On the strengths and weaknesses of academic social critique

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The pragmatist renunciation of sociology's critical exclusivity is reversed in the recent thought of Luc Boltanski, as capitalist "displacements" to the world of work together with new and complex forms of domination demand the return to a critical methodology. Unlike others of his generation, however, Boltanski's arguments for change do not extend to democracy itself, writes Boyan Znepolski.

Social critique as an academic genre can emerge in different places – in social science research laboratories or as the result of close interaction between social studies and social protests of citizens. An example of the first type of critique is the critical sociology of Pierre Bourdieu. It was originally designed as a research project that strictly distinguished between academic and everyday attitudes, between academic and everyday discourses on the social world. In his autobiographical book Rendre la réalité unacceptable, Luc Boltanski, one of Bourdieu’s closest disciples who later distanced himself from “the teacher”, testifies to the deliberate and strict asceticism of the Bourdieusian circle. Even at times of great social exaltation the researchers belonging to this circle kept away from the tumult of the day:

“This ascesis made us avoid the places where doing politics was more a matter of fun. I remember that even in the fine months of May-June 1968 we spent more time at our [research] centre, pen in hand, writing texts in which we presented the results of our research […] than walking around Paris or chatting in cafés.” (Boltanski, 2008a, p.175)

Back in those days, the social critique of the Bourdieusian circle was based on the study of objective social structures, of objective social divisions and inequalities, of the objective injustice inscribed into the structures of the social world. The confidence in the power of its research methods relieved it of the need to seek additional legitimation, to blend its voice with the voices of social protest.

There is also, however, another tradition of social critique as represented by the sociological school of Alain Touraine, who has spent almost his entire research career on
the barricades of various social movements in France, Central Europe, and Latin America. This type of social critique methodologically requires close interaction of sociological analysis and social protest. It is born of their resonance, of their mutual catalysis. This social critique has no cause of its own other than the cause of protest movements; it analyses society through the voices of discontent coming from society itself. Its role, so to speak, is to filter and modulate these voices, to serve as their self-consciousness, to clarify and focus on their “ideal” motives and symbolic stakes. Of course, such closeness runs the risk of blurring the boundary between social research and social movement, of turning social sciences into an academic form of trade unionism. Touraine is often criticized for doing precisely that, but, paradoxically, similar criticisms – of having turned into a tribune of the people, of having abandoned the political asceticism of his early sociological programme – were levelled at Bourdieu in his later years, when he expressed his solidarity with the railway workers’ strike of the mid-1990s, as well as later, after the release of the documentary about his life, *La sociologie est un sport de combat/Sociology Is a Martial Art* (2001).

**Social sciences after the era of critique**

The research projects of Bourdieu and Touraine no doubt differ methodologically. One strives to “shatter” the illusions of the social actors, to probe below the surface of appearances, to reveal the truth about the social world, and especially about the relations of domination that determine the social world. The other has the ambition to study the birth and assertion of new social actors, thereby investigating the concrete historical possibilities for social action. [1] The two projects are similar, however, in their explicit critical orientation. They were formulated in the 1960s and 1970s, a time of class division and class struggles, of powerful social movements, of perception and judgment of societies through the key terms *domination, dominant class, dominant ideology, social movements, social justice*, of constantly sought and provoked social change. In this situation the social sciences defined themselves through their critical function: Bourdieu defined his sociology as *critical sociology*, [2] while Habermas strove to define the status, methods, and goals of a *critical (social) science*. [3] Critique was inscribed into the research programmes themselves: social research was regarded as critique, while the ultimate purpose of critique was to “unlock”, to provoke, and to catalyse social change by revealing the mechanisms of domination and exploitation; by demystifying the dominant ideology, whether with scientific detachment and a claim to objectivity and distance vis-à-vis the object of research, or in the form of close collaboration with the social movements it was studying. In any case, a significant part of the sociology and social philosophy from this era ought to be regarded not just as a specific intellectual tradition but also as a significant social actor.

