology reconfigured, or is it overcome?

My purpose in this chapter is to revisit the stakes motivating these revisions and adjustments insofar as they offer a new theoretical compromise. I ask about the rapport of ‘critical sociology’ with the ‘sociology of critique’, indeed, about the aftermath of a step that had *replaced* ‘critical sociology’ with the ‘sociology of critique’. Are we now witnessing a reversal of this substitution and the possibility of a return to Bourdieusian sociology? Be that as it may, the lesson to keep in mind is that we are confronted not with a ‘complete’ sociological style but, rather, with an *incomplete* theoretical construction, which is under constant reconstruction. Its author seeks to overcome internal contradictions and insufficiencies, aiming to make sense of realities that are plural and complex. I wish to address this construction process in this chapter. I will begin this analysis with theoretical inflections and hybridizations that can be found in the first version of the *EW* model (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006 [1991]), proceeding towards the possibility of finding a compromise between ‘critical sociology’ and the ‘pragmatic sociology of critique’ – a project that creates new problems and raises new questions.

## I. Inflections

In the optic of the *EW* model, ‘polities’ are historical constructions as well as ideal concepts, which must not be confused with reality. It is nevertheless possible to describe their genesis and development on the basis of ‘grammars of the political’ which obtain their legitimacy as systems of constraints answerable to the institution of a legitimate order of worth. Such a model of polities has not been seen as inevitable or as unchanging. On the contrary, it is presented, from its very inception, as open to other eventualities, in order to forecast an evolution and even the advent of other polities. In other words, the analytic framework proposed by the early *EW* model allowed for the notion that new polities might emerge in order to answer new exigencies of justification and justice. Boltanski and Thévenot formulate the hypothesis that the formation of polities is of general importance at a particular point in time. It is also true that, in order to stabilize themselves, polities require a social anchoring, relating to a specific historical configuration. Evidently, none of this applies to all societies; it applies only to those marked by modern political philosophies. Ultimately, the six polities identified by Boltanski and Thévenot are not merely limited in number. They testify to a specific concern with contemporary societies. It is for this reason that subsequent work has revealed the existence of other polities. For example, the last transformation of the spirit of capitalism created a new polity designated ‘connectionist’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005 [1999]).

Pursuing a similar vision, later works have raised the possibility of other polities. The earliest was the attempt made by Claudette Lafaye and Laurent Thévenot (Lafaye and Thévenot, 1993), who, based on the expression of disagreements and conflicts with regard to the management of nature and the invocation of ecological justification, have offered the hypothesis of a new ‘green city’ in construction (Lafaye and Thévenot, 1993). This construction was revealed as contradicting some of the constitutive principles of the axiomatic in the polities model. Moreover, there were criticisms, amongst them Bruno Latour’s, for whom there could not be an ecological polity since the questions it addressed are already plausibly addressed in the six original polities (Latour, 1998: 222). This early attempt clearly failed to reach its goal. Not so for the possibility of a seventh – ‘connectionist’ – polity proposed by Boltanski and Chiapello in *NSC* (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005 [1999]), the contours of which have to be sketched. In order to do so, this chapter will summarize the general problematic of the book as a whole, underscoring some of the *inflections* introduced there with regard to the general architecture of the polity.

Boltanski and Chiapello offer an audacious and unprecedented analysis of transformations in the *spirit* of capitalism. The book is an ‘encyclopaedic summa’,

which can be intimidating not only due to its sheer volume (over five hundred pages), but also in terms of its theoretical and empirical scope. Obviously, I will not be offering an exhaustive synthesis. I merely wish to render explicit some aspects that may help us understand how the authors succeed in constructing a *seventh polity*, by way of some inflections with regard to the initial *EW* model. The purpose of the book is to analyse ‘the ideological changes that have accompanied recent transformations in capitalism’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005 [1999]: 3).

The perspective adopted is not concerned with the study of the mutations that have affected social structures or the economic infrastructure (in the Marxist sense of the term). Rather, its aim is to understand ‘the way in which the ideologies associated with economic activity are altered’ (ibid.). This clearly follows the general line of Max Weber’s study *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (2001 [1930]). The very decision to echo Weber’s title is hardly fortuitous. The bulk of the analysis revolves around three main *actors* (*actants*) that are essential to the three parts of the book – namely, *capitalism*, *the spirit of capitalism*, and *critique*. What the authors seek to clarify are the relations and articulations established and operative between the three, while taking into account the manner in which they affect the ideological sphere in the final decades of the twentieth century (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005 [1999]: 4).