The situation changed radically in the 1980s and 1990s, when the decline of the workers’ movement, the discrediting of the political project of the “Eastern bloc” and, finally, the fall of the Berlin Wall heralded the end of “the age of ideologies”, of “extremes”, and of “history”. The collapse of the conceptual framework of the world radically affected both the agent and the horizon of social change. In this situation, the connection between social sciences and social critique was also disrupted. Social sciences began to define themselves not as *critical* but as *pragmatist*: Habermas (1979) formulated his *universal pragmatics*, and Boltanski, the erstwhile student and disciple of Bourdieu, defined his sociology as *pragmatist*. [4] The pragmatist turn, however, unambiguously reformulated
the relationship between social science and social critique: the social sciences were no longer expected to perform a critical function; they expelled critique beyond their own boundaries, turning it into nothing but a subject of study. The task from now on would be to study the critical potential of intersubjective communication (Habermas) or the different regimes of justification and critique used by actors in their everyday practices (Boltanski). In this way the social sciences followed the spirit of the times: in a spirit of universal democratization and liberalization, they gave up their critical privileges and delegated them to the citizens themselves.

Habermas is one of the authors credited for integrating social critique into the theory of democracy: one of the basic conditions for democracy is the existence of a critical public sphere, but the critical public sphere, too, must be congruent with the requirements of democracy. No one can claim monopoly over social critique, nor can any critique be presumed to be cognitively privileged over the others. All citizens, including intellectuals (to the extent that they are participants in public discussions), are equal in their critical claims. In this way, social critique drastically changed its scale and scope: it ceased to be an explicit research and political project, a critique of society in the true sense of the word, and became limited to mutual critique of the claims to validity of the statements formulated by the participants in public communication. However, we could ask ourselves whether the procedural formalization and universalization of critique in the spirit of distributive justice, which relieved critique of a clearly defined agent and purpose, didn’t actually have the same effect as mass privatization, from which the vast majority of small shareholders do not profit in any way. Today the pragmatist model in general and the Habermas model in particular have been called into question: the critical potential inherent in everyday communication and interactions has proved to be most insufficient for responding to the growing sense of injustice caused by, say, globalization.

Thus, the very connection between theory of democracy and social critique has been called into question. Ever more radical projects are appearing – projects in which critique is thought of not within the framework of democracy, that is, as a guarantee of democracy, but against democracy, as an alternative project. Democratically conducted critique in the name of democracy is increasingly giving way to a radical critique which rejects liberal democracy. [5] The sociological project of Luc Boltanski strives to revive (and rehabilitate) an apparently abandoned classical critical approach capable of overcoming the critical weaknesses of social sciences as influenced by pragmatism, without turning into a radical critical utopia.

**Luc Boltanski: From critique to pragmatics and back**

The theoretical trajectory of French sociologist Luc Boltanski is probably the most telling of the reorientations of social critique in the second half of the twentieth and the first years of the twenty-first century. Boltanski started out as a critical sociologist in Bourdieu’s school in the 1960s and 70s, then developed his own project for a pragmatist sociology in the 80s and 90s. In the past few years, however, he seems to have returned to critical sociology. [6] The transition from critical sociology to pragmatist sociology is formulated most clearly in his programme article “Sociologie critique et critique de la sociologie” (1990). All arguments in this article are based on the relationship between researchers of the social world and social actors, and call for democratizing this relationship. Boltanski examines Bourdieu’s critical sociology as a representative of
classical sociology, which posits as its constitutive condition a principled cognitive asymmetry between the sociologist and the social actor:

“On the one hand, the researcher’s attitude [toward the social world] carries the claim to truth. The researcher in the social sciences claims to illuminate reality in a more different and better way than do the actors. On the other hand, [the] validity [of the researcher’s claims] does not depend on the agreement of the actors. Conversely, the classical sociologist – even if he admits he has produced an interpretation that does not exhaust reality – believes he is revealing a dimension of social reality which, as such, is not obvious to the actors.” (Boltanski, 1990, p.125)

According to Boltanski, this is the ambition both of classical sociologists like Durkheim and of critical sociologists like Bourdieu. He leaves the impression that there is no fundamental difference between classical and critical sociologists – classical sociologists are critical and critical sociologists are classical – as both the former and the latter claim to reveal the truth about the social world, while at the same time exposing the illusions with which the social actors live and act. The asymmetry in the cognitive abilities of the sociologists and of the actors stems from the cognitive privileges provided by the research laboratory. It is precisely the research laboratory which ensures access to an external and “impartial” place from where the truth about the social world is revealed: “This external place furnished by the method is nothing other than the laboratory. It is precisely because he has a laboratory that the sociologist can interfere in [social] struggles without being absorbed by them. Outside the laboratory he is an actor like all others.” (Ibid. p.125)

Boltanski’s arguments against critical (and classical) sociology are simultaneously scientific and political. [7] On the one hand, the critical sociologist can never be sure that they have overcome the social actor in themselves:

“The laboratory can never be sufficiently powerful or the method sufficiently strict to eliminate all risks of the opponent’s revealing, in his turn, the illusions of the author and showing how those illusions are ‘factually’ maintained by hidden interests – which prompts the honest sociologist, one who is open to criticism, to try, in his turn, to reveal through a preliminary self-analysis his implicit premises and to engage in an endless regression aimed at eliminating all impurities from his work.” (Ibid., p.127)

But this argument, which questions the possibility of the classical division between factual and value judgments, is less important to this analysis than the second argument – let us call it “the democracy argument”. It is not just that sociologists cannot free themselves of their prejudices completely and with certainty; it is also that, once they are produced, their interpretations enter the public sphere where they become just some of the many interpretations of the social world which are often used as arguments because of their claim to objectivity, but which are also often contested because of their implicit ideological premises. This argument of Boltanski against critical (and classical) sociology seems to be guided not by some “scientific logic”, by strictly methodological reasons, but
by the requirements of democracy: in a democratic society, where the principles of democracy apply also to the production of knowledge, social scientists *do not have the right* to claim *monopoly over legitimate social critique*.

The transition which Boltanski makes, and which is implied in the title of his article, “Sociologie critique et critique de la sociologie”, is in fact a “democratic” transition, which, as such, remains implicit, unarticulated. This is a transition from an elitist to a democratic sociology, a transition which deprives social scientists of their privileged positions in the order of knowledge about the social world. The main task of pragmatist sociology (sociology of critique), which has replaced critical sociology, is to reconstruct the principles of justice that are presupposed or cited by the actors themselves when justifying their actions and speech acts or criticizing the actions and speech acts of other actors. Thus critique is eliminated, amputated from the activity of sociologists. Sociologists can criticize only in their capacity as citizens; as researchers, they can only research and elucidate the critique of others. In this way, social critique is deprived of academic and scientific legitimacy.

In his latest works, and more specifically in *Rendre la réalité inacceptable*, Boltanski (2008a) however again returns to critical sociology and affirms social critique as its main task. What is the reason for this U-turn, for this return to something that has already been rejected? Having once renounced classical sociology and critical sociology as the latter’s contemporary form, having rejected the hierarchy in the order of knowledge between the scientist and the actors, and the distinction between truth and illusion about the social world, why does Boltanski reintroduce the critical privileges of the sociologist?