### ***1. From on Justification to the New Spirit of Capitalism: Continuity or Rupture, or Both?***

Clearly, the *spirit* of capitalism is apprehended out of the *justifications* that aim to provide it with legitimate normative support. The authors retain the basic matrix of the *EW* model, granting the concept of *polity* a central role as *the normative fulcrum for the construction of justifications*:

Inasmuch as they are subject to an imperative of justification, social arrangements tend to incorporate reference to a kind of very general convention directed towards a common good, and claiming universal validity, which has been modelled on the concept of the *city*. (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006 [1991]: 22; italics in original)

From the perspective of pragmatic sociology, the spirit of capitalism includes a reference to such conventions (at least in those aspects that are oriented towards justice). It presupposes access to two different levels.

The first contains an agent capable of actions conducive to profit creation, whereas the second contains an agent equipped with a greater degree of reflexivity, who judges the actions of the first in the name of universal principles. (Ibid.: 22)

The model of politics is itself oriented towards the question of justice, which implies a simultaneous treatment of *agreement* and of *critique* as inseparable moments tied to action (Nachi, 2006a).

By adopting such a perspective, the authors seek to distinguish themselves from critical theories (Marxism, Frankfurt School, Bourdieu) that tend to conceive of society exclusively in terms of domination, power relations, exploitation, and conflicts of interest. In addition, they aim to differentiate themselves from Kantian and contractual theories (for instance, those developed by John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas), since these approaches tend to overemphasize the sociological significance of ‘public debate’ and ‘democratic deliberation’, along with the procedural foundation of political justice, but without paying sufficient attention to its evaluation, thereby underestimating the importance of a contradictory and conflictual reality in people’s lifeworlds (Nachi, 2006b).

In works deriving from the first current, the description of the world seems too grim to be true: such a world would not be habitable for very long. But in works related to the second, the social world is, it must be confessed, a little too rosy to be credible. (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005 [1999]: 27)

The very concept of *critique* avoids this theoretical polarization to the extent that critique

is meaningful only when there is a difference between a desirable and an actual state of affairs. To give critique the place that falls to it in the social world, we must stop reducing justice to force, or allowing ourselves to be blinded by the existence of justice to the point where we ignore relations of force. (Ibid.: 27–28).

The position adopted by the authors caused some embarrassment amongst adepts of pragmatic sociology, established – one must recall – in opposition to Pierre Bourdieu’s ‘critical sociology’. The agenda was in fact to replace ‘critical sociology’ with the ‘sociology of critique’. One of the epistemological principles underpinning the model of politics aims to abolish the dividing line, the alleged gap between common sense and scientific explanation. It conceives of the explanatory knowledge generated by the sociologist as a *second-order construct*, to invoke Alfred Schütz. This is essential to granting persons the competency required for the exercise of critical judgement, and it was the original contribution of Boltanski’s ‘pragmatic sociology’ in relation to Bourdieu’s ‘sociology of *unweiling*’. Barely a decade after its initial formulation, this basic principle is now undermined. This is no doubt a sign of inflection of the analytic

framework in pragmatic sociology. How is this sign to be interpreted? This inflection did not escape notice. Some authors of Marxist persuasion saw in it a ‘resolutely *critical*’ reversal, even a return to Marxist critique. So Jacques Bidet, for instance, claimed that

compared with *On Justification*, *NSC* expresses a radically critical political position as well as a far-reaching ambition, which – in a field of elective affinities – includes the heterodox approaches of regulation and even of Marxism. (Bidet, 2002: 230)

I recognized, as did Philippe Corcuff, ‘an early overture towards a new social critique’ (see Corcuff, 2000), signs of continuity and discontinuity with the earlier work conducted by Boltanski and Thévenot.

Some continuities are first discernible in the quest after an alternative sociology – that of Bourdieu – focused too exclusively on ‘domination’ and on ‘power relations’, manifesting a concern to make space for the goals of justice and the moral constraints operating in social action [...]. In continuity and discontinuity of the dotted lines that mark critique, *NSC* systematizes and radicalizes the critical approach, going so far as to unveil a new form of exploitation [...]. Or, more directly renewing social critique, Boltanski and Chiapello are led to free themselves from the framework of a pragmatic sociology, understood here as a second-order construct. The macro-social entities they invoke (capitalism, spirit of capitalism, and critique) and the historical narrative into which they step (from the crisis of May 68 to the rise of connectionist neo-capitalism in the 1990s) tend to command over the actors participating in it [...]. We are dealing with a true break in pragmatic sociology. (Corcuff, 2000: 223–224; my translation)