Although Boltanski prefers to justify the evolution in his positions through methodological arguments, not through the interactions between historical contexts and theoretical approaches, in this case, as we shall see, the theoretical change is occasioned by a determining social-historical circumstance. The critical competence applied by the actors in their everyday interactions has proved to be most insufficient to understand and, above all, to meet the challenges of contemporary societies. Behind the backs of the actors who are criticizing each other or justifying their actions and statements to each other, there has arisen a world that apparently needs to be countered by a specialized, focused, and resolute critique. Back in the 1980s and even in the 1990s, the critical potential of pragmatist sociology may have been sufficient, but today the context is different and therefore the critique, too, must be different. The time has come for sociology to become *critical* again. [8] Boltanski (2008a, p.178) defines the new vocation of sociology in the spirit of his “teacher”, Bourdieu:

“To say that which is, to show the world in the form of a reality it was compelled to take in a particular society, means to render the world unacceptable. This was and still is our task, the task of sociology: *to render reality unacceptable*, at least in the form it takes when – as a constructed reality that is solidary with a preceding social order, with its contradictions, non-transparencies and asymmetries – it seems to subject to itself the entire world as if to petrify and make it similar to a thing. And probably that is why we can indeed speak of sociology as a ‘struggle’. Of course, [a ‘struggle’] striving not to render the world impossible for living but, on the contrary, helping to reveal the lateral possibilities hidden in it, to finally make possible its appearance.”
The task of critical sociology is to constantly demarcate reality and the world by delineating the contours of reality and showing it to be a socially constructed, specifically deformed by symbolic violence, realization of the world; a realization which, once it is exposed to be secondary and derivative, reveals a perspective on the world, that is, on hitherto concealed, excluded but still existing possibilities for reconfiguring reality. This task is entrusted to the critical sociologist, not to the communicative acts of actors, because these acts obviously take place within the boundaries of reality and reproduce it. One can find in Boltanski’s text implicit sarcastic references to Habermas. The text does not explicitly refer to Habermas, but he can be identified in the parodied names of his theories. Boltanski (ibid., p.104) discusses an increasingly promoted since the 1970s social value - politeness, which today has a “central place in the pantheon of civic values”:

“Politeness is expected to make it possible to reconcile the rejection of rigidity (the opening up) with the rejection of relativism. It is, then, oriented towards the moment of closure of the debate, the moment at which the clash of ideas and claims, all of which are legitimate in themselves when they are the subject of mutual respect - that is, according to the ethics of politeness - will produce a recognized truth sanctioned by a legal or informal agreement.”

This schematic, almost grotesque summary of Habermas’s discursive ethics should not be viewed as a direct assessment of his critical theory [9] but, rather, as an indicator of the changed location of social critique. Social critique has become radicalized, shifting to the left, and when viewed from its new perspective Habermas proves to be in the zone of conformism. [10] This means that the very idea of communicative rationality aimed at reaching consensus, that is, civic unity, proves to be largely discredited and impossible.

Boltanski’s book raises two main questions. The first one is: why have the critical competence of social actors, the critical potential of their everyday communication, the forces of civil society, so to speak, proved to be most insufficient to produce an adequate understanding and critique of contemporary societies? Why has this idea, which Boltanski himself long believed in, suddenly proved inadequate? Whence this deficiency, inability, incompetence? The second question is: can social critique be a task of sociology today, and if yes, in what form?

Boltanski gives a more detailed and convincing answer to the first question, the question: Where is social critique? Why is it absent? According to him, the main reason for the exhaustion of the critical energy of civil society is the great social change that took place in the western world in the second half of the 1970s and which consisted in the change of the model of justice, of the fundamental structural categories in which society thinks of itself, of the organization of work. As regards the model of justice, there was a transition from the model of “collective redistribution” (redistribution collective) to the model of “individual reward” (rétribution individuelle). From a sociological point of view, the meritocratic model based on the individualization of merits and rewards entails fragmentation and elimination of collectives. According to Boltanski, this model is conservative because it substitutes redistribution among classes or groups, which requires social reforms, implementation of social policies, and so on, with redistribution...
among individuals, depending on their contributions, something that is done within the framework of the status quo. The meritocratic model was established as dominant because of the coordinated effect of two factors; this was concomitant with the elimination of social classes. Boltanski calls the first factor “displacements of capitalism” (déplacements du capitalisme). This factor concerns the change in the organization of work that took place in the 1980s and 90s, resulting simultaneously in the growth of inequalities while these became ever more difficult to identify as collective inequalities, “precisely because of the individualization of the conditions of work, of the transformation of categorizations (categorizations using classifying criteria), of the change of designations (for example, ‘operator’ instead of ‘worker’), of the growth in the number of workers with a different status working in one and the same place, and so on” (ibid. p.131). It follows, then, that the imposition of the meritocratic model and the elimination of social classes necessary for that is above all a strategy of capitalism and, in particular, a corporate policy which, by reorganizing the form and nomenclature of work, disunites, alienates workers from each other, eliminates the conditions for the creation of a community of workers. The death of social classes, then, is not the result of natural evolution – it is a caused death, we may even say a staged death. This conclusion is important because, as we shall see, it is at the basis of the possibility for the revival of social critique.

The staging and proclamation of the death of class society is not the work of capitalism alone. Capitalism closely interacts with the State. Boltanski follows Marx in this respect: capitalism and the State are in complicity; the State has a class character. As regards the conditions for the existence of classes, however, he remains a disciple of Bourdieu: classes exist or cease to exist depending on whether the State recognizes their existence or not. After the end of the Second World War, in the 1950-1970 period, the State (more specifically, the French state) recognized the existence of social classes and of class struggle by peaceful means as a way to control social conflicts and their possible revolutionary denouement. In the 1980s this danger decreased significantly – due to the weakening of the trade union movement, the “shrinking” of communist parties, the implosion of the countries from the Eastern bloc – and then “a new formula of the State in which the very term ‘social class’ is absent” was established” (ibid. p.132). The removal of this term from the official vocabulary of the State led to the abandonment or relegation of other important terms, such as “social handicap” (handicap social), “social inequalities”, or “social justice”, as well as of regulative ideas like “equalizing living conditions” or “equalizing chances of success”, which until then had determined the agenda of society.

To summarize: according to Boltanski, the “displacements of capitalism” and the change in the “formula of the State” are processes that were coordinated, synchronized, and deliberate with regard to their effects; these processes led to the fragmentation of the social sphere and the disappearance of large structural units such as “classes”. Here we are less interested in the plausibility of this thesis than in the final diagnosis – disintegration of social classes, fragmentation of the social sphere. But what is the connection between this diagnosis, if we accept it to be true, and social critique? To Boltanski, it is more than obvious: in a fragmented social sphere where everyone is tied to a specific status, social critique becomes impossible. Not just because the unity and “striking power” of the collective is lost, but above all because “social visibility” is lost: some determining social conditions can be discerned, understood, turned into causes, only if they are defined as collective conditions. According to Boltanski (ibid. pp.122-123),
this is what constitutes the advantage of sociological analysis in terms of social classes and class division of society: “Statistics based on class equivalence […] allow one to reveal the inequalities in the distribution of public or private goods and to show that successes or failures are neither distributed randomly nor depend on individual qualities (as the ideology of meritocracy claims), but according to collective chances for access.”

The elimination of social classes and the rejection of the analysis of society in class categories deprived social critique of moral grounds, turning the problem of social inequalities and social injustice into a private problem. Why criticize, if everyone is personally responsible for their own lives, for their successes and failures? In addition to this first reason, Boltanski also suggests a second one, namely “the withdrawal of power from discourse”. Who to criticize, if the sources and channels of domination cannot be clearly identified in contemporary societies? Unlike the “simple domination” characteristic of totalitarian regimes and dictatorships, contemporary “complex domination”, as Boltanski calls it, is not achieved through repression or legitimated ideologically. It is based on “dispositives” (institutions, legal systems, regulations), which are simultaneously diverse, dispersed, encoded in professional jargons and are therefore difficult to reconstruct and unite in a single general picture. In the new mode of domination,

“partial and technical measures, which are difficult to interpret for non-specialists and dispersed but nevertheless coordinated, are implemented discreetly without resorting to extensive ideological discourses in the public sphere, the only starting point at the local level being the reference to rationalization, to efficiency, to the saving of resources and to quality in the sense of quality of ‘products’.” (Ibid. p.164)

It is precisely this neutral expert discourse, uttered monotonously and melancholically as if in the voice of historical necessity itself, which conceals the social inequalities and tensions, obfuscates the possible ideological identifications and legitimations, tones down the political differences, ultimately rendering politics itself meaningless.