Corcuff’s analysis is no doubt valid, but it seems to me that Boltanski and Chiapello are not performing a break with pragmatic sociology. Theirs is rather an *inflection*, and more precisely, a *displacement*, the aim of which is to rectify the ‘pragmatic excess’ that has been revealed, thereby taking into account the criticisms deemed pertinent and directed at the *EW* model. In a later study, Boltanski responds in detail to these different points of criticism and refines the position he adopted in *NSC*:

One of the aims of *NSC* was to answer to objections. It led us, Ève Chiapello and myself, to modify significantly the framework that was presented in *On Justification*. We particularly sought to develop a dynamic that would enable us to account for the emergence of new normative points of support and, in this precise case, for the ongoing formation of a new city, which we have called ‘the projective city’. (Boltanski, 2002: 285; my translation)

The critical posture adopted in *NSC* seems to me to have remained consistent with the conception articulated by Michael Walzer, who considers that social critique must be understood as a form of *critical interpretation* (Walzer, 1993: vii). From this perspective, critique is *internal*; it is predicated on a common sense shared in society, and it therefore refuses to claim an overarching view. In this respect, the orientation chosen in *NSC* does not seem to me to infringe upon this rule. My conclusion converges with the position defended by Claude Gautier. *NSC* is located on a *very relative* line of continuity with earlier works devoted to an elaboration of a ‘pragmatic sociology of critique’ (Gautier, 2001: 197). Even if it owes much to the *EW* model, *NSC* must be treated on its own terms, representing as it does a definite culmination in Boltanski’s intellectual trajectory. It is a fulfilment, a renewal even, of the analytic framework of pragmatic sociology. By constructing a model of normative change, it offers, in fact, an ambitious and original analysis of the ideological transformations and forms of legitimation of the new spirit of capitalism by constructing a model of normative change (Boltanski, 2002: 286). It proposes a *general explanation* of a new ideological configuration out of empirical data (the discourse of management from the 1970s to the 1990s), articulating within a single and coherent framework the processes of *description*, *interpretation*, and *explanation*.

## ***2. Inflections of the Initial Framework of the Politics Model***

As already noted, *NSC* introduces a series of *inflections* with regard to the initial model of politics. In fact, analysis of the transformations of the spirit of capitalism led the authors to clarify certain fundamental concepts and to revisit some litigious points of the analytic framework in its original version. For example, this is the case with the concept of ‘test’, the early formulation of which failed to take into account relations of power and, above all, relations and actions of a non-institutional nature. Thus redefinition of the concept introduces an important distinction between ‘tests of strength’ and ‘legitimate tests’, one with which I have dealt at some length elsewhere (Nachi, 2006a: ch. 1; § II.4). I have also had occasion to account for another theoretical revision, concerned this time with the controversial hypothesis of the non-attachment of worth to individuals (Nachi, 2006a: ch. 3; § I.7). I tried to show that, in 2004, Boltanski disclaimed this hypothesis by underscoring the analysis of singularization processes, showing that individuals have *fixed attributes*, if only by way of *rigid designators* (after Kripke), such as proper names, for instance. These fixed attributes are indefinitely attached to the identity of individuals and are therefore consubstantial with regard to the specificity of individual personality.



There was another modification of the *EW* model consisting of the identification of a new polity in formation – the ‘projective city’ – brought about by the transformation of the new spirit of capitalism and the emergence of an ordinary sense of justice in accordance with a connectionist world. This world should be the extension of the ‘projects-oriented polity’ (*cité par projets*), which is organized by networks, flexibility, autonomy, etc., and described as connectionist and reticular in nature (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005 [1999]).

Beyond these various inflections, there is another essential aspect marking a difference of posture in relation to *critique*. In their early works, which led to the construction of the politics model, Boltanski and Thévenot advocated the ‘acritical posture’ of the sociologist, considering that ordinary people are capable of critique. Assuming an overarching position is, therefore, superfluous and may even impede the work of the sociologist. It is the ‘critical sociology’ developed by Pierre Bourdieu which is relevant in this context. The alternative proposed was to break with this posture and to *replace* ‘critical sociology’ with a ‘pragmatic sociology of critique’. In *NSC* the authors do not abandon the idea of studying critical operations since the very object of their work is the critique of capitalism, but in contradistinction with the *EW* model, *they themselves assume a critical position*, which should be *a priori* contrary to the pragmatic position defended in earlier works. Ultimately, we know very well that the *question of critique* suffuses the whole of pragmatic sociology. It might even be at the origin of the politics model. And yet, in *NSC* it assumes a new form, expressed in the object of analysis – the *critique* of capitalism being one of the three central actors (*actants*) of the book – as well as in the critical position taken vis-à-vis the evolution of the ideology legitimizing the spirit of capitalism (Callinicos, 2006). The attempt here aims to articulate two postures of critique that were initially deemed incompatible, even antagonistic – namely, ‘critical sociology’ and the ‘pragmatic sociology of critique’. This attempt is undertaken, to a considerable extent, in Boltanski’s *On Critique*, as we shall see below.

This shift of perspective led the authors to formulate a series of *propositions for social and juridical reforms*, which would lead to the establishment of a ‘projective city’. In this sense, they write that

our intention was not merely sociological, directed towards knowledge, but geared to a revival of political action, understood as the formation and implementation of a collective will regarding our way of life. (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005 [1999]: xlv)

For this reason, as Corcuff notes, the perspective adopted in *NSC* is best located between pragmatic sociology and macro-sociology (Corcuff, 2000: 223). We now see that in 2004 Boltanski took another significant step, which led him

further away from pragmatic sociology as originally conceived. He introduced the phenomenology of Michel Henry and, as strange as this may appear, the structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss.

## **II. Hybridization**

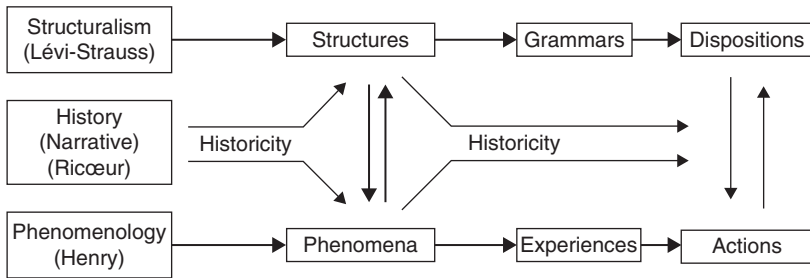
According to a number of commentators, *The Foetal Condition* (Boltanski, 2013 [2004]) is a disconcerting and ‘terrible’ book (Karsenti, 2005), because of the subject treated and because of the problematic elaborated by Boltanski in this study. The book appears similar to *NSC*. Yet, whereas the latter attends to the metamorphoses of capitalism, the former takes as its object the study of changes in a larger domain, the ‘domain of life’, or – more precisely – ‘the transformations that have affected what is habitually called the ‘domains of life’ and particularly the conditions of reproduction, gestation, and birth (Boltanski, 2013 [2004]: 11). The period under consideration coincides with that of *NSC* since an essential vector of change is the legalization of abortion in many European countries during the 1960s and 1970s, the effects of which were most notable in the last third of the twentieth century. Let us consider how this sociology of reproduction has led Boltanski to proceed with a surprising theoretical composite.

### ***1. Hybrid Composite: Linking Pragmatic Sociology, Structuralism, and Phenomenology***

One of the aims pursued by Boltanski here is to bring together pragmatic sociology, structuralism, and phenomenology. This opening towards other theoretical horizons imposes itself because, in a way, the politics model stood at odds with an *unjustifiable practice*. Obviously, the *incompatible* constraints to which abortion gave rise could not become the object of a legitimate *agreement* or of *moral justification*. Confronted with such inherent limits for the politics model, Boltanski is led to solicit the contribution of other theoretical perspectives. The main goal is to construct a *new analytic framework* that would enable the convergence of ‘three distinct approaches linked with intellectual traditions that have difficulty finding accord’ (Boltanski, 2013 [2004]: 16). I will briefly describe the first two approaches and examine the third in more detail.

### ***2. Grammaticality***

The concept of grammaticality refers to the structures and constraints weighing on the actions of individuals. We are not far from the grammar of politics, although it is important to highlight a modification in the very definition of the

**Figure 10.1.**

notion of ‘grammar’, something that has *de facto* consequences at the analytic level. We know that the *EW* model borrows the notion of ‘competence’ from Chomsky’s theory of ‘generative grammar’, aiming to construct a grammar of forms of agreement out of the actors’ justifications (Nachi, 2006a: 39–43). This borrowing refers to the *classical model* of generative grammar that was developed in the 1960s (Chomsky, 1965). Many formulations have ensued since, leading Chomsky to propose a new and more elaborate version of his model. There is no space here to go over the different phases of the ‘Chomskyan revolution’ extensively described by the linguist Jean-Élie Boltanski (2002). Of the succession of models, I will mention only the *optimality theory*, amongst the most characteristic aspects of the last version of generative grammar. J.-E. Boltanski made use of it in order to construct a grammar of reproduction. As he remarks,