Social critique: Old words, new perspectives

The second question raised in Boltanski’s book concerns the possibility of social critique today, more specifically of social critique as a task of sociology. In its turn, this question points to another one: is it possible to reactivate the old critical reflexes, to use once again the erstwhile conceptual tools of critique? This is precisely what Boltanski does: he reintroduces terms such as “domination”, “dominant class”, and “dominant ideology”, which reproduce the situation of a polarized, dramatic social sphere and are as if designed to “magically” invoke social critique. Unlike Marx, however, where these terms are clearly defined, in Boltanski they tend to remain empty signifiers. In Marx the dominant class and the exploited class are designated as bourgeoisie and proletariat, and defined through ownership and their place in the division of labour and the production process. In Boltanski the contours of the dominant and the exploited are vague, and it is as if the only thing that distinguishes the two categories is the cyclicality of successes and failures. Deep social asymmetries are measured by the indicator that “it is invariably the same ones who succeed in all (or almost all) trials, while for others, who are invariably
the same too, the trials always (or almost always) have a negative outcome” (ibid. p.155).

In Marx, the main mechanism for exploiting workers is elucidated through the “added value theory”. Boltanski does not deal with the mechanisms for exploitation of the oppressed classes by the dominant class. Marx has his own theory of ideology, expounded in *The German Ideology*. Boltanski (ibid. p.163) argues that there is no dominant ideology because in contemporary societies domination is exercised without ideology: political goals are achieved “discreetly and efficiently without recourse to discourse and to justification, by direct intervention on the dispositives themselves”. In addition, unlike Marx, where social critique is objectively based on a philosophy of history, in Boltanski there is no philosophy of history, agent of social change or horizon of change. All those deficits are compensated by a single surplus. Boltanski hyperbolizes to the point of absurdity the influence and freedom of “the new class of success” (the managers in the different social spheres). In Marx, capitalists are the dominant class by virtue of the objective structure of social reality, not just by virtue of their own will to dominate. Therefore, to the extent that they are inscribed into reality, to the extent that they are subordinate to the latter, they too are subject to social constraints: the cyclic crises of capitalism, capitalist competition, the phenomenon of “alienation” characteristic of bourgeois society, and so on. In Boltanski, “the ruler” (the dominant class, the class of the privileged) are represented as constructors of social reality; they are “the producers of the rules which they impose on others” (ibid. p.169), but they themselves are free to play with those rules, being in a sphere that is as if free from all social constraints and regulations.

Applied to the situation of contemporary societies, the classical scheme of class societies, with their divisions and conflicts, proves incapable of expressing their specificity. The dominant class cannot be identified clearly in social and ideological terms, nor can its domination be clearly deciphered. Societies have changed but so has the way we think of them. In this situation, critical sociology seems to have no other option but to join the general trend of critiquing democracy in the name of democracy, which is one of the two possible idioms of social critique today.

Although well-founded, Boltanski’s critique of contemporary society is not original. Today, this critique is shared by many researchers in the humanities and social sciences. More important still is that Boltanski has not arrived at it by using the research tools of critical sociology: he has not invented it, he has simply joined it, adding his voice to that of others. According to this critique, in the last twenty or thirty years democracy has gradually turned into a “market democracy” or “manager democracy”. The key moment for understanding this decline is the change of legitimacy: political legitimacy has been supplanted by expert legitimacy. Whereas once – not so long ago, in the 1960s and 70s – the ruling elites still legitimated themselves through the principle of representation, claiming to represent citizens, nowadays they legitimate themselves through their expert knowledge. The essence of this “democratic decline” can be represented schematically by the changed relationship between politics and economics. According to Boltanski (ibid. pp.142-143), in the last thirty years there has been a new articulation of the State and capitalism, whose principle is:

“subjection of politics – defined as investigation of lateral possibilities [different variants of the future society which are subject to collective choice] – to
neoclassical economics viewed as an implacable science of the determining conditions [déterminations] by virtue of which reality is what it is and cannot be other. In this logic, ‘the responsible’ ['les responsables'] have no choice but to follow ‘the new trends’ determined by ‘experts’, therefore the role of politics cannot be other than marginal. The exercise of politics in this case is reduced primarily to strategic management of information (not to say propaganda) or to some kind of palliative medicine."

In other words, politics must present the decisions prepared by experts in a way that makes them maximally acceptable to the citizens. In addition, politics must develop adaptive measures that will mitigate the social consequences of the implementation of these decisions.

In a recent article entitled “Institutions et critique sociale. Une approche pragmatique de la critique”, Boltanski (2008b) proposes a more modest but also more concrete critical task of sociology. If contemporary (state) institutions applying the principle of meritocracy fragmentize the social sphere – dividing, isolating individuals – then critique must do the opposite – it must counteract fragmentation, linking individuals with each other, helping to create new social ties between them. The critical function is a function involving the social linking of individuals:

“[critique of] development rests on work whose object is linking – social linking [le lien social] – and which consists in destroying some relations in order to establish others. This does not mean substituting autonomy for heteronomy in the sense of the Enlightenment. On the contrary, the work aimed at linking consists in expanding, often in a categorial mode, properties hitherto regarded as accidental or secondary so as to make them a mainstay for classes, be it in the sense of ‘social classes’ or of genders and/or sexual orientations or of the attitude toward nationality or ethnicity, and so on.” (Boltanski, 2008b, p.33)

The role of social critique is not simply to reveal, to unmask, to deconstruct domination, but also to construct – to help construct groups or classes that are carriers of social change. [11] If in social reality individuals are institutionally (meritocratically) disunited, then social critique, working in the zone of the marginal, insignificant, rejected, unarticulated characteristics, strives to create new “chains of equivalence” which can become the basis for the appearance of new collective agents penetrating reality and changing reality. [12] What is specific to Boltanski, however, is a clearly discernible self-limitation in his notion of the future “classes”. Whereas Boltanski refuses to predict exactly what they will be, he outlines their general profile. They will not be classes of the State, nor will they be associated exclusively with a single political party; they will be based on one leading characteristic – for example, socio-occupational identity – but they will not completely identify themselves with the latter, keeping the significance of their other identifications as well (gender, sexual, religious, ethnic, and so on); above all, they will not identify themselves primarily through the struggle for political power. By introducing this limitation, Boltanski clearly manifests his own position: he eliminates from the code of the future classes the possibility for a revolutionary deviation that might call into question liberal democracy.
Boltanski is one of the authors who think that we must urgently invent a way to remain within the framework of democracy, but to this end we must urgently find carriers of social change – of new social projects, new proposals for a social world within the framework of democracy. If this endeavour fails, if the existential vacuum filled with entertainment and consumption and the crisis of the social imagination continue, then the other idiom of social critique will take the upper hand – a radical critique where the first condition for unlocking the social imagination is disassembling the restrictive emblem “democracy”. After Luc Boltanski comes Alain Badiou. [13]

References


Habermas, J. (1968) Erkenntnis und Interesse, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.


Footnotes

1. For a comprehensive review of Touraine’s sociology at its different stages of development, see the chapter devoted to Touraine by Danilo Martuccelli in his book Les sociologies de la modernité (Martuccelli, 1999).