[Optimality theory] drew attention to a fundamental notion, which linguistics had ignored – namely, the *conflictual exigencies* at the heart of language, the grammars of different languages being nothing other than efforts to *resolve these conflicts*. (Boltanski, J.-E., 2002: 160; my translation)

With regard to reproduction, this grammar refers to the constraints that weigh on the ‘production of new human beings’ in order for them to come into the world and find a place amongst other humans. Clearly, this first approach is devoid of historical dimension, and has no anchor in the experience of actors, hence the necessity to deploy an approach likely to remedy such deficiencies.

### **3. Historicity**

The concept of ‘historicity’ can be used to confer a diachronic dimension to the competence model, conceiving of it along the axis of an extended temporality and, more precisely, inscribing the constraints of reproduction in

the historical process that enabled their stabilization and transformation. The goal is to show how these constraints

were manifested different[ly] and have therefore weighed differently on the actions of individuals that were subjected to them in different historical contexts. (Boltanski, 2013 [2004]: 18)

In order to account for the historical character of the competence model, two paths are explored by the sociologist: one relies on the work of historians, demographers, and archive documents; the other is based on biographical narratives and testimonies written by individuals, in this case women, who lived through an experience of abortion. In the first case, Boltanski could open with a reference to modes of arrangement that came into being at different historical periods (arrangements with God, with relatives, with the state); in the second case, interviews with women opened a perspective towards new types of arrangement (the parental project) as it has taken shape since the 1970s.

In addition to the grammatical and historical levels of analysis, a third approach concerns itself primarily with giving an account of the *singular experience of individuals*.

#### **4. Phenomenology**

In many ways, the last approach is the most original, but also the most surprising. Its analysis is not restricted to the grammatical level of reproduction's constraints; instead, it focuses on *the experience of abortion*. This dimension is examined in Chapter 7, in which the author puts in place an analytic framework which may reduce to one form of description an ensemble of practices and experiences that reflect very diverse trajectories and trials. Indeed, Boltanski is not satisfied with the elucidation of structures and logics that underlie the competence model of reproduction, an endeavour that involves no interrogation of the practices themselves. Instead, he seeks to establish strong connections between the rules and the logics, which govern the grammar of reproduction, and their being tested in the lived world. The goal is quite substantial, since *the ambition is to transcend the opposition between structure and phenomenon*. Moreover, the perspective adopted does not aim to confirm the *gap* that may be discerned between the rule and the practice, the structure and the phenomenon. On the contrary, it aims to show the *continuities* between the two registers and, furthermore, the *extensions* of the first into the second.

Instead of underscoring the distance between the lessons taught by the grammatical method and by the experiential approach, as is often the case when following methodologies of the structural type, we have rather tried to show how the two

approaches could converge, or even how it was possible to find a new, out of the experience, albeit described in another language, the very elements whose pertinence was demonstrated by the grammatical method. (Boltanski, 2013 [2004]: 17)

Here there is a kind of *dialectic* established between the *structural* and the *phenomenal*, which the sociological method should scrutinize closely. Such at least is the task Boltanski set for himself in order to construct his analytic framework of reproduction. The phenomenological approach consists in attending to the *experience* of women who lived through abortion in order to describe the way in which they have suffered it *in their flesh*. It is obviously to account for the *singularity* of this *experience suffered in the flesh* that Boltanski borrowed an *atypical* path in contemporary phenomenology, that of Michel Henry.

We know well that when *experience*, *perception*, or *the body* are interrogated, one naturally turns to the *Phenomenology of Perception* of Merleau-Ponty (2012 [1945]). Here this is not the case. And, indeed, this is not the case for a good reason: at stake is not the body in the phenomenological sense but, rather, the *flesh*. Pregnancy is a state that is *incarnate* in the flesh. It is in the ‘guts’, if one may put it that way. Here, too, just as with the establishment of a grammar of reproduction, the concept of *flesh* becomes the keystone of this phenomenological perspective.

Granted, the path is tortuous and filled with obstacles, but it may be the only one that can allow a refinement of the concept of *practice* in the articulation of models of competence, which are established from a position of exteriority and the narratives that people offer for their lives, when ‘setting the plot’, they ask themselves about the intentions and motives that were theirs in the action. That is how the conception of the *flesh*, set to work, in the first part, in a strictly structural manner, since its determinations are established exclusively in opposition to the concept of speech – to ground the distinction between reproduction by the flesh and reproduction by speech – this conception is reworked and elaborated anew with a different orientation, in which the aim is to account for the experience of the flesh during pregnancy, as a dimension of the relation to the body proper. (Boltanski, 2013 [2004]: 17; italics in original)

In this context, Boltanski refers to the *phenomenology of birth* developed by Henry, which aims to show the necessity of substituting a definition of birth as ‘coming into the world’ with ‘coming into life’ (Henry, 2003: 131; my translation). He also borrows the concept of *auto-affection*, which locates the test of life in *pure immanence*:

How does life engender ego within itself, making it into a living ego? It does so insofar as it engenders itself and the manner in which it does so. Life engenders

itself in the process of its eternal auto-affection, a process in which it comes into itself, crushes against itself, tests itself, delights in itself, as it is nothing but the eternal felicity of this pure delight in itself. (Henry, 2003: 132)

We are on the hither side of the separation between *subject* and *object* (Boltanski, 2013 [2004]: 268).

Let us turn, in conclusion, to the question of how, in *On Critique*, Boltanski overcomes pragmatic sociology in order to establish a new theoretical compromise.

### III. The Compromise between ‘Critical Sociology’ and the ‘Sociology of Critique’

It may seem incongruous to ask about an overcoming of pragmatic sociology, and all the more so at a moment when this *style* has not yet been stabilized. Yet the question seems relevant if one seeks to grasp the mechanisms that enable the evolution of this sociology such as it is found in the latest works of Boltanski. Furthermore, the question enables us to measure the tension or the theoretical distance which separates the original model from the new analytic framework that sustains a *sociology of emancipation* (Boltanski, 2011 [2009]). Following the extension and hybridization of the general model of politics, which we have considered above, the point is not to demand the *return* to ‘critical sociology’, particularly because it follows a marked insistence on the passage away from it and towards a ‘sociology of critique’, often presented as one of the prominent elements of the new pragmatic style.

Obviously, after *On Critique* we are witnessing the emergence of a new theoretical configuration which should lead to the pure and simple overcoming of the pragmatic style, culminating either in a theoretical model that breaks with the politics, or with the invention of a theoretical compromise that would allow yoking together two antagonistic sociological approaches.<sup>1</sup> In the latter case, it seems appropriate to ask whether this new composite is still related to the pragmatic style or whether, on the contrary, it would constitute a *sui generis* style. The stakes are quite high and Boltanski’s purpose in *On Critique* is ambitious. The range and depth of analysis concerns sociology, social critique, society, the social order, domination, institutions, and, last but not least, emancipation.

Pragmatic sociology took as its object the study of social critique in the ordinary sense. The sociologist attends to the way in which critique is deployed in daily life, the way it demands legitimate justifications on the part of actors that are also its authors. As a result, he is not bound to assume a critical posture *a priori* since he is supposed to proceed directly to a thick description

of the operations of critique. This first axiom of pragmatic sociology is once again challenged in favour of a new exigency, which associates *description* and *critique*. For these are not opposed at all. On the contrary, they nourish each other and evolve in a parallel fashion, a tension that entangles them further. It becomes impossible to dissociate 'description' from 'critique', and 'critical sociology' from the 'sociology of critique'. Who, one may ask, would be interested in sociology for sociology's sake (the way one speaks of 'art for art's sake' [*l'art pour l'art*])? The answer is as follows: 'It remains the case that critique's dependence on sociology has as its corollary sociology's dependence on critique' (Boltanski, 2011 [2009]: 16).

The entanglement of sociology and critique leads the sociologist to take upon him or herself the critical vocation of sociological work. Boltanski's ambition, not a minor one, is to render compatible 'critical sociology' and the 'sociology of critique'. Faced with this task, the challenge is to explore the extent to which the critique of sociology can contribute to a redeployment of 'critical sociology' (Boltanski, 2011 [2009]: 29). That is one of the main arguments of the research programme elaborated in *On Critique*. As he discusses the conceptual foundations of critical theories, the author underscores, amongst other things, the problems raised by the use of the notion of *domination* in 'critical sociology'. For Bourdieu, the sociology of domination grants a central role to 'symbolic violence',<sup>2</sup> an essential characteristic of which being that it is euphemized and unrecognized by those subjected to it. From this perspective, ideology would be that which conceals forms of domination and exploitation; actors would be oblivious, blinded by *illusion* and, moreover, alienated. In short, actors are dominated without knowing it, without being conscious of their domination. Only the enlightened sociologist would be capable of *unveiling* the underlying mechanisms of the forms of domination, something that naturally grants him or her an overarching position. The enterprise of emancipation depends less on the reflexive activity of individuals than on sociological practice itself.