2. For Bourdieu (1993, p.28), sociology necessarily presupposes critique, while this critique is above all a critique of power and domination: "[S]ociology [...] is a critical
science, critical of itself and the other sciences and also critical of the powers that be, including the powers of science. It’s a science that strives to understand the laws of production of science; it provides not means of domination but, perhaps, the means of dominating domination [domineer la domination]."

3. See in this connection Habermas's study Erkenntnis und Interesse (Habermas, 1968).

4. Luc Boltanski expounded the principles of his sociological programme in a book co-authored by Laurent Thévenot, De la justification (Boltanski et Thévenot, 1991). He calls his sociology sociologie pragmatique. I translate this phrase as "pragmatist sociology" because of the intellectual influence of the tradition of pragmatism but also to avoid the misleading implications of the phrase "pragmatic sociology".

5. In this connection, see the recently published collection Démocratie, dans quel état? (Agamben et al., 2009).

6. I have in mind Rendre la réalité inacceptable (Boltanski, 2008a) as well as his latest book, De la critique. Précis de sociologie de l’émancipation (Boltanski, 2009).

7. In his latest book, De la critique. Précis de sociologie de l’émancipation, Boltanski critiques Bourdieu's critical sociology along several lines: (1) in critical sociology, the actions of agents are excessively determined by structures; being captive to their illusions, agents are fatally doomed to reproduce the existing social order and deprived of a critical and creative potential; (2) it is difficult for classical sociology to combine, without contradictions, the claim to scientific objectivity and the claim that it is a value-laden theory and critique of domination; (3) critical sociology is too all-encompassing, over-totalizing, viewing society through the lens of a determining asymmetry and, in this sense, it is incapable of encompassing the complexity and plurality of contemporary societies.

8. This conclusion, presented indirectly as a methodological argument, is to be found in De la critique. Précis de sociologie de l’émancipation: "Critical sociology works with a construction that clears the path to real critical possibilities but presupposes agents subordinate to structures that evade them, and blocks the way to the critical abilities of actors. Pragmatist sociology of critique is a sociology which devotes great attention to the critical actions undertaken by actors whose own critical abilities however seem quite limited." (Boltanski, 2009, p.75) Actually, Boltanski does not return to critical sociology without reservations. He strives to judge the disadvantages of the two approaches and to combine their advantages. Here I will not deal with the way in which Boltanski tries to reconcile and combine critical sociology and pragmatist sociology.

9. Habermas must be defended against all rash interpretations which claim that the theory of communicative action elaborates a mechanism for the production of quick and easy consensus. The focus of this theory is in fact completely different. At its core lies its critical function, for communication is above all critique -- a critique of cultural dialects and particularities, of social pathologies, of false authorities and false identifications, of different ideologemes and mythologemes -- which must pave the way for a possible consensus.
10. Actually, in his latest book Boltanski questions the critical potential of his own pragmatist sociology. Relativization of reality is a necessary condition for social critique, but the research scope of pragmatist sociology makes it difficult to keep the necessary critical distance: "pragmatist sociology, precisely because it is situated close [to the social actors] and takes as its starting point reality as seen both by the actors and by the observer, tends to lead to the closing up of reality within itself". (Boltanski, 2009, p.77)

11. Boltanski admits that this task could hardly be fulfilled by pragmatist sociology as defined in *De la justification* (Boltanski et Thévenot, 1991). That is because pragmatist sociology is confined to the critique expounded by the actors themselves, which is too dependent on the models of justice established in the particular historical context. It often follows the requirements of those models and is incapable of turning into a critique of the models themselves: "We can ask ourselves whether the model of the meaning of justice established on the basis of the polls conducted in the 80s has made way to a *meritocratic* model of justice because of its contextual dependence upon the historical moment characterized by the failure of the efforts made in the previous decades to impose the validity of a collective notion of justice viewed as *social justice*." (Boltanski, 2009, p.59)

12. In Boltanski social discontent is constructed in a similar way as in Ernesto Laclau (2005).

13. See Alain Badiou's article in *Démocratie, dans quel état?* (Agamben et al., 2009).

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