The use of the notion of *domination* by critical theories is faulty for its vagueness, its extensive, undetermined character, which leads to a truncated version of the social world. As Boltanski rightly remarks, 'By dint of seeing domination everywhere, the way is paved for those who do not want to see it anywhere' (Boltanski, 2011 [2009]: 46). Hence we are confronted with the need to reflect upon issues arising not only from domination and exploitation but also from emancipation. In order to do so, we need to readdress the concept of critique. For Boltanski, the goal is to establish a new programme for a 'pragmatic sociology of critique' that rejects the notion of an asymmetry between 'enlightened sociologists', on the one hand, and ordinary actors, oblivious to his situation and dwelling in illusion, on the other. Therefore, the strategy the

sociologist must adopt will consist in ‘returning to things themselves’ on the basis of *observation*, *description*, and the *interpretation* of situations in which critique is deployed (Boltanski, 2011 [2009]: 24). Only then – with the sociologist adopting the point of view of the actor – does it become possible to conduct critical operations out of a ‘sociology of critique’. As Boltanski underscores,

[T]he metacritical position will therefore consist in making use of the point of view of the actors – that is to say, base itself on their moral sense and, in particular, on their ordinary sense of justice, to expose the discrepancy between the social world as it is and as it should be in order to satisfy people’s moral expectations. (Boltanski, 2011 [2009]: 30)

Such a strategy would make ‘critical sociology’ and the ‘sociology of critique’ compatible, enabling the formation of *a compromise between sociology and social critique*. Both programmes have inherent limits. Both are confronted with a problem raised by the relation between metacritique and ordinary critique. Whereas ‘critical sociology’ is constructed exclusively around an overarching position for critique, ignoring the point of view of the actors, ‘pragmatic sociology’ is concerned mainly with the operations of ordinary critique and lacks any metacritical objective. Each programme errs by excess and insufficiency, hence the advantage of putting them to work together, by articulating the conceptual architecture of two sociological theories. And it would be a mistake to think that this is any kind of *collage* or juxtaposition of two theoretical frameworks. On the contrary, there is a guiding will to *establish a relationship between sociology and critique, metacritique and ordinary critique*.

To be credible today, sociologies directed towards a metacritique of domination should draw the lessons of past failures and [...] equip themselves with an analytical framework that makes it possible to integrate the contributions of what we have called *the overarching programme*, on the one hand, and *the pragmatic programme*, on the other. From the overarching programme this framework would take the possibility, obtained by the stance of *exteriority*, of challenging reality, of providing the dominated with tools for resisting fragmentation – and this by offering them a picture of the social order and also principles of equivalence on which they could seize to make comparisons between them and increase their strength by combining into collectives. But from the pragmatic programme such a framework should pay attention to the activities and critical competences of actors and acknowledgement of the pluralistic expectations, which, in contemporary democratic-capitalist societies, seem to occupy a central position in the critical sense of actors, including the most dominated among them. (Boltanski, 2011 [2009]: 48; italics in original)



In short, the purpose is to *forge a compromise between 'critical sociology' and the 'pragmatic sociology of critique'* in order to grasp the critical practices of human actors. It will be understood that the great benefit of such a theoretical compromise is to avoid theoretical, and epistemological, polarization between the *overarching* and the *pragmatic* conceptions of social critique. Critique can, therefore, be apprehended in a dual perspective, which takes account of the two registers *meta/ordinary*, both interdependent and mutually nourishing.

In order to understand the mechanisms of critique and its normative underpinnings, Boltanski introduces a fundamental distinction between '*reality*' and '*world*'. According to him, critique can be deployed only at the level of reality. Indeed, the question of *uncertainty* opens the path of critique. We find ourselves, therefore, in a two-dimensional or twin-level plane: on the one hand, *reality*, as a social construction – referring to *what is natural*, what is confounded by *order* and is oriented towards permanence; on the other hand, the *world*, in the Wittgensteinian sense – *everything that occurs*, the 'flow of life', marked with uncertainty and incessant change. The world does not transcend reality. It is immanent. Critique is possible because of the *gap*, the tension that separates reality from world, permanence and change, the certainty of what is and the uncertainty of what occurs.

Here the establishment of a theoretical compromise finds one of its main justifications: to provide a new analytic framework that absorbs the contradiction between sociology and social critique, rendering *description* and *critique* compatible. Boltanski turns away from the sociology of domination and from pragmatic sociology in their strong versions. He pleads for a new, hybrid, and composite compromise that affords the power of institutions a central role.<sup>3</sup> This follows the distinction he had proposed earlier between the *weak* and *strong* use of the notion of habitus dear to Bourdieu (Boltanski, 2003). The question of *uncertainty*, crucial for criticism of the notion of habitus, is also the point of departure towards establishing the new theoretical compromise. Ultimately, the analysis I have sketched should furnish a recognition of the transformation of perspectives necessary for a *sociology that aims at emancipation*.

## Concluding Remarks

The originality of Boltanski's sociological project resides, first of all, in the fact that each of his works initiates a new, quasi-autonomous, even self-sufficient, research programme. Each relies also on specific and pointed empirical investigations, offering, as it were, a whole 'paradigm' of its own, from the construction of the object to the conceptual apparatus mobilized by way of the requisite methodological approach. In a sense, each work marks a decisive stage in the evolution of Boltanski's thought. Carried by an innovative impulse, Boltanski has been consistent in revising the theoretical framework of his

analyses, remaining as rebellious vis-à-vis all forms of orthodoxy and refusing to confine himself to any model, his own included. It is this state of mind, I believe, that has led him to the *inflections, hybridization, reversals, and overcoming* which I have attempted to sketch in their most striking developments. Understandably, it is not easy to follow such an intellectual trajectory, as the author's positions have not ceased to evolve.

Besides, from a *theoretical* perspective we are not finished with the surprises. In fact, following the inflections performed on the analytic framework of the politics model, the drawing out of a new city in *NSC*, we have had to contend with a true *reversal of perspective*. One objective of *The Foetal Condition*, and not the least amongst them, was to *bring together pragmatic sociology, structuralism, and the phenomenological approach*. If *NSC* was recognized as ambitious, and rightly so, *The Foetal Condition* does not lack in audacity or originality, even if the reaction of the sociologists was lukewarm at best. With *On Critique*, an additional step is made, leading to a theoretical compromise between 'critical sociology' and the 'sociology of critique'. In any case, to gather in one sociological gesture all these theoretical perspectives – known to be quite different at the very least, even irreconcilable – while confronting the sacred cows of disciplinary borders, is no doubt unusual, and in many respects laudable. This is not to say that there is no unity, or a shared problematic, to the work as a whole. The common thread, easily discernible, is the will to trace the *grammars* that sustain the operations of social critique and the ordinary sense of justice.

Boltanski's intellectual trajectory, marked by so many inflections and theoretical 'de-centrings', is not lacking in audacity. Having taken his distance from Pierre Bourdieu's 'critical sociology' (with whom he was one of the closest collaborators) in order to develop, amongst other things, a 'sociology of critique', he is now in the process of drawing back to the former, in order to construct an analytic framework that enables him to articulate two of the most important sociological programmes today. But in spite of its ambition and its innovation, this enterprise raises many questions. One must ask whether, as a scientific discipline, sociology has the vocation to work towards a renewal of society's emancipatory practices. One is also entitled to ask what remains 'pragmatic' in this new theoretical compromise: if one associates the pragmatic style to the early model of politics, the new analytic framework proposed by Boltanski could be said to effectuate an overcoming, even a break, with regard to the initial model. On the other hand, if pragmatic sociology means insistence on a concern with ordinary critique, one could acknowledge the existence of a very relative continuity with the initial model. In the final analysis, the 'new pragmatic sociology of critique' aims at something entirely different from the mere description of the operations of ordinary critique. At stake is the very *emancipation of society!*

## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Gil Anidjar, Professor at Columbia University, both for his translations and his comments. In addition, I wish to thank Simon Susen and Bryan S. Turner for reading and commenting upon a previous version of this chapter.

## Notes

- 1 For an extended reflection on ‘compromise’, see Nachi (2004, 2001).
- 2 On the question of ‘symbolic violence’, see Terray (2002).
- 3 The reflections on the concept of ‘institution’ are of great importance to our understanding of the mechanisms of critique. As Boltanski writes:

[T]he possibility of critique is inscribed, in some sense latently, in the tensions contained in the very functioning of institutions [...]. Critique is the only bulwark against the domination liable to be practised by institutions. (Boltanski, 2011 [2009]: 83)

Due to the limited space of this chapter, I confine myself to this brief remark and refer the reader to Chapter 3 of *On Critique*, entitled ‘The Power of Institutions’.

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